

**Curious Reversals and Marvelous Wounds:  
Metamorphosis and Identity in Angela Carter's  
*The Bloody Chamber***

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## Introduction: Stealing Past the Dragons

Asked to describe her childhood, Angela Carter often referred to her grandmother, calling her “a ‘South Yorkshire matriarch’ with an innate conviction of the irreducible superiority of women.”<sup>1</sup> This dynamic Granny took an active role in her granddaughter’s life, gathering Carter’s mother (pregnant with Carter at the time) and brother and whisking them off to the safety of South Yorkshire during World War II. Indomitable and unflappable, Granny managed to secure a cottage when lodging was scarce, and the Stalker brood remained in South Yorkshire for the duration of the war. Though Angela Stalker went on to become Angela Carter--a powerful British writer who eludes categorization with the broad body of her work--she seems to fall most neatly under her own term, “spell-binder.”<sup>2</sup> Alternately labeled magical realist, feminist, journalist, novelist, editor and social critic, Carter was, first and foremost, a story-teller. In a 1984 interview with John Haffenden, Carter connected her grandmother with the art of storytelling that Carter brilliantly embodied in her own life:

When my grandmother read “Little Red Riding Hood” to me, she had no truck with that sentimental nonsense about a friendly woodcutter carefully slitting open the wolf’s belly and letting out the grandmother; when she came to the part about the wolf jumping on Little Red Riding Hood and eating her up, she used to jump on me and pretend to eat me.<sup>3</sup>

Like her grandmother, Carter never had any truck with stale, unchanging roles and the conventional view of life. She assumed her Granny's revisionist stance, refashioning the world around her to suit herself.

Born in 1940 to Olive and Hugh Stalker, Carter went to school in South London after leaving her Yorkshire refuge during the war. Finding employment as a junior reporter for the *Croyden Advertiser*, she married Paul Carter in 1960 and began studying medieval literature at the University of Bristol in 1962. Her first published novel, *Shadow Dance*, appeared in 1966, beginning a prolific career that would win her literary prizes, critical acclaim, and "flotillas of friends" and admirers.<sup>4</sup> She won the John Llewellyn Rhys prize for *The Magic Toyshop* in 1967, and went on to receive the Somerset Maugham Award the following year for her next novel, *Several Perceptions*. Her career as a novelist, essayist, and editor continued until February 1992, when friends and admirers mourned the death of an author Salman Rushdie called the "high sorceress [and] benevolent witch-queen" of English literature.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the glowing praise that Carter received from Rushdie and others, she managed to offend and confuse many readers. Many male readers rejected her feminism, while that same feminism--a unique brand that defied conventional categorization as surely as her writing style did--rankled many feminist authors and critics. Michael Wood notes her distaste for female victimization stories typified by Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*: "*By Grand Central Station I Tore Off His Balls* was the title

Carter said she had in mind.”<sup>6</sup> Her rejection of a feminism that passively rails against woman’s role as victim emerges throughout Carter’s work, from her early novel *The Magic Toyshop* to her final achievement, *Wise Children*.

*The Bloody Chamber*, a collection of short stories that her Chatto editor Carmen Callil calls “the first of her masterpieces,”<sup>7</sup> falls in the middle of her career. Published in 1979, the work appeared in the same year as her non-fiction examination of pornography and cultural ideologies of femininity, *The Sadeian Woman*. Both works explore the roles of women in an attempt to refute a simplistic dichotomy--expressed by de Sade in his two major female characters Justine and Juliette--that casts women as passive angels or evil whores. In de Sade’s controversial canon, Justine represents virtue, whereas “the wicked Juliette, her sister and antithesis, dehumanises herself completely in the pursuit of pleasure.”<sup>8</sup> Carter asserts that strong and active females in de Sade’s world are necessarily “woman-monsters” who must accept “exile from human life.”<sup>9</sup> While Carter does not deny the existence of the “woman-monster,” she rejects the idea that the assumption of strength and power relegate all women to this category.

While *The Sadeian Woman* explores these questions in the guise of a sociological inquiry into the nature and uses of pornography, *The Bloody Chamber* treats these same questions in ten lyric tales based on fairy tales and folklore. What Lorna Sage calls a “rewriter,”<sup>10</sup> Carter examines and revises classic fairy tales--many drawn from Charles Perrault--in her collection. The “Bluebeard” tale, “Beauty and the Beast” and “Little Red Riding

Hood” serve as the basis for most of the stories, with “Puss-In-Boots,” “Snow White,” and “Cinderella” appearing in places as well. In addition to orally transmitted fairy tales, Carter also uses a more contemporary tale--*Alice in Wonderland*--to inform both the structure of the collection and its thematic concerns. Laced throughout the tales is a strong interest in the folk lore of vampires, werewolves, and other monsters who haunt the forests of Carter’s fairy tale worlds.

By choosing to work within the fairy tale genre, Carter assigns herself a task of revision with didactic implications. Often regarded as children’s tales, fairy tales have always carried an educative level that seems to imply a sense of moral responsibility. Defending his own use of the fairy tale structure, C.S. Lewis distinguishes between poet and man, but insists that “every poet was also a man and a citizen; in that capacity he ought to, and would wish to, make his work edifying as well as pleasing.”<sup>11</sup> Noting that inhibitions and innate stubbornness can often prevent children and adults from learning the lessons thrust upon them, he hypothesizes that imaginary, magical worlds might “steal past those watchful dragons” and achieve their purpose of edification.<sup>12</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, a psychoanalytic theorist concerned with the effects and uses of children’s literature, also asserts the educative function inherent in fairy tales: “The question for the child is not ‘Do I want to be good?’ but ‘Who do I want to be like?’”<sup>13</sup> According to Bettelheim, fairy tales answer this question by creating positive models for emulation.

Though theorists and authors such as Lewis and Bettelheim see the positive and didactic value of fairy tales, feminist critics often denigrate the form as an oppressive medium that helps ensure the passivity of women. In *Woman Hating*, Andrea Dworkin reconsiders the morals of fairy tales:

The lessons are simple, and we learn them well:

Men and women are different, absolute opposites.

The heroic prince can never be confused with Cinderella, or Snow-White, or Sleeping Beauty. She could never do what he does at all, let alone better . . . .

The good father can never be confused with the bad mother. Their qualities are different, polar.

Where he is erect, she is supine. Where he is awake, she is asleep.

Where he is active, she is passive. Where she is erect, or awake, or active, she is evil and must be destroyed.<sup>14</sup>

Dworkin's analysis of traditional fairy tales embeds two sets of oppositions. First, the contrast between male and female reinforces man's dominant, superior position over passive females. Second, the division between good (passive) females and evil (active) females recalls de Sade's archetypal division between virtue and evil that allows females no place in the middle ground.

The virtuous and passive feminine ideal, contrasted with the fallen woman or whore, emerged not only in literature but as the cultural ideology of femininity that dominated the Victorian era and beyond. As Elaine Showalter points out, "the middle class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in post-industrial England and America, prescribed a woman who would be a perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men."<sup>15</sup> This Angel in the House exhibited none of the qualities of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call "the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister."<sup>16</sup> The "monster-woman" replaces virtue and purity with sexual license and destruction. Christina Rossetti's 1859 poem "Goblin Market" dramatizes the two "alternative possibilities of selfhood for women" in Laura and Lizzie.<sup>17</sup> While Laura represents the fallen woman who gives in to sexual temptation and therefore must be destroyed or violently purified, Lizzie serves as the self-sacrificing angel. The poem serves as striking proof that the restrictions placed on feminine self-identity were not solely imposed by male authors.

These rigid and restrictive roles are exactly what Carter rejects in her short stories. She sets up the collection as a progression: the first story, "The Bloody Chamber," offers a paradigm that reverses the original tale and offers salvation at the hands of a strong mother-figure. This straightforward, positive revision becomes more complicated and complex as the stories progress. Two "Beauty and the Beast" tales obscure the lines between predator and prey and initiate a pattern of "curious reversal[s]"<sup>18</sup> in which Carter constantly revises and expands upon her own revisions. The stories escalate in complexity as they move toward

the center story, "The Erl-King." In this story, the theme of motherhood emerges as a central concern for the later tales, where mothers are restrictive, yet finally empowering as they enable and engender the process of self-identification. The final stories offer a vision of female strength and wisdom that can conquer the monsters who lurk in the fairy tale woods. Religious imagery scattered throughout the stories casts the transformation process that Carter celebrates as a path to salvation.

Carter's revisions are unquestionably feminist tales. She undermines the lessons that Dworkin sees in fairy tales, creating worlds where Cinderella can be confused with the heroic prince and Little Red Riding Hood can save herself. Yet Carter's revisions are not one-dimensional. Her female characters are mutable and complex, undergoing transformations that challenge them to save themselves and others. In their mutability and complexity, her women refute the dichotomy of passive good and active evil. While Carter certainly imagines, and even celebrates, female monsters, she also draws strong, active female figures whose powers are creative rather than destructive. A major facet of her revision lies in her portrayal of mother figures. Dworkin notes the fate of mothers in traditional fairy tales:

These fairy tale mothers are mythological female figures. They define for us the female character and delineate its existential possibilities. When she is good, she is soon dead. In fact, when she is good, she is so passive that death must be only more of the same. . . . When she is bad, she lives, or when she lives, she is bad.<sup>19</sup>

In Carter's revisions, motherhood emerges as a strong creative and protective force. "The Bloody Chamber" and the concluding wolf stories, especially "Wolf-Alice," clearly show a maternal tradition that is positive and empowering.

Through her use of the maternal image, Carter develops the idea of the "wise child,"<sup>20</sup> which finally emerges as the central focus of her collection. If, as Bettelheim suggests, the purpose of fairy tales is to answer the question "Who do I want to be like?," then Carter answers that question with a positive yet complex vision. The wise child combines innocence with experience, embraces change and mutability, and acquires the ability to cast off the oppressive elements of the mother figure without destroying all of her positive aspects. The wise child provides salvation for herself and others; the young girl in "The Erl-King" slays the embodiment of lover, father, and mother to free herself and her caged sisters, while Wolf-Alice uses her nurturing powers to bestow grace on the ghastly Duke.

Though Carter's stories reflect a feminist revision of patriarchal fairy tales, her vision of the wise child does not apply only to females. Ultimately, her concerns become grander: the complexity of human relations, the importance of transformations and mutability, and the question of salvation emerge as important themes not only for women, but for us all. Richly allusive, Carter places herself in a feminist literary context, drawing on Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Bronte, Christina Rossetti, and other female authors. However, her allusions also place her in a larger literary tradition that reaches back to Genesis and stretches to the present

day. Thus her work becomes important not only for women, but for all who wonder "Who do I want to be like?"

## Notes

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16. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 28.
17. Gilbert and Gubar 564.
18. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979; London: Vintage, 1995) 46. This quote comes from "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon."
19. Dworkin 41.
20. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* 118. This quote comes from "The Company of Wolves."

### **Curious Virgins and Avenging Angels: “The Bloody Chamber”**

Carter bases her title story on Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” a cautionary tale about sexual temptation, curiosity, and punishment. The original tale opens with a description of a wealthy, monstrously ugly man who succeeds in wooing a beautiful young maiden with his hospitality and riches. After their marriage, he leaves her in the castle, entrusting her with a set of keys, but warning her not to enter a forbidden chamber. Neighbors flood into the castle as soon as Bluebeard leaves, but his wife succumbs to her curiosity and abandons her guests to find the forbidden room. Here a horrifying scene of dead corpses confronts her. All of Bluebeard’s previous wives hang along the walls, dripping with blood from their slit throats. The key falls into a pool of blood, and though she scrubs it with sand and grit, the stain will not go away. Thus, when Bluebeard returns, he discovers her betrayal, and prepares to kill her. Doomed and desperate, his wife attempts to stall, asking permission to say her last prayers. When he grants a delay, she seeks aid not from her sister, who is in the castle with her, but from her absent brothers. Just as Bluebeard’s mighty cutlass nears her throat, two dashing horsemen (the brothers) enter the scene with swords flashing. The two brothers kill Bluebeard immediately, gallantly rescuing their sister from a grisly death.<sup>1</sup>

Relating the “Bluebeard” story to other fairy tales that contain the “central motif of a chamber which must not be entered,” Bruno Bettelheim connects the murderous Bluebeard with the animal grooms of tales like the English “Mr. Fox” and the Brothers Grimm’s

"Fitcher's Bird."<sup>2</sup> On a broad level, Bettelheim sees the "Bluebeard" narrative as a test of female trustworthiness and betrayal:

Whether it is Bluebeard or the sorcerer in "Fitcher's Bird," it seems clear that when the male gives the female a key to a room, while at the same time instructing her not to enter, it is a test of her faithfulness. . . .

Returning unexpectedly, they find that their confidence has been betrayed. The nature of the betrayal may be guessed by the punishment: execution. In certain parts of the world in times past, only one form of deception on the female's part was punishable by death inflicted by her husband: sexual infidelity.<sup>3</sup>

Bettelheim sees the bloody key as a sign of the wife's lost innocence and sexual betrayal: "It makes sense that the blood cannot be washed away: defloration is an irreversible event."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the moral of the story emerges: "women, don't give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don't permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed."<sup>5</sup> The woman must restrain her sexuality, while the male must curb his natural and justifiable anger.

Bettelheim calls the original Bluebeard "the most monstrous and beastly of all fairy-tale husbands,"<sup>6</sup> and Carter uses this beastliness to create the predator-prey imagery in her revision. She creates a similarly beastly husband, a Marquis who recalls the Marquis de Sade with his pornographic library and grisly torture chamber. The virginal bride also plays a

similar role in Carter's tale, but her defloration comes at her husband's hands. Using this fairy tale paradigm, Carter subverts the traditional story, eliminating the masculine heroes in favor of a tiger-killing mother who crashes into the castle like an "avenging angel."<sup>7</sup> This avenging angel becomes the focal point of Carter's revision. She recalls the Victorian Angel in the House, but her avenging fury erases the passivity of her cultural and literary models. The pianist's mother serves as the first example of Carter's positive mother figures, and strikes a keynote in her feminist message. As Patricia Duncker notes: "Carter is transforming the sexual politics of the fairy tales in significant ways. The mother of Bluebeard's bride never deserts her child. She has the wisdom to give her child the freedom demanded by sexual maturity."<sup>8</sup> By creating a mother who allows sexual curiosity to flourish without abandoning or destroying her daughter, Carter envisions a new feminine archetype. With this vision, Flora Alexander writes, "female consciousness, and the possibility of female power, are admitted into the story."<sup>9</sup>

Before introducing the strong female presence, Carter sets up a traditional structure of male dominance and female victimization. Though the pianist's sexual curiosity qualifies her status as victim, the sexual act becomes a symbol of male power and female submission in Carter's story. The opening sentence, describing her train ride, outlines the importance of sexual initiation in the tale, bringing into relief the difference between innocence and sexual knowledge:

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable white linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietness of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage. (7)

The length of the sentence creates a visual image of a long train, winding through the countryside toward Bluebeard's magical castle by the sea. The train's motion generates sexual energy as it becomes a phallic symbol, evoking the sexual essence of her husband and the marriage she will soon consummate. This sexual energy contrasts with the images of girlhood and virginity described in the same sentence. Her anticipation seems pleasant, a "delicious ecstasy of excitement," yet the passage also carries undertones of foreboding and fear in the harsh image of the "ceaselessly thrusting" pistons. This juxtaposition of virginity and innocence with driving lust creates a pattern that Carter exploits throughout the story.

The tension between sexuality and innocence grows stronger as Carter delineates the character of the husband, who controls their sexual relations to satisfy his sadistic tendencies. He becomes a violent and cruel sexual predator, contrasting with his child-bride's "bony hips . . . [and] nervous pianist's fingers" (10). Still imagining their wedding consummation, her language foreshadows more strongly her impending danger: "His kiss, his kiss with tongue

and teeth in it and a rasp of beard, had hinted to me, though with the same exquisite tact as this nightdress he'd given me, of the wedding night" (8). While the experience remains something to be anticipated with excitement, the rasp of tongue, teeth, and beard hints at the voracious sexual animal hidden behind his civilized facade.

By giving Bluebeard's sexuality a beastly, carnivorous element, Carter makes him a predator who threatens devourment. In her aptly titled essay, "Running with the Tigers," Margaret Atwood comments on the importance of animal imagery in the stories, noting that "the distinctions drawn are not so much between male and female as between 'tigers' and 'lambs,' carnivores and herbivores, those who are preyed upon and those who do the preying."<sup>10</sup> Cat imagery dominates "The Bloody Chamber," and the cats in Carter's stories are almost always cruel predators (with the exception of "Puss-in Boots"). The Marquis is no exception--even in their courtship, the pianist notices his beastly aspects. His leonine head, silver-streaked mane, and stealthy, cat-like creep immediately mark him as a lion. Connecting the Marquis with the Marquis de Sade after whom he is modeled, Atwood remarks, "His cathood is like that of Borghese in [de Sade's] *Juliette*, who is a 'glutton for pleasure, like a huge, cruel cat and cruel as a cat is sleepily cruel, by nature.'"<sup>11</sup> When Bluebeard strips her, the pianist becomes a "lamb chop" (15) to be consumed. In her husband's beastly castle, the virginal young pianist finds she must play the lamb to her husband's lion.

