

# The Female Grotesque in Works by Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter

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## Abstract

*The paper initially focuses on the character of the female grotesque presented in Bakhtin's study of Rabelais, paying special attention to Bakhtin's discussion of the "idealizing tradition" and the "Gallic tradition", two opposing views in the context of the medieval debate about women known as the querelle des femmes. This theoretical framework is then used to explore three twentieth-century examples of the British feminist novel claiming that they offer feminist versions of the medieval popular comic images of the woman in the Gallic tradition.*

*Keywords: female grotesque, querelle des femmes, Mikhail Bakhtin, feminism, Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter*

## Introduction

In her seminal study, Mary Russo draws attention to an important similarity between the grotesque and the female, pointing out that both categories are recognizable only in relation to a norm. Thus "the grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm [represented by the ideal of the classical body]" (11) and "the female is always defined against the male norm" (12). Russo emphasizes that the grotesque is a term which, from women's perspective, has a more ambivalent meaning than male theoreticians of the grotesque have realized. Recognizing the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of carnival, the carnivalesque body and the comic grotesque, she at the same time makes a critical point about his failure to "acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic" (63). Particularly indicative of this failure is his discussion of the image of the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags, which Bakhtin sees as an embodiment of his concept of the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, the pregnant hags illustrate the ambivalent nature of the grotesque body combining "a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life" (25–26), but for the feminist reader, Russo claims, the image "is loaded with all the connotations of fear and

loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of ageing” (63). This reminds us that, in everyday life, women run a greater risk than men of having their bodies perceived as grotesque if they deviate from the accepted ideal of beauty and youth.

### **The Female Grotesque in the Context of the *Querelle des Femmes***

In his discussion of Rabelais’s works, Bakhtin indeed creates a concept of the grotesque body that does not focus on sexual or gender differences: “it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits ... the emphasis is on apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecating” (26). Developing his interpretation of the Rabelaisian grotesque from this definition, Bakhtin sees Rabelais’s images not as representing individual bodies but rather as the ever-regenerated body of all people<sup>1</sup>; as a result, he overlooks or undermines the misogynist character of some representations of the feminine. One may mention here the episode describing a procession of thousands of dogs that follow a lady and besmirch her dress after she has been sprinkled with the diced genital organs of a bitch in revenge for her rejection of Panurge (229), or the scene in which Panurge proposes to build city walls from the genital organs of Paris women, suggesting their cheapness (313).

On the other hand, Bakhtin is not completely unaware of the fact that Rabelais could be accused of having a hostile attitude towards women, finding it important to defend the author when referring to the passage in which Panurge asks advice about whether he should marry. Bakhtin places the advice received by the character in the context of a medieval debate known as the *querelle des femmes* [quarrel of women], which concerned the nature of women and marriage. He points out the difference between the “idealizing tradition” and the “Gallic tradition” which lay at the heart of the debate. While the idealizing tradition exalts womanhood,<sup>2</sup> the Gallic tradition is a contradictory phenomenon. It is constituted by the ascetic tendency of medieval Christianity, which sees woman as the incarnation of sin, and the popular comic approach, adopted by Rabelais, which produces an ambivalent image of woman as the incarnation of the “material bodily lower stratum” that degrades and regenerates simultaneously (239–240). The images of the female grotesque typical of the popular comic version of the Gallic tradition has a liberating potential, which is realized – as I intend to show – in the works of the feminist authors Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter.

Before turning to the novels that contribute to the *querelle des femmes* dispute, I would like to throw more light upon the nature of this intellectual discussion, which has acquired the status of a “key term of European gender history” (Zimmermann 18). The tradition of the *querelle des femmes* emerged in the fifteenth century to develop from “a defense of women by the *champions des dames* (defenders of women), which dominated into the sixteenth century, to an increasing participation in this gender debate by the women themselves” (19–20). For centuries the debate included such topics as women’s access to reading, writing and education, the assessment of marriage, and controversies over topics such as feminine beauty, learned women and female poets. Finally the dispute evolved into “a much more complex phenomenon: an all-encompassing gender quarrel in which not

only women but [...] men are at issue as well. It is a quarrel in word and image but also about words and images ... The points of debate are the delimitation of an 'imaginaire', an imaginary space of masculinity and femininity, of gender hierarchies..." (19–20).

