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UNDESIRABLE DESIRES: SEXUALITY AS SUBJECTIVITY IN ANGELA CARTER’S THE INFERNAL DESIRE MACHINES OF DOCTOR HOFFMAN

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In her postmodern, magic realist narrative The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman (1972), Angela Carter destabilizes the active male/passive female dichotomy by depicting a diverse array of female characters that maintain their sexual desires even while being victimized. Carter’s refusal to negate female desire even when it is deeply disturbing has led to extensive scholarly debate about her position as a feminist author. Reflecting on Carter’s complicated and diverse feminist statements, Alison Lee aptly notes that Carter “called herself a feminist, but her feminism is no more monolithic than her representations of female sexuality” (x). As demonstrated in The Infernal Desire Machines, Carter’s refusal to desexualize her female characters works as a controversial method through which to maintain their subjectivities even when they are objectified and exploited. In Carter’s novels sexuality is subjectivity; thus, to deprive a female character of her sexuality would be an act of dehumanization. Rather than desexualize and subsequently dehumanize her female characters, Carter creates women who are sexual even when their desires are seemingly undesirable from feminist perspectives. It is this depiction of undesirable desires that makes Carter’s novels highly controversial as feminist texts and yet, as I contend in this article, the richness of Carter’s writing and feminist commentaries also resides in her nuanced and often troubling depictions of female eroticism.

Carter occupies a precarious position within feminist literary studies because of her overt sexualization of women in oppressive situations as well as her refusal to offer obvious feminist critiques of power relations between the sexes. Although contemporary
feminist theorists are highly critical of the gendered active/pas-

sive binary, ironically the wariness expressed toward Carter’s nov-

eels seems to stem from her rejection of traditional feminist modes 
of writing that clearly depict the evils of sexism and patriarchy by 

representing women as either victims of male dominance or active 

resisters of patriarchal oppression. As Lee notes, “It has some-
times been difficult for feminist critics to embrace Carter whole-

heartedly. Not all of her representations of women are 

emancipatory, but this reservation on the part of some critics has 
to be balanced against the extraordinary complexity with which 

Carter viewed relations between men and women” (x). Due to 

Carter’s refusal to simplify the complexity and diversity of re-
lations between the sexes in order to convey a clearly feminist mes-
sage, some critics have questioned whether her intent, methods 

and results are truly feminist. Rather than depict women freeing 

themselves from the shackles of patriarchy, Carter’s representa-
tions of heterosexual relationships demonstrate the pervasiveness 

and insidiousness of patriarchy, the ways that women internalize 

sexist and misogynist beliefs and, in turn, how women’s sexual 
desires are shaped by living in patriarchal environments. 

Although debates about Carter’s status as a feminist often stem from her unsettling depictions of female sexuality, as 

Carter’s description of the “moral pornographer” reveals, erotici-

zations of exploitation can be feminist in both intent and result. 

She argues that,

A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current 
relations between the sexes. . . . Such a pornographer would not be the 
enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the 
heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he 
entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it. (Sadeian Woman 20)

Although Carter’s argument for moral pornography arises out of 
an analysis of writings by the Marquis de Sade, her description of 
a pornography that can be used as a feminist political tool reads 
as a defense of her own writing which uses explicit depictions of 
the often troubling and violent nature of sexual relations 
between women and men in order to critique patriarchy. Carter 
alludes to the risk of writing moral pornography in her assertion 
that the moral pornographer must enter into “the realms of true
obscenity’ in order to develop graphic and critical depictions of misogyny. Although the backlash to Carter’s writing by both feminist and non-feminist theorists attributes to the riskiness of this choice, her highly disturbing depictions of power imbalances between the sexes provide powerful critiques of patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny, and thereby demonstrate the importance of taking this risk. Reflecting on feminist critiques of Carter’s writing, Nicola Pitchford notes that “despite Carter’s public feminism, her perversely elaborate representations of female characters caught in situations of sexual domination and violence seemed at odds with the dominant wing of the Women’s Liberation Movement [in the 1970s], which rejected pornography and the eroticization of oppression” (“Angela Carter” 410). Although today Carter is widely “adopted, though not without dissent, as one of the most astute feminist writers and critics of her generation” (Smith 333), widespread simplifications of Carter’s depictions of heterosexual relationships coupled with a lack of sustained critical analysis of troubling female desires seemingly reflect ongoing discomfort with her feminist approach among literary scholars. As it is extremely difficult to maintain all of the nuances of Carter’s rich feminist commentaries when writing about her novels, critics quite understandably tend to gloss over or simplify her complicated feminist statements. In order to attend to the complexity of Carter’s feminist commentaries about power and sexual desire, I offer a close reading of the relationships that Carter’s protagonist, Desiderio, has with various female characters in The Infernal Desire Machines. Carter’s intricate writing calls for active reading practices as it is only through closely and rigorously analyzing her representations of both heterosexual dynamics and female desire that readers can fully grasp the depth and power of Carter’s feminist statements. Although some may argue that the difficulty of her texts results in a failure to communicate her feminist messages to readers, by demanding attentive reading practices, Carter trains her readers to apply critical analyses of male/female relations and sexual desire beyond the reading of her novels. The difficulty of Carter’s writing may thus be read as a means of encouraging widespread feminist critique and activism.