The sexual tension between lion and lamb heightens when the pianist discovers the library. Here she finds that sex can be sadistic and violent. Hidden in books with titles like *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, and *The Secret of Pandora's Box*, she finds pornographic images of female suffering at the hands of powerful and sexually aroused men. Her interest piqued, the pianist continues to look through her husband's extensive collection of pornography, though it frightens and disgusts her. This sexual curiosity places her in danger, for when Bluebeard discovers her in the library, he becomes aroused by her innocence and shock. With a "curious mixture of mockery and relish," he asks, "have the nasty pictures scared Baby? Baby mustn't play with grownups' toys until she's learned to handle them, must she?" (17). Stumbling away and stammering, the pianist attempts to delay the inevitable consummation. Cold-blooded fear consumes her curiosity and excitement, but she cannot avoid her master's desires. Cruelty and domination replace mutual love and pleasure in the seduction scene, as he forces her to play the role he desires. Laying a possessive hand on her breast, the Marquis pushes her onto the "carved, gilded bed on which he had been conceived" (17). As the birth-place of this sexual monster, the ornate bed casts a dark pall over their love-making.

The actual consummation scene resonates with violent overtones. In the confessional narrative the pianist remembers, "[h]e made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade. . . . It was as cold as ice and chilled me" (17). The necklace, an image of constraint and death, draws his lust even more than her naked

flesh. He kisses the rubies first, before he kisses her body. Then, reflected twelve times in the surrounding mirrors, he “impale[s]” his bride (17). The violent overtones in the word “impale” reinforce the predator-prey nature of their relationship. The mirrors reflect the pianist’s fragmentation as she experiences a shattering initiation into the world of experience.

The shattered images of the pianist become representations of the Marquis’s pornographic lust and powerful, lascivious gaze. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey comments on the power of the omnipresent male gaze to objectify, subordinate, and impale women:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact. . . . Woman displayed as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of erotic spectacle.<sup>12</sup>

The visual dynamic of the relationship in Carter’s tale dominates the marriage: under the weight of her husband’s cruel stare, the pianist becomes little more than an object to be looked at. Bluebeard is attracted to her waifish, childish beauty that speaks of innocence and naiveté. His previous wives also presented commanding spectacles: the first was a powerful diva of the opera who drew the stares of a crowd on stage, another was a “lady of high

fashion” whose photograph dominated the society pages (10), while another was an artist’s model, whose existence revolved around being seen through male eyes. And now the pianist would join the “gallery of beautiful women,” like a painting on display (10).

The virginal musician discovers the weight of her husband’s gaze quite early. Even before their marriage, after he has given her the bloody ruby choker as a wedding gift, she hints at the terror and power in his glance:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or . . . cuts on the slab. I’d never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, my pale face, the way the muscles in my neck stuck out like a thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And for the first time, in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.

(11)

His gaze is a hungry, greedy, lusty power that demeans and de-humanizes her. She becomes nothing more than flesh--a cut “on the slab” to be scrutinized through a monocled eye. His gaze not only demeans her, but it also penetrates to the corruption inside her. Though his

glance destroys her innocence, it is a destruction enabled by her own willingness to be corrupted. This willingness, which I will discuss later, makes the pianist more than just an unwitting victim.

Bluebeard's gaze becomes even more cruel after their marriage. Shocked by the pornographic images that her husband cherishes, the pianist soon finds her life mirroring the sadistic scenes. She becomes a living incarnation of the art work, a doll or toy set up to create an appearance with erotic impact on her violent husband. For their first sexual experience, he forces her to put on the "chaste little Poiret shift of white muslin," which ironically exposes her breasts through the flimsy fabric. Mary Kaiser notes the connection between the *fin de siecle* designer Poiret and the "image of innocence, vulnerability, and victimization that Bluebeard desires."<sup>13</sup> Poiret was the inventor of the "hobble" skirt, and the dress that Bluebeard's bride wears creates a striking image of entrapment as it showcases both her sexuality and her innocence. While her skirt hobbles her legs, the ruby choker constricts her neck. Relishing the spectacle, Bluebeard removes her clothing, leaving only the biting choker, to decorate her body as he impales her.

The ruby choker becomes a focal point for the Marquis's sadistic gaze, while crystallizing the misogynistic overtones of the blood imagery. He gives it to the pianist as a wedding gift, and in her Gothic language, Carter evokes a sense of impending doom with its description:

I wore a sinuous shift of white muslin tied with a silk string under the breasts. And everyone stared at me. And at his wedding gift.

His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat.

After the Terror, in the early days of the Directory, the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine had an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound. And his grandmother, taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies; such a gesture of luxurious defiance! That night at the opera comes back to me even now . . . the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels around her throat, bright as arterial blood. (11)

The image of arterial blood emphasizes the potent image of the guillotine and the slicing blade that seems to hang tenuously over the pianist. As an article of jewelry, the necklace serves to enhance the physical beauty that draws her husband's lascivious gaze. This necklace, however, becomes a literal "choker," hinting at the gruesome death her husband plans for her. Its painful, biting presence serves as a reminder of his omnipresent gaze, his violent lust, and the decapitation ritual that portends her death.

Carter continues to exploit the jewelry motif as a symbol of Bluebeard's power with the pianist's wedding ring. It becomes an evil magical force in the story and incorporates the

violent and misogynistic elements of the masculine gaze. Instead of a traditionally pure and sparkling diamond, the Marquis gives his wife a fire opal that has been in his family for generations. Thus the ring becomes a symbol of the patriarchal continuation and succession of sadism and death. When the pianist's wizened old nurse sees the ring, she immediately senses its malevolent aura, growling "opals are bad luck" (9). As the musician discovers her husband's evil intentions, the ring begins to assume a fiery life of its own. She calls it "his sultry, witchy ring" (13) and describes it as a glimmering "gypsy's magic ball" (12). When she finds the torture chamber, the ring flashes through the darkness, signaling the magic power of his gaze: "The light caught the fire opal on my hand so that it flashed, once, with a baleful light, as if to tell me eye of God--his eye--was upon me" (29). Thus marriage, represented by the wedding ring, becomes a trap that enables the Marquis to subject her to his demeaning gaze.

When the fire opal flashes, it illuminates a grisly scene of blood and torture straight out of Perrault's original tale. Confronted with the carnage, the pianist flees to her music room, where she begins to appropriate magic as a source of female power. Witchcraft, in particular, becomes a powerful feminine art. Carter provides an early hint of witchcraft with the nurse, who appears as a clairvoyant sage who senses the danger inherent in the Marquis's opal. This sensitive power also emerges in the pianist's mother, who uses maternal telepathy to divine her daughter's unhappiness. By introducing a positive mother figure, Carter subverts the traditional fairy tale world of absent and evil mothers. In Carter's revision, she

creates a powerful mother who usurps the male's traditional role by saving her daughter with maternal magic.

Carter also connects the maternal magic image with the sea, giving it magical power in her descriptions. The pianist calls it a "siren sea," and the Marquis's office faces away from the sea, "as if he wanted to turn his back" on it (25). Like a vampire who cannot stand to see the light, the Marquis shuts out the sea's regenerative force. Carter links this powerful image of the sea with motherhood: it has an "amniotic salinity" that comforts the musician as she arrives at the foreboding castle (12); as she descends into the bowels of the torture chamber, she notices that she can "no longer hear the sound of the sea" (27). The final scene cements the connection between mother, magic, and sea: driven by her maternal instinct, the mother charges out of the sea like an "avenging angel" or "Medusa" to destroy the Marquis (39-40).

Through her music, the pianist appropriates the siren power of the sea, and, by extension, her mother. With this power, she becomes a witch in her attempts to save her life. Carter links her virginal innocence to her music, describing them both as siren powers that draw the Marquis to her. Though the siren song is powerful, it places her in danger, and as she finds herself isolated in the "Castle of Murder" (33), the pianist must draw on her own latent strength. Discovering the chamber of death, she says, "my mother's spirit drove me on, into that dreadful place, in a cold ecstasy to know the very worst" (28). Fleeing the chamber, she takes refuge in her music room, hoping that her magical music can save her:

perhaps I thought my own particular magic might help me, now, that I could create a pentacle out of music that would keep me from harm for, if my music had first ensnared him, then might it not also give me the power to free myself from him? (31)

Though her husband sees her as an object of his lust, she dons a mantle of power through her creative art, assuming an active, aggressive attitude. Thinking she hears her husband outside, she is relieved to find the blind piano-tuner, who, she says, “looked far more terrified of me than my mother’s daughter would have been of the Devil himself” (31). Finally assuming a fearsome role rather than a passive one, the pianist links this transformation to her mother.

The pianist’s transformation from passive to active also occurs in the sexual realm. Though her initiation is violent and cruel, she ambiguously welcomes the sexual awakening. In the train she shivers with excitement, waiting for the consummation. The duality between fear and desire sharpens when she enters the castle, and their first sexual confrontation contrasts his voyeuristic pleasure with her own ambiguous feelings:

He stripped me, gourmand that he was. . . . And when nothing by my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together . . . the child with her sticklike limbs . . . and the old, monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most

pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain. And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring. . . . And I began to shudder, like a racehorse before a race, yet also with a kind of fear, for I felt both a strange, impersonal arousal at the thought of love and at the same time a repugnance I could not stifle. (15)

The image of the bare, lamb-like child contrasts with the sexually curious woman who becomes aroused at the thought of his embraces. Even after their first encounter, when she is hurt and bleeding, she says, "I clung to him as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could comfort me for suffering it" (18). The pianist's masochistic embrace combines fear and arousal to make her complicit in her own corruption.

In her complicity, the pianist begins to mirror her husband's lusty nature. As she browses through the library, she does not look for childish and innocent moral tales. Rather, she hopes to find a "novel in yellow paper," a racy romance to read by the fire (16). Thus, she is not completely innocent as she enters the library. Instead of the novel she longs for, she finds pornography, an extreme representation of the sex that excited her. Simultaneously disgusted and titillated, she does not shut the book, but keeps turning the pages "in the anticipation of fear" (17). This juxtaposition of curiosity and fear characterizes her relationship with the Marquis.

The library becomes the room of knowledge and exploration, where the Marquis hands his wife the portentous keys to the castle. In the library of pornography she discovers books like *The Secret of Pandora's Box*, which will unravel the secrets of sexual initiation. The books foreshadow the important awakening the pianist will undergo as she opens the Pandora's box of her own sexuality. The Pandora's box image implies something destructive about her unleashed sexuality, which may be dangerous to herself or her lover. Thus, when the Marquis gives her the keys in the library, he makes himself the arbitrator of her awakening. After her husband leaves, the pianist seizes the phallic keys, saying:

The bunch of keys lay, where he had left them, on the rug before the library fire which had warmed their metal so that they no longer felt cold to the touch but warm, almost, as my own skin. . . . I picked up the clinking bundle of keys, the keys to the interior doors of this lovely prison of which I was both inmate and the mistress and had scarcely seen.

When I remembered this, I felt the exhilaration of the explorer. (24)

The keys symbolize sexual initiation, and their warm, comforting feel signals her welcoming attitude toward her defloration. She embraces the chance to explore her sexuality, and delves into the house, beginning with the library.

As she embraces her sexuality, Bluebeard's bride begins to parallel him as a sexual predator. Playing on the Marquis's feline description, Carter uses similar imagery to paint the pianist as a sexual animal. Thinking back to her arrival at the castle, she remembers: "I

drew up my furs around me, a wrap of white and black, broad stripes of ermine and sable, with a collar from which my head rose like the calyx of a wildflower. I swear to you I had never been vain until I met him" (12). Donning her furs, the pianist assumes the animal-like nature that marks a predator throughout Carter's stories. Notably, the furs are white and black, signifying the tension between innocence and experience. By comparing her to the calyx of a wildflower, Carter evokes an image of sexuality that belies the pianist's innocent facade. The site of fertilization on a flower, the calyx creates an image of a phallic shaft emerging from the folds of the flower. The flower imagery complements her previous description of the Marquis as a lily:

I know it must seem a curious analogy, a man with a flower, but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily. Yes. A lily. Possessed of that strange, ominous calm of a sentient vegetable, like one of those cobra-headed, funereal lilies whose white sheaths are curled out of flesh as thick and tensely yielding to the touch as vellum. (9)

This passage links the Marquis's potent, barely contained virility to death in the form of the funereal lily. In the wildflower passage, Carter echoes the obvious sexual tone, this time making the pianist the sexual being. Vainly admitting her own beauty, she begins to appropriate the gaze of her husband.

The pianist's burgeoning visual power stems from her sexual knowledge. Ironically, Bluebeard provides this knowledge that strengthens his wife and allows her to turn his power

against him. It is only through the sexual act that he initiates that she can see his true self: "the real man, whose face [she] had glimpsed in the storm of orgasm" (26). After her betrayal, the pianist prays that her husband will be struck blind, unable to see the damning stain on the key. Here, Carter inverts the masculine gaze theme to enhance female power. In the face of her impending death, the pianist turns to Jean-Yves, the piano tuner who is "blind, of course" (23). Lacking the power of sight, he cannot subject her to the lurid gaze of her husband. She attracts Jean-Yves not by her virginal beauty, but with her music. This music makes a new "key" that is in her service rather than her husband's. Thus, Jean-Yves sees her as an artist--a powerful creator who draws him in with her siren song. In this attraction he parallels the Marquis, yet while the Marquis longs to corrupt the artist with his gaze, Jean-Yves wants only to protect her. His eyes are "singularly sweet," and his voice has the "rhythms of the countryside, the rhythms of the tides" (31-32). By connecting him with the ocean, Carter gives Jean-Yves the nurturing power of the amniotic sea. He comforts the pianist when the Marquis returns, vowing to stay with her at all costs. By denying the piano-tuner sight, Carter strips him of the Marquis's visual power, making him non-threatening to the pianist.

With the character of Jean-Yves, Carter introduces a feminist counterpart to the male gaze and alludes to a rich tradition of female literature. The blinded (or otherwise maimed) male hero occurs throughout the feminist tradition, most notably in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane*

*Eyre*, with the character of Rochester. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore the meaning of Rochester's blindness:

Many critics, starting with Richard Chase, have seen Rochester's injuries as "a symbolic castration," a punishment for his early profligacy and a sign that Charlotte Bronte (as well as Jane herself), fearing male sexual power, can only imagine marriage as a union with a diminished Samson. . . . The angry Bertha in *Jane Eyre* wanted to punish Rochester, to burn him in his bed, destroy his house, cut off his hand and pluck out his overmastering "full falcon eye". . . . when both were physically whole they could not, in a sense, *see* each other because of the social disguises--master/servant, prince/Cinderella--blinding them, but now that those disguises have been shed, now that they are equals, they can (although one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh.<sup>14</sup>

Though she does not establish an equal relationship with her monster-husband, the pianist finds a new mate in Jean-Yves. Like Rochester, the blinded piano-tuner can also see beyond the flesh, for he sees his branded lover "clearly with his own heart" (41).

The pianist cannot establish a mutual relationship with Jean-Yves until she has escaped Bluebeard's castle. As she nears her death, the previously innocent, victimized young musician attempts to turn his power against him, using his intense gaze to trap him:

I forced myself to be seductive. I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then. (35)

She cunningly hopes to use the pose of the innocent yet masochistic girl to arouse him, luring him into their marriage bed where this time he will be the victim.

By turning the tables on her husband, the pianist gives birth to a darker, more cunning side who will do anything, even murder, to survive. Gilbert and Gubar have connected this idea of hidden female anger--what the pianist calls her "dark, newborn curiosity" (22)-- with a beastly, repressed form that often appears in the guise of a mirror reflection. Mirror imagery abounds in *Jane Eyre*--again a principle text in the tradition Gilbert and Gubar identify--in which Bertha Mason serves as Jane's dark doppelganger. Virginia Woolf also uses this theme in *Moments of Being*: "I dreamt I was looking in a glass when a horrible face--the face of an animal--suddenly showed over my shoulder. I cannot be sure if this was a dream, or if it happened."<sup>15</sup> These cunning doubles and monstrous reflections are the antithesis of the Angel in the House, embodying the evil avatar of woman who is routinely destroyed in traditional fairy tales.

Carter exploits similar mirror imagery in "The Bloody Chamber," where the pianist's cunning and readiness to slay the monster that terrorizes and oppresses her makes her a prolepsis for even stronger, more cunning female figures that emerge in stories that follow.

Mirrors throughout the story project many different reflections of the pianist; in a passage quoted earlier she hints at the change that will befall her: "I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me . . . . And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away" (11). In the mirror's reflection, she finds a shadow of the animal he may release in her. After he installs her in the castle, she enters the bedroom, where she finds a collection of framed mirrors. In the mirrors she becomes a "multitude of girls" who might, and might not, be the naive innocent she appears in her white Poiret shift (14).

The bedroom mirrors reflect a disturbing, masochistic side of the pianist that enjoys sexual violence. Burdened by her ambiguous desire for a violent, sadistic husband, she stares into his eyes as he gives her the keys:

I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes. I hardly recognized myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet-- might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them? And, in the red firelight, I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption. (20)

She is reborn in his eyes--reborn into sexual knowledge and a corruption that engages her own animalistic instincts.

By forcing the pianist to recognize her own corruption, Carter complicates the original tale of masculine monsters and innocent virgins. On one level, she subverts the story

by reversing conventional roles and substituting a strong, independent mother for the masculine heroes who save the female victim. The pianist's mother comes crashing out of the sea, "a wild thing" with a "white mane" that marks her as a lion to match Bluebeard (39). This lion puts a "single, irreproachable bullet" through her son-in-law's head to rescue her daughter (40). Thus Carter allows the lions to do battle while the lambs (Jean-Yves and the pianist) find a harmonious union.

