

Exchanging Apples: Leonora Carrington and the Pro-Mythical Turn in Post-War Feminism

Per Faxneld

per.faxneld@sh.se

Abstract

The surrealist Leonora Carrington made extensive use of esoteric material throughout her career. The article focuses on the iconography of a painting she created for a poster produced by the Mexican women's liberation movement *Mujeres Conciencia* and how it can be understood by considering some of the key esoteric currents Carrington engaged with. Many of the themes on display in the poster, the article argues, can also be found in a series of other works by Carrington, and should be seen as part of a life-long treatment of intertwined esoteric, mythological, and feminist concerns. While it is impossible, as well as undesirable, to establish absolute symbolical “meanings” when analyzing Carrington's creations, it is suggested her artistic project aimed at the undermining of oppressive, monolithic patriarchal myths by making polyvalence itself a key strategy. The article situates Carrington in the traditions of surrealist anti-clericalism and turn-of-the-century esoteric and myth-embracing feminism that she visibly drew on, and finally demonstrates how her work also fits with a new pro-mythical turn in the second-wave feminism of the early 1970s.

Keywords: Leonora Carrington; surrealism; esotericism; feminism; anti-clericalism; myth

“I think there are very dangerous devils, and I think there are interesting devils . . .”

– Leonora Carrington¹

Introduction: Of Intertextuality and Polyvalence

The British-born Mexican surrealist author and artist Leonora Carrington’s (1917–2011) reputation has been growing steadily over the years since her death. A well-established name already during her lifetime, Carrington has recently been the subject of a successful documentary, an academic conference, several books, and exhibitions in prestigious museums across the world. Moreover, the main exhibition of the 2022 Venice Biennale featured her work prominently and was even named after her book of children’s stories *The Milk of Dreams* (originally published, posthumously, in Spanish in 2013 as *Leche del sueño*).² Throughout Carrington’s oeuvre, esoteric themes abound—and she has accordingly been analyzed by several scholarly experts in this topic.³ Considerably more common, however, are investigations of feminist dimensions in her texts and images, often focusing on how such features intersect with Carrington’s use of mythological imagery.⁴ The present article will attempt to make a further contribution to these discussions by situating Carrington in a tradition of turn-of-the-century esoteric and myth-embracing feminism that she visibly drew on and demonstrating how her work further fits with a new pro-mythical turn in the second-wave feminism of the early 1970s.

1. Quoted in Chloe Aridjis, “An A-Z,” 17.

2. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/milk-dreams/leonora-carrington>, accessed June 17, 2023.

3. It has been said that “Carrington, more than any other Surrealist, went on to explore a wide range of esoteric themes” (Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 7). Aberth’s book provides much insightful analysis of such themes, as does Wouter Hanegraaff, “A Visual World”; Victoria Ferentinou, “Surrealism, Occulture and Gender”; Victoria Ferentinou, “The Quest for the Goddess Matriarchy”; Victoria Ferentinou, “A Witch in Search of Myth”; Kristoffer Noheden, “Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, and Initiation.” Janice Helland’s “Surrealism and Esoteric Feminism,” 53–61, 102–4, is somewhat less convincing.

4. The most important efforts taking feminism and myth as well as esotericism into account are the aforementioned works by Ferentinou and Aberth.

There are a few important caveats to address before proceeding. Surrealism scholar Kristoffer Noheden has emphasized that “as a consequence of Carrington’s meandering interest in a wide range of esoteric material, there is no . . . stable framework in which the manifestations of these components in her work can be anchored.”⁵ Similarly, the art historian Susan Aberth stresses that in Carrington’s creations “symbols cannot and do not ‘illustrate’ ideas in the manner we are accustomed to.”⁶ Comparative literature scholar Jonathan P. Eburne characterizes them as a “carnavalesque accumulation of intertexts” and “an intertextual framework whose instabilities render it virtual rather than propositional.”⁷ Moreover, her son Gabriel Weisz Carrington has pointed out that “people always want to ‘explain’ Leonora’s work,” by for example referring to “‘mythical traditions’—which by the way has turned into a cliché.”⁸ He suggests it is better “to avoid the interpretative curtailment that so often accompanies the search for specific cultural backgrounds or influences for her work.”⁹ Instead, he says, “I will not interpret, I will remark and engage in dialogue but cannot brand upon the object of my observation a definite meaning over a pictorial world that I read and scrutinize.”¹⁰ In the same spirit, this article will not endeavor to fix *definite* symbolical “meanings,” but rather attempt to tease out what represents *one* layer of resonances and intertexts.

Point of Departure: Of Women and Snakes

As the point of departure for my analysis, I would like to discuss Carrington’s poster for the Mexican women’s liberation movement *Mujeres Conciencia*.¹¹ Completed in 1972, the painting was printed as a poster in 1973.¹² Carrington

5. Noheden, “Leonora Carrington,” 39.

6. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 9.

7. Jonathan P. Eburne, “Poetic Wisdom,” 160.

8. Gabriel Weisz, “Shadow Children,” 131.

9. *Ibid.*, 132.

10. *Ibid.*, 139.

11. Image link: https://masdearte.com/media/n_carrington_mapfre12.jpg

12. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 63; Susan Aberth & Tere Arcq, “As in a Mirror with Multiple Facets,” 103.

subsequently brought a considerable quantity of these posters to the US, where they were handed out to various feminists and generated considerable excitement.¹³ Stylistically, the image differs from the artist's typical manner of painting in being more symmetrical, schematic, and flattened, creating an icon-like quality as if it was an altar image intended for the temple of a new religion of Carrington's devising. Moreover, it atypically exhibits only one color (aside from black and white), green. Dense with connotations, the poster's image depicts a black female figure giving a white apple to a white female figure, who is in turn giving her a black apple. Above them a serpent hovers. Like all Carrington's works, it represents what Eburne calls a sort of "mythomaniacal diversity" and "participates in a vigorous intellectual genealogy."¹⁴ Examining Carrington's 1974 novel *The Hearing Trumpet*, Anna Watz has pointed out that it questions "the notion of origin," playing "with a multitude of renditions and translations of the same myths or narratives."¹⁵ Arguably, a similar multitude of layers is present in the poster's many mythical echoes and polyvalent references through which Carrington reconfigures a central Christian myth and impishly adds layer upon layer of subversion, inscribing herself in several dissident traditions that have targeted this specific narrative.