The female voice joined the debate in the early fifteenth century through the works of Christine de Pizan, who in her letters against the *Romance of the Rose* and in *The Book of the City Ladies* attacks misogynist representations of the feminine, setting up catalogues of exemplary women (Gray 20–21). Later she was followed by others, such as Jeanne Flore and Marguerite de Navarre, both contemporaries of Francois Rabelais and authors of collections of short stories inspired by Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In their works they both responded to the sixteenth-century discourses of misogyny, which presented woman as "having depraved and quarrelsome nature", as "a wanton, deceitful, unscrupulous person, whose character was derived from Eve, the faithless and disobedient first woman" (16). Jeanne Flore's *Comptes amoureux* has a revolutionary character, offering an apology for women's sexual liberation and a condemnation of arranged marriages (31).<sup>3</sup> Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* concentrates on "fundamental conflicts between the ways in which men and women see the world and their relationship to it" (Bauschatz 47–48). Her central concern is the difference between male and female moral codes, reflected for example in the story-tellers' discussions about rape, which is a common phenomenon in Navarre's stories.

Although working centuries later and in a different cultural context, Fay Weldon, Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter continue the tradition of sixteenth-century female writing because their works, just like the tales of Flore and Navarre, can be seen as fictionalizing the questions raised by the *querelle des femmes*. While their French predecessors produced collections of short stories in a cultural milieu conditioned by male-dominated polemics about the nature of women, the three British authors have worked in the atmosphere of the second wave of feminism, in which the same dispute became dominated by the female perspective. In their responses to the misogynist images of woman common in their era, Flore and Navarre often turned to the idealizing tradition, generally avoiding grotesque representations of womanhood. Thus, though Flore, advocating female sexual freedom, creates images of sensual women that in their essence do not contradict the misogynist perception of woman as a grotesque creature with insatiable sexual appetites, in her presentation of women's physical appearance she never ventures into the sphere of the grotesque. All her heroines are young and beautiful, while the portraits of their old husbands are "compilations of grotesque details" (Gray 36–37). Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* reflects this idealizing approach in the focus on female virtue, while her use of the grotesque is rather traditional – it aims to induce a negative response from a suitor, whose sexual advances the heroine of one of the stories tries to avoid by grotesquely disfiguring her own face.

Flore's and Navarre's late-twentieth-century counterparts, by contrast, place the female grotesque at the centre of their works by employing images of women that, for centuries, carried negative connotations – or at least strongly ambivalent ones. In her study, Mary Russo lists some stereotypical examples of the female grotesque, including the Medusa, the Crone, the Fat Lady, and the Unruly Woman (14). Each of the heroines of the three novels – *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984) – falls into more than one of these categories. As I will show below,

by employing these traditional versions of the female grotesque, Weldon, Winterson and Carter produce images that in many respects correspond with the popular comic approach to the woman of the Gallic tradition. Weldon's, Winterson's and Carter's heroines are all marked by the grotesque bodily excess that is typical of the non-idealizing representations of the female, which relate woman to "the material bodily lower stratum" instead of exalting her. At the same time the three characters exemplify the womanhood that "is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband, lover or suitor)" (Bakhtin 240).

Bakhtin claims that in the carnivalesque context of popular comic medieval culture, the images of woman focus on her ambivalence: woman signifies both the "bodily grave of man, [...] represent[ing] in person the undoing of pretentiousness, of all that is finished, completed, and exhausted" as well as the life-giving womb that guarantees the process of regeneration (240). However, the fact remains that in the medieval phase of the *querelle des femmes* debate, these representations were appropriated by male authors, who often reduced their ambivalent meaning to its negative pole, producing an outlet for the voice of misogyny. The aim of this paper is to analyze the forms acquired by these traditional images of the female grotesque in the works of Weldon, Winterson and Carter, and thus to examine the feminist potential of the woman of Gallic tradition.

