

Speaking the Unspeakable: Women, Sex and the Dismorphmythic in Lovecraft, Angela Carter, Caitlin R. Kiernan and Beyond

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One night I had a frightful dream in which I met my grandmother under the sea. She lived in a phosphorescent palace of many terraces, with gardens of strange leprous corals and grotesque brachiote efflorescences, and welcomed me with a warmth that may have been sardonic. (1936¹)

I close my eyes and I see her, Jacova Angevine, the lunatic prophet from Salinas, pearls that were her eyes, cockles and mussels, alive, alive-o. (2003²)

H.P. Lovecraft is known for shying away from representations of women, as well as anything overtly sexual. His women are likely to be abject constructs, and the sex he refers to something evil, demonic, a pact with a Satanic creature, with the fishy folk, or white apes, each example of miscegenation leading to a threat to humankind. The insipidity, problematic allure, and treacherous fecundity of the women in *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927³; *SHL*) set the tone for Lovecraft's treatment of women and their sexual culpability in his tales.

There is a filial legacy of Lovecraft's work. Many male authors, including Robert Bloch and Neil Gaiman, have extended, built on, his writing, taken further the tropes, settings, stories and sometimes, like Gaiman in "Shoggoth's Old Peculiar" (1998⁴) and "Only the End of the World Again" (2000⁵), they have also taken a comic turn. But perhaps surprisingly there is also an emerging legacy in work by women writers, notably Angela Carter and Caitlín R. Kiernan, and most recently in the collection *She Walks in Shadows* (2015⁶), which invited women to be inspired by, respond to, and re-imagine Lovecraft's work. Not all of these writers merely expose him for a misogynist. Some seek the back-story to the women who spawn the offspring of the creatures from the deeps, from the stars, from a Lovecraftian pit of the weird. Some extend and morph the plotlines or provide a future for the

women in Lovecraft's tales. Some take Lovecraftian tropes and explore them in different, contemporary contexts.

Angela Carter exposes the basis of his sexual terrors in a particularly male idolatry of woman as a powerful, dismorphmythic creature grown from a fear and loathing of sex, leading to an offloading of that disgust and terror on to the abjected woman, a mixed and troubled response theorised by Julia Kristeva⁷. Lovecraft's recognised disgust at difference and disability, and his sexism are revealed as a familiar product of a kind of pathological terror at all things Other and all things sexual, a terror found in much fin de siècle writing and art, where women are represented as simultaneously sexually alluring, terrifying, monstrous, and abject, a construction which reappears in the femmes fatales of, for example, film noir. Horror and the comic share many characteristics, however, and comic Gothic horror provides an effective way of puncturing the mix of adulation, terror, disgust and abjection with which women are sometimes portrayed. Several of the women writers in *She Walks in Shadows* choose that mode, focusing sometimes on the sexual fears, sometimes on reducing the weird to the banal everyday, while Angela Carter does both. Carter exposes Lovecraft's mystification and shuddering terror at woman, made into an undying, mythical, sexualised creature who lets in the destructive darkness, and does so particularly in *Nights at the Circus* (1987⁸), with her portrayal of the designs and actions of two eminently powerful men, Christian Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke.

This essay focuses on Lovecraft and his legacy in the work of Carter, Kiernan and a range of other women authors, including Mary Turzillo⁹ and Wendy Wagner¹⁰, each published in *She Walks in Shadows*¹¹. It traces the fascination Lovecraft has with the myths of abject and dangerous women beginning with *SHL* and proceeding to the short stories of women as monstrous, vulnerable, enthralling ("Medusa's Coil", 1939¹²), as deadly hags ("The Dreams in the Witch House", 1932¹³; "The Dunwich Horror", 1929¹⁴), as capable

of luring travellers and students to hell, coupling with the devil or inhuman creatures (“The Shadow over Innsmouth”, 1936¹⁵). It goes on to consider how Carter, Kiernan and several others expose the sexual roots of such a fascination, such disgust, instead writing from the women’s perspectives, giving them identity and agency. Carter, Kiernan, Wagner, Turzillo and others reinvigorate and explore the hidden agendas, and/or turn the tables on those whose overheated, disgusted imaginations represent women as hags, serpentine seducers with evil intent, and bestial betrayers of pure bloodlines. They write from and against Lovecraft’s abject representations of woman as Other, his lurking fears of deformity, miscegenation, and sexual energies.

H.P. Lovecraft, Sex and Women

SHL sets up both a rich, selective history of weird horror, its roots in the supernatural rather than the mere terrors of the everyday (or night time) reality, and exhibits a kind of pathological disgust concerning procreation and fertility. In the second chapter, “The Dawn of the Horror-Tale”, for example, his tone of informed, assertive persuasion, outlining the sources of horror, is intermixed with shuddering distaste at “lips” (4), “revolting fertility-rites of immemorial antiquity” (4), and “breeding-seasons” (5) of animals connected to witchcraft. He uses a range of words related to the dangers of rapture and desire involving the “daemon lover” (5), and “corpse-bride” (5), and to procreation and birth: “born” (5), “fertile” (5), linked with “slyly” (14), “daemonic” (18), “monstrous morbidities of witchcraft and black magic” (5), and once, “Ymir and his shapeless spawn” (5). In the third chapter, in his discussion of established Gothic tales including *The Castle of Otranto* (1764¹⁶), *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820¹⁷), the ‘generally-insipid’ (8) heroines are dismissed as mundane, as is much of the narrative because at once realistic and full of staged performances. *SHL* speaks of the deformities of the Welsh, the frailty or disgusting evil of women in Arthur Machen’s work. He links all of these terrors in Machen’s “The Novel of the Black Seal” (1895¹⁸) ‘in the

lovely reaches of Wales, a strange son born to a rural mother after a fright' suggests 'a hideous connection and a condition revolting to any respector of the human race'. The child, an 'idiot boy...jabbers strangely at times in a repulsive hissing voice, and is subject to odd epileptic seizures' (97). Women are more than frail in Machen's *The White People* (1904¹⁹) with 'revolting orgies of the Witches' Sabbath' (95), and disgusting rites learned by a nurse from her witch grandmother which lead a young girl, at puberty, overtaken by a 'banefully beautiful' 'cryptic' horror to poison herself.