Susan Aberth comments that here "man has been eliminated as the chooser and instead the snake from Eden, provider of wisdom not Satan, stands in the Garden."¹⁶ I will presently demonstrate that in Theosophy, and other esoteric currents that Carrington was exposed to, the snake as a benevolent provider of wisdom was not necessarily a notion in opposition to retaining its identification with Satan.

13. Terri Geis, "Leonora Carrington in the 1970s," 21-22.

14. Eburne, "Poetic Wisdom," 143.

15. Anna Watz, "'A Language Buried At the Back of Time,' 95. Though published in 1974 (in French, as *Le Cornet Aconstique*), the novel was completed already in 1950. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 60.

16. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 103. Salomon Grimberg instead offers a goddess-centered interpretation, stating that it "rejects the patriarchal myth of her expulsion from the Garden of Eden" and serves as "a reminder to women everywhere to be conscious and to have conscience to restore the original vision of the Goddess to avoid future destruction of the planet." Quoted in Tere Arcq, "The Mystery of the White Goddess," 187.

Moreover, this identification coupled with a positive understanding of the eating of the forbidden fruit fits well with broader concerns in Carrington's oeuvre.¹⁷

To unpack the cultural resonances of this specific image, a brief delineation of certain iconographical traditions surrounding the myth of the Fall is necessary. If we commence with the figure of Satan in Christian art more broadly, it frequently exhibits some female anatomical parts—typically breasts—which make the figure a sort of hermaphrodite. Satan was also often represented as explicitly female. Narrowing our focus to Satan exclusively as the snake in the Garden of Eden, it is notable that from the late twelfth century until the late sixteenth century this creature was commonly depicted with a woman's head on the serpentine body. Sometimes also with the breasts of a woman. For example, Michelangelo's *Temptation and Expulsion* (1511) in the Sistine Chapel ceiling features such a creature handing Eve the forbidden fruit,¹⁸ as does a sculpture (ca. 1220) at the so-called "Portal of the Virgin," the Western entrance to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Raphael, Cranach, and Hans Holbein the Younger all painted the motif. Historically, then, Satan as female is a central concept in Christian visual culture.¹⁹ This notion of Eve plotting against Adam and God in alliance with a female Satan has been called an expression of "male dread of conspiring females, the fear of the witches' coven."²⁰

The female serpent-Satan iconography is something that Carrington would have been familiar with. During her 1932 year at a finishing school for girls in Florence, she spent considerable time exploring the city's treasures of art.²¹ One of the works she might have seen is Michelangelo Naccherino's (1550-1622) celebrated marble

17. I would, then, to some extent take issue with the notion of a dichotomy between the snake as provider of wisdom and the snake as Satan, as several important systems of esoteric thought in fact identify the snake as both simultaneously: a benevolent Satan who bestows gnosis upon mankind. See, e.g., Kennet Granholm, "Dragon Rouge," 149; Per Faxneld, *Mörkrets apostlar*, 183-87; Per Faxneld, "Intuitive, Receptive, Dark," 222; Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 117-21.

18. Image link: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/michelangelo/sistine-chapel-ceiling-the-temptation-and-expulsion-1512>

19. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 45-51.

20. John A. Phillips, *Eve*, 62.

21. Stefan van Raay & Joanna Moorhead, "The Young Artist," 29-30.

sculpture featuring a female Satan in the Boboli Gardens.²² And indeed, Paolo Uccello, one of the Florentine artists Carrington frequently mentioned as a favorite, painted a version of this motif.²³ Hieronymus Bosch, another of Carrington’s major sources of inspiration, also depicted a female serpent (with a clearly visible breast) giving the apple to Eve in the left panel of his triptych *The Haywain* (1510–1516).²⁴ That Carrington chooses to portray the giving of the forbidden fruit as a woman-to-woman affair thus finds a logic in this iconographic tradition. Additionally, the motif of two women exchanging consciousness-expanding fruit could be seen in light of Carrington’s well-known explorations of Mexico City’s markets in search of magical herbs together with her equally esoterically inclined artist friend Remedios Varo (1908–1963).²⁵ Read thus, the figures in the painting handing each other fruit mirror the magical reciprocity between the two artist witches.

Of Gnosis and Mythical Revision

What about the idea of the serpent as a *benevolent* bringer of gnosis-inducing fruit, then? Carrington’s poster clearly depicts the triumphantly rising serpent and the sharing of fruit in a celebratory manner. This stance has roots in ancient Gnosticism but was established in modern esotericism primarily by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the main ideologist of the Theosophical

22. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 50.

23. Susan L. Aberth, “An Allergy to Collaboration,” 27. Paolo Uccello, *Creation of Eve and Original Sin* (1432–1436), fresco, 244 x 478 cm, Green Cloister, Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Image link: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/25/Paolo_Uccello_006.jpg.

24. Image link: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Haywain_Triptych#/media/File:Bosch_-_Haywain_Triptych.jpg. Paul van Calster, ed., *Catalogue Raisonné*, 340. It has also been suggested Lilith appears in a different Bosch painting, though the argument is somewhat vague. See Virginia Tuttle, “Lilith in Bosch’s ‘Garden of Earthly Delights,’” 119–30. On Bosch’s importance for Carrington, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 70; Ara H. Merjian, “Genealogical Gestation,” 47–48. Merjian has rightly criticized how “scholars have frequently downplayed the extent to which Carrington’s work engages with the history of art and literature from more ancient sources, through the Renaissance, up to late nineteenth-century Romantic and Symbolist precedents” (49).

