Fairy Tale as Sexual Allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber

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Angela Carter, in her 1990 introduction to The Old Wives’ Fairy Tale Book, makes a distinction between folklore, emerging from oral “unofficial” culture, and the fairy tale, product of a literary “official” culture. Folklore, she explains, is anonymous and fluid, resulting in “stories without known originators that can be remade again and again by every person who tells them, the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor” (ix). Literary fairy tales, on the other hand, according to Carter, transformed an oral tradition into texts that become middle-class commodities. This analysis accords with Jack Zipes’s economic reading of fairy tales in Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales, wherein he argues that folk tales represent a “pre-capitalist folk form” that was transposed by the Grimm Brothers and others into a “bourgeois art form” (20). Carter’s narrative of the transition from oral tradition to written tales also suggests Julia Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality as the transposing of an entire system of codes or signs.

Distinguishing it from allusion, Kristeva writes in Revolution in Poetic Language that in its “passage from one signifying system to another,” intertextuality “demands a new articulation of the thetic—of enunciative and denotative positionality” (60). In other words, the stance of the speaker—the “thetie”—is significantly altered when intertextual transposition takes place, while allusion merely gestures toward another text without taking on its entire context. As Carter suggests in her introduction to The Old Wives’ Fairy Tale Book, intertextuality was embedded into the history of the fairy tale when Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, and other compilers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transposed oral folk tales into fairy tales. This transfer involved what Kristeva refers to as “a new articulation of the thetic,” as the politics, economics, fashions, and prejudices of a sophisticated culture replaced the values of rural culture that form the context of oral folklore. Part of this transfer, Carter argues, was the transposing of an essentially feminine form, the “old wives’ tale,” onto a masculine one, the published text. Referring to the tradition of “Mother Goose,” Carter asserts that oral folktales record the “strategies, plots, and hard work” with which women have coped with the conditions of their lives but that in their oral form these narratives are considered
"Old wives’ tales—that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it" (xi). In her 1979 collection of retold fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter shows an acute awareness of the changes that result from an oral to written transposition and calls attention to them by heightening the intertextuality of her narratives, making them into allegories that explore how sexual behavior and gender roles are not universal, but are, like other forms of social interaction, culturally determined. This theme is closely related to that of Carter’s 1978 study of the writings of the Marquis de Sade, *The Sadeian Woman*, where she attacks what she calls the false universalizing of sexuality, which, tending to enforce the archetype of male aggression and female passivity, merely confuses “the main issue, that relationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men” (6-7).

I wish to argue that Carter’s use of intertextuality in *The Bloody Chamber* moves the tales from the mythic timelessness of the fairy tale to specific cultural moments, each of which presents a different problem in gender relations and sexuality. Although she recounts the plots of the same fairy tales—“Beauty and the Beast” twice, “Little Red Riding Hood” three times—Carter changes the cultural context from tale to tale, and, as a result, each retelling generates a different narrative. The outcomes for her protagonists can be tragic or triumphant, the tone can be serious or farcical, depending on the historic and cultural circumstances. To demonstrate the range of the collection, I will consider two tales with the same scenario, a young, powerless woman under the domination of an older, powerful male figure who is not only a threat to her virginity but a threat to her life. “The Bloody Chamber,” a retelling of “Bluebeard,” is set in the world of decadent turn-of-the-century French culture, among the operas of Wagner and the fashions of Paul Poiret. “The Snow Child” is set in medieval Europe, deep in a forest, and is based much more closely on its original, a version of “Snow White.” “The Bloody Chamber” is a tale of feminine courage triumphant, while “The Snow Child,” as its chilling title suggests, is a stark, uncompromising tale of sexuality as a function of overwhelming male power.