Two common problems emerge in our reading of the work of Lovecraft, master of horror: his fictional representations of or absence of women, and his terror and disgust at otherness, which manifests itself most obviously as racism. The two come together in the terrifying results of miscegenation, a Lovecraftian staple. It is not surprising, then, that contemporary women writers might decide to foreground, interrogate, undercut, remythologise issues and characters who represent concerns to do with gendered and racial difference, while also building on his rich scenarios of horror. Lovecraft's cosmic and undersea worlds are where eternal powerful creatures lurk, and when invited by deliberate acts, invade, mate, overwhelm local folk and their bloodlines, advance forces presaging an utterly undermined security in human identity, and potentially the end of the world. The fishy creatures from the depths in "The Shadow over Innsmouth" mate with the women of the village, although (as in much of Lovecraft's work), this is suggested, rather than detailed. The indescribable act results in a pact between the fishy and village folk through the now intermixed beings, an economic treaty leading to an abundance of fish, rich jewellery, and grotesque semi-human offspring.

Lovecraft's migrant invaders are subtle, utterly ruining and morphing bloodlines through their sexual relations with culpable, deranged women. They are also intrusively colonial, overtly invasive in terms of their buying support through investment (fish, gold),

and ensuring continuity through shared, hidden, religious practices. Many of the threats in Lovecraft's work resemble those in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897²⁰) – women's unlicensed sexuality, the invasion of non-human, dubiously treated foreign others (not like "us", whoever "us" refers to). They also find worrying resonance in contemporary racist, sexist propaganda concerning "migrant hordes" and "swarms" when referring to the 2015-18 refugee crisis. These ongoing and contemporary resonances perhaps explain why insightful women writers are revealing their unsubtle tendencies, hidden messages, contradictions, abject terrors and flaws.

Biography and sources

For Joyce Carol Oates, Lovecraft is "The king of weird", for whom "the gothic tale would seem to be a form of psychic autobiography" (1996²¹). Howard Phillips Lovecraft was an only child, his father a travelling salesman for a Providence silversmithing company. The father exhibited dementia, depression and paranoia, and as Oates comments, was "probably a victim of untreated syphilis", dying in an insane asylum when Lovecraft was only seven.²² Biographers suggest that his mother Susie, the unstable, emotional, reclusive daughter of a well-to-do Providence businessman was both excessively attached to Lovecraft and critical of him. Oates comments on his "widowed, ailing mother Susie, who seems to have made of her son's personal appearance (tall, gaunt, with a long, prognathous jaw and frequently blemished skin) an image of moral degeneracy"²³, which could have led to his claustrophobia and sexual disgust²⁴. Not surprisingly, according to Frank Belknap Long's *Howard Phillips Lovecraft: Dreamer on the Night Side*²⁵ and S.T Joshi's *H. P. Lovecraft: A Life*²⁶ it can be argued that his parents' behaviours are sources for his loathing and fear of moral and hereditary degeneracy, and their cause: women and miscegenation. There are other potential sources in the women in his life. When his mother died his spinster aunts brought him up

while the other main female influence was the more modern New Yorker Sonia Greene, who was briefly his wife, and with whom he had relationship problems. Lovecraft also had female writing collaborators including Winifred V. Jackson, Anna Helen Crofts, Sonia H. Greene, Hazel Heald, and Catherine L. Moore, whose tales he often ghost wrote, co-wrote or completed as a source of income (he offered the same service to male writers, including Harry Houdini, which in the end, like several others, was not a positive collaboration). Exploring his papers and letters, Bruce Lord suggests that “Lovecraft places sex in direct opposition to intellect and the pursuit of intellectual ends”²⁷. Joshi notes that when he was eight, Lovecraft read about sex, found it disgusting and “prosaic”, preferring the moral restraint of the Puritans as an indication of human development, and intellect:

a Puritan in the conduct of life is the only kind of man one may honestly respect. I have no respect or reverence whatever for any person who does not live abstemiously and purely ...in my heart I feel him to be my inferior – nearer the abysmal amoeba and the Neanderthal man...²⁸

Simultaneously he seems to have seen sexual activity as a sign of degeneracy:

a mechanism which I rather despised or at least thought non-glamorous because of its purely animal nature & separation from such things as intellect & beauty – & all the drama was taken out of it.²⁹

With the close examples of his syphilitic father and his unstable mother, Lovecraft rolls together sexual activity, women and miscegenation, a horrific (in his view) result of misbreeding with dangerous others. These are ideas derived from a prurience which is common in his time (see Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity*³⁰) but which belies his own fears and fascination with women and sex.

Lovecraft has a particular distaste for sex and coupling with the Other, and wayward grandmothers are a familiar culpable cause of identity horror when miscegenation is discovered and the narrator or protagonist becomes aware that he bears the terrible curse of his deviant ancestry. Arthur Jermyn's grandmother ("Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family", 1921³¹) mated with a white ape. Shub-Niggurath, "The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young", is also mentioned in several tales, her over-productive spawning clearly as disgustingly threatening as her origins. In "The Shadow over Innsmouth,"³² grandmothers engaged in sexual acts with the undersea fishy folk, while the albino, intellectually challenged Lavinia Whateley in "The Dunwich Horror"³³ was sexually entangled with Yog-Sothoth, a Mythos creature (referred to in several stories but not fully described). She produced the variously tentacled and monstrously Other Whateley twin brothers, of whom only Wilbur can move among humans. Nine foot tall, Wilbur wears long coats and is discovered to have tentacles below the waist, and a smell that sends dogs mad with anger. His monstrous twin is kept from human sight in the outhouse, where he is cared for by the grandfather, mad old Whateley, Lavinia and Wilbur, fed local cows, and grows to an enormous size, exploding himself and the building when his carers die. Lovecraft enacts his racism, sexism and terror at disability in this tale.