25. On the friendship between Carrington and Varo, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 59–64 and Janet A. Kaplan, *Remedios Varo*, 93–98.

Society.²⁶ In her late 1880s writings, Blavatsky retained the traditional identification of the serpent with Satan but reinterpreted the figure as a positive gnosis-bringer setting our spiritual evolution in motion:

...it is but natural—even from the dead letter standpoint—to view *Satan*, the Serpent of Genesis, as the real creator and benefactor, the Father of Spiritual mankind. For it is he who was the “Harbinger of Light,” bright radiant Lucifer, who opened the eyes of the automaton *created* by Jehovah, as alleged; and he who was the first to whisper: “in the day ye eat thereof ye shall be as Elohim, knowing good and evil”—can only be regarded in the light of a Saviour. An “adversary” to Jehovah the “*personating* spirit,” he still remains in esoteric truth the ever-loving “Messenger” (the angel), the Seraphim and Cherubim who both *knew* well, and *loved* still more, and who conferred on us spiritual, instead of physical immortality—the latter a kind of *static* immortality that would have transformed man into an undying “Wandering Jew.”²⁷

This understanding also influenced the choice of name for Blavatsky’s Theosophical magazine *Lucifer* (1887–1897, subsequently changing name to *The Theosophical Review*).²⁸

It is highly likely Carrington was in some way or another familiar with Blavatsky’s ideas. Firstly, it has been suggested she may have read Theosophical periodicals during her early years in England.²⁹ Secondly, it is documented that she socialized with Piet Mondriaan (1872–1944) during her transitional 1941–1942 year in New York.³⁰ Mondriaan was a member of the Theosophical Society from 1909 until his death, and his work was deeply marked by its influence.³¹ Thirdly, the occult milieu in her later home Mexico City was imbued with Theosophy, and it seems Carrington encountered it directly through Remedios Varo.³²

26. For a classic discussion of the serpent as a kindly bringer of gnosis in Gnosticism, see Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 84, 247–49.

27. H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, 243.

28. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 121–23.

29. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 67–68.

30. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 52.

31. Pablo Bris-Marino, “The Influence of Theosophy on Mondrian’s Neoplastic Work.”

32. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 67–68, 74; Ferentinou, “The Quest,” 190n41.

Echoes of Blavatsky's beliefs also appeared in works we know for certain that Carrington read, like British occultist Dion Fortune's (1890–1946) *The Mystical Qabalah* (1935),³³ which discusses the symbol of the serpent in several places, often with reference to Blavatsky, declaring that “the Serpent . . . represents the dawn of objective consciousness and is the symbol of initiation.”³⁴ At least by the early 1980s, it is documented that Carrington was moreover acquainted with such notions from reading Hans Jonas' 1934 classic *The Gnostic Religion*.³⁵

Theosophy had been highly attractive to independent-minded turn-of-the-century women, as it offered them agency in various manners—including roles as spiritual leaders and interpretative freedom regarding theology.³⁶ Accordingly, an important dimension of Blavatsky's new version of the Eden myth, detailed above, was its feminist implications. The traditional telling of it supposedly proved that all women, being daughters of Eve, are weak and receptive to Satan's guiles. For most of Christianity's history it was the most invoked Biblical story when priests, inquisitors, theologians and even nineteenth-century medical doctors and politicians wanted to keep women subjugated. Several of the most prominent feminists around the year 1900 therefore singled this narrative out as a vital target for critique.³⁷

Many of these early feminists, like Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–1898) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), were also Theosophists. Thus, their political counter-readings of the Biblical narrative of the Fall closely followed the esoteric counter-readings established by Madame Blavatsky in an effort to calculatedly undermine the frequent patriarchal use of this story to keep women in place. According to this understanding of the tale, eagerly embraced by a multitude of

33. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 67.

34. Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabala*, 272. Cf. Blavatsky's expounding in *The Secret Doctrine*: “. . . that which the clergy of every dogmatic religion—pre-eminently the Christian—points out as Satan, the enemy of God, is in reality, the highest divine Spirit—(occult Wisdom on Earth)—in its naturally antagonistic character to every worldly, evanescent illusion, dogmatic or ecclesiastical religions included.” Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, 377.

35. Ferentinou, “The Quest,” 192n86.

36. Siv Ellen Kraft, “The Sex Problem”; Siv Ellen Kraft, “Theosophy, Gender, and the ‘New Woman’.”

37. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 35–45, 136–37; Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine*.

Blavatsky-reading feminists, Eve was in fact a heroine, not the first sinner. However, these dramatic reinterpretations, which in many cases resulted in an attitude of “Satanic feminism,” proved too controversial for mainstream feminism at the time, and such radical voices soon found themselves marginalized as suffragettes forged alliances with the Christian temperance movement to gain the vote.³⁸ In the feminism of the 1920s through to the 1960s, this form of drastic feminist counter-mythology thus arguably became somewhat less prominent.

With the second-wave feminism of the early 1970s, though, the older approach would see a powerful resurgence in what can be called a pro-mythical (or mythical revisionist) turn. In emancipatory literary texts of the same period, we see a similar preoccupation with subverting patriarchal myths—for example in Angela Carter’s (1940–1992) reworking of the Eden story in “Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest” from her 1974 collection of short stories *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974).³⁹ This project would come even more to the fore in the same author’s 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber*, which revises fairytales into startling narratives of powerful females striking back at violent patriarchal figures and structures.⁴⁰ Significantly, Carter—clearly recognizing a kindred spirit—later selected Carrington’s short story “The Debutante” for an anthology she edited in 1986 (*Wayward Girls and Wicked Women*).⁴¹

In 1974, the journal *WomanSpirit* started publication, and in 1978 the theologian (later redubbing herself “theologian”) Carol P. Christ’s (1945–2021) influential essay “Why Women Need the Goddess” first appeared in print.⁴² This coincided with developments in the same direction within Wicca and other neopagan currents. Carrington was very much part of this renewed feminist interest in

38. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 130–41.

