

***Bare Essentials: Gender Fictions,
Embodiment Matters***

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Declaration

I, Charis Xinari, declare that, except for all citations referenced in the text, the work contained herein is my own

Abstract of Thesis

Feminist theory's concern with the subject 'woman' has generated a number of views regarding the use of the term as defining her ontological status within discourse and signification. The crisis of both the sex (female) and the gender (feminine) that traditionally defined her subjectivity has forced feminist theory to reconsider its definition of woman. Butler's notion of performativity has challenged the very notion of a subject that performs his/her gender, as well as the notion of a body on which the mark of gender is inscribed. If sex and gender, and ultimately our bodies, are discursive constructions then where is woman's subjectivity grounded and what are the implications of such an approach to subjectivity for political efficacy?

According to Merleau-Ponty "existence realises itself on the body." If the body is the locus of subjectivity then it is to the matter of embodiment, as substance and as point of concern, that we need to turn in order to discuss the development of subjectivity, and gender subjectivity in particular.

This thesis deals with the notion of gender as embodied practice and looks at the transgender subject—both transvestite and transsexual—as addressing the matter of embodiment located primarily in transsexuality's desire to occupy material body. In the association that it establishes between gender practices and an experience of the 'flesh as the flesh itself' as defining subjectivity, the transsexual body, 'the matter of embodiment' as it has been argued, opens up a space for the reconsideration of the matter of embodiment altogether.

Such concerns are addressed through a reading of the transsexual body via the work of Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler in the first part of the thesis. The second part develops the ideas stemming from these readings through the work of Angela Carter with a particular focus on embodiments of woman/hood in *Nights at the Circus* and *The Passion of New Eve*. Carter's interest in the material conditions of woman, her concern with 'demythologising' women, as well as the bodily resistance—the body's resistance to be consumed by and within discursive powers—embodied in her work, serve as the space for a re-examination of the role of the body in the development of gender subjectivity.

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Abbreviations

Page references to some frequently used texts are preceded by the following abbreviations. The editions used are those listed in the “Bibliography” section at the end of the thesis.

By Judith Butler:

BM *Bodies that Matter*
GT *Gender Trouble*

By Angela Carter:

NC *Nights at the Circus*
PNE *The Passion of New Eve*
SW *The Sadeian Woman*

By Simone de Beauvoir:

SS *The Second Sex*

By Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

PP *Phenomenology of Perception*

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Introduction

There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body as such cannot be thought.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

The body as the locus of subjectivity has been at the centre of philosophy's pre-occupation with being since the Ancient Greeks. In its consideration as the space within which, and on the surface of which, subjectivity is developed and inscribed respectively, the flesh has been thought both in relation and as *other* to the mind. The mind/body dualism (where body is the flesh) epitomised in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, which privileges the mind by positing it at the centre of being, carries with it a history of corporal suppression bordering on *somatophobia*, inherent in Western culture. This is a suggestion a number of contemporary philosophers have made. Elizabeth Grosz says that "since the inception of philosophy as a separate and self-contained discipline in ancient Greece, philosophy has established itself on the foundations of a profound somatophobia" (5). With reference to Plato, she traces the etymology of the word *body (soma)* to its introduction "by Orphic priests, who believed that man was a spiritual or noncorporeal being trapped in the body as in a dungeon (*sēma*)" (5). Similarly to Grosz who interprets Plato as considering matter as "a denigrated and imperfect version of the Idea" (based on his doctrine of the Forms), Susan Bordo further reads the position of the body within Western philosophy as that of the "enemy" [her emphasis]. She in turn quotes Plato as saying that the body "takes away from us the power of thinking at all"—"Whence come wars, and fightings, and factions? Whence but from the body and the lusts of the body?" (quoted in Bordo, 145). The body (understood as a matter of flesh) constitutes, as Grosz characteristically says, "a betrayal of and a prison for the soul, reason, or mind" (5).

Concomitant to an understanding of the body as flesh is the body's elision from the 'I' of subjectivity through the view of the body as the "denigrated and imperfect version of the Idea" (Grosz 5). Matter and flesh become in this context, the descriptive characteristics of the body which itself becomes literally, a matter of flesh (not of mind); not the embodiment of the Idea but rather its flawed and imperfect *other*. As such, the body is seen as that which tries to become the expression of mind and soul but can never achieve this

elation as it is always subject to nature and physical laws. The body's materiality, its material form, firmly grounds and prevents it from becoming anything more than *res extensa* (Descartes' extended matter as the antipode of *res cogitas*, the mind); its mortal nature, its material needs, and the primitive instincts that rule it always invest it with the potential to undermine the "I's" best efforts for self-realisation.

The body's materiality becomes in this context its literal fall from Grace, a fall which is central to the narrative of Western culture as it affiliates itself to the *grand narrative* of Christianity. Adam and Eve's fall is instigated by the serpent, a creature condemned to crawl and thus constantly in touch with natural matter, always grounded and never elevated. It presents the first woman—created out of the first man's rib—with the temptation of consuming the forbidden fruit, the fruit of knowledge. In accepting the challenge Eve simultaneously disobeys the law of the Father-God, mediates this defiance through her body in the act of consumption, and becomes aware of her body's materiality by acquiring knowledge of her body both as object and subject for the first time. This knowledge is later inscribed on the surface of the body, a body invested both by nature and by knowledge. Her encounter with Adam, subsequent to the consumption of the fruit and the emancipation of their respective awareness of sexual difference congenital in their desire to hide the mark of their difference behind the fig leaf, inscribes on their bodies both the recognition of their materiality as well as a narrative of corporal oppression to compensate for the original sin. Their exile from the Garden of Eden and their subsequent grounding on earth, where Adam is condemned to work to cover their material needs and Eve is condemned to bleed once a month and go through painful labour to bring her children into the world, establishes a direct connection between the materiality of their bodies, their mortal state, and their fall from Grace. The body becomes the prison within which the firstborn are to serve their sentence. In the narrative of the development of subjectivity, female subjectivity in particular, the body is always and already that which keeps us firmly grounded through its materiality, signified in Eve's bleeding womb, her narrative inscribed through her own flesh and blood. In the context of the myth of the Fall and in her quest for knowledge (*epistēmē*), Eve also becomes the first scientist (*epistēmōn*). As her knowledge is mediated through the body, in the act of eating and not that of reading, this knowledge is empirical and always embodied; Eve is the embodiment of knowledge. Eve's subjectivity is formed through her epistemological narrative, a narrative which is

both formed and forming through her body. As *epistēmon* rather than *gnostis* (from *gnosis*, knowledge of an intuitive form), Eve possesses the object of her knowledge in that it is incorporated in her body. Thus, knowledge is never outside her body but always located within its experience.

Like Eve's narrative which is marked by her disobedience followed by corporal punishment by the law of the Father, the narrative of female oppression is inscribed by patriarchy's attempt to use women's biology as a justification for social inequality between men and everyone else who is *other* than men. Patriarchy has tried to use women's biology, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, "as a convenient self-justification for women's secondary social positions by containing them within bodies that are represented, even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable."¹ Thus the "facts" of biology become central in the narrative of women's oppression and their bodies are demonised both by patriarchy, and often by women themselves, as that which is simultaneously *other* and yet grounds them firmly to their material conditions.

Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms. Relying on essentialism, naturalism and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men (Grosz 14).

Patriarchy has carved women's position in society based on the narrative which itself has constructed in reading the female body as biologically inferior to the male. Thus it has accounted for placing woman in the position of the *other*, an other who having been created from Adam's rib is condemned to be always imperfect and to require to be complemented, defined in relation to man, never autonomous, never whole. Philosophy's claim of a disembodied subjectivity as expressed from Plato to Descartes, is in contradiction to this definition of the subject/woman as constituted by and within her body. This is collateral with philosophy's and patriarchy's (a philosophy which has for the most part been reliant

¹ Grosz uses the term 'misogynist' (as in 'misogynist thought') rather than the term 'patriarchy.' I have changed the term not because I want to argue that patriarchal thought is necessarily misogynist but rather because I believe that this is a more appropriate term in this context.

on patriarchal ideas of the world) regard of woman as more corporeal than man, and thus inferior, as well as an understanding of her body as irrational, fluctuating flesh contrasted by male rationality and virility. If women are so in touch with nature and their bodies which define their position in society that implies, within patriarchal culture, that woman's sex and gender—a distinction that does not come to prominence before the 20th century but which is fundamentally introduced in the narrative of the Enlightenment—is a given that stems from her very nature, her body. Women, as subjects, have been interpreted and constituted through their bodies. Myth and the "facts" of biology have formulated their position in society and moulded the bodies which are their vehicles in the world; but it is through interpretation and narrative construction (the fictions of sex and gender) that their subjectivity has been inscribed on the surface of their bodies. As such, the nature of woman's body (its "naturalness" as well as its ontological constitution) becomes contestable.

The historical effects of the Enlightenment—effects which are still in process—forced philosophy to reconsider the notions of the subject and subjectivity. Even though the distinction between sex and gender does not become a feminist discursive trope until the nineteen-sixties, the first indications of such a differentiation between sex (as "natural", biological body) and gender (as cultural attributions inscribed on the surface of the body) are implicit in the Enlightenment's philosophical narrative. Current perceptions of the development of gender subjectivity are grounded on the eighteenth century's notion of the subject as a *tabula rasa*. Enlightenment's reaction against preconceived ideas and established authorities introduced the notion of the self-created, self-developed, fatherless subject that enters the world as a "blank page" waiting for inscription. During this time, the development of subjectivity becomes determined by experience and through the subject's interaction with the world. In *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, where he refutes the existence of innate ideas, John Locke emphasises the contribution of both consciousness and experience in the acquisition of knowledge, our understanding of the world, and the creation of personal identity.

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:--How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the *materials* of reason and knowledge? To this I

answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the *materials* of thinking. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.²

Locke's assertion of the mind as 'white paper' rejects the notion of subjectivity as predetermined by laws and powers external to the subject and opens the space for the possibility of the creation of subjectivity and personal identity as effected by the subject itself. Nature thus, is not destiny.

Accordingly, the development of gender subjectivity is regarded as contingent to education and training, nurture rather than nature. Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, while admitting a physical difference between the sexes—"In the government of the physical world it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male"—advocates that it is not woman's nature, her body or intellectual abilities, that make her into what she is but it is rather her instruction that creates the subject that is woman. Similarly to Kant's response to the question 'What is Enlightenment?', that "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity"³, she calls for an emergence of woman from "the state of perpetual childhood" that results from a process of objectification orchestrated by men and perpetuated by women that foolishly fall for men's flattery—"I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the phrases susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness."⁴ Wollstonecraft focuses on the idea of Education as it is discussed in the *Vindication* where she argues that femininity is a construction of patriarchy perpetuated by women's willingness to succumb to it and play along gender rules, and roles, created for them by a male/masculine dominated society. "One cause for this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books

² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (2.1.2), in *John Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding* collated and annotated by Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1894) 121.

³ Immanuel Kant, "An answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment" in *Kant's Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970) 54-60.

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Polity Press 1989) 84 – 114.

written on this subject by men” who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, instruct them to develop in a specific role. As a result “the civilised women of the present century, with a few exceptions are only anxious to inspire love.”⁵ Like Kant, she takes from Rousseau his notion of freedom as autonomy and extends Rousseau’s ideas to implicate the development of female and feminine subjectivity:

[T]he most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau’s opinion respecting men: I extend it to women.⁶

Implicit in Wollstonecraft’s argument is the desire for women to be viewed first and foremost as human beings, different in biology, but equal in their potential for self-development as autonomous beings within the context of Enlightenment reason entailing a rejection of myth and preconceived ideas. The contradiction in her argument however, rests in her belief in an equality which appears to be limited by her insistence on men and women serving different roles in society. The mind is a blank page, she seems to argue, but woman’s body is inscribed by nature and has been invested with the responsibility of motherhood. Women are equal to men, but the gender roles ought to remain the same; equality is to be based on the subject’s potential for self-realisation. Thus biology and the sex and gender narratives stemming from their assumption, remain fundamental to woman’s position but do not limit her potential in the project of the development of subjectivity.

The idea of the subject as a “blank page” inscribed through experience and developed by and within culture is further explored in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Shelley’s own position remains ambiguous when discussed both within the context of Enlightenment thought and the Romantic tradition with which she was affiliated and that marks a reaction against the same notions that make the creation of this tradition possible: Reason and the self-created, autonomous subject. Frankenstein’s creation, a “blank page” waiting for inscription, with no guidance by his father and with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*—

⁵ Ibid. 85.

⁶ Ibid. 88.

yet another discussion of the Fall—as his cultural text, and society’s regard of him as a monster based on an evaluation of his body, becomes that which cultural discourse and societal structure makes him. The notion of the autonomous, self-defining subject is challenged within Shelley’s text which appears to anticipate poststructuralism’s definition of the subject as the product of discursive power.

Post-Enlightenment, in the mid-twentieth century Beauvoir argues that “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (SS 295), thus shifting emphasis from nature to nurture and culture. Following that, a few decades later, Judith Butler contests the very notion of the subject by arguing that in fact, there is no subject that performs its gender as gender is in essence, in *its* essence, performative. Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and her celebration of the *trans-* subject, the subject in *transition*—the in between—has been emblematised as the expression of a postmodern view of gender which, however, cannot remain unrelated to the development of subjectivity. Butler’s chosen subject is more specifically the transgender subject (be it transvestite or crossdresser), that which consistently crosses the boundaries of gender through the reiteration of a gender performance that does not correspond to the physicality of his/her body/matter. Such acts that repudiate conventional gender classification while rejecting the contingency between sex, gender and the body/matter, subvert established gender structures and destabilise traditional views of gender, its relation to the sexed body, and subjectivity. Butler’s emphasis on the transgender rather than the transsexual illustrates the argument concerning the performative nature of gender, but at the same time privileges an understanding of gender performance (and its performatives) as independent of or, *contra* and in spite of the body/matter, the matter of which does not pre-exist the constitution of the subject as such. Bodies that matter—as well as those that do not matter—can only be understood as discursive effects, and within the context of discourse and signification; access to a pre-linguistic body, a body that pre-exists subjectivity as the location from which subjectivity is acquired and subsequently inscribed on its surface is precluded—“the body as such cannot be thought.”⁷

Feminist theory of the last two decades has turned to the narratives of psychoanalysis and structuralist/poststructuralist theory to discuss the notions of sex and gender identities, a focal point for feminist politics. Proto-feminist and feminist reactions to

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak, “In a Word: Interview,” with E.Rooney in *Differences* 1:2, 1989, 124-156.

patriarchal formulations and understandings of the subject/woman—from Mary Wollstonecraft within the context of the Enlightenment to Judith Butler within the context of postmodernity—have varied in focus and in scope, as well as in politics. That which remains the underlying preoccupation throughout the history of feminist thought is the notion, and the materiality, of the female body. The female body and the narratives that constitute its reality—myth, religion, science—and the historical variations of its materiality, its flesh which “comes to us out of history,”⁸ have been patriarchy’s primary tool of female oppression as well as the creative force that has been the feminist movement’s primary drive. In theories and politics that read the female body and the sexual difference invested in it both by nature and by culture as the locus of resistance against further manipulation by patriarchy, as well as in those practices and political acts that attempt to go beyond the restraints presented by the body/matter, the latter is inevitably present. To go beyond the limits and limitations presented by the body entails, nonetheless, an investment of it as the locus of identity and subjectivity. The last two decades have brought with them an extreme preoccupation with body matters as well as a variety of extreme corporeal acts often literally inscribed on the surface of the body or otherwise enacted through it.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and the publication of all the philosophical trouble it created, as well as the popularisation of all matters pertinent to the body epitomised in our contemporary obsession with plastic/cosmetic surgery⁹ and reflected in the increasing interest in the definition of identity and subjectivity through corporeal matter, present us with an unprecedented desire to negotiate the notion of subjectivity through the flesh. As the humanist conception of the autonomous, self-actuating agent invested with reason, leading to an understanding of the subject as self-dependent, is challenged within poststructuralist thought that relies heavily on Foucault’s work on power, contemporary notions of subjectivity result from theory’s desire to challenge traditional understandings of

⁸ “Flesh comes to us out of history.” Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*.

⁹ In an essay entitled “Embodiment Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body,” Kathy Davis says:

“The body is the vehicle *par excellence* for the modern individual to achieve a glamorous life-style. Bodies no longer represent how we fit into the social order, but are the means of self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be.

[...] Individuals are prepared to go to great lengths to achieve a body which looks young, thin, sexual and successful while ageing, ill, or disabled bodies are hidden from view.” In Kathy Davis (ed). *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Sage 1997), 2.

the subject. Foucauldian understandings of the creation of the subject, central to the currently predominant poststructuralist thought, have forced theory to re-evaluate the position of the body in contemporary debates of subjectivity. Feminist investments on the female body have inevitably been influenced by poststructuralist theories of textuality and the notions of sex and gender identity, central to feminist politics, grounded on either the embrace or the attempted transcendence of the female body have been unsettled. Butler's use of the transgender subject as subversive of sex and gender identity norms has made transgender practices, symptomatic of our culture's investment on the body, the evident subject/matter of debates around subjectivity and embodiment.

The notion of embodiment implicit in Butler's philosophical argument which is informed by Hegel to begin with, and is mediated through her reading of Foucault, through whom she proceeds to read Beauvoir, has brought Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the concept of embodiment to the foreground of discussions concerning theory's conceptualisation of subjectivity. If the body is both an object and a subject, in and of the world, as he argues; and, if as Beauvoir argues, taking from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Sartre's existentialism, the body is not a thing but a situation; how do we begin to understand sex and gender subjectivity as embodied practice that informs contemporary understandings enacted on and through the body? And how do we account for the current crisis of identity that transgender body/narratives have brought into the domain of theory and that appear to be symptomatic, not only of culture's preoccupation with the body/matter but, of our desire for embodiment? Why is it that at a specific point in time the body becomes the focus of the debate around subjectivity and why is subjectivity subsequently concomitant to the materiality of the body? Is it, perhaps, due to having now discovered ways to affect the plasticity of the body—through exercise regimes, plastic/cosmetic surgery, cosmetic products and make-up—that we are now able to subvert traditional understandings of identity contingent to a regard of the body as defining identity?

It needs to be acknowledged that the contemporary crisis of sex and gender identity politics is always taking place within the narrative of the Enlightenment. It is contingent upon the notion of the subject as a *tabula rasa* and its re-consideration within the context of poststructuralist thought—that challenges the subject's authority of its own text—and in the reduction of subjectivity to textuality (product of language and power, a narratological

effect), that the interest in the body as grounding subjectivity becomes central to contemporary debates. Thinkers now discuss the body in terms of *materialisation*: how and under the influence of which powers is corporealisation achieved?

The new body that has begun to be identified can no longer be considered as a brute fact of nature. In the wake of Foucault (e.g. 1979, 1980), a chorus of critical statements has arisen to the effect that the body is “an entirely problematic notion,” that “the body has a history” in that it behaves in new ways at particular historical moments, and that the body should be understood not as a constant amidst flux but as an epitome of that flux (Csordas 2-3).

The notion of a fixed body is contested, as a number of postmodern/poststructuralist theories and practices exemplify. Some of these practices escape the body’s materiality even in their material engagement with it. This is aptly epitomised in the French body-artist Orlan’s surgical alteration of her body to create a body of art comprised of features from Old master paintings.¹⁰ Parveen Adams argues that Orlan’s project is disembodiment through speech. “Her subjective account is that with each operation she becomes more distant from her body. It is as though she sloughs off her body to enter the pure subjectivity of speech. It is as though the body is surgically severed from speech” (Adams 154). Orlan’s practices have been likened to those of the transsexual who, unhappy with the materiality of his/her body, seeks sex reassignment, the surgical remoulding of the body to match the desired gender identity; but it is a mistake, as I will try to show within the context of this work, to confuse the transsexual’s desire to escape the “wrong body”, which is a narrative that occasionally translates to embodied resistance in relation to the experience of subjectivity, with a desire to escape the body altogether and corporealise discourse.

¹⁰ Parveen Adams says in her book *The Emptiness of the Image*, regarding Orlan:

“The images at which refiguration is directed come from her choice of features from Old Master paintings. She is turning herself into an art historical ‘morph’. She is an image trapped in the body of a woman. When she speaks of “woman-to-woman” transsexualism that is exactly right. She is changing, not from one thing to another—metamorphosis—but from one register to another. What is at stake is abstraction through *art*, both the art of the image and the art of the scalpel. She claims to be flesh become image” (143-144).

Although I disagree with Adams’ view of Orlan as the better transsexual as well with her further view of transsexuality as always and already attempting to escape the body, I do share her understanding of Orlan as a spectacle that creates her own materiality not through the body—although ironically the physicality of the body (flesh and blood) is the only omnipresence in her performances—but through the image. Although Orlan’s project aims at using the plasticity of the body to show that there is no material body that “does” or “is” beauty, the body/matter is that which is confirmed both in the audience’s reactions to the spectacle of her undergoing surgery (fainting, vomiting, leaving the room) and her own body’s reaction to it (bleeding).

It is those with a vested interest in body/matters, those for whom bodies have been at the centre of the establishment of their position as oppressed subjects, who can and do challenge both the theory and the practice of embodiment in its various enactments as defining subjectivity. For feminists, the body has become a territory which needs to now be reclaimed from those lines of poststructuralist thought which, in appropriating it in terms of textuality, have allowed it to be absorbed by the narrative of discourse and signification, thus reducing it to mere language. For women, as for the transsexual subject, it is the “desire to occupy flesh as the flesh itself” (Prosser 7) that is at stake in what Barbara Brook reads as theory’s new found somatophobia, “the paradoxical immateriality of bodies in much of the theorising around the body.”¹¹ If the body, in all these formulations of subjectivity, is at the centre of identity formation, feminist theory needs to reclaim not woman’s sex or gender, but her body. How do we go about developing a new theory of subjectivity through the body without falling back into essentialist notions of identity, the same notions the sex-gender distinction had almost made possible, yet without losing sight of the body altogether? It is to the notion of subjectivity as embodied practice that we need to turn to reclaim our bodies, our selves.

It is for these reasons that theory has now turned its interest to the notion of embodiment as defining identity. For it is both as objects and as subjects that we participate in the world. As Susan Bordo argues, “we are creatures swaddled in culture from the moment we are designated one sex or, the other, one race or another” (Bordo 36); our bodies are thus both in and of the world. The acknowledgement of the position of the body both as subject and as object has led to a rethinking of the notion of embodiment as understood by Merleau-Ponty. More specifically feminist theory has turned to a re-examination of Beauvoir’s view of the body as a situation. Butler’s relation to phenomenology as understood through her work on Hegel, her assessment of Foucault’s understanding of power as inscribed on the surface of the body—an idea which presumes a body as *tabula rasa* on which cultural inscriptions can be etched—as well as her own understanding of the Beauvoirean “becoming” as happening from a place outside the materiality of the sexed body, have also forced theory to reconsider Beauvoir’s work, and the notion of the body as a situation in particular.

¹¹ Brook, Barbara. *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London: Longman 1999) 116.

Toril Moi in *What Is a Woman?*, where she is trying to develop a theory of the sexually different body without rethinking, as Butler does, the notions of sex and gender and the distinction between them which she considers “irrelevant to the task of producing a concrete, historical understanding of what it means to be a woman in a given society” (Moi 4-5), returns to a re-examination of Beauvoir’s work. Moi argues that “no feminist has produced a better theory of the embodied, sexually different human being than Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*” (Moi 5). Moi’s work also suggests—at some points expressly—that Beauvoir’s work, her view of the body as a situation, her understanding of woman as a “becoming” as well as her emphasis on the sexually differentiated body through lived experience (whereby lived experience is discussed through her understanding of and intellectual interaction with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) can be a useful tool in reading the transsexual body, the male-to-female transsexual body in particular.

Although feminist theory’s relation to the transsexual subject has been contentious, the male-to-female transsexual has presented feminist theorists with a great challenge: s/he has forced them to rethink the question “what is a woman?” which Beauvoir first tried to address, outside essentialist understandings of sex, gender and the subject. In h/er claims of an essential gender identity grounded on a body which can be surgically reconstructed—outside the womb, outside the maternal body—the transsexual makes h/erself. S/he literalises the notion of the autonomous, self-created subject who can erase the mark of sexual difference and thus re-invent and re-inscribe h/er identity. The transsexual appears to literalise the notion of the subject as *tabula rasa*. In that s/he is a woman *in the making*, the male-to-female transsexual has forced us to ask, above all, what *makes* a woman? Is *making* a woman the same as becoming one as Beauvoir has it? How much of this making is narrative work, materialising the body through discourse, and how does that enable a subject to make claims to womanhood? There are a number of reasons why male-to-female transsexualism brings the category woman into crisis: the transsexual ability to transcend one body and surgically construct another that is essentialised and through which s/he grounds h/er subjectivity; the male-to-female transsexual’s claim of being “really” a woman trapped in a man’s body concomitant to her excessive performance of femininity; h/er essentialisation of gender in h/er belief that gender persists within and without [the conforming body] and cannot be altered, whereas sex can be manipulated. Second wave feminism has read the male-to-female transsexual as an organ of patriarchy’s effort to

literally possess women's bodies.¹² Feminism affiliated with poststructuralist theory has read the same subject as symbol of subversion of essentialist sex and gender categories.¹³ None of these theories has, however, successfully addressed the transsexual subject and h/er body/narrative through a theory of embodiment that does not find recourse to essentialist definitions of what is a woman, or without resulting to the elision of the material conditions of woman manifested through her body.

This thesis aims at reading transsexual narratives as the locus of gender embodiment within a general understanding of the body as a situation as discussed by Simone de Beauvoir, and more specifically, through her understanding of woman not as an essential state of being but rather as a "becoming", as argued within the context of a phenomenological tradition. As Beauvoir argues, "for the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another" (65). What can transsexual narratives tell us about the embodied situations of sex and gender and the processes involved in "becoming" a woman, as it were? Does a transsexual "really" become a woman and what is the force of that "really"? Or is it that, "really", there is never a body as *tabula rasa*; that identity can be re-invented, but it can only be so from a place which is always already inscribed, and although that does not create for the subject an unalterable identity, it conditions the end result of the alteration?

This work examines transsexual narratives and gender fictions by stripping the subject down to its bare essentials: the body and the narratives that condition its materiality. As Csordas argues, "our lives are not always lived in objectified bodies, for our bodies are not originally objects to us. They are instead the ground of perceptual processes that *end* in objectification, and the play between pre-objective and objectified bodies within our own culture is precisely what is at issue in many of the contemporary critiques" (7). Merleau-Ponty argues that to be a body is to be tied to a specific world and the bodies that we are, are not primarily in space but of space. As such the body is the fundamental of existence; it is that through which we experience the world as well as that which forms our representation in the world. One could go as far as to say that the body is *essential* to our

¹² See Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*.

¹³ This category includes many theorists but Judith Butler's discussions of sex, gender and the body remain the most influential in this context.

being; but *essences* have become so very problematic and invalid in these postmodern times. How do we then examine the *essentials* of subjectivity outside essentialist models? How can an investigation into the *bare essentials* of being avoid reverting to essentialism, thus returning full circle to where it started? “We begin from our conclusions,” says Eve/lyn.¹⁴ It is only through lived experience from a specific situation that we can re-evaluate the nature of our lives. It is true as they say, that “the body as such cannot be thought”;¹⁵ neither is that feasible nor is it necessary, for that matter. An examination of the *bare essentials* exposes them as always and already vested with discursive interest and influence. The body as a *tabula rasa* is by definition impossible to read; the moment it is read, even the blank sheet becomes inscribed through the act of reading. How can we then speak of *bare essentials* without either essentialising them or revealing them to have been vested all along? If theory cannot theorise about the materiality of the body without escaping its flesh, and as we cannot find recourse to the flesh as a pre-linguistic body, it is to the narratives that expose the essentials of subjectivity as being bare only by name, inscribed even in their nakedness and in their claims of having the ability to shed their skins and uncover themselves as bare flesh, a blank sheet awaiting for inscription, that we need to turn. If “the cultural imaginary is always embodied”¹⁶ then it is also true that embodiment is narrative work developed and experienced through the body; and if the body cannot be theorised maybe it can be discussed in the context of its fictional imaginings. If theory, with body as its subject—but not its object—cannot account for the bodily resistance which forms an essential part of subjectivity, the body’s story, its fictions, its narratives might.

Angela Carter’s work presents us with what I would like to term as a *bodily resistance* which seems to have escaped both theory’s work—particularly as expressed in Butler’s discussions of the body as discursive effect—and the transsexual’s construction of h/er body/narrative. This resistance is also located in the transsexual body/narrative—the transsexual (auto)biographical accounts of the experience of “being born into the ‘wrong’

¹⁴ Angela Carter’s involuntary transsexual character in *The Passion of New Eve*.

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak, “In a Word: An Interview,” with Ellen Rooney. *Differences* 1:2, 1989, 124-156.

¹⁶ Moira Gatens, “Universal Rights and the Cultural Imaginary,” Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, Edinburgh, 2 June 2003.

Gatens, here draws on Cornelius Castoriadis for the concept of ‘cultural imaginary’ but she also develops the notion in her work *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996).

body”, a story told in words and in flesh—not in the articulation of that experience but rather in the silencing of bodily acts that can disrupt the flow of the narrative and are thus erased, both from the transsexual narrative/account and from h/er body/narrative. It is in these disruptions that bodily resistance is located, and it is only through disrupted narratives that it can be read.

Carter’s work exemplifies a commitment to the material conditions of woman. This is for Carter the only way to reclaim woman from the mythical attributions patriarchy has invested her with and through which it has tried to construct her by keeping her at a distance from materiality. Myth, Carter argues, has formed our lives and our bodies. Women have been instructed how to “be” through myth, a quality which has overtaken our bodies and our lives. Myth has instructed us how to conduct ourselves in the world, it has defined our position and that position cannot be separated from our bodies as it is through our bodies that we participate in the world. If woman has no body, how does she begin to write her own narrative, to define her own position, and tell her story? Carter does tell woman’s story; but hers is a narrative in which bodies resist and persist. Body/narratives are never coherent because absolute truth and Reality do not exist, any more than a narrative that does not undermine itself from within. The body/narrative of the subject in her stories is full of “inappropriate” acts—acts that cannot be contained in the traditional division of sex and gender performances. Bodily resistance is embodied in Carter’s work much as it is embodied in transsexual body/narratives and accounts of the experience of being “born into the ‘wrong’ body.” That bodies resist narrative and textual formulation is evidence of the body/matter’s resistance to textual and physical annihilation. Those aspects of the body/matter subvert a coherent discursive formulation of the body/narrative; and that the body itself is always a project that involves narrative work, accounts for the position of the body as object in the world and as a body/subject. Bodily resistance is non-essentialist because it is enacted.

Chapter One outlines the theoretical/philosophical background for a discussion of sex and gender as embodied practice through the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Judith Butler. An understanding of Beauvoir’s phenomenological/existentialist affiliations is vital for an appreciation of her argument that “one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman.” The notion of the body as a *situation* as well as woman, not as an essential ontological position but rather, as a *becoming* should be

discussed within the context of the phenomenological/existentialist philosophical tradition from which the terms adhere. Beauvoir's thought in *The Second Sex* is particularly influenced—by her own admission—by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Her debt to the latter is evident in the fundamental ideas that ground her argument—existence as preceding essence, and the body as our vehicle in the world—and as such should also be read in relation to his work. Butler's own attempt to read Beauvoir through the sex/gender distinction, especially in *Gender Trouble*, does not allow for a development of gender subjectivity through the body but is rather limited to an understanding of it as inscribed on the surface of the body, and for that matter, *any* body. Her understanding of gender as an enacted “phantasy”, as opposed to materially enacted through the body, forces her to think of the materiality of the body only in relation to discourse and signification and not as Beauvoir—Butler's point of departure—would have it as realised within a specific bodily situation. Is it that Beauvoir—as Butler seems to argue—privileges a body that is only activated through the imposition of the mark of gender on the sexed body, thus implying that sex has been gender all along? Or is it that Beauvoir is not really arguing in relation to the sex/gender distinction, but rather, focuses on the idea of becoming a subject by negotiating one's freedom in relation to one's situation, the body? If the body is a situation then how does it affect the development of subjectivity?

Chapter Two discusses transsexual body/narratives as they have been constructed both by the subjects themselves and by the medicodiscursive system that has made their development possible. The transsexual body—the contested matter of transsexual subjectivity—problematizes the relationship between sex, gender and the body while at the same time confirming that correspondence between gender identity and the sexed body is fundamental to the experience of subjectivity as ‘whole’ and not as fragmented self. The narrative of “being born into the wrong body” central in the transsexual medicodiscursive narrative that allows access to sex reassignment surgery, as well as the normalising perceptions of sex and gender identity, literally form the materiality of the transsexual body. An examination of the body/narratives of transsexuality can address the matter of embodiment as grounding subjectivity and also investigate the mechanisms through which sex and gender narratives materialise—in the flesh—subjectivity. The material body is the transsexual *topos*, as seen in the transsexual's desire to reassign the body to fit the mind. What this dualism that transsexuality appears to support reveals, though, is the subject's

desire to be 'at home' in his/her body. Where, is this home for the transsexual, though? Is the transsexual's plight any different from any other subject's desire to feel comfortable in his/her own body? Ultimately, what subjectivity does the transsexual embody and what does that tell us about the relationship between the body and its narratives—the ones that form it as much as the ones that it forms, or rather, the ones that develop through the body in the act of reading and being read? Finally, what is the significance of body/narratives (male-to-female transsexual narratives, in particular) for the category of women and feminist theory?

Chapter Three examines the problematisations her novel *The Passion of New Eve*—as fictional transsexual autobiographical narrative—poses in relation to transsexual subjectivity and the “becoming” of the subject woman. Sex and gender categories are for her as mythical as the rest of the cultural imaginary embodied in women's subjectivity. By critically examining the transsexual account of subjectivity—itsself a narrative dependent on other narratives for its development—Carter addresses, not only the matter of transsexual subjectivity (does the transsexual change subjects, bodies, or just body parts, as Garber asks)¹⁷ but also, the matter of subjectivity as embodied practice, sex-specific and gender-specific, and for that reason always manifested through the body as *situation*. Moreover, in crossing the boundaries of gender in its representation of Eve/lyn, as well as the boundaries of genre in posing as a transsexual account, the novel exemplifies Carter's interest in developing alternative narratives of origin that do not conform to the conventions of literary genres or subjectivity. In being both about the *transgender* and the *transgenre*, Carter's narrative of the original woman (a concept loaded with irony in so many respects) makes her project to 'de-mythologise' woman by re-inventing her gender narrative through alternative genres parallel to the transsexual author's project of re-inventing identity.

Chapter Four discusses Angela Carter's own interest in the subject of feminism, woman, and the body/matter through her novel *Nights at the Circus*. The novel exemplifies Carter's interest in the material conditions of woman, her social position and her situation in the world; a situation which Carter appears to understand in relation to Beauvoir's notion of the body as a *situation*. In this novel where facts and fiction are blurred because the actual world and a participation in it is fundamental to subjectivity—and subsequently

¹⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests*.

materiality is elemental to a “body that rises to the world”¹⁸—Carter discusses something which also preoccupies her in *The Sadeian Woman*, her discussion of de Sade’s work and the ideology of pornography: myth and the flesh. The annihilation of the body through myth and the impossibility of political action concomitant to the elision of subjectivity through mythological narratives, is one of Carter’s main targets. For Carter, mythological narratives participate in the process of embodiment of subjectivity; if subjectivity is to be reformulated as to accommodate a new identity for woman (the New Woman) the effects of myth through its incorporation need to be re-assessed. Her interest in ‘de-mythologising’ woman does not stretch to abolishing myth; rather she is interested in presenting women with the fraud beliefs patriarchal myths have seduced her through or otherwise possessed her, to keep her in a distance from the material conditions of her being. Woman herself is annihilated in this process of construction through mythology; she loses her body and herself and she becomes nothing more than a symbol. If feminism is to materially benefit women, Carter argues, it must do so not by inventing new myths (“consolatory nonsense,”¹⁹ as she calls it) for women to be nurtured on; rather, the material conditions of women, who are however formed through myth, must be addressed in a re-examination of the value of myth as forming female/feminine subjectivity and the bodies that enact it. Finally, in *Nights at the Circus*, Carter’s project of creating alternative narratives of origin as to enable women to escape the shackles of mythology, ‘takes off.’ Fevvers, her winged woman, is what comes out of the “unhatched egg” that Eve/lyn finds h/erself to be in *The Passion of New Eve*. In this sense, the novel appears to answer the problematisations about sex, gender, subjectivity and the body, put forward in *Eve*.

Through these explorations, and in recognising that the materiality of the body is not limited to physicality but is rather always mediated through discourse, signification and the cultural myths that shape our lives and the subjects that we become and come to embody, this thesis aims at thinking not “the body as such” but the body as a *situation*.

¹⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

¹⁹ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*.

Chapter One

The theory behind/on the body

I cannot understand the function of the living body except by enacting it myself, and except in so far as I am a body which rises to the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Woman, like man, is her body; but her body is something other than herself.

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

In the Introduction to *The Second Sex*¹ Simone de Beauvoir remarks on a crisis in femininity around the 1950s with the advent of feminism in recent years. Beauvoir notes how “to be a woman” has become a problematic ontological status both in relation to feminism² that considers the term “woman” as carrying negative and derogatory connotations; and in relation to misogynist views which, in trying to secure woman’s inferior status in society, call upon women to remain “women” and attribute femininity as sourcing from what is considered to be “the facts of biology.” Beauvoir herself does not deny the facts of biology as evinced by her long analysis of them in the chapter entitled “The Data of Biology”; what she does, however, deny is that they define for woman a fixed position in society. She compares women to other oppressed categories—as it were, cultural *others*—like North American Negroes or the Jews³; “whether it is a race, a caste, a class, or a sex that is reduced to a position of inferiority, the methods of justification are the same”. “The eternal feminine” corresponds to the “black soul” and to “the Jewish character” (SS 19). She proceeds, however, to argue that even though these categories can stand united in oppression, in that they all occupy the position of the *other*, the bond that unites women to their oppression with these *others* is not comparable for they have been oppressed as a result of historical events whereas woman has been oppressed due to the facts of biology—“The division of the sexes is a biological fact, not an event in human history” (19). One, of course, could take issue with that today as the factual claims of biology have been read as more than biological differences, as a narrative that constructs biological “facts” by reproducing the narrative

¹ All references to this text, unless otherwise stated, are from Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. and ed. by H.M.Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997).

² In using the term “feminism” Beauvoir refers to either feminist trends that have preceded her or that are contemporary to her in the 1950s.

³ Terminology that has acquired derogatory connotations through the same discourse that has defined women as inferior to men.

of sexual difference in order to sustain this difference.⁴ It has certainly been argued that sex—traditionally associated with the facts of biology and the biological differences between men and women—does itself have a history.⁵ Beauvoir, however, is interested, as becomes clear in her argumentation, to note the biological differences between the sexes and to explore how they have come to fix for woman an inevitable position as the second sex. For her, the biological human female body is central to woman's *situation*—a term whose existentialist connotations she acknowledges—and has formed her position in society. For Beauvoir, as for Merleau-Ponty, our bodies are experienced by us, both as objects and as subjects in the world. Since it is only through the body that we experience the world, the way in which we experience that body is bound to affect how we experience the world.

Woman's relation to her body is fundamental to both an understanding of her experience of the world and how the world views her. "The fact of being a man is no peculiarity" (15), Beauvoir says, whereas women always need to first of all present themselves as women in order to define themselves. Man takes his position in the world as a granted; he does not need to present himself on the basis of his sex. The use, even, of the terms "masculine" and "feminine" is just a matter of form, she says; man represents, in discourse, both the positive and the neutral (man as a sexed being, and man as a human being under which woman is subsumed); whereas "woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity" (SS 15). Woman's biology, argues Beauvoir, is one of the fundamental elements of her situation; but so is man's.

Woman has ovaries, a uterus; these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones (15).

⁴ In *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling argues that intersex bodies unsettle the binary opposition concomitant to sexual difference. Their bodies, she argues, are oppressed and shoehorned into categories precisely because they threaten the existence of categories and the binary pair of sexual difference.

"One person's medical progress, however, can be another's discipline and control. Intersexuals such as Maria Patiño [intersex Spanish Olympic athlete raised as a female] have unruly even heretical bodies. They do not fall naturally into a binary classification; only a surgical shoehorn can put them there. But why should we care if a "woman" (defined as having breasts, a vagina, uterus, ovaries, and menstruation) has a "clitoris" large enough to penetrate the vagina of another woman? Why should we care if there are individuals whose "natural biological equipment" enables them to have sex naturally with both men and women? Why must we amputate or surgically hide that "offending shaft" found on an especially large clitoris? The answer: to maintain gender divisions, we must control those bodies that are so unruly as to blur the borders. Since intersexuals quite literally embody both sexes, they weaken claims about sexual difference."

Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 8.

⁵ See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

Women should not deny the femininity of their bodies, she argues. That women simply are not men—the antifeminist argument—has been easy to prove by antifeminists; and Beauvoir agrees. Each human being is singular and individual and women should embrace their singularity rather than deny it. She sees no point in women trying to become men by denying their feminine weakness, the difference of their bodies; a denial of “womanhood” does not liberate us from oppression but rather makes us unrealistic—“this denial does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality” (14), she says. Woman’s reality, argues Beauvoir, is her body; its biological facts and the signification assigned to it within culture and society. It is for this reason that she starts from the data of biology and she proceeds to a lengthy analysis of them.

But who is qualified to speak for woman, she asks—“Man is at once judge and party to the case; but so is woman” (27). For that matter, how do we remove ourselves from the myths of her [woman’s] superiority, inferiority or equality as expressed at times, from different points of view, within culture?

What we need is an angel—neither man nor woman—but where shall we find one? Still, the angel would be poorly qualified to speak, for an angel is ignorant of all the basic facts involved in the problem. With a hermaphrodite we should be no better off, for here the situation is most peculiar; the hermaphrodite is not really the combination of a whole man and a whole woman, but consists of parts of each and thus is neither. It seems to me as if there are, after all, certain women who are best qualified to elucidate the situation of woman (27).

The individual who is to represent the whole needs to have experienced woman’s situation, Beauvoir argues; and sexual difference, as experienced through the biological body and within culture, does matter in this assessment of the position of woman in society. Independent observers cannot be found. Angels, being both mythical and sexless creatures, part of the purely spiritual and immaterial, cannot have knowledge of the situation. Sexual specificity and participation in the material world is central in our understanding of our situation. Hermaphrodites, although occupying material body can never experience themselves as either a whole man or a whole woman, for they are not. Even if raised as one sex and gender or another, their situation being biologically different, they are bound to have only partial knowledge of either situation or not even that; their biological situation forces them to apprehend the world in a different manner than men or women.

There is, for Beauvoir, a specific type of woman that can speak for other women's oppression: the woman who "has won the game", whose privileges have been restored, and who for that reason has never viewed her femininity as an obstacle. This is of course the woman Beauvoir was. She was white, upper middle-class, and extremely well educated. She held a degree in philosophy from the Sorbonne, and was placed second only to Jean-Paul Sartre, with whom she later emerged as one of the leaders of the existentialist movement. She was by no means an 'ordinary' woman. This has been one of the most frequent criticisms relating to her work; her privileged position, say her critics, makes her an inadequate representative. Her own obliviousness as to sexual specificity in relation to her own position in the world; her privileged upbringing as well as her position as an intellectual; her personal relationship with Sartre and the circle of existentialist and other philosophers from her years at the *École Supérieure*, have worked against her acceptance as an intellectual representative by certain feminist trends. Yet Beauvoir does not deny her position; she specifically wants to argue from that position. She does not deny sexual difference or specificity; she denies that woman's biology should hold her back and prevent her from exploring her possibilities in the world, and through her own life she reinforces this belief. It is a mistake to regard Beauvoir's feminism as a feminism of equality. It is, perhaps, best described, as Toril Moi also puts it, as "a feminism of freedom"⁶; a freedom which, is influenced by Sartre's understanding of the term, and yet for Beauvoir, is limited by the body. Total transcendence cannot be achieved due to the limits posed by the materiality of the body, a materiality in which biology is significant yet not enough to define woman. Yet as she says, "some of us [women] have never had to sense in our femininity an inconvenience or an obstacle" (SS 27). Even though she acknowledges that women like her find other problems more pressing than those concerned with themselves (women), still this detachment granted them by their privileged position allows them to be more objective. This is an issue that cannot be won, for women, by quarrelling, she argues; but rather with rational philosophical argumentation. Thus she finds her position as ideal for an explanation of woman's situation.

Still, we know the feminine world more intimately than do the men because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do the men what it means to a human being to be feminine; and we are more concerned with such knowledge. [...] It is significant that books by women on women are in general animated in our day less by a wish to demand our rights but rather by an effort

⁶ Toril Moi. *What is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 230.

towards clarity and understanding. As we emerge from an era of excessive controversy, this book is offered as one attempt among others to confirm that statement (28).

Thus she highlights her interest that the specific text be read not as fighting for women's rights but rather as explaining woman's situation. After all, in Beauvoir's view of things women had won their rights—"in recent debates on the status of women the United Nations has persistently maintained that the equality of the sexes is now becoming a reality" (27). According to Jean-Paul Sartre, "we are condemned to be free"; Beauvoir also believes in man's freedom but she rejected Sartre's concept of absolute freedom.⁷ As for woman's freedom, that is always experienced as limited due to the limitations posed by her body, her situation.

In order to appreciate how Beauvoir understands the body as a situation we need to turn not to Sartre, who also discusses the term in *Being and Nothingness*, but rather to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this work, Merleau-Ponty sees a turn to an examination of the body as the vehicle of perception, and a consideration of the notion of embodiment, as vital for our understanding of the world of phenomena and our perception of it. Indeed, if we are to successfully interpret the body as a situation and woman as a 'becoming' rather than a state of being, it is imperative to read her within the context of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Even though the notion of becoming is contingent to the central existential dictum that existence pre-exists essence, around which Sartre's work develops, it is in accord with Merleau-Ponty's work in the *Phenomenology* that Beauvoir understands woman's body as a situation and woman's subjectivity as a becoming concomitant to that. It is at an understanding of the notion of the *body* through *embodiment* that the two of them meet.

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge 1996). Margaret A. Simons, in an essay entitled "Beauvoir and Sartre: The philosophical relationship" (*Yale French Studies* 72 1986, 165-179), says that the differentiation of Beauvoir's philosophy from Sartre's "must include Beauvoir's early criticism and rejection of Sartre's concept of absolute freedom. [...]"

An important area of Beauvoir's originality and influence on Sartre is in the relationship of the individual to the social, historical context of the individual's action. Beauvoir was the first one to address herself to the problem of the Other, a concern which later became so prominent in Sartre's work. Beauvoir also recognised earlier than did Sartre the limiting effects of the social-historical context, including one's personal history and childhood, upon an individual's choice. She found Sartre's early voluntarism exaggerated" (169).

I. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the situation of the body

It is true, as Marx says, that history does not walk on its head, but it is also true that it does not think with its feet. Or one should say rather that it is neither its 'head' nor its 'feet' that we have to worry about, but its body.

Maurice Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

To what extent does the body come into being through its interaction with the material world, society and culture, and how do these factors affect the *corporealisation* of our subjectivity through the imposition of sex and gender identity? Simone de Beauvoir highlights in *The Second Sex* that to be a subject one needs to occupy material body. "To be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards this world; but nothing requires that this body have this or that particular structure" (39). Beauvoir's original critique is of the biology-is-destiny formulation and the position the facts of biology have fixed for woman in society and history. Without denying the effect biology has on woman's experience of her own body, Beauvoir tries to exemplify that although a body itself is a requirement to being a subject, the form this body takes is not conditioned by anything else other than its own experience of the world. The human race's emphasis on the reproductive function of man as a species, she argues, comes from man's knowledge of his own finitude bound up with death. She reads Sartre's discussion of Heidegger's dictum in *Being and Nothingness* to the effect that "the real nature of man is bound up with death because of man's finite state" (39). She sees man's interest in the perpetuation of the species as correlative to man's individual limitation posed by death. It is essential for him, she argues, that he creates in the progress of his life both a past and a future and thus reproduction becomes essential to being. Even though the perpetuation of the species is vital to man's being, sexual differentiation is not; for species can reproduce without forming their lives on the basis of sexually different bodies, she argues. "True enough, this differentiation is characteristic of existents (*sic*) to such an extent that it belongs in any realistic definition of existence. But it nevertheless remains true that both a mind without a body and an immortal man are strictly inconceivable, whereas we can imagine a parthenogenetic or hermaphroditic society" (SS 39). Beauvoir's emphasis is thus placed on the intrinsic relationship between mind and body, rather than on man and woman's reproductive role and their investment on sexual difference concomitant to that role.

The body is positioned between language and materiality, as it is both a material

entity and a linguistic construction. Therefore in order to discuss it as a “notion” would be merely to continue the long line of theories that have developed on the body itself and around the idea of “what is a body”, thus perpetuating the theorisation of what is considered to be the material manifestation of being. As it is the effort of this work to find the “body” in the “text” it is most appropriate to ask the question: what is the role of the body in *becoming*?

A long line of phenomenological tradition has tried to understand and answer the fundamental ontological questions by developing a “philosophy of *consciousness*.” Neither science nor intellect can grasp the nature of consciousness, therefore, according to Edmund Husserl, philosophy has to return to the study of *phenomena*—appearances and our awareness of them. It is through phenomenological reduction that the essential elements of consciousness can be revealed. Therefore, phenomenology is the means through which consciousness can be approached and studied. For Husserl’s successor, Martin Heidegger, phenomenology is not so much a tool for the study of consciousness as it is a means of exploring the ontological questions of *dasein*, “being-in-the-world”. According to Merleau-Ponty, in order to understand and describe the fundamentals of experience, philosophy needs to pay attention and address the body, through which one experiences, and becomes part of, the world. The body, then, is both an object and a subject, in the world and of the world. The emphasis is on being-in-the-world and being in the position of a subject-object which gains its being by experiencing the world through action.