While highlighting the ways that women are subjected to oppressive patriarchal forces, Carter undermines the view that
women remain fixed in their victimization by emphasizing their persistent sexual desires and outlining their diverse negotiations of power dynamics in their sexual relationships with men. Desiderio’s desire for Mary Anne, Aoi, Albertina, and Mamie Buxskin highlights the fluidity and diversity of sexual desire and power relations between the sexes. Carter’s depiction of female subjectivity and sexuality reflects poststructuralist views of the subject “as neither totally subjected or constituted . . . nor totally individualistic or constituting . . . but rather, as both constituted and constituting” (Marshall 82). Rather than create a false binary wherein women are positioned as passive objects of active male desire, Carter creates characters who may more accurately be described as falling into one or more of the following four categories: the desiring subject, the desired subject, the desiring object, and/or the desired object. The “desiring subject” expresses active sexual desire and is seen by others as having power over her or his actions. This is not to suggest that the desiring subject is unaffected by her or his surroundings; rather, as Carter’s depiction of the sexist roots of many of Desiderio’s desires reveals, the desiring subject’s sexual interests are greatly influenced by her or his socialization and social context. The “desired subject” is desired by others and yet maintains a position of power and respect, and thus is not oppressed by her or his position as the “object” of desire. The “desiring object” refers to one who is sexually objectified and yet also expresses desire. While often being oppressed by this objectification, the desiring object continues to express sexual desire for another, and thus is not entirely passive. The “desired object” is objectified and is also denied sexual agency so that she or he appears to exist solely for the pleasure of others. The complexity of Carter’s narrative resides in her examination of how the subject positions of her characters shift with social context, as well as her destabilization of beliefs that men are necessarily powerful and women powerless. Understanding Carter’s characters as falling into one or more of these four subject categories acknowledges her critique of binary understandings of the subject as either active or passive and encourages a more nuanced reading of relations between the sexes.

Although Carter’s characters disrupt dichotomous understandings of subjectivity, many theorists reinstate gender and sexual binaries in their analyses of this novel, and thereby reduce the
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complexity of Carter’s depiction of relationships between the sexes. Most current discussions of *The Infernal Desire Machines* lack a sustained analysis of the desire that female characters in this novel express for Desiderio. Sally Robinson, for instance, argues that in this novel Carter “places man in the position of questing, speaking subject, and woman in the non-position of object who is *subject* to male regulation, exploitation, and violence” (emphasis in original 108). Although Robinson importantly examines the objectification and victimization that Carter’s female characters endure, her assertion that these women are passive objects does not account for Carter’s choice to provide her female characters with sexual desires. Robinson asserts that “Woman, in Desiderio’s narrative, as in the classical quest story, occupies a range of traditional *object positions*: she is a fetish, a foil, the exotic/erotic object awaiting the hero at the end of his quest, *but never a subject*” (emphasis added 112). Robinson argues that Carter’s depiction of passive femininity in all of her female characters provides an implicit critique of universalizing views of female experience. Yet she ignores the diversity among Carter’s female characters, and thus, ironically, she projects a universalizing view of women onto this narrative. Lee, unlike Robinson, recognizes the centrality of female sexuality in Carter’s novels as is seen in her assertion that Carter’s women are notable for “they are capable of feeling and expressing erotic pleasure” (ix). Yet, oddly, Lee ignores the sexual desires of Carter’s female characters in her analysis of *The Infernal Desire Machines*, arguing that in this novel “desire . . . is gendered as male” (73). Like Robinson, Lee fails to examine how the desire that Carter’s female characters express for Desiderio allots them agency, although to varying degrees. Arguments that Carter creates a binary that positions women as passive objects and men as active subjects not only ignore the shifting nature of the power relations between Desiderio and the women in this narrative, but also negate the novel’s nuanced attempts to highlight and problematize the Western obsession with figuring the world in terms of such reductive dichotomies.

