

BROKEN HYMENS IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*

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Traditional fairy tales with female protagonists mostly offer cautionary tales, innocent initiations, or outright horror stories that incentivize female listeners into conduct of virtue that establishes femininity as equal to the suppression of one's sexuality. Writers such as Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm recorded these traditions, effectively regurgitating the same patriarchal values that first established these narratives. Such patriarchal traditions thrive on the oppression of female agency, using fairy tales to caution listeners against any contradictory rhetoric that establishes women outside the gender roles dictated by a patriarchal society. But unlike the tales from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, literature from the 1960s to the 1980s developed a line of questioning regarding gender and sex. This development led many readers and writers into the literary era of Postmodernism, during which many female writers distinguished themselves for recreating previous patriarchal narratives from a feminist point of view. This is especially true of Angela Carter.

While Angela Carter has received great acclaim as a feminist writer in the twenty-first century, in the 80s she was heavily criticized by some feminist critics for her graphic portrayal of female sexuality, which some dubbed as pornographic. Pornography is commonly made for the male gaze, and it tends to uphold patriarchal notions that sexualize and objectify women. But what sets Carter apart from sexist pornography, making her work radically feminist, is how she acknowledges the phallogentric patriarchal power structure in fairy tales, and still portrays female agency and powerful female sexuality. Angela Carter reframes female sexuality by questioning traditional fairy tale narratives and their discourse on the female body and sexuality in her anthology *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

Published in 1979, this collection includes various stories she wrote for different publications. Carter presents a number of familiar tales and legends, rewritten in a way that that

reframes the power relations that have conventionally established gender roles for women from a male perspective for the satisfaction of the male gaze. Carter's versions of stories like *Bluebeard* are not just modern versions of fairy tales. She was inspired by Perrault's traditional versions and created new versions that mirror the traditional ones but simultaneously criticize them. Carter's fairy tales are about fairy tales, but, more specifically, about women's position within those fairy tales and how the traditional stories would be shaped if female characters are given agency and understanding over their own bodies. Many of her tales are written from a female perspective to present aspects of the tales that were insinuated but not overtly acknowledged. Characterized by her indulgence in symbolism, she actively defines and names the natural processes of female bodies, processes long hidden behind classic symbols. Fairy tales traditionally use symbols or allegories to represent aspects of femininity and sexuality that are socially unacceptable to discuss. This lack of clear representation, which focuses on alluding to topics such as premarital sex and menstruation, but not addressing them up front, means that listeners internalize them as inappropriate to discuss. This created a genre in which the oppression of female sexuality thrives.

It is important to clarify that female sexuality refers to women's sexual activity.

Traditional fairy tales do not tend to give women agency over their sexual activity but still manage to oversexualize them. As we will see, Carter plays with symbolism to deviate from the genre's tradition by openly acknowledging female sexuality and giving her protagonists agency over their sexual activity. The symbols in the stories in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* are endless, but there are a few that are staples of the genre. Inspired by Francisco Vaz da Silva's "Red as Blood, White as Snow, Black as Crow: Chromatic Symbolism of Womanhood in Fairy Tales" my analysis takes special notice of red symbols, and their correlation to sexuality. It is no coincidence that many of these bloody symbols are in line with the gothic genre typical of

recreated fairy tales, along with werewolf and vampire lore. Carter relies on the goriness of this genre to deliberately use these often-overlooked symbols to expose their correlation to femininity and sexuality from a female perspective. Ruby necklaces, red mouths, carnivorous roses, menstruation, and red hoods are a few of the symbols I will analyze to explore how Carter imbues them with symbolic meaning in relation to female sexuality and femininity in fairy tales. I will focus on symbols that are ascribed to femininity that were previously presented in traditional fairy tales from a male perspective, in order to study how Carter rewrites their meanings to effectively criticize patriarchal notions about female bodies within the traditional versions of the tales.