Yet on a deeper level, Carter inverts the roles of the Marquis and his wife. Even in his cruelty, the Marquis has at least one moment of weakness or grace, where his monstrous layers fall away to reveal the human within. Secure in his knowledge of her disobedience, he waits for the inevitable revelation. He insists that she retrieve the keys, and when she returns, she senses a small change in him:

When I came back into the bedroom carrying the bunch of keys that jangled at every step like a curious musical instrument, he was sitting on the bed in his immaculate shirtsleeves, his head sunk in his hands.

And it seemed to me he was in despair.

Strange. In spite of my fear of him, that made me whiter than my wrap, I felt there emanate from him, at that moment, a stench of absolute despair. . . . The evidence of that bloody chamber had showed me that I could expect no mercy. Yet, when he raised his head and stared at me with his blind, shuttered eyes as though he did not recognize me, I felt a

terrified pity for him, for this man who lived in such strange, secret places that, if I loved him enough to follow him, I should die.

The atrocious loneliness of that monster! (35)

His gaze has been blinded, and though he is still fearsome, the Marquis has become an object of pity, more human in his despair. He seems, just for a moment, an unwilling participant in the drama about to unfold.

Just as she gives the monster husband a touch of humanity, Carter also makes the pianist more than just a simple victim. As she enters into the murderous castle of lust and death, she enters with complicity into a bond of masochism and violent sexual awakening. Even after she recognizes the dangerous meaning behind her husband's proprietary gaze, she still desires him and his embraces. The bloody mark on her forehead signifies her acceptance of the sado-masochistic dynamic of the castle. As Patricia Duncker states:

she carries the mark of her complicity and corruption forever, the complicity of women who have been made in man's image, who have desired to be possessed, who walk after the diva Isolde, the model of Montmartre, the Romanian Countess, who meet the reward of complicity in the bloody chamber.<sup>16</sup>

The mark of blood on her forehead reminds her always of her own corruption in the dangerous sexual games at Bluebeard's castle.

With "The Bloody Chamber," Angela Carter turns a one-dimensional cautionary fairy tale into a complex story of feminine self-exploration and triumph. By creating a sexually curious, active female protagonist, who assumes the cunning nature of Bertha Mason and other literary anti-Angels yet manages to survive and flourish, Carter re-writes not only Perrault's "Bluebeard" tale, but challenges a tradition of literature stretching from oral folk tales to Victorian women's fiction. With the pianist and her mother, Carter also challenges the cultural ideology--epitomized by de Sade's polarizations--that divides women into two opposite, self-contained categories. Margaret Atwood suggests how Carter fundamentally alters de Sade's world:

their change from lamb to tiger need not be a divesting of all "feminine" qualities, as it is for de Sade. . . . Lambhood and tigerishness may be found in either gender, and in the same individual at different times. In this respect, Carter's arrangements are much more subject to mutability than are de Sade's. . . . [Carter] celebrates relativity and metamorphosis and "the complexity of human relations."<sup>17</sup>

The four characters in "The Bloody Chamber" are all mutable and complex: a cruel sexual predator who becomes pitiable in his loneliness and despair; an innocent virgin who masochistically embraces his demeaning caresses; a lioness mother who slays man-eating tigers yet rushes to her daughter's aid when she hears distress on the phone line; and a gentle,

blind piano tuner who emanates strength and courage--all meet in Carter's story to provide the sort of accommodation missing in de Sade's work.

The mutability of Carter's characters releases her stories from the traditional fairy tale mold, where characters are types who fit neatly into their designated roles. As the opening story in the collection, "The Bloody Chamber" sets up a paradigm of subversion and reversal that Carter exploits throughout the remaining stories. She creates villains and victims who becomes increasingly ambiguous as the stories progress, culminating with the figure of the Erl-King, who is neither villain nor victim but a curious mixture of both. After reading "The Erl-King," we emerge on the other side of a transformative mirror, where Carter begins revising her own revisions to develop of model of the wise child who appears, at times, in the initial figure of the pianist. With her ability to combine innocence with experience and embrace knowledge and sexuality as a way to save herself, the pianist echoes Carter's later heroines. In this respect the mother and Jean-Yves also emerge as wise children who can combine courageous action with gentle and nurturing love.

## Notes

1. Charles Perrault, *Perrault's Fairy Tales*, trans. A.E. Johnson (New York: Dover Publications, 1969) 33-43.
2. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979) 299.
3. Bettelheim 300.
4. Bettelheim 301.
5. Bettelheim 302.
6. Bettelheim 299.
7. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979; London: Vintage, 1995) 39. This quote comes from "The Bloody Chamber." Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
8. Patricia Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers," *Literature and History* 10:1 (Spring 1984) 12.
9. Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989) 70.
10. Margaret Atwood, "Running With the Tigers," *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (London: Virago Press, 1994) 118.
11. Atwood 122-3.

11. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 19.
12. Mary Kaiser, "Fairy Tale as Sexual Allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14:3 (Fall 1994) 33.
13. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 368.
14. Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex: University Press, 1976) 69.
15. Duncker 11.
16. Atwood 122.

## Marvelous Wounds: Carter's Revisions of "Beauty and the Beast"

Two stories based on "Beauty and the Beast" follow the opening story of *The Bloody Chamber*. What has been called "the most symbolic of the fairy tales after Cinderella, and the most intellectually satisfying,"<sup>1</sup> becomes the source for Carter's "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride." The original tale has deep roots, calling to mind the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. The most well-known and enduring version of the story, however, is that of Madame Leprince de Beaumont, who published *Magasin des enfants, ou dialogues entre une sage Gouvernante et plusieurs de ses Eleves* in 1756. The English translation appeared in 1761, recounting a tale that would become a model for a type of animal bridegroom tale much different from the "Bluebeard" story.

In Beaumont's original tale, a wealthy merchant loses his fortune suddenly, forcing his children to move to a small house in the country and work for their livings. After an unsuccessful attempt to regain his fortune in the city, he returns home impoverished and downhearted. Lost in a snowy forest, he heads for a solitary mansion for refuge, where he finds rest and nourishment, but never encounters the master of the wealth around him. As he prepares to leave the next morning, he spies a beautiful arbor. He breaks off a branch of roses for his youngest daughter, Beauty, and immediately a terrible beast accosts him, insisting that he must die for his ungrateful thievery. The beast allows the merchant a three-month respite, provided that the man return to suffer his fate, or send one of his daughters in his place. Altruistic and self-sacrificing, Beauty returns in her father's stead, becoming both the mistress of and a prisoner in the Beast's isolated mansion. He treats her with respect and adoration, but she cannot see past

his hideous visage, and when he asks her to marry him, she denies him.

After Beauty magically sees her ailing father in a looking glass, the Beast allows her to return home for one week. Once she is home, however, her evil older sisters plot to insure her death. Hoping that the Beast will become enraged at her absence, they detain Beauty longer than a week. Yet during her visit, Beauty sees the unhappy marriages that her sisters have made with handsome gentlemen, and realizes her love for the Beast. Returning to find him on his death bed, she promises to marry him, and the ugly Beast transforms into a handsome prince. He tells her of the curse he has been under, which could only be broken when a beautiful virgin would consent to marry him. The story ends in the classic, happily ever after style: "he married Beauty, and lived with her many years and their happiness as it was founded on virtue was complete."<sup>2</sup>

While Bettelheim has connected "Beauty and the Beast" with animal-groom stories like "Bluebeard," he sees a vast difference in the meanings of the two stories:

Considering "Bluebeard" in conjunction with "Beauty and the Beast," one might say that the former presents those primitive, aggressive, and selfishly destructive aspects of sex which must be overcome if love is to bloom; while the latter tale depicts what true love is all about. . . . While "Bluebeard" conforms to the child's worst fears about sex, "Beauty and the Beast" offers the child the strength to realize that his fears are the creations of his anxious sexual fantasies; and that while sex may at first seem beastlike, in reality love between woman and man is the most satisfying of all emotions, and the only one which makes for perfect happiness.<sup>3</sup>

Bettelheim goes on to note the importance of the Oedipal love and transference that occurs in

"Beauty and the Beast." As Beauty shifts her adoration from her father to her lover, she matures into a productive woman. As an archetypal symbol of lost virginity, the broken rose branch signifies the sexual maturation she will experience, while also suggesting the pain attendant on this sexual initiation.

Both of Carter's "Beauty and the Beast" revisions focus on an initiation or transformation that is simultaneously painful and redeeming. In "The Tiger's Bride," Carter introduces the phrase "marvellous wound,"<sup>4</sup> which captures the double nature of the transformations depicted. In "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," Carter recreates the Beast's traditional shift from animal to human, while adding layers of complexity and hinting that perhaps Beauty is more beastly than her captor. She goes on to suggest that this beastly nature does not have to be destroyed, and indeed might be cultivated, in order to achieve the "perfect happiness" that Bettelheim describes. These themes of dual natures and the desirability of beastliness recur much more prominently in "The Tiger's Bride," where Carter reverses the transformation to create a Beauty who meets the Beast in the animal world. This inverts the more traditional paradigm of "The Bloody Chamber," in which Carter equates a beastly nature with evil that must be destroyed. While both "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" end with a union that mirrors the original fairy tale marriage, one leaves us in clichéd domestic bliss while the other ends with pacing tigers, gnawed bones, and reeking piss. With these opposing happy endings--problematic and not at all transparent--Carter suggests that what must ultimately be celebrated is the process of change itself. These stories set up a pattern of mutability and ever-changing relations that pervades the rest of the collection.

## I

"The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" treats many of the same themes found in "The Bloody Chamber," including sexual maturation, self-identity and recognition, the male gaze, and predator-prey relationships. Carter's story sticks closely to the original "Beauty and the Beast" tale as it begins, remaining essentially unchanged until Beauty's confrontation with the Beast. By calling her Miss Lamb, Carter seems to mark her as the innocent, virginal prey to the monstrous beast. Her opening descriptions of the girl complement this characterization; like the original Beauty, she waits patiently for her father to return, and worries about his safety:

This lovely girl, whose skin possesses that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow, pauses in her chores in the mean kitchen to look out at the country road. Nothing has passed that way all day; the road is white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal silk. (41)

Miss Lamb glows with innocence and the purity of untrammelled snow, as virginal as white bridal silk. However, the bridal silk is "spilled," connoting an accident or loss. This sense of a loss corresponds to the traditional interpretation of Beauty's impending defloration. This description of Miss Lamb's innocence prepares us for her domination by the powerful beast, but, as noted earlier, appearances in Carter's fiction cannot be trusted. In a characteristic reversal, Carter transforms many of the themes in "The Bloody Chamber," creating a new paradigm of gender, and even human, relationships in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon." Miss Lamb becomes a vain predator, while the lion's gaze acts as an agent of a positive metamorphosis that is not a shattering sexual initiation, but is rather a healing process that saves Miss Lamb from her

flirtation with crass materialism, vanity, and greed.

The opening paragraphs of the story lead us to conventional assumptions about Mr. Lyon and Miss Lamb; after reading "The Bloody Chamber," we might assume that Mr. Lyon is, like the Marquis, an ugly and rapacious predator who will victimize Miss Lamb. Almost immediately, however, Carter calls this structure into question. Just as Bluebeard's imposing and terrifying castle reflects his nature, Mr. Lyon's palace acts as a similar mirror. When Mr. Lamb seeks refuge, he finds "a miniature, perfect, Palladian house that seemed to hide itself shyly behind snow-laden skirts of an antique cypress. It was almost night; that house, with its sweet, retiring melancholy grace, would have seemed deserted but for a light that flickered in an upstairs window" (42). The house is feminine, shy, and sweet, giving a hint to the character of the occupant inside. The flickering light beckons Mr. Lamb like the sweeping beam of a lighthouse that saves ships and captains from a rocky death. Thus, through his house, Carter begins to figure the Beast as a savior.

Though the Beast puts on a show of grandeur and power, he remains unconvincing as a monstrous villain. When Mr. Lamb enters the gate, he hears "a great roaring, as of a beast of prey," but opens the door to the house to find a cheerfully lit room, full of flowers and chandeliers that "tinkled a little, as if emitting a pleased chuckle" (42). The welcoming atmosphere continues as he moves into the house with an amusing King Charles Spaniel to guide his way. However, when Mr. Lamb picks the white rose for Beauty, his awe turns to fright in the presence of the angry beast. Yet even in his extreme anger, the beast appears frustrated yet oddly non-threatening, "like an angry child [who] shakes a doll" (44). His anger abates as he stares at Beauty's picture, and he consents to let Mr. Lamb leave with the rose, growling, "Take

her the rose, but bring her to dinner" (45). And, as the narrator says, "what else was there to be done?" (45).

When Mr. Lamb shows the Beast Beauty's picture, Carter introduces an inverted image of the powerful gaze seen in "The Bloody Chamber." The Beast stares at Beauty's eyes, seeing "a certain look she had, sometimes, of absolute sweetness and absolute gravity, as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul" (44). Mr. Lyon looks to Beauty to find a positive version of that powerful gaze, hoping that she can shatter his outward appearance to see his soul within. Notably, his eyes look "almost blind, as if sick of sight" (45). This blindness connects him with the nurturing savior figure of Jean-Yves in "The Bloody Chamber," not with the murderous Bluebeard. Though he looks for salvation in Miss Lamb's eyes, the Beast will ultimately rescue her with his own gaze. In yet another Carteresque paradox, The Beast becomes both captor and source of freedom as he offers the key to Miss Lamb's salvation.

Though his eyes are blind and his roaring little more than a childish fit, Beauty sees the Beast as a carnivore: "when she saw the great paws lying on the arm of his chair, she thought: they are the death of any tender herbivore. And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial" (45). Her self-conscious pose as the sacrificial innocent is just that, however: a pose, with little substance behind it. While the Beast eats nothing, she dines on duck and grilled veal, hardly the fare of the "tender herbivore" she fancies herself to be. Even Beauty notices the inversion of their roles, "as if, curious reversal, *she* frightened *him*" (46; my italics). As Carter begins to effect her "curious reversal," Beauty assumes the frightening, predatory role while the Beast turns his transforming gaze on her to become her savior.

Mirror and reflective imagery emphasizes the inversion of the conventional predator-prey

paradigm in the story. Beauty's vanity and obsession with her own reflection triumph over her innocent facade. This vanity only emerges, however, after she has left the Beast to return to London. The city functions as a traditional symbol of materialism and temptation in the story, a dangerous place where innocence and altruism cannot survive. Her first expedition in the city begins her shift toward an animalistic nature: "they had planned a delicious expedition to buy her furs and she was as eager for the treat as any girl might be" (48). As seen in "The Bloody Chamber," Carter uses the furs to signal Beauty's emerging predatory nature. She links this change to Beauty's growing vanity and selfishness:

She smiled at herself with satisfaction. She was learning, at the end of her adolescence, how to be a spoiled child and that pearly skin of hers was plumping out, a little, with high living and compliments. A certain inwardness was beginning to transform the lines around her mouth, and her sweetness and gravity could sometimes turn a mite petulant when things went not quite as she wanted them to go. You could not have said that her freshness was fading but she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days, and the face that smiled back was not quite the one she had seen contained in the Beast's agate eyes. Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterizes certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats. (49)

Bluebeard's feline nature in "The Bloody Chamber" reappears in Beauty, marking her as a predator who feeds on "high living and compliments." Clearly describing Beauty's new reflection as a negative shift, Carter contrasts the lacquered mirror view with the reflection inscribed in the Beast's agate eyes, "in which she saw her face repeated twice, as small as if it

were in a bud" (47). This image alludes to Miss Lamb's burgeoning sexuality in a positive, non-threatening way, suggesting that the relationship she will find with the Beast will not destroy her innocence.

Ironically, it is not her developing relationship with Mr. Lyon that destroys her innocence, but rather her own vanity. When Beauty sees herself as an attractive object, she gains a lacquer that obscures her humanity. While Carter's emphasis on the mirror imagery shows Beauty's emerging vanity, it also creates a reversed image of the male gaze discussed in the previous chapter. "The Bloody Chamber" exploits this traditional structure with a male figure, acting as the sexual and emotional powerhouse or lion, who victimizes the lamb-like virgin. The hints of complexity and reversal woven into that story reappear in "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" as the major dynamic of the story. In "The Bloody Chamber," the Marquis's eyes are a source of debasement and exploitation. Here, however, the Beast's eyes are sad and shuttered, and when he gazes at her, he reflects her face as a refreshingly innocent bud. While Bluebeard's pianist saw a horrifying vision of her own corruption in her husband's eyes, Beauty sees a poignant image of new life and growth.

While she inverts the piercing, negative male gaze through the eyes of Mr. Lyon, Carter also develops and reverses another aspect of the gaze. In her famous exploration of women and writing, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf examines the effects of a male dominated culture on feminine creative ability. Questioning the culturally determined place of women as inferior to the patriarch's superiority, she caustically comments on the importance of the female as reflective surface:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic

and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle. The glories of all our wars would be unknown. We should still be scratching the outlines of deer on the remains of mutton bones and bartering flint for sheepskins or whatever simple ornament took our unsophisticated taste.<sup>5</sup>

Insisting that men need to find glorification and magnification in feminine eyes, Woolf acknowledges that while serving as a mirror gives a sort of "delicious power," it is a passive, self-denying power. Similarly, the Modernist poet H.D. uses revisionary mythology to rebel against this same phenomena in "Eurydice":

why did you turn?  
why did you glance back?  
.....  
what was it that crossed my face  
with the light from yours  
and your glance?  
what was it you saw in my face?  
the light of your own face,  
the fire of your own presence?<sup>6</sup>

Speaking as Eurydice, H.D. lashes out against the male tendency to look for his own reflection in the female visage. In her poem this tendency not only places women in an inferior position, but becomes a destructive and damning force.