### **She-Devil – The Revenge of the Fat Lady**

Ruth, the heroine of Fay Weldon's novel about a suburban wife who exacts a devilish revenge upon her unfaithful husband and his mistress, clearly resembles the popular comic medieval characters of strong women "who are happily given to the sway of their bodily senses or who are using every ruse they can to prevail over men" (Davis 158). In an act of carnivalesque inversion, Weldon's character transforms herself from an unattractive, economically dependent wife who spends her life satisfying the needs of her family into a sexually attractive multimillionaire who takes full control over the life of her depowered husband Bobbo. Through a series of skilfully designed schemes, she deprives her husband firstly of his house, then his money, and finally even his freedom (when he is imprisoned for a theft she herself has committed), acquiring in the process literally everything his mistress initially possessed.

Ruth's revenge starts when she, in reaction to Bobbo's unfaithfulness, consciously adopts the role of a 'she-devil', stripping herself of the socially sanctioned form of femininity that requires submission, unrequited loyalty, and constant sacrifice of one's needs on the altar of other people's happiness: "But this is wonderful! This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good. There is only in the end what you want. And I can take what I want. I am a she-devil" (Weldon 43). Rebelling against the social norms and expectations which define the Good Wife, Ruth represents the grotesque category of the Unruly Woman, which is, according to Davis, exemplified by such characters as Chaucer's Wife of Bath or Rabelais's Gargamelle. She also reveals a particular affinity with "the clever and the powerful wife of the *Quinze joies de mariage* (The Fifteen Joys of Marriage) – cuckolding her husband and foiling his every effort to find her out, wheedling fancy clothes out of him, beating him up, and finally locking him in his room" (Davis 158–160).<sup>4</sup>

The character's deviation from accepted cultural norms is underlined by her physical appearance, the grotesqueness of which emerges through Ruth's repeated evaluations of her body against the classical ideal represented by her husband's mistress. Being too tall and too heavy, dark, with jutting jaws, a hooked nose, and three moles on her chin, the heroine is sharply contrasted with fair Mary Fisher, whose body is delicate and whose face is beautiful: "When Mary Fisher ran, her footsteps were light and bright. Ruth's weight swayed from one massive leg to another and shook the house each time it fell" (Weldon 23). The contrast between the grotesque and the classical body is not just a matter of two different aesthetics; it also intervenes into the sphere of social behaviour. As Bakhtin states, the dominance of the classical concepts of the body established in the seventeenth century produced a new canon of behaviour, requiring people to "close up and limit the body's confines and to smooth the bulges" – in other words, to conceal the features of the body that are perceived as grotesque (Bakhtin 322, note 8).<sup>5</sup>

Bakhtin's interpretation implies that every well-behaved person should adopt the same rules. However, as Sandra Lee Bartky argues, the canon of behaviour differs according to gender. Using Foucault's concept of the "docile body" produced by power structures, she maintains that the female bodies are more "docile" than males' since they are exposed to extra "disciplinary practices" aimed at the creation of their femininity. Bartky identifies three main categories of disciplinary practices: those concerned with the body's size; those affecting the body's gestures, postures, and movements (i.e. bodily manners); and "those that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (105). Through submission to this discipline, female bodies become more "limited and closed up," as well as more prone to imitate the classical ideal of beauty than male bodies. "Today massiveness, power, or abundance in a woman's body is met with distaste" (105) because it defies the patriarchal concept of femininity as signifying weakness, submission, and inferiority. Ideally, women should have a fragile body "lacking flesh or substance", which should be accompanied with "an infantilized face" that "never displays the marks of character, wisdom, and experience" (111).<sup>6</sup> This body then functions as both an object of desire and as a sign of woman's docility and her subordinate position in relation to men.