The first symbol I will discuss is found in the very first story “The Bloody Chamber,” Carter’s version of the *Bluebeard* tale. This story is narrated by an unnamed protagonist, a young girl who marries a Marquis, who, as in the *Bluebeard* tale has had previous wives who all died mysteriously. This young bride, chosen for her look of purity, is taken to the Marquis’ residence to live, where she is given the keys to all rooms in the castle, but is warned by her husband not to open the door to his private study. The Marquis also gifts his newest wife a precious heirloom, “a choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (11). This object foreshadows the husband’s intent for her fate and Carter leaves no question of what the necklace resembles. However, Carter also presents the reader with the historical background of this symbol which dates back to the Directory (1795-99); one of the newly formed French governments after the French Revolution. The Directory was responsible for pausing the mass executions that were called the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution. Although not explicitly, Carter is referencing the *Bals des victimes* that took place “[a]fter 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” (Carter 11). Although the balls’ existence is debated, there is no question that Carter is referencing these balls that were attended by aristocrats, the relatives of those who suffered the fate of the guillotine. According to Ronald Schechter in “Gothic Thermidor: The Bals des victimes, the Fantastic, and the Production of Historical Knowledge in Post-Terror France,” the aristocrats that attended these lavish balls wore clothes of mourning, styled their hair like those beheaded by a guillotine, and wore red ribbons where their heads would have been separated from their necks, all in grotesque parody; but he argues that all evidence of the existence of these balls is anecdotal (78-79). Yet that is perfect for Carter since this collection of stories is about tales that have many different versions and that come from an oral tradition.

In “The Bloody Chamber,” tradition comes from the Marquis’s grandmother who, “taken with the notion, had her ribbon made up in rubies; such a gesture of luxurious defiance!” (11). This ruby choker made by the duke’s grandmother, specifically with these precious stones, offers a direct reference to the red ribbons worn by relatives of the victims of the Reign of Terror as a sign of survival. The necklace distinguishes the grandmother as part of the bourgeoisie, and she mocks the French Revolution by adorning it with Rubies. The grandmother’s ruby necklace is a symbol of defiance, of life, but it is turned by her grandson into a condemnation of his brides; he admits so calling it “the necklace that prefigures your end” (36). Since the bride is unable to keep away from the Marquis’ study, she finds herself in his bloody chamber which reveals the tortured bodies of his deceased wives. Once she realizes the reality of her precarious position, the meaning of the symbol around her neck becomes clear. He gave the necklace to his bride as a sign of his intentions, counting on his bride’s ignorance of the symbolism and luring her into

attempting to find its meaning. His knowledge of the symbol's meaning puts him in a position of power, something he already had because of his age and experience as well as his immense wealth and control over her living arrangements.

This choker is also part of his ritual, his fixation on it also hints at his sexual perversion. During the traditional ritual of marriage and its consummation, the bride, our protagonist, narrates how "he made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade" (17). If the meaning he ascribes to this symbol is that of a prescribed death, the fixation of wearing this slit-throat-like choker during their consummation hints at his morbid fascination with dead female bodies as a sexual fantasy. Since "it is sexual desire, often intertwined with the desire for power over another human being, that comes to the forefront of eroticized fairy tales" (Jorgensen 28), it is safe to say that the necklace is a symbol that, for the Marquis, represents his ownership of his bride's life which brings him sexual gratification. Getting sexual gratification from his control over another, physically and psychologically, as well as his obsession with brutalizing female bodies, rather than the act of consummation itself, is what establishes his sexuality as perverse. He has given his bride the key to his bloody chamber, and by forbidding entrance, he set this naïve girl up to enter the room as he had always intended her to, much like Eve was lured into tasting the one fruit she was forbidden from eating. Although the protagonist retracts her consent after learning her husband's intentions, "up until then, the adolescent protagonist has not denied her own interest in the sado-masochistic transaction" (Makinen 13). Even though she has no previous sexual experience, the bride is curious of her own potential for corruption and engages in a consenting sexual relationship. In this case the choker might reflect the loss of her virginity; however, she retracts her consent upon learning the intended meaning of the symbol at her neck. The blood of his deceased wife on the

key alerts the Marquis of his bride's disobedience and, much like God marked Cane's brow, the Marquis presses the bloodied key to his bride's forehead, staining it forever. But this bride does not die, Carter gives her a strong mother who comes to save her daughter, decapitating the Marquis. Like the Marquis's grandmother, the bride survives decapitation. The symbol of the ruby necklace still foreshadows, but it makes you think twice of what the true meaning of the symbol is and which ending it alludes to. Carter presents two contrasting but possible interpretations for this ruby necklace. From a male perspective it is a symbol of power over another, which is the perspective these tales traditionally share, which also blames the victim for her subordination. However, Carter uses the historical background of this symbol to successfully give it meaning outside of that patriarchal structure, a structure that gives her female protagonist agency over her own life and sexuality.