Placing herself in a larger context of feminist revision, Carter reverses this paradigm with

the figures of Miss Lamb and Mr. Lyon. As mentioned above, Beauty sees herself in her captor's eyes, but is unable to see beyond his ugly appearance to his inner self. As he lies dying, she rushes to his side and professes her love. At this, his eyes begin to open, and she takes note of their startling appearance: "How was it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?" (50). Thus, Beauty had assumed the ego-centric role traditionally associated with male vanity and pride.

It is the gentle Beast who brings her out of this self-centered stance, saving her, not from a murderous husband, but from herself. Carter uses religious imagery to add a spiritual level to the transformation Mr. Lyon engenders, making it more significant than a simple switch from animal to human or vice versa. When Beauty first meets her Beast, she notices the light reflecting in his mane: "she watched the firelight play on the gold fringes of his mane; he was irradiated, as if with a kind of halo, and she thought of the first great beast of the Apocalypse, the winged lion with his paw upon the Gospel, Saint Mark" (46). She senses his monstrous, awesome power, and hints at the apocalyptic change that he will initiate. Sensing his power, she both fears and desires it: "though she stretched out her hand towards him, she could not bring herself to touch him of her own free will, he was so different from herself" (48). When Beauty departs for London, she thinks she has escaped the transformation that is both feared and desired:

She sent him flowers, white roses in return for the ones he had given her; and when she left the florist, she experienced a sudden sense of perfect freedom, as if she had just escaped from an unknown danger, had been grazed by some

possibility of change but, finally, left intact. Yet, with this exhilaration, a desolating emptiness. (48)

In a "trance before the mirror" (49), Beauty quickly remembers her broken promise when she hears claws scrabbling outside her door. It is only the spaniel, now ragged and neglected, but Beauty thinks that it is the Beast. Contrasting emotions run through her mind: "First, she was frightened of his anger; then, *mysteriously joyful*, she ran to open the door" (49, my italics). Again, the Beast figures as an agent of spiritual transcendence, recalling both the powerful, angry God of the Old Testament and the joyful savior of the New.

By casting Mr. Lyon as an agent of cataclysmic transformation, Carter creates a sense of apocalypse that ends with a purposely ambiguous scene of domestic bliss. Though the Beast has transformed Beauty from a selfish child into a compassionate woman, he too has undergone a metamorphosis. He loses his beastly exterior and becomes a handsome man, but Mr. Lyon does not lose all traces of his predatory nature. Though Margaret Atwood laments that Mr. Lyon "devolves into plain Mr. Lyon, walking quietly and on two feet,"<sup>7</sup> his last words allude to the hungry nature of the Beast: "I think I might be able to manage a little breakfast today, Beauty, if you would eat something with me" (51). With these final words, the Beast implies that their harmony depends on Beauty's acceptance of her own animal nature, and on a union in which beastly hunger does not necessarily destroy virtue.

## II

"The Tiger's Bride" follows "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon," revisiting the clash between animal and human of the preceding story, and delivering another, even more shocking, transformation. In classic fairy tale form, this story supplies a rescue at the end, but this rescue differs greatly from those of "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon." Again, Carter gives us an apparently powerless female, trapped by a monstrous beast who, like Mr. Lyon, offers Beauty salvation while seeking the same thing from her. In "The Tiger's Bride," however, Carter creates a Beauty figure who is trapped by circumstances, not by her own passivity. The tiger's bride embodies a "furious cynicism" (52) that draws her toward the tiger's raw, animal power. Her justifiable cynicism and fury make this Beauty a strong precursor of the wise child figure that Carter explores in the final stories. Beauty ends the story by embracing a salvation that rejects humanity's distinctions between animal and human, good and evil, and prey and predator.

Like the virgins of the first two stories, Beauty is trapped by a patriarchal system that makes her an object to be bought, sold, or married off. Beauty's father--hardly the loving, if somewhat bumbling, father of Madame de Beaumont's tale--leads her into her trap and shuts the door firmly behind her. He takes the role usually allotted to witches or evil stepmothers in classic fairy tales: he lets greed and moral degeneration obscure his love for his daughter as he pushes her into the lion's jaws. Carter hints at Beauty's impending doom and her father's unrealistic expectations with her opening description:

We come from countries of cold weather; at home, we are at war with nature but here, ah! you think you have come to the blessed plot where the lion lies down with the lamb. Everything flowers, no harsh wind stirs the voluptuous air. The

sun spills fruit for you. And the deathly, sensual lethargy of the sweet South infects the starved brain; it gasps: "Luxury! more luxury!" But then the snow comes, you cannot escape it, it followed us from Russia as if it ran behind our carriage, and in this dark, bitter city has caught up with us at last, flocking against the windowpanes to mock my father's expectations of perpetual pleasure as the veins in his forehead stand out and throb, his hands shake as he deals the Devil's picture books. (51)

The landscape of their southern vacation becomes harsh, bitter, and destructive, and seems to signify that, in typical Carter fashion, appearances are not what they seem. Beauty cannot trust the deceptively nurturing warmth of the "lovely land where the lemon trees grow" any more than she can trust her father. Her father appears here as a dissolute, illusioned thrill-seeker who consorts with the Devil and loses his daughter to a beast in a card game. In her mocking tone, Beauty emphasizes his greed as he gambles her away: "You must not think my father valued me at less than a king's ransom; but, at *no more* than a king's ransom" (54). After he has lost his daughter, Beauty's father breaks into histrionics, quoting lines of poetry and lamenting the loss of his "pearl beyond price" (55). Beauty mocks her father's melodramatic grief, however, cynically dismissing his cries as "rhetoric" (55). Traditionally a positive relationship in fairy tales, the father-daughter bond in "The Tiger's Bride" calls into question the very value of human relationships. By undermining one of the most fundamental human relationships, Carter reveals that Beauty is alone in a world where she can trust no one.

In the original "Beauty and the Beast" tale, Beauty must transfer her attachment and affections from her father to her husband to create a successful and productive relationship. In

"The Tiger's Bride," however, Beauty simply moves from being her father's possession to being the Beast's prize. As she journeys to her new prison, the deathly landscape creates an ominous tone that recalls the pianist's voyage to Bluebeard's castle. Here, however, the sexual tone of that voyage disappears, as she describes barren scenery, and the Beast's castle has none of the sensual luxury that both tempted and repulsed the pianist: "The mist lifted sufficiently to reveal before me an acreage of half-derelict facades of sheer red brick, the vast man-trap, the megalomaniac citadel of his palazzo. It was a world in itself but a dead one, a burned-out planet" (57). The barren imagery associated with the Beast's castle makes him a figure to be both feared and pitied; his "atrocious loneliness" parallels Carter's Bluebeard (Bloody Chamber, 35). The Beast is completely inhuman, and like the Marquis who cannot stand the sight of the maternal sea, he cannot look at paintings of human faces; pictures have been "taken from their hooks and propped with their faces to the walls as if their masters could not bear to look at them" (57). Through her father's treacherous greed, Beauty has been condemned to live in a sterile and depressing house, where, ironically, a dining room full of horses serves as a welcome sign of life. The whimsical stable, where "a dozen gracile muzzles lifted from their mangers" (57) is the only positive element in the house, suggesting that there is something to be desired in the animal world, and that they have more claim to the luxuries of the house than humans do.

Like Carter's Bluebeard, the terrifying Beast has a pitiful aspect. The inhuman desolation of his palazzo reflects his loneliness but inspires awe and fear in Beauty. Like his house, The Beast's fierce demeanor also creates terror in Beauty. His power is evident from the opening pages of the story, when Beauty describes her father's invitation to gamble with the Beast as an offer he could not refuse: "Everyone who comes to this city must play a hand with the *grand*

*seigneur*; few come. They did not warn us at Milan. . . . I did not know that the price of a stay in its Decembral solitude was a game with Milord" (52). Their landlady expresses both awe and terror at the invitation, "gingerly fingering an envelope with his huge crest of a tiger rampant on it, something of fear, something of wonder in her face" (52). His strong, reeking scent, large size, and massive voice all combine to make "La Bestia" a figure of fear (52).

As Beauty wonders about her new captor's "beastliness," she compares The Beast to the "tiger-man" of her youth:

My English nurse once told me about a tiger-man she saw in London, when she was a little girl, to scare me into good behaviour, for I was a wild wee thing and she could not tame me into submission with a frown or the bribe of a spoonful of jam. If you don't stop plaguing the nursemaids, my beauty, the tiger-man will come and take you away. . . . But, if this young lady was not a good little girl and did not eat her boiled beetroot, then the tiger-man would put on his big black travelling cloak lined with fur, just like your daddy's, and hire the Erl-King's galloper of wind and ride through the night straight to the nursery and--

Yes, my beauty! GOBBLE YOU UP! (56)

Beauty connects the Beast with the "earliest and most archaic of all fears, fear of devourment" (67). She also connects this fear with her father, describing the tiger-man in a fur-lined cloak that is "just like your daddy's." Carter implies that like The Beast, Beauty's father is in league with the tiger-men of the world, and she cannot count on him for rescue.

Aware of The Beast's predatory nature, Beauty fears she will be his prey. In the opening description, Carter explicitly refers to the predator-prey dichotomy she uses throughout the

stories of *The Bloody Chamber*. Describing The Beast's country, Beauty says, "you think you've come to the blessed plot where the lion lies down with the lamb" (51). She soon realizes, however, that this is impossible; as she notes later, "The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers" (64). In the tiger's stark and treacherous world, the heroine seems to be the helpless lamb. However, as I will discuss later, she rejects helplessness and passivity to "run with the tigers."

By apparently pushing her into the role of the sacrificial lamb, Carter once again connects Beauty with Bluebeard's wife in "The Bloody Chamber." When the tiger expresses his desires, he closely parallels Bluebeard. Like the murderous Marquis, he wants to make Beauty an object, a possession to be gazed at and to be owned. His demeaning request attempts to make a commodity out of her body:

the valet twittered . . . "My master's sole desire is to see the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress and that only for the one time after which she will be returned to her father undamaged with banker's orders for the sum which he lost to my master at cards and also a number of fine presents such as furs, jewels and horses--" (58)

He sees her as an object that, if untouched, will remain "undamaged." This attitude denies her human emotions and thoughts, and ignores the pain that his request causes. The Beast sends Beauty a doll in her likeness, which can whirl around the room, powdering her face and wielding a mirror, but has no will or heart of her own. In the doll, Beauty sees an aspect of her own life, thinking, "[t]hat clockwork girl who powdered my cheeks for me; had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?" (63). The Tiger

sees Beauty as a doll, a toy he can buy and keep locked in a solitary castle for his visual pleasure.

Again recalling Bluebeard's pianist, Beauty's virginity pushes her into this role, and is an important aspect of the bargain The Beast wishes to make. When the valet repeats his master's desire, he adds, "The sight of a young lady's skin that no man has ever seen before--" (61). Cursing her innocence, she thinks, "I wished I'd rolled in the hay with every lad on my father's farm, to disqualify myself from this humiliating bargain" (61). Thus her virginity becomes both a source of entrapment and a form of power. In this ambiguous position Beauty again mirrors the pianist in "The Bloody Chamber," but Beauty uses the powerful side of her position more aggressively. Though he holds her prisoner, The Beast does not use physical force to gain his desires, and Beauty withholds her virginal skin from his sight.

As she finds power in her virginity, Beauty shows her rejection of passivity. Though she is trapped as the possession of an inhuman monster, she does not passively accept her fate or look to her mother or another figure for aid. Her strength becomes evident from the opening paragraphs of the story, as she rails against her fate. She is not her father's "girl-child, his pet" like Miss Lamb professes to be (Courtship 41). Faced with the Beast, Miss Lamb "stayed, and smiled, because her father wanted her to do so" (Courtship 45), but the tiger's bride watches her fate with "the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly" (Tiger's Bride 52). This furious cynicism immediately differentiates her from Miss Lamb. Miss Lamb, like the passive Beauty of the original tale, wants a flower from her father. The stronger, more cynical Beauty of "The Tiger's Bride," however, scoffs at the flowers The Beast offers: "The valet sat up on the box in a natty black and gold livery, clasping, of all things, a bunch of his master's damned white roses as if a gift of flowers would reconcile a woman to any

humiliation" (55). In a characteristic switch, Carter makes the father beg his daughter for a rose, to show her forgiveness. Pricking her finger on the stem, however, she notes with satisfaction, "and so he gets his rose all smeared with blood" (55). The bloody rose implicitly accuses Beauty's father of her impending defloration, while symbolizing the violent rupture of their relationship and the inability of a flower to reconcile her to acceptance or forgiveness.

Beauty's strength and refusal to play the timid daughter role appears even in her memories of childhood. As a child she was not truly afraid of the mythical tiger-man, for she would "squeal in delighted terror, half-believing her, half knowing that she teased [her]" (56). While the real-life version of the tiger-man may seem scary, Beauty knows she can match wits with him, and finds a kind of delight in the contest that ensues when he offers his deal. Listening impassively to the valet's embarrassed stammerings, she interrupts with disbelief: "I could scarcely believe my ears. I let out a raucous guffaw; no young lady laughs like that! my old nurse used to remonstrate. But I did. And do. At the clamour of my heartless mirth, the valet danced backward with perturbation" (58). Like Carter's Little Red Riding Hood, whom I will discuss in a later chapter, Beauty loudly laughs in the predator's face, refusing to take him and his threat seriously. In this laughter, and in her pride, comes an indomitable power that will squeeze tears from The Beast's evasive eyes.

Much stronger than Bluebeard's pianist, Beauty faces her adversary with a defiantly improper laugh and an aggressive attitude. Rejecting the terms of the Tiger's deal, she offers him her own deal:

"You may put me in a windowless room, sir, and I promise you I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face, to

hide it; though the sheet must be laid over me so lightly that it will not choke me. So I shall be covered completely from the waist upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only the once. After that I must be driven directly to the city and deposited in the public square, in front of the church. If you wish to give me money, then I should be pleased to receive it. But I must stress that you should give me only the same amount of money that you would give to any other woman in such circumstances. However, if you choose not to give me a present, then that is your right." (59)

Beauty laughs at her captor, and seizes the opportunity to choose her own destiny. Recognizing that her father has prostituted her body to pay for his gambling debts, she makes another economic deal of prostitution. While she will not agree to let him look at her naked body, she will allow him to have sexual relations with her. Her offer shames the Tiger: "How pleased I was to see I struck The Beast to the heart! For, after a baker's dozen heartbeats, one single tear swelled, glittering, at the corner of the masked eye" (59). In her ability to pierce the mask and produce human emotions, Beauty gains control over her captor.

Beauty also gains control by turning the tiger's gaze against him, making him the object of her stare. While Beauty hides behind her cynicism and pride, the tiger wears an elaborate mask to shield his animal features. His mask is inhuman, betraying his beastly nature: "He throws our human aspirations to the godlike sadly awry, poor fellow; only from a distance would you think The Beast not much different from any other man, although he wears a mask with a man's face painted most beautifully on it. Oh, yes, a beautiful face; but one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human" (53). Calling him a "carnival figure made of

papier mache and crepe hair," Beauty begins to think of him as a "clumsy doll" (53-4). Thus he parallels her in her doll-like, powerless status. Seeing him as a doll, Beauty subjects him to her own gaze. During her first interview with The Beast, when he asks to see her naked form, she remains impassive and seeks out his eyes behind the mask: "I remained standing. During the interview, my eyes were level with those inside the mask that now evaded mine as if, to his credit, he was ashamed of his own request even as his mouthpiece made it" (58). Like Beauty, he attempts to avoid the gaze, unwilling to bare himself to her.

Though both Beauty and the Beast try to avoid the gaze that will pierce appearances and reveal their true souls, they find a common ground--a reciprocal pact--in the forest near The Beast's castle. The valet delivers an invitation to go hunting, and as they mount up, Beauty speaks to her horse, establishing a bond with the animal world, while The Beast betrays his unease, clinging to the horse's mane "like a shipwrecked sailor to a spar" (62). Thus Beauty seems to have a link to the animal world, while her beastly captor appears more human. This minor revelation foreshadows the more dramatic revelation that comes when The Beast removes his masking layers. The valet warns Beauty of his master's intentions, but when the tiger removes his mask, the power of his appearance strikes her like a blow:

A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood. His domed, heavy head, so terrible he must hide it. How subtle the muscles, how profound the tread. The annihilating vehemence of his eyes, like twin suns.

I felt my breast ripped apart as if I had suffered a marvellous wound. . . . Nothing about him reminded me of humanity. (64)

The "marvellous wound" she experiences shocks her, but also strikes a note of recognition, moving her to make the pact reciprocal. She too strips off her clothes, showing him white skin, but worrying that perhaps her unveiling will not be enough:

I therefore, shivering, now unfastened my jacket, to show him I would do him no harm. Yet I was clumsy and blushed a little, for no man had seen me naked and I was a proud girl. Pride it was, not shame, that thwarted my fingers so; and a certain trepidation lest this frail little article of human upholstery before him might not be, in itself, grand enough to satisfy his expectations of us. (64)

By calling her skin upholstery, Beauty gives a sense that it is just a covering, that there are more layers to be stripped off, and that her own nude body is not enough to match the tiger's form.

The powerful derobing scene, in which both Beauty and the tiger confront the gaze they have been avoiding, becomes the spark for Beauty's metamorphosis from human to animal. When she returns to the palazzo, she has changed. Beauty looks in the mirror and sees "a pale, hollow-eyed girl whom [she] scarcely recognized," and the mechanical doll, created in her likeness, no longer looks exactly like her (65). Gazing at the doll, Beauty realizes that she does not want to return to her father and play the role of his daughter, thinking, "I will dress her up in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter" (65). Beauty realizes that she has a grander metamorphosis to come, and knows that she no longer belongs in the treacherous human world where fathers can sell their daughters for gambling debts and appearances, like outer skins, are deceiving.