There are other dangerous, duplicitous, plotting and deviant women in his work, though not all are sexually terrifying and disgusting. None are caring, trustworthy, maternal or stable. "The Dreams in the Witch House" (1970³⁴) has a landlady with occult designs on her student tenants. Nabby Gardner in "The Colour Out of Space" (1927³⁵) descends into madness, Lady Margaret Trevor from Cornwall ("The Rats in the Walls", 1924³⁶) is a threat to local children, and the evil heroine of an old ballad. Both Audrey Davis in "The Curse of Yig" (1929³⁷), and De La Poer in "The Rats in the Walls"³⁸ are murderers ultimately committed as criminally insane. Asenath Waite from "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1937³⁹),

possessed by her deceased father, is a confusing character whose unstable identity indicates women's dangerous nature, among other things. However, as a figure of contestation, she has proved extremely popular among the women writers who respond to and write from or against Lovecraft in *She Walks in Shadows*⁴⁰. The women in co-written tales are also deadly, duplicitous, and sexually transgressive. "The Last Test" (1928⁴¹) and "The Curse of Yig"⁴² are among Lovecraft's revisions/collaborations with women authors, as is "Medusa's Coil"⁴³, co-written with Zealia Bishop. This latter tale intermixes Lovecraftian distaste for sexually energetic women with designs upon men, whether their husbands (Denis de Russy) or those who would paint them (Frank Marsh), with more familiar fin de siècle depictions of women as femmes fatales, snakes, Gorgons, half animal, half human, representations of desire as bestial. Marceline in "Medusa's Coil"⁴⁴ seems a compelling foreign beauty but carries a terrible secret. Like Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* (1891⁴⁵), her evil, dark, demonic self is only revealed in Frank Marsh's terrible picture of her. This revelation, like the uncovering of Dorian's picture in which all the sins of the flesh and soul have led to a vile, putrid, decaying horror, shows her possessed by a huge black snake. Marceline is a more conventional siren drawn from the contemporary fascination with women as whores, beasts, goddesses and deadly serpents, but she is also from New Orleans and somewhat dark skinned, a heated product of Lovecraft's racism and Othering.

Miscegenation and Fishy Folk

As Silvia Moreno-Garcia comments, Lovecraft's fixation with eugenics and sexual hierarchy always and necessarily positions men above women intellectually and in terms of human value. Responding to Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949⁴⁶) and Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993⁴⁷), Moreno-Garcia argues that "For Lovecraft, however, all women appear to be Others, all women are 'monstrous'. Only men are normal. And only certain, men at that" (17⁴⁸). Lovecraft is fixated on miscegenation, a disgusting terror and one

for which all women, particularly mothers and grandmothers, contribute when mating with the fishy folk, Elder Gods, white apes, whatever inhuman threatening creatures enter their lives. His racism and sexism intersect, loose or economically originated sexual acts lead to racial degeneration, and the possible end of the world (“The Dunwich Horror⁴⁹”). In Arthur Jermyn’s family, his music hall mother is a hidden problem, and further back the historical grandmother seems to have mated with a white ape in Africa, and been turned into an African idol (“Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family⁵⁰”). In “The Shadow over Innsmouth⁵¹” the protagonist ignores the traditional horror tale warnings, catches the bus to the town no one stays in, plies an old man with whiskey for an interview, stays the night against all good advice, and comes into close proximity with the townspeople’s mutated descendants, the fishy folk. The experience is equally bizarre and disturbingly frightening. The priests of the cult religion of Dagon, who wear tall tiaras, duck in and out of the seemingly ordinary houses turned places of worship. The jewellery is foreign and strange, the atmosphere threatening. Terms used of the mutated people such as “hordes”, and “swarms”, dehumanise them and remind twenty first century readers uncomfortably of both zombies (invasive, mindless), and the language very recently (2015-18) used of migrants/refugees, each deemed Other, and less than human. Lovecraft was horrified at the immigrant population of New York, and Angela Carter noted the Portuguese settled inhabitants in Providence as potential fuel for his racism.⁵² In “Innsmouth,” the narrator protagonist is disgusted by the non-human behaviour of the inhabitants:

the blasphemous fish-frogs of the nameless design – living and horrible – and as I saw them I knew also of what that humped, tiaraed priest in the black church basement had so fearsomely reminded me. Their number was past guessing. It seemed to me that there were limitless swarms of them.⁵³

He discovers that historically the people of the town mated with the fishy folk, the resultant rich catches reviving their dying fishing industry. While this might be understood as ensuring their survival, less acceptable is the acquisition of that strange jewellery, wages of what is represented as a vile sin, miscegenation. On returning home, the protagonist recognises similar jewellery in the family treasures, and realises he is himself a descendant of the Innsmouth Marsh family.

I gazed at their pictured faces with a measurably heightened feeling of repulsion and alienation. I could not at first understand the change, but gradually a horrible sort of *comparison* began to obtrude itself on my unconscious.⁵⁴

The inherited taint and guilt, it seems, lies with his degenerate grandmother.

Instead of a message about embracing the Other as oneself, recognising the stranger is a construction, as one would identify from the work of Julia Kristeva⁵⁵, Lovecraft presents this revelation as causing abject terror and disgust. The decay of the human race is seen to have spread more widely, beyond its containment in the seaside town.

Although neither Arthur Jermyn nor the narrator of “Innsmouth” can bear the truths about their origins and heredity, in “Innsmouth” the narrator is eventually drawn into acknowledging his heritage, something the reader feels is not supported by Lovecraft, seen instead as an inevitable degeneracy. He has a “frightful dream”⁵⁶ of meeting his grandmother on the ocean floor in a context of weird otherness, and plans to release his cousin from an insane asylum, together joining the historical family long hidden from their knowledge. Joyce Carol Oates makes a direct connection between Lovecraft’s own life and the end of the tale, when she defines this act: “To expunge the drama of having witnessed a parent’s descent into madness one may join the madness oneself”⁵⁷.

It is hardly surprising, given Lovecraft's absences and skewed representations of women, that contemporary women Gothic horror writers would want to seize and reimagine his women, offer a back story or a future, or completely rewrite the situations and events, using horror, carnival, parody, pastiche.

Lovecraft's misogyny is a target for Angela Carter, as is his reticence in naming the horrors he conjures. She brings her demythologising, down to earth realism as well as her own version of replaying and parodying various fantasies to bear on the kinds of constructions and representations of women which Lovecraft, among others, dangerously produces.