39. Later reprinted in Angela Carter, *Burning Your Boats*, 58–67.

40. Carter, *Burning Your Boats*, 111–228.

41. Marina Warner, “Leonora’s Storytelling Imagination,” 296. A clear parallel between the two is Carrington’s preoccupation with children’s books (e.g., Lewis Carroll) and her depiction of Blue Beard (Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 112), a figure Carter also reworked (Carter, *Burning Your Boats*, 111–43).

42. Carol P. Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 8–13.

myth, and, as art historian Victoria Ferentinou has highlighted, an important precursor to it.⁴³ Other artists treading a similar path include the Swedish-born English artist Monica Sjöö (1938–2005), who just like Carrington was influenced by the work of poet Robert Graves (1895–1985). In her controversial 1968 painting *God Giving Birth*,⁴⁴ Sjöö depicted God as a woman with a face that is sharply divided into a black and a white portion, interestingly recalling the yin-yang black/white of the women from Carrington’s poster.⁴⁵ Later works by Sjöö include *Aspects of the Great Mother* (1971),⁴⁶ where the assembled goddesses comprise one that can be read as having horns and demonic-looking red eyes, and several paintings featuring sacred serpents.⁴⁷ In 1975, Sjöö issued the pamphlet *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All* (eventually expanded into a 1981 book of the same name in cooperation with Barbara Mors), and in 1976 she published the article “The Witches Are Returning” in *Peace News*.⁴⁸ Though it does not seem Carrington and Sjöö knew each other, and there are many differences between their artistic approaches, they can definitely be described as fellow travelers on the road of feminist-artistic mythical reworking.⁴⁹

43. Ferentinou, “The Quest,” 187; Ferentinou, “Surrealism, Occulture and Gender,” 112.

44. Image link: <https://guide.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/collection/monica-sjoo/fodande-gud/>

45. Sjöö read Graves’ *The White Goddess* (1948) in 1963. *God Giving Birth* was attacked as being both blasphemous and pornographic and was reported to the police when exhibited in London in 1973 (the charges were, however, dropped). “Biography,” in *Monica Sjöö*, 160, 163. For further discussion, see: Shai Ferraro, “God Giving Birth.”

46. Image link: https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2023/03/sjoo-monica_aspects-of-the-great-mother_1971_f_albin-dahlstrom.jpg

47. The horned figure here likely represents Diana (and the “horns” would be the crescent moon traditionally found in depictions of her), but on a purely visual level it also suggests the depictions of a female Satan discussed earlier.

48. “Biography,” in *Monica Sjöö*, 163.

49. Another artist whose work has interesting parallels to Carrington’s is Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002), especially her tarot garden in Tuscany, Italy (which she started planning in 1974, opening in 1998, see: <https://ilgiardinodeitarocchi.it/en/about/chronology/#1955-1977>, accessed June 17, 2023) and the big sculpture work “Le paradis fantastique” (originally created for the World Fair in Montreal in 1967, since 1971 located close to the Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm) reworking the Eden motif (see <https://webshop.modernamuseet.se/en/posters/niki-de-saint-phalle-1>, accessed June 17, 2023).

In the early 1970s, Carrington—who had always been a staunch advocate of equality and an active subverter of patriarchal structures—became involved with organized feminism. It was thus she came to design the poster for the Mexican women’s liberation movement in 1972. Feminists in other countries also started to become interested in her life and work around this time, which led to a 1974 feature article in *Ms. Magazine*, the first mainstream feminist publication. Written by Gloria Orenstein (b. 1938), who would develop into a famous proponent of goddess-based eco-feminism, it introduced Carrington to a broad US feminist audience.⁵⁰

Asked in an interview many years later if there were others in contemporary feminism who thought along the same lines as Carrington regarding paganism, witchcraft, and so on, Orenstein answered: “I think there were probably plenty, but we had not made Ecofeminism mainstream within feminism yet. . . . In those early years, it was the urban feminists who were politicized in a Marxist way.” Carrington, though, “was very ahead of her time,” Orenstein explained, “drawing the chakras and talking about women’s psychic evolution.”⁵¹ Her reworkings of mythical imagery can be seen as similarly ahead of her time, but also, like her esoteric interests, as grounded in pre-war forms of feminist radicalism. Carrington’s poster thus served as one of the bridges between 1970s radical feminism and turn-of-the-century pro-mythical (and often esoterically inclined) feminism. It was, in other words, one of the factors that helped effect what I have referred to above as the pro-mythical turn in post-war feminism.

A key work in the latter was theologian Mary Daly’s 1978 book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Daly embraces the witch, the hag, the fury, and other negative stereotypes of women, making them mythic heroines and sources of emancipatory power. Enthusiastically, Daly draws on the vocabulary of esotericism in referring to her project as “a process of alchemy,” where feminists “transmute the base metals of man-made myth by becoming

50. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 103.

51. Geis, “Leonora Carrington in the 1970s,” 23.

unmute, calling forth from our Selves and each other the courage to name the unnamable.”⁵² Using her characteristic neologisms and deconstructed words, she also introduces a sort of initiatory theme when talking of “dis-covering the labyrinth of our own unfolding/becoming,”⁵³ and discussing “re-calling/re-membering/re-claiming our Witches’ power to cast spells”⁵⁴ and “igniting the divine Spark in women,”⁵⁵ which involves the “Fire of Female Friendship.”⁵⁶ Carrington’s imagery in the poster clearly fits tremendously well with such (slightly later) feminist projects, and can be seen as one of the triggering factors of a broader development.