Merleau-Ponty, strongly influenced by Husserl, opens his *Phenomenology of Perception* with the question “what is phenomenology?” and proceeds to answer that “phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it, all problems amount to finding definitions of essences” (vii). It is a “transcendental philosophy” but, “it is also a philosophy for which the world is always “already there” before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with a philosophical status” [my emphasis] (vii). If phenomenology is a philosophy for which “the world is always ‘already there’” and as such this philosophy makes an attempt to a “primitive contact” with this world, from that we can deduce that it is actually an attempt for the discovery and discussion of the world in pre-linguistic terms. As paradoxical as it may sound, phenomenology is a philosophy that aims at addressing ontological questions not via philosophising⁸ as such

⁸ Merleau-Ponty says in relation to that: “It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing.

but through discussing the materiality of being and how being is perceived by and through the body, the primary tool of being in the world. Choosing to ignore the small paradox of theorising about the materiality of the body in order to escape theory, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology seems an ideal way to address the issues of the creation of subjectivity, and how those relate to bodily manifestations of being in relation to a body which is both the initiator of that creation and its reflection. In fact, it is probably the paradox of trying to philosophise about a "pre-philosophical" world that positions his phenomenology as the bridge between the "real" world and the world of perception. Phenomenology is "[t]he search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but it also offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them. It tries to give a direct description of our experience as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian or the sociologist may be able to provide" (*PP* vii).

Focusing on experience and the "lived" world entails an ontological approach through the body, the organ through which the world is perceived and ultimately lived. This perception is "the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them" (*PP* xi). Both the world and the subject come into existence through the gaze directed from the body and through the actions generated by that same body in relation to the material world. Acting and experiencing become the presuppositions of being in the world with the body at its centre. Contrasting Cartesian thought and the mind-body dualism Merleau-Ponty declares that "the world is not what I think, but what I live through" (xvi-xvii). Although this is not a direct attack on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, it is privileging a body that *acts* as much as it thinks.

Even though there is an emphasis on *acting* in order to *be*, Merleau-Ponty's man is also a *subject*. Not only is his body an object in and of the world, it is also subjected to meaning, thus becoming subjectivated by language and historicity. Being in the world is being in history. "It is necessary", as he argues, "that my existence should never be reduced to my bare awareness of existing, but that should take in also the awareness that *one* may have of it, and thus include my incarnation in some nature and the possibility, at least, of a historical situation" (xiii). Because of his immersion in language and meaning, man is historically situated. Man cannot exist independently of, or outside, the world; man's existence stems from being in the world and is validated

Husserl's first directive to phenomenology, in its early stages, to be a 'descriptive psychology', or to return to the things themselves, is from the start a foreswearing of science" (viii).

only in relation to that world. If man exists in a historical context that is to say that man's perception of the world and others is contingent to the world's perception of man. Therefore my exterior appearance defines me for others as they are defined to me by their exterior. Significantly what I see of others and what others see of me, and the way we define each other, is the body—"I must be the exterior that I present to others, and the body of the other must be the other himself" (*PP* xii).

What needs to be paid particular attention is that, in Merleau-Ponty the body is not just a *medium* through which I experience the world, or a tool that enables experience; it is the fundamental of experience. I have a body but in order to exist I must have a "lived" body. I am a body which is historically situated and participates in the world through action⁹, and my body is the sum of who and what I am. The "lived" body is not mere flesh, or mere language or mere mind; it is the combination of all. I am not merely the result of meaning; I am also the generator of it. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is not trying to explain a pre-existing meaning and it is not based on the idea of a pre-existing Logos. "Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing, truth into existence" (*PP* xx). This is not the search for Reason; this is the discussion of phenomena. This is the philosophy that understands the body as an entity in the world, both fixing the world with its gaze while at the same time being fixed through the world's gaze upon it. Ultimately, "we are literally what others think of us and what our world is" (*PP* 106).

My body is my point of view upon the world, it is through my body that I gaze and experience the world; but at the same time my body is "of" the world. I can only perceive myself in relation to the world. My position is ambiguous: I am an object and a subject. If I distance myself from my body I objectify it, it becomes one more object in the world, I perceive it through my gaze. At the same time though, when I am experiencing the object that is my body, am I not still a subject that experiences the world? Ultimately, my body is the object I cannot distance myself from; it is how I perceive and how I am being perceived. As a consequence, I am my body.

There are two ideas that need to be highlighted in this context: the first one is the body as historically situated; the second one is the body as my representation in the world. Both these ideas are central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as object in the world and as the embodiment of a subject. They are concomitant to an

⁹ "Acting" in the world became, in the mind frame of existentialism, a presupposition of being. For Jean-Paul Sartre in particular man can only exist by taking *responsible* action. Man is nothing but the sum of his actions, according to Sartre.

understanding of the body as 'enacted', rather than 'being', and as the realisation of our experience in the world—"The body can symbolise existence because it realises it and is its actuality" (*PP* 164).

Beauvoir's own definition of the body as a situation and as our vehicle in the world seems to come straight out of Merleau-Ponty: "The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and to be continually committed to them" (*PP* 82). Merleau-Ponty's definition of the body as such draws a connection between the subject that body represents, the body as object in and of the world which it inhabits, and the process of "becoming" implicit in the projects with which the body is involved. In this context, the body itself is a project; it is itself involved in a process of becoming, in being able to be seen as an object but also trying to be seen as a subject. My body is "both an object for others and a subject for myself" (*PP* 167). It is the position of the body as simultaneously subject and object that makes it the centre of experience; and it is because it is at the same time that through which we experience the physical world—"I apprehend my body as a subject-object, as capable of 'seeing' and 'suffering'" (*PP* 95)—and the representation of our subjectivity in the world, that the body symbolises existence.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an inscriptive surface but rather it is that which comes into being in its enactment through its experience of the world; but that enactment can never be merely discursive. Discourse is embodied; but it is itself not merely communicated through the body. It is also formed by it because of experience. Our experience of the world, as both subjects and objects, in and of it, defines this embodiment. "Existence has no fortuitous attributes, no content which does not contribute towards giving it its form; it does not give admittance to any pure fact because it is the process by which facts are drawn up" (*PP* 169-70). As a result, experience of the world is always mediated through the body, and the representation that it presents to the world is a reflection of that existence. Existence is constituted of acts, acts that are embodied; mediated through and reflected on the body and the way it participates in the world.

As we can only understand our bodies in relation to the world—as objects and subjects, in and of it—our bodies are always bound to a specific situation. This situation is always expressed in our understanding of bodily spatiality. It is through the perception of space through the perception of the object that we apprehend the world.

That makes of our bodies a given situation within which, and through the presence of which in the world, our position in that specific world is defined. “It may be said that the body is the ‘hidden form of being oneself’ or on the other hand, that personal existence is the taking up and manifestation of a being in a given situation” (PP 166). Our bodies, says Merleau-Ponty, are tied to a certain world, and the experience of that world is manifested through our bodies. For Merleau-Ponty, as for other phenomenologists and existentialists, man is a being which is historically situated; that is his body, his situation, is formed within a specific historical context and his acts define his own position in history—“Because we are in the world, we are *condemned to meaning*, and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history” (PP xix).

This is the context within which Beauvoir understands woman’s body as a situation; and it is within the framework of Merleau-Ponty’s own understanding of the body and bodily spatiality, “the deployment of one’s bodily being, the way in which the body comes into being as a body” (PP 149), that I propose to read Simone de Beauvoir’s own understanding of the notions of *becoming* and the body as a *situation*.

II. Simone de Beauvoir and the body as a situation

For Beauvoir, as for Merleau-Ponty, the body is the object through which we are called to experience the world of objects—which our body is also part of, an object amongst other objects—as well as a preliminary sketch for our projects¹⁰. As Merleau-Ponty makes clear, the body is not like any other object precisely because it is through that which we can experience all other objects. My body is the object from which I cannot distance myself, says Merleau-Ponty. Although we can turn away from other objects and thus block our perception of them, we cannot distance ourselves from our bodies. The body is constantly perceived because it is the object by virtue of which other objects exist. The latter though is also that which prevents it from ever being completely constituted as an object; thus it is not so much an object of the world but rather “our means of communication with it”—“the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought” (PP 92). This is what makes

¹⁰ “Le corps est notre prise sur le monde et l’esquisse de nos projets.” Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 73.

our situation in the world important to our understanding of it. As with an object when looked at from different sides and thus receiving different perceptions of it, so with the body and its relation to the world; the world appears different when experienced from a different situation. Moreover, the partial view of the object can never account for the total being of the object; the object is not merely that which we can see with our limited perspective of it. Our body, though, forms our view of the world, as it is through the body that we perceive the world. More than that, Beauvoir adds, the body is the space through which our existential projects develop.

Nevertheless it will be said that if the body is not a *thing*, it is a **situation**, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting—that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty: it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects [my emphasis] (SS 66).

The body, more than being an object in relation to other objects, is the space through which our experience of all other objects is mediated and through which subjectivity develops. This last point, introduced by the English translation of Beauvoir's text, creates a problem for our understanding of Beauvoir's view of the body. Toril Moi notes that, as translated, the phrase introduces "the erroneous idea of the body as *instrument* for a grasp rather than the 'grasp' itself", as well as, "the idea of the body as a *limitation*, as something that necessarily hampers our projects."¹¹ Moi also says that this corresponds to a traditional understanding of consciousness as inhabiting the body, an idea that Beauvoir is actually trying to resist. Moi is right in pointing this out, not so much in order to argue that the problem lies in the translation—which she does suggest—but rather because her observation makes a very important point in relation to the position from which Beauvoir is arguing and what she is essentially arguing for.¹² The two points that Moi notes in relation to this phrase, central to Beauvoir's argumentation and through which Beauvoir's ideas have come to be identified, are indeed fundamental to an understanding of Beauvoir's work within the tradition with which she affiliates herself as well as independently of it, if that is possible. The body is not itself to be grasped by us, it is rather our own grasp of the world; it is a vehicle through which we experience this world and through which our being is enacted.

¹¹ Moi, Toril. *What is a Woman?*, 62 n91.

¹² I find Toril Moi's discussion of Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty to be excellent and I do agree with most of the points she makes as well as with her understanding of Beauvoir's argument. I do however find her discussion of Butler's argument to be rather weak overall, with the exception perhaps of the parts on Butler's understanding of Beauvoir.

Neither is the body a limiting factor as such; it rather demarcates the space within which experience is embodied. Consciousness—to use the phenomenological term—does not inhabit the body, and neither does it pre-exist it; consciousness comes into being through the experience of the world through the body, a body which rises to the world and is the representation of that world. “For Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, human transcendence—human freedom—is always incarnated, that is to say that it always presents itself in the shape of a human body” (Moi 63).

The other notion which is important in this context, is that of the body as a *situation*. Moi, again, highlights a common misunderstanding of Beauvoir’s contribution in the debate over the matter of the body, a misunderstanding which in a way informs, at points, Butler’s reading of Beauvoir,¹³ and that is that the body is *in* a situation rather than that the body itself *is* a situation. That the body is a situation has been taken, by some critics, to mean that the body cannot be understood outside a cultural and historical context; we only know the sexed body as such through discourse and signification. This is also the basis of Butler’s argument in relation to the sexed body in that we cannot have access to a body outside language, outside a given socio-historical context/situation.

But this is to miss the point, to reduce Beauvoir’s claim that the body *is* a situation back to the more familiar idea that the body is always *in* a situation. For Beauvoir these are different claims, equally important and equally true, but not reducible to one another. For Beauvoir, the body perceived as a situation is deeply related to the individual woman’s (or man’s) subjectivity (Moi 60).

The notion of *situation* is bound for Beauvoir as for Merleau-Ponty with a notion of subjectivity as always embodied in relation to a person’s *lived experience*, a term which as Moi points out, “describes the way an individual makes sense of her situation and actions” (63). This is vital for the understanding of the existentialist subject’s situation and interaction with the world. Lived experience is part of our situation—and our situatedness in the world—as it is accumulated over time through the subject’s interactions with the world. Thus I absolutely agree with Moi when she says, reading Beauvoir, that “to claim that the body is a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman’s body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom” (65). This freedom is, as already said, limited for Beauvoir who distinguishes between two kinds of freedom: freedom as transcendence and concrete freedom. The former is the existential

¹³ Butler’s take on Beauvoir is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

condition of human beings and is similar to Sartre's understanding of freedom—as beings-for-themselves (conscious beings) we are condemned to be free and thus must always make ourselves. This, for Beauvoir, is the “very modality of existence” and as such it applies to all human beings. Concrete freedom however, relates to the concrete possibilities open to individuals and it is unequal. “Some have access only to a small part of all those that are available to mankind as a whole, and all their efforts only bring them closer to the platform from which the most privileged are departing. Their transcendence thus loses itself in the collective and takes on the appearance of immanence.”¹⁴ Thus our experience of the world is bound to be relative to our concrete freedom. The body being a situation bound to lived experience thus becomes an obstacle to absolute transcendence, given that woman's concrete freedom is bound to the way she experiences her body in the world.

Beauvoir's affiliation to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body as both a project and a situation one finds oneself in, is evident particularly in the way that she organises her argument in the first chapter of *The Second Sex*, “The Data of Biology”. Throughout her text, and in this section in particular, she explores how woman's body has fixed her in the position of the *other* in culture and society. Through an examination of the data of biology she aims, not at denying female biology as it appears to manifest itself through the experience of the female body, but rather to explore how this experience affects woman's understanding of her body and its situation in the world. As she has already pointed out in the Introduction, it is not merely women's bodies that suffer hormonal effects, but also men's. However, men fail to acknowledge this effect their biology imbues their situation with, and concentrate more on arguing that woman's biology condemns her to always be inferior to any man. The lowest of men, Beauvoir argues, prides himself at, at least, not being a woman. This is another indication of woman being associated to the corporeal, and thus inferior, whereas man prides himself at being associated with the non-corporeal, the mind, and thus is superior.

The defining centre of woman's “inferiority”, according to men, is related to the fact of menstruation. “From puberty to menopause woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned” (60), Beauvoir says. She is, though, not concerned so much with exploring how culture has read this biological fact, but rather with explaining woman's relationship to her body. She explains how the glandular instability that occurs during woman's periods—and after

¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) 459.

they have ceased, because of their absence—affects woman's experience of her body.

It is during her periods that she feels her body most painfully as an obscure, alien thing; it is indeed, the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and then tears down a cradle within it; each month all things are made ready for a child and then aborted in the crimson flow. Woman like man is her body; but her body is something other than herself (61).

Beauvoir notes woman's experience of her body as foreign to her—a foreign body—other than herself; a body over which she has no control and whose biological functions she can apprehend only in their experience through that body. The alienation from her body that woman experiences during her periods, introduces a dualism in the experience of subjectivity: I am this body but this body is foreign to me, it is beyond my control, it is an *other*. The experience of her reproductive role in relation to her periods, the experience of the body as a vessel for containing a child—a child whose existence to begin with is introduced from outside the body, mediated from an *other* (man)—or even as a field preparing to be ploughed, destabilises the inside/outside relationship between woman and her body and forces her to experience it as an object. It is this experience of woman's body that allows her to be objectified; as soon as the dualism is introduced, woman loses her freedom; she becomes an object in the economy of patriarchy.

That experience is for Beauvoir formative of how woman apprehends her situation, her body. In agreement with Merleau-Ponty within an existentialist/phenomenological context she argues that woman, like man—as Merleau-Ponty argues—is her body; but her body is often experienced as other. More to the point, as she aims to argue later on, woman is more than that body. Although it is through that body that she experiences the world, it is often in her alienation from her body that she does so; that body is not enough to define her as a woman. Even though “the biological considerations are extremely important in the history of woman” and are an “essential element in her situation” (SS 65), and for that reason she asks that we bear them in mind throughout her argumentation, she finds them insufficient in explaining woman's position in society and in the hierarchy of the sexes. Woman can only apprehend the world through her bodily specificity, and the biological facts create for her a situation through which she experiences the world; woman's understanding of the world would be very different if apprehended through another body. Yet her biological body is not enough to constitute her as *other*.

For the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is

bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. This accounts for our lengthy study of the biological facts; they are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. But I deny that they establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny (SS 65).

Woman's biological body is part of her situation, and as Beauvoir has discussed, her projects in the world, her lived experience and her subjectivity, are not limited by that body. It is unavoidable though that woman's own experience of her body will affect her point of view upon the world because her body is the grasp of that world. Concomitant to such an understanding of the body is Beauvoir's understanding of woman not as a fixed idea but as a *becoming*. Like man who, according to Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, is "not fixed, who makes himself what he is" (SS 66), woman, Beauvoir proceeds to argue, is not "a completed reality, but rather a becoming" (66) and it is through this becoming that her possibilities should be defined. This has been, perhaps, the most contentious of the ideas that Beauvoir expresses in *The Second Sex* as it has—mistakenly—given rise to an understanding of woman as not defined by her sex (the sexed body) but by her gender. In fact, it has been read as, to begin with, a denouncement of the biology-is-destiny formulation, and subsequently as a definition of woman through cultural, rather than "natural" effects. She does say that, "it is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfilment – it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself" (68). The truth is that, at this point, Beauvoir is not talking about a distinction between culture and nature and it is debatable whether one exists in her text. Moi exemplifies this point most eloquently in arguing that Beauvoir's work should not be understood through the sex/gender distinction.¹⁵ Woman becomes a subject through her body and its lived experience; the body cannot be separated from the world, or as Merleau-Ponty has it, the form and its content cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Which brings us to a paragraph central to Beauvoir's argument:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an *Other*. In so far as he exists in and for

¹⁵ Moi argues that this is the problem with Butler's reading of Beauvoir and to some extent I agree with her. I don't think that Beauvoir is arguing for a distinction between the two. If anything she appears to argue that the relationship between the "natural", or rather the biological, body and culture is organic. There is no body on the surface of which culture inscribes the mark of gender in order to constitute the gendered subject. Subjectivity is developed through the experience of the world, lived experience.

himself, the child would hardly be able to think of himself as sexually differentiated. In girls as in boys the body is first of all the radiation of a subjectivity, the instrument that makes possible the comprehension of the world: it is through the eyes, the hands, that children apprehend the universe, and not through the sexual parts (295).

This part, which in many ways summarises Beauvoir's thesis, has been read as privileging gender, and an inscription of it over the biological body. That "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman", has mistakenly been read outside the existentialist philosophy that underpins Beauvoir's work. The reason for this *becoming* is not an overtaking of sex by gender, but rather, Beauvoir's commitment to the existentialist dictum that 'existence precedes essence'. Woman's subjectivity is not a biological given, even though the facts of biology, as already discussed, play a significant role in it; but subjectivity cannot be reduced to those facts. It is through lived experience that the human female becomes feminine, that her position is defined as such. It is because she is part of civilisation, because she is historically situated, that she becomes a woman; but this becoming cannot happen in a disembodied space. As Moi says in relation to this excerpt, "the woman that I have become is more than just gender, she is a fully embodied human being whose being cannot be reduced to her sexual difference, be it natural or cultural" (78).

We are not born as our sex and gender; we become them. Although this implies that there is no essence behind gender performance—as Butler will proceed to argue—that does not mean to say that gender can be experienced in a disembodied space. Neither is Beauvoir arguing that the biological body is overtaken by gender and she does not make claims to a distinction between the two. Rather she is arguing that we *become* our subjectivity but subjectivity is always embodied.

III. No body is doing it: Gender performativity and the body/matter

(a) Gender Performativity and performative acts

There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Judith Butler’s discussion of gender as a performance, an act or, at its most extreme point, a masquerade, and the use of drag as an example of the *performative* nature of gender, certainly did create “gender trouble” in the nineties. Starting from Simone de Beauvoir and the idea of woman as a situation, and moving to Freudian, Lacanian and Neo-Lacanian psychoanalysis, she discusses the constitution of gender categories within a system of power relations and sexuality. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault on power and the juridical systems that establish power relations, and in relation to his work on sexuality, she discusses the genesis of sex and gender categories as the result of compulsory heterosexuality. These, according to Butler, are the institutions that define identity categories, the categories that are presented to us as the origin, as the cause, whereas they are the effect, of these institutions. There is nothing essential in gender categories as they are the outcome of a set of limitations and prohibitions that form the nature of our society, rather than the consequence of a pre-linguistic essence. As such, gender categories are the result of what Foucault calls the juridical systems of power responsible both for the production and the representation of the subject they produce,¹⁶ and the system of signification presented in the form of cultural attributes and employed as essential configurations invested on the body. In addition, if one takes the contestation of the biology-is-destiny formulation into account “gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (*GT* 6).

Butler, more than discussing gender as performance, is interested in how gender acts are legitimised, how such acts come into being and how they create and maintain their status. Gender identity is created through the reproduction of a set of cultural standards that have already found legitimation within and through language and history. If gender is not the causal result of sex, then gender acts legitimise themselves as they

¹⁶ See Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over life,” in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

are being “uttered,” or indeed, performed.

In *How to do things with words*, J.L. Austin introduces the notion of performativity and performative speech acts. “The uttering of words”, says Austin, “is, indeed, usually a, or even the leading incident in the performance of the act [...], the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed” (8). The performative utterance’s success is subject to the appropriate circumstances and it depends on both a set of other actions as well as the reiteration and repetition of it (the utterance) not only by myself but by other persons as well. Therefore, performative acts name the very thing they purport to express. The most famous example of a performative act, cited by Austin, is the wedding ceremony whereby through the utterance of a few words the couple comes in to being—the declaration “I do”, coming from the couple, which in itself implies an action. This is followed by the utterance, “I now pronounce you husband and wife”, by the person conducting the ceremony. However, for a performative utterance to be “happy” i.e. successful, the circumstances have to be appropriate. So, for example, in the wedding ceremony the person that utters the words must be “a proper person”, “with the capacity to perform” the act/utterance, otherwise the action is “void” or with no effect¹⁷. According to Austin, “for the invocation of particular procedure invoked [...] there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances” (26). Austin makes a distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts to distinguish between an action we do (an illocution) and its consequence (a perlocution). Illocutionary acts are “utterances which have a certain (conventional) force”, while perlocutionary acts are the consequences of an utterance, “what we bring about by saying something” (Austin 108).

Butler emphasises the point that there is an important distinction to be made between performance and performativity: “the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the subject.”¹⁸ This idea is the result of the marriage of Foucauldian thought on power and discourse in relation to the production of the subject, and Austin’s “notion of performativity, performative speech acts in particular -

¹⁷ J.L. Austin, *How to do things with words*, p23

¹⁸ Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, “Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler”. *Radical Philosophy*, Vol.67, summer 1994.

understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name.”¹⁹ Discourse becomes, in this context, a productive force and Butler is trying to think “about performativity as *that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names.*”²⁰ “If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse” (BM 225).

Following a Derridean²¹ re-thinking of Austin she emphasises an element of repetition and recitation that characterises this production. More than carrying the element of performance, performativity is based on and characterised by a ritualistic element in the “conventional force” that characterises, and is the presupposition for, an illocutionary act. This is where the foundational difference between performance and performativity lies, in that the first requires a subject that produces it whereas the latter produces a subject, or as Butler says, “contests the very notion of a subject”. Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only, to repeat an earlier phrase, a reiterated acting that *is* power in its persistence and instability (BM 225). In her own words, “performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed.”²²

In reading the ritualistic element in the notion of performativity as it is discussed by Austin, Butler says in *Excitable Speech* regarding performative acts that, “as utterances, they work to the extent that they are given in the form of a ritual, that is repeated in time, and, hence, maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context” in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* ed. Peggy Kamuf, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Here Derrida emphasises the notions of iterability and citationality. “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”?” Derrida asks. In discussing Austin further he concludes that performatives legitimise that which they name through recitation (as in a theatrical play, a philosophical reference, or the recitation of a poem). Sara Salih explains that “Butler uses ‘citation’ in a specifically Derridean sense to describe the ways in which ontological norms are deployed in discourse, sometimes forcibly and sometimes not” [Salih, Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London: Routledge 2002, 90-1)]. This informs Butler’s assertion towards the end of *Gender Trouble* that any-body can perform femininity and the use of drag as an example (an example which subsequently was read as a paradigm) but Salih also notes that she takes the notion of citationality up again in *Bodies that Matter* as “useful as a queer strategy of converting the abjection and exclusion of non-sanctioned sexed and gendered identities into political agency.” I do not explore this further as I am not so much attempting a critique of Butler in the specific context of this work, but rather, I am interested in exposing the body as site of resistance to annihilation through discourse through a Beauvoirean reading of the body in transsexual narratives/embodiments and Angela Carter’s work.

²² *Radical Philosophy*, Vol.67, summer 1994.

moment of the utterance itself” (3). Through repetition of ritual, conventionality is reinforced thus creating the ideology that seems to form the subject. In fact, according to Butler, it is only through such mechanisms, the mechanisms of discursive power, that the subject comes to be at all.

Where there is an “I” who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that “I” and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no “I” who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the “I” only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated, to use the Althusserian term, and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the “I”; it is the transitive invocation of the “I” (BM 225).

We are then, in this sense, faced with a subject that cannot pre-exist its gender, or its identity in general, as she/he is actually the product of it and not its generator. If gender is itself created on the basis of ideology that comes into being through performative acts then the gendered subject is performative in that it is engaged in a ritualistic repetition of acts and gestures established on the grounds of their very own uttering and enactment. But, is this a *subject-matter* that matters?

(b) Performing Gender

In what sense, then, is gender an act? As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimisation.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Butler locates the strongest indication that gender is performative in the relation between gender and the body that is performing it. To prove that gender is a set of stylised acts, and that there is no “natural” coherence or contingency—at least none that exists outside language and signification—between the sexed body and the gender that is being performed, because gender is an artifice and as such it can be performed by *anybody* on any *body*, she uses drag and the practices of cross-dressing as an example of gender performativity. The suggestion is that gender is an illusion that passes as the real and as the effect of sex,²³ when in fact its only reality is fundamented by the same

²³ Butler’s use of the term ‘sex’ is indeed very confusing. It seems that sometimes it is posed as the

gestures and acts that purport to be its result. The contrast between the 'inside' and the 'outside', as well as the double inversion on which drag works, provides the ground for the argument against the defining relation between 'inside' and 'outside' and the Freudian assumption of the connecting line between sex/gender/desire.²⁴

Gender, as Butler has argued before, is a constant impersonation or identification with an idea/l which legitimises itself through reiteration. If identification is understood as "an enacted fantasy or incorporation," says Butler, what becomes clear is that coherence is both desired and idealised and "this idealisation is an effect of corporeal signification" (GT 136). Therefore acts and gestures are produced that create the effect of a substantial gender identity subsequently inscribing it on the surface of the body as the signifying gesture of an inner truth. This, however, according to Butler, is the effect of gender performativity, the interpellation of which, creates the signifying effect of gender identity.

[A]cts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (GT 136).

The subject that actively performs gender is an actor not only in the sense of doing the act but more in the sense of impersonating the act, performing it as on a theatrical stage. There is an important element of dramatisation there, says Butler, of bringing gender into life by acting out its mark and incorporating it, rather than merely inscribing it on the body, so as to create the truth effect of a "'cause' of desire, gesture, and act" that can be "localised in the 'self' of the 'actor'" (GT 136). If there is no such thing as an inner truth of gender, Butler continues, and if gender is "a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies" (GT 136), then there is no such thing as a true or false gender; there is only the truth effect of a discourse created by and for the sustenance of the belief in a primary and stable identity. The implication here is that the only element of truth in gender is the result of a convincing performance, of successfully "passing as"

anatomically shaped body, other times that it is the condition that characterises the body before the inscription of gender and thus subsequently erased by gender. Many of her critics have argued that her use of the term is extremely problematic and I am inclined to agree.

²⁴ This is an issue which this work will explore later on in reference to transvestism and transsexualism, and also in relation to the work of Angela Carter.

the desired gender identity.

Although Butler does not discuss “passing” as such and the implications of it within cultural discourse extensively, the subject/matter of passing is implied in her work. The truth effect of gender is ultimately contingent to successfully passing as one gender or another and the sustenance of it is conditioned by a performance which passes as the “real” in its re-iteration and re-citation. Her use of drag as an example of gender performativity also implies the notion of passing; drag, transvestism, as well as transsexuality²⁵ are all reliant on “passing as” one identity or another. Butler briefly argues in *Gender Trouble*—particularly with reference, but not restricted to, transsexuality—that the body is not the ground or cause of desire (presumably the desire to be one gender or another and all desire contingent to that) but rather reveals itself “as its *occasion* and its *object*” (GT 71). This “conflation of desire with the real—that is, the belief that it is parts of the body, the ‘literal’ penis, the ‘literal’ vagina, which cause pleasure and desire” (GT 71)—is, for Butler, characteristic of “the syndrome of melancholic heterosexuality”²⁶ which has disavowed homosexuality at its base. “The loss of homosexuality is denied and incorporated,” Butler continues, leading to the configuration of the body as the “self-evident anatomical facticity of sex, where ‘sex’ designates the blurred unity of anatomy, ‘natural identity,’ and ‘natural desire’” (GT 71). Thus, in Butler’s understanding, the sexed body becomes a prop for passing as one gender or another, a far cry from both Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body’s relationship to subjectivity, and from Beauvoir’s understanding of *becoming*. As for the transsexual subject, his/her desire to own a “literal” vagina or a “literal” penis—the desire to occupy material body as the flesh itself—can be dismissed as the ultimate passing.²⁷

The course of becoming our gender seems here very much like a “dress” rehearsal until we achieve the acceptable standard of gender identity/performance, a suggestion which is not to be rejected altogether. Both boys and girls are guided from a

²⁵ This matter is dealt with extensively in Chapter 2 of this work.

²⁶ Melancholia and melancholic gender are notions that enter Butler’s work through her study of Freud and are further discussed in *The Psychic Life of Power*. I am not exploring these notions further as I am not specifically interested in Butler’s work relating to psychoanalysis but rather on how she understands the materiality of the body as discursive effect. Although her readings of Freud and Lacan are important in an understanding of her overall argument I am not exploring this aspect of her work. I am rather more interested in her philosophical relationship with Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty.

²⁷ Jay Prosser in *Second Skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*, makes an interesting point about the practices that lead to passing. He says that although the adding of make-up, prosthetics, or several layers of clothes to cover the “hated” body—the body the transsexual does not feel as his/her own—allows for passing it also prevents the subject from *being*: “The significance of this second skin is thus (aptly) twofold. As it allows for passing, it also entraps and prevents *being*” (75).

young age in how to become successful—or rather “truthful”/genuine—men and women but it seems that both sexes are given a period of grace which lasts until the beginning of puberty. From puberty onwards, both boys and girls are pressurised both by their peers as well as from their family environment to act more like their gender. So for example, girls are encouraged to dress up and wear make-up and learn to take care of the house²⁸ as well as developing a general behaviour that reflects their gender, while boys are encouraged to conform slowly but steadily to the norms of masculinity, whatever those norms might be according to society and point in time. Having reached adulthood, both genders are expected to act fully in accordance to the norms of either femininity or masculinity, which ought to be, and is usually perceived as, the result of an “inner” desire or inclination to become their gender contingently to their sex.

The sexed body has always been the primary criterion for the assignment and the assumption of the appropriate gender mark. Butler has argued gender binarism is not a “natural” effect of an “essential” cause, but rather both the result and the *raison d’être* of a political and discursive system that safeguards and supports a system of heterosexual desire and reproduction. If gender is a set of signifying acts and gestures then the inscription of gender on the surface of the body can be achieved regardless of the actor’s sex and in many cases sexual orientation. In other words, if gender does not follow from sex, a convincing gender performance can be achieved irrespectively of the sexed body, thus undermining the “inner”/“outer” contingency in relation to which, the development of gender identity has been established.

According to Butler, that gender is a fabrication and that a primary or original gender identity does not exist, is revealed, and indeed parodied, in the practices of cross-dressing, female impersonation and “the sexual stylisation of butch/femme identities” (*GT* 137). With reference to anthropologist Esther Newton’s *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, where Newton sees in drag a double inversion of “inside”/“outside”, as both the feminine appearance created as the effect of “dressing” for the part versus what is under the clothes i.e. the anatomical body, and the male anatomical body versus an “inside” essence (the self) which is feminine, Butler says:

I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. [...] Both claims to truth contradict one

²⁸ One can argue that this is actually changing as women are not to be restricted at the house anymore, however, there are always certain cultural standards and expectations one needs to fulfil in order to ‘fit in’ and become normalised.

another and so displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity (*GT* 137).

This suggests that not only is there no “reality” behind gender signification and the enactment of the gestures that express it, but there is no body that participates actively in performing its gender. This has really been the problem with Butler’s argument, in that it seems to neglect the presence of a material body in the linguistic exchange between culture and bodily being, by denying a *corporeality* where the subject’s *corpus* is both present and active. The use of drag as an example of gender performativity—taken up by many as paradigmatic of it—and its suggested ability to parody the socio-cultural and socio-political conventions of gender, have been viewed with suspicion by her critics. In response to her critics, she says in the Preface to *Bodies that Matter* that “such a wilful and instrumental subject”, one that treats its gender much like a garment which it dons at will, is one that does not realise “that its existence is decided by gender” (*BM* x). For Butler, it is gender that decides its subject; there is no subject that picks its gender at will, as gender conditions the subject’s existence. Thus she sees her critics’ reaction to her work as a misinterpretation of her text.

The problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity. One ought always to be wary of one’s examples. What’s interesting is that this voluntarist interpretation, this **desire for a kind of theatrical remaking of the body**, is obviously out there in the public sphere. **There’s a desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body**. But no, I don’t think that drag is a paradigm for the subversion of gender²⁹ [my emphasis].

It is precisely this “desire for a fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body” whose existence in the public sphere Butler presumes, that makes her text problematic. I find it difficult to read the reaction to the suggestion of a free-floating artifice which can never be incorporated, as the reflection of a desire to become bodiless subjects. Butler appears to interpret the public’s reaction to *Gender Trouble* as symptomatic of a cultural anxiety with the body, which gives rise to a desire of transcending the limits posed by the flesh. This can only be true in an understanding of the body as limitation—and not as the abode of freedom—where transcending the body becomes in fact synonymous to freedom as transcendence. If Butler’s inference bears any relation to her reading of the

²⁹ *Radical Philosophy* 67, summer 1994.

existentialists, it is then a misinterpretation of their understanding of the body as a situation and a project. The body is that which binds us to the world; it is a pre-requisite of existence because it is the manifestation of existence. As such a “fully phantasmatic transfiguration of the body” serves no material purpose and cannot affect the material experience of our freedom as it does not affect that which Beauvoir terms as our concrete freedom. A vision of “a theatrical remaking of the body” as grounding subjectivity can serve no political purposes and appears purely idealistic. The body being the manifestation of existence, all lived experience channels itself through the body; as such political efficacy can only be achieved not through the body as transparent entity (where materiality merely consists of a theatrical performance) but rather with an interest in the material conditions of the subject. It is primarily the subject woman and her creative agency as well as her body, that are at stake under such a consideration of gender categories and gender performance. In drag practices, the body in general disappears under the weight of the performance; but it is ultimately the female body which seems to be its target. In parodying the creative structure of gender as well as its phantasmatic relation/contingency to sex (even though it still remains unclear what sex signifies in this context—is it the anatomical body, or is the emphasis on the body’s genitals?) drag parodies the whole notion of being a woman. By emphasising an iconic status of woman which it subsequently seeks to destroy by playing on the distinction between the anatomical body of the performer and the gender that is being performed, drag is perversely *iconoclastic* in that it undermines the model of the reproduction of a femininity built on patriarchal values by endlessly reproducing it. Drag often promotes a disembodied image of woman and, motives aside, a disembodied femininity while at the same time disregarding the fact that bodies, as material entities, have a history in that they become involved as existents in an actual world.³⁰ If gender is an ideological construction resulting from the cultural interpretation of sex, then as phantasmatic as they might be, genders also have a history which ultimately connects them to the bodies they claim to express. And if woman, like man, is a historical idea as well as a physical entity, as in the thought of Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, then history binds gender and the body together.

According to Butler, “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a

³⁰ For Sartre the state or quality of “historicity” is bound with an understanding of an existent that participates (acts) in the concrete world. The subject’s involvement with the world places him in history and defines his historical situatedness implied in his situation.

production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures as an imitation” (GT 138). The problem is, though, that if drag is imitating and indeed parodying gender, a gender which has already been declared void, what is there to parody? Butler claims that the parody is of the notion of a true and abiding gender identity, and that it is precisely the notion of an “original” that does not exist that it is being parodied. But if there is no “object” *in* parody and *to* parody then “the imitation that mocks the notion of an original” is indeed more like *pastiche*³¹ rather than parody. The aim is not always to satirise the notion of an authentic gender identity, to laugh at, or with, the conventions of gender or the male body’s desire to incorporate the feminine gender. How does drag “create a unified picture of ‘woman’” (as Butler claims that it does), it is not clear. For all one can see, is what *appears* to be a woman—but is not. If for Beauvoir female biology is not enough to define one as a woman, neither is an imitation of the cultural signifiers of femininity. If the biological body does not suffice to *become* a woman, its presence is a pre-requisite for becoming one; a woman can become her subjectivity only from that position and in that situation. One cannot simply accept that what brings women together is appearance, not only because all women do not share the same body image or presentation—which immediately invalidates such *representations*—but also because drag and the impersonation of women stubbornly reproduces one model of woman, or one model of femininity, usually the type that is a *phantasy* born and cultivated in male heterosexual imagination. It would be most dangerous for women—and feminism—to accept and adopt drag practices as a model for the subversion of gender identities and an example of gender performativity, for although it reveals the performative structure of the iconography of gender, it fails to understand its historical and socio-political position as well as the contribution of that position in the development of gender identity.

(c) Performative bodies

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

³¹ See Fredric Jameson’s “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA.: Bay Press, 1983), p.114.



Gender is a performance in the sense that there is an element of acting a role, enacting a number of cultural conventions while incorporating them in such a way as to create the illusion of an essential creation. Such an understanding of the production of gender conventions entails that there is no essential subject or law that generates the acts that express and characterise gender identities. It is rather that such acts and gestures are legitimatised through discourse and by virtue of being enacted and reiterated. The effect of gender is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (*GT* 24), and the subject of gender seems to be a product of discourse, the same discourse that produces gender identities.

However, poststructuralist theories of the birth of the subject—such as Butler’s, informed by Foucault—have come under criticism by a number of feminist theorists. Susan Bordo sees in a lot of feminist work that stems from Foucauldian, poststructuralist or postmodernist thought, a problem of bodily immateriality, in that it reduces the body to mere textuality. This is true, according to Bordo, of the work of Judith Butler and her discussion of performativity in relation to gender performance, and the use of drag as the exemplification of the subversion of gender identity as it is understood within the heterosexual matrix. As she says:

I view current postmodern tendencies thoroughly to ‘textualise’ the body—exemplified in Judith Butler’s analysis of drag as parody [...]—as giving a free creative reign to *meaning* at the expense of attention to the body’s material locatedness in history, practice, culture. If the body is treated as pure text, subversive destabilising elements can be emphasised and freedom and self-determination celebrated; but one is left wondering, **is there a body in this text?** [my emphasis] (Bordo 38)

The question is, several years after, still valid. It seems that the extreme popularity and popularisation of *Gender Trouble*, as well as the growing interest in the “body”, both on the part of critical theory and the general public, have given rise to a notion of the body as an open-ended space of signification. This is actually spreading to all areas dealing with the body, both as notion and as physical entity, from the medical science and aesthetic plastic surgery to body art and sexuality. We are not sure if it is cultural anxiety relating to identity and the body that nourishes theories of (dis)embodiment, or if it is critical theory that opens a space for a generation of (dis)embodied subjects.³² Oddly enough, it should be noted that, at least on the cultural level, the effort to

³² Interestingly enough though, if the subject is the product of discourse, as Butler argues, then it is theory that is to be kept responsible for the havoc created around body matters.

suppress the body and its desires results in a further emancipation of the body as that which cannot be immaterialised or disregarded, an issue in which this work is particularly interested.

Bodies that Matter is Butler's response to her critics and in particular to the criticism she has received regarding the loss (or, is it the absence?) of the materiality of the body in her discussion of gender performativity and which involves the production of a subject through discourse. It is, according to Butler, only by being named that the subject comes into being, it is by being addressed and socially recognised that the subject is formed. The formation of the subject, then, seems discursively determined. One question that arises from this is that of agency. Beauvoir has attempted to dislocate the formation of the subject from biological restraints in order to advocate a possible transformation of female subjectivity and to escape the biology-is-destiny formulation. Butler argues that in Beauvoir's work, gender is imposed on sex; thus sex turns out to have been gender all along³³. Instead, she (Butler) argues that if gender is a performance, an act which legitimises itself and is thus performative, then the subject of gender is a product of discourse and as such it cannot exist before, or outside, discourse. In Beauvoir then, the agency that was not limited by nature, but allowed for a development within the borders prescribed by the body, is now understood as limited by nurture. In Butler this is taken further by suggesting that there is not even an agent within subjectivity that affects its own production. Both these implications raise some issues for feminist body/politics and female/feminine subjectivity especially in relation to the materiality of the female body.

Beauvoir says that the body is our "sketch upon the world", a "limiting factor for our projects" (SS 66). This line of thought presents the body not as a "limitation" to one's projects, but as the sketch [*l'esquisse*] of these projects, and Butler understands Beauvoir's perception of the female body as saying that it "ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence" (GB 12). Hence the emphasis on the facts of biology that are part of woman's existence but that do not create for her a predestined position in the world. The Beauvoirean position, it has been argued, seems to perpetuate the same dualism that it might have set out to

³³ See "Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire" in *Gender Trouble*. In an early article entitled "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's the Second Sex" that long precedes the publication of *Gender Trouble* Butler's thought appears somehow different from the position she adopts in *Gender Trouble*. There is however even there an indication of how her thought is to evolve as she reads Beauvoir's understanding of gender as a cultural interpretation of sex ("or the biological body", as she often conflates the two terms).

attack, that is, the mind/body and nature/nurture binarisms³⁴. If one takes into account the interpretations that these binarisms have had (mind and nurture are related to maleness and masculinity whereas body and nature are related to femininity), Beauvoir's effort to escape the biological determinism that has plagued the female body seems like an effort to use masculine standards to discuss the situation of women.³⁵ Both Beauvoir's and Butler's arguments can create new possibilities for our understanding of the development of gender subjectivity; however, Butler's argument appears to promote the creation of a disembodied subjectivity. It seems that despite her efforts to address the issue of materiality, Butler does so in a way that perpetuates the immateriality of both the subject and the body outside discourse.

Beauvoir has implied that gender is the socio-cultural attributions that, in relation to the female body (the biological body), give birth to the subject that is woman. Butler reads this as a form of cultural investment on/of the body. According to her, such attributions are invested on the sexed body and subsequently take over in the form of engendering—while in a sense de-sexing—the body, thus guiding the becoming of woman.

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. [...] The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorised as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (GT 6).

Gender attributions are cultural constructions and the feminine/masculine dichotomy is put together and sustained by and within the constraints of heterosexuality, as Butler has suggested before; however there is, according to her, at least one line of connection

³⁴ This is an idea that Butler came to support in *Gender Trouble* even though in previous work she was quite sympathetic to the Beauvoiran mode of thinking. "The theory of embodiment informing Beauvoir's analysis is clearly limited by the uncritical reproduction of the Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body. Despite my own previous efforts to argue the contrary, it appears that Beauvoir maintains the mind/body dualism, even as she proposes a synthesis of those terms" (GT 12).

³⁵ Margaret A. Simmons says, in exploring the philosophical relationship between Beauvoir and Sartre, that it is important that we take their relationship into consideration for an understanding of their work. "It can also highlight the different voices of men and women within a sexist society. For in spite of the often 'feminine' quality of Sartrean description of sensuous lived experience in *Being and Nothingness*, and Beauvoir's espousal of 'masculine' values in *The Second Sex*, both are writing from their very different experiences as man and woman" (169).

between sex and gender. Gender follows from sex in the sense that gender is formed as the cultural interpretation of sex and the imposition of signification and meaning on the sexed body. There is no *essential* relationship between sex and gender, and gender conventions are socio-cultural fabrications; however, the signification attached to the embodiment of gender norms establishes, even if fraudulently, a contingency between the anatomically sexed body and gender. Anatomy is read in the light of signification, therefore language and textuality can overtake the anatomy of the subject, thus subjectivating it. Therefore, the subject enters the domain of *impersonation* where in order to become his/her own person, his/her own self, he/she needs to *enact* the mark of his/her gender. As the subject exists within the dichotomy of male/female, one needs to impersonate femininity or masculinity in order to be. If that is correct, the turn from biological determinism is potentially useless, as we seem to be trapped in another form of determinism, cultural determinism. One could further claim that we have never actually escaped biological determinism in the first place, as gender attributes are the artificially produced signifieds of biology. More than that, as Butler argues, if we are to accept and follow that logic, sex becomes and is viewed as a non-accessible site preceding language, to which we can only have access through its cultural interpretation, gender.

If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this “sex” except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that “sex” becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a pre-linguistic site to which there is no direct access (BM 5).

According to Butler, if one follows the radically constructivist position, it is not only gender and the subject that are being constructed by and within discourse, it is also sex and the sexed body. This follows from the logic that sex can only be read through gender, its cultural construction, and is therefore yet another construction. As it is posited as a pre-linguistic site it is impossible to access it any way other than by translating it into gender. However, as soon as it becomes translated it ceases to be “sex” and it “becomes” gender.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler claims that in fact, more than “becoming” while being subjected to the sociocultural laws and powers that establish and perpetuate gender, the subject becomes performatively gendered even before birth. Through interpellation within medical discourse, the child is turned from an “it,” to a “he” or a

“she” on the basis of the appearance of its genitals. Right there and then, “and in that naming, the girl is ‘girded’, brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender” (BM 7). That is, for Butler, merely the beginning of gendering as well as the birth of the subject, as the child is being subjected to societal laws even before its birth, and is performatively subjectivated.

But that “girling” of the girl does not end there; on the contrary that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalised effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm (BM 8).

It seems, though, that the performative instating of gender launches the creation of the performative body. If we can only have access to a body that is culturally interpreted, i.e. gendered, sex cannot be read prior to being/‘becoming’ gender, and the body cannot be said to exist prior to its existence as the gendered body. In that sense sex becomes performative as well, as, according to Butler, it originates and is supported by the same systems of power and discourse that produce gender. Thus there is no recourse to a body that exists before the mark of its sex and gender.

Evidently, one cannot disregard the process of materialisation the body undergoes through discourse, but when the historicity of the body—and for feminist politics the historicity of the female body—is disregarded, then the argument becomes problematic. The problem in Butler’s approach to the matter, as I see it, is not that she “forgets about” the body—or the female body specifically—when it comes to feminist politics, and it is not even that she can only have access to the body discourse permitting. She surely knows there is a body that acts (or acts out) its gender, as well as a body that can endure physical pain and experience emotion, a body that is constantly at the centre of identity formation and the creation of subjectivity. The body does matter, but it matters only in its *materialisation* by the same performative discourse that instates the reality of gender. In a way, the body cannot be read prior to its signification, even though that signification claims to be representational. “On the contrary”, says Butler, “it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification” (BM 30). Yet again, the body that she is referring to is the only body she can have access to, the sexed/gendered body, and that always appears to be, according to Butler, performatively produced. As I will try to argue later on, in relation

to transvestism and transsexuality, the productive force that performatively produces sex and gender, also generates the notion of a body that is performative, in the sense that it is both performatively produced and it enables the performative production of its sex and gender. These bodies are usually disembodied from and by the subject that either tries to subvert sex and gender identities, or conform to them by deceiving them, in any case, subverting both the notion of materiality and the materialisation of the body.

Butler also seems to credit her critics, those who call for a retrieval of “the body from what is often characterised as the linguistic idealism of poststructuralism,” with a certain degree of somatophilia in the same manner they accuse her text of somatophobia. I am not sure if her work expresses a fear of the body, but it certainly raises a concern about its position within feminist politics—“I would like to raise the question of whether recourse to matter and to the materiality of sex is necessary in order to establish that irreducible specificity that is said to ground feminist practice” (*BM* 28-29). The argument that the materiality of the body as it has been constructed so far has, more often than not, worked against the category of woman, is certainly understandable. Butler responds to that by saying, “against those who would claim that the body’s irreducible materiality is a necessary precondition for feminist practice, I suggest that that prized materiality may well be constituted through an exclusion and degradation of the feminine that is profoundly problematic for feminism” (*BM* 30). Thus, of course, the emphasis on the process of *materialisation* rather than the matter itself, and the venture for the creation of a theory that neither presumes nor negates materiality. When one argues for the persistence of an embodied subject, especially in relation to feminist interests, one needs not necessarily perpetuate the mind/body dualism, or the associations of the feminine with the body and the masculine with the mind, thus excluding the feminine altogether, as Butler argues in relation to Irigaray.³⁶ If anything, both these ideas need to be overlooked. However, one needs to take into account the dangers one is facing when one chooses to ignore *matter* as a feminine/feminist matter, and one that grounds, in relation to others, the category of women and feminist politics. The examination of the process of materialisation can be a valuable tool for the subversion of, or the attack against, the effects of that production, but the dissolution of matter into discourse is not. For at some point one will be forced to answer the question that is born from our attempts at the de-construction of sex/gender identities; if matter

³⁶ Butler’s discussion of Luce Irigaray’s work.

does not ground the category of woman, then what does? If our feminist concerns lie in *the materialisation and the production of women that grounds us as a category* and its purposes, and it is thus to these powers that we need to turn our attention, how do we manage not to be subsumed and subjectivated under new male standards, under a different guise?

