CHAPTER 11

Laughing (at) Freaks: “Bending the tune to her will” in Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* and Rosie Garland’s *The Palace of Curiosities*

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**Abstract**

In different albeit complementary ways, Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Rosie Garland’s *The Palace of Curiosities* (2013) employ reference to Victorian freaks (and processes of ‘enfreakment’) in order to treat issues that are still cogent nowadays, such as gender roles and female agency. These two novels focus on the lives of the winged ‘Cockney Venus’, Sophie Fevvers, and of Eve, the Lion-Faced Woman, through a typical neo-Victorian filter aiming at exploding the ideological and cultural frame of mind of the nineteenth century, as it were, from within. Through the use of literary strategies, such as parody and historiographic metafictional rewriting (since Eve’s story is partially modelled on Julia Pastrana, the ‘Ape Woman’), Carter and Garland turn Fevvers and Eve from emblems of non-normative bodies into active agents of their own destiny. In this respect, the presence of humour and carnivalesque laughter becomes the instrument through which these female freaks question patriarchal norms.

**Keywords**


...The presence of laughter constituted an intrinsic element of freak shows as part of the nineteenth-century culture of display. As much is exemplified in Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* (2003), a neo-Victorian bio-fiction of Sarah Baartman (or, in Dutch, Saartjie Baartman). In a significant passage of the novel, Sarah describes her 1810 exhibition at No. 225 in London's
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Piccadilly. Presented in a bamboo cage, her attire consisting mainly of an apron of pearls and feathers, she is met with a freak-hungry audience:

Surrounding me would be scores, sometimes hundreds, of white faces, all peering up at me, a sheen of horror, pity or terror occupying their faces, or perhaps a smirk of amusement, contempt or nervous excitement [...]. Cries, insults, shouts and laughter would at times overwhelm me.

CHASE-RIBOUD 2007: 4

Baartman, originally a Khoisan African woman, became one of the stars of European freak shows in the early nineteenth century. Dressed up as a savage and displayed as an exotic attraction, she was considered a ‘human curiosity’ because of her prominent breasts, buttocks and hypertrophic labia. In London, for the price of two shillings, it was possible to watch this rare specimen of a human being, who also became an object of interest for ethnographers and doctors alike.1 This is one of the reasons why the Hottentot Venus “has become an icon of the commodification of the female black body that has important connotations for scholarly research and constitutes a precedent for the exploitation of black sexuality” (Ruiz 2013: 137). Arguably, however, Baartman’s perceived freakishness also speaks to issues of female objectification and commodification in neo-Victorian fiction more generally, particularly to the uneasy tension between female agency and laughter: both women’s own laughter and that of others directed at women as comic objects.

Akin to recent rediscoveries of Baartman’s life by filmmakers, historians and photographers,2 Chase-Riboud’s novel portrays Baartman’s sad life and destiny

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1 After Baartman’s death Georges Cuvier conducted an autopsy of Baartman in order to better study her ‘peculiarities’. A cast of her body and skeleton were held at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 2002, the year in which her remains were brought back to Africa (where she was finally buried), following heated debate between the French and South African governments. Reflecting upon Georges Cuvier’s description of Baartman’s racial and ethnological traits, Sadiah Qureshi writes that his “anatomical observations testified to Baartman’s humanity, but his decision to categorize her as a Boschimane, rather than Hottentote, suggests that for Cuvier Baartman was as close as possible to an ape” (Qureshi 2004: 243).

2 The 2010 movie Black Venus, directed by Abdellatif Kechiche, was nominated for the Golden Lion at the 67th Venice International Film Festival in the same year. Several historiographers and biographers, such as Rachel Holmes and Clifton Crais and Pamela Scully, have focused their attention on Baartman’s history (see Holmes 2007; Crais and Scully 2009). Finally, in Lyle Ashton Harris’s photograph entitled Venus Hottentot 2000, the model Renée Valerie Cox plays Saartjie Baartman’s role.