Desiderio’s sexual encounter with Mary Anne, who is reminiscent of a walking, talking version of Sleeping Beauty, at first glance seemingly provides a clear critique of male exploitation of passive, victimized females. Desiderio highlights Mary Anne’s frailty in his description of “her white, thin, nervous fingers” and
“the pale curve of her cheek” (52). Her passivity is emphasized through her deathlike state; Desiderio describes her hair colour as “the lifeless brown of a winter frost” (52), her hand as “icy” (54), and notes that “She did not look as if blood flowed through her veins” (53). After having sex with Mary Anne while she is in a somnambulist state, Desiderio ironically describes her as “the beauty in the dreaming wood, who slept too deeply to be wakened by anything as gentle as a kiss” (57). His attraction to this personification of female passivity implies that his desire is triggered by his powerful position in this relationship, and thereby reveals that Desiderio’s patriarchal socialization is often manifested in his sexual desires.

Although Desiderio is clearly a desiring subject during this encounter, Carter does not allow for a straightforward interpretation of Mary Anne as the submissive victim of Desiderio’s nearly necrophiliac desire. According to Desiderio’s description of this somnambulist, she is not wholly passive as when they first meet she is awake and expresses desire for him. Upon meeting Desiderio, Mary Anne forgets her errand and stands “transfixed with surprise and apprehension” (53) and when they shake hands Desiderio notes that “She would not let go of me for a long time” (54). When he tells her his name, she repeats his name “quietly to herself but with a curious quiver in her voice which might have been pleasure” (54). Whereas Mary Anne translates his name as meaning “the desired one,” (54). Ricarda Schmidt notes that “Desiderio is the Italian word for wish, longing, desire; that is, it is the active form, not the passive one which the somnambulist Mary Anne gives as a translation of his name, calling him ‘the desired one’” (57). Mary Anne’s inaccurate translation of this name suggests that she sees Desiderio primarily as an object of her desire. The pleasure she derives from speaking his name and translating it in its passive form suggests that she enjoys her objectification of Desiderio and her temporary position as an active desirer.

Carter disrupts Mary Anne’s initial sexual agency by emphasizing her somnambulist state during her sexual encounter with Desiderio. While having sexual intercourse with Mary Anne, Desiderio states that “all this time I was perfectly well aware she was asleep” (56). His awareness that Mary Anne is sleeping emphasizes the disturbing character of his desire and positions
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this sexual encounter as a rape. Although it seems that Mary Anne should be considered a desired object, Mary Anne’s passivity is destabilized since she maintains her desire of Desiderio even in this passive state, and consequently she may more accurately be described as a desiring object than a desired object. According to Desiderio, Mary Anne arrives at his room with “Her eyes . . . open but blind and she held a rose in her outstretched fingers” (55). Carter blurs the line between passivity and activity in her depiction of this sexual encounter since Mary Anne’s desire seemingly leads her to Desiderio’s bedroom and yet she is unaware of her actions.

Interpretations of the encounter between Desiderio and Mary Anne are further complicated by Carter’s undermining of Desiderio’s reliability as a narrator. Carter repeatedly encourages readers to doubt the trustworthiness of Desiderio’s account of his interactions with women in The Infernal Desire Machines. As Linden Peach argues, “The opening lines of Desiderio’s account of the Great War give us reason to doubt at least some of the narrative that follows for he claims to have remembered everything perfectly” (102). Desiderio contradicts his claim of perfect memory when he asserts, “I cannot remember exactly how [the war] began” (Carter 15). In addition to his memory being faulty, readers should also question his reliability since many of his experiences with women consist of him taking advantage of power imbalances which his descriptions often try to hide or excuse. For instance, Desiderio’s assertion that “As I went towards her [Mary Anne], so she came to me and I took the rose because she seemed to offer it to me” (55–56) may be read as an attempt to excuse his abuse of power over the sleeping Mary Anne since he describes their desire as mutual. As the rose is a symbol of female genitalia, Desiderio encourages readers to interpret this action as a sign that Mary Anne offered him her body, and thus he suggests that he was “led” to believe that Mary Anne wanted to have sex with him.