What is at stake in the process of de-essentialising gender categories is the materiality of the sexed/gendered body. For if gender is a performance, constituted by a set of performative acts, or an impersonation with no access to an original persona that is being impersonated, then what becomes of the material body upon which the impersonation of an illusion is imposed? If there is a 'becoming' in being a woman in the sense that gender overtakes sex in order to create the subject that is woman, how does that becoming shape that subject's body? What are the powers at work in creating female subjectivity, a subjectivity that seems to be more 'feminine' than 'female'? I am, here, inclined to agree with Susan Bordo who calls for a resistance to general notions of the body as blank page.

When bodies are made into mere *products* of social discourse, they remain bodies in name only. Unless as Richard Mohr argues, we are willing to grant that our corporeality is more than a 'barren field', an 'unchalked blackboard', 'ineffective' apart from the social forces and discourses that script and shape it, then *those* forces are the 'true body', and they—lets face it—look suspiciously more like 'mind' than body, 'emanating' (as Mohr describes it) 'from the gas cloud-like social mind—or whatever it is that speaks social 'discourses'—as it brushes across the tabula rasa of the body (Bordo 35-6).

It seems that in the theory of "becoming" a woman, for every act that is being acted out and legitimised there is another one which is being cancelled. If there is indeed a 'becoming' then there must be a place of origin for this 'becoming'; and for a body to become subjected to gender thus becoming the gendered body, there has to be a body from which this can take place. Even if gender is a performance, or even if gender acts are performative, both the performance and the performativity of gender require a body to be articulated through. If the materialisation of that body is more important than its matter, what is at stake for women and feminism? One could argue that one way or another, it is impossible for women to share a body—racial, cultural, social, political differences do not permit it. Butler recognises that through Foucault, who in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' clearly writes, "... nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition of for understanding other

men.”³⁷ However, if women are denied a body of their own then how can we speak of feminist body/politics and how can we ground our resistance to a phantasmatic ideal, generally produced, these days, in board rooms of television production companies, by increasing numbers of men that feel they can speak for women thus guiding the development of gender identity according to male standards? The call, is not for a return to the biological or the pre-linguistic body as the site for grounding feminist politics; it is for being alert to the usurpation of the one site women could speak from, by the same discourse that produces and maintains the sex/gender binarism, while trying to employ the same mechanisms in order to subvert its practices.

Butler’s understanding of sex, gender and the body is, very much removed from the Beauvoirean concept of the body as a *situation* and woman as a *becoming*. The problem with Butler’s argument is that, for all her acute reading of Beauvoir’s phenomenological/existentialist perspective, she still attempts an understanding of becoming one’s sex/gender identity from a location outside the body. This appears to be a problematisation that she puts forward in relation to Foucault as well. In her article “Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions”, she problematises Foucault’s understanding of subjection and argues that his discussion appears to presuppose a body on which history inscribes the subject. “Foucault’s efforts to describe the mechanism by which bodies are constituted as cultural constructions, however, raises the question of whether there is in fact a body which is external to its construction, invariant in some of its structures, and which, in fact, represents a dynamic locus of resistance to culture *per se*.”³⁸ Butler’s later work attempts to exemplify that this is not possible; there is no body that pre-exists that inscription. I would, however, like to argue that there is, in fact, a site of resistance located within the body’s own spatiality and enacted in its lived experience by the subject. The body’s resistance to annihilation through discourse is neither essential nor constructed because it is *enacted*. *Bodily resistance*, as I would like to call it, manifests itself both in the studies of concrete bodies within culture and discourse, and in their narrative and fictional representations. For this I propose to read transsexual body/narratives as a possible location of this resistance. This I would like to explore in relation to practices that physically and ideologically suppress the body, such

³⁷ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin 1984) 76-100.

Butler, in her article adds to that in spite his own statement Foucault ‘nevertheless points to the constancy of cultural inscription as a “single drama,” suggesting that this drama of historical “inscription” enjoys the very universality denies to the body *per se*.’ (p309)

³⁸ ‘Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions’ in *The Body*, ed. Don Welton, 308.

as in the practices of eating disorders. For this I now turn to Susan Bordo's own objection to poststructuralist readings of the body, her work on anorexia nervosa, and the study of the anorexic body.

IV. Discipline and Bodily Resistance

It is true that the work of Foucault, postmodernism and poststructuralism is largely responsible for the extensive attention that the "body" has had for the last 25 years at least. It is also true that a great part of the work and interest in the "body" borrows heavily from that line of thought. Feminists have indeed relied extensively on Foucault's work in order to discuss (feminist) body/politics but it would be unfair to say that the discussion is instigated by Foucault. As Susan Bordo argues in *Unbearable Weight*, without disregarding the debt to Foucault in whose writings she is also interested, feminists were exploring the idea of bodies as cultural codes long before they became familiar with Foucault. As Susan Heckman notes in her essay "Material Bodies", "for Bordo, in the marriage of feminism and poststructuralism/Foucault, feminism is and must be the dominant partner", and that "it is the political implications of Foucault's perspective that are and must be the focus of its application in feminist theory."³⁹ This is very much to say that Foucault is not the reason why theory has turned to the body; Foucault has rather become the discourse through which we discuss it. His work on power relations and sexuality provide the framework through which feminist theory can discuss the issues of sex and gender and the subversion of identity, an identity produced by and within a phallogocentric discourse.

This is the same discourse that generates, for Butler, a performatively produced subject and a performative body. These same powers produce, for Bordo, the anorexic body, the body that needs to be disciplined in order to create an illusion of the subject "being in control", controlling its own creation and the bodily manifestation of its identity. As it will be argued in the process of this work, the attempt to discipline and manipulate the physicality of the body—often by eliminating it—results in the creation of *abjected* bodies, where the idea of the body as *abject* is related to Julia Kristeva's notion of "the abject" as it is discussed in *Powers Of Horror: An essay on Abjection*. It will be argued here that certain types of embodiment, predominant in transsexualism

³⁹ Susan Heckman, "Material Bodies," *The Body*, ed. Don Welton, 63.

and transvestism in particular⁴⁰, are characterised to a certain degree by a conflicting set of notions, somatophobia and somatophilia, as they desire and reject the body at the same time. The rejection is of a body that does not agree with the 'inside' "essence" of the gender performer and therefore is regarded as a misrepresentation of the true self. This is true, as much of the workings of the mind that create the anorexic body, as well as of the subject of transvestism and transsexualism. As Bordo says in her close reading of Delmore Swartz's poem 'The Heavy Bear', the body, "like an image-maker from the darkness of Plato's cave, [...] casts a false image of me before the world, a swollen, stupid caricature of my 'inner being'" (3). The body is, in this situation, an obstacle in the realisation of the self, either because its sexual signification does not agree with the subject's desires, or because it is understood as non-conforming to the norm. Thus it is resisted and it is fought against; it is suppressed and subjected to disciplining practices that assume a change of the body image in such a way as to create a text that is the symbol of an inner truth.

Such practices maintain the mind/body dualism as they regard the body as working against self-realisation. Thus, the body is not only external to the true self but it is also the enemy that undermines the symbolic manifestation of that self.

But what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the construction of the body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom...) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self realisation (Bordo 5).

This is characteristic of a tradition that goes as far back as before Christianity, with its ideas against matter and material needs, to Plato and Aristotle, both of whom regard the body as a source of evil and an obstruction due to the distractions that it causes with its desires and needs. The repression and the effort to discipline bodily instincts and desires, is not a modern one. One only has to think of the Spartans and their disciplining practices aimed at controlling the physical needs of the body, as well as their brutal methods of maintaining a uniform body/subject by discarding the new-born children that did not comply with the rules of homogeneity. Ironically enough, the Spartan

⁴⁰ I am returning to the discussion of transvestism and transsexualism to discuss particular types of embodiment because it is in these practices that there is a very evident and extreme effort to embody a gender which is not in accord with the physicality of one's body. In the context of gender performance and performativity drag lends itself to a number of readings of embodiment and corporealisation where the body seems to be subjected to a death and a rebirth (materially and symbolically) that place it in the

methods of disciplining the body showed, at the same time, an extreme preoccupation with the body as well as an extreme desire to create an army of bodies that could resist the temptation of their own desires. Significantly, what is remembered from Spartan tradition—as an expression in language and, in many occasions, a practice in culture—is the “Spartan meal” consisting of a stock-like soup whose purpose was to strengthen one’s stamina and ability to resist and control hunger.

According to Bordo, “the practice of dieting—of saying no to hunger—contributes to the anorexic’s increasing sense of hunger as a dangerous eruption from some alien part of the self, and to a growing intoxication with controlling that eruption” [my emphasis] (143). We are then within the workings of two different, but nonetheless correlated, kinds of discipline. On the one hand we have the discipline that results in the desired body image—although it is questionable if the anorexic has any clear cut image that she desires—and the pleasure of being able to control one’s bodily desires, the pleasure of being in charge. In both cases, the power that the anorexic feels she possesses is an illusion, as the same power she feels and seems to be exerting and exercising on the body is actually overpowering her own will in that it finally becomes uncontrollable, out of her control. The desired body image, is never, as such, achieved, because it is in its essence an illusion; for there is no clear body image that the anorexic desires other than the expression of her own aversion to the body. Subsequently, the originally desired body image is lost in her own intoxication with the power to discipline the body and it is that same power that turns against the subject; power takes over the anorexic subject’s body.

Anorexia is very much a result of power relations, or rather of the exertion of power escaping the sovereign’s control. Similarly to Foucault’s discussion of the exertion of power by the sovereign on the body of the condemned in public torture, the anorexic’s effort to discipline the body is also the body’s punishment for declaring its presence through the feeling of hunger; the anorexic body is very much the mark of culture over the female body that needs to be disciplined, its cravings and desires controlled. The result is very similar to the marks of the corset left on the Victorian female body that, forced to follow fashion, was also forced to suffer and bear the markings of cultural power exemplified in the markings of the corset that restricted and confined the body. Anorexia is a form of exerting power on the body, fighting the body’s needs and desires and winning. As one of Burch’s patients, quoted in Bordo,

position of an object—as Kristeva would have it, that which is rejected but from which one cannot part.

says, “you make of your own body your very own kingdom where you are the tyrant, the absolute dictator.” The anorexic’s preoccupation with power and control over her own body is absolutely obsessive—“Energy, discipline, my own power will keep me going”, says ex-anorexic Aimie Liu, recreating her anorexic days; “I need nothing and no-one else... I will be master of my own body, if nothing else, I vow” (Bordo 172).

Of course, this battle between the “self” and the “body”—where both seem to be personified—is absolutely in accord with the mind/body dualism where the mind should, must, subjugate the body and ultimately escape the limitations presented by it. The objective is for the mind to become sublime by subjugating the body, to elevate itself from the restraining boundaries of fleshly existence. Anorexics alienate their bodies from their selves, they construct a division and they protect the boundaries between the body and the mind which are never to become one—“the body is experienced as confinement and limitation”, “as alien, as the not-self, the not-me” (Bordo 144).

The anorexic violates Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body as the centre of subjectivity: I am not my body, I am not this flesh nor am I this image; this is just an illusion. Yet at the same time it confirms Merleau-Ponty’s view of the body as the representation of subjectivity, by trying to mould the body to fit the essence inside it. This is, in a way, the anorexic’s justification of the battle against the body, against the existence of the flesh and subsequently material existence: this body does not adequately represent me. The anorexic’s only reality is her very immateriality. “The only way to win this no win game”, says Bordo, “is to go beyond control, to kill off the body’s spontaneities entirely—that is, to cease to experience our hungers and desires” (Bordo 146). The body is that which abases the self and for that it is loathed and must be rejected. Its starvation is connected to its rejection as it declares one’s desire to punish it for the disgust it is causing while working on reformulating its presence. The body is rejected but it persists; it is an *abject*⁴¹.

The transsexual—and often the transvestite—shares with the anorexic the same disgust, the same abhorrence about the physicality of the body. In both situations the

⁴¹ The notion of the abject is explored specifically in relation to the anorexic body and the transsexual body in Chapter 3. Although the term is borrowed from Kristeva the analysis pursued does not always explore the psychoanalytic complexity of it. This exploration is limited though as it is not the object of this work’s enquiry to examine Julia Kristeva’s work as such nor the notion of the abject in her work, both of which are to be read through the psychoanalytic theory lens. Rather, the notion is used within the context of this work as correlative to bodily resistance. The term is not much used in relation to Kristeva’s work on abjection, but for the most part in relation to its more general use in language as that which is cast away because it is felt as contemptible.

physicality of the body is seen as an obstacle to self-realisation. There is the same exertion of power on the physicality of the body in order to keep it from emancipating itself. In the case of pre-op transsexuals⁴², the desire to escape the physicality of the body is also characterised by the desire to have a body, but nonetheless a physically different one. It is an abjection characterised both by a lack and by a presence; what is abjected is a body which is both material and *phantasmatic*, in that the feminine body that is desired can only be manifested through language and signification but is yet as *imagined* as it is *present* whereas the male body that is present is imagined as *absent*. The body that is abjected is that which, even though desirably rejected, is still ever present.

In the practices of transvestism the body is concealed, it becomes mere signification; it can only, in fact (and that *fact* is indeed a *phantasy*, both a fantasy and a phantom) exist as a phantasy. What is abjected is the physicality of the male body lurking underneath the extreme portrayal of femininity that covers the secret of the body beneath the appearance of the clothes. "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (Kristeva 3).

Yet the body resists, it enacts its resistance in its physical functions and in the manifestations of its desires as well as in its narrative representations. Nowhere is this more enacted, than in the transsexual body/narrative which, literally embodies this resistance by appearing to conform to classification and yet evades classification. A reading of the transsexual/body narrative, the narrative of transsexual subjectivity literally embodied and also narrated in (auto)biographical published narratives bears witness to the force of bodily resistance.

⁴² Transsexualism, here, refers particularly to male-to-female transsexualism.

Chapter Two

“Born into the wrong body” or, the birth of a narrative: Gender subjectivity and transsexual embodiment

We must [...] recognise a primary process of signification in which the thing expressed does not exist apart from the expression, and in which the signs themselves induce their significance externally. In this way the body expresses total existence, not because it is an external accompaniment to that existence, but because existence realises itself on the body.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Transsexuality reveals the extent to which embodiment forms an essential base to subjectivity; but it also reveals that embodiment is as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself.

Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*

I. Vested Interest: Approaching gender embodiment through transsexuality

In *Vested Interests*, her long study of transvestism, Marjorie Garber argues in “Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender” that what is at stake in such incorporations of gender is the theorization of one’s subjectivity. “What does, or might, the concept of ‘male subjectivity’ mean to a transsexual, whether male-to-female or female-to-male?”¹ she asks, and how is the insignia of male subjectivity inscribed in one’s “dress, behaviour, sexual object choice, core gender identity”? Garber’s intent is to “test the ‘differences’ between theory and praxis on the question of gender construction, by noting some compelling dissymmetries between ‘male’ and ‘female’ subjectivity as they are read from the borderlines of gender.”

The transsexual body is not an absolute insignia of anything. Yet it makes the referent (“man” or “woman”) seem knowable. Paradoxically, it is to transsexuals and transvestites that we need to look if we want to understand what gender categories mean. For transsexuals and transvestites are *more* concerned with maleness and femaleness than persons who are neither transvestite nor transsexual. They are emphatically not interested in “unisex” or “androgyny” as erotic styles, but rather in gender-marked and gender-coded identity structures (Garber 110).

¹ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge 1992) 94.

Transsexualism does, indeed, appear to 'know' something; it appears to know something about that which it seeks to embody. However, what is it that the transsexual seeks to embody? What *is* the referent of transsexualism? Is it man/woman or male/female or, is it masculine/feminine? Considering that, at least in so far as the male-to-female transsexual is concerned, "androgyny" is not an option, what does that say about the gender that is being embodied, or performed, and why is it that such embodiments, or performances, have a rather hyperreal character in that the male-to-female transsexual often passes as more 'real' a woman than a 'real' woman? Such embodiments, or performances, of femininity bring into crisis the very notion of the 'real', of the 'real woman', and more to the point they problematise the ontological definition of woman. What is a woman? If woman is a category, a position—the existence of which, outside that position, some feminist theorists have even come to challenge²—does the male-to-female transsexual seek to fill that same position as a genetic woman would? If not all women perform gender in the same way, or in fact do not perform the same version of gender, of femininity, then what prototype does the transsexual perform and seeks to embody? Judith Butler, borrowing terminology from Fredric Jameson, has termed gender and its performance within transgender practices as being of the order of *pastiche*, the parody of an original that shows that there is no original that is being parodied, no original to *be* parodied³. However, the question persists: what does the fact that subjects seek to surgically reassign their sex to conform to their desired gender say about gender subjectivity and its embodiment?

A popular show making an annual appearance at the Edinburgh Fringe is entitled *The Ladyboys of Bangkok*. This is both the name of the group and the title of the show, both the subject and the object, the performing group and most importantly

² According to Julia Kristeva, "strictly speaking, 'women' cannot be said to exist" (quoted in Butler's *Gender Trouble*). Furthermore in an interview by "psychoanalysis and politics" in *Tel Quel*, Autumn 1974 she says: "The belief that 'one is a woman' is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that 'one is a man.' I say 'almost' because there are still many goals which women can achieve: freedom of abortion and contraception, day care centers for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use 'we are women' as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot 'be'; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*." For Kristeva "woman" is to be used as a category for the purposes of political action, not as an essential identity.

³ In discussing parody and pastiche Butler seems to disagree with Jameson's definition of pastiche as "blank parody, parody that has lost its humour" and argues that "the loss of the sense of the normal can be its own occasion for laughter" in the realisation that the "normal" is "an ideal that no one *can* embody." However she does make clear that "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (*GT* 139), but does not specify which is the way of distinguishing between the two.

the act, the performance itself. The ostensible subject of the performance is to exhibit and expose, as well as to celebrate, how convincingly feminine the ladyboys are even though underneath the flamboyant dresses and the layers and layers of make-up, beneath the surface of the performance, the body is very different from what lays on the surface. Indeed the show is a celebration on the outside, on the surface of the body, of a femininity felt inside [the body] but which escapes, it seems, that intermediary space between the body's surface and the soul, genetic anatomy and biology. However, the performance plays precisely on that discrepancy between surface and what lies underneath: it illustrates that femininity is an acquired trait, that femininity can be acted out, and that it does not stem from the body but rather, that it stems from the soul within the body. Most importantly though, the performance—which is itself the corporealisation of femininity, its grounding and its subversion at the same time—denotes that to perform femininity *anybody* would do; in *acting* it out, as it were, in materialising it and in being its manifestation, the “body” is corporealised through the performance itself. The body, then, is both present in its manifestation through the acting out of all stereotypical feminine behaviour, and absent because in fact there is *no body* doing the action, as the body is produced through the action that it is supposed to generate. Such performances both concern the body and they escape it; they concern themselves with its semiology and they escape its flesh. In that they corporealise the body they purport to express, such acts are performative, in that they instate that which they claim to represent.

The ladyboys have turned their own imaginary bodies—bounded in corsets, covered in fishnet stockings and draped in shiny gold fabric—into a paying spectacle in exchange for the opportunity to own a material body.⁴ But, what materiality is to serve the body of femininity if it is proved to be, in its essence, immaterial? In participating in a show that capitalises on the plasticity of the gendered and sexed body through the

⁴ Their bodies might not fully correspond to the femininity they perform but they could not perform it if it did not come from within, the director explained to me later. In response to my query about how the performers themselves felt about being part of this act he replied, that even though there are a few individuals who do this for fun, for most of these people these are their real lives. Most of them, he explained, are in transition. They are transsexuals in several different pre-op stages. Some of them were undergoing hormonal treatments and some had plastic surgery (mainly breast implants). For a few of these individuals, participating in this show was a way of raising money for their future operations. They are performers (singers, dancers, actors), the director explained, but their femininity, the feminine image they corporealise, is not an act; they live as women, they act as women. However, the ladyboys performed what they embodied and were the very embodiment of their own performance. They became themselves, the *ladyboys*, during that performance, a performance which was majestically kitsch both in terms of the repertoire of the songs and their stage appearance, from singing ‘I feel like a woman’ to Sinatra’s ‘My Way’.

exploration and manipulation of its volatility, or rather its surface value, they aspire to become the thing that they represent. But, are they not already that representation? The question remains, though: what subjectivity underlies and supports this feminine extravaganza, where femininity is spectacularly disembodied and fantasmatically corporealised?

Nonetheless, what such performances emphasize, is precisely the transgender's interest in gender marked embodiments of womanhood, as well as their investment in such gender corporealizations. Moreover, what is a vital element of such embodiments is transgenderism's reliance on the reproduction of a certain gender iconography. It is often the case, within the context of male-to-female transsexual narratives, that sex re-assignment aside, it is facial reconstruction (feminisation) that makes a more positive difference in the subject's life post-operation⁵. More than raising the usual questions regarding the definition of beauty, feminine beauty in particular, pertaining to the issue of cosmetic surgery (who sets the standards, according to what criteria, and how are said criteria and authority validated within a given socio-cultural context?) this invites questions about how and why facial reconstruction, and not the fact that one can live and work as a woman long before s/he undergoes surgery, facilitates her "function in society"? To put it simply, why is it that one's "passing" as a woman is more important, to the subject and her sociocultural context, than one working and acting as a woman, and what does that say about the significance—and signification—of "passing as" in the ontological debate that seems to beg the question: to *be* a woman, or to *pass* as one? For the transgender psyche, is the desire to *be* stronger than the desire to 'pass'? Or is it that,

⁵ A recent documentary on Channel 4, which examined the subject of sex change and followed four pre-op male-to-female transsexuals, from the late stages pre-operation and quite literally, all the way in the operating room, seemed to inconspicuously confirm the transsexual subject's insistence on the relation between body and gender signification, the flesh and its representation(s). One of the subjects was a former Billy Idol fan and look alike (and that alone should say something about idolising a performance) who had been married (more than once) before he decided that he wants to be a woman. Another subject, a successful jazz musician who appeared to go through a lot of extremely painful operations, including the sex change, in order to achieve 'womanhood', expressed her happiness to finally be a woman by exclaiming, post-reassignment, "I feel like Audrey Hepburn." His/her desire is not concerned with camp aesthetics; the aim is not to reproduce the star herself but rather the "woman" she was assumed to be. The intent is not to embody, the image of Audrey Hepburn herself but rather that image of womanhood which Hepburn represents and corporealises. This reference to an archetypal woman, who has achieved mythical cult status as a film star and a style icon, becomes the measure of gender against which every other performance is judged and assessed. A third subject by the name of Anne, a transvestite who lived and worked as a woman and who was undergoing hormone treatment felt the need to undergo surgical facial feminisation in addition to body feminisation. "Her face is not in proportion for feminine beauty," Dr Ousterhout, a San Francisco specialist said. So, Dr Ousterhout, who believes that "beauty is not an accident" was called to reconstruct Anne's face according to "what I think makes a beautiful female face." According to Anne, after her recovery from a series of painful and costly operations which involved re-adjusting her bone and jaw structure as well as reshaping her nose and lips, facial reconstruction "has allowed me to function in society." "Sex Change." Channel 4. London. 1 May 2003.

perhaps, the core of transgender desire is indoctrinated on the notion of 'passing', of crossing the boundaries of sex and gender and not being uncovered, and of being accepted and categorised within the established norms? More to the point, what does the surgical reassignment of body parts, and in particular transsexuality's emphasis on the body's genitalia, say about the role of the body in the development of gendered subjectivity and the corporeal relation such reassignments establish between sex, gender and subjectivity?

For the transgender subject, something is clearly at stake in their persistence to ameliorate the body while perpetuating a feminine ideal. Theory's interest should turn to the subject that has clearly invested in the categories of sex and gender and their rigid division as to examine and discuss the mechanisms that inform these categories and affect our positions within any given cultural context. As Garber says, "those who problematize the binary are those who have a great deal invested in it" (Garber 110). Garber also points out that, more than bringing into crisis the definition of sex and gender categories, the transgender creates a new binarism which now also needs to be addressed. During the last forty years, ever since sex reassignment surgery became more accessible and ever more intriguing, the transgender has brought into crisis the matter of "construction" and that of "essence".

In putting in question the age-old boundary between "male" and "female" they also put in question a newer binarism which has become something of a theoretical commonplace, and which now begs to be deconstructed, if we are to come to terms with "subjectivity" as a category to be linked with gender identification in the nineties: that between "constructed" and "essential" (Garber 110).

To that I would like to add that transgender brings into crisis the very notion of identity and the means through which it is both defined and grounded on sexually different bodies whose fundamental difference, on the 'inside', is chromosomal—with all the implications pertaining to that—and that come to be, in any given cultural context, the establishment of subjectivity and the reflection (not just on the surface, but in their total being) of our cultural beliefs and anxieties.

In *Second Skins: The body narratives of transsexuality*, Jay Prosser argues that, "queer studies has made the transgendered subject, the subject that crosses boundaries, a

key queer trope.”⁶ However, Prosser argues, queer theory fails to explore the “bodyliness of gender crossings” as it focuses on writing of “transitions as discursive” hence its failure to account for transsexual embodiment.

The concomitant of this elision of embodiment is that the transgendered subject has typically had center stage over the transsexual: whether s/he is transvestite, drag queen or butch woman, queer theory’s approbation has been directed towards the subject that crosses the lines of gender, not those of sex. Epitomizing the bodiliness of gender transition—the matter of sex the cross-dresser has been applauded for putatively defying—the transsexual reveals queer theory’s own limits: what lies beyond or beneath its favoured terrain of gender performativity (6).

According to Prosser, transsexuality, through its broader implications for contemporary theory, brings into view the materiality of the body. He situates his project of bringing transsexual narratives into current theories of the body, in relation to the general concern and preoccupation of the last few years with the body-mat(t)er especially within feminist theory, expressing a certain discontent with a line of poststructuralist thinking that locates the materiality of the body in “reference to discourse and signification” (13). Such concerns, as discussed in the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Toril Moi, and Susan Bordo’s discussion of the body beautiful and eating disorders, draw attention to the disembodied matter that the body has become and the potential dangers for feminism and feminist theory, that lurk with the repudiation of flesh as grounding corporeality. “If sexual difference is where the body’s materiality is most displaced as these feminist analyses suggest,” Prosser argues, “transsexuality, the attempt to materialize this difference in the body, may be the matter to recall theory to the residue of referentiality in the body” (13).

Prosser is right in drawing attention to transsexuality’s implications for critical theory relating to the body. Transsexuality, the *matter* of changing sex, the plastic/surgical moulding of the flesh as a process necessary to the fulfilment of gender identity, is the matter that brings the question of the development of gender subjectivity home: how is gender subjectivity developed, through what mechanisms and structures is it grounded as an identity and how does the body/matter contribute to this foundation? The study of transsexual narratives, published autobiographical narratives and, ultimately, the transsexual subjects’ body/narratives, brings forward and in some ways

⁶Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (Columbia University Press: New York 1998) 5.

appear to resolve the question of the development of gender subjectivity in relation to the body/matter. The question that can be addressed through a consideration of transsexual narratives—the narratives of gender *transformation*—in relation to critical theory is, what position does the body occupy in the (trans)formation, development and grounding of gender subjectivity? If gender identity is in any way related to a development of body consciousness, *embodiment* as Merleau-Ponty would have it, transsexuality is the ideal space to examine the matter of gender as a matter (*the matter?*) of embodiment.⁷ To reiterate a question that Prosser poses as well, and more importantly to critically interrogate this question in relation to male-to-female transsexual narratives, “[w]hat does transsexuality, the fact that subjects do seek radically to change their sex, convey about sex, identity, and the flesh?” (63); what contribution can the outcome of such a discussion make in the general debate about the development of gender subjectivity and, more specifically, the formation of gender identity and female/feminine subjectivity?

Transsexuality has, for the most part, been understood within a contrasting bipolarity: (a) as a practice or a state of being that defies sex/gender boundaries and classification, through its willingness to transgress; or, (b) as a naïve and stubborn understanding of gender identity in relation to an essence grounded on the body’s (reassigned) sex. Both understandings situate transsexuality and its subject—subversive agent or essentialist subject—in the position of the enemy within: by transgressing the boundaries of sex, the transsexual both confirms their validity by insisting on grounding gender identity on sexed corporeality (albeit surgically constructed), while by “choosing” his/her sex s/he undermines the same relationship—that between sex, gender, flesh—that s/he seeks to establish.

Critical theory’s understanding of transsexuality has been rather conflicting and ambiguous. As Prosser says, “since the body is conceived as a discursive effect, in

⁷ Judith Shapiro in an essay entitled “Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex” [included in *Body Guards*, Epstein and Straub (eds), 1991] where she examines, “the paradoxical relationship between sex and gender” concludes, prior to examining transsexualism through a cross-cultural perspective:

If, on the other hand, we step back from the entire enterprise of physical sex change, as many critics of the transsexual phenomenon have done, we might see the most technologically sophisticated strategy imaginable as a crude and primitive approach to issues of personal and social identity. The analogy cannot be pushed too far, addressing gender issues through sex change surgery is a bit like turning to dermatologists to solve the race problem (262).

This is a view with which I disagree and hope to prove—even if indirectly—that rather the opposite is true even if we were to accept—taking on Shapiro’s analogy—transsexuality as “skin-deep.” For an interesting discussion of skin and transsexuality as a phenomenon of the skin see Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*.

terms of signification, the transsexual is read as either a literalisation of discourse—in particular the discourse of gender and sexuality—or its deliteralisation” (13). In the light of Foucault, Lacan and Derrida the body’s materiality is displaced from the flesh to discourse and signification. In the process of deconstructing the ontology of gender identities and categories, postmodernism/poststructuralism has created a body of theory that distances itself from its subject matter the more it attempts to grasp it—“materiality is our subject, but the body is not our object” (Prosser 13). “When figured as literalising gender and sexuality, the transsexual is condemned for reinscribing as referential the primary categories of ontology and the natural that poststructuralism seeks to deconstruct”, Prosser continues (13). Among others who read transsexualism as falling into the trap of essentialising genitalia and insisting on stabilising the correspondence between gender, desire, and biology⁸, Lacanian Catherine Millot more specifically says that, “[I]n their requirement for truth ... transsexuals are the victims of error. They confuse the organ and the signifier.”⁹ The general consensus on this side of the opposition is that, in its effort to escape a materiality which is insufferable, transsexualism invests in an alternative materiality which it later comes to essentialise. As such, transsexual politics, at least in so far as they can be understood from the perspective of the “outsider”¹⁰ is in contradiction with the poststructuralist project, within the postmodern space, of destabilising essences. On the other side of the opposition though, the transsexual has been celebrated as the postmodern subject *par excellence*—“what is more postmodern than transsexualism?” Kristina Straub and Julia Epstein ask¹¹. “The transsexual is celebrated for pushing sex as a linguistic signifier beyond the body” (13), says Prosser. More than that, the transsexual has become a symbol of the fluidity of identity and the transgression of limits and limitations posed by and within the physicality of the body. Such views have prompted some theorists to profess that in a way, “we are all transsexuals” and “there are no transsexuals”¹².

⁸ See Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Crossdressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York: Routledge 1992; June L. Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” in *Discourse* 15, no. 1, 1992.

⁹ Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essays on Transsexuality* (Paris: Semiotext(e), 1991).

¹⁰ It is, I believe, important to clarify one’s position as an outsider (outside the transsexual phenomenon) although it is often argued that in one way or another we all participate in this phenomenon (see, for example, Judith Shapiro, ‘Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex’). A position on the outside, on the periphery—ironically, a periphery that has become the centre of this discussion—is bound to influence one’s political, and indeed, vested interests.

¹¹ Epstein, Julia and Kristina Straub (eds), introduction, *Bodyguards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 11.

¹² Judith Halberstam, “F2M: The making of female masculinity”, in *Feminist Theory and the Body*, eds. Price, Janet and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

We are all transsexuals except that the referent of the *trans* becomes less and less clear (and more and more queer). We are all cross-dressers but where are we crossing from and to what? There is no ‘other’ side, no ‘opposite sex’, no natural divide to be spanned by surgery, by disguise, by passing. We all pass or we don’t, we all wear our drag, and we all derive a different degree of pleasure—sexual or otherwise—from our costumes. It is just that for some of us our costumes are made of fabric or material, while for others they are made of skin; for some an outfit can be changed; for others skin must be re sewn. There are no transsexuals.¹³

Halberstam’s argument is that in its ability to manipulate the skin as a costume, or a disguise or, a device for “passing”, the transsexual demonstrates that in fact there are no boundaries to be crossed or *transgressed*, since the “natural” binary system of heterosexuality does not exist. In fact, Halberstam continues, “[c]reating gender as fiction demands that we learn how to read it [...] we must learn how to take pleasure in gender and how to become an audience for the multiple performances of gender we witness everyday. All gender should be transgender, all desire is transgendered, movement is all.”¹⁴ Halberstam sees a relationship between the postmodern lesbian and the transsexual body in that they “both threaten the binarism of homo/hetero-sexuality by performing and fictionalising gender,” and seems to suggest that playful subversion is a more effective means of action in unsettling traditional (gender) identity norms. However, one has to wonder how politically effective is such an approach to ‘genderbending’ and how liberating can it possibly be? Essentially, what does it liberate us from? We can read gender as fiction and educate ourselves to view it as a performance irrelevant to our physical disposition but to what cost for political efficacy? With regards to the transsexual subject, Prosser says:

In readings that embrace the transsexual as deliteralising as much as those that condemn the transsexual as literalising, the referential transsexual subject can frighteningly disappear in his/her very invocation. Like the materiality of the body, the transsexual is the very blindspot of these writings of transsexuality. Juxtaposing both sets of readings, it becomes clear that neatly superimposed on the literalising/deliteralising binary is another binary, that of the reinscriptive versus the transgressive (Prosser 14-5).

In subverting the relation between sex, gender and the body, the transsexual is seen to deliteralise discourse by going beyond the boundaries of physiology and undermining the biology-is-destiny formulation of years past. In crossing sexes, the transsexual

¹³ Ibid. 126-7

¹⁴ Ibid. 132.

unsettles the formulation that gender follows from sex and threatens the stability of the relationship between gender identity and the body. By violating the law that constitutes the sexed body as a natural given that generates the symbols that express its existence, the transsexual exhibits the artificiality of those symbols. But does the transsexual really want to be seen as the symbol for subversion of gender identity? After all, how can one justify one's investment in gender identity if one becomes the source of its corruption? What needs to be taken into consideration is the transsexual subject's vested interest in the development of gender identity. In literalising gender, in turning the word into flesh, the transsexual reinscribes the surface signification of the body. In moulding the body though, through the surgical reshaping of the flesh to conform to specific standards of femininity often impossible to be embodied by genetic women—both in terms of body image and in terms of acts and gestures—the transsexual both manipulates the reiterative structure of gender identities and contributes to their recitation. Furthermore, as I would like to argue, both readings of transsexuality, although rooted in the transsexual's ability to reformulate the body and thus reinscribe/transgress identity, digress from the issue at hand which is, the desire to corporealise identity rather than to deviate from or reject it altogether, the desire to feel “one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself” (Prosser 7). It is this desire that Prosser locates in transsexuality's preoccupation with embodiment that I would like to relate to the broader discussion around gender embodiment. If, as Prosser says, “the narratives of transsexuality have yet to be carefully read” (14), then this work aims at reading how transsexual narratives have been constructed in relation to the notion of gender embodiment. Without appropriating the transsexual subject and while acknowledging that transsexuality is to a great extent a conscious choice¹⁵, it is my consideration to examine female/feminine embodiment through such narratives.

¹⁵ For the most part, transsexuals deny that to change one's sex is a conscious choice to the extent that they feel their gender as an essence and as beyond their control. The transsexual urge, most transsexual narratives argue, is not a choice it is a *need* and the reassignment is not will, it is destiny. By “conscious choice” I mean that transsexual subjects are not considered to be psychopathic individuals or schizophrenics (although a schizm in the subject's experience of his/her subjectivity does set in as will be discussed further on) thus their consent for the operation is given on the basis of good mental health. In fact, good mental health and awareness of their situation are major requirements for their acknowledgement as transsexuals and their reference to reassignment surgery (see Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, 1966; Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, 1975)

II. Transsexual Investments: The “wrong body” narrative

To choose to study transsexual narratives as a medium for the decoding of the relation between the development and/or construction of gender identity, entails an understanding of the transsexual body—pre-op and post-op—as narratological, enabling the creation of the narrative and being (or finally becoming) the narrative itself. In a pre-op stage, when the subject is experiencing an extreme body dysphoria, the “wrong” body is the source of the creation of the narrative that confirms and validates the condition; in a post-op stage the transformed/transsexed body *is* the narrative itself, both in that it is the realisation of an imagined body image from the pre-op stage, and in that it is the literalisation of the narrative, the one that can *literally* tell the story in words. This body then, has semantic and verbal power in as much as it is both open to interpretation—it is to be read—while pronouncing on its surface and via the written publication of its story the words that have created its materiality. As such, the body is the *langue* and the *parole*, the one that dictates the words, the authority (the Word—which in an ironic twist, is itself mutable; both the centre and at the centre, while also flirting with the peripheral), as well as the totality of the words that compose its narrative in relation to what has been (pre-op) and is (post-op) the reality of the transsexual body and subject. It is the body/narrative in that it is a “narrative” body because it comes in to being through a pre-existing narrative—one that pre-exists the construction of the body—and in that it is the narrative’s material manifestation and its *diegesis* (the telling of the story).

Prosser argues that “transsexuality is always narrative work, a transformation of the body that requires the remoulding of the life into a particular narrative shape” (4). It is precisely that aspect of transsexuality that this work is interested in examining and discussing: transsexuality as the embodiment of narrative work, a narrative (a story; a fantasy?) that pre-exists the construction (in flesh) of the body, the subject/matter of which is primarily the narrative/body later transformed to its body/narrative. Transsexuality is the corporealisation of a narrative that pre-exists the operation—the surgical remoulding of the flesh to serve the image—and as such, although it allows for a transsexual agency, it constitutes the body as the material affirmation and confirmation of an already existing life/body narrative. In transsexual narratives, the body is the establishment of gender identity in that the body is an endowment of the belief that identity is grounded on the body but also, in transsexualism, it is a body that

leads to the demonstration and verification of a *true* gender identity, one that pre-exists and surpasses the body. Such an identity, as it is discussed in transsexual narratives, is understood to occupy the position of an essence, beyond the constraints of one's physical and social apparatus, and alluding to images of imprisonment of this higher ideal in and by the *wrong body*. Here, then, lies transsexuality's discrepancy, in that it perpetuates the existence of a "true" gender identity—ultimately, an essence—that exists/develops independently and outside of the sexed body, while at the same time seeking to surgically transform the "wrong" body to create a sexed materiality which it previously disregarded and was able to exist without, in order to ground what is believed to be the subject's "true" gender identity. In believing in an essential gender identity that surpasses, and often cancels, the experience of the body/matter while also creating an imaginary, immaterial bodily apparatus through which the subject is able to escape its material body, transsexual practices preclude the body from making any contribution to the development of gender subjectivity while allowing for the construction of a narrative that will confirm the subject's inability to exist within/through that body. This narrative the subject subsequently uses as an authenticating trope to confirm his/her discomfort with his/her materiality. By emphasising the impossibility of reconciling that essence (that evidently surpasses the body) with the *wrong body*, the transsexual turns body and matter into a body that indeed *does not matter*, thus gaining access to the possibility of the surgical re-moulding and the construction of the *right* body, that is prescribed by and corresponds to the essence, thus harmonising the development of subjectivity. In denying the correspondence of body and soul(?) through the construction of the *wrong body* narrative, the pre-op transsexual authenticates his/her need for the surgical operation that seeks to embody an essence that has so far existed disembodied, by transforming a body that has been authorised in immateriality, removed from the reality of the flesh, into fleshy corporeality. Furthermore, as I would like to argue, even though the transsexual "epitomizes the bodiliness of gender transition" by crossing the lines of sex—the matter which "the cross-dresser has been applauded for putatively defying"—s/he confirms his/her narrative first and foremost on the surface of the body. In a way, the body that results from a combination of hormone treatment and plastic surgery validates the subject's already imagined identity; the body is the validation of the narrative. As such, it can be argued that transsexuality is implemented *on* rather than *through* the body by inscribing on its surface the mark of sex and the imprint of gender.

However, what defines transsexual subjectivity is the overall experience of the flesh. The refutation of the body pre-operation as well as the experience of the world through a body that does not matter, forms an inalienable part of subjectivity even in its very alienation from consciousness. The transsexual body comes into being in its very erasure from subjectivity, in the subject's attempt to distance him/herself from the body by defining it as *wrong*.

"I was three or perhaps four years old when I realised that I had been born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl. I remember the moment well, and it is the earliest memory of my life" (Morris 1). Thus begins the narration of Jan Morris' transsexual account, marking both the beginning of his published narrative by introducing the reader to the source of his/her *conundrum* as well as instating a narrative that will formulate the development of his subjectivity: that s/he is something *other* than his/her body. It is at that moment, under the piano with his mother playing Sibelius that the young James in a moment of "epiphany" discovers that his body does not correspond to his true nature, that his sex is not compatible to his gender. Unable to explain this realisation and the events that prompted it, he embraces what at that moment strikes him as a predestination gone wayward—"What triggered such a bizarre a thought I have long forgotten, but the conviction was unfaltering"—and follows it in a journey through the sexes to the home of reassignment where he, by becoming *she*, materialises the true self. What is the significance of the recounting of this event right at the beginning of her narration? Is she trying to disentangle her conundrum by going back to the moment where it all started? What is she achieving, in terms of narrative effect, by pinpointing this specific moment in time and space when for the first time, as a young child "he" communicates with the essential self that "he" feels as something *other* than his sex, his gender, his body?

According to Prosser, "an epiphany is above all a narrative moment when what it 'epiphanizes' becomes clear" (118). The feeling of difference that Morris experiences at that moment, "does not become schematized as part of a transsexual narrative until that narrative is discovered and conceived [...] Indeed, we might venture that the episode does not properly acquire its full significance as origin story for the transsexual self until the moment of recounting, until it is assigned this place in the writing" (Prosser 118-9). Prosser's explanation that it is as "the framing vignette for *Conundrum* [...] that the memory becomes the scene that launches the transsexual plot," that its importance is only really grasped—by the subject and within the context of a

transsexual narrative in the making—retrospectively, is valid on a narratological level. I cannot agree though, with the implication that it carries, that the transsexual narrative begins at the moment of remembering and writing. The transsexual narrative becomes whole while and by being re-membered—much like the transsexual body/matter which is re-membered while being surgically reassigned; but the transsexual memory is one that never was. Contingent to the subject's desire for that which should have been the re-membering of the narrative (in flesh and language), that memory is part of an imaginary narrative, constructed through the rejection of the material body.

The construction of the narrative that will make re-assignment possible begins at the moment of the “epiphany”. Morris uses the scene under the piano as a framing vignette for his narrative because that is the moment that shapes his life narrative. As she says, “for forty years after that rendezvous with Sibelius a sexual purpose dominated, distracted and tormented my life: the tragic and irrational ambition, instinctively formulated but deliberately pursued, to escape from maleness into womanhood” (Morris 7). It is at the moment of the epiphany that the conundrum begins and it is at that same moment that the creation of the narrative begins. Although the writing of the narrative, in print, takes place post-reassignment, the construction of the transsexual “wrong body”/narrative, a pre-requisite for the surgical reassignment, is developed long before the subject reaches the operating table or the writer's desk; it is that same narrative that the subject recollects in print as much as it is incorporated on his/her body. The transsexual narrative that leads to the point of transition (the surgical reassignment), pre-exists the materialisation of the body and it is this narrative that the subject comes to embody post-reassignment. The transsexual re-members, materially and linguistically, a body whose narrative comes to be realised (in flesh) through surgery and narrated through the subject's *memoirs*, (as published autobiographical narrative and as recollection of memory). The body of transsexual re-membering is pieced together through fragments of memory that stem from a place beyond the body and yet, always has the body on its sight. It always views the body from the “outside” and experiences it as foreign, as “other”; and it is only from this position of otherness—an otherness experienced in relation to the fleshy materiality of the body—that the transsexual is able to reformulate it. Paradoxically, all forms of incorporation are enacted outside the body yet in such incorporations it is the body which is at stake.

Prosser argues that, “an inquiry into the value of the wrong body formula should acknowledge at the outset its status as a powerful medicodiscursive sign” (68-69). It is

“an authenticating transsexual ‘rhetoric,’” a prerequisite for obtaining access to hormone treatment and surgery. With the publication, in 1953, of *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, Harry Benjamin’s pioneering work on transsexualism, and the medicalisation of the condition through the term “gender dysphoria”, the concept of the “wrong body” and the narrative associated with it acquired a predominant position within the narratives of the development and understanding of transsexual identity. In many ways, Benjamin’s work has been, for a few decades, the transsexual bible in that it describes the symptoms of the condition through close reference to patients’ experiences. Benjamin’s understanding of the phenomenon led to its theorisation and its establishment as a narrative, while his usage of concrete examples of the condition offered a “guidebook” of some form for individuals that felt themselves as other than their bodies, thus providing a possible explanation of their situation. Sandy Stone explains that Benjamin’s work was, for some time, the researchers’ textbook narrative as well as the paradigm of legitimate transsexual testimony—“When the first clinics were constituted, Benjamin’s book was the researchers’ standard reference. And when the first transsexuals were evaluated for their suitability for surgery, their behaviour matched up gratifyingly with Benjamin’s criteria” (291).

More specifically though, Benjamin’s study became the blueprint of the wrong body narrative in such a way that most candidates’ behavioural profiles matched those discussed by Benjamin. According to Stone, one possible explanation why this occurred “was that the candidates, too, had read Benjamin’s book, which was passed from hand to hand within the transsexual community, and they were only too happy to provide the behaviour that led to acceptance for surgery.”¹⁶ Since feeling that one “was born into the wrong body” was the first and perhaps most vital indication of the transsexual condition, the narrative that supported it became an essential requirement for access to surgery. Transsexuals wanted surgery, researchers needed confirmation that the candidates were “true” transsexuals¹⁷ and the subject that was seeking surgery that

¹⁶ Sandy Stone, “The *Empire Strikes Back*: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” *Bodyguards: The Cultural Politics of Gender*, eds. Epstein, Julia and Kristina Straub, 291.

¹⁷ The notion of a “true” transsexual plagues most of transsexual narratives as well as the relevant research. In a section entitled “Three different types of transsexuals”, Benjamin discriminates between a “true” transsexual “who actually wants to *be* a woman in appearance as well as function” and who seeks surgery in order to be constituted “as such as far as possible,” and other types of transsexualism. Specifically, he uses expressions such as “‘transsexual’ ... of the intermediate stages, one that wavers between transvestism and transsexualism,” “more of a true transsexual,” and a “full-fledged transsexual” in order to discriminate between the three types. He illustrates all three categories using cases from his own professional experience and by comparing and contrasting them he aims at defining who is a real, authentic transsexual and how they can be defined as such. Morris also believes himself to be among the “true transsexuals,” a far cry from the poor misguided souls that think themselves to be transsexuals but

could, and would, guarantee an authentic and coherent presentation of gender identity was happy to oblige. Thus transsexual authenticity and identity were first and foremost grounded on “passing”. Before being considered as a transsexual the subject needs to create a story, a narrative that grounds his/her transsexual identity. Thus, transsexual subjectivity was founded on the ability to first of all “pass” as a transsexual, before one is called to “pass” as a woman. What enables this passing and sanctions the transsexual desire to change the body to fit the mind, is the “wrong body” narrative.

Benjamin’s work aimed at helping transsexuals, raising awareness about their situation and creating a more sympathetic view of them in the eyes of the general public. Yet in its definition as a syndrome—“gender dysphoria syndrome” as it was then, and often still is today, known—transsexualism became a condition with prescribed symptoms and a potential cure; consequently to that, a situation which appeared to be a matter of gender¹⁸ disharmony became indeed a matter of the flesh. Benjamin defines a transsexual man as follows:

[t]he (transsexual) man who wants to not only appear as a woman by dressing as one, but who actually wants **to be a woman in appearance as well as function** and wants **medical science to make him such as far as that is possible**. In other words, it is the man who suffers from a reversed gender role and false gender orientation. He wants to change sex.

As we have seen, these persons, in a strictly scientific sense, fool themselves. **No actual change of sex is ever possible**. [...] Nevertheless, the wish to change sex persists, and for all practical purposes such can and has been accomplished as far as **the individual’s future life and position in society** are concerned. This alteration, from male to female concerns only the **visible genitalia and secondary sex characters**. **To the extent of external appearance it can be successful and convincing** [my emphasis] (Benjamin 46).

As Benjamin explains in the first few chapters of his book, the reason why he considers a “real” change of sex impossible, it is because sex is decided at the moment of conception and defined by a combination of X and Y chromosomes. Since science cannot change the chromosomal make-up of an individual, then no “real” change of sex is possible. What science can do, however, Benjamin goes on to explain, is to ensure that individuals who are “genuine” transsexuals and who believe themselves to be trapped in the wrong body, undergo the surgical operation which will make their function and position in society as part of their desired gender category “in appearance

in essence, they are not. Such terminology is bound to create problems of authenticity and how that authenticity is ‘cashed in’ by the subject that is deemed to be authentic.

[...] successful and convincing.” However he clarifies that if the chromosomal sex were to be discovered “this remains true no matter how long the person may have lived as a member of the opposite sex and what operations or hormone treatments may have been applied” (46).