By exposing herself to the tiger, Beauty loses her similarity to the doll, implying that to face the gaze makes her more alive and gives her a more positive existence. Nakedness is

painful yet necessary to Beauty; she feels she must strip down in a harrowing encounter:

I was unaccustomed to nakedness. I was so unused to my own skin that to take off all my clothes involved a kind of flaying. I thought The Beast had wanted a little thing compared with what I was prepared to give him; but it is not natural for humankind to go naked, not since we first hid our loins with fig leaves. He had demanded the abominable. I felt as much atrocious pain as if I was stripping off my own underpelt and the smiling girl poised in the oblivion of her barked simulation of life, watching me peel down to the cold, white meat of contract and, if she did not see me, then so much more like the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence. (66)

She realizes that there is something calculating and cold in the human gaze, which sees flesh as a commodity. Uncomfortable in her human skin, Beauty links this discomfort to original sin.

By alluding to original sin and making Beauty uncomfortable in her own skin, Carter makes Beauty's metamorphosis from human to animal a kind of transcendence that removes her from the world of men. Donning her fur coat, a gift from The Beast, Beauty makes her way to his den. The fur coat provides a visual foreshadowing of the fur coat she will discover at the end of the story, while also symbolizing her emerging predatory nature. As she approaches the tiger's domain, Beauty's coat resolves itself into "a pack of black, squeaking rats" (66), cementing the connection Carter makes throughout her stories between fur coats and the living animal world. Inside his den, she finds a true tiger's lair:

There was a reek of fur and piss; the incense pot lay broken in pieces on the floor. Half-burned sticks were scattered from the extinguished fire. A candle stuck by

its own grease to the mantelpiece lit two narrow flames in the pupils of the tiger's eyes.

He was pacing backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, the tip of his heavy tail twitching as he paced out the length and breadth of his imprisonment between the gnawed and bloody bones. (66)

Now that he has revealed his true nature, the tiger becomes trapped in his house. Remembering her nursery terror, Beauty rejects these fears to become his savior:

The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw, approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction.

He went still as stone. He was far more frightened of me than I was of him.

I squatted on the wet straw and stretched out my hand. I was now within the field of force of his golden eyes. He growled at the back of his throat, lowered his head, sank on his forepaws, snarled, showed me his red gullet, his yellow teeth. I never moved. He snuffed the air as if to smell my fear; he could not. (67)

By reversing the fearful and the feared, Carter again confuses the lines between predator and prey. As she faces her own fears and conquers them, Beauty becomes the powerful savior who can offer the tiger "the key to a peaceable kingdom." In this kingdom, animal appetite and human love can meet without eliminating each other. This becomes an essential difference between "The Bloody Chamber," in which the Marquis dies for his animalistic lust, and "The

Tiger's Bride." While the Marquis offers the key to destruction, Beauty brings the key to salvation. Thus, like the pianist, she creates a new key that she uses powerfully.

When the tiger accepts her offering of peace and acceptance, he begins to purr. The intense sound causes the house to shake and crumble: "The sweet thunder of this purr shook the old walls, made the shutters batter the windows until they burst apart and let in the white light of the snowy moon. . . . I thought: 'It will all fall, everything will disintegrate'" (67). Avis Lewallen recognizes that when Beauty "realises she cannot be free within the patriarchal world her father inhabits . . . the logic of the real animal world of the palazzo reasserts itself [and] . . . The materiality of this world dissolves."<sup>8</sup> While the house crumbles around her, Beauty feels the tiger lick her skin away. When he finishes, he has licked off "skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs" (67). Her earrings dissolve into water and trickle down her "beautiful fur," signalling the disappearance of her last human vestiges (67). As Beauty and The Beast meet in a union of true animal nature, all the trappings of humanity disappear. The old house, in which the tiger had always been uncomfortable, falls to the ground, while Beauty revels in her new, more comfortable skin.

Just as Beauty offers the tiger the key to peace, so too does he give her the same key. By finding her true nature, he releases her from "a life in the world" that she never fit in. Admonished as a child for her unfeminine laughter, coldly sold as a woman to pay her father's debts, she finds true happiness outside this world, in the world of the animal. Here, Atwood asserts, Beauty "discovers herself as animal, as beast-as-appetite, as energy rather than the object of energy."<sup>9</sup> By creating an animal world that is both predatory and nurturing, Carter further muddies the waters in a distinction that seemed quite clear in the opening story. Playing on a

traditional paradigm in which tigers and lions were evil predators who had to be killed so that lambs could survive, Carter provides an alternative view in "The Tiger's Bride." The religious imagery in both "The Tiger's Bride" and "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" exalts the transformations of the stories, making them spiritual transcendences. By creating two very different metamorphoses that end in harmonious pseudo-marriages, Carter emphasizes the importance of the metamorphosis itself. Change and mutability become the keys to the peaceable kingdom that Carter seeks, and those who accept the keys gain wisdom and salvation.

## Notes

1. Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) 137.
2. Opie 150.
3. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) 306.
4. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979; London: Vintage, 1995) 64. This quote comes from "The Tiger's Bride." Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number and, when necessary, by story title.
5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929; San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1989) 38.
6. Hilda Doolittle, "Eurydice," *Collected Poems: 1912-1944* (1925; New York: New Directions, 1983) 51-55, lines 29-40.
7. Margaret Atwood, "Running with the Tigers," *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994) 124.
8. Avis Lewallen, "Wayward Girls but Wicked Women?," *Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature*, eds. Gary Day and Clive Bloom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) 149.
9. Atwood 126.

## Tender Butchers

### I

#### Lovers, Goblins, and Mothers

The fifth of ten stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, “The Erl-King” serves as a critical pivot story in the collection. It revisits many of the themes of the previous four stories, while anticipating ideas and motifs that emerge in the final tales. A power struggle that hinges on the distinction between innocence and experience dominates “The Erl-King,” which is the most dense and opaque story of the collection. The title character is an ambiguous figure who embodies the human and the beastly in his enigmatic presence. His eyes become a crucial symbol in the story; his transforming gaze carries more explicit dangers than Mr. Lyon’s, but is not as cruel as Bluebeard’s stare in “The Bloody Chamber.” The ambiguous nature of the Erl-King and his gaze, which is both captivating and paradoxically liberating, makes his ultimate death a necessary yet tragic loss.

Carter bases her Erl-King on a legendary Germanic account of the “king of the elves or dwarfs . . . [who] was believed to be a malevolent goblin of the Black Forest in Germany who lured children to their deaths.”<sup>1</sup> Goethe uses this figure in his literary ballad “Der Erlkonig,” which Sir Walter Scott later translated into “The Erl-King.” In Goethe’s ballad, the Erl-King

lures a young boy away from his father, and though the father attempts to save his son, the Erl-King triumphs, and the boy dies. Carter retains many elements of this original tale, including the menacing forest and the Erl-King figure who destroys childhood. The explicit father figure disappears in her revision, but becomes incorporated into the Erl-King himself as an ambiguous mother-father figure. Instead of a little boy, it is a young woman who foolishly--yet paradoxically wisely--enters the Erl-King's forest.

While the original legend deals with a more literal death, Carter's revision exploits the symbolic aspects of that death, casting the Erl-King as the murderer of innocence who seduces and cages young girls. Like Carter's other stories, this tale describes a complex transformation, from ignorance into knowledge, innocence into experience, and childhood into adulthood. Indeed, the story itself, with its twisting nature and the shifting, ambiguously characterized Erl-King, embodies the ideas of transformation and mutability. Setting the story at the autumnal equinox, Carter evokes a sense of tremendous change and impending upheaval. This upheaval manifests itself as another "marvellous wound,"<sup>2</sup> this time at the hands of a "tender butcher" (Erl-King 87). This paradox implies that the pain inherent in the wounding process is necessary, even joyful. In "The Erl-King," Carter gives the heroine--again a trapped virgin--power over her own transformation, and the power to transform and free others. Her sexual initiation is both scarring and enabling, for in her knowledge she becomes a Christ-figure who sacrifices her own innocence to slay the Erl-King and all that he stands for, setting a sisterhood of caged girls free. With this heroine, Carter creates the most powerful female we have seen, for she welcomes her

loss of innocence, survives the drowning power of the Erl-King's gaze, and turns his power and knowledge against him to triumph in a way that Bluebeard's wife could not. Her triumph is bittersweet, however, for the Erl-King embodies not only patriarchal and sexual oppression, but also represents a tender lover and a nurturing mother. By using the Erl-King to gain sexual and psychological liberation, then destroying him before he can destroy her, the woods-roaming heroine prefigures the wise child heroines of the concluding stories.

Though "The Erl-King" opens in a forest instead of the looming castles of the previous stories, Carter evokes the same foreboding atmosphere and sense of entrapment. As the girl enters the woods, "vertical bars" of light signal that the forest will become a prison:

The woods enclose. . . . the wood swallows you up. There is no way through the wood any more, this wood has reverted to its original privacy. Once you are inside it, you must stay there until it lets you out again for there is no clue to guide you through in perfect safety; grass grew over the track years ago and now the rabbits and the foxes make their own runs in the subtle labyrinth and nobody comes. The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt round hopelessly for the way out. (84-5)

The wood is no ordinary prison, but rather a labyrinth or "system of Chinese boxes" (85), where taffeta-skirted women lose themselves. The labyrinth image implies that there *is* a way out of

the trap, but finding it requires a level of cleverness and cunning that the lost women do not have.

The whispering, lost women contrast with the overwhelming male presence of the forest itself; the sunlight strikes the "stark elders" with "nicotine-stained fingers," while the mist mimics "the tufts of an old man's beard" (84-5). Thus the wood becomes a male space--a "house of nets"--that locks in women with no means of escape (85). The masculine terms associated with the forest also connote an older, fatherly aspect that characterizes the male space. This creates a father-daughter dynamic of oppression that co-exists with a sexual overtone in the story. The sexual element of the forest is also one of oppression, revolving around a male-dominated prison where the sexual act leaves bloody scars and turns women into caged birds.

Carter heightens and complicates the sexual nature of the girl's experience in the forest by alluding to "The Goblin Market," Christina Rossetti's poetic narrative of sexual temptation, submission, and salvation. A volunteer worker at an Anglican House of Charity, Rossetti expressed deep concern about the plight of the women at the shelter. As Georgina Battiscombe points out, the "inmates of the House of Charity are described as 'fallen women.' Many were certainly prostitutes; but others would have been merely unmarried mothers, girls who had been, in the language of the day, 'ruined' by some unscrupulous man."<sup>3</sup> Rossetti's experiences at the shelter emerge in her poetry as cautionary morals about the dangers of seduction and male power. Though Rossetti dealt with these themes in much of her poetry, "Goblin Market" remains the most famous of these moralistic poems.

"The Erl-King" is replete with allusions to Rosetti's poem, in which goblin men of the forest tempt and seduce young women with their forbidden fruit. Carter's forest abounds with "heavy bunches of red berries as ripe and delicious as goblin or enchanted fruit" that tempt the young virgin (85). After tasting the forbidden fruit of sexual experience, the girl in Carter's story cries out, "[e]at me, drink me; thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden, I go back to him" (89). This specifically connects her to both Laura and Lizzie in Rosetti's poem, for while Laura describes her ruin as "Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden," Lizzie becomes her savior, crying:

Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me;  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men.<sup>4</sup>

After partaking of the Erl-King's "goblin feast of fruit" (89), the girl in Carter's story becomes thirsty and cankered like Laura in "Goblin Market." While "Goblin Market" can be read on both a sexual and a religious level, I will focus first on the sexual interpretation of the poem, which parallels the sexual temptation and initiation of the Erl-King's forest.

On one level, "Goblin Market" clearly represents a symbolic lesson about the dangers of sexual temptation. The evil goblins are all male, while they only lure young women with their luscious fruits. When Laura decides to trade a lock of her hair--a symbol of her virginity--for the fruit, Rosetti's description carries heavy sexual overtones:

Laura stretched her gleaming neck

Like a rush-imbedded swan,

Like a lily from the beck,

Like a moonlit poplar branch,

Like a vessel at the launch

When its last restraint is gone. (ll. 81-86)

After her seduction, however, she falls ill, and cannot hear the goblins' cries. She thinks of Jeanie, another victim of the goblin men, who "should have been a bride; / But who for joys brides hope to have / Fell sick and died" (ll. 312-315). Thus Rosetti connects the loss of virginity with death, warning foolish young women not to listen to the tempting cries of goblin men.

In "The Erl-King," Carter employs the same themes of lost innocence, but embeds a different lesson. Like Laura and Lizzie, the girl enters the forest and hears the enchanting cry of the head-goblin, the Erl-King. His call is a bird's song that contains "all the melancholy of the failing year in it"(85). Thus she identifies the tempting call with a sense of regret and melancholy that becomes more explicit as the sexual relationship develops:

Now, when I go for walks, sometimes in the mornings . . . yet more  
enticingly, in the evenings when the cold darkness settles down, I always  
go to the Erl-King and he lays me down on his bed of rustling straw where  
I lie at the mercy of his huge hands.

He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is  
love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes. (87)

By calling him a "tender butcher," Carter connects the Erl-King with the ambiguous male figures of the previous stories. His touch "both consoles and devastates" her (89), paralleling him with the Bluebeard of "The Bloody Chamber," who is both terrifying and pitiful, and the beastly lovers in the "Beauty and the Beast" revisions who inflict "marvellous wound[s]" that rend and repair at the same time.

The girl's experience in the Erl-King's wood is yet another marvelous wound, a stripping down that bares her soul and makes her completely vulnerable to his awesome power. Like the tiger's bride, she goes beyond simply removing her clothes: "He strips me to my last nakedness, that underskin of mauve, pearlized satin, like a skinned rabbit. . . . I go back to and back to him to have his fingers strip the tattered skin away" (89). As she loses her skin, the girl finds an animal inside, but instead of a prowling tiger, she reveals a quivering rabbit. This image of a helpless creature signifies that in stripping her, the Erl-King gains total control over her body. He clothes her again in "his dress of water, this garment that drenches me, its slithering odour, its capacity for drowning" (89). His embrace is both regenerative and potentially harmful, implying that while there is something positive about her sexual initiation, she might also drown in his power.

The Erl-King's eyes become the source of this power, recalling both Bluebeard's dehumanizing stare and Mr. Lyon's more enabling gaze. The green eyes of the Erl-King embody the trap from which the girl cannot escape:

I lie above him and see the light from the fire sucked into the black vortex of his eye, the omission of light at the centre, there, that exerts on me such a tremendous pressure, it draws me inwards. . . . What big eyes you have. Eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the numinous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes. The gelid green of your eyes fixes my reflective face. It is a preservative, like a green liquid amber; it catches me. I am afraid I will be trapped in it for ever . . . . Your green eye is a reducing chamber. If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish. I will be drawn down into that black whirlpool and be consumed by you. I shall become so small that you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty. (89-90)

The black hole of his eyes devours light and sucks her in with an undeniable power. With "What big eyes you have," Carter parallels this consuming presence with the carnivorous wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood," who swallows the girl and her granny. This reference to "Little Red Riding Hood" also alludes to her own revision of that tale, "The Company of Wolves," in which the virgin brazenly laughs at the wolf's threat. The connection implies that perhaps this virgin, who

“would go into the wood as trustingly as Red Riding Hood” (85), will also laugh at her captor, turning his power against him.

The intense power of the Erl-King’s gaze stems from its ability to devour and consume. In the opening pages, the girl remarks, “[t]here are some eyes can eat you,” connecting this woodland figure with the tiger bride’s “earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment” (Tiger’s Bride 67). While this fear of devourment pervades “The Erl-King,” the consuming nature of his gaze ironically makes the Erl-King, in some ways, a mother figure associated with birth and regeneration. Natural imagery associated with the Erl-King supports his role as a force of life; surrounded by a cold and withered forest that is silenced by a “sickroom hush” (84), he inhabits the one bright spot, a flourishing garden “where all the flowers were birds and beasts” (85). The cheese he makes has a “rank, amniotic taste,” and he tells the girl about “the grass snakes, how the old ones open their mouths wide when they smell danger and the thin little ones disappear down the old ones’ throats until the fright is over and out they come again” (86). This story introduces a metaphor of birth connected with the act of swallowing or devouring. Carter explicitly states the connection as the pair lie on his bed of straw:

His skin covers me entirely; we are like two halves of a seed, enclosed in the same integument. I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me, like those queens in fairy tales who conceive when they swallow a grain of corn or a sesame seed. Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me. (89)

Here Carter lends a positive element to the Erl-King's seduction by linking it to a childbirth image, in which he becomes the mother figure. By casting the Erl-King as a mother, Carter re-introduces the motherhood theme--essentially neglected after the opening story--that will assume a greater and more complex role in the second half of the collection.

By making the Erl-King both a male seducer and a female mother, Carter creates a character who is constantly mutating and changing roles. His roles vary infinitely, for he is alternately a mother, a father, a lover, an innocent woodsman, a dangerous vampire or werewolf, and a rustically domesticated "housewife" (87). As the title character, the Erl-King embodies the importance of change and multiplicity in the story. The change he engenders in the girl parallels his ambiguous identity, for it too is both destructive and empowering. The girl recognizes that "in his innocence he never knew he might be the death of me, although I knew from the first moment I saw him how Erl-King would do me grievous harm" (90). Yet by destroying her innocence, the Erl-King gives her the clue she needs to get out of the forest. No longer a "foolish virgin" (90), she has gained the cunning and the power to slay the source of her oppression, be it mother, father, lover, or monster. The Erl-King manifests all of these elements, and though he means to trap her, she has been shocked out of the hypnotic grip of his siren song: "When I realized what the Erl-King meant to do to me, I was shaken with a terrible fear. . . . now I know the birds don't sing, they only cry because they can't find their way out of the wood"(90). Her new-found knowledge, which distinguishes her from the foolish and innocent girl who first entered the wood, allows her to slay the Erl-King in a scene resonating with allusions to pagan

fertility god rituals of death and regeneration. These pagan overtones give way, however, to the omnipresent Christian imagery of salvation.