Although, in this first person narrative, Desiderio’s point of view is all that readers have to rely on, Carter indirectly undermines his account of events. By emphasizing his awareness of the power imbalance during his sexual encounter with Mary Anne, Carter makes Desiderio sound like a rapist trying to justify his actions. Carter reveals that, regardless of whether or not Mary
Anne desires Desiderio, he is aware that she is asleep, and thus he takes advantage of her inactive state. Desiderio asserts that Mary Anne seeks him out in her slumber and that while they were together “she was dreaming of passion” (56). Yet Debra Malina argues that “If Desiderio successfully reduces Mary Anne to a . . . dream image (and/or a dead body), it matters little whether . . . she . . . dreamt the same dream” (emphasis added 110). While Malina rightly emphasizes the importance of reading this encounter as a rape, Mary Anne’s desire for Desiderio does matter since Carter’s choice to depict Mary Anne as a sexual woman allows her to construct a nuanced analysis of the complexities of rape. Carter reveals that mutual desire should not be used to excuse rapists since one can feel desire without wanting to act on that desire, not to mention that expressing desire is not the same as consenting to have sexual relations. Carter thus provides a critique of male exploitation of women’s bodies while also being careful not to erase Mary Anne’s subjectivity by negating her sexuality.

Carter provides another complicated commentary on power relations between the sexes in her depiction of Desiderio’s relationship with his nine-year-old child-bride, Aoi. While living with the Indian river people, Desiderio agrees to marry Aoi, noting that her father, “Nao-Kurai offered me far more than a bride; he offered me a home, a family and a future” (80). Desiderio believes that this marriage will help him escape the liminal space that he inhabits as a mixed race person of white European and Indian descent (16). Yet Carter highlights Desiderio’s position as a cultural outsider to the river people by emphasizing his inability to shed his upbringing in a culture that condemns pedophilia.

When Nao-Kurai initially hints at his plans for Desiderio to marry Aoi, Desiderio states that “I took no notice of him because I thought Aoi was clearly too young to be married” (76). Desiderio repeatedly demonstrates his awareness that the culture in which he was raised objects to marriages between adults and children. When Desiderio finally agrees to marry Aoi, he states that “Because Aoi was only nine years old, I thought there would be a long period of betrothal but everyone assured me she had reached puberty and offered me visual proof if I did not believe them” (81). Although the river people assert that Aoi is mature enough to get married, Carter’s descriptions of Aoi reveal that
she is still a child. After placing Desiderio’s hands inside her blouse, Aoi asks him “to tell her if her breasts had grown since the last [sexual] performance and if so, how much” (82). Although Aoi may have reached puberty, she has clearly not finished developing into a woman. Carter further emphasizes Aoi’s youth by describing the “wet, childish kisses” (82) that she gives to Desiderio and the “diminutive slit” (84) that is her vagina. Reflecting on his decision to marry this child-bride, Desiderio asserts, “I abandoned the last vestiges of my shore-folk squeamishness” (81) in order to marry Aoi. Yet the emphasis that Carter places on the social construction of subjectivity throughout this novel under-mines Desiderio’s assertion that his 24 years of being socialized in a culture that forbids pedophiliac relationships could be so easily overcome.