A few interesting issues that could be discerned from Benjamin’s work and his definition of transsexualism as a phenomenon are, then, as follows: (a) “real” sex is rooted “inside” the body, located on chromosomal make-up, not visible genitalia; (b) science cannot alter a person’s sex, but it can simulate, on the surface of their body, their desired sex that matches their idea of personal gender identity, by switching focus from chromosomes to genitals; (c) the purpose of this operation is to facilitate the subject’s “passing as” their preferred sex and gender. In asking the assistance of the medical science in becoming a woman and in science’s willingness to assist him to that direction, the transsexual’s condition becomes pathologised. In this configuration of the transsexual phenomenon as pathology, the transsexual curiously becomes the patient (or even, the sufferer), the medical scientist becomes the one who can describe—and in a way, prescribe—the symptoms of the condition for which he can provide a cure, and the condition itself becomes, in the relationship between patient and doctor, a matter of the body. But if the medical scientist knows—as Benjamin seems to assume—that the changes he can make are not really possible on the “inside” (chromosomal make-up), then what does the scientist achieve by altering the genitals that lie on the “outside”, the surface of the body? Rather than changing the patient’s sex the doctor changes the insignia of sex inscribed on the surface of the body, thus enabling his/her successful passing as not only the opposite sex, but most importantly, the opposite gender. In assuming that medical science has the expertise and the ability to “make him” (Benjamin’s choice of words) into a woman, the patient seems to assume that womanhood is somehow located on the body; thus, becoming a woman entails occupying a woman’s body. Beauvoir refers to the body as a “situation”—a situation defined both in terms of space, position and social circumstances—and Merleau-Ponty argues that the locus of our existence is the body. To relate Merleau-Ponty’s words to the transsexual (patient), “he [the patient] is his body and his body is the potentiality of a certain world” (*PP* 106).¹⁹ The transsexual locates in bodily spatiality the development

¹⁸ Gender was even at that point recognised by Benjamin and other therapists as an effect of discourse.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty is here referring to patients suffering from anosognosia and the phantom limb phenomenon, issues that will also be discussed in relation to the transsexual patient in the process of this work.

of his/her subjectivity which cannot be happily achieved in the presence of the “wrong body” and the absence of bodily propriety.

What is important, however, in the relationship between science and the scientist, and, the transsexual (patient) and his/her condition is that in seeking the formers’ help to incorporate his/her “real” gender (the essence imprisoned in the “wrong body”) the latter constitutes gender itself (and not merely sex, allegedly the problem behind this condition) as a matter of the body’s anatomical and hormonal make-up. This creates an understanding of gender as validated and authenticated not only by the set of acts and gestures that constitute its performance, but also enacted and signified by, and on, the surface of the body in the location of the genitals and secondary sex characters. Thus the surface value of sex (the anatomical body) becomes also the surface value of gender. In their use as signifiers of a signified sex and gender identity, the genitals and other secondary sex characters become almost incorporeal in their very corporealisation as they primarily function as the authenticating trope of a convincing sex and gender identity; their presence verifies the subject’s sex and gender. The surgical operation, then, that aims at re-assigning sex on the surface of the body, appears to function not as a process that will enable the subject’s (or the patient’s) crossing from one sex to the other, but rather to facilitate the subject’s passing as the desired sex and gender.²⁰

Although it is clear from Benjamin’s text that he understands the transsexual plight as a phenomenon which can be corporeally manifested in the transsexual’s inclination for self harm and body mutilation due to the feelings of abhorrence created by the persistence of a body that does not match the image of the “real” self, implicit in his text is also an understanding of an incorporeal need for normalisation. For the transsexual, the ultimate test is to pass as more “real” a woman than a “real” woman. Judith Shapiro highlights that “many transsexuals are, in fact, ‘more royalist than the king’ in matters of gender” (253). In referring to research by the sociologist Thomas Kando, she says that his findings showed that “transsexuals were more conservative

²⁰ It needs to be made clear that Benjamin’s grounding of sex identity on chromosomes is also extremely problematic. My discussion of the sex change operation, in relation to Benjamin’s statement, as a device for passing does not recognise chromosomal sex as more “real” than any other configuration of sex. As it is not this work’s preoccupation to examine the narrative of sex as chromosomal configuration, I do not take great issue with Benjamin’s assertion of “real” sex being contingent on chromosomal make-up. Rather, I consider an understanding of sex as a combination of chromosomes, to be medical science’s narrative of sex identity which, much like all other narratives that develop in relation to sex and gender identities plays with the binarism of male/female and all implications pertinent to the perpetuation of that binary. That “real” sex is located in chromosomal make up is as valid a narrative as any other, but only as much.

about sex role norms than both men and women (or, to be precise, than non-transsexual men and women), women being the least conservative.”

Male to female transsexuals tested higher in femininity than women. Most of the transsexuals in Kando’s sample held stereotypical women’s jobs and seemed, on the average, to be “better adjusted” to the female role than women were. As Kando noted, “[transsexuals] are, in many of their everyday activities, attitudes, habits, and emphases, what our culture expects women to be, only more so” (Shapiro 253).

What such findings reveal though, is not only the male-to-female transsexual’s commitment to rigid definitions of femininity and masculinity but also their preoccupation with authenticity with which they evidently have a controversial relationship. For male-to-female transsexuals, *passing as* “real” women epitomises their crossing over the gender border as the passage to occupying body space as the proper self. Nowhere is this more empowering than by serving as the object of the male gaze—the gratifying feeling of successfully passing the test of femininity as a spectacle, a test which transsexuals often win hands down over biological women²¹—or even quite literally serving as a sexual object. Benjamin comments on how some transsexuals find prostitution a convenient occupation, “for emotional as well as practical reasons.”

Much of the existing handicap and danger are compensated for by the enormous satisfaction the transsexual derives from being so thoroughly accepted as a woman. How much more can his femininity be reaffirmed than by again and again attracting normal, heterosexual, and unsuspecting men and even being paid rendering sex service as a woman (Benjamin 51).

To be accepted as a woman, to be paid as a woman, more importantly to be treated as one, is fundamental to most transsexual incorporations of femininity. The confirmation of “woman-ness” located in such sex and gender corporealizations reproduces, however, a very male/ masculine and also fetishistic definition of woman as the object of the male gaze and masculine desire.

²¹ In a controversial reality tv gameshow recently presented on Sky One, six men had to compete for the affections of a very attractive female named Myriam who to the contestants’ dismay was revealed to be, at the end of the game, a pre-op transsexual. The show, ominously named ‘There’s something about Myriam’ was of course playing precisely on this revelation: that the perfect woman is a man. Adding to the fact that all six men were battling their masculine hearts out to ensure Myriam’s affections without—almost ever—being suspicious of her situation, was the fact that these six originally formed part of a larger group who picked Myriam out of a group of parading women (most of whom were non-transsexual women) and voted her as the most attractive female. See “There’s Something About Myriam.” Sky One. London. February-March 2004.

What is embodied in these incorporations is the literalisation of the Lacanian phallus: woman as a castrated man who is forced to turn herself into the object of male desire and a symbol of phallic power in order to compensate for the lack (or, in this case, the literal loss) of the penis.²² The phallus, Lacan argues, is a signifier, “the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified [“les effets DE signifié”]²³, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier.” Men want “to have” the phallus; women want “to be” it. As the organ which is supposed to be represented by the phallus—a representation in itself impossible as the phallus as signifier represents an absence, rather than a presence—the penis is itself fetishised. Both “to be” and “to have” are replaced by a “to seem”, Lacan argues: for men, in order to protect it; for women in order to conceal its lack. This relation between the phallus and its subjects has the “effect of projecting in their entirety the ideal or typical manifestations of the behaviour of each sex.” More specifically, Lacan says that, woman rejects an essential part of femininity “in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other,” and man, in his pursue for the phallus will turn his desire towards “another woman” who “may signify this phallus in various ways, either as a virgin or a prostitute.”²⁴ Most importantly, Lacan argues that both man and woman fool themselves; they can never fully possess or be the phallus. Man deludes himself in thinking that he owns it and thus tries to protect it; woman laments its lack, tries to become it but encounters “her own desire in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love.”²⁵

In incorporating the two extremes of the virgin and the whore, the male-to-female transsexual plays along the lines of conventional understandings of gender and gender roles. Either, by finding confirmation of her femininity in performing the role of the prostitute or, by acting the role of the angel in the house—the extreme sides of

²² It is not the aim of this work to discuss the transsexual subject through the discourse of Lacanian psychoanalysis as the present work, and more specifically this chapter, is interested in examining the transsexual body as narrative and exploring how it relates to the notion of the embodiment of gender subjectivity. For an interesting discussion of the transsexual subject through Lacan see Catherine Millot’s *Horsexe: Essays on Transsexuality* (Semiotext(e): Paris, 1991).

²³ A note on the use of the phrase in Lacan’s original text by the editor of the collection which is the source for this excerpt is as follows:

“Lacan writes that the phallic signifier designates as a whole ‘les effets DE signifié’ (‘signified-effects,’ like ‘sound-effects’ or ‘special-effects’), not ‘les effets DU signifié,’ which would imply that the signified functions as a knowable cause.”

Thus the phallus is itself, not an object, but a signifier which constructs the effects of the signified whose position is preconditioned by that signifier (the phallus). Lacan says that no one can actually have the phallus since it is itself a signifier that creates the “signified-effect.”

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* edited by Vincent B. Leitch (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 2001) 1302-1310.

femininity—s/he seeks to validate her gender identity. In finding confirmation as a woman when acting the role of the whore, s/he plays on the fetishisation of both female sexuality and the female body—the body which, more often than not, is constructed as corporealised fantasy. On acting the role of the angel in the house, she plays on the definition of the feminine as submissive partner. This role is often complemented by the other traditional gender role, that of the mother. Benjamin reports on some of his subjects' desire to complete their happiness as women by becoming mothers. Concomitant to the perpetuation of a femininity framed within the same patriarchal structures that created it in the first place, is an idealisation of femininity itself as well as the position of the woman which—the transsexual often imagines—a woman occupies.

“I have found happiness that I never dreamed possible. I adore being a girl and I would go through 10 operations, if I had to, in order to be what I am now. A girl's life is so wonderful. The whole world looks so beautifully different. The only thing that could add to my life now, would be a baby girl. D. [her husband] says that after all legal matters are settled, maybe we will adopt one.”²⁶

Such idealisations of both femininity and a woman's life are often repeated in a number of male-to-female transsexual narratives, Jan Morris' being one of the most often read and quoted, as well as criticised for her overall enthusiasm in being a woman.²⁷

Thus, transsexuality becomes itself a narrative that relies on other narratives for its creation and development. In her eager repetition of stereotypical patriarchal feminine behaviour, s/he (the male-to-female transsexual) tries to confirm h/er own identity by being more woman than a “real” woman ever could be. In the reproduction of the same structures the transsexual has been celebrated for transgressing by crossing the borderlines of gender, transsexuality essentialises gender norms. In creating a manual for identification of the transsexual condition, medical science constructs a greater narrative within which the subject develops as a transsexual. Within this narrative the transsexual is called to replicate and to exhibit “appropriate” gender behaviour, and it is only this form of behaviour that is officially reported in the scientific studies. On the other hand, the transsexual, sensing the threat of losing identity—the identity authenticated on the basis of her exercise in passing—avoids discussing in her published autobiographical narrative any instances of “inappropriate

²⁵ Ibid. 1309.

²⁶ Excerpt from letter sent to Harry Benjamin by one of his patients post re-assignment. *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, 65.

²⁷ See also Jan Morris, *Conundrum*.

gender behaviour". Sandy Stone reports that, in addition to the published autobiographical narratives accessible to everyone, "many transsexuals keep something they call by the argot 'O.T.F': The Obligatory Transsexual File."

This usually contains newspaper articles and bits of forbidden diary entries about "inappropriate" gender behaviour. Transsexuals also collect autobiographical literature. According to the Stanford gender dysphoria program, the medical clinics do not, because they consider autobiographical accounts thoroughly unreliable (Stone 285).

Thus, the medico-discursive establishment not only legitimises the transsexual narrative but also has the power to authenticate the transsexual narratives that it considers reliable on the basis of what it considers and demands as appropriate gender behaviour, as well as the behaviour it expects the transsexual to exhibit in order to authenticate him/her as such in the first place.

In its medicodiscursive form, the "wrong body" narrative is the verification of an intensely experienced body dysphoria. Such an extreme discomfort with the body eventually leads the subject to a state of disembodiment as the sexed body, the flesh, is ultimately replaced by the body image the subject employs in order to cope with the general discomfort the flesh provokes. At its outset, body dysphoria is very much a corporeal event in that the pre-op transsexual transfers his feelings of discomfort not only on the surface of the body but, often, by and through the body, in an attempt to "do right" what has been "done wrong" through self-mutilation. Scars, tattoos, piercings and sometimes mutilation of the genitals (the markers of sex) inscribe on the surface of the body the narrative of body dysphoria and authenticate the "wrong body" narrative.

Self mutilations are no rarity and have occurred in at least four of my patients out of a total of 152 transsexual males. Two of them tried to castrate themselves but had to give up and call a doctor. One succeeded with the help of a friend in completing the job. One mutilated the penis, requiring several stitches to repair the damage. Many more such incidents have been reported and still more can be assumed.²⁸

Benjamin further explains that, sometimes these acts are done in desperation but as he admits, "others are more deliberate and are meant to force the surgeon's hand to complete the genital alteration" that he had previously, for whatever reason, refused to undertake. In that it fulfils both the prescription and the inscription of the "wrong body"

²⁸Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York: Julian Press, 1966) 47.

narrative in theory and praxis through self-mutilation, body dysphoria becomes a powerful tool for gaining access to surgery and an essential requirement for the transsexual passing/“passing” (both as passage/transition and as a test).

The subject’s body dysphoria eventually leads to a condition similar to what the neurologist Oliver Sacks in his work on severe body image disturbances calls “bodily agnosia”, what Merleau-Ponty also refers to as “anosognosia”, a discrepancy between the subject’s body image and its material body as well as a refusal to acknowledge the material body as one’s own.

As the contours of the image are outlined as fundamentally noncoincident with material body, it is this sense of im-proper-ness—the conceptualisation of the sexed morphology as not the property of the subject’s body image—that is captured so succinctly in the wrong-body formula. It becomes a description simply of the refusal of body ego to own referential body: I do not recognise as proper, as my property, this material surround; therefore I must be trapped in the wrong body (Prosser 77).

The transsexual, like the anosognosic, refuses to accept his/her body as property since the only material body to which the transsexual has access is the “wrong” body. For the transsexual, the “wrong” body is the *im-proper* body, its inappropriateness creating the desire on the subject’s part to escape that body that it refuses to accept (or claim?) as its own. Property is disowned. Possession of the body is repudiated and the subject is forced to create a narrative body, a body composed of language alone, through which to mediate its existence. Within the context of this narrative and to counteract its anosognosic situation, the subject creates a body image mirroring the condition of the phantom limb, thus “remembering in the body image parts actually lost from the material body” (Prosser 84). However, what the transsexual re-members is what has never been, but what, according to the subject, should have been.

The body of transsexual becoming is born out of a yearning for a perfect past—that is, not memory but nostalgia: the desire for the purified version of what was, not for the return to home per se (*nostos*) but to the romanticised ideal of home. Memory annealed in imagination, nostalgia re-collects the fragments of the past and welds them into an imaginary whole (Prosser 84).

As transsexual narrative *par excellence*, the “wrong body” narrative is the validation of the impossibility of reconciliation between the ‘outside’ (the body) and the ‘inside’ (the essence, the soul), a distinction which, more than illustrating a division within the subject while at the same time instating anew and supporting the mind-body

dualism, presents the body to be at fault for the irreparable lack of unity. For it is a *lack* that the subject experiences, not a *loss*; it is a unity which the subject has never experienced, not even before the realisation of its lack. The feeling of being trapped into the wrong body implies that there has never been a time of unity, only ever a struggle, even be it unconscious and unidentifiable, before the moment of epiphany.

At the same time though the “wrong body” narrative privileges the soul (the essence) over the body, presenting the body as the property of the soul; in this case though, it is precisely the body as property that is being contested. The distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ co-extensive of the image of “being trapped into the wrong body”, a schizm within subjectivity, implicates an understanding of the body as container, a case within which the soul is accordingly happily or unhappily enclosed. Similarly to the anorexic individual who sees the body as the “not-me” of identity, an obstacle—“the heavy drag on self realisation”²⁹—so the pre-op transsexual subject experiences the body as a hindrance, a limiting factor for his/her project of identity formation. Much like the overweight individual who wants to resist the cultural significations associated with the “fat” body and who believes the body to be a false projection, on the outside, of the “true” self imprisoned inside the body—the logic that dictates that ‘there is a thin person inside this fat body’, also implying that *this* body is not *me*—the transsexual experiences the body as an unbearable weight, but most importantly as the unbearable weight of a fleshy prison cell within which the soul is encased, held captive. This idea of encasement alludes to an understanding of the body as a costume or mere skin that dresses the soul, but as the improper body is rejected, the soul remains naked, unprotected, and unsubstantiated. The subject lacks both the vest and a medium through which to channel its existence, on and through which to realise its gender identity. That lack is fulfilled precisely by the thing that triggered it in the first place, the “wrong body” narrative. The subject then invests in a narrative whose only relation to the body is through the preclusion of embodiment but which narrative takes the form of vestment and ultimately becomes an investment of the subject’s gender identity. Morris says:

As I grew older my conflict became more explicit to me, and I began to feel that **I was living a falsehood. I was in masquerade, my female reality, which I had no words to define, clothed in a male pretence** (Morris 8) [my emphasis].

²⁹ Bordo, Susan *Unbearable Weight*, 5.

Beyond the clear implication that the body functions as an undesirable disguise for the soul, the correspondence between *body* and *words*, the body as narrative, is unflinching. The male body is considered to be false—a contrast to the “female reality”—a corporeal pretence for the true self whose reality remains unarticulated. Significantly, here, the body being the only corporeal narrative, it articulates and precludes articulation at the same time. It is the vocalisation, the *parole* of subjectivity, and yet its narrative is false; the *body of words* does not correspond to, and cannot define, the real self. The only story its corporeality allows it to narrate is not real, its words are false. The subject is precluded from articulating its essence as it has no words, importantly *no-body*, to tell that story. The anxiety for articulation the subject experiences is twofold: the subject desires a body in order to define—to illustrate and bound—its “female reality” and vocalise its true self, and at the same time it seeks to unify body and soul through this articulation. Ultimately, what is sought is the coherent expression in words of a subjectivity whose body (both its material body and its body of words) corresponds to its soul. The male body embodies, on its surface, on the ‘outside’, a narrative that is not representative of the essence within, on the ‘inside’. Its narrative is not representative of the true self, it is a falsehood, a costume that disguises the truth hidden under its surface [where is that truth located? in which part of the body? is it inside the body at all?], a masquerade; and yet this is the only narrative the body can deliver. The “female reality”, encased as it is in the “wrong” body, has no access to articulation.

Clearly, real existence through the material body is precluded—the body being “wrong”, life through it becomes “a falsehood.” In a reverse analogy with transvestism, it is the physiological body that is the vest that does not fit, that does not express the soul. While the transvestite uses the body by clothing it, by (in-) vesting it, to create the expression (or the illusion) of a reflection of what is ‘inside’, here the in-vestment is on the body, the body itself being the clothing that expresses the “wrong” identity. This suggests that in contrast to transvestism, transsexuality is not only skin deep. But if the body is a “masquerade” and living through it becomes a “falsehood”, then what is the reality of subjectivity? If a body cannot contribute to the development of the true self then how does *any* body become validated as the expression of true identity? The logic that dictates that one’s physiological body is not the source or the expression of one’s true self but subsequently requires a body on which to ground and through which to express one’s identity, leads us to conclude that, bodies do not have any validity in

themselves but are validated by laws and values that are the legitimising force of gender identity and subjectivity. Such legislative organs work—or through a reading of the transsexual narrative, can be seen to work—*outside* the body, sometimes on its surface, sometimes around it, but always through the notion of the body.

More than being preoccupied with the gendering of the body, the transsexual has been accused of essentialising his/her genitals. In the context of the “wrong body” narrative, what seems to be causing the greatest anxiety and is a prominent part of body dysphoria is the impropriety of the sexual organs. Within a medicodiscursive system the sexual organs are the part of the anatomy that defines sex, and subsequently, culturally normalises gender while establishing coherence between gender and the sexed body within the framework of the heterosexual reproductive law. Within the transsexual narrative the sexual organs seem to be, from the theorist’s point of view, a point of controversy. They are the core of the ‘wrong body’ narrative and its insignia on the surface, the ‘outside’, of the pre-op transsexual body. The penis, or the vagina, is the emblematic ‘outside’ that contradicts the ‘inside’; it is the “not-me”, the “other-than-my-real-self”, of the identity emancipated on the body. They are the property that is improper, the anosognosic’s limb that is disowned. “I cannot stand all this anymore,” says one of Benjamin’s patients characteristically pointing downward. “It does not belong to me; it must go” (Benjamin 53). In relation to transsexual sexuality and sexual activity, in which the sex organs play a pivotal part, Benjamin reports that although some transsexuals do not have a sex life due to psychosomatic problems to do with the persistence of the inappropriate sex organs or other reasons mainly relating to the effect of hormone treatment on sexual desire, some transsexuals are sexually active. Some of them even preserve a “normal married life” and have sexual relations with a woman with the help of fantasies.

They say they are able to have sex relations with the help of fantasies, by taking a succubus (under) position in intercourse, or by wearing a female nightgown. Some of these married transsexuals described to me a mental state during intercourse in which the penis seems to lose its identity of ownership. “The penis may just as well be my wife’s being inserted into me as vice versa,” one patient expressed it. Another one said bluntly, “I don’t know whether I screw or I’m being screwed” (Benjamin 50).

In disclaiming his genitals Benjamin’s patient displaces ownership of the penis on his wife’s body rather than his own. In placing himself in the succubus position (culturally, and even within the regulatory practices of sexual desire, the ‘woman’s place’ after all)

signifying the feminine, the patient not only attains fulfilment of that position through the signifier, but also manages to project the penis, the organ, as part of the other's body. In the transsexual logic, it seems, the centre of the gendered body, in fact the centre of feminine subjectivity, both materially and signifiably, is situated in the sex organs, the location of sexual difference. Benjamin says:

Another transsexual who had lived and worked successfully as a woman for years, was accepted by her family, and had an excellent plastic breast surgery performed, wanted me to send her finally to a surgeon for genital alteration. I could not help asking her why, when she had already accomplished so much and seemed reasonably contented. With genuine astonishment, she pointed below and said: "But girls don't have that!" (Benjamin 53-54)

By pointing "below" Benjamin's transsexual points out the issue at stake: I cannot be a proper woman until I have a proper body, and the only way to achieve it is by disowning what I have, my property, and appropriating what is, physiologically, the property of woman. To be a woman presumes ownership of female anatomy. What is most remarkable is that in exclaiming "but girls don't have that!", Benjamin's transsexual, more than expressing a desire to own female genitals, expresses a desire to disown his/her male genitals, highlighting the belief that woman is defined by a lack, the lack of the penis. The emphasis is not on what "girls" *have* but on what girls do *not* have. Worse, the emphasis is not on what *women* "don't have", but on what *girls* "don't have". The reference to "girls" instead of women, and the insistence on property and propriety ("don't have that") alludes to an image, or a gender role, a subject embodies rather than the occupation of a position; to be a girl is very different from being a woman.

III. "A nebulous entity": The essentialisation of gender

In examining published autobiographical narratives within the context of her discussion of the construction of the transsexual narrative, Sandy Stone argues that these usually reproduce a stereotypical and unambiguous image of femininity.

Besides the obvious complicity of these accounts in a Western white male definition of performative gender, the authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous

men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory in between (286).³⁰

Such narratives tend to reproduce every cliché of femininity which they subsequently internalise as a transcendental truth or even an essence. Even though there is often an awareness of the artificiality of the acts of gender, the belief in an essential gender identity itself is fundamental in the development of the narrative.

Morris, eager to support that almost mystical, supernatural feeling that convinces him at that moment under the piano at the age of three or four years old of his extraordinary nature, denies any psychological, psychoanalytic or sociological explanation for his condition by making sure to emphasise that he was brought up in a moderate manner and had a happy childhood. During his early years he was “always sure of an audience” and his “security was absolute”; thus any possible explanations of his condition, which would attribute such a finding to a child’s desire for attention and would lead to the assumption that his story—and, more importantly, *her narrative*—is based on nothing more than the presumption of a deprived childhood, can be precluded.

More to my point, by every standard of logic I was patently a boy. I was named James Humphrey Morris, male child. I had a boy’s body. I wore a boy’s clothes. It is true that my mother had wished me to be a daughter, but I was never treated as one. It is true that gushing visitors sometimes assembled me into their fox furs and lavender sachets to murmur that, with curly hair like mine, I should have been born a girl. As the youngest of three brothers in a family soon to be fatherless, I was doubtless indulged. I was not, however, generally thought effeminate. At kindergarten I was not derided. In the street I was not stared at (2).

Paradoxically, Morris is extremely concerned with presenting an unambiguous gender image for himself (pre-operation) as both a young boy and a man, thus the emphasis on young James’ upbringing. The description, however, centers on James’ appearance. Woolf’s *Orlando* springs to mind from the first pages of Morris’ narration but Jan’s narrative lacks the ironic wink implied in Woolf’s—“He, for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it.”³¹ Woolf’s *Orlando* is nothing if not of ambiguous sex and gender throughout the novel which functions as his/her biography. By contrast, Morris’ narrative, although alluding to *Orlando* and its

³⁰ Stone appears to use the term performative not in terms of “performativity” (as it is used in Butler) but as in “performance”. Thus when she says ‘performative gender’, I take it to mean ‘gender in performance’ rather than ‘gender as performative’.

³¹ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Penguin: London, 1993) 11.

presence in James' childhood home as some form of mystical sign for events to come, as well as an intertext to his/her own narrative, aims at framing both James' and Jan's gender identities within stereotypical and unambiguous gender boundaries: James was brought up as every other boy, attended the old boys' schools (in this case Oxford University), served in the army and climbed Mount Everest; Jan is more "girlie" than any woman would ever want to be; she is submissive and hides her intelligence, collects porcelain ornaments and is flattered when builders whistle at her approvingly. By contrast to Orlando whose appearance matches his/her function, the implication in Morris' text is that gender is an essence that transcends the body and is not corporeally conditioned. Rather, it (gender) conditions the body in which gender finds itself happily or unhappily encased. An infelicitous sex and gender combination leads to the condition known as feeling like being in the "wrong body" which works as a disguise of the truthful gender imprisoned within it.

Morris' conviction that he was "born into the *wrong body*", indicative of most transsexual narratives, grounds his narrative and legitimises his desire to surgically alter the body, the 'outside', to fit the soul, the 'inside'. More importantly at this stage in the narrative, she (Jan), through the recollection of him (James) points to the discrepancy between *him* on the 'outside' (sex and the body) and *her* on the 'inside' (the essence, the soul). At the same time, Morris indicates that there have always been signs of his duplicitous status, none of which were of his own doing but "naturally" manifested and often sensed by other people. There is an emphasis on the "truthfulness" of a number of situations that were beyond his control but that contributed to this idea of being born into the wrong body: his mother really wished him to be a girl (but never treated him like one), visitors often said that with curly hair like his he "should have been born a girl", being the youngest child he was indulged (but generally "not thought effeminate"). As such, both his discovery and later his desire to transform his body to conform to her soul, can be read and understood as to be beyond the subject's power, stronger and more persistent than either mind and logic or body, thus defining itself as an essence pre-existing and overpowering all matter and reason. "I present the confusion in cryptic terms, and I see it still as a mystery. Nobody really knows why some children, boys and girls, discover in themselves the inexpugable belief that, despite all the physical evidence, they are really of the opposite sex" (5). According to Morris, this conviction is not affected by environment or instruction, it is not *constructed*, it essentially *is*.

Morris' dilemma, though, seems to be altogether disembodied. As there are no inscriptions on the 'outside', on the surface of the body, of a misplaced identity—she claims that he was never even thought effeminate—his conundrum seems altogether incorporeal.

I myself see the conundrum in another perspective, for I believe it to have some higher origin or meaning. I equate it with the idea of soul, or self, and I think of it not just as a sexual enigma, but as a quest for unity. [...] I see it above all as a dilemma neither of the body nor of the brain, but of the spirit (Morris 6-7).

The narrative contradicts, and in some ways undermines, Jan's purpose. It is not an extreme body dysphoria that torments James but rather a general feeling of being misplaced and misrepresented. It is not about despising the male body and masculinity as such; rather it is about perpetuating the spiritual epiphany that occurred sometime in early childhood dictating that he was "encased" in the "wrong" body. It is neither a feeling of an uncontrollable psychological pain redirected on the materiality and surface of the body nor a feeling of disgust that constructs Morris' body narrative. Body image drives him but only as an image, an idea/I to match the essence and to serve the coherence between what Jan feels she is and its articulation, its signifiable existence. This is not about establishing a coherence between gender and sex by grounding subjectivity in corporeality—as Prosser has it, to feel "one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself" (Prosser 7). It is not about embodiment; it is about signification where the body serves as the signifier for the signified that is the soul. In this relation between signifier and signified, it is the signified that produces its signifier, it is the soul that produces the body; the body is the effect of the soul.

Gender acquires in this context a privileged position in the process of the development of gender subjectivity. In fact, because it *is* an essence it negates the very possibility of such a process. Gender is mystical, inexplicable, God-given. To desire to be a woman, the young James thinks, seems "a logical enough aspiration, if Woman [is] so elevated and admirable a being as history, religion and good manners combined to assure us" (Morris 17). This essence that Jan acknowledges as her true self is further developed during Morris' years in Oxford—"Oxford made me" (Morris 8), she admits. As part of the Christ Church choir, amidst singing the religious hymns and being taught to adore the Virgin Mary, "whose presence drifted so strangely and elegantly through the Gospels, an enigma herself," the young James moulds his conundrum to an intent while becoming convinced that there is something mystical about his situation—"The

ancients frequently saw something holy in a being that transcended the sexes, and sympathetic friends have detected, in the heart of my own quandary, some sort of inspiration” (14). Not only are James’ identifications with the mystical, the divine and the feminine, enough to increase his faith in the essential quality—and perhaps the superiority—of its being, but they suffice to convince him that his predicament is approved and understood by the spirits in the cathedral—“How could they do otherwise? The noblest aspects of the liturgy aspired to what I conceived as the female principle. Our very vestments seemed intended to deny our manhood [...]” (15). In discussing Lili Elbe’s narrative *Man into Woman*, where the doctor who performs the surgery (known in the narrative as the Professor) is seen as a kind of God who moulds Lili into a woman and “by a single glance [...] awoke her heart to life, a life with all the instincts of a woman,”³² Sandy Stone observes that in such narratives the female is annihilated in spite of its incorporation in the post-reassignment body.

The female is immanent, the female is bone-deep, the female is instinct. With Lili’s eager complicity, the Professor drives a massive wedge between the masculine and the feminine within her. In this passage, reminiscent of the “oriental” quality of Morris’ narrative, the male must be annihilated or at least denied, but the female is that which exists to be *continually* annihilated (287).

Similarly to Lili, Morris annihilates both femininity and femaleness by folding them into one, and more than that, by enfolding femaleness into femininity; thus, a female body has no value as such to the one that possesses it unless it is inscribed by femininity, i.e. unless sex becomes meaningful through the expression of gender acts and gestures. Sex, then, becomes itself not only the expression of gender but also its primary signifier.

Morris also wants to ensure the understanding that her condition—transsexualism—“in its classic form [what *is* its classic form?] is as distinct from transvestism as it is from homosexuality” (5), thus attempting to legitimise her narrative by formulating its credibility based on the proposition that “[b]oth transvestites and homosexuals sometimes suppose they would be happier if they could change their sex, but they are generally mistaken” (5). In an over-simplification, and in many ways a complete misconception, of both the notions and the practices of transvestism and homosexuality, she goes on to explain that transsexuality’s essential difference lies in that “[t]he transvestite gains his gratification specifically from wearing the clothes of the

³² Quoted in Stone, p287.

opposite sex, and would sacrifice his pleasures by *joining* that sex: the homosexual, by definition, prefers to make love with others of his own sort, and would only alienate himself and them by changing” (5), thus attributing transsexualism to the incompatibility between the body (cultural and natural) and the soul (essence). “Transsexualism is something different in kind. It is not a sexual mode or preference. It is not an act of sex at all. It is a passionate, lifelong, ineradicable conviction and no true transsexual has ever been disabused of it” (Morris 5-6). The condition of the transsexual is thus not one of choice, of “preference”. It is beyond sense and science—the psychologist’s chair, the psychoanalyst’s sofa, “neither couch nor drag could isolate, let alone remove” it (Morris 40) —and “no true transsexual has ever been disabused of it.” It is a destiny, a destination, like the home of reassignment, a home that is a return to the womb that will give birth to the “right” body, this time, and will mark the beginning of a new life. This birth is again beyond the subject’s control, as other wheels are turning defining its existence—“Powers beyond my control had brought me to room 5 at the clinic in Casablanca, and I could not have run away then even if I had wished to” (Morris 121). Although Morris, in reading other transgender narratives, can acknowledge a certain empathy and solace with others “who found themselves torn between the sexes”, he discerns that “they did not actually believe themselves to *be* feminine, as I did, or really wish to change their bodies—they merely found it pleasant, convenient or necessary to act the female role” (Morris 38). He likens himself to those among the Scythians that bore themselves as women and did women’s work generally believed “to have been feminised by divine intervention” (Morris 37).

The body/matter cannot define subjectivity but gender can, as the subject revels in the superiority of gender over sex, mind and soul over the flesh. This is most evident in both the way the body is considered and an understanding of gender and the acts that constitute its reality is being put forward. The essentialisation of gender and gender identity is probably the most striking idea in this narrative which serves to portray an image of gender as the fundamental of existence. In its effort to convince of the truthfulness of gender identities and categories, *Conundrum* achieves the opposite: in its deification of femininity it exposes an understanding of woman as insubstantial even in its corporealisation, nothing else but an *idea/l*, instead of an incorporation a *phantasy*. In its numerous recitations of stereotypical gender acts and gestures as an expression of the essence of gender, the narrative exposes the very artificiality of such acts and gestures, constituting them as mere signifiers of an empty signified.

But, what relation does the body bear to the development of gender subjectivity within *Conundrum*? Even with the “wrong-body” narrative as the framing vignette of her narrative, Morris fails to account for any actual relation and contribution of her body—or, any body—to her conundrum. Characteristically she says:

That my inchoate yearnings, born from wind and sunshine, music and imagination—that my conundrum might simply be a matter of penis or vagina, testicle or womb, seems to me still a contradiction in terms for it concerned not my apparatus, but my *self* (17-8).

That she should feel her *self* to be something other than her body can be validated within the context of the “wrong body” narrative that she has already instated; the male body is the not me, it is *an-other*. That her conundrum would have nothing to do with the body, though, not even the “right” body; that she would consider such a relationship “a contradiction in terms”, exhibits an understanding of the development of gender identity independently of the body, *any body*. In her understanding, gender appears to be altogether insubstantial, removed from the body, outside the body. There is no space here for a Beauvoirean becoming, or Butler’s understanding of gender as a set of acts, gestures and desire enacted on the surface of the body to produce the effect of a coherent gender identity. Gender bears no relation to a body that is a situation by and through which one develops one’s gender identity, or even to a body on which gender is enacted.

To me gender is not physical at all, but is altogether insubstantial. It is soul perhaps, it is talent, it is taste, it is environment, it is how one feels [...] it is inner music [...] it is more truly life and love than any combination of genitals, ovaries and hormones. It is the essentialness of oneself, the psyche, the fragment of unity (Morris 20).

Drawing a distinction between sex and gender, she insists on a differentiation between the two: sex is anatomy, gender is psyche. Though the two conceptions “obviously overlap,” Morris contradictorily insists on both the possibility of the two existing independently of any coherence between them, while at the same time insisting that she could only achieve unity within her self through the adjustment of the one to the other—“I was born with the wrong body, being feminine by gender and male by sex, and I could achieve completeness only when the one was adjusted to the other” (Morris 21). It is not however a desire for embodiment that drives her. The completeness that she claims to have desired is not directed by and through the “right” body. Morris does not

search to embody her femininity in order to complete it, but rather in order to complement it. She says:

It became fashionable later to talk of my condition as “gender confusion,” but I think it a philistine misnomer: I have had no doubt about my gender since that moment of self-realisation beneath the piano. Nothing in the world would make me abandon my gender, concealed from anyone though it remained: but my body, my organs, my paraphernalia, seemed to me much less sacrosanct, and far less interesting too (21).

Such a view of the body is in contrast to her account of James’ participation in an Everest expedition where he, as a young man, seems to be enjoying the full potential of his male body that is, now he comes to realise, so much different than a woman’s body—“Let me try to describe the sensation for my readers, as it seems to me today – and especially for my women readers, who are unlikely I now see to have experienced such a conjunction of energies” (69). The description of the scenery with all its phallic force and signification is incorporated in Morris’ narrative—his text and his body/narrative—both as an event and, more importantly, as a corporeal experience. Embodied in the young man’s attempt to conquer the peak of the mountain, is the entire signification that both scenery and male body produce and convey.

But imagine now the young man’s condition [...] His body is running not in gusts and squalls, but at a steady high speed [...] He is the master [...] His mind, like his body, is tuned to the job, and will not splutter or falter. It is the feeling of unfluctuating control, I think, that women cannot share, and it springs of course not from the intellect or the personality, nor even so much from upbringing, but specifically from the body. The male body may be ungenerous, even uncreative in the deepest kind, but when it is working properly it is a marvellous thing to inhabit. I admit it in retrospect more than I did at the time, and I look back at those moments of supreme male fitness as one remembers champagne or a morning swim (Morris, 70-1).

The male body is described in all its virility, inferring a general feeling of power and action—the body that acts upon its materiality, the body that *actually* and physically experiences its materiality. The qualities that are here attributed to men, the male body and the experiential relationship between the two are, in this context, denied to women and their female nature. The implication here is that men are more in *touch* with their bodies, whereas women are more in contact with their spirit. A man can experience his body in the unmitigated manner that a woman cannot. (Is it because man’s body is *flesh* whereas woman’s is *words*?) Men are active, women are passive. This is convincing

evidence of a situation in which the subject of this narrative experiences his corporeal narrative and yet, this is the only time in her narrative that Morris describes such a corporeal experience. Whereas his male body is utterly felt in all its fleshy materiality—tingling “with strength and energy [...] his body has no spare weight upon it, only muscles made supple by exercise” (Morris 70)—the description of her female body right after her operation is a contrast to her experience in Everest. At the clinic in Casablanca, in the depths of Africa—much like in a womb—Morris looks at her body and claims to feel whole again after the years of hormone treatment that kept her body in a state of androgeneity—“I was all of a piece, as proportioned once again, though in a different kind, as I had been so exuberantly on Everest long before. Then I had felt lean and muscular: now I felt above all deliciously *clean*” (123). While on Everest, Morris experiences his body in all its physicality: the combination of muscle and strength, not carrying extra weight, the feeling of being in control, the exhilaration of the feeling that one inhabits a body of “supreme male fitness.” The sensation is one of pure body. However, immediately after his sex change operation, Morris feels “deliciously *clean*” (his emphasis). In Casablanca, Morris does not only find harmony by finally casting off his androgynous body, but it seems that he moves from an original state of embodiment (James, a man, experiencing a “feeling of unfluctuating control”) to a state of disembodiment (Jan, a woman, “deliciously *clean*”, not in control of *any-body*). Yet again in Morris’ narrative, man is an active body, woman—if she is *some-body*—is a passive body, or more frequently, *no-body*. Not only is femininity essentialised and idealised in a narration where the mind, the soul, the ‘inside’ is privileged over the body, the ‘outside’, but also the body becomes a case for something (the soul), the self becomes independent of the body, and woman is a disembodied feeling of cleanliness. In Stone’s words, “the female is that which exists to be continually annihilated” (287).

Morris seems to acknowledge a certain relation between the body and the development of gender subjectivity but that relation does not corporealise itself; rather it remains in the realm of signification. Acknowledging certain psychological changes following the operation, she says:

Psychologically I was distinctly less forceful. A neurotic condition common among women is called penis envy, its victims supposing that there is inherent to the very fact of the male organs some potent energy of the spirit. There is something to this fancy. It is not merely the loss of androgens that has made me more retiring, more ready to be lead, more passive: the removal of the organs themselves has contributed, for there was to the presence of the penis something

positive and stimulating. My body then was made to push and initiate, it was now made to yield and accept, and the outside change has had its inner consequences (133).

As Shapiro notes, “transsexuals usually claim to have quite a definite sense of their gender; it is their physical sex that is experienced as the problem” (250). Morris assumes that there is something inherent in the body—its shape, its physique—hormones aside, that is the cause of gender behaviour, the acts and gestures that are widely accepted to constitute the reality of gender. She accepts that such acts and gestures are related to the body but she refutes that discursive powers (such as gender attributes) affect the body’s materialisation. As James loses the penis Jan’s subjectivity is automatically instated, and her body marked by an absence (the absence of the penis) is made to “yield and accept”; passivity is here expressed as the essential quality of woman.

If it is the body, then, that generates its meaning, it is the body that dictates our behaviour, and more specifically our gender behaviour, as Morris appears to claim at this point. However, this is in direct contrast to her previous claims that it is not the body that prescribes our behaviour, our acts and gestures, but our gender inside the body, the essence—“for I regarded sex merely as the tool of gender” (Morris 91). Where is then Morris’ mysterious gender identity located? Is it “encased” in the body or is it produced by the experience of her bodily spatiality? Reflecting on the imminent sex change, Morris thinks of it as a readjustment of the body, “to reset (as I saw it) the pointer of my sex more sensibly and accurately along the scale of my gender” (90), while insisting that the surgery would have no other effect on the subject than to discard the disguise—“To myself I had been woman all along, and I was not going to change the truth of me, only discard the falsity” (91). Instead, the only effects Morris considers are form, appearance and status, shifting from the “role of a man to the role of a woman” (91). Does Morris then change subjects, in changing the body, or does Morris’ subjectivity transcend the body altogether? If she appears, post-op, to have had no doubts about her subjectivity (“to myself I had been a woman all along”) then what is all the fuss about being born into the wrong body? Ultimately, the question is, how can the “wrong body” narrative ground any claims as to the impossibility of “real” experience of subjectivity through the “right” body, if the fundamental argument is that subjectivity transcends the body? If the body is the fundamental of experience, as Merleau-Ponty has it; if the body is a situation through which we experience the world;

and if our subjectivity is comprised by our lived experience, how can Morris make claims to have been a woman all along? The truth is that Morris could not have known what it is to be a woman all along because he was never in a woman's situation. James might have desired to be feminine, and might have achieved as much femaleness as possible, but he cannot make claims to womanhood outside that position, outside a female situation. What Morris is precluded from is not any access to womanhood post-operation, but rather, any knowledge or experience of woman's subjectivity prior to it.

Strongly fixated on patriarchal, phallogocentric gender roles and the understanding of gender acts as natural and essential, Morris does little to assert her femininity in any way other than to express an image of woman that has always existed in her mind before, during, and after the operation and the change of form. Towards the end of her narrative she asks, "Would my conflict have been so bitter if I had been born now, when the gender line is so much less rigid? If society had allowed me to live in the gender I preferred, would I have bothered to change sex?" (146). Again, her narrative undermines itself from within. If, as she insists throughout her narrative, gender is an essence that transcends the body (and its sex) then what is left for gender to be, other than signifiers and signifieds, acts and gestures, completely incorporeal and meaningless, for they have no material force? Prosser argues that the image of being trapped into the wrong body conveys material force because it suggests how "body image can feel sufficiently substantial as to persuade the transsexual to alter his or her body to conform to it" (69). Such a force remains completely immaterial in Morris' narrative, as what it seeks to embody is the "right" body as the signifying body, a body that is imagined—even fantasised about—before its construction within the realm of gender signification, a body that is more symbolic than corporeal. Even if body image has material force in that it leads to the materialisation of embodied gender identity, what is the effect of such an embodiment on subjectivity? Does the male-to-female transsexual fill the same subject position as a genetic woman, or is s/he of a different subjectivity?

IV. “A harsh feminist thought” or, “What’s in a name?”: Gender and the approbation of the subject ‘woman’

Transsexual narratives, particularly the ones grounded on the “wrong body” narrative, have often come under attack from the lines of feminist thought that have viewed the male-to-female transsexual’s attempt to corporealise femininity as a further appropriation of women’s bodies by patriarchy. Such views, more fiercely vocalised within the narratives of second wave feminism, are nowhere more polemically argued than in Janice Raymond’s *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*. Raymond is extremely suspicious of both transsexual practices and of the transsexual subject. She argues that transsexualism,³³ male-to-constructed-female (her preferred term over male-to-female) transsexualism in particular, is the effect of patriarchal culture and its definitions of masculinity and femininity, as well as its fetishisation of the body’s—especially the female body’s—sexual anatomy.

Most fundamentally, a society that produces sex-role stereotyping functions as a primary cause for transsexualism. [...] I would suggest that a patriarchal society and its social currents of masculinity and femininity is the First Cause of transsexualism. The organs and body of the opposite sex that the transsexual desires merely incarnate the “essence” of the desired role (xviii).

Raymond argues that, the transsexual focus on sex change—an impossible task to begin with, as like Benjamin, she argues that sex is rooted in genetic make-up, i.e. a combination of X and Y chromosomes—is first and foremost a demonstrative example of men possessing women. She proceeds to say that, “[t]ranssexuals are living out the two basic patriarchal myths: single parenthood by the father (male mothering) and the making of woman according to man’s image” (xx).

Raymond’s vision of the transsexual and the hand that creates him/her is one of a modern day Dr Frankenstein and his monster. The association of the *Frankenstein* story to transsexualism is also hinted at by Marjorie Garber in the chapter entitled “Spare Parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender.”³⁴ “*Frankenstein*,” Garber says, “has been read as an allegory of woman and as an inspired and terrifying preview of technologies of reproduction. But it can also be read as an uncanny anticipation of transsexual surgery and, perhaps, specifically male-to-female transsexual surgery”

³³ Note that Raymond uses the term “transsexualism” instead of “transsexuality”.

³⁴ Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests*, p111.

(Garber 111). Like Dr Frankenstein who attempts to create human life in the absence of a maternal body and a mother figure, Raymond appears to view medical science and the patriarchy who is in a co-dependent relationship with it, as a contemporary Dr Frankenstein, who constructs out of bits and pieces—*spare parts*—a human being who though imperfect, even in the eyes of his creator, opens up the possibility of virgin birth and of constructing a human being out of bits of “discarded flesh.”³⁵ In fact, the “male-to-constructed-female” and the establishment that facilitates her construction fold into one in the figures of Dr Frankenstein and his monster, both creator and creation at the same time. Within this context, the scientist’s words can be read as the ultimate parallel for the way feminist theory of Raymond’s generation had read the transsexual phenomenon. In discovering his power, Frankenstein is at first intimidated by the possibilities that it unfolds for the creation of human life, a creation outside the womb, which is replaced by a science laboratory.

When I found so astonishing a power placed within my hands, I hesitated a long time concerning the manner in which I should employ it. Although I possessed the capacity of bestowing animation, yet to prepare a frame for the reception of it, with all its intricacies of fibres, muscles, and veins, still remained a work of inconceivable difficulty and labour. I doubted at first whether I should attempt the creation of a being like myself, or one of simpler organisation; but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man. The materials at present within my command hardly appeared adequate to so arduous an undertaking, but I doubted not that I should ultimately succeed. I prepared myself for a multitude of reverses; my operations might be incessantly baffled, and at last my work be imperfect, yet when I considered the improvement which every day takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged to hope my present attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success. Nor could I consider the magnitude and complexity of my plan as any argument of its impracticability. It was with these feelings that I began the creation of a human being.³⁶

In giving birth to herself out of his (pre-op) own flesh, the male-to-constructed-female transsexual, within Raymond’s context, appears to repeat Frankenstein’s hubristic act of attempting to create life “unnaturally”, out of dead matter and by cutting and pasting pieces of flesh, animate and inanimate. Similarly, the procedure which the transsexual undergoes entails the fabrication of his/her body in an operating theatre where s/he gives birth to h/erself with the assistance of the medical establishment. Sex re-

³⁵ In Angela Carter’s novel *The Passion of New Eve*, Eve/lyn, an involuntary transsexual defines h/erself as being constructed “out of discarded flesh”.

³⁶ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 48-9.

assignment surgery is, of course, preceded by the construction of the narrative that authenticates the subject's misplaced identity and facilitates the operation that will create out of "the materials present" (the male body)—"hardly adequate to so arduous an undertaking"—and a combination of inanimate parts (silicone breast implants) the woman who the creator's "imagination" has successfully made possible prior to the operation. The transsexual, like Frankenstein, is fully prepared "for a multitude of reverses", the result of which will be imperfect; but much like Frankenstein again, s/he hopes that the advances in technology and science h/er own work will facilitate, as well as all other parallel scientific developments, will one day enable h/er to perfect herself. "In a very real sense," Raymond argues, "the male-to-constructed-female transsexual not only wants female biological capacities but wants to *become* the biological female" (29). Bearing in mind that to the present day chromosomal make-up cannot be changed and transsexual women have no reproductive capacity, the transsexual is fully aware of h/er imperfections which she often compensates for by declaring h/er contempt for genetic women, whose only claim to authenticity is their ability to bear children, or by over-compensating in her performance of femininity.³⁷ The latter is evident in the transsexual's interest in definitely unambiguous gender performances, in their conservative views of femininity and masculinity, as well as in their corporealizations of the defining acts and gestures of their "essential" gender identities.

For Raymond, male-to-female transsexualism is a patriarchal ploy for men to possess women's bodies by first fetishising them and subsequently appropriating them, as it were, in the flesh.

Finally, and I think most important, there are more male-to-constructed-female transsexuals because men are socialised to fetishise and objectify. The same socialisation that enables men to objectify women in rape, pornography and "drag" enables them to objectify their own bodies (Raymond 29).