In the light of this theory, it seems ironic that Ruth's quest for power, control, and independence leads her to possess a body that signifies docility, as happens when she transforms herself, through excessive plastic surgery, into a replica of Mary Fisher. In this way she accomplishes the revenge that includes not only the repossession of her husband, but also the acquisition of his mistress's house, her body image – in fact, her whole life. If we read Weldon's novel as a tale about female empowerment, we may find its moral rather ambiguous, as the heroine's willing submission to the norms of feminine beauty and her repossession of her husband – who has been transformed into a spiritless, docile creature – turns her accomplishment into a bitter victory. If, on the other hand, we read it as a critique of the patriarchal society that pressures women to take unnatural measures to comply with social norms of femininity, we may notice that the critique includes a reconsideration of the relationship between the grotesque and the classical.

While at the beginning the boundaries between the grotesque and the classical are clearly defined by the difference between Ruth's excessive, ugly body and Mary Fisher's physical beauty, towards the end of the novel this distinction blurs, partly due to the fact that Ruth in a sense becomes Mary. The plastic surgery – which involves complete

disfiguration of Ruth's original appearance, including the shortening of her femurs – is revealed as a grotesque act that produces a classical body paradoxically marked by the sign of monstrosity. This monstrosity is the result not only of the unnaturalness of the whole process, emphasized by the text's allusion to Frankenstein's monster, but also by the fact that the grotesque – in the form of bodily decay, ageing, and ugliness – becomes an integral part of the classical. Though temporarily hidden behind the surface of artificial beauty, the grotesque is constantly present, as is indicated by its attempts to repossess Ruth's body: "an ingrowing nail was seen to; broken veins on the cheeks needed more laser treatment; facial moles kept struggling to reappear" (Weldon 237).

Ruth's body thus becomes an ambivalent "artistic object" (her surgeon sees himself as a Pygmalion) which, comprising both the classical and the grotesque, exists on the borderline of the two aesthetic categories. This draws attention to the awkward situation of women who, in their everyday existence, are placed under greater pressure than men to adjust their bodies to the ideal of classical beauty, while paying a greater price for their inevitable failure to dissociate themselves from the sphere of the grotesque.

### **Dog Woman – the Unruly Woman's Riot**

In *Sexing the Cherry*, Jeanette Winterson places her image of the female grotesque into the historical context of England's seventeenth-century Civil War. In a magical realist narrative she mingles the historical circumstances of King Charles's execution with the personal history of her heroine the Dog Woman (who makes her living by raising dogs for dog racing) and her adopted son Jordan (a foundling "fished out" from the river Thames), together with a fantastic narrative about Jordan's search for the one of the twelve dancing princesses with whom he is in love. Just like the She-Devil from the previous novel, Dog Woman can easily be associated with the carnivalesque grotesque. The bodily excess that functions as a crucial constitutional element of the physical appearance of Weldon's character also plays an important role in Winterson's work, though this time the author makes greater use of grotesque hyperbole, while focusing more on relating the grotesqueness produced by "the distortion of 'natural' size and shape" (Kayser 185) to monstrous ugliness.

The character's appearance ("How hideous I am? My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas") and her giant-like size (she can easily outweigh an elephant and "hold a dozen oranges in her mouth at once") (Winterson 19–21), which defies all notions of feminine weakness and submissiveness, sharply contrast her with the traditional female ideal. Her terrifying grotesqueness intensifies when, due to her sexual inexperience (men generally react to her appearance with fear), she inadvertently becomes a castrating female following the instructions of a pleasure-seeking man too literally. As an example of the female grotesque, Dog Woman can be read as a representation of the womanhood that denies patriarchal rule. Due to her monstrous ugliness, which repulses potential suitors, she never ends up in the subordinate position of a married woman, and her monstrous size effectively precludes any possibility of male sexual dominance: "there's no man who's a match for me" (Winterson 4).

