

Patriarchal Mediations of *Carrie*: The Book, the Movie, and the Musical

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The Curse: Telekinesis and Menstruation in Stephen King's *Carrie*

The novel's birth was almost as difficult as its title character's. Conceived at the suggestion of a friend who challenged King to create a credible female character ("Why are you writing all of this macho crap? . . . You don't have any feminine sensibility at all"), the work was soon aborted when King realized just how difficult the task of writing a woman's story could be (King, quoted in Underwood and Miller, 85–86). King's wife Tabitha then retrieved the manuscript from the wastebasket, launching him again into the unfathomable depths of a woman's world but also, by answering his questions, helping him to survive in that world; hence, the dedication: "This is for Tabby, who got me into it—and then bailed me out of it" (*Carrie*).¹ Despite his wife's collaboration and the novel's successful coming to term, King remains ambivalent about his ability to create a believable woman, fearing that he may have fallen into the stereotypes identified by Leslie Fiedler in *Love and Death in the American Novel*: "When I think I'm free of the charge that most male American writers depict women as either nebbishes or bitch-goddess destroyers, I create someone like Carrie—who starts out as a nebbish victim and then becomes a bitch goddess, destroying an entire town in an explosion of hormonal rage" (quoted in Beahm, 38).

"Hormonal rage" suggests the connection between menstruation and telekinesis that is the book's main focus; as King readily admits, *Carrie* is in many ways the sexist nightmare of an immature male who, like Billy Nolan, fears female equality as a threat to his masculinity: "*Carrie* is largely about how women find their own channels of power, and what men fear about women and women's sexuality . . . which is only to say that, writing the book in 1973 and only out of college three years, I was fully aware of what Women's Liberation

implied for me and others of my sex. The book is . . . an uneasy masculine shrinking from a future of female equality" (*Danse Macabre*, 170). But King has tried to get beyond a masculinist perspective and to bridge the gender gap: Not only has he given *Carrie* aspects of his own life as a child—King too was "fat," "estranged from other kids my age," "deserted" by his "father," and prone to "violent" feelings, "particularly in my teens" (King, quoted in Beahm, 27)—but King has also attempted to tell the story from a feminist perspective, interpreting his own "male fears—about menstruation and about dealing with women who eat you up" as misunderstandings of nature, fears so strong that they become self-fulfilling prophecies (King, quoted in Underwood and Miller, 95).

Though never explained, it is clearly no mere coincidence that the awakening of Carrie's psychic abilities is tied to the onset of her first period: Menstruation and telekinesis are both referred to by an uncomprehending society as "the curse," and it is patriarchal society's very attempt to repress the power of female sexuality, to keep the blood hidden, that causes the defiant eruption of Carrie's paranormal powers. In *Carrie*, the supernatural rises to assert the inevitability of natural female forces that society has tried to deny; if Carrie's power is a "curse," it is one society has brought upon itself. The fantastic elements in the book are thus an integral part of its social commentary: The metaphysical power of mind over matter is the only channel of force open to Carrie in a society in which men have monopolized all the physically active roles. As King explains, Carrie is "Woman, feeling her powers for the first time and, like Samson, pulling down the temple on everyone in sight at the end of the book" (*Danse Macabre*, 170). At crucial moments in the novel (3–4, 7, 37), King compares Carrie's psychic powers to the force of a nuclear bomb, suggesting that natural energy (female or atomic) will inevitably backfire on society if that energy is directed toward misogyny or war. King likens society's oppression of Carrie to a "chain reaction approaching critical mass": the explosion of Carrie's feminist rage. Nature has her laws and will not be denied.

The young women who bombard Carrie with tampons in the opening shower scene display the "revulsion" and "disgust" (6) they have been taught to feel at the sight of their female natures. Even the gym teacher, Miss Desjardin, whose "nonbreasted," "muscular" physique and skill at "archery" suggest a feminist identification² and whose close mother-daughter relationship helped her feel pride in her first period (5, 9–10), is overwhelmed with "self-shame" when she sees Carrie's bleeding and confesses that "Maybe there's some kind of instinct about menstruation that makes women want to snarl" (10, 16). As on the day when she used a tampon to apply lipstick (8), Carrie in the shower scene has once again exposed an aspect of female nature that is considered unnatural and unfeminine. Like her menstrual blood, the fat, sweat, mucus, and shit Carrie exudes are all mocked by a society that considers the body a threat and that associates women with the body (7, 8, 13).

