Angela Carter between the lines: interrelations of life, poetry, and her early novels in the 1960s

As entrelinhas de Angela Carter: correlações entre vida, poesia e primeiros romances na década de 1960

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ABSTRACT: Starting from the premise that literature produced by an author does not exist in a vacuum, being a reflection of the time and place in which it is embedded, this study aims to trace how Angela Carter's (1940-1992) journey as a poet – a still under-investigated facet of the British author – reverberates in her first two novels, *Shadow dance* (1966) and *The magic toyshop* (1967). It also explores how the 1960s and Carter's personal life are interwoven with the beginning of her literary career.

Keywords: Angela Carter. English Literature. Poetry. Novel.

RESUMO: Partindo da premissa que a literatura produzida por uma autora não existe num vácuo, sendo reflexo do tempo e do lugar em que se insere, pretendemos traçar de que maneira o percurso de Angela Carter (1940-1992) como poeta, faceta ainda pouco investigada da autora britânica, reverbera na publicação de seus dois primeiros romances *Shadow dance* (1966) e *The magic toyshop* (1967), explorando, também, como a década de 1960 e a vida pessoal de Carter se mesclam ao início de sua carreira literária.

Palavras-chave: Angela Carter. Literatura Inglesa. Poesia. Romance.

Introduction

Angela Carter (1940-1992) stands as a prominent British author of the 20th century, recognized as one of the most influential post-war fiction writers in the United Kingdom. While her work is widely celebrated within English-language literature for its eclectic production, traversing a vast range of themes and influences, and for a style characterized by breaking taboos and empowering women in the conduct of their own narratives, her presence in other literary contexts, such as the Brazilian, is still marked by a limited number of translations.

This study proceeds from the premise that literary creation, particularly that of an author as contextually aware as Angela Carter, does not manifest in a vacuum but rather mirrors and actively engages with the historical, social, and personal circumstances of its genesis. Such an interpretive approach demonstrates relevance in

Carter's case, whose literary creations consistently maintain an expressive dialogue with personal, familial, political, social, literary, and cultural dimensions, allowing for a more holistic apprehension of the subtleties within her textuality.

Despite Carter's renown for her short stories and novels, her literary career also includes significant attempts into poetry. This facet of her work, however, remains comparatively less explored and is often unknown even to her avid readers, a relative obscurity partly attributable to the limited volume of her published poems and the brief period during which she actively engaged in this literary form. Furthermore, the circulation of these early writings was largely confined to smaller-scale publications, many of which are now obscure.

Consequently, the scarcity of dedicated academic studies on her poetry, as noted by scholars such as Sarah Gamble (2019), poses a considerable challenge to comprehensive research. Gamble's chapter, "Angela Carter's poetry" in *The arts of Angela Carter: a cabinet of curiosities*, represents a vital contribution, investigating Carter's poetic development and identifying crucial links between her initial lyrical efforts and her later prose fiction. During her lifetime, Carter published only two principal volumes of poetry: *Five quiet shouters* (1966), a collection featuring four other authors, and *Unicorn* (1966), a compilation of poems predominantly written in the 1960s. It is particularly in *Unicorn* (1966) that Carter began to explore themes and stylistic approaches that would come to define her celebrated subsequent work in fiction.

My current doctoral investigation, currently nearing completion, centers on Angela Carter's poetic production, primarily the poems collated in the posthumous anthology *Unicorn: the poetry of Angela Carter* (2015), edited by historian and literary critic Rosemary Hill. The study aims to present, analyze, translate, and critically comment on these poems, focusing on linguistic-stylistic aspects and thematic axes. The analysis will be particularly informed by feminist literary criticism, theories of eroticism, and medieval studies, with a sustained focus on manifestations of the erotic and the processes of constructing feminine subjectivities.

This article, therefore, will closely examine this early poetic output, with *Unicorn* (1966) as a central exhibit, to demonstrate its crucial role in shaping Carter's distinctive voice and to trace the emergence of key thematic preoccupations – notably eroticism and medievalism – that connect directly to her biography and her later, celebrated prose.