Although the relationship between Desiderio and Aoi is one of the most complex and disturbing in *The Infernal Desire Machines*, theorists tend to avoid closely analyzing this power imbalance even though they examine in-depth various other taboo subjects that Carter explores in this novel. Lee notes that some of Desiderio’s “desires are ugly—incest, rape, murder, cannibalism, and sadism” (68). It seems unusual that pedophilia is not included on this list considering Desiderio’s interactions with Aoi and also Mary Anne, who he claims to believe was around 17 years old when they had sex (53) although he later discovers that she was, in actuality, only 15 years old (62). Lee provides only a fleeting mention of Aoi’s relationship with Desiderio and does not analyze the power imbalance between them (71). Rather, she spends more time examining Desiderio’s sexual relationship with Aoi’s grandmother, Mama, whom she describes as “a nurturing and sexual woman... [who] is also prepared to comply with tradition and participate in Desiderio’s murder and cannibalism” (emphasis added 109). While Lee notes Mama’s participation in the plot to kill Desiderio, she does not examine Desiderio’s discovery that Aoi is the one who is supposed to perform this murder (Carter 92). She also does not analyze Mama’s disturbing role in training Aoi to act as Desiderio’s “erotic, giggling toy” (85), a role that calls into question whether Mama’s type of “nurturing” is desirable and provides an indirect critique of women who participate in the patriarchal control of female bodies. Like Lee, Nicola Pitchford also evades analyzing Aoi, simply asserting that
“in accordance with their traditions, the river people determine to kill Desiderio and eat his flesh in order to absorb his special knowledge of the ways of the ‘shore-dwellers’” (Tactical Readings 122–123). Pitchford overlooks the central role that Desiderio’s marriage to Aoi plays in this murder plot and she only alludes to Desiderio’s relationships with Aoi and Mama, stating that the river people “almost succeed in luring him to a ritual death by showering him with sexual attention from the family’s women” (emphasis added 123). Considering that Carter emphasizes Aoi’s childishness by repeatedly describing her playing with her doll and noting the different colored ribbons and bows that she wears in her pigtails during her sexual encounters with Desiderio, Pitchford’s description of Aoi as a “woman” seems both odd and inaccurate. Evasions of in-depth examinations of this pedophilic relationship not only overlook the powerful commentary that Carter makes about exploitative male–female sexual relationships through her depiction of the extreme power imbalance functioning between Desiderio and Aoi, they also run the risk of being read as inadvertently condoning this oppressive hierarchy.

Presumably the widespread unwillingness of theorists to closely analyze Desiderio’s relationship with Aoi partially results from the cultural context in which this relationship develops. Theorists may be uncertain about how to discuss sexual relations that occur between a man and a girl in an environment where such relationships are not only condoned, but also encouraged. The lack of sustained analysis of the relationship between Desiderio and Aoi suggests that many critics subscribe to a cultural relativistic stance that inhibits critical analyses of this power imbalance. Yet, rather than providing a neutral depiction of the river people by evoking a form of hands-off cultural relativism, Carter emphasizes that Aoi’s role as the sexual instigator in her relationship with Desiderio is greatly influenced by her socialization among the river people. When Aoi first knocks on Desiderio’s door, he asks, “‘Who’s there?’” (82), and in response Aoi states, “‘A poor girl a-shivering with cold this night’” (83). Desiderio’s reflection that Aoi “answered in the voice of a child who recites a poem she has learned by heart” (83) implies that he is aware of the powerful familial forces encouraging Aoi’s seduction of him. Desiderio further reflects that her “every word and movement [seemed to be studied] from a book of manners. Mama must have taught her
Everything” (83). Regardless of his awareness that Aoi does not act independently, he proceeds in having sexual relations with her. As the desire that Aoi expresses for Desiderio is allotted to her “performance” of the role of seductress for her family’s benefit, rather than arising from a deeper, personal interest in Desiderio, she is positioned as a desired object rather than a desiring object.

Even though Desiderio is aware that Aoi is not acting of her own volition, he only becomes disturbed by Aoi’s (mis)use by her family when he discovers that she is meant to be the person who kills him. He then refers to her as “poor Aoi, who would have murdered me because they told her to, a programmed puppet with a floury face who was not the mistress of her own hands” (92). Although Desiderio does not disagree with Aoi’s programming to perform the role of his erotic toy, his perspective shifts once he is negatively affected by this familial pressure. Desiderio’s description of Aoi as her family’s “puppet” seemingly reflects his attempt to place all the blame for his sexual exploitation of her onto her family. Dehumanizing depictions of Aoi as a puppet and Desiderio’s “erotic, giggling toy” (85) highlight Carter’s message that sexuality is subjectivity; unlike the other more active females in this novel, Aoi is likened to inanimate objects because of her lack of sexual agency. While Desiderio may be read as a desiring subject during his sexual exploitation of Aoi, when he discovers the family’s plan to murder him his agency is temporarily suspended since he is left no choice but to leave this community. Although it is not clear what message this novel would convey regarding the river people if Aoi expressed more active and autonomous desire for Desiderio, as the novel stands, it implies that Desiderio is wrong to have sexual relations with Aoi since his socialization in an environment that condemns relationships between adults and children outweighs his brief time spent living with the river people.