Angela Carter Demythologises

Angela Carter, who turned the tables on many misrepresentations of women's sexuality, travelled to Providence to seek out Lovecraft in history, in traces. She was intrigued both by his compulsion to represent women as abject and his deployment of sexual imagery in depicting terrors unknown. A late twentieth century feminist, Carter is both influenced by and has a wicked passion for debunking male sexualised terrors and fetishisation of women. Some of her sources for these terrors include Jacobean revenge tragedy, the darker fairy tales of Perrault and Grimm, the work of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, the fin de siècle's mix of disgust and carnival, film noir, popular fiction and film, and pornography from de Sade onwards. Carter explores the treatment of evil and the abjection of women in Lovecraft, adding a touch of irony, humour, parody, as she exposes the disgust with which he constructs women and anything to do with sex. Carter's femme fatales overturn the designs of their would-be puppeteers and manipulators, including the Asiatic professor in *The Loves of Lady Purple* (1974⁵⁸), Uncle Philip in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967⁵⁹), and the primary focus in this essay, the Grand Duke and Christian Rosencreutz in *Nights at the Circus*, (1987⁶⁰). Her

women laugh, calculate, escape, refusing to internalise the disempowering narratives which would lock them up in their appearances, the myths of denigration, forever. Evil is not a supernatural occurrence in Carter, and women refuse to remain in the roles of aged hag, whore, victim, monster, or source of all evil.

The introduction of *She Walks in Shadows* points out that it is a popular view that women prefer not to write weird or Mythos-influenced work “The first spark was the notion, among some fans of the Lovecraft Mythos, that women do not like to write in this category, that they *can't* write in this category.”⁶¹ If that were the case, it could be because of the rather predictable deified and reified parts women have to play in such work. However, this is not true of the stories in the collection, nor of the much earlier work of Carter. Carter’s writing is particularly clear and outspoken when debunking myths which constrain women, locking them up in appearance, in subordinate performative roles. Her down-to-earth, no-nonsense critique and humour is fuelled by a very real awareness of the dangers of being defined by and caught up in some powerful other’s constraining myth:

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 How that social fiction of my ‘femininity’ was created by means outside my control, and palmed off on me as the real thing This investigation of the social fictions that regulate our lives – what Blake called the ‘mind-forged manacles’ – is what I’ve concerned myself with consciously since that time.⁶²

Her Gothic comic horror uses pastiche, parody, and the bawdy and her earthy, very tangible versions of human evil contrast with the hidden threats, the suggestiveness of Lovecraft’s own unnameable horrors and lurking fears. She notes:

Lovecraft tacitly assumes that the 'unnameable' is the temporary embodiment of a free-form, cosmic evil like a blasting dew. This is a convention of the genre in which he works. Some of the consolatory quality of the tale of supernatural terror lies in this; that it removes evil from the realm of human practice and gives it the status of a visitation from another realm of being. It is an affliction. It is a possession.⁶³

Carter's critique of the dangerous absurdity of deifying and then destroying women as a form of sexual threat projected from male squeamish sexual fears is (to me) a clear response to Lovecraft's depiction of hags, bestial couplings (never seen but hinted at) and the vulnerability to which women's illicit, sexual behaviour potentially leads the whole of humanity. This response peaks in *Nights at the Circus*. Her character, Fevvers, a larger than life, performative cockney Venus, fledgling protected child of a sisterly whorehouse, is a winged woman with a heart of gold, aerialiste well versed in the arts of deception and entertainment. Fevvers is a 20th-century feminist match for Lovecraft's pantheon, his crones, lascivious female relatives who couple with a variety of demonic, mythic, fishy or bestial creatures to bring about the advent of the Elder Gods, the end of the world as we know it, springing from his pathological need to mythologise then abject women.

In *Nights at the Circus*⁶⁴, Fevvers' strength is in her personal control over her own being as both fact and fiction. She's earthy, gargantuan in many ways, larger than life, comic, yet material and materialistic, often to the point of putting herself in danger. In the opening scenes, set on the cusp of the century in her dressing room after her performance, Fevvers is interviewed about her history and status as a bird woman by the American journalist, Walser, in front of the poster which shows her in full flight. The very energy and bawdiness of her larger than life being is contrasted with the static clock, stuck at midnight, the witching hour, a time which licenses fantasy. The events of the novel intermix the down-to-earth with the fantastic so that it is hard to define and pin down this real and magical woman, as the

powerful men, Christian Rosencreutz, the Grand Duke and others who try, discover. She is dressed up as winged Venus in the brothel in which she lives as a child, and learns to fly by first jumping off the sideboard, but we also see her perform in the circus in a slow motion flight as an aerialiste, a move which only a bird woman rather than one on a string could manage.

Carter's short stories and novels upset representations of women as performative whores, puppets, objects of desire and victims of the drive to idolise, control and destroy. In this respect, Christian Rosencreutz is the main target in her engagement with Lovecraft's version of women. Rosencreutz deifies Fevvers, attempting to control her. In his role in the House of Lords his view is that women should not have votes "on account of how women are of a different soul-substance to men, cut from a different bolt of spirit cloth", pure, rarified, and not able to bother about politics. His house reeks of dominant masculine power, political and economic. The *Times* newspaper, the rich leather, the heavy, wooden studded doors, marble bathroom, the ornaments and objects of the fabric of the place are constant reminders of control and cruelty. Rosencreutz greets her in a priestly white robe tied with a cord and she catches sight of a heavy book, the "Mysterium Baphometis Revelatum"⁶⁵, which has the same kind of invented mythic power base as anything from Lovecraft's imagination, particularly his fictional grimoire, book of horrors and illicit knowledge, the *Necronomicon*. Rosencreutz wishes to sacrifice Fevvers, over whom he takes power by naming in his own way, as an angel, and a host of other beings (Azrael etc), each of which suggests sacrifice. To maintain power, he calls her by the name she refuses to use, Sophia. "Azreal, Azrail, Ashirel, Azriel, Azaril, Gabriel, Dark angel of many names, welcome to me, from your home in the third heaven,"⁶⁶ "Flora", "Venus Pandemos."⁶⁷