The lengthiest and perhaps the paradigmatic story of the collection, “The Bloody Chamber” explores the sexual symbolism of the secret room, making explicit the Freudian interpretation given by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* that the “bloody chamber” is the womb. In addition to making the tale’s latent sexual symbolism manifest, Carter also addresses in this story what she calls in *The Sadeian Woman* the “mystification” associated with the womb. The “bankrupt enchantments of the womb” led, she writes, to the segregation and punishment of women (109); in “The Bloody Chamber,” Bluebeard, the connoisseur of women, makes his womblike secret chamber into a museum of tortured and murdered women.

Following the tradition recorded by Iona and Peter Opie, that the original of Bluebeard was a notorious Breton nobleman (103–5), Carter places her version of the tale in a castle on the coast of Brittany but makes its owner a wealthy
aesthete who is as much at home at a performance of Tristan at the Paris Opera
as he is within his ancestral hall. If the secret room containing the corpses
of his dead wives is likened to a womb, Bluebeard’s castle is a metaphor for his
sexuality. A phallic tower, it floats upon the “amniotic salinity of the ocean,”
reminding Bluebeard’s bride of an “anchored, castellated ocean liner” (12, 14),
and becomes the stage for a symbolist version of the battle of the sexes. The fin
de siècle time period is critical to Carter’s interpretation of “Bluebeard,”
because she sees the bride’s fate as possible only at the moment in history when
images of female victimization and of female aggression converged.

Combining, like J. K. Huysmans, a taste for Catholic ritual and for sensual
experimentation, Carter’s Bluebeard displays an edition of Huysmans’s Læ-beus
“bound like a missal” among an extensive collection of eighteenth- and
nineteenth-century pornography (16). Like Huysmans also, Bluebeard has
discovered a group of symbolist painters whose imagery accords with his
temperament.1 Among these images of young, attenuated, passive women, Carter
includes some imaginary symbolist paintings, such as Moreau’s “famous Sac-
rificial Victim with the imprint of the lacelike chains on her pellucid skin” and
“Two or three late Gauguins, his special favourite the one of the tranced brown
girl in the deserted house” (20). A willowy young music student, living in pov-
erty with her widowed mother, the bride becomes a vehicle for Bluebeard’s
attempt to realize the decadent image of the dependent, virginal child-woman,
ripe for tragedy.

Avis Lewallen has commented that she finds “The Bloody Chamber” the
most disturbing of the tales in the collection, because of its lush, seductive
descriptions of sexual exploitation and victimization.2 Carter, however, uses the
language of the story not to lull the reader into ignoring the dangers posed by
Bluebeard but instead to heighten the reader’s awareness of the threat posed by
the sadomasochistic underpinnings of much of decadent culture, which created
a dangerously passive and readily victimized feminine ideal. In The Sadeian
Woman, describing the ideal presented by Sade’s victimized Justine, she
writes, “She is obscene to the extent to which she is beautiful. Her beauty, her
submissiveness and false expectations that these qualities will do her some
good are what make her obscene” (57). The decadent sign system that sur-
rounds this version of Bluebeard brings the sadomasochistic subtext of the
original to the forefront by giving its murderous episodes the lush refinement
of Beardsley’s illustrations of Salome.

Bluebeard, like his historical precursor the Marquis de Sade, is a producer
of theatrical effects. His rooms are deliberately planned as stages for symbolic
action, the bloody chamber a kind of wax museum of his previous wives, pre-
served in their last moments of agony, the mirrored bedroom with its “grand,
hereditary, matrimonial bed” a set for “a formal disrobing of the bride” (14,
15). Clothing, in this theatrical context, becomes costume, in which, as in the-
ater and religious ritual, the individual is subsumed by a role. The bride’s dress
(designed by Poiret, the inventor of the “hobble” skirt) and her wedding gift,
“A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit
throat” (11), not only situate her in fin de siècle France but also reflect the image of innocence, vulnerability, and victimization that Bluebeard desires. Nakedness becomes a kind of costume as well, in the overdetermined imagery of Bluebeard’s bedroom. Watching herself being disrobed by him, the bride perceives herself as a pornographic object: “He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations” (15). In this scene the bride has been reduced to an unaccommodated body, while Bluebeard retains all the accoutrements of power, wealth, and taste.