However, as a dangerous woman who proves her active participation in an underground resistance to Puritan rule by gathering “119 eyeballs” and “over 2,000 teeth” (93) from her mangled enemies, she also resembles the carnivalesque female figure used to “incite and embody popular uprisings” (Russo 58). While Weldon’s Ruth resembles the images of women whose unruliness places them in conflict with their husbands, Winterson’s Dog Woman suggests another important version of the Unruly Woman, defined by possessing “the license to be a social critic” (Davis 162–163). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the female persona was often assumed as a popular folk disguise by males for the purpose of rioting. On the one hand, “the males drew upon sexual power and energy of the unruly woman and on her license (which they had long assumed at carnival and games) to promote fertility, to defend community’s interests and standards, and to tell the truth about unjust rule.” On the other hand, “the disguise freed men from full responsibility for their deeds”; in their roles as women they acted in full accordance with the belief that disorderly behaviour was female nature (Davis 181–182).

Although it may appear paradoxical that Winterson’s Unruly Woman becomes associated with an “uprising” against the official revolutionary forces, what she actually embodies is the revolution of the body, oppressed by strict Puritan morality: “The Puritans, who wanted a rule of saints on earth and no king but Jesus, forgot that we are born into flesh and in flesh must remain. Their women bind their breasts and cook plain food without salt, and the men are so afraid of their member uprising that they keep it strapped between their legs with bandages” (Winterson 70). Representing a force that uncovers the hypocrisy of the most zealous preachers of Puritan morals, who secretly satisfy their perverse bodily desires in a local brothel, Winterson’s heroine is the woman of the Gallic tradition, “a foil to [men’s] avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism” (Bakhtin 240).

Still, being in conflict only with some men (i.e. the authoritarian representatives of Puritan morality), while siding with others (the Royalists, whose pleasure-seeking lifestyle was much more compatible with the natural needs of the body), Dog Woman complies more than Weldon’s She-Devil with Bakhtin’s interpretation of popular comic images of womanhood. Besides representing the strong woman who cannot be tamed by patriarchal culture, she also appears to represent the untameable “material bodily lower stratum”, which, as Bakhtin reminds his readers, was traditionally personified by female characters. The eruption of Dog Woman’s violence against her Puritan enemies thus symbolizes the violent eruption of the grotesque body into the sphere of the social and the political, which emerges whenever Puritan zeal attempts to relegate its forces to the utmost margins of culture.

### **Winged Woman – The New Woman’s Flight**

In *Nights at the Circus*, the female grotesque takes the form of Fevvers, a winged woman occupying the centre of a narrative in which Walser, a sceptical American journalist, tries to unravel the mystery of her wings. Creating a double grotesque image, a grotesque unity of incompatibles (the female body with wings) in combination with Rabelaisian hyperbole, Carter successfully challenges patriarchal conceptions of the feminine ideal. The Rabelaisian hyperbole takes the form of the bodily excess that relates Fevvers’ looks to the

appearance of Weldon's and Winterson's heroines. Although Fevvers, being "six feet two in her stockings" (Carter, *Nights* 12), is not really beyond the limits of human proportions, she appears giant-like to the eye of the observer (Walser). At one moment she seems to be "twice as large as life" (15) and when "without her clothes on" she looks "the size of the house" (292). The bodily excess is accompanied with vulgar manners, which include "guffaw[ing] uproariously" (7), talking too loud, slapping her thighs, wiping her mouth on her sleeve, and her gargantuan appetite. As a result, Fevvers appears as "untouched" by social norms of appropriate behaviour, which gives her unruly body an aura of unrestricted freedom.