His next chant is:

Lady of the hub of the celestial wheel, creature half of earth and half of air, virgin and whore, reconciler of fundament and firmament, reconciler of opposing states through the mediation of your ambivalent body, reconciler of the grand opposites of death and life.⁶⁸

This precedes his insistence that she dies on the altar. While the danger is real, the incantation is dealt with by Carter through Fevvers as gibberish, and the various signs of power Rosencreutz carries with him, including his rose coiled, penis rampant pendant which “aspires upwards”, “dragged down” by the female part, are exposed as a constructed nonsense. Rosencreutz intones pseudo-religiously “the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex which sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules,”⁶⁹ which Fevvers recognises as tedious and pretentious “neo-Platonic Rosicrucianism.”⁷⁰ The deification and reification of women is his plot, his aim is to capture, control, then destroy Fevvers so that he ingests her power to make him somehow immortal. Luckily, Fevvers has the energy to break his spell and escape, flying free of the legitimated insanity of this version of male sexualised power. As he approaches with a blade, Fevvers realises she is to be sacrificed to his insane notions. Stabbing him with her ornate toy sword, she escapes, leaving feathers behind, earthy, shaken but in control.

The scene emphasises Carter’s debunking of extreme masculine terror at women’s sexuality, a sexuality constructed as some kind of power to enable eternal life. This is based on various heightened, intense, inventions, supported by myths in which woman is both life force and sacrificial victim, dangerous in her sexuality, objectified, reified, deified, sacrificed. Fevvers’ commonsensical responses interpose Rosencreutz’s incantatory rapturous inputs. Her escape is a deflation for the mystical nonsense he has spun, upon which he has built his notion of everlasting life, and a triumph for her very everyday self-awareness, energy and the self-preservation implicit in action. When she escapes the mythos-dominated misogynist

Christian Rosencreutz, Fevvers flies away through the trees in the early morning, landing bruised but free.

The novel licenses the reality of the fictional, the fantastic, while critiquing the mythologising imposed upon Fevvers and women more generally, which Rosencreutz, the Grand Duke and others perpetrate when trying to take over her freedom and her body. She is a winged, free agent, neither a sprite to be caught and tamed, nor a mythical goddess of some merged version of sources for Rosencreutz nor a golden bird static and petrified, on a golden swing, for the Grand Duke who shrinks and controls everything he desires to own. She is her own free agent, and her refusal of these men's fantasies undercuts and ridicules them, while never ignoring the danger their power represents. Finally, she has control over her own sense of fantastic freedom, her own agency.

Angela Carter visited Providence in search of traces of Lovecraft, commented on his gravestone carving "I am Providence", the weather, the settled migrants. Her essays, collected in *Shaking A Leg*, show her interest in his recurrent themes and entities. With her usual humour she notes his sexual restraint, his expressionism, the marvellous, the bizarre and unnameable and his construction of

tales of terror which impose an expressionist landscape of dread and menace upon the mundane geography of New England. Some of these tales (like 'The Picture in the House', 'At the Mountains of Madness', perhaps and one or two others) conform to the surrealistic aesthetic of convulsive beauty.⁷¹

She also notes the 1960s and 70s resurgence of interest in his work: "Lovecraft had a great vogue during the acid honeymoon of the last decade":

He can invoke the marvellous, usually when he is not trying too hard to do so. He invented a bizarre cosmogony full of ambivalent deities with names that look like typing errors. Hastur, the Unspeakable, Chthulhu, who lies in the watery depths. Nyarlothotep, the Messenger. Shub-Niggurath, the black goat of the woods with a thousand young.⁷²

Carter recognises that Lovecraft's interest in sex is deeply buried, neither prurient nor homoerotic, and although octopoidal creatures somewhat invade Rosa Dexter in what she suspects is a co-written piece:

Fond as he was of tentacles, he never – being a fine, old-fashioned, New England gentleman – allowed them to sully the flesh of a white woman.⁷³

Tentacles, and sexual fascination, are part of the subject of Caitlín R. Kiernan's "Houses under the Sea" (2003.)⁷⁴

Caitlín R. Kiernan

Where Angela Carter is an earthy, feminist and comic debunker of Lovecraft's archaic language, fascination with esoteric knowledge and power, terror at difference, at female fecundity and the bodily, Kiernan rejuvenates the strange and revivifies the underlying sexual fascination which Lovecraft wraps in the winding sheets of disgust and death. Herself a resident of Providence, Rhode Island, where Lovecraft was born and lived, Kiernan has been called his spiritual granddaughter, a title she relishes. "Houses Under the Sea" was invited for a second collection by the horror editor Ellen Datlow, partly to feed her own lifelong fascination with Lovecraft and the good writing arising from his work. In this tale Kiernan explores the compulsive, unavoidable fascination of a contemporary man with Jacova Angovine, an ancient but contemporary woman, herself from the fishy folk. Datlow forbade

“use of the words ‘eldritch’, or ‘ichor’, and no mention of Cthulhu or his minions. And especially no tentacles⁷⁵”. However, there are, of course some tentacles in the collection.

Kiernan acknowledges Lovecraft’s influence:

I think what Lovecraft taught me was the paramount importance of *mood* if one is to create genuinely masterful dark fantasy. And, also, he taught me the power of *suggestion*, that it’s so much more effective to hint at the nature of the unknown than to throw the door wide open, that it’s the unknown that truly terrifies and inspires awe and wonder. The known can always be dismissed. Too few people ever get past his god things and arcane texts, which are really only window dressing, to find the heart of some of the most powerfully atmospheric prose of the weird ever written.

Lovecraft’s “mythos” is only a delivery device for his deeply subversive cosmicism, in which all of human history is, at best, a dust mote in an indifferent gulf of time and space.⁷⁶

This comment deliberately ignores critical concern over Lovecraft’s racism and sexism, moving beyond the “window dressing” of gods and the arcane to recognise both his talent for atmosphere, the indescribable and probably unnameable, the weird, and a grander, cosmic perspective where humankind is put in its (rather inferior) place. Kiernan neither attacks and undermines nor parodies the Lovecraft-inspired woman, Jacova Angevine, at the heart of her story, instead emphasising her eternal, otherworldly power, the allure of the inexplicable, the mixed charm and threat, found traditionally in mythic or faery folk. Where Lovecraft provides a narrator who discovers to his horror, his own origins among the inhabitants of Innsmouth, marking the proximity of the human to the abject, underlining disgust at miscegenation, corruption, greed, Otherness, in “Houses Under the Sea” Kiernan offers us a similar undersea world to that suggested in Lovecraft’s own work, but nuanced differently.