However, Bluebeard has conveniently excised from his collection of fin de siècle imagery the era’s complement to the woman-as-victim, the avatar of the New Woman, “She-who-must-be-obeyed.” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out that these complementary images appeared almost simultaneously in the late 1880s, when the harrowing mutilations and murders of women by Jack the Ripper took place at the same time as Rider Haggard’s enormously popular novel She introduced a heroine who, by combining virtue with authority, represented “an entirely New Woman” (6). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the emergence of female aggression in the suffrage movement generated a backlash of images of suffering, victimized women. Carter, in The Sadeian Woman, shares this interpretation when she argues that the real threat posed by the emancipation of women was the removal of “the fraudulent magic from the idea of women” (109). If Bluebeard’s murders mirror those of Jack the Ripper, who was also obsessed with the womb, then Bluebeard’s murders are avenged by a figure who also seems to have stepped out of the zeitgeist of the 1880s. The bride’s mother rides onto the scene just as Bluebeard is preparing to dispatch his latest wife and kills him with a single shot from her dead husband’s service revolver. Like Haggard’s fearsome heroine, she is woman-as-avenger on a grand scale. At the tale’s opening the bride calls her mother “eagle-featured, indomitable,” recalling that she “had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I” (7). Appropriately, she reappears at the conclusion as a complement to her daughter’s masochistic passivity, just at the point when the bride herself has begun to act in her own behalf and emancipate herself from Bluebeard’s pornographic scenario.

Patricia Duncker reads the ending of “The Bloody Chamber” as carrying “an uncompromisingly feminist message” (12), while all of the other tales in the collection, she feels, merely recapitulate patriarchal patterns of behavior. What Duncker perceives as an inconsistent application of feminist principles is, I believe, merely a reflection of Carter’s project in this collection, to portray sexuality as a culturally relative phenomenon. The feminism, as well as the masochism of “The Bloody Chamber,” is a feature of its turn-of-the-century setting. The same scenario, when it is transposed to a medieval Northern European setting in “The Snow Child,” will have a much darker resolution since its cultural context lacks an image of power for women.

“The Snow Child” is a stark, two-page version of “Snow White,” reducing the fairy tale to its skeletal outlines as a fable of incest. Carter uses, rather than
the Grimm Brothers’ version, in which a queen wishes for a child, another version, quoted by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*, in which a count wishes for a daughter (200). The girl appears, just as he imagined her, but he is forced to abandon her through the jealous stratagems of his wife. Bettelheim argues that all versions of Snow White are myths of Oedipal conflicts between mothers and daughters, but certainly the harsh simplicity of this version heightens the Oedipal tension.

Its opening paragraphs in exact parallel with the traditional tale, Carter’s version veers away as the Countess’s stratagem for leaving the girl behind is intercepted by the Count: “The Countess dropped her glove in the snow and told the girl to get down to look for it; she meant to gallop off and leave her there but the Count said: ‘I’ll buy you new gloves’” (92). From this point, the tale becomes a fable of the struggle between masculine power and women’s sexuality. In the traditional tale the Count must choose between the Countess and the Child. In Carter’s version the Count, who has all the real power, does not have to choose; he can have both Countess and Child. The Countess, in fact, is as powerless as the Child, since both are held in the tyranny of the Count’s desire. He has granted a subsidiary power to his wife, signaled by her title and indicated by her horse, furs, boots, and gloves, but as a sign of their mutual dependence on his favor, the furs, boots, and jewels fly off the Countess, onto the girl, and back onto the Countess again depending on the whims of the Count.