The grotesque nature of her body is further emphasized by her wings, which, in the magical realist world of the novel, are accepted as real. Some critics stress that the wings are used in the text to displace "concerns pertaining to breasts, female genitalia and menstruation" to "another part of the body" (Peach 154), which suggests that they function as a sign of the mysterious nature of the female body which the rational observer tries to resolve. However, the wings also allow a different reading, focusing on the fact that they are "repeatedly given masculine or phallic overtones" (Bell 29). As I show below, the phallic overtones of the wings are crucial for the production of the liberating effect which Carter's image of the female grotesque possesses. If the wings are read as a sign of the phallic principle, Fevvers' grotesque body can be viewed from two main perspectives. The first one is represented by a male character, Mr. Rosencreutz, who treats her as a personification of the occult symbol that is pictured in his medallion: "The penis represented by itself, aspires upwards, represented by the wings, but is dragged downwards, represented by the twinning stem, by the female part, represented by the rose" (Carter, *Nights* 77). This image focuses on the downward movement in which the high, the phallic, is dragged down by the low, the womb, to the level of the earth. The second perspective, captured through a poster that advertises the "most famous *aerialiste* of the day" (7), however, offers a different image of the winged body: "The artist had chosen to depict her ascent from behind – bums aloft, you might say; up she goes, in a steatopygus perspective, shaking out about her those tremendous red and purple pinions, pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she" (7). Here the focus centres on the upward movement in which the body moves towards the high sphere of the sky.

The first perception, emphasizing the downward movement, connects Fevvers' body image to the "downward thrust, inherent in all Rabelaisian images" (Bakhtin 386), as it represents the carnivalesque "grotesque swing, which brings together heaven and earth", in which "the accent is placed not on the upward movement but on the descent" (370). In fact, from a feminist perspective, this "grotesque swing" can be seen as bringing down to the material bodily level the phallic, patriarchal culture whose power is associated with the oppression of the female body – which has been traditionally perceived (to a greater extent than the male one) as "the site of unruly passions and appetites that might disrupt the pursuit of truth and knowledge" (Shildrick, Price 2).<sup>7</sup> However, since the result of such grotesque debasement is, in fact, the regeneration of the debased – through its contact with the material bodily stratum, the high is "uncrowned in order to be regenerated" (Bakhtin 372) – it is possible to see the whole process as merely the mis/use of the body for the sake of the strengthening of the element that oppresses it. Carter's narrative symbolically

suggests this possibility when Rosencreutz tries to use Fevvers in a ritual aimed at his own renewal.

This, however, is all challenged by the second perception of Fevvers' grotesque body, which focuses on the opposite, upward movement. Now it is not the body that "drags" down the wings, but rather the wings that, moving the body upwards, liberate it from the sphere of the low. Here Carter turns one of the main principles of the carnivalesque grotesque upside-down, since the ultimate liberating power is not given to Fevvers' Rabelaisian body but to the wings that redeem the female subject from the limits of the material bodily principle. On the one hand, this fact becomes a part of the story's plot when, for instance, posing as the Winged Victory in the brothel, Fevvers is not treated like one of the prostitutes by the customers, and thus avoids the fate of a "whore". On the other hand, this "escape" from the material bodily sphere acquires wider implications in the symbolic context of the novel, in terms of which the wings make her a "New Woman" who is no longer "bound down to the ground" (25).

Through these wings, the "New Woman" is allowed to make herself at home in a sphere that was traditionally defined as truly belonging only to man – who, as Carter states in another of her novels, "lives in historicity" because "his phallic projectory takes him onwards and upwards" (*Passion* 53). Possessing this "phallic projectory", Fevvers, even if unable to control history as such, is certainly able to control her own history. In one sense this is reflected in the fact that her point of view controls the narrative that presents "her-story"<sup>8</sup> to Walser, whose attempt to explain the "winged woman" from an "objective" point of view of masculine rationalism fails. In addition, Fevvers exercises a kind of control over the processes that form the history of one's life that was traditionally accessible only to men. Through her wings she achieves economic independence (making the most of her "winged wonder" status), escapes from sexual victimization (she is able to "fly off" when threatened by a male aggressor), and is even freed from the dependent status of woman in marital relationships. It is Walser who, once married to her, is expected to "hand himself over into [her] safekeeping" and let her "hatch him out" and "make a new man of him" (Carter 281). Visualizing the journalist as writing down not only her story of a woman with wings, but "the histories of those woman [*sic*] who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten", she believes that in that way he too can "help to give the world a little turn into the new era" when "all the women will have wings" (285). Fevvers does not require a complete re-writing of history from women's point of view, but the adding to history of the voices of those (i.e. women) who are usually "erased from history as if they had never been" (285). She advocates not the replacement of the masculine by the feminine, but rather the co-existence of the two.