While Carter’s representations of Mary Anne and Aoi highlight the extreme power imbalances that may exist in heterosexual relationships, Carter’s depiction of the relationship between Desiderio and the shape-shifting Albertina reveals the various ways that women actively negotiate their relationships with men. Not only does the power dynamic between Albertina and Desiderio shift with the various guises that Albertina assumes, this power
relation also changes within scenes where Albertina’s form remains temporarily stable. Albertina initially appears to Desiderio while he is on the verge of sleep as “a young woman in a négligé made of a fabric the colour and texture of the petals of poppies which clung about her but did not conceal her quite transparent flesh” (25). Desiderio later refers to Albertina in this first image as “the glass woman” (41). As the glass woman, Albertina is fragile, sexualized, and unable to speak, and thereby seemingly embodies the passive feminine ideal. Yet Desiderio notes that “Where her heart should have been there flickered a knot of flames” (25). These flames undermine understandings of her as entirely passive since they seemingly represent her desire for Desiderio, and thus she is positioned as a desiring object rather than a desired object.

Although Albertina is objectified while she is the glass woman, she strategically positions herself as the object of the male gaze in order to gain control over Desiderio, and consequently she is not entirely victimized through this objectification. Although unable to speak, Albertina attempts to control Desiderio by leaving him messages that he finds both irritating and haunting. She tells him to “BE AMOROUS! . . . BE MYSTERIOUS! . . . DON’T THINK, LOOK . . . WHEN YOU BEGIN TO THINK, YOU LOSE THE POINT” (26). Albertina’s messages encourage Desiderio to objectify her and embrace his irrational sexual desires. In their description of the femme lesbian identity, Lisa Duggan and Kathleen McHugh undermine the notion that women are necessarily oppressed through objectification. They write that the femme “perspective is always partially extrasensory . . . Mulvey’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness,’ without the tragedy” (154). Similarly, Albertina’s objectification as the glass woman is strategic and thus not tragic because it serves her purpose to control Desiderio through seduction. She uses her femininity to inspire Desiderio’s desire in order to fulfill her goal of luring him to her father’s desire machines. Carter thereby disrupts the view that female objectification in a heterosexual context is necessarily synonymous with male dominance and female oppression. Although Desiderio is clearly a desiring subject in his sexual relationships with Mary Anne and Aoi, Carter disrupts understandings of him as a desiring subject in his interactions with Albertina by having her manipulate his desires and subsequently his actions.
Albertina’s ability to assume various identities and genders serves to disrupt the active male/passive female binary as “she” often embodies maleness and femaleness, activity and passivity. The shape-shifting Albertina seemingly taps into Desiderio’s “queer” desires in order to assume guises that she knows he will find alluring. While Albertina, as the glass woman, resembles the feminine ideal, many of the other forms that she takes merge femininity and masculinity, as is seen when she appears to Desiderio and the Minister in the form of Doctor Hoffman’s male Ambassador. In this scene, the effeminate male Albertina exerts much power over Desiderio and the Minister. Desiderio describes Albertina as a “luring siren” and a “tentacular flower” (33) and notes that Albertina “treated us with the regal condescension of a first lady and the Minister and I found ourselves behaving like boorish provincials who dropped our forks . . . while he watched us with faint amusement and barely discernible contempt” (emphasis added 32). Although Albertina is in a position of authority as Doctor Hoffman’s Ambassador and uses “his” femininity to manipulate the Minister and Desiderio in this scene, as Albertina does not express any desire of his own, he is situated as a desired subject rather than a desiring subject. Although effeminacy, like femininity more generally, is most often associated with weakness, Carter demonstrates that both female femininity and effeminacy can be used to manipulate men, and thereby reverse typical power imbalances between women and men as well as effeminate and masculine men.

In her depiction of Albertina’s role as Lafleur, the Sadeianesque Count’s servant and male sex slave, Carter once again complicates a seemingly straightforward depiction of objectification and exploitation. While watching the Count caress Lafleur, Desiderio notes that Lafleur has “the submissiveness of a born victim. . . . This pliant valet was almost extinguished by subservience . . . He was only a tool of the Count’s will” (124). This depiction of Lafleur as an entirely passive victim is later undermined when Desiderio wonders if the Count’s “servant had more autonomy than he thought. Something in the texture of the valet’s presence hinted he was self-consciously the slave. Occasionally, when he whimpered, he seemed altogether too emphatically degraded” (128). Carter implies that Lafleur only performs the role of the slave, and thus retains agency. After Lafleur’s identity as Albertina
is revealed, it becomes increasingly apparent that “he” was not simply a submissive victim since Albertina, as “her” father’s agent, strategically assumes this guise in order to keep watch over the Count (167). After the Count dies, Albertina tells Desiderio, “I must pay him my last respects . . . We travelled a long way together. And, after all, I admired him!” (165). She seemingly admires the Count’s ability to alter the world around him through his potent sexuality. She may thus see him as a role model in her mission to lure Desiderio to the desire machines through the use of her sexuality.