Carter's poetic career: early work and rediscovery

Angela Carter's initial attempts into the literary field were, indeed, through poetry. This early poetic production, though a less prominent facet of her career, laid foundational elements for the maturation of her subsequent, widely recognized style, constituting a fundamental stage in the consolidation of her distinctive authorial voice. During this formative period in the 1960s, Carter was a literature student at the University of Bristol; her immersion in the academic environment, particularly her engagement with medieval literature (a point to be elaborated upon later), coupled with her early involvement with the local literary scene, were pivotal in shaping these initial writings. Poetic practice provided her with a crucial field for linguistic experimentation and the exploration of intricate themes, often resulting in brief compositions marked by notable imagistic and thematic density.

It is noteworthy that Carter's main body of published poetry dates from the 1960s. Although poetic compositions from the subsequent decade exist, her publications in verse progressively declined. Rosemary Hill (2015, in her introduction to Carter, 2015) posits that as Carter began to dedicate herself more intensively to novels, short stories, and drama, she likely found in prose a broader and more accommodating vehicle for the expansion of her rich imaginative potential. Hill (2015) also observes Carter's singular ability to (re)elaborate pre-existing narratives and characters, suggesting that poetry served as a primordial locus for Carter to experiment with and discover her formidable strength as a writer before transposing these discoveries into longer fictional forms.

A significant hiatus of forty-nine years passed from the initial publication of *Unicorn* in 1966 until Carter's poetry received renewed critical and public prominence. This resurgence was largely due to the efforts of Rosemary Hill, who, in 2015, undertook the task of collecting and organizing Carter's poems written between 1963 and 1971. The resulting anthology, *Unicorn: the poetry of Angela* Carter (2015), can be regarded as a vital expansion of the original 1966 edition. It was intended to disseminate Carter's brief yet significant career as a young poet to a contemporary literary audience and to re-situate her early poetic endeavors within her broader artistic development.

Hill's 2015 edition presents a multifaceted structure, comprising not only Carter's poems but also substantial critical essays by Hill herself. In her insightful analyses, Hill

(2015) situates the poems within the wider context of Carter's oeuvre and interprets them as manifestations of the cultural effervescence of the 1960s, also arguing that these poems functioned as a field of experimentation for Carter's own evolving literary voice. The volume is meticulously subdivided into the following: a Preface by Hill; "The Poems", featuring texts from the original edition of *Unicorn* (1966); poems from the anthology *Five quiet shouters*; and poems published by Carter in *The Listener*, a small poetry magazine, in 1971. Following the poems, Hill's collection includes her critical essays: "A splinter in the mind: the poems of Angela Carter", which contextualizes their publication and republication, underscoring how they foreshadow Carter's novelistic genius; "Angry young men and disgusting girls: writing in the 1960s", exploring the decade's influence on writers; and "Hairy fairies: the prose of Angela Carter", drawing parallels between poetic themes and Carter's early prose. The book concludes with Acknowledgements and a Bibliography.

Hill's motivation for organizing this anthology stemmed significantly from an essay she wrote in 2012 for the *London Review of Books* concerning *A card from Angela Carter*, Susannah Clapp's compilation of Carter's postcards: Clapp was Carter's friend and decided to publish a book with all postcards she had received from Carter, when in other countries. Reviewing Clapp's book prompted Hill to reconsider Carter's work, an author who admitted that similarly to many of her contemporaries, she hadn't read much of in the 1980s when she was in her twenties (Hill, 2015).

Another poignant impetus, explicit in the book's dedication, was the memory of Hill's husband, the poet Christopher Logue (1926-2011), who consistently asserted that Carter was a great and underrated poet (Hill, 2015). Hill recounts finding a 1966 typescript of *Unicorn* (1966) among Logue's books and, later, a letter from him detailing his unsuccessful attempt to have Carter's poetry reprinted. This personal connection fueled her scholarly endeavor. In a subsequent article for *The Guardian*, Hill (2015) further elaborated on her discovery of the poems and provided valuable details about the eponymous three-part poem "Unicorn", perceiving in Carter's verses the nascent germ of ideas that would extravagantly flourish in her novels and short stories; verses that, not always floral, could also be sinister.