Thinking about it later, Sue Snell realizes that she and the other young women in the shower scene were unconscious participants in a social ritual:

women finding a place in patriarchal society by projecting their own unacceptable female traits onto Carrie and making her the scapegoat for them. To rise in society, Sue must see through men's eyes, oppressing undesirable females like Carrie and repressing the undesirable femaleness within: Wearing hair rollers and taking birth-control pills, Sue ensures that her body will be presentable to the male gaze (34). Sue comes to realize that her social popularity is bought at a high price; in ostracizing Carrie, she is not only denying sisterhood, she is also repudiating her own female independence: "And having something she had always longed for—a sense of place, of security, of status—she found that it carried uneasiness with it like a darker sister" (33).

For her own sake as well as Carrie's, Sue attempts to reintegrate femaleness back into the social body before it surfaces vengefully as a "dark thing" to destroy the society that denied it light. First she reintroduces a female awareness of the body into her relationship with Tommy. Whereas earlier she had viewed their relationship through society's eyes ("they fit together walking . . . she could look at their reflection in a store window and think, There goes a handsome couple"), now she begins to see things from her own perspective: Having sex to gain social advancement is not true love but a brutal, unfeeling act: "[S]he had let him fuck her (do you have to say it that way yes this time I do) simply because he was Popular" (33–34). Only when Tommy stops trying to score and admits to her that he got the rubber on wrong, only when she stops trying to be the perfect model she thinks he wants her to be and confesses that the first time was painful, do they really make love. Sharing with each other their doubts about the future, Sue and Tommy find that an admission of bodily weakness brings not repudiation but a mutual recognition of their common humanity. It is no accident that Sue finds the sight of Tommy "looking pensively out the back window with his pants still down around his ankles" both "comic and oddly endearing" (32): The male mind that admits to physical vulnerability is more attractive than a sham of invincible intellect.

Sue's second step toward reintroducing a female acknowledgment of the physical is to undo her earlier scapegoating of Carrie and ask Tommy to take Carrie to the prom in her place, thus claiming her own ability to do without social affirmation and giving Carrie a chance at the acceptance she herself has had. Tommy's acquiescence to Sue's request shows his unchauvinistic regard for Sue and her need to atone for her cruelty toward Carrie; it also shows Tommy's truly masculine willingness to face society's censure at his association with Carrie in a romantic setting.

Like dark doubles of Sue and Tommy, Chris Hargensen and Billy Nolan also chafe at social conformity, but only work their way in deeper in an effort to get out. Chris's conformist assault on Carrie (and refusal to atone for it by doing the gym exercises set as penance) has gotten her barred from the very prom to which Carrie has now been invited. The ferocious zeal of Chris's conformist assault has backfired, excluding her from her place as leader of an adolescent rite of passage (Queen of the Prom) and alienating her from her

former entourage, who agreed to submit to the punishment prescribed by authority. Chris's overzealous attempt to conform is both a sign of her deep insecurity about fitting in and an indication of a female independence trying to get out: Chris has channeled all her nonconformist rage into being an exceptional conformist, a standard of standardized womanhood; in Chris, the goody-goody and the bad girl are one and the same.

Like Sue, Chris finds that packaging herself for male consumption makes her attractive to society men, but the sex that ensues is also prepackaged, already programmed, a simulacrum of feeling between a commercial-perfect couple, a consummate joining of gender stereotypes. Having stereotyped herself to be attractive, Chris finds that she can attract only stereotypes: These men love her only for her image, an image they had her create only to reinforce their image of themselves. Chris's "passivity" during intercourse makes them feel more actively virile; they don't want an individually responsive woman. The fact that Chris later "achieved her own solitary climax while viewing the incident as a single closed loop of memory" (94) shows both her isolation in a world of conformity and her desire for personal fulfillment, even if this must be merely masturbatory or through a voyeuristic fantasy.

Seeking the real in a world of simulacra, Chris is understandably attracted to Billy Nolan, whose "old, dark" 1950s car promises delivery from the false light of the new, the "machine-stamped, anonymous vehicles" of her 1970s boyfriends (95). Chris's nostalgia is for a genuineness she has never known, a passionate individuality that will bring out her own; as the "first [lover] she could not dance and dandle at her whim" (94), Billy seems more than just a stereotype responding to her stereotypical beauty. Unlike her white-collar yuppie boyfriends, sweaty, grease-monkey Billy seems at home with physical labor, with fluids, and with the body. Not having cordoned himself off from the facts of life within a "ventless" car smelling of "plastic seat covers and windshield solvent" (95), windows-open, fast-driving Billy gleefully faces death and loves to get his hands dirty. As Chris exhorts him to "Feel me all over. Get me dirty," Billy's unrepressed physical desire and the memory of their "sudden brush with death" in the car thrill Chris with the feeling that at last she has broken out of her society's mandate to conform, its repression of natural instinct (96).