Although Albertina clearly has more power than Mary Anne and Aoi, the extent of Albertina’s agency in her role as Lafleur and in the other roles she assumes is debatable since her seduction of Desiderio serves her father’s plan to construct a new world by capturing the powerful eroto-energy between Albertina and Desiderio. Peach argues that Albertina “turns out to be the Doctor’s puppet and agent who almost succeeds in drawing Desiderio into a cage” (115). While Albertina does help her father through her seduction of Desiderio, Peach’s description denies Albertina any agency and does not account for her desire for Desiderio. The intensity of the attraction between Desiderio and Albertina suggests that her actions are guided by more than just her father’s influence. Pitchford importantly notes that Albertina’s decision to participate in her father’s plan allots her a position of power within a male dominated society. Pitchford argues that the war of dreams promises Albertina “power and freedom from the single image of sex object. It offers a world where she can play the powerful roles of Ambassador and ‘Generalissimo’” (Tactical Readings 126). Albertina may also assume the role of her father’s agent because she agrees with his worldview. As Desiderio notes, Doctor Hoffman and Albertina “appeared to understand each other perfectly” (199). Yet as Albertina endures sexual abuse in order to carry out her mission, she seemingly neither acts entirely of her own freewill, nor is she wholly subservient. In her role as Lafleur, for instance, Albertina is positioned as a desiring object as she is objectified and treated like a sex slave by the Count, while ultimately performing this role because of her desire for Desiderio and her position as her father’s agent.

Even at times in the narrative when Albertina is overtly victimized, Carter complicates her seeming lack of agency. After
Albertina almost dies as a result of being raped by the centaurs (179–180), Desiderio notes that she believed that the beasts were:

only emanations of her own desires, dredged up and objectively reified from the dark abysses of the unconscious . . . according to her father’s theory, all the subjects and objects we had encountered in the loose grammar of Nebulous Time were derived from a similar source—my desires; or her; or the Count’s (186)

Albertina’s view that the centaurs must be a manifestation of one of her unconscious sexual fantasies allows her to reclaim this experience by asserting her agency in the face of abjection. Considering that Albertina is unsure if she evoked her rape by the centaurs, it is unclear in this instance whether she is a desired object or a desiring object. Albertina may resist thinking that Desiderio’s thwarted desire for her could have triggered this rape because such a view would negate her agency and reduce her to a desired object. Carter complicates the suggestion that Desiderio could have caused this rape by depicting him sympathizing with Albertina because of his past experience of being raped by the acrobats of desire (117). Reflecting on Albertina’s violation, Desiderio asserts, “I could do nothing but watch and suffer with her for I knew from my own experience the pain and indignity of a rape” (179). Desiderio’s usual position as a desiring subject is disrupted when he is raped by the Moroccan acrobats, and thereby temporarily reduced to a desired object. Describing this rape, Desiderio asserts, “The pain was terrible. I was most intimately ravaged I do not know how many times. I wept, bled, slobbered and pleaded” (117). Carter undermines the notion that men are always in a position of power by revealing that they also can be victimized by rape. By having Desiderio be a rapist who also experiences rape, Carter destabilizes the victim/victimizer dichotomy and demonstrates the fluid nature of power.