Using an element that can be read as a symbol of phallic, masculine power (wings) to create a picture of the New Woman of the New Age, Carter, in her specific way, produces a grotesque conception of the body that, like Rabelais's conception, "is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture" (Bakhtin 325).

## Conclusion

As has been shown, the three characters discussed in this paper represent, in various ways, traditional categories of the female grotesque. Firstly, they all can be seen as Medusa figures, powerful enough to destroy men. While in the case of Fevvers this destructive power appears only in the form of unrealized potential, when Walsler feels that she “could easily crush him to death in her huge arms” (Carter 52), in the other two cases it takes the form of either symbolic (Ruth’s disempowerment of her husband) or real castration (Dog Woman’s act). Furthermore, the characters’ bodily excess aligns them with the grotesque category of the Fat Lady, which both challenges socially sanctioned norms of feminine beauty and points at the uneasy situation of women who, more than men, are pressed to comply with the rules of classical aesthetics. Finally, Weldon’s, Winterson’s and Carter’s characters function as examples of the Unruly Woman, who not only escapes from her entrapment in the subordinate position of wife, but also becomes a voice providing a critique of male-dominated social systems and institutions. All this aligns the three female characters to the woman of Gallic tradition and allows one to perceive them as twentieth-century feminist versions of the medieval popular comic image of womanhood.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, analyzing the scene of Gargantua’s birth, he believes that what “loom[s] beyond Garagamelle’s womb [is] the devoured and devouring womb of the earth and the ever-regenerated body of the people” (Bakhtin 226).

<sup>2</sup> “At the time of Rabelais, this second line was supported by the ‘Platonizing poets’ and was based in part on the tradition of chivalry of the Middle Ages” (Bakhtin 239).

<sup>3</sup> Although there are some, e.g. Floyd Grant, who pursue the hypothesis that *Comptes amoureux* could have been written by a male author, the problematic gender of Jeanne Flore in no way diminishes the importance of the fact that, as Cathleen M. Bauschatz states, the work “creates a convincing picture of a woman writer speaking to women readers” (44).

<sup>4</sup> *Quinze joies de mariage* is an anonymous late 14<sup>th</sup> or early 15<sup>th</sup> century satire that represents the misogynist voice of the *querelle des femmes* debate, warning the young man against the trap of marriage.

<sup>5</sup> This canon consists of restrictive rules, such as “not to place the elbows on the table, to walk without protruding the shoulder blades or swinging the hips, to hold in the abdomen, to eat without loud chewing, not to snort and pant, to keep the mouth shut, etc.” (Bakhtin 322, note 8).

<sup>6</sup> The fact that Bobbo believes that he is more intelligent than his mistress, a writer of Romantic fiction, which is reflected in his attempt to improve her style of writing, illustrates this male need to adopt the position of intellectual superiority.

<sup>7</sup> As Shildrick and Price point out, “the ability to effect transcendence and exercise rationality has been gender marked as an attribute of men alone” while “women remain rooted within their bodies, held back by their supposedly natural biological processes” (2).

<sup>8</sup> Drawing a distinction between masculine history (“his-story”) and the history as presented by the novel, Aidan Day believes *Nights at the Circus* to be “a her-storical novel to the extent that it gives details on and voices to women involved in historical events – details left out of conventional history”.

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