But Billy's dirty machismo is as much a stereotype as the yuppie lordliness for which it is designed to compensate. Billy's craftsmanlike pride in making things with his own hands is tainted by vengefulness: His father failed in the gas station business, and Billy's independent workmanship is used to make a special tool to break into the school building and set up the blood bath for Carrie (100, 102). After running away in disgrace, Billy's father was replaced in his mother's affections by a man named Brucie; Billy runs over stray dogs with his car and plans to dump blood on Carrie, imagining that the dogs and Carrie are Brucie (161). His rough sex with Chris is a way of getting back at her moneyed father and all the men with their "plump, glistening daddies' cars" whom he

blames for doing in his own father (101). Finally, his association with Chris is both a wish-fulfillment fantasy of being accepted into a society that had rejected his father and also his way of taking revenge on that society, and on his mother, for his father's rejection (82). His interest in Chris is no more personally affectionate than his masculinity is individual or affirmative: From his "stuffed crotch" to his massaging of Chris's shoulder as if he were "testing a cut of beef" (54), Billy is a walking stereotype of a man puffing himself up and scapegoating women for what goes wrong in a man's world.

Even if Billy were what she was looking for, indications are that Chris is too insecure about losing her position in society to date him for long. In the end, she finds her inability to control him more of a threat than a thrill, and plans to withhold her sexual favors as punishment for his independence: "[W]hen this is over you're going to get it buddy maybe you'll go to bed with lover's nuts tonight" (117). He, in turn, plans to rape her, as his own insecurities about his masculinity get the better of him and his nightmare of rejection becomes a self-confirming prophecy: "When this was over he was going to have her until every other time she'd been had was like two pumps with a fag's little finger" (121). "When this was over"—in each case Billy and Chris temporarily channel their hatred of society, each other, and themselves onto Carrie: The blood bath at the senior prom is thus the (un)natural extension of the scapegoating that occurred in the bloody shower scene.

Just as the actions of Billy and Chris and of Sue and Tommy can best be understood within a larger familial and social context, so Carrie's unnatural acts can be seen as the consequence of her parents' and grandparents' failure to reconcile natural desires and social strictures. Turning to religion for consolation at the loss of her father, Margaret White also uses religion as a weapon to get back at her mother for seeing another man in her father's place, accusing her of "living in sin" with a boyfriend (44). In reaction to what she sees as her mother's infidelity and in line with certain fundamentalist attitudes toward the body, Margaret comes to view all sex as sinful and any female desire as a temptation that must be resisted, as her mother did not. When Margaret and her husband Ralph find themselves giving in to their sexual urges, Ralph runs off and is subsequently killed in an accident that strongly suggests that he simply could not live with his own body's tendency to break out of its religious confines: Ralph dies "when a steel girder fell out of a carrying sling on a housing-project job" (10). So that she can still believe in Ralph's purity and in her own worthiness as his sinless wife, Margaret attempts to forget the fact that they ever had intercourse and to deny responsibility for the child growing within her: "Mrs. White believed, from her fifth month on, that she had a 'cancer of the womanly parts' and would soon join her husband in heaven" (11). Despite her self-mortifying need to live up to Ralph's and God's expectations, Margaret stops herself from aborting the child and allows her maternal nature a momentary triumph over paternal law.

But the fear that her daughter Carrie may one day give way to sexual desire causes Margaret to conceal from her all knowledge of female nature. Although Carrie insists that the real sin was her mother's keeping her ignorant of the facts of life, Margaret views Carrie's menstrual flow as itself a sin, a sign of female desire that Carrie could have willed not to express. As Carrie begins to show a natural interest in boys and to assert her supernatural powers against her mother's social strictures, Margaret's maternal instincts intensify in an ironically patriarchal and conformist direction. Like the goody-goody bad girl Chris, Margaret asserts her female independence by her overenthusiastic adoption of a social role: She becomes a fanatical fundamentalist, an extreme version of patriarchal religion's ideal—the piously protective mother. In attempting to save her daughter from men with lust-enticing “Roadhouse Whiskey” on their breath, men like Ralph who “took” Margaret in a moment of weakness (70), Carrie's mother associates men, sex, and death in her daughter's mind. It's true that Margaret's father died in a “Roadhouse” shootout, but Margaret represses the fact that this very roadhouse owned by her parents was also probably the site of her own conception, just as Carrie was conceived the night Ralph came home with “roadhouse whiskey” on his breath (43, 154). Carrie's attempt to shock her mother into a recognition of her female nature—“You FUCK!” Carrie screamed. (there there o there it's out how else do you think she got you o god o good)” (42)—can only be heard as a curse, a blasphemy from her mother's body-fearing, fundamentalist perspective.