Kiernan does not look at the hags or culpably weak human females; instead, she focuses on the erotic attraction of Angevine, an undersea woman, whose eternal circle, drawn around the narrator, will forever trap him in his memories. He replays the TV footage of a sinking submarine which proves both an undersea world, and his actual sexual encounters with her. In Kiernan's story, Lovecraft's Innsmouth is displaced to the California coast and Angevine is a former Berkeley professor expelled from academia because of esoteric research. The prophetic head of the "Open Door of the Night" cult, Angevine is an eroticised fantasy memory to the protagonist. She is simultaneously a leader of an undersea cult, who leads her earthly followers to drowning or eternal life, and like a traditional mermaid, fascinating, offering a deadly embrace. The first vision of Jacova Angevine reminds us of John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969⁷⁷). Sara Woodruff is glimpsed, isolated at the end of the Cobb, the stone jetty in Lyme Regis, her hair blowing in the salty wind. She is a woman who constructed her own sexually interesting story, of betrayal, to rescue herself from marginality, and in her mystery and allure, her outsider position, she is as unforgettable as is Jacova Angevine. The narrator-protagonist in Kiernan's tale can forget nothing as he pieces together the times he has seen and been with Angevine, her public appearance "on the old pier at Moss on the day they launched the ROV Tiburon 11"⁷⁸ and on CNN. He is abashed that his role and skills are constructing a story of her life but he has to try and make sense of her allure and an unimaginable reality. He recalls both the sexy woman he loved and lost and her historical and publicly remembered role as one who led what seemed like a religious cult to their death under the sea. Piecing the story together also involves tracking back through images of her life, and reading her father's novels, the "unremarkable mystery tales and potboilers"⁷⁹.

Angevine's fascination is signalled in references to both the female seller of cockles and mussels in the folksong, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, where human bodily corruption

is set against otherworldliness: “I close my eyes and I see her, Jacova Angevine, the lunatic prophet from Salinas, pearls that were her eyes, cockles and mussels, alive, alive-o”⁸⁰. She is an eroticised fantasy memory to him, long lived, famous when he met her. His awe is redoubled when he pieces the tales together. Her book “Waking Leviathan” ended her career, seen as confused, “preposterous,”⁸¹ as indeed such a tale, which breaks the bounds of safe history and realism, would be seen. Probably her fault was producing an academic book on the topic of undersea life rather than a potboiler like her father’s, where fiction can say more. Further recollections of her are based on the tales she told him including one of when, as a child, she drowned but came back to life in the hospital, telling “some crazy story about mermaids and sea monsters and demons, about those things trying to drag her down to the bottom of the sea and drown her and how it wasn’t an undertow at all”⁸². This offers a clue to her adult behaviour.

He recalls Angevine with her followers in a warehouse in Monterey:

men and women in white robes are listening to every word she says. They hang on every syllable, her every breath, their many eyes like the bulging eyes of deep-sea fish encountering sunlight for the first time. Dazed, terrified, enraptured, lost.

All of them lost.

I close my eyes and she’s leading them into the bay.

Those creatures jumped the barricades

And have headed for the sea. ⁸³

This scene reminds us of the order of Dagon, and the fishy folk emerging from and returning to the sea, flip flopping in the streets, in Lovecraft’s “The Shadow over Innsmouth”. The tale is tangled but we piece it together, as the narrator protagonist does when waking “from a long

dream of storms and drowning”⁸⁴. Her book and Angovine herself spoke of a civilisation under the sea, her father’s books talk of people walking into the sea (Pretoria) and mermaids, gold coins, stamped with the figure of an octopus, huge fish and someone praying to “momma Hydra.”⁸⁵ The figure of Hydra is central to Angevine’s identity and the threat she poses not just to her drowned followers but the narrator. He talks of “Jacova’s mother Hydra, that corrupt and bloated Madonna of the abyss, its tentacles and anemone tendrils and black, bulging squid eyes, the tubeworm proboscis snaking from one of the holes where its face should have been”⁸⁶. She is a creature is straight from Lovecraft. He reconstructs the tale from his recollection, video, TV, newspaper clippings, acknowledging that it is just a story, a fiction he has bought into and must edit: “Whatever remains, that meagre sum of this profane division, that’s the bastard chimera we call a ‘story’. I am not building but cutting away. And all stories, whether advertised as truth or admitted falsehoods, are fictions.”⁸⁷ His tale is a “ghost story,”⁸⁸ realising that Jacova has become “my ghost, my private haunting.”⁸⁹ She is likened to undersea creatures, the unknown, the timeless, from a kind of Atlantis, since the submersible sent down to the ocean floor recorded a stone monolith, carved, clearly a cultural artefact. He replays a videotape over and over, raw unedited footage of the end of the ROV Tiburon 11, which fell into an unexpected abyss under the sea, hovering over the Delta stone with its carved delta sign. As he follows the submersible’s perspective, he sees Jacova’s body on the sea bed. She seems utterly other, but oddly, he realises, this seemingly dead body, this creature, was recorded the day before she led her followers into the sea. Like the little mermaid, perhaps, Angevine takes her followers to another existence, and the tale of mass drowning could be no more than a cover story: “She opens her eyes, and they are *not* her eyes, but the eyes of some marine creature adapted to the perpetual night. The soulless eyes of an anglerfish or gulper eel, eyes like matching pools of ink, and something darts from her parted lips—”⁹⁰.

