‘Weird Beauty’: Angela Carter and Lafcadio Hearn in Japan

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Lafcadio Hearn and Angela Carter make an unlikely pair. Carter — female, tall, resolutely English, outspoken, brazen, full of wild surmise and outrageous humour — was a steady, if somewhat cultish success from the moment she started writing and publishing in the 1960s. By the time of her death in 1992, she had become ‘the modern author most widely studied in British universities and colleges’ (Lodge 16).

Hearn, on the other hand — small, reticent, half-blind, a misfit and recluse — was never quite Irish or Greek or American or Japanese, and spent much of his life as an impoverished failure. But these two writers, separated by nearly a century (Hearn was born in 1850, Carter in 1940), share a sensibility that was admirably suited to recording an encounter with Japan.

In 1969, when she won the Somerset Maugham award for her novel Several Perceptions, Carter took her prize money and went travelling, first to the United States, and then to Japan. She stayed in Japan until 1972 (Lee xiii; Peach 19). The literary products of her Japanese experiences are relatively few: four short stories with Japanese settings; a dozen essays and reviews for New Society and other British periodicals; and, in her novel The Infernal Desire
Machines of Dr Hoffman, a fantasy setting based on Japanese details. In the torrent of critical writing about Carter that has spilled out since her death – more than a dozen books and over a hundred scholarly articles – her relationship with Japan has gone largely unexamined. But travelling to Japan was not a minor incident in Carter’s life. Lorna Sage, author of a monograph on Carter and editor of a collection of essays on her work, describes Japan as ‘the place where [Carter] lost and found herself’ (24). As Donald Richie puts it, ‘Japan, itself so subservient to social restraints, had taught her to throw them off’ (181). Carter herself said that ‘in Japan I learnt what it was to be a woman and became radicalized’ (Nothing Sacred 28).

I would like to think that Carter went to Japan because of Lafcadio Hearn. Alas, there is no definitive evidence. Carter’s publisher, Carmen Callil, recalls that Carter mentioned Hearn, but she does not know which of his books Carter read or when (Clapp). During the late 1960s – i.e. just before Carter’s departure for Japan – Kobayashi Masaki’s film version of Kwaidan (1965) was very popular: it won an award at Cannes and was nominated for an Academy Award. Its success may have brought Hearn, and thus Japan, to Carter’s attention.

My purpose in placing Carter and Hearn side by side is not, then, to suggest direct influence. Rather it is to explore two phenomena: first, the close imaginative alliance between the Gothic and the Orient; and second, to suggest how self-consciousness about the dangers of exoticizing has altered representations of Japan.

I want to begin by pointing out how much Carter’s sensibility resembles Hearn’s. Both were students of what we now call ‘popular culture’. In the recent anthology Lafcadio Hearn’s America, Simon J. Bronner brings together the ‘ethnographic sketches and editorials’ Hearn wrote in or about America. Bronner notes that critics and biographers (most importantly Malcolm Cowley) have ‘fixed the reputation of Hearn as a literary artist whose greatest contribution was an interpretation of Japan’ (30). While Bronner does not dispute the enduring interest of Hearn’s writing about Japan, he champions Hearn’s work in recording ‘rare glimpses of nineteenth-century American urban ethnic and occupational life that are needed to inform a fuller, if darker, picture of American social development’ (31). Hearn’s American writings are often represented by the lurid and sensational reports he wrote on such topics as murder and