Carrie's natural interest in sex threatens Margaret's sense of her own purity: If she cannot protect her daughter from female desires, then she must defend herself to ensure her own salvation and marriage in a male heaven: “It says in the Lord's Book: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Your father did the Lord's work” (71). The sight of “Momma holding Daddy Ralph's long butcher knife” (67), the nightmare vision of her mother as the insane embodiment of patriarchal religion's ideal of motherhood, greets Carrie when she returns from the prom, and the knife descends as Margaret carries out the religious imperative she feels is her duty: Thus the mother commits the very rape and murder from which she had hoped to save her daughter. The mother's fear grew fantastic enough to become reality.

Margaret's murder of her daughter at the end is doubly ironic in that, by the time Carrie returns home, she is truly her mother's daughter: The blood bath at the prom has made her as fearfully destructive of society as her mother, seeming to confirm all her mother's worst nightmares about the outside world. From King's point of view, Carrie is no more responsible for the terrible direction her female power takes than is her mother for her murderous maternal instincts; in interview after interview, King insists on the social cause behind Carrie's actions, on society's responsibility for its own destruction: “[I] never viewed Carrie as evil. I saw her as good. When she pulls down the house at the end she is not responsible”; “when she perpetuates destruction on her hometown, it's because she's crazy. She doesn't want to make fires any more

than she wants to wet her pants" (quoted in Underwood and Miller, 202). Like a madwoman who in the extremity of her fear loses control of her bodily functions, Carrie can no longer contain her female powers from drowning the world in the very blood it would disown. Mirroring her mother's own murderous assertion of a blood tie, Carrie brings Margaret's heart to a dead stop, taking revenge and at the same time fulfilling her mother's masochistic desire to cut out the evil body so that her purified spirit may ascend to heaven.

Playing to the hilt her assigned role as bloody female, Carrie vengefully becomes patriarchal society's worst nightmare concerning women and their bodies: Mother Nature as a force greater than man's or God's. If the supernatural is merely an extension of the natural, then what chance has society to win redemption from death through scapegoating? Despite its attempt to place the blame for Carrie's actions on another woman—Sue is the preferred scapegoat (58)—the White (male) Commission will eventually have to acknowledge its own responsibility in the creation of a Carrie, or the next girl-child to be born will grow up to be a "world-beeter" in the literal sense (181). Believing that "Momma wanted her to be the Angel's Fiery Sword, to destroy" (164), Carrie turns a male society's stereotypes against itself and wreaks a terrible revenge on behalf of her mother and other sisters in oppression.

The Transformation of *Carrie*: Novel into Film into Musical

Because of King's subsequent reputation for writing slangy, fast-paced horror, readers tend to forget that *Carrie*, King's first novel, is highly experimental in form. Whereas his later works display the predominantly linear plotting and linguistic transparency typical of much nineteenth-century realism, *Carrie*'s collagist juxtaposition of disparate print-forms is closer to modernism or postmodernism in style. King's verbally conspicuous conjoining of newspaper clippings, book and letter excerpts, investigative hearing transcripts, Associated Press wire reports, classroom desk graffiti, slang definitions, and a death certificate function like a Brechtian alienation effect to make readers question customary modes of representation. By emphasizing the literariness of his literature, King demystifies print, making readers read the words on the page not as some natural, transparent reflection of the truth, but as a personally and politically motivated refraction of reality. As Sue Snell muses on the newspapers' transformation of Carrie into a story, "They've made her into some kind of a symbol and forgotten that she was a human being, as real as you reading this, with hopes and dreams and blah, blah, blah. Useless to tell you that, I suppose. Nothing can change her back now from something made out of newsprint into a person" (97–98). "Hopes and dreams and blah, blah, blah" suggests the rapidity with which real human emotions become sentimental clichés when they are put into words, and "she was a human being, as real as you reading this" describes Sue's and King's effort to counter this tendency, to

make the reader conscious of the reading process and of how most print derealizes people even as it seems to convey the truth about them.

If "The White Commission Report" is published by "Signet Books," then so is the paperback version of King's novel (130). The Commission attempts to whitewash Carrie's story, circumscribing her terrible power within scientific jargon ("A View Toward Isolation of the TK Gene with Specific Recommendations for Control Parameters") and writing it off as a "once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon" or the more colloquially reassuring "fluke" (165, 179, 165). Against the bureaucratise of the "State Investigatory Board," which concludes that "we find no reason to believe that a recurrence is likely or even possible," King juxtaposes the letter of a near-illiterate whose report of a frightfully telekinetic young "Annie" rises like a return of the repressed to disturb the smooth surface of official narrative's secondary revision (180). King's self-reflexive fiction warns against the normalization of horror, society's tendency to translate what it cannot bear to look at into more acceptable terms, as in "Slang Terms Explained: A Parents' Guide," with its neat definition of "to rip off a Carrie" as "To cause either violence destruction; mayhem, confusion; (2) to commit arson" (179). As Douglas E. Winter puts it, "Carrie has been defined away as a comfortable colloquialism, memorialized for her act rather than herself" (33).³ In the war of the words King dramatizes between an oppressive/repressive official discourse and an uncannily resurgent speech, we can see the beginnings of a literary mode that will become a King trademark: stream of consciousness, that form closest to the unvarnished truth of primary process mentation. In parenthetical run-on sentences with lower-case I's—"(i killed my momma i want her o it hurts)" (170)—King sets a fluid, feelingful language of the unconscious, both Carrie's and the town's, against the officialese that insists on distinguishing high from low, victors from victims, and the innocent from those (scapegoated as) responsible.