The Christian imagery in the *denouement* again recalls Carter's allusion to Rosetti's "Goblin Market." As stated above, the sexual interpretation does not eclipse the religious aspects of Rosetti's poem; as Battiscombe insists, "although it has been almost wholly neglected by the critics, the religious interpretation of "Goblin Market" is much nearer to her own way of thought than the sexual one."<sup>5</sup> In the religious reading, Lizzie becomes a Christ-figure to save her sister Laura, who, like Eve, has tasted the forbidden fruit. Gilbert and Gubar provide a succinct analysis of Lizzie's sacrificial role:

just as Christ intervened to save mankind by offering his body and blood as bread and wine for general spiritual consumption, so Laura's "good" sister Lizzie, like a female Savior, negotiates with the goblins (as Christ did with Satan) and offers herself to be eaten and drunk in a womanly holy communion.<sup>6</sup>

Lizzie returns home to offer her "womanly communion" that will ensure Laura's salvation:

Eat me, drink me, love me;  
Laura, make much of me;  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men. (ll. 471-474)

In assuming the role of Christ, Lizzie's Communion kindles a purifying fire in Laura; a "Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart, / Met the fire smoldering there / And overbore its lesser flame" (507-9). This fire saves Laura, who, like Lazarus, finds "Life out of death" (524). Her innocence restored, Laura rejoins life; eventually to marry, bear children, and live happily ever after in blissful sisterhood with Lizzie.

When the girl in "The Erl-King" repeats Lizzie's line "Eat me, drink me" (89), Carter connects her with the Christ-like attributes of Lizzie. Just as Lizzie rescues her sister, Carter's heroine also saves a sisterhood of young women who have been turned into caged birds. In this final passage, Carter switches both tense and grammatical subject, rendering the action in the future and referring to the girl as "she" instead of continuing in the first person. This signifies the dramatic change that has come over the girl: if the "I" who tells the story is a "foolish virgin" who cannot find her way out of the wood, then the "she" is the enlightened, experienced woman who can set her sisters free.

The salvation scene resonates with both violence and a triumphant reclamation of the power she lost upon entering the wood. The girl lulls the Erl-King into the same "half dreaming, half waking" trance that he had exerted on her, then strangles him with ropes of his own hair (91). Switching to the third person, she releases the caged birds:

Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change  
back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his  
love-bite on their throats.

She will carve off his great mane with the knife he uses to skin the  
rabbits. (91)

By appropriating his knife--the symbol of his sexual power over her--she turns the sexual experience she has gained against him. In this action she parallels Delilah--a Biblical temptress--when she cuts off Samson's hair. Just as Samson gives Delilah the clue to how to slay him, so too does the Erl-King provide the girl with the power to destroy him.

The crimson imprints on the newly transformed girls' throats signify their entrance into the world of the sexually experienced, paralleling them with the blood-marked pianist in "The Bloody Chamber." Discussing "The Erl-King," Elaine Jordan argues that the "shifting of tense and grammatical subject in this story . . . ought to be read as twistings and turnings to escape the transparent, unambiguous world of experience."<sup>7</sup> The crimson brand of experience, however, which is as permanent and implicating as the pianist's "mark of Cain" (Bloody Chamber 36), does not support Jordan's reading. Although the girl has destroyed the Erl-King and resurrected the birds as girls, they cannot escape the world of experience, for their knowledge will remain forever. In fact, it is this knowledge--though branding and potentially imprisoning--that gives them the power to escape.

While the Erl-King has given her the power to make these transformations and escape from oppression, the girl herself initiates the change. *She* recognizes the fate that awaits her, *she* turns his head away in order to avoid the ensnaring power of his innocent yet insidious gaze, and *she* lulls him to sleep in order to destroy him. She has left the ranks of foolish girls who swish

through the forest in a futile attempt to escape, and is now a cunning, powerful woman who knows the solution to the labyrinth and uses it to free her sisters from what Jordan calls the “‘archetypal’ cycles of oppression.”<sup>8</sup> This oppression comes not only from the male seducer, but from the mother, the father, and all the other monsters that the Erl-King represents.

Carter further complicates the climax with the final image, where the girl strings an old fiddle with the slain Erl-King’s hair. The resulting music represents one of the most complex and ambiguous moments of the story:

Then it will play discordant music without a hand touching it. The bow  
will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out:  
“Mother, mother, you have murdered me!” (91)

This suggests that the Erl-King, in addition to being her mother and her father, is her own child. In “Wayward Girls but Wicked Women?” Avis Lewallen provides a particularly relevant and provocative reading of this passage:

in “The Erl-King,” desire is the product of nature--the Erl-King “came alive from the desire of the woods” (p. 68)--but we deduce from the punch-line, “Mother, mother, you have murdered me!” (p. 91), that the Erl-King is also the created child of desire in an Oedipal configuration, and therefore potentially dangerous: “Erl-King will do you grievous harm” (p. 85). . . . Desire is dangerous because you may create out of it.

the cage of your own entrapment, like the young girls trapped as birds in the Erl-King's cages.<sup>9</sup>

The dynamic of mothers and children becomes extremely complex here. While the Erl-King functions as an ambiguous mother figure, he also appears in this conclusion as a child--making the girl a mother. This inverted relationship implies that not only can mothers be dangerous to children, but so too can children be dangerous to mothers. By casting the Erl-King as the dangerous child of desire, Carter counters the empowering aspects of desire with the danger of drowning in it.

In "The Erl-King," Carter creates a celebration of feminine transformation and power. Though a male figure initiates her into sexual experience, the girl then uses this experience to find her way out of the wood, bringing with her the experience but slaying the innocent monster who lured her in. By killing the Erl-King she becomes a Christ figure, who offers up herself for the salvation of the other caged birds that the Erl-King has unwittingly destroyed. In assuming this power, she uses the monster that attempts to imprison her. Describing Carter's later fiction, Michael Wood looks to *The Bloody Chamber* to find "the enduring heart of her work," insisting that "[w]hat we find in these extraordinary works is the full range of Carter's irreverence and intelligence, and the play of a considerable moral courage, which suggests that even our monsters, those figments of Goya's sleep of reason, will help us if we help ourselves."<sup>10</sup> In this respect, "The Erl-King" occupies a prominent and pivotal point in the collection of stories, for

it represents the high point of the kind of female power that can conquer fear and use its monsters to gain freedom.

## II

### Down the Rabbit-Hole and Through the Looking-Glass

I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole--and yet--and yet--it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what *can* have happened to me! When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!

--*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Carter's stories center on change and metamorphosis, which are dominant themes throughout the fairy tale genre that she works with. Though she draws on many earlier stories and legends for the genesis of specific tales, she also uses a more contemporary set of tales, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* stories, to inform the structure of her own collection. These captivating children's tales treat the idea of change and metamorphosis in a whimsical, nonsensical manner that has delighted children and adults since their publication in 1865 and 1871. In these stories, Alice--a young girl on the threshold of puberty--enters a "curious" world where everything is reversed and change is the only constant. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice falls down a rabbit hole to enter the reversed world, while in the sequel,

*Through the Looking-Glass*, she steps through a mirror. These portals bring her into a world of questionable identity: “I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? . . . But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”<sup>11</sup>

Carter embeds multiple references to Carroll’s curious world of metamorphosis in the collection. She scatters the word curious (e.g. the “curious reversal” in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”) throughout the tales as she depicts young women engaging in the process of transformation and metamorphosis. And one of the most important and dominating motifs in the collection is that of the mirror: whether she is describing Bluebeard’s bedroom (“And surrounded by so many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls” [Bloody Chamber 14]), or Miss Lamb’s growing vanity (“she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often” [Courtship 49]), Carter emphasizes the significance of the reflective image. Indeed, “The Erl-King” becomes a symbolic mirror, serving as a portal to the remaining stories. The confusion and complexity of “The Erl-King” begins to open up in “The Lady of the House of Love” and the stories that follow. When the hero in “The Lady of the House of Love” explores the Countess’s house, he finds a world that rapidly becomes “curiouser and curiouser” (Lady 99). This exploration again links Carter’s story to Carroll’s *Alice* stories, where Alice also enters a new, “curiouser and curiouser” world.<sup>12</sup> After “The Erl-King” we seem to have stepped through a looking-glass, and like Alice, we plunge into a new, curious world in the last five stories. Here, women can be virgins, whores, monsters, mothers, or some new, hybrid creature. While Carter complicates the

maternal image, she also removes traditional gender restrictions, creating male mothers in yet another "curious reversal."

A female monster dominates "The Lady of the House of Love," a story that follows "The Erl-King." In "The Company of Wolves," the penultimate story of the collection, the narrator says "the wolves have a way of arriving at your own hearthside. We try and try but sometimes we cannot keep them out" (111). In all of Carter's stories females find wolves--in the castles, in the forests, and at the hearthsides. In "The Lady of the House of Love" and the stories that follow, however, we encounter a new world, one where metamorphosis is still important, but where the wolf might be the female heroine. In these tales, Carter seems to embrace the "monster-woman" that so many feminists rail against as a legitimate representation of femininity. The carnivorous sexual predator of "The Lady of the House of Love" is a woman, while the threatened virgin is a male. This story provides an inversion of Carter's earlier stories, which were in themselves reversals and revisions.

"The Lady of the House of Love" alludes to and reverses almost all of the stories that precede "The Erl-King," while drawing on a rich tradition of folklore. The fairy-tale structure combines elements of the Bluebeard story, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Beauty and the Beast*, and also includes fragments of vampire folklore. "The Lady of the House of Love" incorporates ideas from all the preceding stories, including the opposition of beauty and beastliness and prey and predator; and the importance of a transformation that becomes a spiritual resurrection. In another inversion, this time of her own story, Carter creates a new "tender butcher," who kills the

Countess with nurturing human love. Her death becomes a resurrection as it releases her from her ghastly condition and initiates her into the human realm.

In many ways, "The Lady of the House of Love" presents a reversal of the title story, "The Bloody Chamber." Carter evokes the same ominous and desolate atmosphere as the story opens, and the Countess's house mirrors Bluebeard's "mysterious . . . lovely, sad" castle (Bloody Chamber 13). Both mansions reflect the mysterious and dangerous nature of their occupants, and both contain a death chamber with an eerie catafalque as the centerpiece. Just as Bluebeard's "Castle of Murder" (Bloody Chamber 33) houses a sexual beast who brings death to virgins, so too does the Countess Nosferatu's murderous castle seductively lure virgins to their deaths.

The Countess Nosferatu is a sexual predator every bit as dangerous as the Marquis in "The Bloody Chamber." This voracious huntress crouches and pounces on her prey in a "negligee of blood-stained lace" (95). Smearred with blood, "she strikes, she gorges" as she feeds on the quivering bodies of "rabbits and small, furry things" (95). As she crosses the threshold of puberty, however, small furry things no longer satisfy her: "But now she is a woman, she must have men" (96). The Countess begins stalking young men, "shepherd boys and gipsy lads who, ignorant or foolhardy, come to wash the dust from their feet in the water of the fountain" (96). She has a lush mouth--"a whore's mouth" (101)--and she lures them to her chamber with the promise of forbidden sexual pleasures: "When she takes them by the hand and leads them to her bedroom, they can scarcely believe their luck" (96). Their luck disappears, however, as she makes her fatal conquest and buries their bones in her lush rose garden.

Though most of the men end up as rose-garden fertilizer, one gains power over the Countess through his innocence and virginity. When the virginal hero wheels his bike into the Countess's deserted Romanian village, his apprehension recalls the pianist's tension in Bluebeard's mansion. He brushes his anxiety away, however, brusquely reminding himself that "he was no child, now, to be frightened of his own fancies" (99). This virgin differs most significantly from the virgin in "The Bloody Chamber" in gender. The sexual tension and gothic horror of "The Bloody Chamber" revolve around Bluebeard's entrapment, exploitation, and planned murder of his virginal young bride. The innocent virgin in "The Lady of the House of Love," ironically, is a male. The first male virgin in the collection, the young hero has the same power that Carter's females find in virginity:

He has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous of states; ignorance, yet at the same time, power in potentia, and, furthermore, unknowingness, which is not the same as ignorance. . . . in the invisible, even unacknowledged pentacle of his virginity, the young man stepped over the threshold of Nosferatu's castle and did not shiver in the blast of cold air, as from the mouth of a grave, that emanated from the lightless, cavernous interior. (97-99)

By connecting the male would-be victim with Bluebeard's pianist, Carter reverses the gender paradigm of the first story.

Though Carter does invert the gender roles of "The Bloody Chamber," the reversals that "The Lady of the House of Love" treats are much more complex and rich than just a simple gender switch. The Countess is the more aggressive predator in the story, yet she is also, in many ways, a victim. Carter connects her with the Erl-King, lord of the forest goblins: "Now she possesses all the haunted forests and mysterious habitations of his vast domain; she is the hereditary commandant of the army of shadows who camp in the village below her chateau" (95). Like the Erl-King, she too keeps a caged bird to sing for her. At the same time, however, Carter links her to the foolish women of the Erl-King's forest, who cannot find their way home. The cyclist sees her as a "sad Columbine who lost her way in the wood a long time ago and never made it to the fair" (102). He also calls her a doll, comparing her to the doll in "The Tiger's Bride," who is condemned to an imitative, non-human life: "she is like a doll, he thought, a ventriloquist's doll, or, more, like a great, ingenious piece of clockwork" (102). The Countess is an ambiguous villain, for "she would like to be human," and "nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition" (95). Just as Carter connects all her beasts with their houses, so too does she create a symbol for the Countess in the form of her mansion. The walls are "hung with black satin, embroidered with tears of pearl" (94). These tears echo the tears on the Countess's face after a kill: "The blood on the Countess's cheeks will be mixed with tears" (96). Though she wants to be human, she cannot change her beastly tendencies, and is condemned to her solitary and tragic life.

The absent mother figure plays an important part in the Countess's tragic story. When the cyclist first sees the Countess, she is wearing her mother's wedding gown, and looks "like a child putting on the clothes of a dead mother in order to bring her, however briefly, to life again" (100). The obscene rose garden, whose intoxicating smell both repulses and lures the cyclist, connects the Countess to her mother: "This garden, an exceedingly somber place, bears a strong resemblance to a burial ground and all the roses her dead mother planted have grown up into a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates her in the castle of her inheritance" (95). As a symbol of motherhood, the garden represents a trap that keeps her contained within her ghastly condition. This echoes the suggestion that mothers can be harmful or oppressive that first appears in "The Erl-King."

The Countess dons her mother's dress as a part of her seduction ritual, and it is precisely this seduction that succeeds in briefly bringing her mother to life again. When she cuts herself, the Countess sees her own blood for the first time, and like a small child, stands fascinated by it. The hero then becomes a mother figure as he attempts to cure her:

Into this vile and murderous room, the handsome bicyclist brings the innocent remedies of the nursery; in himself, by his presence, he is an exorcism. He gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own hand, but still it spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. He will kiss it better for her, as her mother, had she lived, would have done. (106)

With his innocent and nurturing cure, the cyclist brings death to the Countess. The silver tears fall from the wall and her “painted ancestors turn away their eyes and grind their fangs” as she partakes in a painful initiation into the human realm (106). The cyclist awakes to find her dead, and “[i]n death, she looked far older, less beautiful and so, for the first time, fully human” (107). Although his kiss kills her, it also saves her from her monstrous existence. This kiss represents yet another curious reversal of the fairy tale form, in which the handsome prince’s kiss usually awakens the helpless princess.

Its capacity for salvation makes the Countess’s death a positive experience. The cyclist awakens to the lark’s “ecstatic morning song,” and sees “a lace negligé lightly soiled with blood, as it might be from a woman’s menses” (106). These two images provide striking reversals: before the Countess’s death the lark would only sing “a brief cadenza . . . to announce how it cannot escape” (94), and the bloody negligé signaled her blood-sucking habits. Now that the Countess is no longer a monster, the caged bird, which serves as a symbol for her own restricted existence, can sing freely, while the bloody stains from her midnight snacks have become the regenerative blood of reproduction. When the cyclist brings the lark to the window, its flight provides a moment of joy and an image of transcendence:

At first, it exhibited the reluctance for the sky of a long-caged thing, but, when he tossed it up on to the currents of the air, it spread its wings and was up and away into the clear blue bowl of the heavens; he watched its trajectory with a lift of joy in his heart. (106-7)

This passage suggests a sense of life out of death, implying that the hero is not only a mother figure but also another Christ figure, who supplies a spiritual salvation.

