

Angela Carter and Folk Music: `Invisible Music', Prose and the Art of Canorography [book review]

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Angela Carter and Folk Music: 'Invisible Music', Prose and the Art of Canorography by

Polly Paulusma, Bloomsbury Academic ISBN 978-1-350-29628-2

There is surely always a new angle, a new perspective to be found. And it's encouraging when the subject is Angela Carter, whose feminist fairy tales and magic realism has borne much scholarship and has been a staple of British literature study for decades. Polly Paulusma, independent scholar but also, critically, an independent singer, musician and songwriter, must have felt at least a tingle of excitement when she was given access to Angela Carter's folk archive, held in private hands, to unravel a hunch, test a theory, that she had had for some time: that Angela Carter is not just influenced by music, specifically folk song, in a thematic context, but infuses directly into her texts performative knowledge from singing and song research.

It has long been known that Angela Carter, with then-husband Paul Carter, was active in the 1960s Bristol folk scene, attending clubs and later running the 'Folksong and Ballad Bristol' club, encouraging singers to consider performing the songs of the British Isles, specifically England, when they took to the floor (a scan of the club manifesto is the first appendix). What is less known, or at least less appreciated, however, is Angela Carter's folk singing praxis, her English folk song academic research, and the research she undertook with Paul, who also collected and recorded singers. Paulusma, herself an Angela Carter devotee, has dared to listen where no other Carter scholar has previously lingered. In examining the writer's understanding of English folk song, its modes and melodies, the rhythmic vessels in which the lyrics are carried, Paulusma has found folksong mapped across Carter's literary output, from short story to novel, to form a body of 'song-infused musico literature' (p. 128).

Paulusma shows us how, with impressive theoretical sleight of hand, both literary and musical, taking apart the songs Carter was known to have herself performed, as verified by

friend and keeper of the folk archive, Christine Molan, and illustrating how they find themselves, subtly or more overtly, in Carter's oeuvre. The reader is treated to a demonstration of, for example, how the liminal spirit of the greenwood is found, lyrically, thematically, and sonically, in her work, highlighting short story, 'The Erl King', as a clear proponent. The gender fluidity of folksong, not just of the subject but its performers, too, informs her embodiment (or impersonation) of genders, and the willingness to slip between them. Carter's shifting, shifty, tenses are shown to be deliberate resonations of the 'wooziness' (p. 76) of the uncertain, unpredictable modes in folk song. And Paulusma's close analysis of the melody is particularly enjoyable in 'Reynardine', one of 32 songs Carter transcribed in full. She says:

The Mixolydian ABCD melodic structure of the tune intensifies the meaning, suggesting a dragging, a pulsing, a resistance, a darker and more menacing compulsion. The tune opens with an optimistic spiral-climb phrase up the scale only as far as the VI – before lowering its eyelids flirtatiously to the IV to rest (p. 54).

Paulusma proposes a term – “canorography”, from “canorous”, meaning melodious or resonant’ (p. 17) – to describe this immersion of song (in all its facets) in literary works, and is adamant that this approach is not particular to Angela Carter: other writer-singers, and she offers Zadie Smith, Maya Angelou and Kazuo Ishiguro, and the prose of artists better known as musicians (Leonard Cohen, Tracy Thorne, Kerry Andrew, James Yorkston and Kathryn Williams), could/should be examined for ‘onward pedagogical implications for the teaching and reimagining of literature as audial event’ (p. 156). Most pleasing is the chapter in which Paulusma illustrates canorography in action, through a spotlight on the work of contemporary folksinger, Emily Portman. Here, Portman's admiration for Carter is assessed

and Paulusma draws up four categories where the work of the two artists can be compared side by side.

In *Angela Carter and Folk Music: 'Invisible Music', Prose and the Art of Canorography*, Paulusma offers us a rigorous blueprint for this new enquiry. In clear yet entertaining prose, discussions are made with precision and concision, and her burgeoning theory underpins each topic of debate so there is no tangential waywardness. This is a tantalising proposal for Carter and music-literary scholars alike.

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