Both this communal stream of consciousness of primary and primal truths similar to Jung's universal archetypes of the collective unconscious (as Carrie may be likened to the anima or vengeful dark side of an unaccepting patriarchy) and King's use of collagist technique or dialogic form serve to challenge society's pretended monopoly on truth. And yet the novel's multiplicity of perspectives may also be read as a sign of psychic splitting: Whereas a part of King clearly identifies with Carrie and understands her power as the vengeful return of natural female energy that patriarchy is responsible for having repressed, another part of King shares patriarchy's horror at women, amply embodied in the novel's misogynistic officialese. Asked by a Penthouse interviewer about his "greatest sexual fear," King responded, "The vagina dentata, the vagina with teeth"; his second greatest, King said, was represented in a "horror story . . . about a pregnancy" (quoted in Underwood and Miller, 189). That King's first novel is evidence of a horror at what terrible powers castrating women may give birth to is something King readily admits: "Carrie expresses a lot of male fears—about menstruation and about dealing with

women who eat you up" (quoted in Underwood and Miller, 95). As openly confessional in his first novel as he is in later interviews, King's split form displays both his patriarchal gynophobia—his fear of the "bitch goddess[']s . . . hormonal rage" (quoted in Beahm, 38)—and his feminist social satire, his sincere desire to depict women in sympathetic and nonstereotypical ways. The formal experimentation of *Carrie* represents the ideological conflict in King's psyche and society.

Just as King's novel departs from the conventions of narrative realism, so Brian De Palma's film version of *Carrie* (1976) marks a spectacular divergence from the standard practices of classic Hollywood cinema. Whereas most Hollywood horror occludes its means of production by hiding its film technique so as to further identification between viewer and victim (or between voyeur and victor), De Palma's movie keeps flashily calling attention to its style. The opening shower sequence is shot in soft focus and slow motion, dollyingly lyrically by a scene of high-school girls cavorting like nymphs in various stages of undressed innocence; this is followed by a fluid dissolve to Carrie in the steamy gym shower, caressing her breasts and thighs. Though logically impossible, the entire scene seems to be presented as if from Carrie's point of view, a wish-fulfillment fantasy of laughing female community and innocent sensuousness. Abruptly, the tempo jolts from slow to regular motion as dream turns to nightmare: Carrie bleeds, fears she is dying, and encounters a shocked, ashamed, and contemptuous circle of sexually repressed young women who jeer at her and pelt her with tampons like stones.

But the unusual slow motion and the unusually public view of young women's private spaces have distracted most viewers from imagining this opening shower sequence as depicted from Carrie's point of view; instead, the scene is more often criticized as voyeuristic, as the typical male director's and viewer's eye-rape of female characters. The fact that a previous shot has revealed this to be "Bates High" and that the scene of Carrie in the shower quotes shots from *Psycho* can't help but remind us of voyeuristic Norman Bates (Tony Perkins), who stabs the Janet Leigh character in the shower. Thus De Palma's filmic allusiveness and his conspicuously "Peeping Tom" camera⁴ counter the suggestion that this scene might be taken from a woman's perspective: The diegetic focalizer may be sympathetically and innocently female, but the extradiegetic eye seems distanced and predatorily male. The women characters in this scene are both sex objects and sexual innocents as the viewer's vantage shifts between Carrie as naive perceiver and Carrie as salaciously perceived. (One might compare Milton's presentation of Eden in *Paradise Lost*, first seen from Satan's cynical, destructive perspective but also alternately from that of prelapsarian Adam and Eve.)