In its harsh reduction of sexual desire to a function of power, the story’s scenario echoes the sexual politics of Sade. The Child, like Bluebeard’s bride in “The Bloody Chamber,” is a version of Sade’s masochistic Justine, whose situation is summed up by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*: “To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case—that is, to be killed. [¶] This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman” (77). Like Sade’s Justine, the Snow Child will die, a victim of the Count’s tyrannous desire and of the Countess’s realization that they are rivals in a life-and-death struggle. Duncker has noted the resemblance between the Countess and Sade’s sadistic Juliette: “with one small touch Carter reveals the Mother [the Countess] as a sister to Sade’s Juliette, the sexual terrorist” in the image of her high-heeled, spurred boots (?). Instead of a fiery suffragette, then, the Snow Child finds a mother-figure who colludes in her subjugation. In the feudal culture of “The Snow Child” power is masculine, and in this tale Carter portrays the sexual consequences of a feudal system of absolute power.

When she picks up the Countess’s rose, the Snow Child is prickled in the finger and dies. After her death, her body is raped by the Count, and then it melts into the snow, leaving only a feather and a bloodstain. This closing image underlines the portrayal of the Snow Child as a creature of the forest, who, naked and mute, confronts the culture of the dressed and mounted Count and Countess. The Countess, though associated with the Count, is also compared to a wild animal, “wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes” (91), and she, too, is naked when her clothing flies onto the body of the girl. In their wilderness
and in their nakedness both women are contrasted with the Count, who not only represents culture but also bestows a cultural status on women. Like the bride in "The Bloody Chamber," the women in "The Snow Child" are placed in a pornographic contrast with the Count who is always clothed, always embedded in culture. Thus Carter introduces the notorious analogy that in Western culture male is to female as culture is to nature. Although some feminist theorists claim to find a kind of liberation in the position of woman as Other in phallogocentric culture, Carter finds the situation more complex and more troubling. Always suspicious about universals and never romantic about oppression, Carter sees the real suffering involved in the politics of gender. It is hardly liberating to be likened to an animal, if that implies entrapment, control, exploitation, and even violent death. Sally Robinson, in her discussion of Carter's fiction, adds that "for Carter, denigration and celebration of Woman as Other are both masculinist strategies within patriarchal cultures, whereby Man secures his hegemony over the places of enunciation" (98). In "The Snow Child" Carter demonstrates the deadly consequences of the nature/culture analogy's denial of cultural status to women.

In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter writes, "the notion of a universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick" (12), a statement that neatly sums up her deuniversalizing of fairy tale plots in *The Bloody Chamber*. Situating her tales within carefully defined cultural moments, Carter employs a wide-ranging intertextuality to link each tale to the zeitgeist of its moment and to call attention to the literary fairy tale as a product, not of a collective unconscious but of specific cultural, political, and economic positions. In addition, focusing on the "strategies, plots, and hard work" of women allows Carter to reappropriate the "old wives' tale" as feminine narrative. In *The Bloody Chamber*, then, Carter deconstructs the underlying assumptions of the "official" fairy tale: that fairy tales are universal, timeless myths, that fairy tales are meant exclusively for an audience of children, and that fairy tales present an idealized, fantastic world unrelated to the contingencies of real life. Instead, Carter pushes Bruno Bettelheim's reading of fairy tales as Freudian fables even further and presents them as studies in the history of imagining sexuality and gender.

NOTES

1In his *Symbolist Art* Edward Lucie-Smith writes, "the fact, however, is that the literary Symbolists, when they at last achieved an identity of their own by bringing together ideas which had existed in a state of potentiality for some years previously, also looked about for artists who seemed to echo and to justify their own announced programme in another field of creative activity. The best-known example of this is J. K. Huysmans's discovery of the work of Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, and the use which he made of it in his novel *A rebours* (Against Nature), published in 1884. Gauguin was also to be taken up in this way, at a slightly later date, after the Café Volpini exhibition of 1889" (51).
Lewallen writes, “Of all the tales in the volume I found ‘The Bloody Chamber’ most troubling in terms of female sexuality, largely because of the very seductive quality of the writing itself. As readers we are asked to place ourselves imaginatively as masochistic victims in a pornographic scenario and to sympathise in some way with the ambivalent feelings this produces” (151).

WORKS CITED