Regarding the poem "Unicorn" itself, Hill observes that Carter reconfigures the known myth of the lady and the unicorn and does "a kind of flat-pack of pre-existing characters and stories to be reconfigured every so often according to the needs of a

different age" (Hill, 2015). "Let us cut out and assemble our pieces" runs the first line, and then the reader is instructed to "bend tab, cut into slot marked 'X'". Hill compellingly argues that Carter, at 23, had arrived "in the middle of the mysterious forest that was to keep her supplied with ideas for the rest of her life" (Hill, 2015). Finally, Hill argues that Carter saw at once how myths and folk tales offer a kind of narrative flat pack, pre-existing characters and stories that can be reconfigured according to the taste of each generation. Hill thus highlights a semantic play suggesting Carter's poetic work invites active reader participation in its construction of meaning.

Thematic and biographical analysis: poetry, prose, life, and context

The thematic preoccupations evident in Carter's poetry, particularly the interplay of violence, sexuality, and the deconstruction of myth, resonate profoundly with her more famous prose, the celebrated collection *The bloody chamber* (1979). A recurring and potent trope in Carterian symbology involves the erotic and often perilous encounter between young women and bestial or animalistic figures, vividly explored in both the poem "Unicorn" and the short story "The tiger's bride". The latter, a radical reworking of "Beauty and the Beast," narrates a young woman's journey from being an object of exchange to an embrace of her own feral nature through a transformative sexual union with a tiger-man.

In parallel, and predating these prose explorations, the poem "Unicorn" addresses a similar nexus of themes, focusing on the charged encounter between a virgin and a unicorn. Carter subverts the traditional medieval legend by infusing the encounter with an explicit and unsettling sexual connotation. This erotic construction, central to Carter's early poetic project, often eschews romantic sentimentalism. It aligns with Anne Carson's conceptualization of Eros: "Eros is an expropriation. It robs from the body [...] and leaves the lover [...] with less" (Carson, 2022, p. 59, translated by the author). When Carter's virgin declares to the unicorn, "You think you are possessing me- / But I've got my teeth in you" (Carter, 2015, p. 6), she articulates this dynamic of mutual expropriation. Her monologue interweaves images of love and war, reinforcing the ambivalent, often agonistic, nature of Eros. The metaphor "They sharpen knives", alluding to sexual consummation, resonates with Carson's catalogue of violent verbs used by poets to describe erotic experience, reflecting an "intense preoccupation with

the integrity and control of one's own body" (Carson, 2022, p. 69, translated by the author).

Even when the unicorn seemingly reasserts control ("'You can put your knickers back on in a minute, dear'" [Carter, 2015, p. 6]), the virgin's earlier pronouncements frame her as an active participant: "I love the game, I love the chase, / I know and welcome each advance..." (Carter, 2015, p. 5). When this "game" morphs into a "battlefield", her paradoxical "unarmed" state ("So I conceal my armoury. / Yours is all on view.") can be read as a stripping away of social masks. Here, Carter depicts love not as a gentle union but as an invasive force, "a personal struggle... that involves will and physical strength" (Carson, 2022, p. 74, translated by the author), where the individual's response is a strategic choice.

The pronounced medievalism in "Unicorn" is deeply rooted in Carter's academic background at the University of Bristol. As detailed by Edmund Gordon (2017, p. 68), her English literature curriculum prominently featured medieval studies, including a comprehensive course on Middle English literature taught by the medievalist Arthur Basil Cottle. While Chaucer and Shakespeare were compulsory, the program allowed specialization. Gordon (2017, p. 68) notes Carter's early focus on sixteenth and seventeenth-century literature alongside introductory courses in Old English and Saxon civilization. Her strong inclination towards Middle English literature suggests these studies significantly influenced both the formal and thematic dimensions of her nascent poetic output, including the symbolic landscape of "Unicorn".

The impact of the expanded edition of *Unicorn: the poetry of Angela Carter* in 2015 was also noted in the press. James Kidd (2015), in an article for *The Independent*, highlighted Carter as a "posthumous poet" whose imagination for "condensed spaces" peaked in her poetry. Kidd observed that the book's subtitle exposed Carter's facet as an "occasional versifier", assuring devotees of her style they would feel at home with the "'plethora of dreams', 'fabulous beasts', pantomimes, fireworks and sudden changes of register" (Kidd, 2015), as "the Unicorn's deconstruction of a fairytale ('Let us cut out and assemble our pieces') could be exported from one of Carter's stories", and "the violent and erotic tones are funny and disturbing at the same time" (Kidd, 2015). This reception underscores the ease with which attentive readers can trace correlations between Carter's poetic themes and her novels.