Yet Carter reverses her own reversal once again in the story with the figure of the masculine hero. Though he appears as a positive character who releases the Countess from her beastliness, Carter ends the tale with an allusion to his death. She treats his heroism ironically throughout the story, giving him an egotistical voice that parodies a traditionally male stance. He prides himself excessively on his rationality:

He has chosen the most rational mode of transport in the world for his trip round the Carpathians. . . . the bicycle is the product of pure reason applied to motion. Geometry at the service of man! Give me two spheres and a line and I will show you how far I can take them. (97)

It is no accident that he thinks of Geometry and the related sciences of rationality and reason as being tools of *man*. This assumption casts women in a less rational, more helpless role, while assuming the power of rationality for males. He continues to demonstrate this masculine egotism when he thinks of the Countess:

Then he padded into the boudoir, his mind busy with plans. We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We

shall turn her into the lovely girl that she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares. (107)

In his mind, he makes the Countess a passive doll, to be placed at the mercy of males who will cure her. He diagnoses her problem as “nervous hysteria,” a term that denotes “emotional instability.”<sup>13</sup> The term hysteria--deriving from the Greek word for uterus-- describes what was considered a feminine problem. In *Sexual Anarchy*, Elaine Showalter discusses the condition as a women’s disease: “hysteria carried the stigma of being a humiliating female affliction.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the cyclist assumes that her emotionally unstable behavior, which is such a marked contrast to his own rationality, is simply a female disorder that can be quickly cured.

Carter reverses the story a final time in the final paragraphs, when the cyclist returns to his regiment. He finds the Countess’s rose, the symbol of both her death and her escape, and attempts to “resurrect” it (107). The last two paragraphs clearly link the revival of the rose with his impending death:

When he returned from mess that evening, the heavy fragrance of Count Nosferatu’s roses drifted down the stone corridor of the barracks to greet him, and his spartan quarters brimmed with the reeling odour of a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity, their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour. Next day, his regiment embarked for France. (107-8)

In her death, the Countess regains the power to consummate the death she could not finish in life. The odor of her rose, which recalls her sexuality and serves as a symbol of her freedom, permeates the quarters with a foreboding hint that "he will learn to shudder in the trenches" (104). Thus, like the virgin in "The Erl-King," she gains the key to freedom, then slays the one who gave it to her.

The constant reversals and inversions in "The Lady of the House of Love" create a new world that constantly redefines good and bad. The vampire who appears to be a voracious killer can also be a pathetic victim, while the virginal hero's self-assurance leads both to destructive male arrogance and salvation. Love--embodied in the cyclist--is both sexual and maternal, bringing a death that is simultaneously a salvation. The Countess is both horrifying and pitiful as she lures young men to her castle, and her death is a welcome release that foreshadows the salvation of the Duke in "Wolf-Alice."

While this story revises the earlier stories, it also looks ahead to the remaining trilogy of wolf stories, in which Carter continues to use complex female characters. The female who is both threatening and victimized reappears in "The Werewolf" as a grandmother who is mother and monster. The ambiguous conception of motherhood recurs in all the wolf stories. In "The Company of Wolves," the maternal figure protects yet also represses and must be symbolically destroyed when the wolf consumes the grandmother. The last story, "Wolf-Alice," combines human and animal, mother and child in one figure who has the wisdom to save the Duke. This

complex figure “might prove to be the wise child who leads [us] all” to an Edenic state where wounds are healed and scars fleshed out again. (Wolf-Alice 121).

## Notes

1. Anthony S. Mercatante, ed. *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend* (New York: Facts on File, 1988) 241.
2. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979; London: Vintage, 1995) 64. This quote comes from "The Tiger's Bride." Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number, and, when necessary, by story title.
3. Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981) 94.
4. Christina Rossetti, "Goblin Market," *The Norton Anthology of Women's Literature*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985) 897, lines 471-474 and 484. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.
5. Battiscombe 107.
6. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 566.
7. Elaine Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter," *New Feminist Discourses*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992) 126.
8. Jordan 126.
9. Avis Lewallen, "Wayward Girls But Wicked Women?," *Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature*, eds. Gary Day and Clive Bloom (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) 154-155.
10. Michael Wood, "Angela Carter," *British Writer's Supplement III*, ed. George Stade (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996) 87.
11. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1989; New York: Dover Publications, 1993) 8.
12. Carroll 7.

13. "Hysteria," *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*, 1985.

14. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy* (New York: Viking, 1990) 106. Showalter offers a provocative analysis of the relation between shifting roles of women at the *fin de siecle* and the insistence of male doctors and theorists that physical and intellectual stimulation led to madness and sterility. Her discussion of the rest cure and its effects complements Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," which exposes the rest cure as a male-enforced cage that creates, rather than cures, madness. See also Showalter's *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

## WISE CHILDREN

"Lamb to the slaughter, one might have said . . . . But no sacrificial lamb nor shrinking violet she. She was a wild thing."--*Wise Children*

A group of three wolf stories, "The Werewolf," "The Company of Wolves," and "Wolf-Alice," concludes *The Bloody Chamber*. Carter continues to revise fairy tales and folk lore, subverting Perrault's Red Riding Hood tale while also weaving werewolf and vampire legend into the stories. The themes of transformation and salvation recur in these final stories, while Carter expands her scope to explore ideas of motherhood and to celebrate the wise or cunning child. Carter's wise child, developed in a clear yet complex manner in these final stories, favors metamorphosis over stasis and is directly related to the mother figure. As Robin Ann Sheets notes, "if we are to move beyond the oppositions of male/female, dominant/submissive . . . then a reconceptualization of the mother's role might be the place to begin."<sup>1</sup> The wise child in these stories is one who has the cunning or knowledge to face her fears and shrug off the restrictive elements of the mother figure while embracing the positive aspects of the maternal tradition. It is this wise child that Carter calls women--and finally all humans--to be in *The Bloody Chamber*. With the final stories, Carter provides a response to Bettelheim's question of emulation with a resounding and positive image of the female who conquers the much-feared woods and wolves,

combines elements of both the tiger and the lamb, and embraces wisdom and experience as the way to empowerment and the source of salvation.

While almost all the stories allude to the mother, her presence grows stronger and more complex as the stories progress. In the opening story, Carter uses the mother as a flat character-- a plot device useful for inverting the traditional Bluebeard story. In that story, the mother is a positive figure who saves her daughter from the equally one-dimensional villain. However, if Carter seems to champion a straightforward revision of traditional tales with a positive and empowering vision of the mother in "The Bloody Chamber," she complicates this as the stories progress. In "The Erl-King," the mother becomes an ambiguous figure embodied in the Erl-King himself. In that story Carter implies that the mother must be destroyed in order for the young woman to find freedom. Carter continues to use this negative representation of the mother in "The Lady of the House of Love," where the lush, sexually suggestive rose garden symbolizes the Countess's dead mother. There, the garden traps the Countess in her own ghastly, monstrous state. When the hero assumes a mothering role, we know that he too must be destroyed.

The shifting or ambiguous roles of the maternal figure recur in "The Werewolf," but in this and the other final wolf stories, Carter begins to make sense of the confusion. In "The Werewolf," we actually hear the mother speak for the first time. By giving the mother a voice, Carter gives her more power and a more important role in her revision. Red Riding Hood's mother instructs her to go and "visit grandmother, who has been sick. Take her the oatcakes I've baked for her on the hearthstone and a little pot of butter."<sup>2</sup> This mother must be obeyed, and

Red Riding Hood accordingly sets out for her journey. Before she leaves, however, her mother gives her an important weapon, her "father's hunting knife" (109). By appropriating this classic phallic symbol of male power and domination for her daughter, the mother provides strength and self-sufficiency for her daughter and assumes a powerful position.

When Red Riding Hood enters the wood, her mother warns her not to leave the path "because of the bears, the wild boar, the starving wolves" (109). While the sense of foreboding echoes the same ominous tone in stories like "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Tiger's Bride," this danger lacks the sensual, sexual quality of the previous stories. Carter links the horrors of the wood with pagan or anti-Christian figures. In these harsh woods, "the Devil is as real as you or I," and vampires and witches lurk in the graveyards (108). Carter alludes to Walpurgisnacht--a celebration of witches and devilment--to enhance the sense of spiritual rather than sexual dread.

The strength that the mother imparts to Red Riding Hood becomes evident when she meets the werewolf in the dangerous wood. In another reversal, Carter creates a young girl who is already knowledgeable, and does not need an encounter with a beast or sexual predator to gain this knowledge. Unlike her previous heroines, who derived some sort of power from their virginity and innocence, this young girl rejects fear because of her knowledge: "she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard" (109). She remains wary and cunning, and when she hears the wolf's howl, she spins on him with her flashing knife:

It was a huge one, with red eyes and running, grizzled chops; any but a mountaineer's child would have died of fright at the sight of it. It went for

her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right paw. (109)

The girl does not passively await her fate, nor call for a masculine woodsman to rescue her. Rather, she wields her knife with courage and alacrity, then wraps up the paw and places it in her basket. Like a bull-fighter who cuts off a slain bull's ear as a coveted symbol of masculine prowess, she claims the paw as a symbol of her own victory.

When the girl turns on the wolf and slashes its paw, the terrifying, grizzled beast turns into a pitiful victim. He "let out a gulp, almost a sob, when it saw what had happened to it; wolves are less brave than they seem. It went lolloping off disconsolately between the trees as well as it could on three legs, leaving a trail of blood behind it" (109). This trail of blood recalls the wounds of the previous stories, yet here the masculine beast, rather than the female, becomes the bleeding victim. With this sobbing beast, Carter reverses the bleeding or wounded woman image that recurs throughout the earlier stories.

The bleeding wounds that occur throughout *The Bloody Chamber* recall Freud's conception of the woman as a castrated male. In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter offers a rejection of this idea that mirrors her fictional message in *The Bloody Chamber*:

the social fiction of the female wound, the bleeding scar left by her castration . . . is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus. . . . Female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitude towards women and our attitude to

ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed.<sup>3</sup>

While Carter does create bleeding women, she also gives her male characters wounds. The pianist's mother pierces Bluebeard with a bullet in "The Bloody Chamber," while the Erl-King dies at the hands of his child-lover. Carter's rejection of this "social fiction" emerges in "The Werewolf" as a male beast who is wounded by a little girl wielding her father's knife.

The knife represents both paternal and maternal power, for though it is her father's weapon, her mother appropriates it and gives it to Red Riding Hood. Yet, while Carter makes the mother a source of power and protection, she also paints motherhood in a more negative light with the figure of the grandmother. The conclusion of the story reveals the grandmother as a witch, who must be destroyed by Red Riding Hood. Witches in Red Riding Hood's forest are marked like the pianist in "The Bloody Chamber":

When they discover a witch--some old woman whose cheeses ripen when her neighbors' do not, another old woman whose black cat, oh, sinister! *follows her about all the time*, they strip the crone, search for her marks, for the supernumerary nipple her familiar sucks. They soon find it. Then they stone her to death. (108)

Here Carter ironically links the nipple, a maternal symbol, with witchcraft. Though witchcraft has appeared in other stories (e.g. "The Bloody Chamber") as a positive female force, here it becomes something that must be destroyed.

Though the ironic tone of the passage quoted above calls the grandmother's threat into question, she must, nevertheless, be killed. When she reaches her grandmother's house, the child discovers that the wolf's paw, so carefully saved as a trophy, is really her grandmother's hand. She finds the tell-tale wart--the magic nipple that signals maternal witchcraft--and realizes that her grandmother is the same red-eyed wolf who threatened her in the woods:

She pulled back the sheet but the old woman woke up, at that, and began to struggle, squawking and shrieking like a thing possessed. But the child was strong, and armed with her father's hunting knife; she managed to hold her grandmother down long enough to see the cause of her fever. There was a bloody stump where her right hand should have been, festering already. (109).

The grandmother is too weak to defeat the strong child, and Red Riding Hood calls in the neighbors who stone the woman to death.

One of the shortest stories in the collection, "The Werewolf" is perhaps Carter's most obvious--yet also self-mocking--attempt to delineate her idea of the wise child who can serve as a model for all women. Carter may direct the hint of sarcasm at herself, as if to chide herself for believing that such a brief, simple story could contain the essence of her message. Set phrases seem to leap out of the narrative to describe the girl's power and courage, which stem from her knowledge and cunning: "Here, take your father's hunting knife; you know how to use it," "she knew the forest too well to fear it but she must always be on her guard," "wolves are less brave

than they seem" (109). Carter links this knowledge to the maternal presence, for while the mother gives her daughter the symbolically powerful knife, Red Riding Hood goes on to destroy her grandmother with this power. The suggestion remains, then, that while there are positive aspects that should be embraced and retained from the maternal figure, she must also be destroyed. The grandmother's death becomes a necessary sacrifice--a maternal sacrifice that mirrors the necessary yet somehow tragic slaying of the Erl-King. The story ends neatly: "Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered" (110). Margaret Atwood sums up the story with two morals:

Moral: women can be werewolves too. Other moral: to be a "good child" (BC, p. 108) does not mean you have to be a victim. In the demanding "old country" to be a good child is to be a competent child, to know how to recognize danger but to avoid being paralyzed by fear, to know how to use your father's hunting knife to defend yourself against those who also hunt. "Good" means "good at."<sup>4</sup>

Red Riding Hood is not only a "good child," but is also a wise child who can destroy the imprisoning or threatening aspects of the maternal tradition while remaining securely in the maternal house.

After painting her vision of the wise child in "The Werewolf," Carter expands this idea in the more complex story that follows, "The Company of Wolves." Another revision of the Red Riding Hood story, "The Company of Wolves" follows more closely to the original tale, and

returns again to the theme of sexual experience that comes from an encounter with a male beast. Motherhood recurs in this story as an important theme, and the virgin is another wise child who can meet the beast on his own terms and become an agent of grace and salvation.

The story opens with the same sense of terror that characterizes most of the stories of the collection. Here, the terror is specifically and immediately located in the form of the wolf; he is the only terrifying beast who “howls in the woods by night” (110). Carter perverts the usual meaning of a religious congregation, creating instead a “congregation of nightmare” (110). His ability to inspire terror stems not only from his fierce appetite, but more importantly, from his cunning nature. Carter repeatedly notes this trait: “The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he’s as cunning as he is ferocious” (110), and on the following page, “he was cunning and easily gave them the slip” (111). Though this cunning is terrifying, it is also something to be desired--a source of power that elevates the wolf over the other carnivores in the woods.

Through the wolf’s fearsome savagery, a sense of despair emerges that makes him yet another incarnation of the Bluebeard and Mr. Lyon figures of the early stories. Carter connects the despair of the wolves to a religious or spiritual lack, setting up the structure for a religious salvation in the tale’s conclusion:

That long-drawn, wavering howl has, for all its fearful resonance, some inherent sadness in it, as if the beasts would love to be less beastly if only they knew how and never cease to mourn their own condition. There is a vast melancholy in the canticles of the wolves, melancholy infinite as the

forest. . . . that mourning for their own, irremediable appetites, can never move the heart for not one phrase in it hints at the possibility of redemption; grace could not come to the wolf from its own despair, only through some external mediator, so that, sometimes, the beast will look as if he half welcomes the hand that despatches him. (112)

The canticles of the wolves reinforce the religious connection, as does Carter's language as she talks of grace. The passage foreshadows the grace that only the wise child, Red Riding Hood, can bring.

In many ways this story returns to the structures and themes of the previous tales. The sexual element--missing in "The Werewolf"--returns here, with the threatening agent being a male figure and the innocent virgin being a female. The sexual nature of Red Riding Hood's encounter becomes obvious as the story progresses. She is a virgin on the threshold of experience: "Her breasts have just begun to swell . . . her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month" (113). In contrast to this female virgin figure, the lycanthrope runs through the forest, naked with nipples as "ripe and dark as poison fruit" (116). These nipples of poison fruit recall the Erl-King and his goblin fruit of sexual temptation.

The sexual tension heightens when Red Riding Hood encounters a handsome young man, "laden with carcasses of game birds" (114). Though Red Riding Hood plays in to his seduction, expressing awe at his compass and shyly offering a kiss, the dead birds mark the man as a

predator, again like the Erl-King who traps the feminine birds in cages.<sup>5</sup> The young man's sexuality is potent with a dangerous edge; he flirts and laughs with her, while "gleaming trails of spittle [cling] to his teeth" (114). The wolf's sexual threat manifests itself as a literal devourment, again recalling the fears and threats of all the previous stories. The tiger's bride describes the "earliest and most archaic of all fears, fear of devourment" (Tiger's Bride 67), which is exactly the fear that the wolf embodies. When the werewolf knocks on granny's door, Carter warns, "you can hurl your Bible at him and your apron after, granny, you thought that was a sure prophylactic against these infernal vermin . . . but it won't do you any good" (115-6). By calling the grandmother's precautions prophylactics, Carter reinforces the connection between the sexual act and devourment. Granny's prophylactics fail her in the end; her last thoughts are "[h]is genitals, huge. Ah! huge" (116). The wolf finishes her off and buries her bones under the bed, hiding "the tell-tale stained" sheets (116) that recall the pianist's stained sheets from "The Bloody Chamber."

The blood-stained sheets evoke scenes of violent wounding, sexual initiation, and menstrual bleeding. All of these images meet in Red Riding Hood's scarlet cloak that signifies both her impending sexual maturation and the maternal love that surrounds her. Though children "do not stay young for long in this savage country," Red Riding Hood "had been indulged by her mother and the grandmother who'd knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow" (113). Like the girl in "The Werewolf," Red Riding Hood is courageous yet wary: "She is quite sure the wild beasts cannot harm her although, well-warned,

she lays a carving knife in the basket her mother has packed with cheeses" (113). Her courage stems in part from her wisdom and in part from the maternal nurturing she has received. This nurturing, however, also has an ominous aspect, as represented by the scarlet shawl that recalls the hymeneal and wounding blood that the virgins of Carter's stories spill.

When Red Riding Hood meets the wolf in her grandmother's cottage, her courage, wisdom, and eagerness for the sexual initiation all combine to save her from the wolf's devouring power and make her a salvation figure for him. Like the sly adulteress in "Puss-in-Boots," Red Riding Hood willingly participates in the sexual flirtation, offering the hunter a kiss if he beats her to Granny's house. Red Riding Hood hopes to lose this contest, and dawdles on the way "to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager" (115). Thus the wise child begins to take charge of her own sexuality.