De Palma's urge to identify with girlish innocence seems at odds with his fear of mature female sexuality as evil; the director's cynicism pulls back from idealism as if in horror at the prospect of being victimized along with women or by women. De Palma seems to participate in the dizziness of first

love when he has Carrie and Tommy whirl wildly in their prom dance together, but the dancers begin to spin so fast that the viewer is made aware of their turning as technique or trope, as conspicuous metaphor fashioned by a director both within and outside the fantasy of first love, both identifying with Carrie in Tommy's arms and looking on as two actors revolve on a rotating platform.⁵ Soon after, the shower scene's slow motion is resumed as Tommy and Carrie progress to the stage to be crowned King and Queen of the prom; as before, our entranced identification with Carrie is broken as the blood falls (this time pig's blood from a bucket overhead), and the film speed reverts to real time, befitting a postlapsarian world of female victimization. But this is also a world of bloody female revenge, of the "bitch goddess" and her "hormonal rage." The division in De Palma between a feminist sympathy for women's right to fight back and a patriarchal horror of the female sex as destructive is now spectacularly in evidence as a split-screen effect: On one side is Carrie, blood-spattered and blood-spattering; on the other, her victors turned victims. Like a visual trace of the director's schizophrenia, a line splits the screen, showing up identification as problematic—divided and unstable.⁶ At one point Carrie's side slides from right from left: We are uncertain with whom to identify, by whom to be repulsed; victor and victim seem displaced, displacing each other, unplaceable.

The film's most lasting impression of formal division as ideological contradiction comes in its concluding dream sequence. As in the preceding shower and dance scenes, here viewer identification is ostensibly with another "good girl," Sue, whose barefoot, slow-motion progress in a white dress beside a white picket fence to Carrie's graveside seems another example of cinematic free indirect discourse, of a scene imbued with Sue's own sensibility: She sympathizes with the wounded innocent in Carrie and brings flowers in commemoration of that innocence to lay on her grave. But the soft-focus in this scene is strangely insistent; Sue's walk is peculiar and the movement of cars in the background seems odd; even the sunlight appears somehow unnatural. Suspicious spectators—viewers who know De Palma—watch with a cynical eye, somewhat distanced from Sue's perspective and from her idealization of Carrie. When Carrie's bloody hand reaches out from the grave to grab Sue's white arm as the film jolts back into the misogynist nightmare that is real time, we are shocked—but not entirely. Previous shocks—and De Palma's style-disturbing content, his identification-troubling technique—have partially prepared us. When the scene match-cuts from Carrie's grip on Sue's arm at the graveside to Sue's mother holding her in bed, we are only partially identified with Sue the victim; another part of us cranes up and away with De Palma the director who, in his coolly cynical self-control, knew better than to trust in female innocence. De Palma shot the dream sequence night for day, with special lighting and filters to simulate the sun, and he shot it in reverse, with the actress playing Sue walking backwards. In the final version, nothing is quite convincing (the movement of the cars seems odd because they're going backwards), just as

for De Palma wish-fulfillment fantasies have lost much of their credibility: His film exposes their unreality.

King's comments on De Palma's film are interesting for what they reveal about the psychosocial and stylistic conflict registered by both auteurs. Arguing that "humor and horror exist side by side in [the movie], playing off one another," King notes that "Much of De Palma's film is surprisingly jolly, but we sense his jocoseness is dangerous" (*Danse Macabre*, 170). Both the humor and the horror seem particularly to do with the film's women:

The girls laboring over their calisthenics [in an amusing scene] were the same girls shouting "Plug it up, plug it up, plug it up!" at Carrie not long before. . . . [De Palma] sees this suburban white kids' high school as a kind of matriarchy. No matter where you look, there are girls behind the scenes, pulling invisible wires, rigging elections, using their boyfriends as stalking horses. . . . I think the film unconsciously takes the attitude that all men are cat's paws. (*Danse Macabre*, 171, 172; King, quoted in Underwood and Miller, 95)

Whereas De Palma would like to see women as a certain source of hope and leavening humor in the world, he is continually uncovering their other side: horrible, dangerous, violent, matriarchal—cats playing with their male victims. Like the film's divided tone of humor and horror, its female characters are two-faced, double-dealing, putting on an innocent, frolicsome front while secretly plotting behind the scenes to gain control over men. Or perhaps we should say that it is King and De Palma who are divided: between a conscious desire to identify with female innocence and an unconscious gynophobia. When King says that "De Palma's film is kind of light and frothy and he gets you at the end when you think it's all over," we see again Sue's white arm being grabbed by Carrie's bloody hand: the film's representational schizophrenia in regard to illusion and supposed reality, the dream of female innocence betrayed by shocking duplicity (King, quoted in Connor, 12).