He ends on his repeated dream, inescapably locked into remembering her. She has drawn a circle around him, but he missed the boat. He didn't go with her to the bottom of the sea and now the door to that other world is forever shut: "the gates are shut now, they won't open again for you or anyone else."⁹¹ Kiernan's story is erotic, full of longing and loss, of explanations mixed with research and dream, "moving between the fantastic made real and the realistic, TV culture captivating us as readers with this tale of the other, newness, longing and loss."⁹²

Where Lovecraft condemns, his fascination mixed with disgust at the miscegenation caused by interbreeding with the sea creatures off Insmouth, laying the blame on the sexual activity of the grandmothers, the Insmouth greed for rich fish catches and exotic treasures, Kiernan paints another, equally dangerous picture. "Houses Under the Sea" gives us a different sense of the allure of such creatures through the persona and unavoidable attraction of the marine scientist and cult leader Jacova Angevine, her scarred shoulders indicating her fishy links. To the narrator she resembles a mermaid who could roll him down to another world, both captivating and threatening. Even though her eyes are dead, like a fish, she is still eroticised, inescapable and elemental.

She Walks in Shadows (2015)

Several women writers have taken up the challenge of engaging with Lovecraft-inspired universes by repeating the ways in which women are figured as crones, denigratingly undermining heritage and the purity of the family line, coupling with the monstrous and spawning hideous creatures. Others, equally culpable and vile, live amongst the normal, unaware of the terrible legacy of the guilty, miscegenatious acts of their lascivious grandmothers. Sean Moreland's review captures the varied tone of *She Walks in Shadows* as

“synthesizing a string of discordant, haunting, harrowing, and sometimes also hilarious little symphonies in the key of HPL.”⁹³

Amelia Gorman’s “Bring the Moon to Me”⁹⁴ begins as a sisterhood, family tale in which the younger woman and her mother trade expertise in knitting, the mother knitting sweaters for fishermen which she swears will protect them from the threats of the sea, from the weather, from storms, and the daughter producing computer code to help men navigate to the moon,. The imagery is comforting, domestic, but there are comparisons between their work: “My mother turned the yarn into thick forest and spiralling galaxies.”⁹⁵ The daughter demonstrates her weaving of code, for her mother’s comprehension, using table runners and napkin rings. Although this is cosy, the daughter feels, “we’re changing the world.”⁹⁶ As she begins to see repeating patterns not only in the jumpers but in numbers in her own work, the underlying uncanny takes over from the domestic. The wool of her mother’s work is “like a snake or an eel,”⁹⁷ with a life of its own and for the men who buy the jumpers, who “stumbled off, somewhat dazed from a house smelling of lanolin and fish oil”⁹⁸ they are seen as offering some kind of spell, warding off the dangers of the sea. Once mother and daughter have shared their similar work and the discovery of the patterns, the mother tells of a different jumper with a different kind of pattern and code a (Cthulhu) call knitted in it. Promising a fisherman safety with this jumper, she actually sent him to the creatures of the deep.

She gave it to a fisherman and told him her usual marketing ploy: it would keep him safe from all the dangers above and below the water. She lied. She sent him out wearing a beacon that shouted at the heart of the moon. It made him see things, he still babbles about the underwater city and the sunken dead that drifted up from the sea bed.⁹⁹

However, her plan is much greater: “even that wasn’t loud enough to bring someone down from the sky.”¹⁰⁰ The knitting of wool and code is a dedicated women-driven, cosmic plot in plain view. The daughter and her naïve co-workers weave a computer code, that will more effectively call those from beyond and, like an iteration of *Alien*¹⁰¹, guide Astronauts to venture out, and bring back permanent change. “The Astronauts will return but not alone, they will bring the shadow from the Moon down, finally. It will be enormous, its landing will send out ropes as large as the Pacific.”¹⁰² More than a shadow, it has the characteristics of the Elder Gods and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, heralding the end of the world: “Its hooves will trample the street lights and skyscrapers until there is nothing but starlight. I will stand on the rocks by the bay and wrap my sweater tightly around my shoulders, knowing that I will be the last left standing.”¹⁰³ The justification of the domestic – keeping warm with a sweater, knitting, weaving, protection against storms at sea, with the now terrifyingly nuanced “My work will change the world”¹⁰⁴ – nicely interweaves the familiar Lovecraftian tropes with an updated, sisterly, domestic scenario. These women are more deliberately active than the rather downtrodden Lavinia Whateley in “The Dunwich Horror” (1929), who also has connections with the elder gods.

The folktale sylvan settings of “Lavinia’s Wood”¹⁰⁵ remind readers of tales of sirens, seductive women luring their smitten, bewitched partners into the greenwood to turn them into creatures. But backwoods Lavinia Whateley, odd among her extended family, avoids the abuse of her many cousins, and like the witch maidens of folk tales, chooses the kinder, less deformed Rist as her partner to fulfil her destiny (and affect that of mankind). Their tryst at her house in the woods is not quite what he expects. Lavinia takes him to a hill top and a stone altar. As they have sex, her real intended (monstrous, otherworldly) partner starts to come to life through Rist, making him a traditional sacrifice to the gods, and he is left, a crumpled scrap of clothing without substance. This tale mixes folklore and the Cthulhu

mythos, and although we see Lavinia's motives, she is still only a victim and a damned vessel, in line with Lovecraft convention. She suffers a stroke, and her own father Wizard Whateley indulges in a coarse joke when he says "Yog-Sothoth might be the key an' gate, but he still needs a little help with the keyhole". Slumped, sliced, Lavinia has no prospects for other suitors, and her duty will be evident nine months later.

Several stories in the collection are influenced by body transfer, and by the story of Asenath Waite whose body is possessed by her father in "The Thing on the Doorstep." (1937). Mary Turzillo's "When She Quickens"¹⁰⁶ is an amusing tale of female spite and trickery in which the all powerful empress Ayahuasca, who after her sacrificial ritual death, normally reincarnates taking the body of a selected child, finds herself temporarily cornered by her unfaithful partner, whose mistress will bear a child who could inherit. Instead, she directs her migrating soul into the pacing snow leopard and outwits them all. Wendy Wagner's "Queen of a New America"¹⁰⁷ also draws from Lovecraft's fascination with body transfer and ancient religions, as well as his finally rather unsatisfactory writing relationship with Harry Houdini (who died before the production of their final "jointly" written work). The long entombed Egyptian queen Nitocris laments the wear and tear on her tomb contents, her land of Egypt, and the mundanity of modern America, takes a host African American child's body, comes close to taunting male teens, and eats a scarab beetle. The queen in the host child body suddenly becomes aware of the new America she can bring to being, one eventually dominated by a powerful Black female ruler.