When she reaches her grandmother's cottage to find not a handsome man, but a drooling wolf, Red Riding Hood assumes a more aggressive control of her own sexual initiation. She turns it from the devouring and destructive experience that the wolf plans into a positive experience of grace and salvation. She notices her grandmother's hair, burning in the fireplace: "When the girl saw that, she knew she was in danger of death" (117). Surrounded by "the wolves' threnody"--a death song for the girl--she takes off her shawl and turns to the wolf: "since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid" (117). She begins to take an active role in her own seduction by throwing her scarlet shawl on the fire. With this action, she casts off the maternal symbol of both protection and restriction. This liberates her, and she begins to

throw all her clothes into the flames, until “now she was clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh” (118).

Confronted with a willing participant, the wolves’ threnody becomes a “prothalamion” (118)--a wedding song for their impending union. When the wolf delivers his set line from the original Perrault tale, “All the better to eat you with,” Red Riding Hood negates his threat by laughing: “she knew she was nobody’s meat” (118). With this laughter she becomes the sexual aggressor:

She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing. The flames danced like dead souls on Walpurgisnacht and the old bones under the bed set up a terrible clattering but she did not pay them any heed.

(118)

The clattering bones become a representation of the grandmother, who even in death expresses her disapproval. Red Riding Hood ignores them however, becoming again like her counterpart in “The Werewolf,” who wisely knew when to accept the maternal tradition and when to reject it. Here, she rejects her grandmother’s Bible-hurling fear for a consummation that becomes a kind of pagan celebration of witches, werewolves, and devils.

Carter juxtaposes the pagan imagery in the final scene with the pervading Christian imagery of the story. She opens the story on Christmas Eve, providing an immediate allusion to the birth of the Christian savior. As discussed above, she also links the wolves’ despair with

a lack of religious grace, and implies that this grace must come from an outside agent. By assuming an aggressive role in their consummation, Red Riding Hood becomes that agent of grace, turning a scene of destruction into a "savage marriage ceremony" (118). This ceremony concludes on Christmas Day with a slightly perverted yet nonetheless valid scene of domestic bliss: "See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf" (118). Physically intact and not devoured, the girl has saved both herself and the wolf, for she has given him the means to escape his "irremediable appetites" (112).

In the first two wolf stories, Carter provides an image of what might be the ideal woman: a "wise child" who combines innocence with experience, rejects the oppressive qualities of motherhood while retaining the strengths of the maternal tradition, and above all, prospers while offering salvation to others. She continues to use the theme of the wise child in the final story, "Wolf-Alice," which reverses or revisits all of the stories of the collection. While the wise child in "The Company of Wolves" triumphs because of her sexually aggressive nature and her willingness to disregard maternal and religious shackles, the heroine of "Wolf-Alice" offers a new type of wisdom that does not depend on sexual experience. In this final story, Carter continues to celebrate the melding of the beastly with the human and the process of self-identity, and concludes with the most positive and empowering look at motherhood in the collection.

Incorporating elements from many fairy tales and folk lore, including *Cinderella*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and vampire legends such as *Dracula*, "Wolf-Alice" serves as a mirror or

revision of "The Bloody Chamber," which is in itself, of course, a revision of the Bluebeard narrative. The Duke in "Wolf-Alice" mirrors the Count of "The Bloody Chamber"--both noblemen secrete themselves in their patriarchal castles where they commit atrocious crimes and hide bloody chambers. The ending of "Wolf-Alice" is quite different from that of "The Bloody Chamber," however, and seems to advocate a different sort of resolution to the opposition between beastly and human. While "The Bloody Chamber" ends with the destruction of the monster (at the hands of the mother), "Wolf-Alice" ends with a vision of maternal creation that brings life and salvation. Patricia Duncker links Carter's wolf and tiger as predators who "roam through the tales seeking whom they may erotically devour,"<sup>6</sup> but in the final story, Wolf-Alice is creative rather than consuming. This wolf is both mother figure and wise child. The two Red Riding Hood figures derive their wisdom from cunning, aggression, and sexual liberation, but Alice finds wisdom in the maternal role. With this maternal role, Carter modifies and expands her vision of the ideal woman to include the nurturing, creative function.

Carter's early descriptions of the Duke cast him as the arch-villain and anti-mother figure whose devouring appetite threatens all around him. His eyes become the focal point for his destructive power; they are "rapacious . . . eaten up by swollen, gleaming pupil. His eyes see only appetite. These eyes open to devour the world" (120). Carter's description of his birth creates a terrible perversion of the nursing mother and child image: "the Duke came shrieking into the world with all his teeth, to bite his mother's nipple off and weep" (122). He haunts the graveyards, digging up corpses and violating the sleep of the dead.

Despite his monstrous nature, the Duke does not pose a threat to the animal-child who inhabits his castle. A human child suckled by wolves, Alice presents a strange melding of animal and human characteristics. As a beast, she fits perfectly into the Duke's beastly castle, and thus he allows her to stay. There she begins the process of self-identification and maturation that Carter celebrates in all her stories. Her first menstruation surprises her, for she has no notion of time or human sexuality: "She has, as yet, no direct notion of past, or of future, or of duration, only of a dimensionless, immediate moment" (122). When the menstrual flow returns on a monthly cycle, she begins to establish herself in the context of time, and consequently of the larger world around her:

for the world around her was assuming form. She perceived an essential difference between herself and her surroundings that you might say she could not put her *finger* on--only, the trees and grass of the meadows outside no longer seemed sufficient to itself, but a kind of backdrop for her, that waited for her arrivals to give it meaning. (124)

As she becomes more conscious of herself and of time, she also becomes more conscious of her mother. The warmth of her cinder bed recalls "her foster mother's belly out of the past . . . her first conscious memory, painful as the first time the nuns combed her hair" (124). Thus, the mother figure emerges as something painfully missing in Alice's world.

The maternal image recurs at the end of the story as Alice assumes a regenerative role to save the Duke from his monstrousness. Carter gives this salvation religious overtones by recalling Adam and Eve in Eden:

If you could transport her, in her filth, rags, and feral disorder, to the Eden of our first beginnings where Eve and grunting Adam squat on a daisy bank, picking the lice from one another's pelts, then she might prove to be the wise child who leads them all and her silence and her howling a language as authentic as any language of nature. (121)

By taking us back to Eden, Carter envisions the possibility of a radically altered world where the power of language and naming does not necessarily rest exclusively in male hands.<sup>7</sup> Though she suggests that "the bitten apple [cannot] flesh out its scar again" (121), Carter does allow Alice to become the wise child who leads the Duke out of his monstrousness. Shot by the silver bullet of a vengeful groom, the Duke limps home to his solitary castle. There, Alice becomes a mother and saves him both physically and spiritually: "Then, she was pitiful as her gaunt grey mother; she leapt upon his bed to lick, without hesitation, without disgust, with a quick, tender gravity, the blood and dirt from his cheeks and forehead" (126). This maternal action functions much as the hero's nurturing kiss did in "The Lady of the House of Love." However, while his kiss saved the Countess through death, Alice's ministrations save the Duke by bringing him into human life. The story concludes with a poignant image of Alice assuming the creative role: "Little by little, there appeared within [the mirror] . . . as if brought into being by her soft, moist,

gentle tongue, finally, the face of the Duke" (126). He is graced with a mirror reflection, a sign of humanity within the vampire's castle. While this vision reverses the ending of "The Tiger's Bride," where the tiger licks Beauty *out of* humanity, it also echoes the redemptive nature of that metamorphosis.

Wolf-Alice becomes a savior figure by embracing the maternal role which is a positive source of creation. This focus on maternity makes "Wolf-Alice" a marked reversal of the traditional fairy tale genre, where mothers are usually evil, weak, or dead. As her final statement in the collection, "Wolf-Alice" modifies Carter's earlier vision of the feminine ideal. Previous stories such as "The Erl-King," "The Lady of the House of Love," and "The Werewolf" suggest that the mother can be restricting and oppressive, and must be symbolically or literally destroyed. While this sense of liberation remains an important part of Carter's message, she implies with her final story that we should not discard all of our maternal shackles. Perhaps, like Red Riding Hood, we must disregard the clattering bones of our grandmothers but still sleep soundly in granny's bed and prosper in her house. Carter's wise child ultimately finds wisdom in a liberation from feminine stereotypes that is not a complete rejection of maternal and nurturing roles.

## Notes

1. Robin Ann Sheets, "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1:4 (April 1991) 657.
2. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979; London: Virago Press, 1995) 109. This quote comes from "The Werewolf." Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number and, when necessary, by story title.
3. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: The Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1978) 23.
4. Margaret Atwood, "Running with the Tigers," *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*, ed. Lorna Sage (London: Virago Press, 1994) 129-130.
5. This bird hunter recalls the threatening figure of Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron," who invades on an innocent girl's forest and threatens sexual experience that will destroy her innocence. Jewett's heroine rejects the hunter in favor of her own kind of wisdom and experience that stems from art and nature rather than sexual initiation at the hands of a male predator. By alluding to Jewett's version of the wise child, Carter anticipates the heroine of "Wolf-Alice," whose wisdom is paradoxically innocent and depends on compassion rather than sexuality.
6. Patricia Duncker, "Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's Bloody Chambers," *Literature and History* 10:1 (Spring 1984) 6.
7. See Genesis 2:19-20: "So from the earth he formed all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he could call them; whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name. The man gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every wild animal."

## Afterword

*The Bloody Chamber* represents a story-telling *tour de force* for Carter. She uses lush, Gothic atmospheres as the backdrop for a cast of characters that ranges from arch-villains to innocents and includes all the combinations in between. "Wolf-Alice" ends the collection but does not neatly wrap up the tales with one concluding message or simple moral. Rather, the final story expands Carter's vision, opens up new concerns, and invites us to consider further questions and reversals. Like Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, Carter tells a never-ending stream of tales as deep and eternal as her good friend Salman Rushdie's "Sea of Stories."<sup>1</sup> For Carter, story-telling is a transformative process, becoming the source of the change she glorifies and the wisdom she seeks. With her tales, she shatters old molds and envisions new, radically different ones. Thus, like Scheherazade, she uses story-telling as an act of survival and liberation to create worlds where survival depends on metamorphosis.

Carter's concern with metamorphosis and salvation lends itself naturally to the fairy tale form, and she maintained her interest in this genre throughout her career. In addition to *The Bloody Chamber*, she also edited several collections of tales for both children and adults. Carter once compared her art, especially her revisionist tendencies, to that of a vintner: "I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode."<sup>2</sup> The explosions she delights in are positive, transforming explosions that crack old molds and destroy stereotypes. Her fairy tale revisions allow her to burst the bottle of patriarchal assumptions and ferment a new wine out of female strength and mutability.

The concerns of *The Bloody Chamber* remained with Carter as her career ended. Just

before her death in 1992, Carter wrote a "last acknowledged response to the Grimms."<sup>3</sup> This story, "Ashputtle: or, The Mother's Ghost" continues what Atwood calls the "search for synthesis" between "sex and love, freedom and bondage, [and] prey and predation,"<sup>4</sup> while returning to Carter's vision of motherhood and the wise child in a brief revision of the Cinderella story. The story centers on a "burned girl" who, like Wolf-Alice, lives in the ashes of the fireplace.<sup>5</sup> Carter combines the two images of motherhood that emerge in *The Bloody Chamber*--repressive and liberating--in her final story. Just as the heroines in *The Bloody Chamber* undergo transformations and defy easy categorization, so too does the burned child undergo a metamorphosis that makes her both wise and predatory.

Though dead, Ashputtle's mother reincarnates herself as first a cow, then a cat, then a bird, to free her daughter from the oppression of her archetypal evil step-mother. She feeds her daughter, cleans her, and clothes her, then relinquishes her duties and goes to sleep, thinking "[e]verything is all right, now" (303). With the end of the story, Carter suggests that the burned child's liberation depends on or causes her mother's ultimate death. Yet, in this final story, death seems to be a welcome release for the mother, rather than a tragedy. Carter's final wise child is cool and calculating. No nurturing innocent like Wolf-Alice, the burned child saves herself and uses sexuality to conquer her step-mother. Plotting to steal her step-mother's man, the burned child drinks her mother's milk and grows breasts. Soon she is "clean and combed but stark naked" (302), so the mother's ghost enters a bird and strikes her own breast to produce a stream of blood that becomes a red silk dress for the burned child. The imagery of blood and wounding from *The Bloody Chamber* becomes here a symbol of nurturing self-sacrifice that opens the door of sexuality for the burned child. When her mother's ghost has been sucked dry of both blood

and milk--two regenerative life forces--the child seduces her step-mother's man:

The burned child went into the kitchen to show herself to the man. She was not burned any more, but lovely. The man left off looking at the step-mother and looked at the girl.

"Come home with me and let your stepmother rake the ashes," he said to her and off they went. He gave her a house and money. She did all right. (303)

Like the wise child in "The Werewolf," who "lived in her grandmother's house . . . [and] prospered" (110), this child destroys both avatars of the mother to live in the man's house and prosper.

Carter's last story is rife with the same ambiguities and complexities of *The Bloody Chamber*. Ironically, the child's prosperity depends on a male transferring his sexual gaze from her step-mother to her. This same male gaze that is both de-humanizing and liberating throughout *The Bloody Chamber* appears in "Ashputtle" as a useful tool in the child's quest for security. The girl's metamorphosis from a charred and submissive child into a mature sexual temptress echoes the sexual initiations that pervade *The Bloody Chamber*, and turns her monsters into forces that help her as she helps herself. The notion of self-help, so important in all of Carter's stories, depends on the process of self-identification that occurs both in "Ashputtle" and the stories of *The Bloody Chamber*. This self-identification comes from experience--often, but not necessarily, sexual--and leads to wisdom.

The wisdom that Carter champions in *The Bloody Chamber* is marked by self-sufficiency rather than submissiveness, aggression rather than passivity, and anger or laughter rather than tears. Her final novel, *Wise Children* (1992), celebrates and chronicles two wise children--Dora

and Nora Chance--who embody these characteristics. The antithesis of passivity, these twins dance, sing, and laugh their way through a lifetime of triumphs and defeats. As they enter old age in the novel, their refusal to submit to anything, even death, remains constant: "Nobody could say the Chance girls were going gently into that good night."<sup>6</sup> Like Carter, they welcome and celebrate change, insisting in the opening paragraph that "you can't trust things to stay the same" (1).

While Dora and Nora provide dazzling examples of the female wise child, their uncle, Peregrine Hazard, serves as their male counterpart. "Peregrine Hazard, adventurer, magician, seducer, explorer, scriptwriter, rich man, poor man" (18), mirrors Carter's own magical, seductive powers and her refusal to be pinned into one category. Peregrine Hazard is the hilarious and exuberant incarnation of Carter's wise child, about whom she says: "You loved change. And fornication. And trouble. And funnily enough, towards the end, you loved butterflies" (19). Like a butterfly just out of metamorphosis, Peregrine flits from continent to continent, fornicating and stirring up trouble and change. Large and generous, transient yet eternal, he mirrors the mother's ghost in "Ashputtle," for though he disappears without warning, he always returns to nurture the Chance girls in their motherless world. Thus, he evades all traditional gender restrictions to become a mother-figure, even delivering a set of twin infants (out of his pockets rather than his womb) at the end.

As her final work of fiction, *Wise Children* encapsulates many of Carter's concerns and themes in an explosive, raucous, life-affirming narrative. Like *The Bloody Chamber*, *Wise Children* ends with a birth scene that lends to her revisions and creations a positive, optimistic tone. The importance of mothers--be they animal or human, male or female--dominates much

of her work. These mothers give birth to the wise children that Carter celebrates and believes in. In *The Bloody Chamber* she creates mothers and children who breathe new life into the fairy tale form. Carter uses this form in a way that is often hilarious and playful, yet offers a serious inquiry into the nature of human relations.

Though *The Bloody Chamber* undeniably supports a feminist reading, ultimately her vision of the wise child encompasses both sexes and provides a meeting ground between them. Elaine Showalter insists that in "the purest feminist literary criticism. . . [t]he orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint."<sup>7</sup> While Showalter sees the emergent plot as a feminist one, Carter characteristically turns this idea on its head, reversing the reversal that Showalter describes. By turning fairy tales of female submission and repression into narratives of metamorphosis and feminine triumph, Carter certainly creates a feminist plot that emerges from the original orthodox and patriarchal tales. Yet, to read the straightforward, feminist revision as the final emergent plot would be to ignore Carter's larger aims. Finally, the feminist reading recedes to take its place beside a more universal vision that allows for male mother, female monsters, and characters who defy all classifications in their search for wisdom and salvation.

## Notes

1. Salman Rushdie, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990). Rushdie's novel celebrates story-telling as a necessary aspect of survival in the form of a children's tale, connecting his vision of story-telling with Carter's fairy tales.
2. Angela Carter, "Notes From the Front Line," *On Gender and Writing* ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora, 1983) 69.
3. Donald Haase, ed., *The Reception of Grimm's Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993) 19.
4. Margaret Atwood, "Running With the Tigers," *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter* (London: Virago Press, 1994) 132.
5. Angela Carter, "Ashputtle: or, The Mother's Ghost," *The Reception of Grimm's Fairy Tales: Responses, Reactions, Revisions*, ed. Donald Haase (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1993) 301. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
6. Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
7. Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (NY: Pantheon, 1985) 266.

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one neither given nor taken  
Jennifer

On my honor I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid.

Jennifer A. Grass