The ideological tensions implicit in the split forms of the novel and film versions of *Carrie* became major rifts in the stage musical (1988). Because this dramatic version of *Carrie* is virtually unknown, some background information may be in order. Representing the first joint venture ever of British and American equities, *Carrie, the Musical*, ran for twenty-five performances at Stratford-upon-Avon before its transfer to Broadway. The director, some crew, and several cast members were regulars of the Royal Shakespeare Company, which hoped that *Carrie* would follow in the line of successful British imports like *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, helping to fund future plays by the Bard (Shakespeare, not Stephen King). *Carrie* made its Broadway debut on 19 May 1988 and closed just five performances after its opening night; the production lost \$8 million, becoming the biggest flop in Broadway history or, as one outraged investor put it, "the biggest flop in the world history of the theater, going all the way back to Aristophanes" (Henry, "The Biggest," 65).⁷

Most of the reviews were enough to frighten prospective theatergoers away, with headlines like "Bloody Awful," "Blood and No Guts," "Getting All Fired Up over Nothing," "'Carrie' blazes, can't bring down the house," "Shakespeareans' fling with King disastrous," and "Staging a Horror on Broadway." Critical commentary certainly focused on the musical's horrible aspects, describing it as "dreadful," "hideous," "ghastly," "grotesque," "coarse," "disgusting," and "in the worst possible taste." The most phobic reaction to the show probably comes from the reviewer who wrote: "'Carrie' is not merely problematic. It is not simply a miscalculation. It is stupendously, fabulously terrible—ineptly conceived, sleazy, irrational from moment to moment, the rare kind of production that stretches way beyond bad to mythic lousiness" (Winer). Many critics thought that the whole thing was simply a terrible idea from the very beginning: "A show about a girl who discovers she has diabolical powers related to her menstrual cycle is not everybody's idea of a musical," warned one (Kissel), and the *New Yorker* critic commented, in inimitably fastidious fashion, that "Among those works one might consider adapting for the musical stage. I would have thought that a story whose plot is set in motion by the onset of the heroine's first menstrual period belonged pretty far down the list—only a notch or two above John Chadwick's 'The Decipherment of Linear B'" (Kramer, 85). Stephen King himself was only slightly more sanguine about the show's prospects, saying "Look, if they can do a musical about a dictator in Argentina and a barber in Fleet Street, this might work, too" (quoted in "Broadway"). It seems that this play will live on in memory, if at all, as a colossal mistake; the April 1991 issue of *Spy* magazine, for example, lists *Carrie, the Musical* among what the editors call "great lapses of common sense through history," ranking it up there with "Esperanto," "open marriage," and "the electric carving knife" (Collins, 48). *Carrie, the Musical*, was not videotaped; no cast album was made; the music and lyrics were never published.

Act I opens with a scene of the adolescent girls in calisthenics class, their aerobics exercises presumably intended as a sign of youthful exuberance and natural high spirits. At odds with this impression are the chorus-line high kicks, professional acrobatics, and towering human pyramid the girls build with their obviously twenty-five-year-old-and-up bodies, which continually remind those in the audience that they are attending a showy Broadway musical and not merely eavesdropping on an average high-school day in the gym. As one critic noted, "[Debbie] Allen's choreography isn't about joy or striving or aspiration, it's about T. & A.—a sort of sexualized aerobics: balletoporn" (Kramer, 85). The girls then strip down before hitting the showers and, in appraising themselves from an imagined male point of view, they sing of hating their bodies. But there are actual male spectators in the theater audience, and the girls' undressing is played less as introspection than as a striptease in the come-hither style of the hookers' line-up in *Sweet Charity* (the choreographer is a Bob Fosse veteran). Our identification with these girls' insecurity over their bodies is further hampered by the fact that, as one reviewer put it, "Since these young

women have the world's greatest bodies, the show immediately leaps into a logical quandary" (Kroll, 73). As with the schizophrenic style of De Palma's film version, this "logical quandary" consists of a conflict between lyrics calling for a female-identified viewer and other insistent theatrical devices that hail the spectator as a male voyeur who will appreciate a burlesque-house ambiance, grind-show costumes, and peekaboo routines with towels and semitransparent scrims set up as shower stalls.

Even the set design prevents us from losing ourselves in the characters, distracting us both from feminist sympathy and from boys'-night-out lechery. Ralph Koltai's sets are neither here nor there, not a girls' gym and shower nor a burlesque show/bordello. Koltai's abstract design presents the "gym" as a black-and-white formica cube like a Mondrian box. As the set changes from "gym" to "shower," brilliant white enamel panels revolve smoothly under computer control. The stylized and depersonalized look of Koltai's design seems to set the play in some perfect future, far removed from the girls' adolescent angst or from their professional titillation of \$50-a-seat theatergoers. As one reviewer remarked, "[The] sets are nerdy, but their highly kinetic high-tech sleekness has little to do with establishing a realistic ambiance from which the supra-real goings-on could startlingly take off" (Simon, "Blood," 60).