³⁷ The following is from Judith Shapiro's essay 'Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Sex and the Mutability of Gender' (p262):

"The futuristic possibilities of transsexualism are invoked in the following passage by a defensive male to female transsexual seeking to assert her superiority over what are here called 'Gennys,' or genetic females:

Free from the chains of menstruation and child-bearing, transsexual women are obviously far superior to Gennys in many ways... Genetic women are becoming quite obsolete, which is obvious, and the future belongs to transsexual women. We know this and perhaps some of you suspect it. All you will have left is your "ability" to bear children, and in a world which will groan to feed 6 billion by the year 2000, that's a negative asset. (cited in Raymond 1979: xvii)

Raymond sees the transsexual desire to be “rid of” the penis and to incorporate on a genetically male body the parts of female biology most frequently fetishised in patriarchal practices such as pornography, for example, as yet more indication that all the male-to-constructed-female transsexual wants is to literally possess woman’s body. “Transsexualism is thus the ultimate and we might even say the logical, conclusion of male possession of women in patriarchal society. Literally, men here possess women” (Raymond 30). Raymond’s argument, although often based on a certain biological essentialism which appears to be in contradiction to her claims—as well as the claims of a generation of second wave feminists—about the social constructedness of gender, can be at least substantiated by the fact that it is indeed male subjectivity that often defines the image of femininity male-to-female transsexuals embody. As Judith Shapiro also argues, the majority of doctors assessing transsexual subjects are male and their prognosis is usually based on their own understanding of femininity and masculinity, as well as their felicitous and infelicitous incorporations. Doctors have in the past facilitated these subjects’ appropriation of stereotypical gender norms by outlining their own male/masculine expectations for a successful feminine performance in terms of appearance, as well as in terms of social contact.

Given the preponderance of male to female transsexuals, it is interesting to keep in mind that the professional community in which this transformation is effected is largely male. It has been male surgeons’ and psychiatrists’ expectations about femininity that have had to be satisfied if a sex change operation is to be performed. [...] ³⁸

But looks aren’t everything. Members of the medical establishment have also felt the need to socialise male to female transsexuals into their future roles in a gender stratified economy (Shapiro 254).

Thus the male dominated medical establishment prescribes for these subjects the gender performance with which it expects them to conform, if they are to get access to surgery to begin with, and within which they are subsequently expected to evolve as women. Thus male-to-female transsexuals become, often, a corporealised image of woman as social product and fleshy construction of a patriarchal sex and gender normalising system.

³⁸ More specifically at this point Shapiro says:

“There are reports in the literature of doctors using their own responses to a patient—that is, whether or not the doctor is attracted to the patient—to gauge the suitability of sex change surgery.” Shapiro cites studies included in Kessler, Suzanne J. and Wendy McKenna’s *Gender: An ethnomethodological approach* (John Wiley & Sons: New York, 1978) as her source.

Informed by the male establishment responsible for both their assessment as convincing women based on the ratings of their performance, as well as their future development within a woman's skin, the male-to-female transsexual enters the world in a new bodily situation, but from a position already prescribed for h/er by the interweaving narratives that constitute h/er reality and are literally incorporated on h/er body. Before s/he has reached the operating table s/he has mastered the essence of a woman: a set of acts and gestures that appear as a universal and are commonly accepted and classified as "appropriate" feminine behaviour, incorporated on a body that can be moulded accordingly. Before s/he is released into the world s/he is prepared—or so s/he thinks—for h/er new social context and h/er position within it; as this, too, has been presented to h/er as a universal truth, s/he often uncritically adopts it. Armed with h/er pre-op education which is combined with h/er own previous view of femininity from the borderlines of gender—as a transvestite, a crossdresser, a homosexual, or any combination of these identities—performing a notion of femininity which is idealised in most transsexual narratives, s/he becomes for the most part an uncritical performer of what s/he considers to be the rules of gender.

The transsexual performance has, for these reasons, forced feminist theorists to turn their attention from gender identity to gender subjectivity.

But what is a transsexual? Is he or she a member of one sex trapped in the other's body? Or someone who has taken hormones and undergone other somatic changes to more closely resemble the gender into which he (or she) was not born? Most pertinent to this enquiry, does a transsexual *change subjects*? Or just bodies—or body parts? (Garber 105)

In reviewing Jan Morris' *Conundrum* in 1974, Nora Ephron³⁹, in a piece which is, as witty as it appears, unsympathetic to the transsexual plight as expressed in Morris' narrative, highlights an important implication that seems to underlie this narrative and which is simultaneously Morris' disguise as well as her exposure. Ephron primarily questions the validity of the "wrong body narrative" as authenticating transsexual narrative trope for Morris' situation, and even goes as far as to humorously suggest that Morris could have escaped his conundrum had he been born into a culture which does not have an ideal view of the position of being a woman, or had he visited a good Freudian analyst.

³⁹ Nora Ephron, *Crazy Salad: Some Things About Women*. London: Bantam, 1976.

The entire mess could doubtless have been avoided had James Morris been born an Orthodox Jew (in which case he could have adopted the standard Jewish prayer thanking God for *not* making him into a woman) or had he gone to see a good Freudian analyst, who might have realised that any young boy sitting under a piano was probably looking up his mother's skirt. But no such luck. James Morris has become Jan Morris, an Englishwoman who wears sweater sets and pearls, blushes frequently, bursts into tears at the littlest things, and loves having a gossip with someone named Mrs Weatherby (Ephron 204).

As harsh as Ephron's critique sounds, she does highlight a very important point about Morris' narrative: she draws attention to Jan's interest in proving the authenticity of her "wrong body narrative", implicit in which is an essentialisation of femininity which Jan proceeds to incorporate in her performance of woman-ness following her sex re-assignment surgery. Furthermore, Ephron makes the point that femininity, or a performance of it, does not equal being a woman even if one alters one's anatomy to simulate that of a biological woman. Most importantly it seems to me, Ephron's argument, unlike the majority of second wave feminism narratives (including those by Raymond and Germaine Greer⁴⁰), does not focus on biology *per se* but rather on how biology and female anatomy has been interpreted in order to create the notion (or the "reality"?) of woman.

She points out that many genetically born females fail in their incorporations of femininity often *in spite of* their female bodies. "I always wanted to be a girl, too. I, too, felt I was born into the wrong body, a body that refused, in spite of every imprecation and exercise I could manage, to become anything but the boyish, lean thing it was" (Ephron 204). Femininity, she argues, does not equal woman. Most women cannot—and do not want to—perform the femininity Morris here embodies, as it is nothing more than an idealised version of woman's position in society in relation to her body. If anything, Ephron seems to argue, it is such performances of femininity—and not the actual modification of the body, or parts of it—that annihilate the female body, turning it into nothing more than an idea, an idea that cannot contain the material conditions of womanhood. "I wanted more than anything to be something I will never be—feminine, and feminine in the worst way. Submissive. Dependent. Soft-spoken. Coquettish," Ephron proceeds, but "was no good at any of it, no good at being a girl." In contrast Morris appears to be perfect at it in spite spending most of her life as a man, in a male/masculine situation (or is it *because of* that, that Morris has developed such an acute sense of femininity?). "On the other hand," she continues, "I am not half bad at

being a woman. In contrast Jan Morris is perfectly awful at being a woman; what she has become instead is exactly what James Morris wanted to become those many years ago. A girl. And worse, a forty-seven-year-old girl. And worst of all, a forty-seven year old *Cosmopolitan* girl” (204). Morris has become a middle-aged girl who drinks tea with the woman down the street while having a bit of a gossip; who considers the “real things” in life to be in the domain of a woman, like “bringing up children, painting pictures or writing home”; and who worries about the most inconsequential of things. In realising that one of the workmen working in her house has broken her little red porcelain horse Morris restrains her annoyance and proceeds to make everybody a cup of tea; “but I am thinking to myself, as they sheepishly help themselves to sugar, a harsh feminist thought. It would be a man, I think. Well it would, wouldn’t it?”, she concludes.

No wonder Nora Ephron is upset; no wonder she finds Morris’ prose “cloying” to begin with, and after Jan’s sex-change “over-embellished, simile-laden verbiage that makes the style of Victorian women novelists seem spare,” to the point of finding the book “mawkish and embarrassing.” Morris’ prose is indeed full of gender stereotypes, and her assumptions about the performance of femininity even become offensive at times, especially in the implied assumption that women would feel immense satisfaction on becoming an object of male admiration. Receiving looks of approval by milk-men and builders, she feels “elated [...] as though I have been given a good review in the *Sunday Times*.”⁴¹ For Morris, clearly men and women belong in different realms; and so they should remain. James Morris was elated by a good review of his mental work; Jan Morris, on the contrary, is equally elated by receiving approving whistles by workmen hanging on building sites. Her position however is different; as a man (albeit with

⁴⁰ See Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Anchor 2000).

⁴¹ All quotes at this point are from Ephron’s review. Morris seems to have removed, or replaced some of the above quotes from the latest edition of her book, which remains, to this day, a combination of bad prose and gender stereotypes. In her Introduction to the 2000 edition of her book Morris begins by calling the work a “period piece.” “It was written in the 1970s, and is decidedly *of the 1970s*.” She proceeds to say that perceptions of sexual identity have greatly changed since then; and so has Jan’s book. A number of gender stereotypes have disappeared although most of them remain at large. The “essence” of it is the same but Jan has felt obliged to change her narrative, to change her story as it were, to make it more of the times, which in itself is an indication of how fickle her perception of gender subjectivity is. Then however she proceeds to revel in the fact that scientists have now discovered that the hypothalamus of a transsexual’s brain is smaller than a man’s and even smaller than a woman’s (does that mean that transsexuals are physically and mentally—“naturally— inclined to be more feminine than genetic women?). “There really is some physical, as to psychological reason for the phenomenon,” Jan triumphantly concludes. Although a consideration of this latest scientific development and its implications is not of the present discussion, suffice to say that Morris’ delight in it reveals once again her essentialist understanding of sex and gender subjectivity. For Morris subjectivity is located not in the lived experience of her situation but quite literally in the head.

female/feminine aspirations and sensibilities), she did manage to live the kind of life women of her time could only dream of, but then again, she did make her position clear early on in her book by attributing a metaphysical essence to her conundrum. Even Sandy Stone exclaims: “No wonder feminist theorists have been suspicious. Hell, *I’m* suspicious” (289).

Stone’s suspicion and Ephron’s suspicion might well be raised from different positions but they both meet at the same intersection in the debate around gender and subjectivity: the transsexual body. Ephron reacts to Morris’ narrative by essentially accusing her of being of female body but of male subjectivity, and Garber points out that to Ephron, Morris’ self-image of feminine helplessness does not “‘make’ him” [Garber’s choice of pronoun] a woman. Rather, for Ephron, Morris is an individual “whose consciousness needs raising whatever the gender of her subjectivity (or her sexual organs)” (Garber 107). Morris refers to the gender acts that apparently ground her subjectivity as “nonsense”—“I know it is nonsense but I cannot help it” (quoted in Ephron 208), she says.

The truth, of course, is that Jan Morris does not know it’s nonsense. She thinks that is what it is about. And I wonder about all this, wonder how anyone in this day and age can think that this is what being a woman is about. And as I wonder, I find myself thinking a harsh feminist thought. It would be a man, I think. Well, it would, wouldn’t it? (Ephron 208)

Ephron’s point challenges the subjectivity that the transsexual subject within this specific, or any other similar, transsexual narrative embodies. Who is speaking here? Is it Jan the woman, or is it, as Ephron implies, the man who has turned himself into the girl he wishes he was all those years ago? And, is it thus appropriate for this subject to claim the ability to make, as Jan says, “a harsh feminist thought”, or is it that “he” is merely masquerading as “she” by claiming a position which s/he cannot fulfil?

In *A Posttranssexual Manifesto*, Stone raises her own objections to the way male-to-female transsexuals represent themselves by and within the transsexual narrative, particularly in their formulations of the “wrong body narrative”. Stone refers to a ceremony known amongst transsexuals as “wringing the turkey’s neck”, a euphemism for the act of penile masturbation just before the operation which will permanently separate them from their former selves. Stone notes that none of the published autobiographical male-to-female narratives make any mention of this ceremonial passage from maleness to femaleness, preferring rather to construct both an

idealised image of femininity and a romantic description of the passage from one body—let alone identity—to another. As Morris says, pun probably unintended, “I adapted willy-nilly” (Morris 130).

All these authors replicate the stereotypical male account of the constitution of woman: Dress, makeup, and delicate fainting at the sight of blood. Each of these adventurers passes directly from one pole of sexual experience to the other. If there is any intervening space in the continuum of sexuality, it is invisible. And nobody *ever* mentions wringing the turkey’s neck (Stone 289).

Stone explains that with the “wrong body” narrative in place as powerful medicodiscursive sign, as the first “gender dysphoria” clinics refused to perform surgery on demand, the transsexuals had already read Benjamin’s book and knew what was expected of them if they were to become successful candidates for surgery. The gender dysphoria clinics regulated transsexual subjectivity and the narrative that accompanied them to such an extent that they were even able to construct the boundaries around “the permissible range of expressions of physical sexuality.” As Benjamin’s subjects did not, in their interviews, appear to have any erotic desire or relationship to their bodies, nobody else mentioned anything about that either. Penile pleasure is absent from all data taken from pre-operative transsexuals even into the 1980’s and pleasure through masturbation was textually forbidden even in post-operative subjects. “‘Wringing the turkey’s neck,’ the ritual of penile masturbation just before surgery, was the most secret of secret traditions. To acknowledge so natural a desire would be to risk ‘crash landing,’ that is, ‘role inappropriateness’ leading to disqualification” (Stone 292). The medical establishment which presented itself as the defining authority of embodied sex and gender identities and the narrative that seemed to both inform and confirm their research studies, constructed the transsexual subject as completely disembodied. The feeling of being in the “wrong body” was not a matter of body after all but rather one of disembodiment; and the transsexual body, which should have been the ultimate authenticating trope of the transsexual situation, became annihilated by and within the very narrative which was supposed to bear witness to the validity of its claims for identity formation in relation to the flesh. How can transsexuals be expected to know what it is like to inhabit “flesh as the flesh itself” if flesh was what they were forced to distance themselves from?

The transsexual subject has been distanced from his/her pre-op body through the prohibitions posed by the narrative established within the context of the studies taking

place in gender dysphoria clinics that expected him/her to conform to specific gender rules. These rules were, however, an act that the transsexual was called to act out, a gender fiction impossible to embody since it was developed on the basis of a completely disembodied subjectivity. In this way, the subject was effectively silenced and along with it his/her sexual desires, which were forcefully suppressed or enacted with absolute secrecy. The same males who have theorised women for centuries, argues Stone, have also silenced the transsexual. Structures similar to the ones inscribed on women's bodies have also literally inscribed the transsexual body. The same structures that have conspired to normalise women, have tried to normalise the transsexual so that s/he is no longer an emblem of transgression but rather the embodied narrative of conformity. "A story which culture tells itself, the transsexual body is a tactile politics of reproduction constituted through textual violence. The clinic is a technology of inscription" (Stone 294).

If the clinic is indeed a technology of inscription where does it inscribe its narrative? Essentially, there is no body on which gender can be inscribed as it is completely erased within the framework of the "wrong body" narrative which subsequently facilitates, in its material effects, the construction of the body not as inscriptive surface but rather as fully fleshed inscription. What does this, then, say about the transsexual *situation*? Beauvoir has made clear that the body is a situation, and the transsexual confirms that both in its narrative constructions as well as in their embodiment. The male-to-female transsexual, in h/er narrative representations, passes—as it has been argued here—from one situation to another without ever inhabiting flesh, only ever using it as a disguise: prior to the operation, as a disguise for the feminine "essence" trapped inside the body; following the operation, as a device for successfully passing as an embodiment of that "essence".

Given this circumstance in which a minority discourse comes to ground in the physical, a counterdiscourse is critical. But it is difficult to generate a counterdiscourse if one is programmed to disappear. The highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself, to fade into the "normal" population as soon as possible. Part of this process is known as *constructing a plausible history*—learning to lie effectively about one's past. What is gained is acceptability in society. What is lost is the ability to authentically represent the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience (Stone 295).

What needs to be problematised is the discourse that produces the transsexual body as unambiguous simulation of the desired gender's experience—a simulation which, more

often than not, emancipates itself and becomes a simulacrum. In her *Manifesto*, Stone calls for a constitution of transsexuals “not as class or problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a *genre*—a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (Stone 296). The transsexual should focus on the transgressive possibilities of his/her situation rather than on constructing a plausible history, a history (a narrative) in which the subject’s agency is illusory, and his/her experience is disembodied, removed from her situation. If bodies do have a history, if they are *situations*—spatially and historically situated—then, male-to-female transsexuals occupy a different situation than genetically born women. “Whether desiring to do so or not, transsexuals do not grow up in the same way as ‘GGs,’ or genetic ‘naturals.’ Transsexuals do not possess the same history as genetic ‘naturals,’ and do not share common oppression prior to gender reassignment. I am not suggesting a shared discourse” (Stone 295). What Stone does suggest though, is for the transsexual body/narratives to be read/“read” as disruptive “to the accepted discourses of gender.” Such readings/“readings” can conspire with other oppositional forces to undermine the discourses which have prescribed for them a preconditioned position. To do so transsexuals do not need to forgo “passing”—and Stone does not ask for that. “Passing” is a part of the transsexual’s history, his/her lived experience and his/her situation. “Passing” is part of the narrative; erasing it from the narrative would be to further erase a part of transsexual history and to attempt to silence the already silenced transsexual body. The “wrong body” narrative *per se*, is not problematic; as Prosser argues, the reason transsexuals articulate the description of their situation as being in the “wrong body” is because this is what transsexuality feels like. Neither is the “wrong body” narrative exclusive to transsexuality; rather, this is a narrative shared by a number of body-image related disorders (eating disorders, particularly anorexia, being the prime example) to describe the experience of the body as *other*. This is, for the subjects involved, a description of what subjectivity often feels like in relation to the body; and it is, in any form of its manifestation, part of lived experience and as such bound to subjectivity.⁴²

Narratives of subjectivity often absorb and annihilate the body by grounding subjectivity on an “essence” that transcends it thus ignoring lived experience. The

⁴² The description of the experience of being in the “wrong body” as such, is indicative of a schizm in subjectivity instigated by not feeling “at home” in one’s body. This is an experience which is not exclusive to transsexuality. Much like “passing (as)”, another common transsexual preoccupation, it

transsexual experience must be read, creatively and actively, by the subject of transsexuality towards possessing what the transsexual desires: the experience of the flesh as the flesh itself. This experience, however, cannot be realised, read/“read” and understood, beyond the transsexual body which is also a construction of discourse (social, cultural, political, medical), as it is a body bound to a specific world. If the transsexual desire for the “right” body is to be justified, it should be so as a collective history of narrative creation and corporal silence; as a narrative body who tells the whole story as it is *remembered* (overcoming the schizm in subjectivity created by the “wrong body”) in recounting its history, and not the story culture wants it to tell.

It is the resistance effected within the erased transsexual history, the erased facts and rituals—“wringing the turkey’s neck”—which never make it as testimony (somatic lived experience and narrative evidence), its bodily suppression and its oppressed desires, that I would like to classify here as bodily resistance to the discursive forces that seek to formulate and fix the transsexual and h/er narrative. It is this resistance of the body against the discursive effects of gender conventions, driven by that which the transsexual both desires and abhors, embodied experience, because—not unlike women—s/he has learned that, “[u]nder the binary phallographic founding myth by which Western bodies and subjects are authorised, only one body per gendered subject is ‘right.’ All other bodies are wrong” (Stone 297). It is this resistance, effected through our bodies, and not *in spite* of them that we can present as against patriarchal discourse; as women—in process and progress—against the myths of gender which have imprisoned us in the “wrong bodies”.

extends beyond the boundaries defined by the genitals and it concerns performance (theatrical and evaluative) in relation to the body, rather than the body in itself.

Chapter Three

Irresistible Matter

Why is our body, for us, the mirror of our being, unless because it is a *natural self*, a current of given existence, with the result that we never know whether the forces which bear us on are its or ours—or with the result rather that they are never entirely either its or ours.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

I think it was Rilke who so lamented the inadequacy of our symbolism—regretted so bitterly we cannot, unlike the (was it?) Ancient Greeks, find adequate external symbols for the life within us—yes, that’s the quotation. But, no. He was wrong. Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them? Therefore we must not blame our poor symbols if they take forms that seem trivial to us, or absurd, for the symbols themselves have no control over their own fleshly manifestations, however paltry they may be; the nature of our life alone has determined their forms.

A critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives.

Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*

Angela Carter’s specific interest in matters of the body and the body/matter is evident throughout her work; more evidently so in her novels *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*. Originally published in 1977 and 1984 respectively, these two works reflect Carter’s interest in the creation of alternative narratives of origin that circumvent traditional trajectories. This concern she shares with the authors and creators of transsexual narratives, especially the autobiographical accounts—or life writing—of transsexual subjects. Both *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus* are presented as alternative biographical narratives of their central characters, Eve/lyn and Fevvers respectively. *The Passion of New Eve* is a fictional autobiographical account of Eve/lyn, an involuntary male-to-female transsexual, narrated retrospectively and in the first person by Eve/lyn h/erself. *Nights at the Circus* begins as a biographical account of Fevvers, the winged trapeze artiste, in the form of an interview given by her and her foster mother Lizzie, to Jack Walser, a young American journalist who is out to discover the ‘truth’ about Fevvers’ wings. Both narratives develop around transgressive subjects who cross the boundaries of sex, gender, and the “natural” body, as well as the geographical boundaries of space. In crossing the discursive limits of sex and gender identity, the geographical boundaries of space, as well as the conventions of genre, the two novels exemplify Carter’s own concern with definitions of ontology and literature.

In her narratives that cross the boundaries of theory and fiction, bodies are examined in relation to materiality and historicity, the manifestation of their existence and their participation in the world. She believes, as does Merleau-Ponty, that bodies become subjects only through their participation in the material world and their course towards historicity.

Carter's commitment to materiality is evident in the anti-mythical quality of her work in relation to the subject/woman and the subject of feminism, in that it re-examines and seeks to undermine the mythology of gender as it has been constructed by, and within patriarchy, as well as feminism's reaction to established perceptions of gender, identity and subjectivity. Fevvers' queer body is very literally so, and Carter is interested in exploring the conditions under which it becomes unsubstantiated and constituted as fiction - a mythical creation. The preoccupation with authenticity—"is she fact or, is she fiction?" (NC 7)—that is at the epicentre of *Nights* linked to the appearance, and later the reality, of the *aerialiste's* body and the body of the New Woman, as well as the relationship between bodies and the genders (or the mythologies) they incorporate, are more evident in *The Passion of New Eve*, first published in 1977. Although generally perceived as dealing with the idea of gender as a social construction, and although receiving extensive criticism for its assumed inconclusiveness, *The Passion of New Eve* is concerned with ideas that stem from Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, anticipates Butler's *Gender Trouble*, and problematises a number of transgender theories that emerged more prominently some time after the novel's original publication. As such, at its core is not the construction of gender identity, and the mechanisms that enable it *per se*, but rather its *embodiment*. Through Eve/lyn¹, the involuntary transsexual; Tristessa, the transvestite screen idol; and Leilah, the temptress striptease artist, Carter examines gender incorporations and the construction of the subject/woman as a corporeal experience. From Evelyn's original encounter with Leilah and his seduction by her, to his personal initiation to the ways of femininity through his involuntary metamorphosis from stereotypical male to the object of his own sexual fantasies, to the unravelling of Tristessa's secret, Carter examines the relationship

¹ Throughout this work I use the name "Evelyn" and the pronoun "he" to refer to the character's identity prior to the sex reassignment surgery (and thus prior to the change of "situation"). I use "Eve/lyn" and "s/he" when referring to events that relate to the character preceding the change (thus also indicating the schism within subjectivity evident in the narrative). I maintain Eve/lyn as marking the character's subjectivity as opposed to "Eve" for reasons that become clear in my argument regarding the character's identity and subjectivity. As transsexual subject, manifested through historicity the subject occupies a different position than man or woman, because s/he has lived through both 'situations.' This idea will be developed throughout this chapter.

between gender and the body. In this context the body is viewed both as a biological entity and as a “body subject to taboos” (SS 68)—as in Beauvoir—as well as a body that comes into being through the re-enactment of its gender (as is Butler’s starting point).

As a fictional transsexual account, a work of literature, *The Passion of New Eve*—like all of Carter’s fiction—crosses the boundaries of literature and theory and thus brings together the aesthetic and the political. The interface between the aesthetic and the political seems to be, for Carter, constitutive of femininity itself. Myth, as she exemplifies in *Nights at the Circus*, is always political, in spite of its pretences to an aesthetic associated with political innocence and naivety; that is why she chooses to take issue with it. Fevvers exemplifies the complexity of the workings of myth in relation to subjectivity, and Carter is interested in exposing its effects on shaping woman’s subjectivity manifested through the body. Thus, it is to the body and the narratives (mythical, literary and philosophical) through which it is read/“read” that we need to turn to discuss the subject’s situation in the world. As Eve/lyn discovers, “flesh is a function of enchantment. It uncreates the world” (PNE 148). As a fictional transsexual account (a fictitious autobiography), *The Passion of New Eve* brings together, and establishes an association between, the *transgender* and the *transgenre*, both qualities embodied in Eve/lyn’s body/narrative.

The novel is not only about the experience of passing from one sex and gender to another (as it were, from manhood to womanhood) as explored through Eve/lyn’s body/narrative which, crosses the boundaries of both sex and gender and passes from one ontological position to another. It is also about the possibility of constructing literary narratives that cross the boundaries of genre; the novel is a work of fiction which poses as an autobiography of Eve/lyn, yet at the same time it demonstrates what Prosser also argues in relation to transsexuality, that “transsexuality is always narrative work” (Prosser 4), and that bodies and narratives form our representation in the world.

Eve/lyn crosses sex and gender, as well as continents; from the old world of Europe, ridden with both mythical resonances and history, s/he crosses to the seemingly new and deceptively Enlightened America, built on the foundations of Reason. At the same time h/er narrative crosses the boundaries of auto/biography and fiction thus also demonstrating that our lives are always in dialogue with the fictions that have informed them. Life writing and fiction blend in Eve/lyn’s narrative, whose life and experience keeps h/er suspended—like Fevvers, who, in being a winged woman, crosses species, both woman and bird—between reality and fiction. Eve/lyn’s body, originally male and

created in the “natural” manner, originating from the maternal womb, becomes surgically recreated in a scientific womb (the operating room in Beulah, Mother’s head quarters); thus, it literally—and literary—embodies Carter’s project. The transsexual body/narrative becomes, in the context of the novel, the embodiment of both narrative and physical transgression. In transgressing the boundaries of sex and gender identity as well as those of genre, Eve/lyn and her body/narrative facilitate the creation of an alternative narrative of origin which, however, never loses sight of the tradition and the trajectories against which it is created. Eve/lyn, like her predecessor, that other first woman, Eve, is the first of her kind; and, like the Old Eve, the New Eve’s knowledge will have to be mediated through h/er body by means of which h/er subjectivity will be developed. In travelling across genders, sexes, bodies, countries, and genres, Eve/lyn’s narrative also addresses the boundaries of those other oppositions that inform, and form, our lives: myth and history; reality and fiction; the physical and the imaginary.

Although it has been argued that in its theme, structure, and narrative technique, the novel “anticipates the vogue for transsexual autobiography”²; and more specifically that “Carter prefigures the provocative notion of a ‘post-transsexual’ identity,”³ I would also argue that it does so in response to the advent of published transsexual autobiographical narratives a few years prior to the publication of Carter’s own text. Jan Morris’ transsexual autobiography *Conundrum*, published in 1974, brought its author and her extraordinary (at the time) situation much attention. Such a peculiar journey and such transformation, as described in a fellow journalist’s account, is unlikely to have escaped Carter’s reading, particularly as the questions such a text raises, as well as the notions that it problematises, would have been of great interest to her. Even though she has never been quoted commenting directly on Morris’ narrative/situation nor on its intertext, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*, *The Passion of New Eve* seems conscious of both texts’ context and appears to engage at points in dialogue with either or both. As such, I would read the novel as a comment/response to the emergence of the transsexual narrative of being “born into the wrong body” textually exemplified in accounts of the experience of transsexuality. Moreover, Harry Benjamin’s *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, as well as Robert Stoller’s *Sex and Gender*, first published in 1966 and 1968 respectively, had been around for a few years before Carter had perhaps

² See, for example, Heather L. Johnson in “Unexpected Geometries: Transgressive Symbolism and the Transsexual Subject in Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve*,” also quoted and commented on by Sarah Gamble (ed) in *The Fiction of Angela Carter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 97.

³ Ibid. 97

conceived the novel, and had caused reaction within the ranks of second wave feminism, which was reaching boiling point in the seventies. Sarah Gamble also implies this when she says that the novel “can be read as a satire upon transsexuality which retraces some of the same ideas as those evoked by essentialist feminists such as Janice Raymond and Germaine Greer”, but adds that this can only be taken so far, as “Carter’s other target in this novel is essentialist feminism itself.”⁴ The novel can indeed be read as a satire, not so much of transsexuality *per se*, but rather of essentialist understandings of gender. Such readings of gender are grounded on the prevalence of an essential gender identity that surpasses the experience of the sexed body as biological and discursive entity—an object and a subject in the context of Merleau-Ponty, or what Beauvoir calls “a sketch of our projects in the world”⁵—as exemplified in Morris’ narrative. More specifically, it is a parody of the stereotypical transsexual narrative of “being born into the wrong body” through the perception of a subject who, quite literally, finds himself trapped in the wrong body against his own will. At the same time though, the novel concerns itself with the politics of transgender and gender embodiment, which it takes very seriously, as it draws attention to transgenders’ interest in gender corporealizations: particularly transsexuality’s investment in flesh and the body, and to their implications for feminist theory. These implications have, as we have already seen, been at the centre of feminist debates for the last twenty years ever since sex-reassignment surgery became more accessible; not, it should be added, without the leverage of the transsexual narrative trope of the “wrong body.”

Although *The Passion of New Eve* has been read retrospectively in relation to the more recent development of transgender theory⁶ in reference to transgender theorists such as Sandy Stone, Kate Bornstein and Riki Anne Wilchins, as well as Donna Haraway’s discussion of the cyborg, I propose to read the novel’s own thesis on all matters trans-gender in relation to Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that “one is not born but rather, becomes a woman” (SS 295). Carter’s discussion of the ‘becoming’ entailed in the incorporation of gender is informed by a Beauvoirean perspective which it critically re-examines throughout the novel. Further to that, I would argue that Carter’s understanding of the body/matter, and the materiality of the body in particular, is also

⁴ Sarah Gamble, “Gender and transgender criticism” in Julian Wolfreys (ed) *Introducing Criticism at the twenty-first century* (Edinburgh: EUP 2002) 52.

⁵ A direct translation from the French text as discussed by Toril Moi in *What is a Woman?*. Beauvoir’s text reads, “le corps est notre prise sur le monde et l’esquisse de nos projets”; Moi translates this as “the body is our grasp upon the world and a sketch of our projects.” See Toril Moi, *What is a Woman?*, 62.

informed by sociological and psychological research contemporary to the novel's inception and is in many ways a critical re-evaluation of such evidence towards the verification of the existence of a "true" transsexual psyche. At the same time, through the novel's focus on transgender (both transvestism and transsexuality) Carter examines the 'becoming' of woman not just through social construction, but as both discursive effect incorporated on the body and as lived experience (in the flesh, as it were) similarly to Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment.

In addition to that, there is in the novel a very specific interest in the commodification of femininity and, in particular, femininity as a disembodied ideal sustained through its fetishization. Leilah's feminine quality is sustained through her striptease act; Eve is the technological construction of the ideal woman, the product of market research, blueprints and cosmetic surgery; while Tristessa trades on being an idea of femininity, corporeal yet insubstantial, conceived in Hollywood studios, contingent on the perpetual reiteration of a set of acts and gestures that bring her into existence, and sustained only through the incorporeal world of celluloid. It was Carter's intention, she admits, "to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity." "[T]here is quite a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity," she continues, "of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities."⁷ The commodification of femininity is an idea that is repeated and re-addressed a few years later in *Nights at the Circus* with an emphasis on the female body and the incredibility of feminine/female identities as they are perceived in terms of spectacle. The "confidence trick" in *Nights*, though, is that Fevvers, who is in truth a winged woman, has to present herself as an illusion in order to pass; she has to conceal her reality of being a winged woman, in order to capitalise on it. The illusion is spectacular, it makes her an idol, it literally elevates her and holds her suspended between reality and fiction; the reality of her body brings her in touch with materiality, down to earth, nothing but "a poor freak down on her luck" (NC 290). In Carter's understanding of the commodification of femininity, what is being commodified is thoroughly insubstantial yet corporealised in its fetishisation: Leilah comes to life through her ritual incarnation, Eve/lyn embodies his own "masturbatory fantasy" (PNE 75), and Tristessa is nothing but an illusion.

⁶For a more comprehensive analysis of this see Sarah Gamble "Gender and Transgender theory" in Julian Wolfreys (ed) *Introducing Criticism at the twenty-first century*, 37-57.

⁷ John Haffenden (ed), *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen Publishing, 1985) 86.

The Passion of New Eve is clearly preoccupied with the idea of femininity, its embodiment or its corporealizations, and its sustenance in relation to the body. It anticipates Butler's suggestion of performative bodies that seem to come into being, or are materialised, through their discursive re-enactment; yet at the same time it problematises that idea. Within Carter's context the flesh resists signification and interpretation; and the body refuses to be annihilated and reduced to discourse or otherwise singularly and comprehensively interpreted in its narrative representations through and within discourse. Such resistance often presents bodies as being practically illegible, both to the author of the narrative and its reader, and is often the result of acts of violence committed on and against the flesh which forms an inseparable part of the body. Leilah, Eve/lyn, and Tristessa, in as much as they are the products of mythological discourse, are ultimately betrayed by the fleshy reality of their bodies which reveal in the end the resistance of the flesh to becoming insubstantial, all symbolic attributions and signification. Eve/lyn's subjectivity in relation to h/er new body remains divided throughout the novel and the old body consciousness betrays h/er in more than one occasions—the sight of “her” in the mirror gives “him” a mental erection, torn between the memory of the old male body and the (dis)possession of the new one; “the cock in my head, still twitched at the sight of myself” (*PNE* 75). H/er union with Tristessa leaves the reader revolving in the perfect circle created between them as they fold themselves “within a single self in the desert” (*PNE* 148). Carter's refusal to present us with clear-cut, legible bodies or an unambiguous theory of the body and embodiment—because she cannot or she will not—has led many critics to dismiss her work. This would account for the frequent claim that Carter's works appear inconclusive or even, as Peter Ackroyd said in reviewing the novel in 1977, reaching the realms of the “grotesque, the fantastic and the merely silly.” Ackroyd proceeds to criticise the “uneasy tone” of the narrative “perched somewhere between high seriousness and farce” which “unsettles the narrative as it leaps from one improbability to the next.” More to the point, Ackroyd concludes that, “Angela Carter isn't quite sure where to land or, even, whether to land at all.”⁸ The criticism here is particularly of Carter's narrative style and technique, also exemplifying another very common criticism that has become a recurrent label of her work; that it relies for its development on the elements of the fantastic and the improbable. *The Passion of New Eve* is narrated

⁸ Peter Ackroyd, 'Passion fruit'. Quoted in Sarah Gamble, *The Fiction of Angela Carter: A reader's guide to essential criticism*, 88.

retrospectively, in the past tense, by Eve/lyn, the involuntary transsexual who takes the reader from his last night in London through an apocalyptic vision of America. New York is, “was, then, an alchemical city [...] chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night” (*PNE* 16) ridden with violent riots—“were the blacks responsible, or the Women?” (*PNE* 11)—garbage and rats in the streets. The scenario might sound farfetched, but it is not. The novel, Carter says, “was sparked off by a visit to the USA in 1969”; at the height of the Vietnam war, New York was the setting of violent public demonstrations, garbage in the streets, and the gay riots at Greenwich⁹. What her critics refuse to understand is her commitment to the material conditions of life and the way they are shaped through myth and its incorporations in everyday reality. Myth is, in its function, performative; through its discourse it creates its subjects and the identities it purports to express and presents as essential. What can be read as a farfetched, doom-and-gloom scenario for the future is a representation of the consequence of more language, more mythology (the mythology that can only produce more mythical creatures) situated outside both historicity¹⁰ and history. Because as bodies we are both objectified and subjectified; and because it is through the concrete materiality of our bodies—which is corporealised through the interaction of the flesh with the cultural imaginary—we enact our subjectivity in the world. Discourse and the cultural imaginary create subject/bodies which ultimately they cannot regulate or control, no more than Carter herself, or her literature, can.

I. ‘In the beginning all the world was America’: Body/space and the inscription of gender

As Merleau-Ponty has it, I am my body and my body is both an object and a subject, in and of the world. Can bodies, even gendered bodies, be confined within discourse and signification, or is there an aspect of the materiality of the body that defies discursive effects? In other words, is there an aspect of the body that does not “speak” sex and gender, and for that reason goes beyond both sex and gender and remains incomprehensible, outside discourse? If we cannot find recourse to a pre-linguistic body, if even flesh can be immaterialised in our effort to read and understand it, then

⁹ Quoted in Olga Kenyon, *The Writer’s Imagination*, Bradford: University of Bradford Print Unit, 1992, 31. Quoted in Sarah Gamble, *The Fiction of Angela Carter: A reader’s guide to essential criticism*, 89.

how do we account for the physical manifestations of bodily resistance? Or, finally, could it be, as Carter's work demonstrates, that bodily resistance to intelligibility is what confirms that bodies *do* matter?

Carter's interest in exploring the materiality of gender and our understanding of the gendered body is reflected in her choice of subject(s): a transvestite Hollywood idol, Tristessa de St Ange, and an involuntary transsexual, Eve/lyn. The former is billed the "most beautiful woman in the world," who executed her symbolic autobiography in arabesques of kitsch and hyperbole" (*PNE* 5); the latter is meant to become, through Mother's surgical intervention, "a perfect specimen of womanhood" (*PNE* 68), but becomes instead, "my own diminutive, Eve, the shortened form of Evelyn, this artificial change-link, the Tiresias of Southern California" (*PNE* 71). Both Tristessa and Eve/lyn represent, in their essence or construction, on one level the matter of gender embodiment; on another level, the construction of gender as a narrative, as well as its power, in its discursive effect, to generate and materialise its subject.

The construction of a gender narrative which brings into being the subject on whose body gender attributes are supposed to be truthfully reflected is mirrored in Eve/lyn's journey from the old continent (Europe) and more specifically London, the centre of the sometime Empire and motherland, to America, the new world, the land of opportunity, discovery and self-discovery, recreation, re-birth. The transition from one gender/sex to another as represented by a literal journey from the place of birth to a place of literal and metaphorical re-birth is a frequent element of transsexual autobiography. Jay Prosser argues that this is quite characteristic of many transsexual autobiographies as they often draw out a "particular truism about autobiography as a voyage into the self."

Writing the life, the trope evidences, inscribes it as a journey: a trajectory in which episodes lead toward a destination. The life written visibly and inevitably takes on this same progressive, connective, and destined pattern of the journey: departure, transition, and the home of reassignment.¹¹

Morris, a travel writer by profession, wanders around the world building up the narrative which will eventually lead him to Casablanca, the home of re-assignment, a destination which in his narrative becomes destiny, but which does not fail to come

¹⁰ For the existentialists, the state or quality of a concrete being's participation in an actual world in order to acquire a history.

¹¹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: the body narratives of transsexuality*, 116.

across as the birthplace of myth—"I could suppose it to be some city of fable, of phoenix and fantasy, in which transubstantiations were regularly effected, when the omens were right and the moon in its proper phase."¹² As Prosser notes, "Morris presents transition as a mystical quest for the grail of the self: ordered, directed, and driven by the vision of an end."¹³ Similarly, Woolf's Orlando becomes an ambassador in Constantinople where his metamorphosis mysteriously takes place amidst a city ridden with riots during which he falls into lethargy only to wake up as a woman through the divine intervention of the three Ladies who, in the midst of chants, apocryphal recitations and the hailing of trumpets, mediate Orlando's transubstantiation¹⁴. Although Eve's journey is not driven by the vision of an end as it has no prescribed direction to turn towards, the birth of the New Eve also takes place in a mythical space, Beulah, "a simulacrum of the womb" (*PNE* 52). Beulah is the place of birth in the middle of the sterile American desert, where the symbolic imagery and the chants of the priestesses verge on the ridiculous and the clichéd, yet are structured by some form of systematising paranoia—"Beulah lies in the interior, in the inward parts of the earth, its emblem is a broken column" (*PNE* 47); "time is a man, space is a woman [...] time is a killer [...] kill time and live forever" (*PNE* 53). Schmidt points out that Beulah recalls "the imaginary place of the ideal patriarchal marriage" in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and William Blake's "Milton". Mother attempts to rewrite history by recreating myth; as Schmidt says, she "wants to make something imaginary concrete and real [...] she wants to end historical time."¹⁵ This subsequently proves to be Mother's fundamental error; in trying to re-create myth, and through it control history, she fails as history overtakes myth.

The mythical references repeated in the disembodied voice that is only present through a loudspeaker refer us back to Oedipus and the myth that defines his lineage and the western world, as well as to the Freudian myth of psychoanalysis. Oedipus tried to rewrite the myth associated with his birth but failed; his actions, patricide and incest, blind him.

But Oedipus botched the job. In complicity with phallogocentricity, he concludes his trajectory a blind old man, wandering by the seashore in a search for reconciliation.

¹² Jan Morris, *Conundrum*, 119.

¹³ Jay Prosser. *Second Skins*, 116.

¹⁴ Woolf, Virginia. *Orlando*, 95-97.

¹⁵ Ricarda Schmidt, "The journey of the subject in Angela Carter's fiction" (*Textual Practice*, Spring 1989, Vol. 3, no. 1, 56-75) 62-63.

But Mother won't botch the job.

Man lives in historicity; his phallic projectory takes him onwards and upwards—but to where? Where but to the barren sea of infertility, the craters of the moon!

Journey back, journey backwards to the source (*PNE* 53).

Mother, of course, does botch the job and concludes her trajectory a blind old woman “wandering by the seashore in search of reconciliation.”¹⁶ The scene in Beulah refers us to a mythical birth, and the birth of myth, only to yet again make the point that myths have historical, not transcendental, validity; as such, the subject they performatively create is the result of a conjunction of the function of myth at a specific historical moment within a given historical context. Mother tries to recreate myth in a space which is itself the result of the Age of Reason, America. In its re-enactment in Beulah, myth and its validity are effectively mocked, and there is a clear sense of irony at the end of the novel in the realisation that Mother, the literalisation of myth, who “had made herself into an incarnated deity” (*PNE* 49), now “exuded a rich smell of decay” (*PNE* 189) and is blind, replicating Oedipus' fate and symbolising the decay of old and new myths. The mythological resonances embodied in the space of Beulah; the reduction of woman (and womanhood) to the womb; and subsequently, woman's reproductive function as the defining essence of womanhood are effectively mocked. The landscape of the American desert in which Eve finds herself “a *tabula erasa*, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg” (*PNE* 83) through which she is expected to be born out of the sterility of the desert, problematises the very understanding of the creation of the subject as birth rather than as an active participation in an actual world moving towards historicity. Subjectivity is not mere existence; it is an enactment of being.

America as the space for re-inscription and re-signification refers the novel back to the beginnings of modernity. John Locke's notion of the *tabula rasa* and America as the blank page, the space of possibilities for the (re)-inscription of identity frames the novel—“In the beginning all the world was *America*” is the opening epigraph of the novel (*PNE* 3)—and the Enlightenment ideas that it carries resonate in the narration. Carter uses the American space parallel to the bodily space in order to explore contemporary understandings of the development of subjectivity that have their roots in the beginnings of modernity. Space becomes body, and body becomes the space of (re)-

¹⁶ Mother's destiny as parallel to that of Oedipus is revealed in the final pages of the novel. Eve finds Mother in a cave by the sea— “her misted eyes wander about the seashore” (*PNE* 189) and as they never focus on her Eve realises that she is blind.

inscription. The male, patriarchal body that comes to the new continent (a new body in itself) and conspires with this new world to produce the perfect archetype creates a new body/space of signification and a new body of myth. This is precisely where Mother fails; instead of creating material body (which she does, unknowingly and in spite of her efforts to corporealise myth) she makes body out of myth, word made flesh, a new body of myth whose novelty is contested, as it is consisted of bits and pieces of old myths. America, the new body, 500 years after being discovered (and invented) by the old Europeans, is becoming old herself; decay has started to appear and the foundations have started to rot. The Reason on which it (America) was built can no longer sustain her. The subjectivity reliant on, and co-extensive of, that foundational Reason is now also questioned and with it, in the context of the novel, so is the understanding of the mind as a recording device for experience and the body as its effect, an inscriptive surface on which the mind inscribes its socio-cultural etchings. Mother's attempt to create the absolute woman out of a man by altering his body and subsequently brainwashing him—"psycho-surgery, Mother calls it" (*PNE* 68)—as well as Eve/lyn's question whether "a change in the coloration of the rind alters the taste of a fruit" (*PNE* 68), are effectively the two sides of the same coin as they both address the relationship between the body (both its 'inside' and 'outside') and gender (both as signifying discourse and defining aspect of subjectivity).

Much in the style of transsexual autobiography, where symbols performatively acquire their function as ominous predictions for the future and clues to an inescapable destiny, young Evelyn reaches New York as "the age of reason is over" (*PNE* 13) as pronounced by the alchemist. Evelyn ominously remembers the question from an old examination paper: "The American constitution is the bastard child of the French Enlightenment. Discuss." (*PNE* 16). New York appears to have been planned and built as a direct result of the Age of Reason, or even as the literalisation of Reason itself, "in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine of reason." "[T]he streets had been given numbers and not names out of respect for pure function, had been designed in clean, abstract lines, [...] to avoid just those vile repositories of the past, *sewers of history*, that poison the lives of European cities" (*PNE* 16). Reflected in the anonymity of the streets, more than a compliance with practicality is a belief that in resisting naming it the object will preserve its objectivity, it will be protected from discourse and subjectivation. The anonymous streets indicated merely by numbers represent the effect of Reason's rejection and its vilification of myth, and they are, more than an homage to Reason, a

conscious effort to protect the new land (and its body) from discourse and signification, from the past, from myth itself. Inherent in this act is the implication that language produces signification; by resisting language the object escapes the Derridean loop of *différance*. By remaining anonymous, the object believes it exists outside discourse; by having no name it thinks itself outside the boundaries of the signifier and its signifieds. Because it has no name it fixes its meaning and is impervious to myth through whose connotations its meaning could, and would, have been deferred and corrupted. Like Oedipus' father, who tries to change the prophesy that announces Oedipus' fate, as well as his own and the city's, the architects of Reason have tried to protect the city from its ancestry, Europe—its myths and superstitions, as well as its history that has turned into myth. Oedipus, though, returns to fulfil his mythical destiny, to kill his father and marry his mother, and become King; history-cum-myth returns to claim the streets of New York, and Enlightenment Reason, as Adorno and Horkheimer illustrate,¹⁷ undermines itself from within.

The narrative establishes a clear relation between Enlightenment idea(l)s and America as the product of its thought and the metaphor for the construction of the humanist subject, unrestrained from myth and superstition, and committed to reason. Yet the streets of New York that are committed to signifying the rational subject of the Enlightenment, pretending to open up the space for the inscription of its narrative on the blank page of its body while in fact already providing a prescribed narrative for it to embody, are now in disarray. The “sewers of history” (*PNE* 16) that new world Reason has tried to disengage itself from by forbidding their incorporation in the manifestation of its body have overflowed and are now taking over the city; eliminating history is impossible. America has never been a *tabula rasa*, it is already inscribed within and by the historical narrative of the Enlightenment. In this struggle between reason, represented in the spatial reality of New York, and myth, as it is made fact in Beulah, the fructifying female space, it is history that prevails. What is at stake in this struggle is the body, both that of the city and that of the subject, as site of conflict between mythology and reason. In this context New York offers itself as a space of/for reinscription; the city of reason is overtaken by irrationality, “nigredo, night” and regresses back to “Chaos, the primordial essence [...] the fructifying chaos of anteriority, the state before the beginning of the beginning” (*PNE* 14). Evelyn's

¹⁷ As discussed in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1972).

encounter with Baroslav prepares him for events to come as he makes gold for him; an ingot of gold which as Eve/lyn admits, although genuine remains of dubious origin. “He made me some gold, following the same method as James Price, Fellow of the Royal Society, but I do not know if he was a charlatan, like Price, who introduced his gold into the crucible through a hollow stirring rod” (*PNE* 14).

Aidan Day says that, “the metaphor of alchemy and its associated figure of the hermaphrodite are to be central to the allegory of *The Passion of New Eve*” (Day 108). In alchemical thought the *prima materia*, which was to transform base metals into gold, was identified, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* quoted in Day, “with mercury, not ordinary mercury, but the ‘mercury of philosophers’ which was the essence of the soul of mercury, free from the four Aristotelian elements—earth, air, fire and water—or rather from the qualities which they represent.”¹⁸ Furthermore, mercury’s personification as a hermaphrodite in alchemical thought, an image of a union of opposites, allowed alchemy to make its pseudo-philosophical claims.¹⁹ Like Baroslav, Mother attempts through transmutation of the elements and base materials to create the golden union of opposites. In that she attempts to make the perfect hermaphrodite she corporealises alchemical theory and its philosophical ideal. Eve/lyn’s body is of alchemic quality, like the gold which, in the process of the novel, becomes an object of exchange between Eve/lyn and the forces that dictate her destiny. It is offered by Evelyn to Leilah before he abandons her, retrieves it in Mother’s cave, and finally returns it to Mother at the end of the novel where Eve exchanges it for a boat and the possibility to start again with h/er body as the vehicle through the world. In that sense the alchemist’s egg is a symbol of Eve/lyn’s situation (in the Beauvoirean sense) as well as both a symbolic exchange between Eve and the Mother and a commodity. Like the origin of the gold and the process of its creation that upsets the rules of scientific reason, Eve’s situation unsettles rational understandings of the development/construction of gender subjectivity manifested eminently not only on the surface of h/er body but in h/er corporeality overall. The alchemist’s egg, like Eve/lyn’s body, destabilises rational notions of creation and circumvents traditional narratives of origin. Its value and its authenticity is challenged while at the same time it challenges the same structures that problematise its validity. The relationship of Eve and the egg as parallel creations is further reflected in her definition of h/erself as “an unhatched egg” (*PNE* 83) waiting to

¹⁸ Quoted in Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998) 108-9.

become a real woman, validated by Eve/lyn's perspective on her position. As such, it extends Carter's project of creating alternative narratives of origin, a preoccupation which is further explored in *Nights at the Circus* where the egg is hatched and Carter is able to produce a woman who, instead of being born through traditional narratives, is hatched from an egg; Fevvers has no history, she is "Year One" (NC 198).