In Molly Tanzer's "The Thing on the Cheerleading Squad"¹⁰⁸, the girls of Miskatonic High seem like god-fearing, cheer-leading, pom-pom waving American high school teens, but as Lovecraft readers we know it is dangerous for the lovely Veronica to come home for supper with Asenath. Fathers body swapping with their daughters is a kind of spirit shift incest in a contemporary American high school and community setting. The horror is

augmented by the social discomfort of dealing with Asenath's sudden unusual lesbian approaches, her role as mascot, and her withered ageing father Ephraim coming to the practices. Veronica is caught up in the little rituals he/Asenath have in mind and ends up victim of a double body swap, trapped in the body of an aged man in need of regular care. The tale deals with sexuality and ageing, ironically undercutting ostensible god-fearing, clean cut family community values.

Everyday American communities are a target also in Valerie Valdes' "Shub-Niggurath's Witnesses,"¹⁰⁹ in which the horned, hooved followers of Shub-Niggurath call like doorstep Jehovah's Witnesses, trying to attract new believers into their cult by pointing out the pointlessness of existence and the opportunity of a form of eternal life. Those who agree and are sold their message disappear into the forest, dance riotously, then become blood sacrifices. This and several other tales in the collection capture the horror of a threat in the seemingly everyday – schoolfriends and their families, religious sales folk, while several also highlight, parody, undercut the dangers of Lovecraft's sexism, sexual disgust concerning women, miscegenation, anything that is Other.

Conclusion

Lovecraft's influence is legion, and emerges in a surprising range of horror texts, from Dennis Wheatley's demonic threats, sexual prurience and esoteric library holdings to Buffy the vampire slayer¹¹⁰ and her friends' use of spells, more esoteric books, and tentacled horrors from the Hellmouth. Many of the stories discussed here are aligned with Buffy's down to earth girl power, and the work of Angela Carter provides much of the critical frame through which we can appreciate these homages, parodies, pastiches, story continuations and checks on the sexism and racism we find in Lovecraft's work. Carter researches, scrutinises, rewrites, parodies and exposes the sources of representations of women's abjection and

disempowerment, and in so doing she also includes and exposes the work of Lovecraft. This she does to tell other stories, particularly ones in which women reject the roles of puppets and pawns (*The Magic Toyshop*, 1967; “The Loves of Lady Purple”, 1974; *Nights at the Circus*, 1987), seizing their sexuality and offering ways of revising and rewriting received, constraining myths. Angela Carter’s criticism of the obscure grandiosity of Lovecraft’s mythos and abstract horrors is played out in many of the tales in the collection by women writers, *She Walks in Shadows*. Like Carter’s work, particularly parts of *Nights at the Circus* (1987), these are serious and amusing parodies of Lovecraft’s repressed sexual responses, his fears and loathing of women, sex and foreign others, and they also bring versions of insidious, cosmic, bodily horror into the commonplace, the domestic and the local. Despite his esoteric references, Lovecraft troubles the reader with unnervingly everyday insecurities, for the naïve traveller, or the curious researcher, the threat of the behaviour of the unknown local people and places, powerful knowledge in obscure books, a disturbing of the notionally domestic for the tenant taking over a room with a history, the student in lodgings with a strange landlady.

She Walks in Shadows engages with Lovecraft’s mythos and his tales’ disgusted fascination with sex, race, otherness, transposing the issues to modern day America. Stories here take the twists and turns of familiar tales, the body-swaps, the power games, the esoteric religions and their power, the books, spiritual and mystical oppressions, and transitions. As with the work of Angela Carter, they often both use parody and comment on contemporary issues – spite, family tension, violence, incest, power games. These new stories are replete with powerful, wry, imaginative women who refuse to be sacrificial victims; cult figures destroyed for their power; hags; sources of inherited problems and disgusting terrors. Instead, many of them are wry, intelligent, able to body-swap to their own needs, fly or swim free, empowered.

Lovecraft 's ineffable, noxious, vengeful, terrifying, nameless horrors and his disgust at Otherness, the foreign, the disabled, the female, are the sources for the lurking evil or threat in the work of Kiernan, Carter and the women writing in *She Walks in Shadows*. The cult and sexual fascination of Kiernan's Jacova Angovine are all too familiar in our contemporary world, and while Carter parodies the deification and sacrifice of women in *Nights at the Circus*¹¹, each reveals the fascination, sexual frissons, and threat of his versions, the weird as palpable and credible. On the one hand, all the tales discussed here pay a form of homage to Lovecraft's cosmic threats and the everyday terror of obscure horrors. On the other hand, women in Carter, Kiernan and several of the contemporary tales each speak back to Lovecraft's sexual fear and disgust, exposing deep seated problems with gender and power, and in Carter's case, among others, giving sexually energetic women the last laugh.

Endnotes

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⁶ Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R Stiles, *She Walks in Shadows*, eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles, (Vancouver, BC: Innsmouth Free Press, 2015).

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⁸⁵ Kiernan, "Houses Under the Sea," 178.

⁸⁶ Kiernan, "Houses Under the Sea," 186.

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⁹⁸ Gorman, "Bring the Moon to Me," 31.

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¹⁰⁵ Angela Slatter, “Lavinia’s Wood,” in *She Walks in Shadows*, eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles, (Vancouver, BC: Innsmouth Free Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁶ Turzillo, “When She Quickens.”

¹⁰⁷ Wagner, “Queen of a New America.”

¹⁰⁸ Molly Tanzer, “The Thing on the Cheerleading Squad,” in *She Walks in Shadows*, eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles, (Vancouver, BC: Innsmouth Free Press, 2015).

¹⁰⁹ Valerie Valdes, “Shub-Niggurath’s Witnesses,” in *She Walks in Shadows*, eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Paula R. Stiles, (Vancouver, BC: Innsmouth Free Press, 2015).

¹¹⁰ Joss Whedon, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2003.

¹¹¹ Carter, *Nights at the Circus*.