The show casts black actor-singer-dancer Gene Anthony Ray from TV's *Fame* as bad boy Billy, thus inadvertently perpetuating the racist association of blackness with evil, and of interracial couples with devil's pacts (the play's Chris is white). (This unfortunate stereotyping is only partially counterbalanced by the casting of black singer Darlene Love—also from *Fame*—as the kindly gym teacher.) Composer Michael Gore and librettist Dean Pitchford, who won Best Song Oscars for the movie *Fame*, impede both audience identification with the sympathetic characters and spectator shock at their evil doings. The extraordinary conventionality of the music and lyrics keeps returning our attention to the fact that we are watching a Broadway musical, distracting us from our would-be involvement in Carrie's plight (she sings: "Was it his voice? Was it his smile?/I haven't felt so wonderful in quite a while") and severely mitigating the effect of the horror (the evil Chris sings: "It's a simple little gig./You help me kill a pig").

The most effective scenes in the musical are the Lulu-inspired operatic duets between Carrie and her mother, the latter played by Betty Buckley, who won a Tony for her performance in *Cats* (she sang "Memory"). Buckley's "haunting, burnt vibrato" (Winer) and "vinegar and molasses voice" (Barnes) work powerfully to convey maternal anguish, and we in the audience are drawn in. As Carrie, seventeen-year-old Linzi Hatley, who "has a belter's voice in the reigning (and amplified) English rock-musical manner" (her only previous credit is as an orphan in *Annie*) (Rich, C3: 1), tends to be more alienating, but she does succeed in communicating her wonder at her female powers in a marvelous scene where she telekinetically animates her hairbrush, powder puff, party dress, and shoes, which come to life, dance, and help her get ready for the prom. (This

Disneysque sequence is reminiscent of the sorcerer's apprentice scene from *Fantasia*.)

Yet the play's climax pushes us away with the strenuousness of its effort to draw us in, and it elicits cool derision where it wants to provoke active fright. As Billy simply walks up to Carrie and empties a bucket of red confetti on her head, we are not moved by pity or fear: underwhelmed, our attention wanders to consider whether it is the director or the dramatic medium itself that is inadequate to the staging of this scene. Carrie then ascends on a pedestal so slowly that we have time to realize that it must be hydraulically powered. The red laser beams that blast from her fingertips shoot out over our heads to points at the back of the theater, a special effect that, probably because we are so accustomed to lasers now, serves mainly to remind us that we are in an electrically wired theater watching a "Broadway spectacular," not at a school prom being terrified by Carrie's flame-throwing revenge. The crashing chords and whizzing lasers seem as familiar and as retro as disco or a 1970s rock concert, and, as characters below Carrie "tumble about confusedly behind a smoke-screen scrim lighted in red to symbolize fire," we're so busy trying to figure out what is happening that the veil between us and the characters' emotions might as well be opaque (Kramer, 85). As one critic wrote, "the gymnasium *Gotterdammerung* is all metaphor. It is just smoke and flashing lights and lasers asking to be transformed by the audience's imagination" (Henry, "Getting," 80). As in the novel and the film, the conspicuousness of the Broadway musical's devices splits our attention between pity at female suffering and fear of female revenge, ultimately distancing us from both. Rather than resolve the ideological contradiction that divides "Thank heaven for little girls" from "Ding! Dong! The witch is dead," each new patriarchal mediation of Carrie seems to take us deeper into formal conflict, as if unsure about whether it wants in or out of the girls' gym.

NOTES

1. All subsequent quotations from King's novel *Carrie* will be identified by parenthetical page citations within the essay.

2. The identification of certain female body-types and athletic abilities with feminism is one of many ways in which King's novel is a product of the historical period in which it was written—the early 1970s.

3. Winter is one of the few critics who actually talk about *Carrie*'s form as if it were something other than merely transparent.

4. Compare the opening sequence of De Palma's *Sisters*, the film on the basis of which King recommended that De Palma be chosen to direct *Carrie*.

5. John Simon's negative reaction to the extravagance of this whirling scene may not be too far from the mark insofar as it points out how De Palma's obtrusive style ends up disturbing viewer identification with the characters: "Worst of all are the big effects, drawn out to impossible lengths and shot with trashy blatancy, as when a couple whirling about a dance floor are dwelt on with a monomaniacal insistence that gives the viewer an acute case of nausea" (*Reverse Angle*, 280).

6. Compare Pauline Kael's comment about how this film device disturbs clear viewer identification with (or of!) character: "There are only a few places where the film seems to err in technique. . . . [T]he split-screen footage is really bad: the red tint darkens the image, and there's so much messy action going on in the split sections that the confusion cools us out" (212).

7. By contrast with the ill-fated musical, the De Palma film was an outstanding success, garnering Oscar nominations for Sissy Spacek (*Carrie*) and Piper Laurie (her mother), earning over \$15 million in domestic film rentals, and establishing King's reputation as a bankable author (Wood, 38).

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