Interestingly, in *Gyn/Ecology* Daly highlights an interpretation of the Eden narrative according to which “it was Lilith who persuaded Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge,” and mentions how one of Carrington’s favorite authors, the earlier mentioned poet Robert Graves, has delineated the demonization of Lilith. She also discusses the identification of Lilith with the ancient Greek goddess Hecate, and stresses that “Yahweh is a derivate and reversal of the Goddess, one of whose primary names is Lilith.”⁵⁷

Of Lilith, Fruit, and Serpents

The notion of Lilith as the one who gave Eve the forbidden fruit was not Daly’s invention but an idea present since at least the nineteenth century (with some interpreters suggesting certain depictions in medieval art show this, though it in fact seems more likely they reference the tradition of a feminized Satan).⁵⁸ We can approach it as another potential layer of meaning in Carrington’s poster.

52. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 34.

53. *Ibid.*, 32.

54. *Ibid.*, 318.

55. *Ibid.*, 319.

56. *Ibid.*, 355.

57. *Ibid.*, 86. In a later book, Daly proclaims: ‘Refusing to shrink into mummified marys, goody goddesses, eternally feminine toadies, we join with Lilith’. Mary Daly, *Pure Lust*, 82.

58. John K. Bonnell, “The Serpent with a Human Head in Art and in Mystery Play,” 290.

Was Carrington aware of Lilith, then? Yes, we can safely assume so. Through her Jewish husband (and their large circle of Jewish friends, as well as her own reading in Kabbalah), Carrington would no doubt have been familiar with this famed mythic “first feminist” from Jewish folklore and mysticism. In fact, Jewish mysticism had increasingly become a theme in her work during the second half of the 1960s.⁵⁹ Moreover, we know that Carrington and Orenstein performed an exorcism from the kabbalistic classic *Zohar*, a book which features a detailed (and negative) discussion of Lilith.⁶⁰

We can also note how Carrington’s friend Leonor Fini (1907–1996)⁶¹ commented on her own long-standing fascination with Lilith in 1969: “. . . I know that I belong with the idea of Lilith, the anti-Eve, and that my universe is that of the spirit. Physical maternity instinctively repulses me.”⁶² As Fini and Carrington were close, it seems reasonable they might have discussed Lilith at some point. Fini’s argument that she aligned with Lilith through her choice of creating art instead of birthing children is evocative. Carrington, by contrast, chose to embrace a maternal, domestic and perhaps to an extent more Eve-like identity in her role as a mother and her well-known “enchanting of the kitchen realm.”⁶³ Are we thus witnessing an exchange between two forms of femininity in Carrington’s poster? An acknowledgement that both are valid parts of the feminine spectrum, with the additional proposition that both need to contain elements of the other to achieve balance (considering they are exchanging apples)?

Lilith as a feminist symbol was quite widely circulated in nineteenth-century discourses, and a revival was imminent at the time when Carrington did

59. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 102.

60. Geis, “Leonora Carrington in the 1970s,” 20; Aridjis, “An A-Z,” 18.

61. It was Max Ernst who introduced Carrington to Fini in Paris, and the two would remain friends. On this, see: Whitney Chadwick, “The Two Leonors,” 57.

62. Fini quoted in: Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and Surrealist Movement*, 130. See also Alyce Mahon, “La Féminité triomphante,” 16.

63. On Carrington and the (esoteric) symbolism of the kitchen, see Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 60, 64–70.

her painting.⁶⁴ In fact, the 1972 article simply titled “Lilith” by Lilly Rivlin, published in the same magazine that featured Carrington in 1974, *Ms. Magazine*, has been identified as the text that sparked a renewed interest in Lilith among feminists.⁶⁵ Rivlin here establishes several of the leitmotifs of contemporary feminist veneration of Lilith, claiming that Lilith has her origins in older goddess cults that have become distorted by “patriarchal inversion” (a term she borrows from the Jungian scholar of myth Joseph Campbell), and speculating on why both God and Adam find Lilith’s longing for equality and freedom unacceptable (in other words, condemning them both as male chauvinists).⁶⁶ Nineteenth-century texts on Lilith, by contrast, tended to retain more of her demonic features, making her a frightful enemy for all male oppressors in a manner that might have appealed to Carrington’s gothic sensibilities.⁶⁷ The poster I have focused on so far was not the only time Carrington treated the Eden theme. Another example is *Forbidden Fruit* (1969),⁶⁸ done only a couple of years before the poster.⁶⁹ In this painting, the serpent gives a pomegranate to a humanoid figure covered in fur and with feet growing from the head, possibly a reference to how the serpent’s gift according to Blavatsky set in motion the evolution to our current state.⁷⁰ In such a reading, this figure would be a primitive version of humanity. The serpent’s tail turns into a spiral, a symbol of (spiritual) evolution in Theosophy.⁷¹ Such a spiral can also be seen in the

64. On nineteenth-century use of Lilith, see Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 58–65.

65. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin & Henny Wenkart, “Editors’ Introduction,” xviii.

66. Lilly Rivlin, “Lilith,” 6–7.

67. Cf. Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 58–65, 366–70.

68. Image link: <https://biblioklept.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/forbidden-fruit-1959-oil-on-canvas.jpg> (note the date in the link is incorrect, Aberth, “Leonora Carrington”, 118, dates the painting to 1969).

69. Reproduced in Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 118.

70. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, 389.

71. Several key Theosophists employed the spiral as an evolutionary symbol; for some examples see: Malin Fitger, “Själens arkitektur,” 503; Gary W. Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory,” 384; Anna (Bonus) Kingsford, *The Perfect Way, or The Finding of Christ*, 335–337.

poster, indicating the theme of a spiral movement towards higher consciousness. Moreover, the serpent's coiled body comes across as a labyrinth, the classic symbol of initiation so recurrent in Carrington's production, thus accentuating the serpent's role as initiator. This might also be how we can understand this animal in *Self-Portrait in Orthopedic Black Tie* (1973),⁷² which features a walking stick in the shape of a snake, or perhaps an erect snake companion.⁷³

Snakes can be seen in several of Carrington's works, but of special interest for the present discussion is one image in the 1969 series of seven untitled rectangular gouaches on parchment that may have been an aborted attempt at a rendition of the tarot.⁷⁴ It has been described as follows by Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq: "A large white snake crowned with Hathor's horns . . . is set against a fruit-bearing tree alluding to the Tree of Knowledge in Paradise. Satan has been transformed by Carrington into a benign deity of wisdom aligned with the goddess, women, and nature, as the trinity near its head implies."⁷⁵ Another possible association regarding the birds might be that Lilith is translated as "screech owl" in the King James Bible.⁷⁶ As mentioned above, several interpreters have suggested the female Edenic serpent in medieval iconography might in fact be Lilith. While this is probably incorrect, Lilith as the serpent is an idea with some resonance in this painting.