Ricarda Schmitt has argued that the "journey, a traditional symbol of a quest" is used by Carter as a device to structure her narrative in her last three novels—*The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus* among them.²⁰ Schmitt further argues that "the adventures these characters encounter on their journeys in the fantastic realm of the imaginary and the symbolic mediate a discussion of the making of the subject in the light of philosophical, psychoanalytical, and feminist ideas." Further to that, in doing so they "deconstruct essentialist, humanist notions of the subject" while exploring "the constitution of the subject" in relation to one dominant aspect, representative of cultural ideas about the subject during each of the respective decades that these novels were written. More specifically, she argues that gender is such an aspect in *Eve* whereas free womanhood has such an effect in *Nights*. Schmitt's argument is certainly valid: in her exploration of the function of symbols through Eve/lyn's encounter with patriarchal symbols of femininity on three different levels—Tristessa, Leilah, and Zero's community of women as sub-human and animal-like—Carter explores the mythology of gender and its effect on the formation of subjectivity. However, I would argue that she does so through the exploration of Eve/lyn's bodily metamorphosis and the inscription of her apprenticeship in the ways of femininity on and through a body which is constructed to be the abode of femininity, a femininity which is not of female subjectivity in its inception or in its experience. The construction of Eve's body is informed by research on what constitutes "a perfect specimen of womanhood" (*PNE* 68), "the *Playboy* centre fold" (*PNE* 75). Not a woman as such but "a lyrical abstraction of femininity, a tinted arrangement of curved lines" (*PNE* 74), Eve is the result of the male gaze and corporealises its desire. Eve's experience of her body—and through it, her journey—is not relevant to a female subjectivity, as she remains for the most part torn between the experience of the old male/masculine body and his (Evelyn's) encasement in the new female/feminine one. She is never offered the opportunity to experience her body as brand new. Much like the myths that have instructed her, Eve's

¹⁹ Ibid.

body is as old as Western culture. Evelyn quite literally finds himself trapped in the wrong body, a body whose possession he has only desired as an *other*, an outsider, and which he is now confronted with from the 'inside', possession rejected yet forced on subjectivity. Thus, Eve's experience of womanhood is mediated through a female body which is not her own, as she is quite literally a man trapped in a woman's body. Much like Tristessa, the perfect woman is a man. Throughout her journey, Eve maintains Evelyn's male subjectivity, a subjectivity that pre-existed the construction of the body and which cannot reconcile itself with her new 'situation' (Beauvoir), her new bodily spatiality.

The notion of the body as the blank page (or the blank space) of subjectivity on which gender can be happily, or unhappily, inscribed is discussed both in relation to gender as incorporated idea/l and as lived experience. The space in which this development is taking place is, to begin with, "an alchemical city" predominated by chaos, "the fructifying chaos of anteriority, the state before the beginning of the beginning" (*PNE* 14). This provides the possibility for complete destruction of the old forms and the generation of the new ones—or as reflected in Baroslav's creation of alchemical gold, the conversion of base metals to gold. The transformation is later continued in the desert, where Eve/lyn finds h/erself "without map or guide or compass" in a land "peopled by echoes" (*PNE* 41). Through this, the novel creates a certain tension between the perception of the mind as a blank page waiting for inscription, the female body as the reflection of that inscription, and the validity and truthfulness of our external symbols. Thus it brings into crisis the very relation between 'inside' and 'outside' the body and challenges their perception as opposite notions that develop independently from each other. For it is not entirely true that h/er new-found situation has no effect on Eve/lyn.

While in captivity in Beulah and prior to his operation Evelyn is informed of Mother's designs on him: "She is going to castrate you, Evelyn, and then excavate what we call the "fructifying female space" inside you and make you a perfect specimen of womanhood. Then as soon as you're ready she is going to impregnate you with your own sperm" (*PNE* 68). Sophia informs him that Mother intends to create the perfect hermaphrodite out of him; he is to enact the perfect union of the sexes by literalising Mother's inane mythical chants. Eve is to become the literalisation of all myth, old and

²⁰ Ricarda Schmitt, 'The journey of the subject in Angela Carter's fiction' (*Textual Practice*, Spring 1989, Vol. 3, no. 1, 56-75).

new, destiny as foretold by the picture of the hermaphrodite creature carrying an egg from the seventeenth-century picture on the alchemist's wall.

Describing the work of transmutation through which the alchemist could arrive at prime matter and then create gold by adding particular qualities to it, the *Britannica* explains that it consisted of removing certain qualities imposed on the prime matter and adding the *appropriate* qualities to get the particular substance that the conjurer wanted.

Regarding all substances as being composed of one primitive matter—the *prima materia*, and as owing their specific differences to the presence of different qualities imposed upon it, the alchemist hoped, by taking away these qualities, to obtain the *prima materia* itself, and then to get from it the particular substance he desired by the addition of the appropriate qualities.²¹

This is, word for word, Mother's design on Evelyn and the process through which she intends to transform him to not only the perfect woman, but to one that is to be impregnated by the sperm extracted from his old male body; the perfect whole. In the city of Beulah, "the place where contrarities exist together" (*PNE* 48), Evelyn is to be broken down to his basic parts and reconstituted through a strange intermingling of myth and Reason, "a complicated mix of mythology and technology, which I for one will never be able to unravel though I am its inheritor" (*PNE* 48). In an unceremonious rape Evelyn performs the sexual act as a man for the last time in his copulation with Mother who collects the product of his ejaculation in a test tube, Eve/lyn being the future receptacle of the seed contained in it.

In his copulation with Mother, Evelyn makes another myth fact. Their union corporealises the Oedipus myth, with Evelyn as Oedipus, the son, and Mother as Jocasta, his mother, with whom he is destined to procreate after he has killed his father and taken his place as King. In Beulah, where myth and its corporealisation are indistinguishable, as "Mother has made symbolism a concrete fact" (*PNE* 58), Evelyn is destined to re-enact and to corporealise through his own flesh all the mythical excesses of Western culture. As Evelyn explains, "in Beulah myth is a made thing, not a found thing" (*PNE* 56). Mother and her priestesses do not confine themselves to re-enacting myth; rather they make myth concrete, not least of all by and through their bodies. Evelyn observes how Sophia, his nurse, lacks a left breast, "though the other was well-grown and shapely" (*PNE* 57), and recollects later how the priestesses of Cybele "had pared away a breast and donated it to their mother" (*PNE* 57). Mother herself is beyond

²¹ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as quoted in Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 108-9.

a mythological construct, a corporeal narrative and manifestation of the mythology of matriarchy and—Carter’s critique—second wave feminism, itself growing on myth and the mythology of mother goddesses; according to Carter, “as silly a notion as father gods.”²²

And she had made herself! Yes, made herself! She was her own mythological artefact; she had reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form as an emblem, as an example, and flung a patchwork quilt stitched from her daughters’ breasts over the cathedral of her interior, the cave within the cave.

I was at a shrine (*PNE* 60).

More than corporealising myth, Mother is a mythical construction. She is literally, in her material manifestation, myth made flesh and flesh-made myth. Myth in this context has a very material effect manifested on the body as it mutilates the priestesses’ bodies (Mother’s disciples), practicing a castration similar to the one Evelyn is about to undergo by asking them to offer one of their breasts as sacrifice to the goddess.²³ As for Mother herself, more monstrous creation than mother-Nature—“Although her arms were the paradigm of mothering, they offered me no refuge; that women are a consolation is a man’s dream” (*PNE* 60)—she creates, in a parody of female bonding represented in the making of an American quilt, a patchwork quilt out of her disciples’ breasts.

Finally, Evelyn is made to offer his own pound of flesh to the goddess. In an auditorium, an operating theatre in every possible sense, and—in Evelyn’s imagination—before the eyes of almost every woman in the world, Mother, who now “was erect, I saw she was six and a half feet high” (*PNE* 69), raises the knife and castrates Evelyn. “Oh the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated with a phallic symbol! (But what else says Mother, could do the trick?)” (*PNE* 70). By turning a phallic symbol against the very symbol of phallic power, the object behind the signifier, Mother expects to have uprooted the source of Evelyn’s maleness, and thus begins the alchemic process which is to turn a base metal into gold, or a castrated man into a woman.

²²Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 5.

²³Such a practice is not very dissimilar to current sacrificial offers to the beauty myth where a pound (or more) of flesh is offered at liberty on the operating table in the form of liposuction, face lifts, breast reduction or augmentation, as a tribute to the body/beautiful; even parting with a toe is not a great price to pay to fit into a pair of Manolo Blahniks these days.

Raising her knife, she brought it down. She cut off all my genital appendages with a single blow, caught them in her other hand and tossed them to Sophia, who slipped them into the pocket of her shorts. So she excised everything I had been and left me, instead with a wound that would bleed once a month, at the bidding of the moon (*PNE* 71).

Implicit in Eve/lyn's interpretation of his castration, as well as in Mother's vision of creation, is a view highly contested within feminism, that woman is defined by an absence, a lack, the Lacanian hole within the whole. This is reflected in a number of psychoanalytic theories from Freud to Lacan that read woman in relation to man, most significantly which view her as an incomplete man and her genitals as underdeveloped, inferior male genitals.

Mother's excision of Evelyn's genitals, the determined yet inattentive manner in which she cuts it all off in one single blow and then tosses it to Sophia who proceeds to just slip them in her pocket as if they were some insignificant item (a piece of meat at best) derogates Evelyn and the sign of his maleness further. In a way it removes all signification from the object; in that the act of castration is not part of a ritual but rather a necessary corrective procedure, Mother separates the object from the signifier. With no ritualistic chants or decorations, on a twentieth century surgical bed, what seems in Evelyn's eyes like a sacrifice on an altar is, by Mother's standards, and barring the presence of all of Beulah's inhabitants, a very informal event. More interested in taking care of business, in a very medicinal manner, and more like a head surgeon performing surgery in front of medical students, Mother who "had not put on a white coat, although she was a surgeon" (*PNE* 69) proceeds in removing the first obstacle hindering Evelyn's metamorphosis to Eve—Evelyn's male genitals. That the sex change operation and the moulding of the body into a female/feminine shape precedes the programming, suggests that Mother considers the female body to be a prerequisite for the development of female subjectivity; a view which she shares with Beauvoir, to a certain extent, as well as second wave feminism which embraced the materiality of the female body and located the source of women's oppression on patriarchy's views of the body. However, in that she first removes the genitals and then proceeds in making all other alterations, she essentialises the object as much as Eve/lyn does in lamenting their marked loss. The genitals appear to be, in this light, even for Mother, not merely the signifier but also the object, the source of maleness. By removing them she could be seen to be producing a blank page ready for inscription. However, she does not only construct a female body, she produces a feminine body. Eve's body is already inscribed by the mark of gender

prior to her participation in the world in her female situation. Mother produces a body which is already feminised through the surgical moulding; not only does Eve acquire the mark of sex—"tits, clit, ovaries, labia major, labia minor..." (PNE 68)—but that mark (the sexed body) is also already marked by the gender contingent on it, a femininity so abstract it can only be corporealised as a male fantasy—"They had turned me into the *Playboy* centre fold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head" (PNE 75), Evelyn exclaims.

By contrast to a perception of the female body as a blank page stemming from the defining lack of the penis, as can be inferred from Freud's discussion of the female body as a castrated male body, and women as victims of penis envy due to the castration complex, Mother creates a Lacanian phallus in the form of inscription. In place of the penis which she has removed, Mother offers Eve a body which in its inscription and signification embodies the phallus. Even though, according to Lacan, neither the male nor the female has the phallus—the penis is an object, whereas the phallus the signifier of its lack—the conflation between the penis and the phallus persists in that "on a visual level the penis continues to stand in for the phallus, because it is more visible."²⁴ In the absence of the former phallic symbol, Eve is turned into a phallic symbol herself; she is, by male standards, embodied male desire *par excellence*. The concept of desire itself derives from Freud's notions of the castration complex and penis envy (women's recognition that they lack the penis and the subsequent repression of their desire to possess one). According to Lacan, upon entering the symbolic order women are forced to identify with that which is absent to make up for this lack.

While males can eventually become representatives of the Name of the Father, females can only fantasise over the missing phallus. Woman is therefore constructed as 'other,' and it is this lack which occasions female desire. Alternatively, she must identify herself as an object of male desire, an act which involves objectification of, and thus alienation from, her self.²⁵

Thus Eve is created as the object of male desire, as she represents, in her appearance, the embodiment of a male fantasy, even Evelyn's own "masturbatory fantasy" which his male subjectivity cannot, mentally, resist. In that the body of the new Eve is fully inscribed, not merely by the mark of gender—itsself a myth—but also by the myth of

²⁴ Sophia Phoca, "Feminism and Gender" in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001. 55-65) 59.

²⁵ Sarah Gamble (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, 216.

psychoanalysis, her body/narrative prescribes for her a story and a narratological space within which she is to develop.

II. “She a visitor in her own flesh”: Gender subjectivity and embodiment

The narrative inscribed on the ‘outside’ is destined, in Mother’s calculations, to restructure sex and gender identity and thus subjectivity—“a change in the appearance will restructure the essence, Sophia assured me coolly” (*PNE* 68), Eve/lyn explains. The body—the ‘outside’—is to reformulate the ‘inside’ in such a way as to restructure the “essence”, an essence which if it can be restructured, it is not *essential* at all in that it does not transcend the body and its experience but it is, rather, itself a construction of that experience that forms subjectivity and more specifically in this context, gender subjectivity. Although Eve/lyn faces the prospect of h/er transformation with scepticism and often, with disbelief, having no choice in the matter, s/he begins to participate in a disembodied manner in the experience of the modes of femininity which s/he is called to replicate.

Then, as I stretched vaguely in my bed, the programming began and, wonder of wonders, old Hollywood provided me with a new set of nursery tales. I don’t know if the movies were selected on purpose, as part of the ritual attrition of my change in ontological status: this is what you’ve made of women! And now you yourself become what you’ve made... Certainly the films that **spun out a thread of illusory reality** before my **dazed eyes** showed me all the **pain of womanhood** [my emphasis] (*PNE* 71).

The gender that Eve/lyn is called to embody is itself completely disembodied, both in its perception and in its perpetuation; it is manufactured in Hollywood studios, conveyed through celluloid, and maintained as an ideal impossible to incorporate emphasised in Eve/lyn’s retrospective knowledge that there is no *body* behind the gender performance enacted on the screen. Eve/lyn will realise when s/he encounters Tristessa—the leading lady in the films that are supposed to provide h/er gender education—that, quite literally, no-*body* is doing that act; in this case, it is rather that the act is *doing* the body and creates the subject presented and maintained through the screen. In its representation in film, an “illusory reality” in itself, gender becomes completely incorporeal. In that the specific notion of gender presented before Eve/lyn’s “dazed eyes”—an indication that she is called to absorb its embodiment in its representation as

an idea rather than lived corporeality—is a fetishistic incarnation of “all the pain of womanhood” showcased through the sufferings of Eve/lyn’s own ideal woman, Tristessa de St Ange, whose name echoes Sadeian philosophy and aesthetics, gender is further incorporealised and so is the otherwise material “pain of all womanhood.” The very notion of pain and the material conditions of womanhood in their screen incarnations are reduced to an illusion, while the female subject becomes an object to serve the male gaze. The spectacle of female suffering further incorporealises its object, the female body, while in the service of the male gaze which fetishizes it by transforming it into an idea of sadomasochistic pleasure, thus reducing the subject/woman to the acts and gestures that compose its narrative. In this manner, the female body, on which these acts and gestures inscribe an idea/l of womanhood that only exists as a male sexual fantasy, completely disappears; it literally is ‘off’ the screen, as the focus is not on the body that does the act but, at best, on the body created by the act. The creation of this body of femininity, conveyed as a cinematic experience and subconsciously absorbed by the audience, thus purveys the gendered body as completely incorporeal as the body of the “do-er” only comes into being through the deed and is in itself relevant to that deed only as its product.

Even though she is supposed to embody that very ideal, Eve/lyn does not recognise h/er body as an embodiment of anything, neither as h/er own flesh nor as h/er own self. “But when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines” (*PNE* 74). Eve/lyn’s estrangement from h/er body is relevant to the experience of the new flesh that s/he is now confronted with; ownership and possession are precluded due to the experience of the body as an-*other* body, the not-me of subjectivity. The image in the mirror is perceived as precisely that, as an image of something *other* than the self. Instead of a truthful reflection of the self, Eve/lyn sees a mere picture from which the self is distanced and which s/he perceives from the outside even though she is looking at it through its (the body’s) own eyes; the eyes that, in Evelyn’s amazement, the plastic surgery had made a little larger than they had been, emphasising, as s/he notices, their colour. Yet the more vivid the image in the mirror, the greater h/er disbelief grows. Although s/he recognises the woman in the mirror as bearing “a strong family resemblance” to “myself” (*PNE* 74), the reflection in the mirror is not internalised as indeed h/er own. The feeling of the body is experienced from a distance,

from the 'outside', even as Eve/lyn's hands explore this unfamiliar organ—"I touched the breasts and the mound that were not mine; I saw white hands in the mirror move, it was as though they were white gloves I had put on to conduct the unfamiliar orchestra of myself" (*PNE* 74). H/er body appears to h/er to be more like a costume, foreign to the self, which s/he has "put on" in order—the contradiction in the experience of the body as the non-self—to handle this body.

The more contact s/he has with h/er body, the greater the split within subjectivity seems to grow; the body is experienced from *within*, yet the experience remains guided by, and is channelled towards, a self which appears to be outside and distanced from the body which it is supposed to occupy. Although, as Eve/lyn recognises, "I was now a woman, young and desirable" (*PNE* 74), the 'I' of subjectivity remains disengaged from an experience of the body as proper and property. Identity (and identification) is divided by and within the inappropriate body, split between Eve/lyn's male subjectivity and what appears to be both its encasement and the object of his sexual desire—"the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself" (*PNE* 75).

I grasped my tits and pulled out the dark red nipples to see how far they'd go; they were unexpectedly elastic and it did not hurt to tag them sharply. So I got a little more courage to explore myself further and nervously slid my hand between my thighs.

But my over-taxed brain almost exploded, then, for the clitoris transplant had been an unqualified success. The tactile sensation was so well-remembered and gave me so much pleasure, still, I could scarcely believe the cleft was now my own (*PNE* 74).

Mother's visit interrupts Eve/lyn's reconnaissance of the unfamiliar territory of h/er body, as she walks into h/er "naked and a stranger to myself" (*PNE* 75) bearing a bag of grapes and a dozen red roses, like the ones Evelyn sent Leilah after he had impregnated her and left her for dead in an abortion clinic. "Well, Eve," she said comfortably. "How do you find yourself?" To which Eve/lyn replies disconsolately "I don't find myself at all" (*PNE* 75). "The psycho-programming had not been entirely successful," Eve/lyn admits, as Mother's excision of the genitals only served the appearance and not the 'essence'. The male self within the body persists, and it is now, in the absence of the genitals, even more pronounced in their signification as the symbol of male subjectivity—"the cock in my head." In their incorporealisation the genitals acquire a

status beyond signification; they become concentrated essence that takes a form of expression in their configuration in Eve/lyn's phrasing of the experience.

Eve/lyn's perception of the loss of h/is genitals and the interpretation of the space that replaces the former presence as "a bleeding wound", attributes to them an essence of subjectivity which is both *of* the body as well as beyond it. Similarly to the transsexual narrative, where the genitals become the focus of the abhorrence of the subject towards h/is body thus becoming a defining part of the experience of subjectivity, s/he experiences their loss as a defining loss of identity constituting the experience of the self as *other* than the body by and through which it is supposed to be lived. The loss of the genitals and the loss of self which occur simultaneously thus create a schema of subjectivity as dependent on a presence. In this case this is formulated on the binary pair of presence and absence as defining values for the male/masculine and female/feminine respectively. In losing h/is penis Eve/lyn is also lost for words, as indicated by h/er response to Mother, as if the insignia of his maleness was also ascribing his position as the bearer of logos—"But where I remembered my cock, was nothing. Only a void, an insistent absence, like a noisy silence" (*PNE* 75). Manifested in the loss of the penis—the presence that becomes an absence—is the acknowledgement of the absence which leaves a gap in subjectivity, thus constituting the feeling of absence as the only presence that remains.

Eve/lyn's alienation from her self is also the result of the objectification of her body and its creation as the embodiment of male desire which compensates, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, for the lack of the penis. In that respect, Eve/lyn also corporealises the presence of the absence, the "noisy silence" that characterises h/er status after h/er castration; h/er corporeality becomes both the signifier of the lack of the penis as well as a constant reminder of that lack. The mirror scene—a characteristic of transsexual (auto)biography—appears both to replicate and to undermine the Lacanian mirror stage. Eve/lyn's body is uncoordinated and s/he relies on other people's support in order to make use of it, yet when she is faced with it in the mirror she fails to acknowledge the image as in any way h/erself and cannot identify with it. H/er disembodiment grows further as s/he begins to refer to h/erself in the third person as if s/he was someone *other* than h/erself, h/er body not h/er property but an encasement which Evelyn (the male) is to bring to life—"They came out of the trapdoor in the sand for their military training and as soon as she was fit to hold a gun, Eve was encouraged to join them" (*PNE* 79). Yet Eve/lyn's experience of h/er bodily spatiality fails h/er as she remains disengaged

from h/er body—"But Eve proved unhandy with weapons, so they laughed at my botched shots and mocked me: "Just like a man!" (PNE 79).

During h/er time in Beulah and particularly after the sex change operation Eve/lyn is frequently reminded of Leilah, the temptress who seduces the young Englishman in the city. Evelyn arrives in New York looking to find himself, but he finds instead a dissolving city. In its dissolution the city brings to him Leilah whose striptease act seduces him and leads him to her room where Evelyn loses himself completely; but as he admits, "I was lost the moment I saw her" (PNE 19). His obsession with her gradually leads to his degeneration as he spends most of his time, hallucinating under the influence of her hash candy until she becomes in his eyes nothing more than a hallucination herself. Leilah, "black as the source of shadow" (PNE 18) comes to him in the night as nothing if not a corporealisation of male lust through the assortment of her symbols—"She had on a pair of black, patent leather shoes with straps around the ankles, fetishistic heels six inches high and, in all the heat and paranoia of summer, an immense coat of red fox was slung around her shoulders" (PNE 19).

Eve/lyn's narration of events and observations in retrospect, draws an interesting relation between the three female/feminine protagonists—although their position as such is probably what h/er narration brings into crisis to begin with: Eve/lyn h/erself is an involuntary transsexual, a man who finds himself trapped into a woman's body; Tristessa, the perfect woman, is a man, a transvestite who "had made of himself the only woman he could have loved" (PNE 128-129) ; and Leilah is a biological female who, in her role as a striptease artist, performs femininity by profession. Eve/lyn acknowledges about h/erself that, "I am not natural, you know—even though, if you cut me I will bleed" (PNE 50); although she is made of flesh and blood and occupies a body that has the "natural" reaction to any impairment of its materiality, s/he was manufactured in Mother's hi-tech lab and moulded by her sculpting knife. Leilah, whose body is "natural" in a manner that Eve/lyn's is not, is as "unnatural" in her gender performance as s/he is. Evelyn observes how "duplicity gleamed in her eyes and her self seemed to come and go in her body, fretful, wilful, she a visitor in her own flesh" (PNE 27). Every night Leilah transforms her self in front of the mirror and Eve/lyn remarks how he enjoyed watching this transformation—"I used to adore watching her dressing herself in the evenings" (PNE 16). Although enchanted by her beauty and maddened by the lust Leilah's incarnation in front of the mirror produces in

him, Eve/lyn is forced to observe that Leilah's state of being in front of the mirror was as unnatural as h/er own state is now. H/er own beauty, drawn up from a protracted study taken from "a consensus agreement on the physical nature of an ideal woman" (*PNE* 78) and manufactured in Beulah, is not so far removed from Leilah's incarnation to her 'self' a self that is no more her own than Eve/lyn's is. As s/he observes, Leilah "did not grow beautiful by a simple process of becoming" (*PNE* 28).

Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became **absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to me to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself.** The **reflected Leilah** had a **concrete form** and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, **all three of us in the room**, it was another Leilah [my emphasis] (*PNE* 28).

Evelyn is not enchanted merely by Leilah's beauty, he is primarily seduced by her act; her striptease in the decomposing streets of New York is what seduces him in the first place, so that he is originally drawn not to the sexuality emitted by her body, but rather enticed by the fantasy that she corporealises and the sexual projection signified in her fetishistic attire. When in front of the mirror, Leilah re-enacts her transformation from woman to fantasy by becoming the image in the mirror, by appropriating that image and manifesting it through her body—"she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection" (*PNE* 28). The image in the mirror brings into being an-*other* Leilah which bears no relation to reality and whose only corporeality is mediated through the body, yet is not embodied by Leilah who remains an *other* to her self. Ricarda Schmitt remarks that "the mirror which shows another Leilah symbolizes the male gaze that gives woman an image of herself which is, to begin with, not related to reality. The woman then tries to transform herself into that symbol of woman that the male gaze shows her."²⁶ Leilah in the mirror is not herself because she is formed and transformed through Evelyn's gaze. Leilah cannot see her self in the mirror; she can only see the reflection of Evelyn's desire. As Eve/lyn admits, "she was the perfect woman; like the moon she only gave reflected light. She had mimicked me, she had become the thing I wanted her to be" (*PNE* 34).

Leilah's gender performance thus becomes as incorporeal as Eve/lyn's. Although her body is 'natural', her gender performance is not and the body that she occupies in this performance is not 'natural' in itself; rather it is 'naturalised' through

²⁶ Ricarda Schmitt, "The journey of the subject in Angela Carter's fiction," 61.

the gaze of an *other* who desires to define her ontological status through that performance. This performance which requires a material body through which to be enacted is in its essence insubstantial, as it has no recourse to a material body that acts out the performance. Eve/lyn does not comment directly on Leilah's body; Evelyn's desire derives from that which she seems to corporealise rather than from the flesh itself. Significantly, in Eve/lyn's memory, Leilah's body comes in to being through her ritual incarnation in front of the mirror and Evelyn becomes aroused by "the way she systematically carnalised herself and became dressed meat" (*PNE* 31).

To watch her dressing herself, putting on her public face, was to witness an inversion of the ritual disrobing to which she would later submit her body for, the more clothed she became, the more vivid became my memory of her nakedness and, as she watched me watching the assemblage of all the paraphernalia that only emphasised the black plush flanks and crimson slit beneath it, so she too, seemed to abandon her self in the mirror, and allowed her self to function only as a fiction of the erotic dream into which the mirror cast me (*PNE* 30).

The more clothed Leilah is the more desirable she becomes; the more attributes she adds to her body, the more her body disappears as if under the weight of insubstantiality. Even the insignia of her sex, her genitals—the organs on which Eve/lyn places such importance in relation to h/er body—become more prominent with every detail she adds to her act, only to be effaced in Eve/lyn's description as "the black plush and crimson slit" beneath the surface of the performance; in this description they [the genitals, the organs] also become an image of something other than what they are. Through her performance Leilah is fixed as a spectacle, tangible yet insubstantial, since there is no recourse to a performing body that acts out the performance; the body itself is performatively created in the process of her ritual carnalisation in the mirror and it becomes itself a fantasy, a fetish. For all his lust for her, Evelyn fails to come in contact with the psychicality of her body—a body which is absent even during their sexual encounters—and their union remains one of a voyeur to the object of his gaze.

Eve/lyn's role as the representative of the male gaze is established early on as the novel opens with Eve/lyn narrating an incident occurring the last night he spent in London as a man, when he and "some girl or other" (*PNE* 5) went to see Tristessa in *Wuthering Heights*. Through the mediation of this anonymous girl, "I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa" (*PNE* 5). Tristessa de St Ange, like those other members of "the queenly pantheon of women who expose their scars with pride" (*PNE*

6), Billie Holliday and Judy Garland, specializes in suffering as indicated by her name—"Suffering was her vocation" (*PNE* 8), Eve/lyn admits. In her groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey discusses the traditional visual apparatus of mainstream Hollywood "narrative" film, through a psychoanalytic framework, as representative of the male gaze that fixes women in the position of passive object by looking at them. Women, Mulvey argues, typically function as primary objects of desire for on-screen characters and members of the audience alike. As it is woman's lack of the penis that produces the phallus, Mulvey continues, phallogentrism paradoxically depends on the castrated woman "to give meaning and order to its world." "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning."²⁷ Evelyn projects his desire for Tristessa on to the anonymous girl who accompanies him to the cinema and who becomes complicit with the male gaze by accepting to fill the space of representation in her sexual act with Evelyn—"When she perceived how Tristessa's crucifixion by brain fever moved me, the girl who was with me got on her knees in the dark floor of the cinema [...] and sucked me off" (*PNE* 9). In literally 'going down' on Evelyn in the dark, on the dirty cinema floor littered with cigarette butts and empty containers, this anonymous girl willingly provides a body to fill the space Tristessa's image opens up but does not fill. The girl, whose name Eve/lyn does not remember because she does not *matter*, literally embodies, at that moment, the suffering female who offers herself unconditionally and is willing to accept humiliation as part of her sex-appeal, thus reproducing the same stereotype Tristessa's femininity represents. Eve/lyn's contact with this girl remains as disembodied as his relationship with Tristessa on screen; the girl disappears in the dark while her body is absorbed by Tristessa's performance which remains incorporeal, even as the matter of the sexual act attempts to corporealise the union between the object of desire and the 'I'/eye of the one that desires it. Thus the girl's passivity and her consent to being an object in the eye of the beholder, hence—as Mulvey suggests—the bearer of meaning rather than its maker, places her in the position of the mirror image mirroring yet another mirror image, which is itself incorporeal and with no original to reflect: Tristessa.

²⁷ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Peter Simon (ed), (W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 2001. 2182-2192) 2182.

III. "Tristessa. Enigma. Illusion.Woman?": Transgender incorporations and (es)-sense of woman

Tristessa's function is better understood in the light of Carter's other work, *The Sadeian Woman*, as her name alludes to Madame de Saint-Ange, the Sadeian libertine in *Philosophy of the Boudoir* who undertakes the innocent Eugenie's sexual and moral education exerted in a series of sadomasochistic acts that blur the boundaries of pleasure and pain. When placed in a Sadeian context Tristessa is not the aggressive libertine who extracts pleasure from 'fucking' (indicating uninhibited sexual aggression) and from making others suffer; instead she is the heroine who finds pleasure in pain inflicted upon her, or rather who sexualises in her performance of femininity a notion of woman as essentially weak yet, paradoxically, with a strong capacity for suffering. In that sense Tristessa reflects in the performance of her sexuality and her essence Sade's Justine, rather than Juliette or Madame de Saint-Ange. Justine, as Carter says, "is not only a woman in a man's world; she is also a receptacle of feeling, a repository of the type of sensibility we call 'feminine'" (SW 47). Carter locates a "Justinian" quality in the characteristic experience of the screen blonde, a blonde which is "not born" blonde but becomes one—"blondeness is a state of ambivalent grace, to which anyone who wants it badly enough may aspire" (SW 65)—exemplified in the persona of Marilyn Monroe. Monroe's "lonely death by barbiturates, nude, in bed, a death adored and longed for by all necrophiliacs" (SW 64) is a situation which Tristessa, "the very type of romantic dissolution necrophilia incarnate" (PNE 7) almost successfully re-enacts in her glass mausoleum, her plans only obstructed by Zero's invasion.

"She suffered exquisitely until suffering became demodded" (PNE 8), says Eve/lyn as s/he remarks on the arousal Tristessa's performance procured in 'him'—"the twitch in my budding groin the spectacle of Tristessa's suffering always aroused in me" (PNE 8). Eve/lyn's own desire is rooted on the sadeian libertine's desire as articulated by Noirceuil, lover of Justine's sister.

Beauty, virtue, innocence, candour, misfortune—the object of our lust finds no protection in any of these qualities. On the contrary. Beauty arouses us further; virtue, innocence, candour enhance the object; misfortune puts it into our power,

renders it amenable to us; so all those qualities tend only to excite us still further and we should look on them all as simply fuel for our passions.²⁸

Tristessa incorporates in her gender performance the object of male desire, woman as helpless victim; like Justine, who in essentialising her virginity and locating her virtue in her genitals, attributes to it a metaphysical quality that forbids her any sexual pleasure. Justine, with her resistance to seduction as well as her inability to control her fate by capitalising on her freedom, is Tristessa's paradigmatic woman. "The virtuous, the interesting Justine, with her incompetence, her gullibility, her whining, her frigidity, her reluctance to take control of her own life, is a perfect woman" (SW 55), says Carter, as she is always at the mercy of every master, thus making submission her nature.

Carter makes a very interesting point regarding the relationship between the typical screen heroine and Sade's Justine in arguing that it is precisely this contradiction between the heroine's beauty—on offer yet unattainable to the gazing audience—and the heroine's denial of her sexuality which is the source of her beauty, that links Justine to the screen goddess.

In the celluloid brothel of the cinema, where the merchandise may be eyed endlessly but never purchased, the tension between the beauty of women, which is admirable, and the denial of the sexuality which is the source of that beauty but is also immoral, reaches a perfect impasse. That is why Saint Justine became the patroness of the screen heroine (SW 60).

The denial of any self-conscious knowledge of her sexuality as often portrayed by Monroe, the big bosomed blonde—often the tart with a heart of gold—can recoup some of her moral status, Carter argues. By "throwing herself away," by giving away for free something which is worth good money, her own capital, she can redeem herself. In this process she can become subject to abuse and can be taken advantage of, thus becoming also pitiable as the woman whose sufferings have no end as she is exploited due to her own gullibility and good nature. "Marilyn/Justine has a childlike candour and trust and there is a faint touch of melancholy about her that has been produced by this trust, which is always absolute and always betrayed" (SW 63), says Carter. Tristessa embodies this same image of a suffering soul, heart-struck by the poignancy of her own situation, and responds to it by imagining, inventing—like Marilyn—a life full of abuse, forced prostitution of the most degrading manner, even a lost child. "But they could do nothing to me I had not already imagined," he admits to Eve/lyn; "the rats ate my baby

²⁸ Quoted in Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*, 71.

and did not even leave the bones behind” (*PNE* 144). Yet, like Justine whose “innocence invalidates experience and turns it into events, things that happen to her but do not change her” (*SW* 51), Tristessa is cheated of experience, as her delusions create for her a confusing reality that does not materially affect her as her very corporeality is experienced through an illusion. “What was he wailing for—,” Eve/lyn is forced to ask, “regret that these things had *not* happened to him and he could only imagine them?” (*PNE* 144).

Tristessa, “who executed her symbolic autobiography in arabesques of kitsch and hyperbole” (*PNE* 5), is proved to be nothing more than an illusion as, “all he’d been,” Eve/lyn comes to realise, “had been the greatest female impersonator in the world, and so forever cheated of experience” (*PNE* 144). He literally comes to corporealise a type of woman as romantic dissolution in its inception and necrophilic fantasy in its incorporation. Woman as ethereal, a Victorian ideal rejected by Fevvers in *Nights*, is aptly incorporated into a male body, the only body that could have experienced woman as distanced from all biological facts and physiological needs. Whereas Fevvers’ body is the abode of limitless freedom, Tristessa’s is the abode of all limitation. Yet whereas controversy surrounds Fevvers’ gender (and other) performance—“is she fact or is she fiction” (*NC* 7)—Tristessa is unquestionably regarded as “the most beautiful woman in the world” (5). This *hypereal* woman incorporated on a body that contradicts the very conditions of a woman’s materiality, appears to be more real than the real itself and Eve/lyn is forced to wonder, “how could a real woman ever have been so much a woman as you?” (*PNE* 129).

The revelation of Tristessa’s flesh impels Eve/lyn’s realisation that Tristessa’s existence was completely incorporeal—“she” a mere fiction of his imagination: “she had been the dream itself made flesh though the flesh I knew her in was not flesh itself but only a moving picture of flesh, real but not substantial” (*PNE* 7-8). Zero’s discovery of Tristessa’s sanctuary and its subsequent violation led by Zero and executed by his harem of submissive yet animalistic wives, leads to the unfolding of her double life: an existence experienced through “her” image yet limited by his body, and at the same time defined by this limitation. In her glass house, in the midst of her waxwork collection—“The Hall of the Immortals” as she calls it—Tristessa is found laying there, surrounded by effigies of all Hollywood greats, wax simulations of the ones that had only ever been simulacra to begin with, like her, real but not substantial. Tristessa, a necrophilic fantasy, is alive and Zero’s force rips away her chiffon negligee only to

reveal “a water-pale torso, a breast as hollow as a whole, a rib-cage like an abacus” (*PNE* 127). The rampaging of the cupboards by the girls reveals “glass jar after glass jar of vitamin pills; phial upon phial of drugs to make you sleep, drugs to wake you, drugs to procure hallucinations for you” (*PNE* 130). Through food abstinence Tristessa tries to discipline the body that presents itself as limitation and by suppressing it to annihilate it—and subsequently escape its presence and erase it from subjectivity and consciousness—thus achieving the ‘absence’ that he sees as characterising woman’s situation. For Tristessa woman’s essence is defined by a marked absence, the absence of the genitals which his ‘inappropriate’ body still possesses; by suppressing the physicality of the body through the discipline of its material needs he compensates for the ‘presence’ his genitals mark. This marked ‘presence’ is rectified through the ‘absence’ of the physical body Tristessa tries to achieve through starvation. The “phial upon phial of drugs” are aimed to support this incorporeal existence and keep ‘her’ between reality and illusion, sleep and awareness, life and death.

Tristessa’s conscious effort to immaterialise the body is grounded on the same principle that is the driving force behind transsexual practices; also the drive that motivates the anorexic individual to suppress her hunger: the body is the locus of identity and my body is other than myself, therefore it must be suppressed. Beneath that formulation though lies another formulation, the one that privileges soul over matter and experiences the body as the heavy weight that is the obstacle to self-realisation. As Susan Bordo argues, in the practices that speak eating disorders, “the body is experienced as alien, as the not-self, the not me” and more than that—an experience not dissimilar to the transsexual’s conundrum—“the body is experienced as confinement and limitation” (Bordo 114). Like the anorexic individual, Tristessa loathes the materiality of his body; not merely though because its anatomy does not conform to the ‘true’ self but also because the very materiality of it stands in the way of corporealising the image of woman which he has dreamed of, founded on and preconditioned by *immateriality*. He starves himself in an effort to control the body whose desires he can only rule by regulating—or rather, by suppressing—its material existence, the materiality that precludes him from being the dream that he has dreamed, and that dream is, in its essence incorporeal.

By contrast to Fevvers’ vision of embodied femininity which celebrates the female body as material entity by ingratiating its needs and desires—nutritional, sexual or other—Tristessa’s imagined idea/l reverts back to the old Victorian model of lady-

like anorexia to represent an image of woman as ethereal, passive and inviolable, an inviolability also at the centre of the anorexic's obsession with the slender body. Through his starvation, Tristessa tries, not to create a feminine body but to vanish the body altogether; an adequate representation of the feminine idea/l he has envisaged.

Woman becomes an idea/l which can only be achieved through evaporation of the material substance that does not allow her to be ethereal, passive and inviolable. Instead of incorporating gender norms, Tristessa chooses to replace the body with pure image, an image whose construction the male transvestite is only too familiar with. Andrea Dworkin argues that male transvestites, rather than caricaturing the women they want to become, "these men have penetrated to the core experience of being a woman, a romanticised construct."²⁹ This 'romanticised construct' is often reflected in representations of femininity in male-to-female transsexual narratives, making transsexuality sound suspiciously like an extreme form of transvestism, and flesh that can be re-sewn begins to sound as alternative matter for an alternative constructed self. In one of many such occurrences in Morris' *Conundrum*, Jan describes her return from Casablanca, post-operation, like that of "a princess emancipated from her degrading disguise, or something new out of Africa," (Morris 126) highlighting both her repulsion for her "old" body which is referred to as a "degrading disguise" and the romanticization of the materiality of the "new" one. Tristessa takes this romanticised construct to its extremes and reaches the limits of immateriality, imprisoned within the contradiction of being an object as diaphanous and immaterial as only things that do not exist can be—"and this object was itself an idea" (*PNE* 129). As Eve/lyn ponders, "Tristessa had no function in this world except as an idea of himself; no ontological status only an iconographic one" (*PNE* 129).

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty discusses the conditions of *anosognosia* and the *phantom limb* as indicating "a 'fictional' or phantasmatic construction of the body outside of or beyond its neurological structure which he explains in relation to the body schema."³⁰ In the case of the phantom limb, the patient still suffers a pain where the limb used to be before its amputation; according to Grosz, "it illustrates an organ or bodily part within a total body image that is no longer there."³¹ In the case of anosognosia the patient cannot recognise a body part as their own when in fact they should, therefore a body part that should occupy a position within the body

²⁹ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman-Hating* (London: Penguin 1976).

³⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1994).

image is not recognised as part of that image. A physiological explanation for anosognosia would account for this phenomenon as “a straightforward suppression [...] of ‘interoceptive’ stimulations” in which case “anosognosia is the absence of a fragment of representation which ought to be given since the corresponding limb is there;” in terms of a psychological explanation, “anosognosia becomes a bit of forgetfulness, a negative judgement or a failure to perceive.”³² Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, anosognosia is the *actual absence of a representation* whereas the phantom limb is the *representation of an actual absence* in the body schema.

Tristessa’s efforts to discipline his body, by suppressing his desires and his physiology in favour of his imagined body-schema, lead him to a state of agnosia.

‘At first,’ he said, ‘I used to conceal me genitals in my anus. I would fix them in position with Scotch tape, so that my mound was as smooth as a young girl’s. But when the years passed and my disguise became my nature, I no longer troubled myself with these subterfuges. Once the essence was achieved, the appearance could take care of itself’ (*PNE* 141).

Tristessa refuses to recognise his genitals as part of his subjectivity because they cannot form part of the body he desires; a body that is more imagined and imaginary than matter formed by desire. By consciously forgetting them he brings forward a contradiction which declares the presence of his genitals as he attempts to conceal them—if they have to be concealed that means that they are present—while by vanishing them he establishes their absence. Thus he recognises their materiality and the effect they have on his subjectivity by acknowledging their presence and attempting to suppress it. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is the same contradiction that governs the anosognosic patient’s situation: the intended oblivion of the body part whose presence disturbs the subject also acknowledges the persistence of the part’s presence, both materially and in the patient’s memory.

In reality the anosognosic is not simply ignorant of the existence of his paralysed limb: he can evade his deficiency only because he knows where he risks encountering it, just as the subject, in psychoanalysis, knows what he does not want to face, otherwise he would not be able to avoid it so successfully (*PP* 80).

The male-to-female transvestite subject knows where his/her lack is located; and that more than a lack, it is a presence—the penis—that s/he fears will betray him. In order

³¹ Ibid.

³² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 80.

for the desired body image to be created, even incorporated, the parts of the body that disturb the desired body/identity must be put away as to cease interfering with the imaginary body-schema that the subject has imagined for itself. By tacking them inside the body (concealing them in the anus) the subject hopes he can erase them from memory—out of sight, out of mind. However, he is only too aware of their presence and that awareness is precisely what forces him to conceal them.

In a state of agnosia, and as this fearful presence no longer asserts itself, Tristessa no longer feels the need to continue concealing his genitals as their presence has already been erased both from the body schema and the mental sensation. In a reversal of Mother's belief that a refiguration in the appearance will "restructure the essence" (*PNE* 68), he further attempts to restructure the appearance following the reformulation of the essence that resulted from a mental re-arrangement of that appearance. However, his attempts to change his 'essence' (male subjectivity) and become a woman (in the flesh?) fail. In the effort to achieve a mental alteration of his materiality by becoming as *phantasmatic* as the gender he is trying to incorporate he reduces himself to nothingness. In lieu of a body, a pose.³³

His effort to become the "absolute" woman makes him more and more of a man in that his male subjectivity prevails. As Eve/lyn discovers, he had attempted to have his genitals surgically removed by the same person that created her "out of discarded flesh" (*PNE* 143); Mother. He offered her "a million dollars to match his function to his form, the poor, bewildered thing" (*PNE* 173) but she refused because "he was too much of a woman, already, for the good of the sex; and, besides, when she subjected him to the first tests, she was struck by what seemed to her the awfully ineradicable quality of his maleness" (*PNE* 173). The part of the body that Tristessa seeks to discard is rooted—the irony of it—not so much on the body schema that he is destined to occupy as a male subject but rather in his inner self, the self he had tried to mould into a woman's shape.

³³ In *Heidegger and the "jews"* where he discusses representation in modern art and aesthetics in relation to the notions of the Sublime and the Beautiful (as discussed in Kant), Jean-François Lyotard closes his discussion on the impossibility to make beautiful art today to represent the feeling of the Sublime, as follows:

"Art is an artefact; it constructs its representation. Art cannot be sublime; it can 'make' sublime, and this is not better than beautiful, only more ridiculous. In lieu of a thesis, a pose."

Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and the "jews"* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 1997) 45. The transsexual also constructs h/er representation, 'makes' a woman out of his male body; this is in turn not better than a 'real' (genetic) woman's representation (image) of 'woman' only more ridiculous as the transsexual's claims to authenticity are grounded on an 'essence' that transcends the body, a body the experience of which is precluded. Thus the comparison between a male-to-female transsexual is not qualitative (who 'makes' a better woman) but rather, like in the comparison between the sublime and the beautiful, one of difference of experience.

By hiding his genitals—what he considers to be the insignia of his maleness—inside his body, Tristessa only literalises Mother’s descriptive schema of the “awfully ineradicable quality of his maleness” which seems to be stemming from within. Rather than being an ‘essence’ which transcends the body, this male quality which is ‘ineradicable’, is itself produced by the same acts that Tristessa performs on his body. The more emphasised a notion of femininity Tristessa projects, the less of a woman he becomes; the deeper he hides his genitals inside his body, the more his maleness is emphasised, as if by pushing them ‘inside,’ the insignia of his maleness that they carry becomes more rooted in his body and his subjectivity. He is merely hiding himself within himself.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva argues that upon entry to the Symbolic the individual subject must define itself as independent; therefore it needs to defend itself from anything that threatens its autonomy and its identity. Such control though is only ever partial as it is testified by *abjection*. Tristessa needs to control the bodily and biological functions that might undermine this identity he has created; in psychoanalytic terms, Tristessa needs to repress that which creates in him the fear of *abjection*.

Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.³⁴

For Kristeva, “the abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine” (Kristeva 1); it only shares one quality with the object, that of “being opposed to the *I*” (the ‘I’ of subjectivity). Neither is it however, outside the self; it exists inside the self, it is part of subjectivity and yet it opposes it. It is thus both *of* the subject and *off* the subject; it is that which subjectivity rejects yet cannot abolish—“to each ego its object, to each superego its abject” (Kristeva 2). The object, through its opposition to the ‘I’ creates a fragile desire for meaning, Kristeva explains, a desire which is unsettled by the abject which, on the contrary, being “the jettisoned object,” is radically excluded “and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 4). The abject, thus, is that which the subject abhors and tries to part company from, because it unsettles the subject’s structure of meaning and the autonomy of self (an autonomy that the abject

³⁴ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S.Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press 1982) 4.

reveals as false) that the subject desires once it has entered the Symbolic, language, signification and meaning.

The object is self-abasing, degrading and despeakable; it is that which I want to discard because it threatens me, 'I', subjectivity. It is that which, although we think we can discard and forget about, we can never be free from because it persists, it undermines us from within and ends up engulfing us. It lives and nurtures itself from our inside, consuming us the more we try to discard that which forms the desire for abjection. Although despicable it is not *unspeakable*; although it forces us back "where all meaning collapses"³⁵, thus threatening our position in discourse and signification (the Lacanian Symbolic), it voices itself, it speaks, in its manifestation in the desire for abjection.

Tristessa's abhorrence of his genitals and his desire to discard them both from the physical body and the body schema is not based on their material existence. It is rather as a signification of a threat of betrayal—of being undermined—that the genitals are suppressed. In their physical manifestation the genitals themselves are non-threatening; Tristessa cannot desire any woman other than himself—"That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made of himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved" (*PNE* 128), Eve recognises—and Kristeva highlights abjection as "a precondition of narcissism" (Kristeva 4). Tristessa's genitals are abhorred as a threat to the schema of signification and 'she' is 'herself' his own construction and a construction of his own male discourse that creates—and in this case, literally reproduces on its body—femininity. The symbolic schema which he calls Tristessa acquires meaning in the Symbolic, the only realm in which she can be sustained. But the presence of his genitals, a threat both real and imaginary, pushes him/her back to the place of no meaning where Tristessa—who "had no ontological status, only an iconographic one" (*PNE* 129)—cannot exist. If the schema that makes perfect sense within discourse falls apart (and it does fall apart in the desert whose blankness and sterility defies meaning and signification) then, it becomes not only meaningless but also improper, invalid and immaterial. Thus he tries to conceal his genitals in his anus, without realising that in doing so, he reinforces abjection as the imaginary thread realises itself by and within his body—turning, as he does, his body and his self full circle—the part that threatens his subjectivity materialised inside him.