While Carter’s depiction of Albertina’s rape demonstrates that fantasies of subjection may be part of sexual desire, she reveals that Albertina does not consciously “ask” to be raped by the centaurs, nor does she derive any pleasure from this brutal gang rape that leaves her on the verge of death (179–180). As Malina aptly notes, Albertina “recodes rape as sado-masochistic fantasy, thereby reasserting her own status as the subject of desire
as well as the object of violation” (108). In his critique of the “literary sensationalism” of Carter’s “patriarchal” depictions of rape, Clark argues that when rape is “tinged with eroticism it represents subjection as part of desire and in itself desirable” (152). Whereas Carter’s narrative works to establish a distinction between sexual fantasy and desired sexual acts, Clark problematically conflates fantasies of desire with material desires. Clark’s reading of Carter’s representations of rape as “patriarchal” demonstrates the dangers associated with writing “moral pornography” as this mode of feminist critique risks being misread as reinstating patriarchal values rather than undermining misogyny through explicit depictions of violence against women. The depiction of Albertina’s rape implies that women should not be chastised for having taboo sexual desires and that these desires should not be used against them as rationalizations for sexual abuse. As Lynn Chancer argues, rape fantasies “can allow women to take pleasure, subversively, from within a subordinate position that has traditionally repressed their sexuality and surrounded it with guilt and taboos” (26). This reclaiming of subordination through masochistic fantasy is especially important to many women who have survived a rape as it allows them to transform a violent act into a source of erotic fulfillment. While most of Carter’s narrative works to breakdown binaries, Albertina’s rape demonstrates the potential danger of destroying the dichotomy between fantasy and reality when it comes to desire. Although rape fantasies can be erotic and a means of healing, if such fantasies transform into reality the rape victim is forced to experience this violent denigration again and is denied the healing potential of the fantasy realm.

While working with the travelling fair, Desiderio develops a relationship with the “phallic female” gunslinger Mamie Buckskin who usurps Desiderio’s usual role as a desiring subject by using him to fulfill her sexual needs. Desiderio describes this embodiment of femininity and masculinity, homosexuality and heterosexuality as “a paradox—a fully phallic female with the bosom of a nursing mother and a gun, death-dealing erectile tissue, perpetually at her thigh” (emphasis added 108). This gunslinger’s appropriation of the phallus reflects her position of power in her relationship with Desiderio. As Desiderio asserts, Mamie “took a great liking to me for she admired passivity in a man more than
anything” (109). He notes that “when she could not entice an equestrienne into her fur-lined sleeping bag, she morosely made do with me and these nights were as if spent manning a very small dinghy on a very stormy sea” (109). Desiderio’s relationship with Mamie reveals the limits of his phallic power as is seen in the seeming inadequacy of his “very small dingy” to handle the “very stormy sea” that is Mamie’s passion. Although Mamie has sex with Desiderio, Carter notes that “sexually, she preferred women” (108). Mamie is an active desiring subject who, by preferring women, relegates Desiderio to the role of sexual runner-up, and thereby unsettles his usual position as the sole “object” of female desire. After Mamie and Desiderio have sex while watching the “pretty riders servicing their horses” (109), Desiderio notes that she gazes upon him differently; he states, it was “as though I had revealed unsuspected talents during the evening, and finally she astonished me by offering to teach me how to improve my draw” (110). Mamie’s offer may be read as an attempt to help Desiderio improve his sexual performance. Her role as sexual teacher implies that women can be superior to men at employing the phallus and can actually embody more phallic power than men. As Mamie asserts control over Desiderio for her own sexual gain, in his relationship with Mamie, Desiderio is a desiring object. Although his value lies solely in his ability to fulfill Mamie’s sexual needs, he also receives pleasure through these sexual encounters, and thus he is not wholly oppressed or passive.

The Infernal Desire Machines demonstrates the importance of closely attending to the intricacies of power imbalances between women and men as well as the complex and often troubling nature of female sexual desires. By exploring such difficult and controversial subjects as necrophilia, rape, pedophilia and sadomasochism, The Infernal Desire Machines provides a clear example of why Carter’s status as a feminist author is the subject of debate. Yet Carter conveys deeply feminist messages through her complicated destabilization of gendered binaries as well as her refusal to desexualize her female characters regardless of the exploitative and threatening circumstances they encounter. Carter’s refusal to desexualize women regardless of how disturbing their sexual desires may be highlights the centrality of sexuality to subjectivity. Carter’s explicit depictions of female eroticism encourage readers to critically examine why female sexual desires are often troubling
by closely examining the ways that women internalize patriarchal, sexist and misogynist beliefs, and how their expressions of erotic desire may reflect this internalization. In *The Infernal Desire Machines*, sexuality is not only subjectivity; it is also a source of power and agency. By closely analyzing female sexual desires and relationships between women and men, Carter’s novels encourage readers to gain deeper understandings of how sexuality can be a weapon that can be used against women and/or a tool that women can use to claim power and challenge male dominance.

**Works Cited**


Malina, Debra. “‘All the women will have wings’: Angela Carter and the Construction of the Feminist Subject.” *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject*. Ohio: Ohio UP, 2002. 97–131.