72. Image link: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/self-portrait-with-orthopedic-brace-zSEy1b0zClze3Q5xno3wcA2>

73. Arcq and Aberth write: "intimating the many magical associations Carrington had with that creature: giver of knowledge to women, symbol of shamanic transformation, the mystical feathered serpent Quetzalcóatl, etc" (Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 87). They also note that The Hermit in Wirth's *Le tarot des imagiers du Moyen Age*, which she had in her library, is accompanied by a snake (ibid.).

74. Image link: https://arthive.com/leonoracarrington/works/543428~Snake_and_swallows. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 90-91.

75. Ibid., 93, image on p. 90.

76. Isaiah 34:14.

Of Witches and Devils

Carrington's use of demonic subject matter can be further contextualized by considering the type of intellectualized, polemical Satanism that was quite prominent in surrealism, usually with a clear genealogy stretching back to Baudelaire as well as to anti-clerical anarchists like Mikhail Bakunin. The latter praised Satan as a symbol of the rebellious impulse in man and we can note that Carrington's son has mentioned Bakunin as an important author for his mother, one whose books were always on the shelf in their home.⁷⁷ For surrealist pro-satanic discourse, a key example is the discussion of Lucifer/Satan that constitutes the culmination of André Breton's small 1944 book *Arcane 17*, where he emphatically states that "rebellion alone is the creator of light."⁷⁸ In the 1948 collective (signed by fifty-two group members) surrealist tract, co-authored by Breton, "Back to Your Kennels, Yelpers of God," the intrinsic value of blasphemy is underscored.⁷⁹ Breton moreover referred to the tract's stance as one of "Luciferianism" in an interview.⁸⁰ The examples could easily be multiplied, and in the visual realm we can for example think of Man Ray's 1929 photograph where an inverted cross is superimposed over a pair of buttocks.⁸¹

We should also consider Breton's enthusiasm for Jules Michelet's 1862 pseudo-historical monograph *La Sorcière* ("The Witch"), and his well-known claim that Carrington epitomized the book's heroic witch.⁸² It must here be remembered that unlike the pagan witch figure popularized by the new religious movement

77. Gabriel Weisz Carrington, "Leonora Carrington, My Mother," recording available online via <https://www.thelasttuesdaysociety.org/event/leonora-carrington-my-mother-gaby-weisz-zoom-lecture/>, accessed June 17, 2023. On Bakunin's "Satanism," see Per Faxneld, "The Devil is Red," 537-39.

78. André Breton, *Arcanum 17*, 132. Breton here partly draws on Victor Hugo's unfinished epic *La Fin de Satan* (which he worked on between 1854-1862). See discussion of the latter in Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism*, 91, 275-76.

79. *A la niche, les glapisseurs de dieu*.

80. André Breton, *Conversations*, 222.

81. On this work, *Monument à D.A.F. de Sade*, see John Fuller, "Atget and Man Ray in the Context of Surrealism," 131.

82. Image link: <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/191531-0>. André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, 335. Cf. Tere Arcq & Stefan van Raay, eds., *Leonora Carrington: Magical Tales*, 192.

Wicca in the 1950s and 60s, Michelet's anti-patriarchal witch is very explicitly a Satanist, whose rebellion against God the Father and his church represents a sort of justified Luciferian proto-socialist revolt.⁸³ Another work admired by the surrealists, Émile Grillo de Givry's *Le musée des sorciers, mages et alchimistes* (1929) highlights woman's intimate ties to Satan, emphasizing that this makes her naturally subversive—a good thing, to the surrealists.⁸⁴ Carrington's surrealist friends, then, were employing Satanic symbolism as part of their seditious repertoire, and Breton explicitly situated Carrington in this tradition.

It is also clear she herself had such predilections from a young age. An early watercolor by Carrington, *Spirito di Firenze* (c. 1932–33),⁸⁵ features a Satan-like figure or demon hovering above Florence, while the cover she drew for a sketchbook from around the same time shows cobwebs, bats, and a grimoire titled “Black Sorcery.”⁸⁶ Blasphemous and anti-clerical motifs can also be found in Carrington's late-1930s short story “As They Rode Along the Edge.”⁸⁷ This may be connected to the negative experiences Carrington had in Catholic boarding schools as a child, which led to a life-long antipathy towards the Catholic Church.⁸⁸ The same antagonism is certainly a dimension of her later frankly proclaiming herself to be a witch in conversations, and the use of the witch motif and various registers of blasphemy in her art and writing.⁸⁹

83. Jules Michelet, *La sorcière*, xviii, 108–9, 151, 382, *et passim*. For further discussion, see Robert Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb*, 211–12.

84. Ferentinou, “A Witch,” 158.

85. Image link: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/leonora-carrington/spirito-di-firenze-bwFwWf-SG2pWrGyyXMWBzeA2>.

86. Aberth, “‘An Allergy’,” 27–30.

87. Leonora Carrington, *The Complete Short Stories of Leonora Carrington*, 44, 49, 53. Moreover, ecstatic revelry reminiscent of the mythical witches' sabbath abound in Carrington's paintings, often referencing and subverting the misogynistic iconography of early-modern clerical anti-witchcraft discourses. Examples of this include *Garden Bedroom* (1941), *The House Opposite* (1945), *Plain Chant* (1947), *Samain* (1951), *The Garden of Paracelsus* (1957), *The Magical World of the Mayas* (1963), *The Chrysopeia of Mary the Jewess* (1964), *Sinister Work* (1973), *Night of the 8th* (1987), and *The Q Symphony* (2002).

88. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 15, 18.

89. Gloria Orenstein, “The Lost Story of Women of Power,” 371.

Carrington’s celebrated painting *Grandmother Moorhead’s Aromatic Kitchen* (1975) features a figure that Aberth describes as “a horned goat-like creature holding a broom—a sign of the hearth and of witchcraft from centuries past.”⁹⁰ The painting also contains Carrington’s famous backwards writing incorporated into an explicitly ritualistic, magical context.⁹¹ Combined with the goat and the broom, the writing evokes demonological notions of how witches did everything backwards at their Satanic sabbaths.⁹² Carrington, of course, always created her own idiosyncratic, multilayered version of any established motif that she employed. For example, Arcq and Aberth point out how Carrington in *The Artist Travelling Incognito* (1949) plays with the notion of a witches’ familiar, providing herself with a white cat instead of the traditional black one.⁹³

Potentially, the complex symbolism of the goat being sacrificed in Carrington’s novel *The Stone Door* can also be related to motifs like the Satanic sabbatic goat. In the novel, it is proclaimed that “. . . the Goat will renew the life blood of the Myth and will violate the Garden of Paradise. The Goat will deliver us the New Myth.”⁹⁴ The goat is, naturally, a well-known visual representation of Satan, while the quest for a new myth is of course very much in line with the ideas so famously propagated by Breton, Pierre Mabille, and other surrealists in the 1940s.⁹⁵ Interestingly, so is connecting Satan with the attainment of the new myth which is to replace Christianity’s hegemonic mythology. This theme is implicit in, for example, Breton’s *Arcane 17*.

90. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 122. Image link: https://worldartfoundations.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/leonora-carrington-grandmother-moorheads-aromatic-kitchen-1975_0.jpg.

91. Ibid.

92. On the diabolical inversions of witches as imagined in the early modern period, see Robert Rowland, “Natthäxor och vardagshäxor.”

93. Aberth & Arcq, “As in a Mirror,” 85. Again, then, Carrington subverts and inverts demonological iconography. Image link: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/leonora-carrington/the-artist-traveling-incognito-1949>.

94. Leonora Carrington, *The Stone Door*, 67.

95. Noheden, “Leonora Carrington,” 63.

However, this is but one layer of cultural echoes. Victoria Ferentinou has written convincingly about the pagan, non-diabolical dimensions of Carrington's employment of the witch figure. Ferentinou shows how Carrington was likely inspired by Kurt Seligmann's *The History of Magic* (1948), where the argument is that the witches' sabbath was a pagan remnant, Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (which she read in 1949), and probably also at least one book by the creator of Wicca, Gerald Gardner.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, considering the context of surrealist use of Satanism as a subversive strategy facilitates alternative ways to frame certain other features in Carrington's work and persona as well. In July 1971, Carrington visited New York, and Orenstein describes how she greeted her by making the sign of the horns, calling it the holy horns of consecration of the goddess.⁹⁷

Carrington's first major work, *Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)* (1937-38) also sees her make this hand-sign, which Aberth calls "the age-old sign of malediction."⁹⁸ Used in several Mediterranean countries both to ward off the evil eye and to direct evil at someone, it is a polyvalent gesture.⁹⁹ We can here again note the iconographic tradition that portrays Satan as a female, often with horns, that certainly resonates with this hand-sign of a horned goddess. In the self-portrait, on the other hand, the sign is perhaps better understood as indicating her interest in sorcery.

By 1971, when Carrington employed the sign as an actual greeting, it had however taken on other connotations in the broader culture of the time. The 1969 debut album of Chicago-based psychedelic Satanic rock band Coven, released on major label Mercury Records, featured a photo of its members giving

96. Ferentinou, "A Witch," 158-59; Ferentinou, "The Quest," 185. See also Kurt Seligmann, *The Mirror of Magic*. Carrington knew the author and congratulated him on this book, praising it in a letter, as detailed in Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 74.

97. Gloria Orenstein, "In Memory of the Most Magical Friend I Ever Had," 194.

98. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 33. Image link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/492697>.

99. See discussion in Adam E. Nowakowski, "'Horns Up!,'" 63-67; Henk Driessen, "Gestured Masculinity," 247.

the “sign of the horns” as a sign of Satanic allegiance.¹⁰⁰ The UK band Black Sabbath also began using it around 1969.¹⁰¹ It had moreover been established as a salutation in both informal and ritual contexts in Anton LaVey’s Church of Satan, with a description of it in the 1969 *Satanic Bible*.¹⁰² This is not to say Carrington was specifically listening to psychedelic rock or reading LaVey, which would appear highly implausible, but clearly this understanding of the hand-gesture was floating around in a variety of contexts at the time. It may partially be derived from an illustration of a hand gesture,¹⁰³ “The Sign of Excommunication,” in one of Carrington’s favorite occult books, Éliphas Lévi’s 1856 *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*, which is slightly different but casts the shadow of the Devil’s face. We can also observe the presence of a yin-yang symbol that suggests the black and the white apple in Carrington’s poster.¹⁰⁴

In the early 1970s, Carrington and Orenstein attended radical feminist events organized by the group NOW (National Organization for Women) in the US. Carrington became so enthusiastic she wanted to start a branch of NOW in Mexico and met with its leadership. In the subsequent discussion with Orenstein, Carrington flippantly asked her if she “thought we could work a little devil worship into NOW.”¹⁰⁵ When Carrington in 1971 describes the hand-sign as indicating an unnamed goddess, it is hence not entirely far-fetched to once more recall the old tradition of Satan as a female entity, and of the demonic

100. Coven, *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls*, LP, Mercury Records, 1969. Image link: <https://i.discogs.com/3B2trxLbt1qLlIJNYEHdj5BwkTY8cz9KPyqehKMGA-g/rs:fit/g:sm/q:90/h:600/w:599/czM6Ly9kaXNjb2dz/LWRhdGFiYXNlLWlt/YWdlcy9SLTEzMzYy/ODItMTI3MjM0OTIy/MS5qcGVn.jpeg>.