³⁵ The body of the mother with which the child is in tune during the Semiotic, before it enters the Symbolic, the maternal *chora* as Kristeva calls it.

Tristessa, who was not “born” a woman, becomes both the mother and the child as he gives birth to himself in this inverted pregnancy in which he impregnates himself with his own penis and thus automatically gives birth to Tristessa by hiding his most abhorred part inside his body.

IV. ‘I thought I had become inviolable, like glass, and could only be broken’: Bodily resistance and bodies that matter

By hiding his male genitals in his anus Tristessa does not become a woman—all “he’d been was the greatest female impersonator in the world and so forever cheated of experience” (*PNE* 144); at best he is a man with an eating disorder and a deep resentment for his own body on which basis he has made claims to femininity. As Marjorie Garber has put it:

Transvestites, cross-dressed, choose women’s names, which they use in their personal ads, and also in their daily or episodic cross-dressing activities. Their wives will address them as ‘Donna’ or ‘Jeanne’ or whatever, when they are wearing women’s clothes. Yet this is clearly not ‘female subjectivity,’ even though it goes by women’s names. It is a man’s idea of what ‘a woman’ is; it is male subjectivity in drag.³⁶

Tristessa’s act of hiding his genitals in his anus is echoed and—graphically—described by the transsexual Richard Raskind (who later became Renée Richards) in her autobiography *Second Serve*.³⁷ Richards describes the diligence with which he proceeded in concealing his own ‘hated’ sexual parts, his desperate efforts to mould the part of the body that the male transvestite abhors, to keep it out of sight—his own as well as everyone else’s—and thus block it from memory.

I became more and more strict in this regard, increasing the strains and inventing new ways to eliminate the hated body parts. Sometimes I would knot a piece of fishing line or strong twine around the head of my penis and use that to pull it backward between my legs. The other end would be secured to a piece of rope cinched tightly around my waist ... I could pass the string between the cheeks of

³⁶ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and cultural anxiety*, 96.

³⁷ Renée Richards with Jack Ames, *Second Serve* (New York: Stein and Day 1983) 56-57.

Richards, a doctor and a tennis player before her operation, became famous by demanding after his rebirth (as signified also in the name which he chose, by his own admission, specifically for that reason) to be allowed to play professional tennis as a woman causing huge reaction by other women professional tennis players.

my ass and up under the rope. Then I would pull the string taut causing my penis to be stretched brutally around the curve of my torso. Believe me, I have great respect for the resiliency of the human penis.³⁸

According to Garber, the obsessive concern of the male-to-female transsexual with his genitals as the location of his/her gender subjectivity is based on the same instrumental conviction shared by the transvestite that “masculine identity, male subjectivity, is determined and signified by the penis” (Garber 97); here aptly demonstrated in the reflection of Richards’ views and practices in Tristessa’s words. But if the penis is not the insignia of anything that is—essentially speaking—masculine identity and/or male subjectivity, its construction as such—as an emblem of sex and gender identity—constitutes it, in language, as the mouthpiece of such qualities and categorisations. In effect, because we cannot meaningfully perceive our bodies outside language, and because the penis ‘speaks sex and gender’ and its physical use and function is always creating and created through discourse, it does form sex and gender subjectivity. Thus, the body as flesh itself, forms a vital part of subjectivity and all mouldings of the body are effectively forming subjectivity; however, that is not to say that a severe mutilation of the genitals can constitute a biological male to a woman.

In transcending the body, Tristessa imagines that he also transcends the limitations posed by its nature—its desires, the constraints imposed by them on the project of self-realisation, and ultimately its mortality. By lying in the constructed ‘hall of the immortals’ Tristessa imagines “herself” (and through that, himself) immortal as well; “her” image is immortal, but the body that sustains him—and through him, her image—is not. Like the fear of abjection, bodies betray us and prove resistant to the manipulation of the flesh as a part co-extensive to, yet separate from, the ‘real’, superior self and the discourse that shapes subjectivity. In the sterility of the desert, Tristessa will be forced to face his worst fear, and he will lose.

As his genitals are revealed, to Zero’s delight and Eve/lyn’s astonishment, the paradigm of Tristessa is proved to have been a fraud; not even a ‘dyke of dykes’ as Zero calls her, but nonetheless, a “jamjar of infertility” (*PNE* 127), a container of his own self, and that self was nothing but a sterile reproduction of no original—“an imitation without an origin” (*GT* 138).

His wailing echoed round the gallery of glass as his body arched as if he were attempting to hide herself within himself, to swallow his cock within her thighs;

³⁸ Ibid. 56-57.

and when I saw how much the heraldic regalia of his sex appalled him, I thought that Mother would say he had become a woman because he had abhorred his most female part—that is, his instrument of mediation between himself and the other (*PNE* 128).

The revelation of Tristessa's genitals and his evident feeling of detestation for them, as well as Eve/lyn's confused inference about Mother's possible theory on the matter of this revelation, unknowingly reinforces Tristessa's abjection by shifting her to the place "where all meaning collapses" (Kristeva 4). The "instrument of his mediation with the other" (*PNE* 128) which is abhorred becomes the matter of dissolution of meaning as what Tristessa considers his most male part, Mother considers his most female part, Eve/lyn assumes. The 'insignia of his maleness' which he has abhorred and tries to suppress in order to successfully pass as a woman, becomes, in its suppression and its literal concealment inside the body, the symbol of his sterility and self-containment. In his effort to enter the realm of womanhood he has excluded himself from it by abhorring the instrument that mediates his union between himself and the other. Further to that, Eve/lyn's use of the terms 'female' and 'woman' and the blurred signification that accompanies them at this stage contribute to h/er own and the reader's confusion as to Tristessa's position. Eve/lyn, immediately after this passage, calls Tristessa a "female man" (*PNE* 128). The semantic confusion of the passage, exemplified in Eve/lyn's explanation of Tristessa's position, forms part of the collapse of meaning embodied in Tristessa's situation.

Yet Eve/lyn recognises that Tristessa was "an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity" (*PNE* 129); thus, she acknowledges this "sensuous fabrication of the mythology of the flea pits" (*PNE* 129) as the "female appearance which was your symbolic autobiography" (*PNE* 129). Nothing more than a composition of signifiers to signify her status as "the most beautiful woman in the world" yet only "in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of a man" (*PNE* 129). Tristessa is merely a narcissistic embodiment and a reflection of his own desires; desires that cannot be embodied by a 'real' woman and can only exist as an incorporation in a male body who is willing to exchange the penis for the phallic power of signification. In return for the phallus, a penis.

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverises the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when the subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside,

finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than the abject (Kristeva 5).

Tristessa's efforts to suppress the facts of his physiology are betrayed by that which he has employed to identify on the 'outside' with this image of femininity which is, in fact, completely disembodied and impossible to achieve. The impossibility lies within him, literally pulled from front to back and tacked inside his body. Yet it is precisely this abhorrence of the genitals that informs and constitutes Tristessa's being. "He had no function in this world except as an idea of himself" (*PNE* 129), her appearance his only essence, a symbolic autobiography which incorporated everything Tristessa could possibly be, and as Eve/lyn admits, "I read it at a glance" (*PNE* 129). In abjecting his body, Tristessa abjects self and subjectivity.

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language or desire is founded (Kristeva 5).

This self that he abjects is the only constitution of his existence; the abject becomes her signifier, the signifier of all the desires and aspirations Tristessa wants to embody. His willingness to sacrifice the penis to make possible the embodiment of the phallus—the irony of it, to exchange a phallic symbol for the possibility of embodying it—is based on his desire for signification that will lead to completeness of meaning.

Tristessa's fears are realised as the object of his shame is revealed and as the body which had disappeared under the weight of signification manifests itself, first through physical pain caused by Zero's violence, and later through pleasure in the union between Eve/lyn and Tristessa during which the latter becomes some-*body* for the first time.

Tristessa, my darling, before the proposition of my body forced you to become the first term of the syllogism, you did not exist at all in any medium of sensible actuality. Yet something that had chosen to call itself "Tristessa," an anti-being that existed only by means of a massive effort of will and a huge suppression of fact, **now wept and bled, torn from a non-life of intermediate stasis by Zero's rage** [my emphasis] (*PNE* 129).

Zero's rage and the violence that he inflicts on Tristessa's body turns her from a no-*body* to a material body—flesh and blood—that weeps and bleeds, intolerant to physical

violence and pain. This is the physical reaction of a human body, a body that resists annihilation through discourse and signification and whose humanity persists in spite of all efforts to the contrary. Tristessa's physical abuse and humiliation now make him nothing but a skeletal body which called itself "Tristessa", an image that he no longer embodies, and yet that was the only name he was ever known by, yet now, "there he dangled, naked, revealed" (*PNE* 129).

After their mocking wedding ceremony and prompted by Zero's kick Tristessa is forced to copulate with Eve/lyn and in that to re-enact Mother's vision of the perfect hermaphrodite. In his forced union with Eve/lyn, Tristessa is faced with the materiality of his body, its carnal needs and desires.

'I thought,' he said, 'I was immune to rape. I thought that I had become inviolable, like glass, and could only be broken.'

I felt his cock pressing against my upper thigh; it was quite stiff (*PNE* 137).

The force of Tristessa's erection forces both bride and groom (both the bride and both the groom) in a peculiar union of bodies that become annihilated through myth yet at the same time have to surrender to their materiality. As Eve/lyn admits, "we were beings composed of echoes. These echoes doom us to love. My bride will become my child's father" (*PNE* 136). Their union is a union of mythical beings in as much as they occupy bodies which are in themselves mythical fantasies. Eve/lyn faces up to that by admitting that the two of them were forced out of their bodies and inhabited false shapes, "unknown even to our selves" (*PNE* 136). Eve/lyn also acknowledges that, although the flesh they both now inhabit has moulded them in a particular shape and has in a way made them more than human (mythical creatures), this reflection is nothing but a shadow of a body that is ultimately human even though the shadow itself appears mythical in size—"the false universals of myth transformed us, now we cast longer shadows than a man does" (*PNE* 136). There seems to be, however, a certain detachment from the bodies involved in the sexual act, as if the union was a union of fantasies, where both are nothing but each other's fantasy which has now become indistinguishable from the body itself, even though at least one of them—Tristessa—no longer appears to be that fantasy and yet has no other corporeality through which to be perceived.

Alone, quite alone, in the heart of that gigantic metaphor for sterility, where our child was conceived on the star-spangled banner, yet we peopled this

immemorial loneliness with all we had been, or might be, or had dreamed of being, or had thought we were—every modulation of the selves we now projected upon each other's flesh, selves—aspects of being, ideas—that seemed, during our embraces, to be the very essence of ourselves; the concentrated essence of being, as if, out of these fathomless kisses and our interpenetrating, undifferentiated sex, we had made the great Platonic hermaphrodite together (*PNE* 148).

The perfect Platonic hermaphrodite represented in their union does not merely correspond to their own union as beings outside—and yet inside—sex and gender norms which, in their marriage, literalise the mythical androgynous being Aristophanes refers to as the perfect example of love in Plato's *Symposium*. More than that, the image of the perfect Platonic hermaphrodite represents here the marriage (the union) between flesh and myth, and the incorporation of cultural discourse and the cultural imaginary on the body. Eve/lyn and Tristessa project—in their union—their desires and ideas of self and being to each other's bodies. For Tristessa, Eve/lyn is the embodiment of his own desires and aspirations which he once endeavoured to incorporate on his own body; for Eve/lyn, Tristessa's body will always incorporate Evelyn's fantasy of the perfect woman. Their union is a representation of myth and the cultural imaginary as always embodied.

Yet their experience of their bodies in this union is also revealed as an experience of the flesh as the flesh itself, beyond mythology and outside discourse. In their lovemaking, they experience the subject's contradictory relationship to its body, as an object from which I cannot distance myself. The body is here experienced through the senses, not through imagination. This experience fails to be articulated in discourse; Tristessa, in trying to describe to Eve/lyn his sensual experience of h/er body, is literally lost for words and is forced to abandon imagery.

He told me my intimacy smelled of cheese, no—not quite like cheese... and rummaged in a forgotten word-hoard of metaphor but at last was forced to abandon imagery, since it was inadequate, and he could only say it was a sweetish smell, but rotten, too, and also a little salty... the primordial marine smell, as if we carry within us the ocean where, at the dawn of time, we were all born (*PNE* 148).

The experience of the flesh “uncreates the world”—the world as the interface between physicality and discourse (language and myth)—and leads the two of them to a “primordial,” pre-linguistic space through a primitive experience of the body, before language and signification. Metaphor and imagery is inadequate, says Eve/lyn, and

Tristessa employs his mere instincts, his senses in order to describe the experience. Yet in Eve/lyn's narration, Tristessa's sensual description (smell and taste) is forced into discourse and signification in its association with the imagery of the sea and the use of that image as a metaphor for the place of birth, a metaphor which Eve/lyn literalises in h/er return to the ocean at the end of the novel. The experience of the flesh allows them to go beyond signification, yet their attempts to articulate the experience irrevocably construct a network of images and metaphors, reliant on myth, through which the experience of the object (the body as flesh) can be mediated.

There is, in Carter's text, a manifestation of the flesh as resisting annihilation through myth. Of the three main characters in the novel, no-one—not even Tristessa—achieves metaphorical or literal immaterialisation, and the final consumption and annihilation comes in the form of sexual jouissance. Mythical incorporations of the flesh are proved fleeting and the flesh manifests itself in violent eruptions of ultimate jouissance that defies both sex and gender—as in the sexual union of Eve/lyn and Tristessa in the desert—or results in literal eruptions of blood as in Tristessa's death and Leilah's abortion.

Leilah's body is butchered on an operating table of some sort as she goes through an abortion performed by a Haitian voodoo lady who “botched the job so badly [...] Leilah became infected and had to go to hospital at the cost of all the rest of her furs, at the price of her womb” (*PNE* 31). She later returns, no longer a body made up of striptease clues, fragmented and thus seductive, but first as “Sophia, all mind” and later as “Lilith, all flesh” (*PNE* 175). Leilah, Sophia, Lilith; it is indeed hard to resist the temptation of reading the symbolism behind the names, the mythology that produces her incarnations and forms her subjectivity in relation to each one of these bodies. Yet her identity is found, in the end, to be illegible and the myth that supports the language that brings her into being is to be seen again as “consolatory nonsense” (*SW* 5). In response to Eve/lyn's query regarding Mother's fate, Lilith explains that she has “retired to a cave for the duration of the hostilities” to which Eve/lyn asks, “Should we do that with all the symbols, Leilah? Put them away, for a while, until the times have created a fresh iconography?”

Shall we do that Leilah?

‘Lilith is my name,’ she said. ‘I called myself Leilah in the city in order to conceal the nature of my symbolism. If the temptress displays her nature, the seducee is put on his guard. Lilith, if you remember, was Adam's first wife, on

whom he begot the entire race of the djini. All my wounds will magically heal. Rape only refreshes my virginity. I am ageless, I will outlive the rocks.'

She laughed self-deprecatingly (*PNE* 174).

The joke is both on the validity of symbolism and its contribution in creating essential identities which prove to be, in their essence, performative as they bring into being that which they name. Further to that, Lilith's sarcasm is directed at the quintessence of myth itself: its self-deceptively timeless validity and its seemingly inviolable nature. She, who has been the embodiment of so many myths whose material effects literally violate and do violence to her body, in being named Lilith is supposed to embody myth itself. Yet she who has been reinvented through myth so many times, Leilah/Sophia/Lilith, laughs in the face of myth and its performativity as she has learned by her third encounter with Eve/lyn that myths themselves are only valid within specific historical contexts, their function is temporary not eternal. Myth can be contained in history, history can make myth; but myth itself cannot transcend history—"Time has a way of running away with itself" (*PNE* 173) Lilith notes. In her effort to conceal her symbolism in the city, for fear that her function might be revealed, she adopts a disguise which is itself the product of another myth. The fragments of her act finally invent and define Leilah who, "seemed to come and go in her body, fretful, wilful, she a visitor in her own flesh" (*PNE* 27). In that she becomes her name Leilah's identity is performative, corporealised only in its performance. Her body though escapes performativity in the literal enactment of pain and loss, an idea that is later repeated both in Eve/lyn's castration by Mother and the physical abuse experienced in Zero's community, as well as in the manifestation of Tristessa's physicality after his shrine is attacked and rummaged by Zero's women.

Similarly, Eve/lyn's body presents itself as the corporealisation of myth, myth made flesh. H/ers is a body which is experienced as foreign even in h/er first encounter with Zero under whose weight s/he feels like a former violator rather than the one who is being violated. By contrast to the narrative characteristic of transsexual (auto)biography, Eve/lyn cannot recognise the new body as h/er own, h/er disengagement from it reversing the traditional "wrong body" narrative where dispossession of the body leads to a journey with the home of reassignment at its end. Eve/lyn's journey to self-discovery follows h/er escape/departure from the home of reassignment which is in fact not a home at all. Whereas in the transsexual narrative self-discovery precedes the construction of the body—thus, in so many ways, it

develops *outside* the body and manifests itself, primarily, on its surface—Eve/lyn’s self-discovery leads her, full circle, to a reconciliation with h/er body and forces h/er to return back to where she came from, the Mother’s womb.

The sound of the sea becomes omnipresent, the sea, which washes away all memory and retains it.
I have come home.
The destination of all journeys is their beginning.
I have not come home (*PNE* 186).

The implication here is that Eve/lyn’s return to the maternal home of reassignment is merely the beginning of her journey. Water is not going to redeem her, wash away the past or predestine her future; neither is she going to surrender herself, and her body, to offer it as it were to the “mother of mysteries” (*PNE* 191). As Eve exchanges her necklace for Mother’s boat, she engages in the symbolic exchange of her alchemical quality and body for a new vehicle to carry her in the world. Eve buys off her body/situation, rejects the leftover body parts from her old body—a body from which she now distances herself— and claims ownership of h/er female body.

Inside, on a bed of dry ice, lay the set of genitals which had once belonged to Evelyn.
‘You can have them back, if you still want them.’
I burst out laughing and shook my head (*PNE* 187).

The necklace which she considers as her passage to death—“I thought I might need something with which to pay the fatal ferryman” (*PNE* 183)—becomes, in her exchange with mother, an object of exchange between life and death. Mother is, in this context, the eternal ferryman himself, who in receiving the piece of gold, enables Eve/lyn’s passage from male subjectivity to a ‘posttranssexual’ subjectivity. Eve/lyn leaves that ‘old self behind,’ like many of the subjects in/of transsexual auto(biographies) but her passage is not as direct as they claim that it is; neither does her narrative end with an arrival ‘at home’ but rather it starts with its beginning, a journey. In this exchange Eve/lyn, pays Mother—herself, by now, an image of death—the rights of passage not to the water of Hades, the water of death, but rather to a sea of rebirth and regeneration. The boat is her body/vehicle which she both possesses and owns through her exchange with Mother. The boat that was meant to be Mother’s coffin becomes Eve’s vehicle for her new journey; thus it brings her full circle to the place of birth and death—the death of the persistence of her old body (the phantom limb of subjectivity) and the

subjectivity developed through it—and the beginning of her new journey into the experience of her subjectivity which is neither male nor female but rather ‘posttranssexual.’ As she explains, “we start from our conclusions” (*PNE* 191).

H/er union with Tristessa simultaneously reiterates and subverses traditional gender role playing as in the consummation of their marriage her “womanhood was ratified” (*PNE* 138). The temptation to read this as either Carter’s ironic comment on such a patriarchal view of marriage which also presumes the union with the male as the space for the ratification of womanhood, or worse, as her endorsement of that view in its reiteration, certainly presents itself. Eve/lyn repeatedly refers to her sexual encounter with Tristessa as the space within which she truly experiences her body; and this is precisely where the core of the matter is. Eve/lyn experiences woman as a situation, a social position one finds oneself in, in Zero’s community. Zero, the one-legged, one-eyed tyrant with a passion for Nietzsche is the castrated, impotent man who makes up for his own lack by humiliating his women. It is in this environment where Eve/lyn learns that to appear as a woman and to occupy the position of one are often two entirely different matters. It is, however, only through the experience of her body as a source of sexual pleasure through Tristessa’s mediation, the mediation of the other, which she experiences her body as primitive flesh even though she acknowledges that she can never have access to it outside the realm of the Symbolic.

When I was a man, I could never have guessed what it would be like to be inside a woman’s skin, an outer covering which records with such fidelity, such immediacy, each sensation, however fleeting [...] I had lost my body, now I was defined solely by his (*PNE* 148-9).

It is only by entering the “realm of negation” in her union with Tristessa that she can experience the flesh, the flesh which both in complicity with, and yet against, Mother’s wishes is impregnated in the creation of the Platonic hermaphrodite between Eve/lyn and Tristessa. Eve/lyn’s pregnancy against her own wishes is revealed as yet another instance when bodies defy both the conventions of discourse and mythical signification.

Eve/lyn who began her journey as the fruit of the tree of knowledge, “a man-made masterpiece of skin and bone, the technological Eve in person,” myth-made-flesh and flesh-made-myth, finds in her encounter with Lilith that “historicity rendered myth unnecessary” (*PNE* 173) and symbolism has been made redundant; Eve has no longer a function in this world, not even an iconographic one.

‘And when there was a consensus agreement on the nature of the symbolic manifestations of the spirit, no doubt Divine Virgins, Sacred Harlots and Virgin Mothers served a useful function; but the gods are all dead, there’s a good deal of redundancy in the spirit world’ (*PNE* 175).

The women’s struggle has created a new mythology which has made Eve obsolete. Eve/lyn, literal incorporation and mythical resonance of Eve, who arrived in this continent by air and water, and leaves behind her earth and fire, now incorporates in her body the alchemical experience. H/er arrival at h/er mother’s home is not h/er destination but only the beginning of her journey to a subjectivity now mediated through the body which has been appropriated through sensation and experience; “ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth” (*PNE* 191).

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter negotiates the matter (both physical and philosophical) of the construction of subjectivity across genders and genres. The transsexual, here becomes, not only the subject of bodily transgression but also the emblem of narrative transgression. The transsexual body/narrative, the result of the alchemical reaction between cultural discourse, myth, the medicodiscursive narrative and science, is explored in this context both as flesh made word and word made flesh. The novel and its protagonist become one, so that the transsexual subject cannot be read/“read” independently of her narrative. Body and narrative coincide; thus the boundaries between the physical and the narrative enactment of subjectivity become obsolete.

Chapter Four

“Is she fact or is she fiction”*: Myth and Materiality in *Nights at the Circus

Myth deals in false universals to dull the pain of particular circumstances.

Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman*

Angela Carter’s enchanting, yet dark, fictional worlds are often inhabited by mythical creatures, the stuff of fairytales: kings and princesses, wolves and werewolves, lions and tigers, creatures intermediary between human and animal, between reality and fiction. Her work demonstrates an explicit preoccupation with fairytales and myths, yet she had declared in an interview that neither did she believe in fairies nor was she interested in creating fairy-worlds—“I am a socialist damn it! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?”¹ Her stories of *The Bloody Chamber* are a reworking of a number of traditional stories, of western myths, mainly myths about women. Stories such as those of Red Riding Hood and of Bluebeard take on new meaning and interpretation in Carter’s retelling of their narratives. Carter attacks the myths of femininity as they were constructed for and about women within patriarchal culture by undermining patriarchy’s cultural myth from within its primary tool of creation, fable and fairytale stories. Much like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, she believed that women had been lulled into submission through flattery—a male practice—subliminally transmitted and perpetuated in the form of myth. If for Wollstonecraft, man’s enlightenment was contingent on woman’s enlightenment and her escape from the state of perpetual childhood in which she has been fixed by uncritically receiving men’s flattery, for Carter, demythologizing woman is now a priority. She defines myth, as she says, “in a sort of conventional sense; also in the sense that Roland Barthes uses it in *Mythologies*—ideas, images, stories that we tend to take on trust without thinking what they really mean, without trying to work out what, for example, the stories of the New Testament are really about.”² For women to accept feminine mythology as an explanation of, and perhaps an excuse for, woman’s situation is to find consolation in the same set of fake universals that have served as the consolatory prize for woman’s

¹ Harron, Mary. “I’m a Socialist, Damn It! How can you expect me to be interested in fairies?”, *The Guardian*, 25 September, 10. Quoted in Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998) 11.

exclusion from the authorial position, that has created the signification of our bodies while defining our identities. Or, as Marx would have it, mythology is the opium of the oppressed.

If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place.

Myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances (SW 5).

Marxist ideology seems to underlie Carter's understanding of myth and its function within society as well as its effect on human relationships. Myth deals in the same false universals that Marx acknowledges in the relationship between the products of labour and their value as commodities.

According to Marx, in capitalist societies the products of labour are given their value as commodities within a system of social exchange. As such the value of commodities is neither natural nor does it reflect any essential attributes commodities have other than the social and economic value men attribute to them, nor, for that matter, do they reflect the labour that went into their making. The economic and material forms of capitalist production obscure and conceal the modes of their production as well as the constructed, man-made and man-oriented nature of their value.

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour: because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.³

² Interview to Anna Katsavos in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Fall 1994, Volume 14.3.

³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol 1. Translated from the third German Edition by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. Edited by Frederick Engels (New York: International Publishers 1967) 72.

This, Marx goes on to argue, is similar to the relationship that exists between an object in the physical world and the eye that perceives it. The light that is received from such an object is not perceived by us “as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself” (Marx 72). Yet, as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre argue within the context of a phenomenological/existentialist tradition that is indebted to Marx, it is the subjective excitation that defines us and the world around us as we know it. It is only through this subjective gaze that we can see for ourselves and be seen by others; the centre of this relationship is the body, the medium through which we perceive and are perceived by the world. “Saying that I have a body,” says Merleau-Ponty, “is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject, that another can be my master or my slave” (*PP* 167). Thus, not only are we subjected to the critical and appraising gaze of others (Sartre’s hell)⁴, but most importantly the value attributed to us and the objects that surround us is arbitrary and valid only within, and because of, a system of social exchange. Marx’s theory of the relationship between labour, its products and the process of commodification works as a metaphor that underlies human relationships and their relation to the world. For as Marx argues, in the relationship between the eye and the object, at least there exists a relationship between two physical objects.

But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things *qua* commodities, and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom (*sic*) (Marx 72).

It is important to note that Marx emphasises that “it is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility” (Marx 73). As such, their value is meaningless outside this context, and their autonomy is as false as their value outside this given socio-economic system of exchange, for both their value and autonomy can only exist within a system of relations between men and the products of their labour. In either case, however, their autonomy is false as it is contingent on their value and that value is in any case arbitrary. As such the values that we attribute to the world around us, in general, are also subjective and non-essential, as we only attribute said values in relation

⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London: Methuen, 1977)

to other abstract ideas in the world whose only credibility is that attributed to them by men and their social context.

Marx's understanding of the modes of production is perceived as the underlying structure of the creation of all human relations. Looking for an appropriate analogy to explain the "definite relation between men, that assumes in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 72), Marx turns to the example of religion and the "mist-enveloped regions" of its world. "In that world," says Marx, "the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race" (Marx 72), thus creating a semiotic system in which signifiers and signifieds as well as the resulting relationship between them give the illusory appearance of an autonomous system. Religion for Marx is a great myth that comes into being through the same set of values and relations that produce commodities. As with commodities, an abstract idea (such as labour within capitalist production) acquires its value within a social system of exchange but in that it becomes independent and powerful in itself. This Marx calls "the Fetishism of commodities" which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they become commodities and is, for that reason and at the same time, inseparable from their production (Marx 72). In its production as an autonomous and essential ideal, religion is just another commodity, perhaps the most powerful of them all, which conceals its own genesis as well as that of its by-products—an Almighty God, an afterlife beyond this world, and its indisputable rules.

For Carter, then, the workings of myth are similar to the workings of religion in Marxist ideology. If for Marx religion is the opium of the people, designed to lull them into submission by reflecting in its internal workings and representing in its social function the same patriarchal structure governing this world, for Carter religion is the metaphor of the primal myth *par excellence* that shapes our lives. Myth deals in the same "false universals" that religion does "to dull the pain of particular circumstances" by offering consolation; and often in order to legitimise such circumstances. Therefore, mythic versions of women from Eve to the Virgin Mary are constructed as both the reflection and the origin of stereotypical images of femininity.

It is precisely these mythic versions of women that Carter's work seeks to take apart but it does so by reinventing the myths that have contributed to their corporealisation. However, she refuses to give straight answers, to assert what is right and wrong, by replacing one myth with another, perhaps because she knows that myth

in and of itself cannot help improve woman's material conditions. "[I] try" she says, "when I write fiction to think on my feet—to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions."⁵ Her work aims at problematising woman's understanding of her position in the world and the means through which her reality, or her "fiction", is constructed. This is perhaps one of the reasons why her work has often been viewed with scepticism from within the lines of feminist thought which has, on some occasions, found her to be apolitical and her novels inconclusive. Carter's insistence on refusing to prescribe the recipe for change but rather articulating possible ways of subversion did not go down well with many of the "sisters". Yet she was a committed feminist—"I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm a feminist in everything else and one can't compartmentalise these things in one's life"—in whose work and life, by her own admission, the women's movement had been of "immense importance."⁶ She is committed to resisting the forces that turn woman into an *other*, even if that means that, in doing so, she has to take her not only from the depths of patriarchal preconception but also, to knock her off the pedestal of divinity where patriarchy has installed her so that she can be out of reach and out of touch with reality and materiality. As Susan Watkins notes, "the potentially deadly effects of symbolic representation for women lie in the fact that the power to create symbols has clearly belonged to men and not women themselves, who have merely been the objects of representation."⁷ Significantly, Fevvers the *aerialiste* from *Nights at the Circus*, her symbolic "new woman" (an anti-symbol waiting to happen) has to literally throw herself off the pedestal on which she stands as the simulacrum of Cupid and into the wind in order to escape her function as a spectacle and a mythical idea/l. Mother, the many-breasted Mother Goddess from *The Passion of New Eve*, the leader of a community of women aiming at reviving matriarchy, is effectively mocked through Carter's subtle irony and wit. Tristessa, the perfect woman, is a man, and in the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* Beauty and Red Riding-Hood are not as innocent and naïve as traditional fairytales would have them be. Rather than being 'mythical', Carter's work is

⁵ Carter, Angela. 'Notes from the Front Line' in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, The Collected Angela Carter, edited by Jenny Uglow with and Introduction by Joan Smith (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997) 37.

⁶ Ibid. p37

⁷ Susan Watkins, *Twentieth-century women novelists: feminist theory into practice* (Hampshire: Palgrave 2001) 134.

anti-mythical, against the mythology of social construction that has informed and shaped women's consciousness for centuries. In "Notes from the Front Line" she writes:

I become mildly irritated (I'm sorry!) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the 'mythic quality' of work I've written lately. Because I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business.⁸

For Carter, then, myths are not the *raison d'être* of the state of things as such, they are rather the reflection of that state and the practices that constitute it. Rather than being an explanation about women's situation, myth is its reflection in discourse and as such it can be reinterpreted. Such reinterpretations, achieved both through the reinvention of myth in her work as well as the 'creative reading' on the part of her public can unsettle the law and order of the patriarchal system which can allow woman to reinvent herself on her own terms.

Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.⁹

In an interview with Anna Katsavos she said, regarding her status of being in the "demythologising business" that, she is "basically trying to find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them."¹⁰ For Carter, feminist critique of the mythology of gender needs to begin with a revaluation of symbolic representation and its function in the formation of subjectivity and consciousness—"a critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives."¹¹

Her critique of myth relies on her belief that myths acquire their value, and are validated, within specific historical contexts and do not, thus, have transcendental value. Like the products of labour within a capitalist economic system, myths, the "product of the human mind", are fetishised in their conception. Myth is the product of history and,

⁸ Carter, Angela. "Notes from the Front Line" in *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, The Collected Angela Carter, edited by Jenny Uglow with and Introduction by Joan Smith (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).

⁹ Ibid. 37

¹⁰ Anna Katsavos, "An Interview with Angela Carter," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14, 3, Fall 1994, 11-17.

more specifically, patriarchal history; history has never existed without its myths. This is not to say that women need new myths to reinvent history, but it is necessary for old patriarchal myths to be reinvented and their effects to be scrutinised.

Social construction, as understood within the context of Marxist theory, informs her understanding of myth and history. However, her attitude towards myth and history should also be understood in relation to the correspondence these have had to the material condition of women's situation. Her understanding of materiality establishes a discursive relationship between the Beauvoirean *becoming* which negates the idea of woman as essence grounded on the natural/biological body, and the perception of the female/feminine body as performative (as understood within Butler's discussion of gender performance and performativity) which in some ways it anticipates. "Flesh comes to us out of history" (SW 11), she says in *The Sadeian Woman*, and so does myth. However, in Carter's context it is myth that is performative, not the body that incorporates it. Myth brings into existence that which it names; it creates and it sustains its own mythology. Through its utterance and recitation it confirms its validity and presents itself as essence. This is how woman is typified, formed, as it were, into "types" of women, symbols and signs apparently transcendental yet entirely insubstantial; much like the female body which loses all substance and evaporates as it comes into being through myth. For Carter, "flesh comes to us out of history" because she understands, like Beauvoir does, woman as a historical idea. As such, she (i.e. her being) is not fixed but in-process, and her existence is contingent to that which ties her to the world; her body, her *situation*. Her body, in its participation in a concrete world, is historically situated; and her involvement as a concrete existent in an actual world creates for her a history. This history is bound to her flesh. For Carter, the way we understand the flesh is historically situated; and this flesh cannot be approached as bare flesh but rather as a body—"a body subject to taboos" (SS 68), as Beauvoir has it—and it is in this context that woman evaluates herself. Myth is involved in woman's reading of her body; but Carter invites woman to read this body creatively. If bodies and the subjects concomitant to them come into being through reading, materialised through articulation, to read the body actively and creatively is to re-invent the body not outside historicity but within it, through the body's interaction with the actual world as a concrete existent.

¹¹ Carter, Angela *The Passion of New Eve*.

Carter's work is anti-mythical, by her own admission. Yet the work itself operates within the domain of myth. This is perhaps a controversy that is reflected in the praxis of her writing; she tries to produce anti-mythical work through literature. The body of her work might be anti-mythical but the body in her work still resists rationalisation. Her work spawns bodies that defy rationalisation and classification: her circus freaks, her galleries of women-exhibits, her transvestites and transsexuals, and even the characters from traditional fairytales re-written into new stories; all of them exist in between the old patriarchal myth and the representation of woman. The borders between the mythical and the real are blurred; this is another example of the transgressive quality of her work, the subjects of which are always involved in Carter's narrative transgressions. Her heroes and heroines cross genders, sexes, species; in doing so they challenge not only the borders of identity but also those of reality and fiction thus contributing to Carter's greater project of creating alternative narratives of origin. Literature's mythological attributes and effect, its ability to transform myth through its medium, is the space through which myth can be re-written and the course of history can be changed.

In *The Passion of New Eve* she presents us with an alternative story of creation; her Eve is, originally, not the bearer of knowledge (*epistēme*) but rather its product, "the technological Eve"; born out of her own flesh, created in an operating theatre through the mediation of a Mother Goddess instead of a Father God. This fatherless subject who gives birth to herself wanders in the blank space of the desert, "an unhatched egg" (*PNE* 83), waiting to come out of her shell. It seems though that 1977 was not yet Eve's time; the novel ends with h/er going into the sea in h/er boat, h/er vehicle in the world, in an effort to re-create h/erself again through a new journey. The egg is hatched a few years later and out of it flies Fevvers, a winged woman. Eve, who finds h/erself "both more and less than a real woman" (*PNE* 83) and thus crosses the lines of sex, gender and identity, is re-incarnated in *Nights at the Circus* as Fevvers the *aerialiste*, both woman and bird who thus crosses species. If Eve had the potential to experience life both as a man and as a woman, Fevvers goes beyond that as her potential is limitless; not only can she transcend the boundaries of gender conventions through the unconventional performance of her role as the "Cockney Venus" (*NC* 8), but she can even transcend the limitations posed by her humanity. Her humanity gives her a firm grasp on reality and the material world; her wings allow her to transcend the boundaries fixed by a materiality which is already conditioned by myth. Her wings, as well as the absence of a

belly button, create for her a new trajectory through which she can define the narrative of her origin and enable her to escape from the myths that keep women grounded; in her narrative, the sky is the limit and nothing is impossible. Not even, for a woman to be hatched from an egg.

Aidan Day has argued that, Carter's exploration is of "the politics of Western heterosexual culture" and that "this exploration is conducted through an engagement with the discourses of reason."¹² This interpretation of Carter's work is correct as to the anti-mythical element of her work, more specifically her view of myth as historically located, and her insistence in the negation of transcendental signifiers. However, if we are to understand her project as indeed grounded on a commitment to "a passion for reason" then the body of her work is reduced to a refutation of the myth that has shaped our lives. Her project, it seems, is more political than that. Not only is it grounded on a commitment to the material conditions of life but also to the materiality of human experience, the body and the experience of the world that stems from it. Such experience is not possible outside myth altogether; what needs to be investigated in feminist critique is the symbols of this experience manifested through and on the surface of the body.

Contingent to her commitment to re-write myth is her belief in the materiality of the body that incorporates it. Hers is a materialist reading of the body. Although the very term materialist, especially in relation to feminism and feminist politics, seems problematic, I propose here that Carter's understanding of the female/feminine body is of a body that comes to us out of history and out of culture; but, that it remains, in spite of the artificiality of its mythology, a very concrete and literal entity that cannot be annihilated through discourse and myth. Her one specifically anti-mythical novel, by her own admission, was *The Passion of New Eve*, which seeks to demythologise the notions of gender and sex and, in doing so, to re-address feminist understandings of gender identity as they come to be through patriarchal myths manifested through the body. Significantly, this particular novel embodies a certain bodily resistance in its very construction; in its context bodies demonstrate, in their resistance to be formulated from the outside (on the surface), a rejection of the corporealisation of a gender subjectivity that does not develop through the body and the subject's active participation as a concrete existent in an actual world. In as much as *The Passion of New Eve* is her anti-mythical novel, *Nights at the Circus* is where her materialist commitment to the female

body is made clear, as it demonstrates a clear concern with the material conditions of woman and how these formulate her body, both as an object and a subject. The novel's preoccupation with fact and fiction, embodied in the performance of Fevvers, as well as the mythological ancestry associated with this woman who takes it upon herself to carry on her wings the whole of womanhood, marks a return to the issues raised in *Eve* regarding the relation between myth, gender identity, and the body.

Carter's stories discuss gender subjectivity in modern society but her use of the fairytale form and the possibility for a re-interpretation of myth examined in her work, seem to trace a genealogy of female/feminine oppression within cultural invention, especially the forms of cultural invention that are designed not only to entertain but also to subliminally teach us about the order of things. Woman, and her position in the order of things, informs much of Carter's work.

My life has been most significantly shaped by my gender... I spent a good many years being told what I ought to think, and how I ought to behave, and how I ought to write, even, because I was a woman and men thought they had the right to tell me how to feel, but then I stopped listening to them and tried to figure it out for myself but they didn't stop talking, oh, dear no. So I started answering back.¹³

Feminist ideas (and ideals) inform most of her work, but feminism itself is no clear-cut idea for Carter. Although she is to a great extent celebrated for her discussions of the subject of feminism, her writing aims at problematising that subject rather than embracing it unquestioningly and uncritically. Alison Easton argues that "Carter's explorations of gender must, however, be understood in the context of the many different, contested positions that feminism has taken over the past thirty years" (Easton 3). Easton finds that Carter's thought is in counterpoint with both feminism's ever-evolving ideas and, often, internally conflicting politics, as well as its inadequacy, as a term and a theory, to clearly represent one unified subject and position, both politically and within discourse. "Her writings," Easton says, "exist in 'contrapuntal relationship' with feminism's constantly evolving and internally conflicted history, never simply representing any one position and never quite in step with anyone."¹⁴ Based on her belief in socialism, her work touches the borders of feminist theory through the reworking of myth and female/feminine representation while maintaining a firm grasp

¹² Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1998) 12.

¹³ Angela Carter, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995).

¹⁴ Alison Easton (ed), *Angela Carter* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2000) 3.

on reality. In “Notes from the Front Line”, she outlines her concern with “the social fictions that regulate our lives” as “the product of an absolute and committed materialism—i.e. that this world is all that there is, and in order to question the nature of reality one must move from a strongly grounded base in what constitutes material reality.”¹⁵ Her relationship with mythology thus becomes contradictory: she reiterates it only in order to undermine it from within—she is in “the demythologizing business.” Even though Carter problematises the notion of an essential feminine/female identity, itself the product of man-made woman-oriented myths, as well as the idea of a unified subject-woman often associated with a popular yet uncritical interpretation of feminism, she cannot find refuge in the kind of poststructuralist ideas that adopt the realms of discourse and signification as the domain where essences stem and thus where they can be discussed and deconstructed. Watkins notes that Carter is sceptical “about the value for feminists of ‘strong’ versions of postmodernist theses of the death of the subject, history and metaphysics.”¹⁶ For Carter, the subject of feminism, woman, is not a free-floating term, but a subject socially constructed and historically situated; a material entity whose corporeality is moulded within social and political discourse as well as the cultural imaginary, a concrete existent which participates in an actual world.

What is extremely relevant here is that in Carter’s work the constructed nature of femininity and the subject-woman are brought forward not in order to be deconstructed or essentially rejected, but so that they can be exposed and reinvented, not as abstract mythologies but as conscious cultural realities. Carter’s characters are often aware of the cultural signification associated with their gender but Carter wants to make them aware of their social and political circumstances. Although her heroines are culturally aware and appear to utilise their knowledge in order to negotiate their social status, Carter seems interested in making them aware of both the potential and the risk that comes with uncritical repetition and gender parody. Playing with gender, acting out a performance of an idea/I, can lead from the parodic incorporation of a phantasmatic idea to the corporealisation of a phantasm, a ghost, an empty signifier that consumes the subject leaving no space for political agency or cultural subversion. Such a subject cannot effectively participate in the world. This seems to be the original state of being of many of her characters: the character “she/I” in the story “Flesh and the Mirror”, who can only be herself if she/I can pretend to be someone else; Fevvers, the symbolic “new

¹⁵ Angela Carter, *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings*, The Collected Angela Carter, edited by Jenny Uglow with an Introduction by Joan Smith (London: Chatto and Windus 1997) 38.

woman” of *Nights at the Circus*; Leilah the temptress, the transvestite screen idol Tristessa de St Ange and, Eve/lyn the involuntary transsexual in *The Passion of New Eve*. In the short story “The Loves of Lady Purple” she asks a very good question; “she [woman] could not escape the tautological paradox in which she was trapped; had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette?”¹⁷ To a great extent this is a question that underlies much of her work, in that it concerns, as she had also admitted,¹⁸ her preoccupation with authenticity, and how one defines and recognises “authentic” and “inauthentic behaviour.” This, according to Carter, “is about the complex interrelation of reality and its representations.”¹⁹

It has to do with a much older thing. I suppose it comes back to the idea of mythology and why I talk so much about religion. It’s because it’s presenting us with ideas about ourselves which don’t come out of practice; they come out of theory. They come out of theory and that’s what it is about.²⁰

In presenting a blurred image of this interrelation, as she does in most of her fiction, but quite emphatically so, in *The Passion of New Eve*, she succeeds in representing the nature of the relation between gender and the forces that regulate its performance, by problematising its implementation. For Carter, parody cannot be effective unless it serves the subject’s political interests and negotiates its personal fulfilment.

Moreover, the use of irony conveyed mainly through her use of language—often the same language used by the narrators of traditional fairytales—is directed at exposing the traps harboured by cultural naivety. In “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”²¹, a reinterpretation of the classical fairytale of Beauty and the Beast, for example, she exposes woman’s position in a patriarchal society as a commodity, an object of exchange between men, or even, as Aidan Day argues, “a masculine conspiracy to deny women the chance of ever reaching autonomous, self-responsible adulthood.”²² She achieves that, not by changing the end but, by shifting emphasis through the use of her ever-subtle irony. When Beauty returns to the Beast’s side after he has appeared to be dying of sickness and starvation due to her absence, she throws herself in his arms and

¹⁶ Susan Watkins, *Twentieth-century women novelists*, 136.

¹⁷ Angela Carter, “The Loves of Lady Purple” in *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Ed. Salman Rushdie (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995).

¹⁸ Interview with Anna Katsavos.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

begs him not to die. After Beauty has agreed never to leave him again, the Beast miraculously recovers and regains his appetite. In its use of a familiar line from everyday life, the story's closing words, in what Day reads as "a parody of the ideological representation of conventional bourgeois marriage,"²³ is an ironic reproduction on Carter's part of the phraseology of emotional blackmail: "Do you know... I think I might be able to manage a little breakfast today, Beauty, if you would eat something with me."²⁴ Beauty's conventional femininity, "her sentimental susceptibility to sickness in the male and her stereotypical recoil from destruction,"²⁵ is here being exploited by the man-Beast who manages to keep Beauty in his possession by selfishly appealing to her sensitive, feminine soul; obviously with the presupposition that she must have one. In that sense, Carter also uses myth to pass a message, but her message is neither subliminal nor didactic. Rather, if she is trying to teach us anything, it is to question patriarchal dictums, and she achieves that through the use of irony working from within the myth of patriarchy itself.

On another level, Carter's reworking of myth serves as the unveiling process of what lies underneath the mythical surface of the relationship between the female and the feminine, the inscriptive surface to which materiality has been reduced, the female body. Carter's primary concern is to acknowledge the presence of the female body rather than to reinscribe it, and to reclaim its sexuality from within the lines of mythical constructions of gender and sexuality manifested on its surface. This is particularly true of her discussion of the work of Marquis de Sade, sadism and pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*, a work that addresses sexuality and the sexualisation of the body in terms of empowerment. In the introductory note to this work—a work that has caused some controversy in feminist circles—she explains that rather than it being a critical study or a historical analysis of Sade's work, *The Sadeian Woman* aims at interpreting "some of the cultural problems he raises about the culturally determined nature of women and of the relations between men and women that result from it" (SW 2). She sees Sade's work as potentially empowering for women as it seems to allow its heroines the same sexual freedom allowed to men—"Sade's work concerns the nature of sexual freedom and is of particular significance to women because of his refusal to see female sexuality in relation to its reproductive function" (SW 2). Carter sees these relations,

²² Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1997) 136

²³ *Ibid.* 139

²⁴ Angela Carter, "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995).

stemming from myth and reproduced in pornography, as constructing mythical versions of women that have become stereotypical representations of femininity and the female/feminine psyche, the Virgin and the whore probably being the advent of all other identities, sexually defined and always playing with this dichotomy. Such constructions, as they are produced by, and portrayed in, pornography, reduce intercourse and the self “to its formal elements.”

Since all pornography derives directly from myth, it follows that its heroes and heroines, from the most gross to the most sophisticated, are mythic abstractions, heroes and heroines of dimension and capacity. Any glimpse of a real man or a real woman is absent from these representations of the archetypal male and female (SW 6).

Ironically, with its emphasis on mere flesh—mouths, breasts, holes and cocks—pornography, rather than diminishing the self to its fleshy parts, annihilates the concrete materiality of the body through its very fetishisation of the flesh. In fragmenting the body and mythologising its parts, it transcends its materiality so much so, that even the biggest pair of breasts or the most “throbbing cock” become completely insubstantial. In fact it seems that the bigger the size—in either case—the more mythical the proportions, the more insubstantial the object. In objectifying the body through its myths, pornography both escapes it and loses sight of it.

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues for the possibility of change from within myth—“Pornographers are the enemies of women only because our contemporary ideology of pornography does not encompass the possibility of change, as if we were the slaves of history and not its makers” (SW 3). However, Carter argues, if all myths are human constructions—and she strongly believes in their artificiality—then they can be reinterpreted as to deconstruct so-called “essential” identities. In this manner she uses pornography itself, or rather its mythology, to liberate woman from the constraints imposed on her by pornography. In “The Tiger’s Bride”, another rewriting of Beauty and the Beast included in the collection of *The Bloody Chamber*, she subverts the relationship between aggressor and victim and the model that places woman in the position of the latter, prey to the animalistic, ready to devour, libido of the male. Beauty is, in this story, no sacrificial lamb, ignorant of sexual instincts and signification. In response to the beast’s demand to disrobe her self she demands that he removes his

²⁵ Ibid. 138

“mask with a man’s face painted most beautifully on it.”²⁶ “Carter’s empirical materialism,” argues Day, “leads her to see both women and men as creatures of the flesh and as equally rooted in and driven by fleshly impulses.”²⁷ Carter reclaims female materiality and sexuality not as passive recipients but as participants in the same active libido that has been constructed by patriarchal culture as male territory—“A recognition of the materiality of the flesh is not the same as attributing particular essences to the flesh.”²⁸

I. Nights at the Circus: All in a day’s work

It is this recognition of materiality as well as the material conditions of woman which, cannot be reduced to language, mirrors and signification, that she discusses in her 1984 novel *Nights at the Circus*. Fevvers, “the Cockney Venus,” the winged trapeze artist who goes by the slogan “is she fact, or is she fiction” (NC 7)—her ‘real’ identity, indeed her reality, challenged by and in her very advertisement—is the “new woman” that heralds the beginning of a new era at the turn of the twentieth century. This “Winged Victory,” this “Helen of Troy,” is rumoured to have wings on her shoulder blades and to have been hatched from an egg. Brought up in a brothel by the woman who finds her in a basket, her foster mother Lizzie, and named after the fluff on her back, this “miracle” is soon educated in the ways of femininity in the world of the brothel in which she serves as a simulacrum of Cupid—“I was nought but the painted, gilded *sign* of love, and you might say, that so it was I served my apprenticeship in being looked at – at being the object of the eye of the beholder” (NC 23). As Fevvers learns to come to terms with her queer body she discovers the potential in her wings—“if I have wings then I must fly!” (NC 27). Fevvers stands before us as the symbol of the “new woman” making her first attempts to fly. After all, this is “the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground” (NC 25). As she makes her first attempt to fly, her greatest fear is “that these wings were in themselves a kind of physical deceit, intended for show and not for use, like beauty in some women” (NC 34). However, in order to learn how to fly and put her wings into use she has to surrender herself to the wind—“I

²⁶ Carter, Angela. *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, with an Introduction by Salman Rushdie (London: Vintage 1996) 153.