Further illustrating the interplay between biography and fiction, Edmund Gordon (2017) explains how the portrayal of Melanie's sexuality in *The magic toyshop* (conceived 1965-1966) mirrors Carter's own adolescent experiences. Set in South London, the novel evokes an oppressive atmosphere where Melanie, sent to live with a tyrannical uncle, grapples with her burgeoning sexuality under constraint. Gordon (2017, p. 31) notes that for Melanie (and Carter), "sex is an idea at once wonderful and hideous, valued largely as the end of innocence". Upon rereading the novel in the mid-1980s, Carter herself was struck by its depiction of "the intense feeling of teenage desire, an extraordinary sexual longing [...] endless afternoons alone in a room [...] when it seems we will never grow up" (Gordon, 2017, p. 31).

Similarly, Carter's debut novel, *Shadow dance* (1966), explores somber themes and marginal characters, establishing crucial connections with her biographical trajectory. Its genesis is notably linked to her complex relationship with the couple John and Jenny Orsborn during the 1960s. Gordon (2017) documents how Carter had intricately woven her experiences with them into the fabric of the novel. Gordon (2017) recounts Carter's brief sexual relationship with John Orsborn, an experience that strained her friendship with his wife, Jenny. Carter then provocatively cast John as the manipulative villain Honeybuzzard in the novel, a move that nearly led to legal action and caused John considerable distress, particularly as Honeybuzzard's character also incorporated John's known habit of exploring abandoned buildings.

Indeed, in the epilogue to *The invention of Angela Carter: a biography* (2017), Gordon clarifies that his work aims to illuminate "some aspects – not all of them attractive – of what she worked so hard to establish and protect [...], [constituting] a first step towards demystifying Angela Carter" (Gordon, 2017, p. 420). This biographical approach intentionally adds layers of complexity to the perception of Carter's life and art. By challenging a potentially one-dimensional image of the writer, Gordon (2017, p. 421) suggests that a full apprehension of Carter's multiple nuances may only be achieved with future biographical investigations from new perspectives. He admits that Carter is "much too big for any single book to contain" (Gordon, 2017), revealing her extraordinary complexity not only as an artist of the word but also as an individual.

Conclusion

The poems disseminated in the 1960s and the publication of novels such as *Shadow dance* (1966) and *The magic toyshop* (1967) thus manifest significant approximations and correlations with episodes from Angela Carter's biography. Consequently, an analysis of the interrelation between the author's life and her textual production across different phases of her career underscores the foundational relevance of her poetry. Investigating this less explored facet of her work contributes to anticipating recurrent themes in her entire literary corpus and illuminates her evolution as a writer.

In Carter's poetry, as Terry Eagleton (2007) might concur regarding poetic works in general, form and content are intimately interconnected, equally playing crucial roles in a comprehensive understanding of the poems and their production context. The poetic, linguistic, and erotic experience Carter provides in her work explores all constituents of a poem in a complex and innovative manner. Therefore, her poetic contribution, when analyzed, proves as vital for Carterian studies in its own right as for the connections it allows us to draw with her wider oeuvre.

Eagleton also recalls that "a poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement, in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end" (Eagleton, 2007). It is precisely by examining the lines Angela Carter chose to leave us with, and the multiple interpretative possibilities emanating from them, that this research and its unfolding works seek to verify, through textual and contextual seams, how she (re)invented herself, establishing a new paradigm of writer through the evolution of her subversive, thought-provoking, and captivating writing process.

Carter's legacy in English-language literature and on a global scale is profound, leaving marks that transcend the narratives she wove and the experiences she lived. Through imagination and linguistic experimentation, Carter invites the reader to confront the world subversively, to question contemporary social normativity, and to claim the autonomy to experience one's own desires. Such a stance resonates in an emblematic diary entry from 1972: "Self-possession. To be in possession of oneself. That's the only thing really" (Gordon, 2017).

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