101. Geezer Butler of Black Sabbath can be seen “raising the horns” in a photograph taken in 1969 (included in the CD booklet of the compilation album *Symptom of the Universe: The Original Black Sabbath 1970–1978*, Rhino Records/Warner Bros. Records, 2002).

102. Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Bible*, 133–34.

103. Image link: <https://www.weiserantiquarian.com/pages/books/64154/eliphas-levi/an-original-hand-coloured-matted-illustration-sacerdotal-esotericism-making-the-sign-of>.

104. Éliphas Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 33.

105. Geis, “Leonora Carrington in the 1970s,” 23.

Lilith as a powerful female demon rebelling against patriarchy and potentially the giver of the forbidden fruit to Eve. This seems especially reasonable given Carrington's untitled 1969 gouache (discussed above) of a horned, feminine serpent next to the tree bearing the forbidden fruit.

Closing Analysis: Of Tarot Cards and Hermaphroditism

Finally, let us consider the Devil card in Carrington's tarot designs.¹⁰⁶ Interestingly, the figure has the breasts familiar from the 1889 Oswald Wirth deck, not seen in for example the Rider-Waite-Smith deck (where Satan is purely masculine).¹⁰⁷ Carrington has thus consciously chosen to draw on the version featuring a feminized Satan, while she turns to the Rider-Waite-Smith deck for some of the other cards.¹⁰⁸ Aberth and Arcq moreover direct attention to the fact that the figure has "an upside-down cross for male genitals that also resembles the sign for Venus (and women)."¹⁰⁹ This could be said to connect the Satanic inverted cross (somewhat similarly superimposed over buttocks in the Man Ray work discussed earlier) with the symbol of woman, furthering the feminization of Satan inherent elsewhere in her works. Unlike the Egyptian ankh in the same place in Wirth's deck, Carrington's choice also underscores her antagonism towards Christianity.

Wirth's conception of the Devil is heavily indebted to Éliphas Lévi's figure Baphomet. This enigmatic entity was illustrated by Lévi himself for his book

106. The card is reproduced in *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington*, 49. Image link: https://i.guim.co.uk/img/media/b2bfa126ea705f20bd5317246109c6924668457a/707_676_4521_5055/master/4521.jpg?width=720&quality=45&auto=format&fit=max&dpr=2&s=c35a54cf276570fafa4bf7b4bbe7ce3d.

107. The Wirth deck can be viewed online via the Bibliothèque nationale de France: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105110785/f13.item.r=wirth%20tarot>, accessed June 17, 2023.

108. Aberth & Arcq ("As in a Mirror," 109) state that she drew on the Rider-Waite-Smith deck for the Devil, but in fact this deck's Devil does *not* have female features.

109. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 109-110. Only two of Carrington's 22 Major Arcana paintings are dated (1955), and it is unknown when the others were produced. *Ibid.*, 89.

Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie,¹¹⁰ that has been considered an especially influential occult tome for the Paris surrealists and which Carrington owned.¹¹¹ Without going too deeply into the intricacies of Lévi's wordy explication of Baphomet, his visual depiction of it clearly draws heavily on images of Satan presiding at the witches' sabbath in early-modern treatises on witchcraft. The Devil card in some Tarot decks dating as far back as to the fifteenth century also strongly resembles Lévi's image, including the hermaphrodite figure's breasts. Though it is vastly more complicated in Lévi's system of thought, it soon became established as a devil-figure in the broader occult milieu and popular culture.¹¹² I would like to close my analysis by pointing out some interesting similarities to Carrington's *Mujeres Conciencia* poster.¹¹³

The gnostic light of illumination Carrington depicts emanating from the serpent's eye echoes Baphomet's torch of enlightenment.¹¹⁴ The white and the black female figures can indicate the unification of opposites Baphomet symbolizes in Lévi (there illustrated with a black and a white crescent moon, respectively). The black figure's hair hangs down towards the ground below, while that of the white rises towards the sky, much like Baphomet's hands (one pointing upwards and one pointing downwards, illustrating the concept "as above, so below").¹¹⁵ The cross at the bottom is entwined by the serpent's tail and appears similar to the caduceus in Baphomet's lap.

110. Image link: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a4/Baphomet.png/1024px-Baphomet.png>.

111. *Ibid.*, 70, 89.

112. On Baphomet, see Julian Strube, "The 'Baphomet' of Eliphas Lévi."

113. Image link: https://masdearte.com/media/n_carrington_mapfre12.jpg.

114. Further, the flame protruding from the devil's head in Carrington's tarot devil design looks more like a plant or perhaps an asparagus than the conventional lit torch, connecting the figure with Carrington's preoccupation with gardens and woodlands—including, of course, the Garden of Eden of her feminist poster.

115. Lévi himself explains the gesture as expressing "the perfect concord between mercy and justice," describing how the figure's "sign of occultism is made with two hands, pointing upward to the white moon of CHESED, and downward to the black moon of GEBURAH." Lévi, *Transcendental Magic*, 77.

The wings in the poster form a black crescent moon, echoing the one seen to the right of Lévi's Baphomet. We can also think of the black wings Baphomet itself is endowed with. In the poster, the wings are perhaps a symbol of woman's divinity regained or accomplished, a sign of apotheosis. As Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq point out, the wings "could be from an angel," potentially a fallen angel we might add, "or could belong to the snake, referencing the plumed serpent of the Aztecs, Quetzalcóatl."¹¹⁶ This is simply part of the multivalence and poly-mythological character of the image. For an artistic project aimed at the undermining of oppressive, monolithic patriarchal myths, polyvalence itself may be a key strategic point. In that spirit, the present article has hopefully contributed to the liberatory polyphony by highlighting further intertexts.

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116. Aberth & Arcq, "As in a Mirror," 103.

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