²⁷ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 147.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 147.

must become the bride of that wild, sightless, fleshless rover, or else could not exist” (NC 33). Fevvers, who “existed only as an object in men’s eyes” (NC 39) and who awaited “in this sarcophagus of beauty” but who refuses to wait for the kiss of the magic prince for fear of being sealed up, as she says, “in my *appearance* for ever” (NC 39), does indeed learn to fly; but the only way she can make use of her wings is by turning her self into a spectacle again. Not only does Fevvers become a performer, an aerialiste, but she also capitalises on the very controversy caused by the impossibility of her situation, so that the whole of London asks, “is she fact or is she fiction?” (NC 7). In her attempt to fly and escape being trapped in her appearance forever, Fevvers turns herself into a larger than life illusion—or is she? As Walser—the American reporter who is sent to (un)cover Fevver’s story—recognises, “if she isn’t suspect, where’s the controversy? What’s the news?” (NC 11). Fevvers’ suspended disbelief as to the real potential of her wings reflects our own scepticism as to her function: is she fact or is she fiction? Is she a real woman with real wings (real potential and corporeal function) or is she just a symbol, the “new woman”, a symbolic winged victory? And for that matter is this “new woman” a reality about to change reality itself or is she yet another myth, a product ready to be commodified and fetishised? In fact Fevvers’ wings do become both a commodity through her effort to capitalise on her own mythology and corporeality and, a fetish in and through the eyes of the ones who want to possess her. Both Mr Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke consume Fevvers’ mythological, yet paradoxically literal, wings as a sexual fetish that is associated in their interpretations of her body and the consumption of her story, with a notion of phallic power and sexual prowess. In their phallocentric perception of her extraordinary body and in their lust for possession of it, Fevvers is annihilated in her very corporeality, reduced to occult symbol, alchemic gold and elixir of eternal life embodied in her wings. This Winged Victory, the New Woman who has wings and will not be kept to the ground, is readily consumed by both Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke—representatives of patriarchy, males with economic power, at the same time producers and consumers of patriarchal myth—as a symbol created to serve male interests; a circus freak with extraordinary, yet incorporeal power. Fevvers is not desired by them in her corporeal nature, as the embodiment of woman(hood), but rather becomes through their mediation the obscure object of desire. Rosencreutz in particular treats Fevvers not as a woman but, as Fevvers recognises after her escape from his house, as “his fleshy bottle of *elixum vitae*,” all along planning to suck all life out of her body to rejuvenate his own.

And after much hemming and hawing and mystical circumlocution, at last he gives it to me: that the sage, Artephious, invented a cabalistic magnet which secretly sucked out the bodies of young women their mysterious spirit of efflorescence—"efflorescence, Flora," he says, with a significant intonation. By applying a concentration of these spirits to himself by his magic arts, and continually rejuvenating himself, it was spring all year long with Artephious and so Mr Rosencreutz hopes it will be for him (NC 79).

Rosencreutz is drawn to Fevvers for the mystical symbolism that he reads in her status of being "in-between"—reality and fiction, woman and symbol, body and fowl. Her corporeality is significant only in that it is a symbol of otherness—a substance other than human—so far as it is perceived as a being in limbo, something and nothing at the same time. As for the Grand Duke, Fevvers is a collector's item—"You must know I am a great collector of all kinds of *objets d'art* and marvels. Of all things, I love best toys – marvellous and unnatural artefacts" (NC 187). Can a woman who carries literal wings on her back—their presence emphasised more in their mythical associations rather than their concrete reality—and claims to be able to fly like a bird, be more than a symbol or a possible fraud?

It is indeed hard to resist the temptation of reading Fevvers in terms of what she seems to represent: another myth, in fact the "new" myth that will replace the old patriarchal archetypes by flying into the wind and reinventing herself. It is also tempting to think that Carter is here presenting her reader with an alternative role model, the woman that capitalises on the myth that has created her—literally and metaphorically—and in a way, 'turns her belly into the trade', or in this case, her wings, wilfully commodifying her body. Fevvers capitalises both on her body and the myth that makes her function as a spectacle possible. In fact, body and myth seem at first to be indistinguishable: Fevvers' body is of mythical origin. The myth of being hatched from an egg with all the mythical connotations that her story brings to mind; her body which is unreal and thus belonging to the realm of myth; her very flesh which appears to be myth made flesh, contribute to her perception as mythical being. From the start of the novel we notice that what is on display is only the part of her that reinforces her mythical status and contributes to the illusion. While wondering if Fevvers has a belly button, Walser says that all he can recall of her belly is "a pink, featureless expanse of stockinette fleshing," which leads him to comment that, "whatever her wings were, her nakedness was certainly a stage illusion" (NC 18). Her wings thus become more real than her flesh, her mythical dimension more emphasised in the eye of the spectator than

those parts of her that make her human. As Walser comments, she is “intended to be *seen*, not *handled*” [my emphasis] (NC 15); in that, Fevvers becomes the corporealisation of a myth, all language, no flesh.

Furthermore, one cannot overlook the mythical ancestry to which Fevvers is associated; she is rumoured to have been hatched from an egg, like Helen of Troy—a name that is both attributed to her by the narrator and which she later appropriates for herself. Like Helen she is phenomenally enchanting yet brings destruction to the one who dares desire her and tries to possess her. As a baby she is left on the doorstep of a brothel. Perhaps, like Helen herself, the product of rape and a symbol of woman’s inability, at the turn of the century, to financially support and raise a child on her own. Unlike Helen or Clytemnestra, who neither have wings nor are blessed with good fortune, but like Castor and Polydeykes, Leda’s pair of male twins that result from her union with the Swan (the incarnation of Zeus the patriarch), she has wings. She is a woman, she has wings and she is determined to make use of them; unlike Helen she refuses to remain a beautiful object, imprisoned in her appearance forever. In her association by birth to Helen and her siblings she incorporates and represents the re-invention of that myth, the myth that has founded the Western world.

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?²⁹

For W.B. Yeats, each civilisation begins with an encounter between human and the supernatural. This is reflected in Leda’s union with the Swan that, effectively, leads to

²⁹ William Butler Yeats, “Leda and the Swan” in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol2, edited by M.H. Abrams (W. W. Norton & Co: New York 2000) 2110-11.

the birth of Greek tragedy (one of the mythical *grand narratives* of Western culture) through which the history of western civilisation is narrated and develops.³⁰ Leda's rape by the Swan is one of two divine enunciations that found Western culture, the other one being Mary's enunciation that leads to the birth of Christianity. Helen—who is, in all accounts and variations of this myth, Zeus' daughter, even though the paternity of the other three offspring varies from one version of the myth to another—and her alleged abduction by Paris, become the pretext for the Trojan War which leads to the destruction of the city and defines the tragic fates of the Greek leaders that participate in it. These create a line of mythological descendants that later shape the birth of Greek tragedy affecting Western civilisation from its foundations to twentieth-century Freudian psychoanalytic theories. Yeats originally read the union of Leda and the godhead as a metaphor relating to history and the political situation of early twentieth-century Ireland.

I wrote Leda and the Swan because the editor of a political review asked me for a poem. I thought, after the individualists' demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularized by the encyclopedists and the French Revolution we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries. Then I thought "Nothing is now possible but some movement from above perceived by some violent enunciation." My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor and I began to write this poem.³¹

Leda's union with the Swan, the "movement from above" marks for Yeats the beginning of a New Era and the end of an old one. In the presupposition that an encounter between the human and the supernatural is at the root of the creation of each civilisation, is an understanding of myth as the cradle of history. In his historicity man is involved with the world (as Sartre has it) but man's historicity is always understood in relation to the myths that give birth to civilisation. Yeats asks "did she put on his knowledge with his power?"; only to imply that knowledge is forced upon us by powers we cannot control. Modernity's obsession with rationalisation— not unlike the current preoccupation with the body, one could say—cannot provide a complete epistemological account because it disregards the power of mythology. Ultimately we are all subject to myth, mortals and gods, and gods themselves can be framed in their own myths; our mythology comes to define us. Can we control mythology and the

³⁰ One could even say, through which western civilisation performatively comes to be through the narratives and discourse of mythology.

³¹ *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol 2, 2110.

symbols associated to our narratives? Even Yeats admits that the symbols which he used have overtaken his poem so that “bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it.”³² Yeats might suggest that when read outside its historical context, the politics with which the poet intended to imbue it are no longer recognizable as the mythical associations of the symbols, as well as the more obvious theme of rape, predominate; however, the poem still remains political and Yeats’ own concern with the gyres of history and the reversal of historical phases appear ever present. As for the theme of rape itself—Irish and British politics aside—Yeats appears to be making a feminist comment: by failing to push “the feathered glory” from “her loosening thighs” Leda, becomes party to destruction. The Swan is here a symbolic choice by the godhead; it is itself inspiring royal awe and, in its phallic shape, patriarchal power. By failing to recognise the signs and read the symbolism, Leda becomes subject to her own, and to her children’s, destruction as well as a participant to the destruction of her civilisation.

Carter seems to be playing with this metaphor on a similar level in that Fevvers’ immaculate conception signifies the possibility of starting afresh, with no preconceptions, no fixed ideas and no prescriptions as to her personal identity and gender, as well as her role in the creation of history. As Lizzie says to her, “You never existed before. There’s nobody to say what you should do or how to do it. You are year One. You haven’t any history and there are no expectations of you except the ones you yourself create” (NC 198). In that she is hatched from an egg, an orphan with no blood relation, no ancestry to look back to, and in that she is physiologically different—a difference that she not only embraces but in which she is celebrated—Fevvers has the opportunity to rewrite history. She is rewriting myth through her body which reverses Leda’s myth: if she is the result of a union of woman and godhead she is empowered by it, not weakened, as her wings—her legacy—demonstrate. She views her history as a woman as a blank page waiting for inscription. Like Eve, that other ‘new woman’ in *The Passion of New Eve*, she sees the potential of re-creating both the narrative of her origin and her destiny; like Eve, she also feels the weight of her symbolism and the need to reinvent herself. Fevvers’ mythological ancestry is haunted by curse and hubris; only by reinventing mythology and creating her own history can Fevvers redeem herself as the “new woman.” In that respect, Fevvers both corporealises myth and its symbolism; but if she is a symbol of anything she is a symbol of the degeneration of old myths and

³² Ibid.

the advent of a new era. She is of myth, but in her corporeal presence she is not the re-enactment of that myth but the passage from myth to reality.

In the progress of the story and as the novel's structure moves more towards the picaresque, the reader can see through the myth, behind an exaggerated corporeality that seems to emphasise the myth rather than to undermine it, the corporeal woman that is Fevvers. When we first meet Fevvers everything about her feels exaggerated: her size is of mythical proportions (she is a "giantess") and so is her disposition—"It was impossible to imagine any gesture of hers that did not have that kind of grand, vulgar, careless generosity about it; there was enough of her to go round and some to spare" (NC 12). Furthermore, "her dyed plumes added a good eighteen inches to her already immense height" (NC 15) while the gaudy plumage on her back makes her look more like an exotic bird rather than a woman. Everything about her points to the spectacular, both as a marvellous being and her function as a spectacle, "succinctly finite" yet "twice as large as life."

Fevvers originally portrays herself as the emancipated woman, the savvy, who consciously exploits her symbolism and her function as a spectacular object "since, is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world?" (NC 39). Similarly to Leilah, the temptress striptease artist in *The Passion of New Eve*, whose "beauty was an accession" (PNE 28), or Tristessa the transvestite screen idol who becomes the perfect woman, Fevvers objectifies herself both through her performance and her mythic origins. Except that Fevvers is corporeal. Even though she capitalises on the illusion, or the (im)possibility of it, in contrast to both Tristessa and Leilah whose functions in the world were symbolic, she is celebrated in her corporeal presence.

In fact, Fevvers' corporeality is emphasized by the description of her physical aspect as a "giantess," her voracious appetite for food, her larger than life presence. Fevvers is no anorexic, skin-and-bone, necrophilic fantasy, "she was a *big girl*" (NC 7). The construction of Fevvers as a woman with a voracious appetite for food as well as the emphasis on her size should be, however, understood within her historical context and socioeconomic conditions. As a woman who marks the turn of the century she should be seen in relation, and as a reaction, to Victorianism's constraints on the female body, confined in corsets and bodices that physically restrain and suppress it, designed to suppress any desire of the flesh and any form of hunger. Fevvers' disposition is designed to express a reaction against established ideas of femininity and mark the turn

of the century with a change of aesthetics signalling the end of Victorian ideology of female corporal suppression. If she is the embodiment of anything, Fevvers is the embodiment of the subversion of established ideas of femininity that work to keep women firmly grounded through the suppression of their bodies. The bodices and the corsets with their laces crossed tight on women's backs work to keep their metaphorical wings firmly in place, confined by the emblems of an ideology that aims at keeping femininity well contained and imprisoned between the female skin and the fabric covering it, reducing femininity itself to a layer as thin as air and more to the point, as substantial as that. Femininity in the Victorian era is immaterial and ethereal, its only substance the air between the fabric and the skin, and given the rigidity with which the corset is applied, very little air at that. The only way women could conform to this perception of femininity was by suppressing their appetites and become air themselves, incorporeal and insubstantial.

A sexual appetite, as well as an appetite for food, does not fit neatly into the decorum of the Victorian novel whose heroines' hunger, according to Helena Michie, "in even the poorest Victorian heroines happens offstage."³³ Michie argues that "despite the gaps in the meticulous realism of the Victorian novel, despite the emptiness of the heroine's plate, women's hunger constitutes a vital mythic force behind both the novel and the culture."³⁴ Victorian heroines do not "intrude into the decorum of the novel" (Michie 13) to speak of their hunger. This is the result of a cultural education which teaches women to suppress their corporeal needs, desires and expressions, but they do act these out, according to Michie, "in the metaphoric sub-texts of the novels" (Michie 13). Conduct books, beauty manuals, pornography, all sub-genres and sub-texts of Victorian literature, Michie says, "simultaneously admonish women to keep their mouths firmly shut, and emphasise the problem of female hunger" (Michie 13). Food is related to sexuality and foods themselves are assigned genders, with tea as "the most feminine food", whereas rich, meaty dishes are masculine. Michie cites M.E.Braddon in *Lady Audley's Secret* saying that at "the tea table women are most fairy-like, most feminine."³⁵ Through the association of the feminine to an insubstantial food substance, femininity is thus linked to a dreamlike ideal and woman is defined by an ethereal quality. At the dinner table, woman is defined by her absence rather than by her

³³ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³⁴ Ibid. 13

³⁵ Ibid. 15

presence. Starvation and weakness, along with the ability to suppress one's appetite with grace, become the foundations of Victorianism's ideal beauty; a beauty which, in its suppression of hunger, is also associated with an elevation of the self, and femininity, beyond fleshy corporeality. The ladylike, anorexic body becomes an emblem of spirituality as well as a symbol of virginity. "Delicate appetites," notes Michie, "are linked not only with femininity, but with virginity" (Michie 15). In a reformulation of the Platonic idea that places the body in opposition to the soul, Victorianism teaches restraint on bodily needs and desires for the elevation of the spirit to a higher moral ground. For the spirit to be uplifted the body needs to remain firmly on the ground. The more insubstantial the body, the greater the possibility for spiritual uplifting. In its discipline of hunger, it seems, and the pressure exercised by society on young women to conform to the ideal of ethereal beauty, Victorianism not only tries to elevate the spirit but also to turn female bodies, in the fragility they are supposed to represent, into mirrors of the soul. This restraint though only applies to women as it is intrinsically related to femininity. In this relation both femininity and women's bodies are immaterialised.

Michie further points to the period of sickness undergone by a number of Victorian heroines before they can admit love for a particular man; a sickness which is associated with fear of their own sexuality as well as a fear of their sexually related "duties"—"weakness, pallor and rejection of food are signs of transition in the refined heroine, as for the first time she contemplates marriage and related sexual 'duties'" (Michie 16). Eating becomes a delicate activity, especially in public, as "the aesthetics of deprivation"³⁶ link femininity to a denial of corporeal needs and desires. It has been argued that one of the psychological causes of anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder contemporary yet not so modern, is linked to a fear of passing from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. In pubescent, and prepubescent, girls this has been linked to a particular fear of sexual growth and maturation. A.H.Crisp finds that the potential problems and fears that come with approaching adulthood add pressure to all adolescents who experience the need for stronger control within the self. This is subsequently manifested through the body, in whose discipline of weight and size, the individual sees mirrored the possibility of overall control of its future life. Crisp, however, finds that "there are specific psychosexual problems for the female

³⁶ Ibid. 20. Michie's term.

adolescent.”³⁷ Modern anorexia is then, as well as Victorian anorexia, linked to a certain notion of, or nostalgia for, a pure and virginal body. For the Victorians especially, the body that will indulge in food will also feel no restraint in indulging in other carnal pleasures, mainly sexual. Thus, in Victorian literature a plump, fuller figure, is usually related to promiscuity; a “plump” woman is also probably a loose woman.³⁸ A delicate appetite is much preferred and young women are forced to abstain from public consumption of food and driven to “nibble scraps” in their bedrooms “so they might face the dinner table with ladylike anorexia.”³⁹ Victorian ideals work thus to refute women’s appetite for food and co-extensively to deny them food itself.

The average Victorian woman might conform, but Fevvers has literal wings; her physiology does not allow for such restrictions. Her wings cannot be physically constrained by a bodice or contained within the Victorian context of corporeal imprisonment posed through material or ideological means—the feminine attire of the time and the ideological and subliminal messages these convey and impose on female/feminine subjectivity. She will not be restricted within the bounds of the corset, unless of course she desires to be; she will fly naked if she wants to but her stage nakedness is an illusion; she will turn ‘her belly to the trade’ but only for her own profit and on her own terms; and she will entertain men’s sexual fantasies so long as there is the possibility of raising her bank balance (like in her encounter with the Grand Duke), or with the intention to satisfy her own sexual desire in relation to the loved one (as in the end of the novel with Walser).

Walser remarks on the quantities of food this giantess with a gargantuan appetite—who performs to the sound of ‘Ride of the Valkyries’— is able to consume: “hot meat pies with a glutinous ladleful of eel gravy on each; a Fujiyama of mashed potatoes; a swamp of dried peas cooked up again and served swimming in greenish liquor” (NC 22). More than the quantities of food Fevvers’ body requires, Walser is

³⁷ In Morag McSween’s *Anorexic Bodies: a Feminist and Sociological Perspective on Anorexia Nervosa* (London: Routledge 1995) 29. McSween also discusses her objections on Crisp’s, and others’, findings that look for a psychological explanation of anorexia nervosa in women in relation to a fear of *themselves* and their sexuality.

³⁸ This is also true of modern adaptations of Victorian novels for cinema and television. For example, in the recent adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* for BBC television, the three elder Miss Bennets—Jane, Lizzie, and Mary—the more prudent and restrained ones, are slim and for the most part elegant; whereas the two youngest, Kitty and Lydia are more plump, with Lydia, the promiscuous sister who elopes at the age of 16, thus shaming the family, as the most curvaceous of all of them; with bosoms overflowing from her dress and short sleeves that reveal plump, fair-skinned arms, her representation embodies Victorianism’s association of a fuller figure with promiscuity.

³⁹ C. Willett Cunnington, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (London: William Heinemann, 1935) 84. Quoted in Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, 20.

astounded by the bodily expressions of her appetite and her eating manners that seem to reflect certain masculine traits, as well as an abundant enjoyment of food usually not associated with women and femininity.

She gave him a queer look, as if she suspected he were teasing and, sooner or later, she would remember to pay him back for it, but her mouth was too full for a ripost as she tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies' fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety. Impressed, Walser waited with the stubborn docility of his profession until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched (22).

Fevvers' attitude to food works to subvert Victorian ideals of femininity and propriety. In a complete inversion of Victorian ladylike behaviour and table manners she gorges on rich, fatty and highly calorific food—the privilege of men and masculinity—and bucket-loads of champagne; she sucks peas from her knife—a punishable offence according to the conduct books of the time that could lead to one “being banished from good society.”⁴⁰ Not only will she not refrain from eating, she will not stop literally ‘stuffing her face’ until she is completely satisfied. She enjoys her food and she is not ashamed to show it. In her display of culinary *jouissance* Fevvers is asserting not only her lack of inhibition but also, in a way, a woman's right to eat. Corporeality is here sustained through consumption, a consumption which more than being the exhibition of an uninhibited sexual drive asserts a woman's right, or even her obligation, to nurture her body. Significantly, Fevvers' eating is clearly associated with the desire not to suppress her desire, or her need, for food rather than an emotional dependence on food itself. Fevvers consumes a great amount of food but she is not emotionally dependent on it; food is a fuel for her body, a counterpart for the energy her work demands rather than a psychological need. Carter might construct her as the opposite of Victorian ladylike ideals, but Fevvers herself has consciously nothing to prove. Her actions, her manners, her act, are not aimed at consciously subverting anything; she is not out to construct a new myth, she is out to earn a living. The exhibition of her voracious appetite is partly directed at shocking Walser but it is made clear that her eating ritual is not put on for his benefit; it is rather a nightly occurrence as indicated by her anticipation of the meal and

⁴⁰ Michie quotes a Countess ... (*sic*) as saying that “a young woman who elected to take claret with her fish or eat peas with her knife would justly risk the punishment of being banished from good society [Countess..., *Good Society* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1969) 170]. Quoted in Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, 18.

the women's remark of the delivery's delay. Consumption does not become, as the antipode of anorexia, yet another compulsive disorder; it is the means to an end, the way for this giantess to keep up her strength. In embodying a reaction against the Victorian politics of "ladylike anorexia" Fevvers does not make symbolic use of food—that would defeat the purpose while immaterialising food itself by turning it into a symbol; her eating works to satisfy her material needs, not endorse her symbolic function. In this context food is not a symbol of anything as it is clearly presented as a physical need which, the female body now refuses to suppress. The quantity of food Fevvers consumes might have been associated with men and masculinity, and she is relishing it, but with the exception of champagne—an indication perhaps of 'new money' especially in the vulgarity with which she consumes it—no special delicacies adorn her dinner table. This is, of course, in contrast to the other two banquets Fevvers is invited to eat at, first at Rosencreutz's residence and then at the Duke's tower, where the variety and quality of foods—Stilton cheese, fine Claret, and caviar—point more to gluttony rather than hunger and are more associated with the male desire to consume Fevvers herself rather than the meal ceremoniously laid on the table.

In the context of *Nights at the Circus*, Carter shifts the emphasis from the libidinal body to the labouring body. Fevvers is not there to consume, or to be consumed as an embodied sexual fantasy or a myth; she is "out to earn a living." Although it is implied that her sexuality is uninhibited, or as uninhibited as her eating, her appetite for food is not representational of her appetite for sex. Food is a pleasure but not a passion. It does not replace any of her other needs and it is not representative of her psyche or her libido. It is, however, representative of her social class, her status as a hardworking girl who makes no apologies and no excuses for who she is or for what her body needs and who makes no pretences or any effort, for that matter, to deny her social and corporeal materiality.

In that Fevvers' meal is the "coarsest cabbie's fare," a traditional working class dinner, Carter also makes a connection between food and class. Helena Michie says in relation to the subject of food as a class issue:

The vision of the delicate young lady has, of course, a class as well as a gender component. A lady does not need to eat both because she does not have male "desires" and because she does little to work up an appetite of any sort. Her

femininity and her social position are defined quite literally by negation; denial of hunger is an affirmation of a precarious class position.⁴¹

Ladies need few calories to sustain them; they do little and they eat little, they are ethereal and small. Fevvers is a working class girl, and “a well bred girl” (NC 186) at that. Her physical needs are by definition more demanding than a lady’s. For a lady a lapse in table manners as well as submission to hunger signify a lapse within class structure. Michie and others⁴² have also seen a relation between a lapse in table manners signifying a fall within class structure as associated with a Fall from Grace, *the Fall*. This idea puts Fevvers’ construction as the fallen woman into perspective in more ways than one. Her lapse in table manners as well as her submission to her bodily needs in the beginning of the second chapter of the novel, is followed by the description of her life in the brothel—amongst other fallen women—and her subsequent literal fall from the objectifying pedestal of femininity. In a reversal of the myth of the Fall, her literal fall empowers her further as it is preceded by the discovery of the power of her wings. In falling, rather than being grounded she is turned into an angel, she flies; her body is uplifted rather than constrained. Her spirit too, it is implied, is set free as she breaks away from the brothel, the abode of fallen women, only to find refuge, however, in Madame Shreck’s museum of freaks where she is yet again conditioned to representation as she becomes a *tableau vivant* in what the Mistress calls “The Down Below.” Thus she is grounded for a while until she breaks free again with the help of her wings (which cannot be constrained) and is yet again elevated, in body rather than in spirit, in the world of the circus. Her final grounding, interestingly enough, occurs on the way to Siberia and after her dinner with the Grand Duke after which her wing is broken and our winged woman finds herself derelict, without any of the props of her spectacular performance, literally grounded and fallen in every way.

Fevvers’ fleshy materiality is at the centre of the novel; and although there is in the novel both a depiction of and a preoccupation with other kinds of reality, materiality and, illusion, these are in a way a ‘supporting act’ to Fevvers’ ‘main attraction.’ Walser’s journey from man and journalist to shaman; Buffo the Great and the community of clowns who deceive their audience even when they appear to be wearing their inside on their outside, like Buffo, “and a part of his most intimate and obscene

⁴¹ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, 18-19.

⁴² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Cubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale U. Press), 53-59, 273-74, 345.

insides at that" (NC 116); the Countess and Olga Alexandrova in the community of imprisoned women, constantly surveyed and surveying, tyrannised by each other's gaze. In Fevvers' words, "you might have said we constituted a microcosm of humanity, that we were an emblematic company, each signifying a different proposition in the great syllogism of life" (NC 279). However, here, more than in any other of her works, Carter focuses on the relation between capitalism and women's bodies and on how they are locked in this interrelation of consuming and being consumed; at the same time consumers, producers and the product of their labour. The commodification of the product of labour as discussed within Marxist theory is here extended to the experience of the female/feminine body. In that the novel begins to unfold in the world of the circus—the domain of the freakish, the illusionary and the unreal, or more to the point, the real that passes itself as the illusion and capitalises on its incredibility—*Nights at the Circus* creates the setting for the exploration of this microcosm which reflects in its workings the system of cultural production on which it capitalises. Captain Kearney's business embodies and literalises in its function the mode of capitalist production. After all, is it not in this space that Fevvers' identity as an illusion is produced? It is in the space of the circus that this genuinely winged body is turned to a spectacular object suspended between fact and fiction. In this context, Fevvers' body represents Woman's body, fact all along, most admired in its fiction, fetishised through its commodification. Female/feminine bodily reality is explored in terms of its exploitation by and through patriarchy and capitalism, and in this context it is found to be a commodity; a product of labour the value of which is only understood within a certain context and which in its production as a commodity conceals its genesis, while its signification comes across as transcendental in its 'essence.' In turning herself into a spectacle, in between illusion and reality, and in fact both, Fevvers' body is fetishised and consumed both by her and by her audience. In her effort to make a living she is forced to reinvent her very real materiality as an illusion; and in doing so she becomes a consumer of the very illusion she has created.

II. Fact to fiction, fiction to fact.

It is perhaps this controversy that Carter plays with, the ambiguous relationship between Fevvers' fleshy materiality and her function as a spectacle and symbolic woman that

unsettles our perception of her. It is not until much later in the novel that we realise that Fevvers is in fact a very literal creation. By the time Captain Kearney's Grant Imperial Tour reaches Siberia nothing of the old Fevvers is left. The spectacle ceases to exist, and her wings appear to be very real, very material indeed, yet not spectacular and not exotic but, an indisputable fact, a literal part of her body.

When asked about the mythical dimension of Fevvers Carter categorically refused that Fevvers is out to create a new myth. "What about Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*? Would you say she's out to create her own myth?" asked Anna Katsavos. To which Carter emphatically replied, "No, Fevvers is out to earn a living."

Everything she says to that direction is undercut by her mother, but the stuff that she says in the beginning about being hatched from an egg, that's what she *says* [Carter's emphasis]. We are talking about fiction here, and I have no idea whether that's true or not. That's just what she says, a story that's being constructed. That's just the story of her life.⁴³

Fevvers is "out to earn a living" not to become a symbol and yet she capitalises on her function as both symbolic woman and mythical creature, an ideal for women at the turn of the century—the New Woman—a fantasy for men; a woman that is out of this world and not of this world, Helen of Troy, myth come flesh. Carter insists on the story of Fevvers' origin being precisely that, *a story*—"that's just what she *says*;" but in that the story of her life is a story that is being constructed, Fevvers' existence, in fact her only materiality, is contingent to that story: Fevvers exists only because of the myth that supports her.

Carter says that, "part of the point of the novel is that you are kept uncertain."⁴⁴ It is the very ambiguity that surrounds Fevvers that makes her what she is: "her slogan, 'Is she fact or is she fiction?'" Yet her wings are real. In the context of the novel they are very literal, and Carter is adamant about Fevvers' function, not as the representation of the Winged Victory, but its realisation.

Fevvers is a very literal creation. She's very literally a winged spirit. She's very literally the winged victory, but very, very literally so. How inconvenient to have wings, and by extension, how very, very difficult to be born so out of key with the world. Something that women know all about is how very difficult it is

⁴³ Interview to Anna Katsavos

⁴⁴ Ibid.

to enter an old game. What you have to do is to change the rules and make a new game, and that's really what she's about.⁴⁵

In that she is born out of key with the world and in a queer body, a body that is not only extraordinary but also very human, Fevvers embodies womanhood. It is primarily because of their physiology that women have been considered inferior to men. For centuries women have been thought of as the second sex, based on the facts of biology. Menstruation, gestation and giving birth, the reproductive function of woman, have defined woman's social position since the beginning of history. Women's bodies and the fact that they are different from male bodies as well as the signification attached to them for that reason within a phallogentric culture have constituted them as *other*, the other side of the binary that is irrational, unruly and volatile. By contrast, men's bodies have been seen as symbols of virility, strength and rationality. How out of tune is Fevvers, not only a woman but a winged one at that? In her wings Fevvers carries, more than the potential of the New Woman, the burden of the old one. More than being all about the possibility of the New Woman, Fevvers' wings are about the restraints posed by women's bodies, their physiology and the signification attributed to them. For in that she has wings Fevvers is also the prisoner of mythology, the mythological ancestry that haunts her lineage, her family history. Not only it is highly inconvenient to have wings, to be a "freak"—"she was always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye and people stood on chairs to see" (NC 19)—but how inconvenient to have mythical wings loaded with signification and symbolism. The burden of symbolism, to be not a woman but an idea; to lose oneself and one's materiality in the myth signified by one's wings and to be evaporated, to become an imaginary and imagined being even in your very literal materiality.

In Fevvers Carter creates not a mythical creature but indeed a physiological anomaly, a creature out of tune with the world, a traveller to a foreign country. In order for Fevvers to create a new game she has to find herself literally in another country where her mythology cannot be understood, where "the human forest-dwellers were deaf to the mythic resonances, since these awoke no echoes in their own mythology" (NC 268). In other words, Fevvers needs to question mythology and above all overcome her own personal myth. After Lizzie's bag is lost and Fevvers' feathers start growing in their natural colour, the "bottle blonde" experiences a complete loss of her self. With

⁴⁵ Ibid.

her myth and the allure of the illusion gone she looks to find herself in the eyes of Walser, the one person who has kept diaries charting her life, in fact re-producing Fevvers—“The young American it was who kept the whole story of the old Fevvers in his notebooks; she longed for him to tell her she was true” (NC 273). Not only is she looking for confirmation of her reality in his eyes but, more than that, she is looking to find the same self that she has lost, the illusion that was Fevvers, in the eye of the one for whom the spectacle was constructed for—“And she would see, once again, the wonder in the eyes of the beloved and become whole. Already she felt more blonde” (NC 285).

Lizzie is all too careful to remind Fevvers of her unique status as a winged woman, both in terms of physiology and in terms of signification. Upon discovering a young mother and her new-born baby in the snow, Lizzie is quick to read the scene as a sign for Fevvers to be reminded of her special physiology and its implications—“this tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system, a woman tied hand and foot to that Nature which your physiology denies, Sophie, has been set here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman” (NC 283). Lizzie opposes all efforts on Fevvers’ part to ground herself, to escape from the signification of her wings and find growth as a woman in the real world through more traditional means, such as love and a family with Walser, whom Fevvers proposes to “hatch out” and turn into the New Man fit for the New Woman—“I raised you up to fly to the heavens, not to brood over a clutch of eggs” (NC 282), Lizzie points out to her. As Fevvers envisages a world, where “all the women will have wings” (NC 285), created with the help of the New Man as well, Lizzie warns her that there will be “storms ahead” and it is not going to be easy.

But her daughter swept on, regardless, as if intoxicated with vision.

“On that bright day, when I’m no more a singular being but, warts and all the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact—then he will slap down his notebooks, bear witness to me and my prophetic role. Think of him Lizzie as one that carries the evidence—” (NC 286).

In imagining herself as pure fact—“no longer an imagined fiction”—Fevvers envisions an existence outside myth. As Walser becomes the new man, and symbolically all men, faced with the fact of womanhood rather than the myth they themselves have created, Walser (and with him all men) will “slap down his notebooks” and refrain from trying to produce her; rather he will witness her as a fact, not fiction, which thus need not be

invented. Walser's narrative will become in this context not the narrative that constructs Fevvers but rather the evidentiary support, the narrative that bears witness to Fevvers' factual existence. Through that narrative, she believes, she will be confirmed as a reality. In this vision Fevvers (and through her, woman) exists as pure fact, outside mythological structures. The mythological weight of her wings, she envisions, will be lifted. Yet as she does that she sets herself up for another fall. In that she is a body that participates in the world she is always subject to the eyes of others, as she admits at the beginning of the novel. Moreover, in imagining herself as "the female paradigm" she creates for herself a new myth, that will again remove her from the fact of her materiality, itself a fact that is always intertwined with fiction. Fevvers, who here speaks "as if intoxicated with vision" (NC 286), although herself inspired and enthused by her own vision, fails to inspire real confidence in her reader. Her speech lacks the power of bringing *real* change and she is rather seen as one who is carried away by an ideal vision that cannot in fact be realised. She is, in a way, looking to subvert patriarchy through matriarchy. Surprisingly, it is Lizzie who points out to her that she has come to be nurtured by her own symbolism—"my prophetic role" (NC 286), as Fevvers refers to her function—as a woman-paradigm. In pointing to the woman "in bondage to her reproductive system" and in reminding Fevvers of her queer body, Lizzie points out the difference between being the embodiment of a symbolic woman—the "Winged Victory," a "freak"—and in a woman's situation. Fevvers desires to be seen as fact but she does not realise at what cost her desire is to be realised. Always an outsider, a concretisation of myth and symbolism, Fevvers' physiology does not allow her to be accommodated within the norm. Lizzie, who became an inconvenient harlot with her republicanism, her talk of universal suffrage, anti-clericism and anti-syndicalism, "with all of which Nelson was in full sympathy but as she said, the world won't change overnight and we must eat" (NC 292), is aware of the material conditions of woman and her situation. Her own politics, originally as idealistic as Fevvers', had to be compromised in the recognition that change is a gradual process; in order for visions to be politically effective they should be grounded on the material world. When faced with the material example of woman's reproductive role she is quick to point out to her daughter that for her vision to be realised she herself must be grounded, no longer symbolic woman, mythical creature or freak. In pointing to the woman and child, Lizzie is pointing to woman's situation at the turn of the century. Fevvers, with one foot on the ground and the rest of her body in the air, has a vision grand in scale and glorious in

prospect; yet her own situation has so far kept her suspended between air and ground, reality and fiction, woman and freak.

Unfortunately for Fevvers, in the meantime she has broken her right wing after *The Trans-Siberian Express* is attacked by a group of revolutionary outlaws, and she and Lizzie are left wondering in the bitter cold weather of Siberia. In her appearance as a literally winged spirit, neither fowl nor woman, virginal yet savvy, a working-class girl out to make a living being caught up in a storm of events that both refer her back to myth and push her forward, Fevvers comes before us as the Angel of History, struggling in the storm, his wings incapacitated, staring at the wreckage of the past piling before him.

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁴⁶

Benjamin's oft-quoted analysis of Paul Klee's painting, first published in English in 1968, is being re-invented by Carter in its replication. For there are only too many similarities between Fevvers' state in Siberia and Benjamin's Angel of History. The storm of revolution wrecks the train that carries Fevvers to world fame, exhibiting her grandeur and spreading her word, thus suspending the realisation of her "prophetic role" (NC 286). In the same manner that the Angel struggles with his broken wing while being pushed back by the storm, Fevvers' myth of a "winged woman" is demolished, just like her wing, and becomes incredible in the eyes and ears of those at the receiving end. At the expressed disbelief of the Escapee as to the technical details of her escape from the Grand Duke's house she protests: "If I hadn't bust a wing in the train-wreck, I could fly us all to Vladivostok in two shakes, so I'm not the right one to ask questions of what is real and what is not" (NC 244). Like the Angel, Fevvers sees piling before her the wreckage of her past; her discoloured plums, like the remnants of the Colonel's circus, a reminder of her former status as a circus freak and a symbolic woman. Her

desire to see herself whole again in the eyes of Walser, “to awaken the dead and to make whole what has been smashed” (Benjamin 249), is now undermined by her own disbelief of her being—“Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?” (NC 290). Fevvers, whose reality consisted of fragments of ancient and new myths—Helen of Troy, Angel of Death, Winged Victory, New Woman, a blonde—is now forced to appear before us in the Shaman’s hut nothing more than “a poor freak down on her luck” (NC 290) no mythological or symbolic attributes, all body.

“Show ‘em your feathers quick!” urged Lizzie.

Fevvers, with a strange sense of desperation, a miserable awareness of her broken wing and her discoloured plumage, could think of nothing else to do but to obey. She shrugged off her furs and, though she could not spread two wings, she spread one – lopsided angel, partial and shabby splendour! No Venus, or Helen, or Angel of the Apocalypse, not Izrael not Isfahel ... only a poor freak down on her luck, and an object of the most dubious kind of reality to her beholders, since both the men in the god-hut were accustomed to hallucinations and she who looks like a hallucination but is not had no place in their view of things (NC 290).

For the first time Fevvers exposes her body not as a spectacular object but as her nature, her materiality unequivocally displayed in the eyes of her audience as her only reality. Her wings, no longer the source of speculation, empty of signification and symbolism, indisputable fact, are here revealed and embraced by her as part of her body and not, as before, as its annihilation. Fevvers’ desire to become whole is unexpectedly fulfilled in the admiration she sees in “the eyes fixed with astonishment, with awe, the eyes that told her who she was” (NC 290) as she is accepted as a fact in her material form. The “wind of wonder” that makes her plumage ripple is the wind that yet again “refresh[es] her spirits” but this time liberates her from the burden of her symbolic status—“It blew and blew through the god-hut, blowing away the drugged perfumes and smells of old blood” (NC 290). The ancestral myths that haunt her lineage, Leda’s rape by the Swan, the smell of blood shed in Troy for Helen and that which marks the Achaian royal houses after it, is blown away in her acceptance as a concrete being and not an idea, as she finally experiences the materiality of her flesh, for once not imagined but real—“Hubris, imagination, desire! The blood sang in her veins. Their eyes restored her soul” (NC 291). In that her corporeality is established by her and in the eyes of others,

⁴⁶ Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*. Trans. by Harry Zorn. (Pimlico: London 1999) 249.

Fevvers does manage to “make whole what has been smashed” (Benjamin 249). In her inability to fly due to her broken wing Fevvers is forced to literally ground her self in the material world. In that she cannot perform the marvellous, yet incredulous, act of flying she confirms her corporeality to her self. The performance artist nurtured in her prevails for a brief moment, so much so that she puts on “a brilliant artificial smile, extending her arms as if to enfold all present in a vast embrace” (NC 291), as if trying to acknowledge that it is all of them that make the spectacle possible. Her curtsey, though, is swiftly interrupted by the look in Walser’s eyes whose response to her revelation further empowers her: “What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?” (NC 291). In that she is now addressed not as a spectacle but as a being, and in that she ceases to be the object of the eye of the beholder, her presence is yet again exaggerated to emphasise her fleshy materiality—“Now she looked big enough to crack the roof of the god hut, all wild hair and feathers and triumphant breasts and blue eyes the size of plates” (NC 291).

At the end of the novel, in an inversion of the old patriarchal myth of Leda’s rape by the Swan, Fevvers and Walser make love with Fevvers on top since “nature had equipped her only for the ‘woman on top’ position” (NC 292). Day argues that in the context of *Nights at the Circus*, this “is not *just* an inversion.” According to Day, if “the anvil of traditional history” is to be changed then “there must be an alternative or reconceived history or herstory within which people may grow.” If the relationship between Walser and Fevvers and, by extension, between man and woman is a relationship of equals then, “[t]he cancelling of the traditional patriarchal icon of male dominance is necessary to emblematised this new relationship. Carter is indicating that a new hi/herstory is possible because of this new kind of relationship between a woman and a man.”⁴⁷ Not only is Fevvers made whole through the acknowledgement of her materiality, but in her physical relationship with Walser she can literally subvert the order of things and symbolise change without losing her self in her queer nature which is no longer an idea but a corporeal fact. In spite of her fall from angel to woman she gets to have the last laugh. At Walser’s remark of her going to such extreme lengths to convince him that she was “the only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world” she begins to laugh.

“I fooled you then!” she said. “Gawd, I fooled you!”

⁴⁷ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, 192-3.

She laughed so much the bed shook.

“You mustn’t believe what you write in the papers!” she assured him, stuttering and hiccuping with mirth. “To think I fooled you!” (NC 294).

Fevvers’ laugh marks her victory over her audience. The last line of the novel in which she exclaims, “it just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence” (NC 295) points to comments made at the beginning of the novel by both herself and Lizzie that, seeing is believing. In the ambiguity of her performance and its overblown artificiality, Fevvers does indeed perform what Walser does suspect; that “a genuine bird-woman—in the implausible event that such a thing existed—[has] to pretend she [is] an artificial one” (NC 17). Thus, in order to earn a living, she presents herself as an impostor—“if there is no controversy where’s the news?” (NC 11). Rather than having passed an illusion as reality, Fevvers has yet again reversed the order of things by disguising her reality in the form of illusion. Her materiality, however, in so far as her body is a situation, is both flesh-made-myth and myth-made-flesh.

Her wings, as Carter emphasises, are very literal; they are a literal part of her body. She cannot part with them and thus are always incorporated to her situation, her winged body is *in* a situation and is *itself* a situation, as well as a narrative to be read/“read.” Her lovemaking with Walser is conditioned by her wings—“nature had equipped her for the woman on top position” (NC 292)—which also condition her situation. Her body is in so many ways not an array of limitations—a limiting situation—but “the abode of limitless freedom” (NC 41): not only does she have the ability to fly, and is thus ‘free as a bird’, but the limitations presented by her wings in her relationship with Walser—she can only be on top—do not limit her experience of her body. Fevvers’ grounding in the final scene of the novel, in union with her man, more than suggesting an alternative *herstory* to allow subversion of patriarchal law, suggests the possibility of negotiating one’s subjectivity through the body regardless of one’s physiology. If anything, Fevvers is a literalisation of a “beauvoirean” interpretation of freedom: in that she is both literally grounded yet inevitably looks to the eyes of others for confirmation. Fevvers’ freedom is conditioned by her situation but, in that she negotiates her existential freedom through her situation, Fevvers becomes a being who participates in the actual world. The New Woman that she symbolises is still embodied in her wings; but this new woman is no longer a fantasy, a fiction, but rather a concrete reality; and for Angela Carter and her reader, the egg is finally hatched.

Conclusion

“We start from our conclusions,” Eve/lyn says in the closing chapter of *The Passion of New Eve*. The New Eve, the technological construction of knowledge and science (*epistēmē*) has returned to her maker, the Mother, only to start her journey again. Mythical resonance of the first woman, corporealisation of the ‘absolute’ woman, s/he is forced to experience woman’s situation in the flesh. Eve/lyn, who starts h/er journey first as a man, whose flesh is used (like Adam’s side) to create woman—the first “woman” there ever was—completes her journey not as the construction of scientific knowledge (of *epistēmē*), but rather as its possessor (*epistēmon*) in the return to the mother’s womb (the cave) where she is to be reborn. In this process though she gives birth to herself, to her subjectivity; this takes place through the only possession Eve/lyn is left with, her body. This body is subject to cultural inscriptions and signification, and complicit with sex and gender narratives through whose reading/“reading” it develops its subjectivity. Thus subjectivity is always manifested through the body; the body as a situation defines our experience of the actual world and body/narratives are formed through our knowledge and experience of that world. Eve/lyn, product of knowledge and science (epistemological construction), equipped with her own knowledge and understanding of the world through h/er body, h/er situation, finally becomes h/erself an *epistēmon* (the one that possesses knowledge) like the first Eve who in consuming the apple, the forbidden fruit, mediates knowledge through her body in the act of eating rather than reading.

This thesis has started from the premise that embodiment grounds subjectivity as understood in relation to Simone de Beauvoir through Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In understanding the body not as a thing but as a situation, as both Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty’s work exemplify, it has explored the notion of subjectivity not as discursive effect but as embodied practice. Embodiment, the contested territory of transsexuality, has served as the space for the examination of the matter of subjectivity as a matter (*the matter*) of the body. Transsexual body/narratives, text and matter (and textual matter), composed of the narratives of cultural and normative perceptions of sex and gender identity, as well as the desire to ground identity in the flesh, tell the story of a stranger in a foreign land and of his/her desire to arrive home. The transsexual desire of

inhabiting 'flesh as the flesh itself' as well as the imagery of homecoming concomitant to the desire of being in the 'right' body, force the question: where is the transsexual home? Is 'home where the heart is,' or is the transsexual subject 'home and away' where ever, in which ever body/situation s/he finds h/erself?

Sandy Stone has made the call for a posttranssexual identity by pointing to the silenced parts of the transsexual narrative located on the silenced experience of the transsexual body. The normalisation of the transsexual body and its disappearance within regular (and regulatory) sex and gender systems of identification, as well as its exclusion from these categories on the basis of the transsexual subject's history, leave the transsexual in a no man's land, not man or woman but in between. This transsexual history that has so far contributed to the transsexual's exclusion from both the norm and its subversion, as well as the bodily resistance—enacted yet silenced—incorporated in the transsexual body/narrative, should be addressed as the core of the matter of transsexuality. The transsexual body, formed by the transsexual experience which combines the embodiment of culture's gender discourse and the desire (transsexual or other) to inhabit material flesh, can subvert the norm through claiming a space for the transsexual experience, and contribute to the discussion of the body/matter. Like the transsexual subject, feminist thought and feminist politics need to ground themselves on the basis of an understanding of subjectivity as concomitant to the experience of the body as a situation. This will enable an examination of subjectivity outside the mind/body dualism or biological essentialism, and will allow for political efficacy with the possibility of material change towards an understanding of sex and gender categories—both transsexuality's and feminism's vested interest—not as limiting and exclusive but as part of cultural discourse.

Angela Carter's work, her investment in the cross-gender and the cross-genre; her interest in subjects that materially defy the regulatory systems of identity and her emphasis on subjectivity as concomitant to lived experience, as discussed in both *Nights at the Circus* and *The Passion of New Eve*, open a space for the discussion of feminist subjectivity outside essentialism while still negotiating the subject's position in the material world. This world is, for Carter, consisted of bodies that are matter formed through myth, yet this is resisting matter; it is matter that forces the subject to experience the body, as Beauvoir has it, as a situation, but also as flesh and bones, a physical object which, as Merleau-Ponty has it, rises to subjectivity in its participation in the world.

Fevvers, the winged woman in *Nights at the Circus*, is forced to experience her body in the world through all possible manners: as product and producer of capitalist labour; as physical entity which needs to be nourished in order to produce; as object in the eye of the *other*; as simultaneously mythological construct—Winged Victory, Helen of Troy, and Angel of the Apocalypse—and beyond myth; as a woman. Eve/lyn in *The Passion of New Eve* is forced to recognise the body as a situation, what we make of what we are made of, and subjectivity as enacted through the body.

“The destination of all journeys is their beginning” (*PNE* 186), says Eve/lyn. The transsexual body/narrative exemplifies that, when subjectivity is concerned there is ‘no place like home.’ Home is where the subject wants to be and yet that home is an illusion. To feel at home in one’s body is what matters. Even though this body desires to find home within the world through belonging in a community that forms part of a category, this belonging can only serve as home for political efficacy. This is a lesson women are gradually learning. Homelessness is not the privilege—or the plight—merely of the transsexual (be it male-to-female or female-to-male); the search for a home, to feel at home in one’s body, and the body itself, is subjectivity’s bare essential. There is no home any of us can arrive at; there is rather an imaginary homeland to which we aspire, and our only means to reach it is through the body, our vehicle in the world.

Transsexual subjectivity (male-to-female in particular) is not the same as woman’s subjectivity. We inhabit the same world, but we have come to it from different situations. These situations are defining to our lived experience and form our subjectivity. “I am not suggesting a common discourse;”¹ I am suggesting bodily resistance located within the body/narratives of subjectivity (woman’s and the transsexual’s) as resistance to the annihilation of the body/matter defining of identity and subjectivity through textuality.

¹ Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual manifesto.”

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