There is another symbol that has similar interpretations: roses. First, they are used as a trap, a symbol of the power another has over the female protagonist. But Carter personifies them. They establish their own agency over themselves and others, and much like the female protagonists, the roses fight back against their aggressors and establish their own autonomy. They are essentially a symbol of the circumstances of the female protagonists of their respective stories. Roses have been over-used to symbolize female sexuality. While popular culture depicts roses as delicate, beautiful, symbols of love, Carter consistently represents them as the opposite. Her roses bite into the skin, some with thorns, others with teeth. Within the collection of *The Bloody Chamber* there is a development of the characterization of roses throughout the multiple stories when looked at as a collection. Within the collection, one of Carter's retellings of *Beauty and the Beast* is the "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" a story about a girl who finds herself keeping Mr. Lyon, a man-like beast, company after her father disrespects his hospitality by attempting to

take a rose from Mr. Lyon's Garden without permission. Within this tale the rose is presented as "one last, single, perfect rose that might have been the last rose left living in all the white winter, and of so intense and yet delicate a fragrance it seemed to ring like a dulcimer on the frozen air" (44). And so, the father falls for a trap and sends his daughter to keep Mr. Lyon company in exchange for Mr. Lyon's forgiveness, the rose, and the father's restored wealth. Whether this bargain is achieved by chance or deliberately planned by Mr. Lyon, is left for interpretation, but seeing as the benefit for Mr. Lyon is evident, the latter is more likely. The story has a typical ending, the daughter and the beast fall in love and Mr. Lyon regains his human form, breaking the curse that turned him into the beast. Even though it is a flower with strings attached, the story still has the traditional depiction that establishes roses as symbols of beauty. It may have been a trap, but both father and daughter have a choice, accompany Mr. Lyon, and regain their wealth, or withdraw and return to poverty, therefore, agency still prevails, and the rose remains an inanimate object that can also be seen as an opportunity, rather than a trap.

It is in "The Tiger's Bride" that their thorny nature peeks through. In contrast with the previous version of *Beauty and the Beast*, this rewrite offers a more brutal interpretation of Beauty's ordeal. Her father, a gambling addict, loses their wealth and in a final game of cards against the man-like Tiger, he bets and loses the only thing he has left, his daughter. This time it is the father who wants a rose, "my tear-beslobbered father wants a rose to show that I forgive him. When I break off a stem, I prick my finger and so he gets his rose all smeared with blood" (55). Far from the previous story's inviting perfection, this rose's beauty is of no consequence. It does not seduce, but rather, its importance lies in its ability to pierce skin since "pricked fingers as well as thorns represent feminine bleeding in connection with potential fertility" (da Silva 245). This rose is a reminder that this father's fortune is bought with his daughter's blood, since

the daughter is considered by him a form of currency precisely because society establishes her value based on her potential for sexuality, “Carter stresses the relationship between women’s subjective sexuality and their objective role as property: young girls get bought by wealth, one way or another” (Makinen 10). Seeing as “the destiny of the fairy-tale maiden is defloration” (da Silva 248), the thorn that pierces her and results in her bleeding possibly symbolizes her future penetration and deflowerment. Just like the rose, the protagonist is unwillingly plucked and given to another. Fortunately for the father, by giving his daughter to the Tiger, his wealth is restored, and his daughter is given the opportunity to return to her previous life, yet she decides to stay with the Tiger and embrace her beastly nature. Instead of the typical ending in which the beast turns human, it is the protagonist who turns into a beast. Carter inverts the traditional roles by embracing the rose’s act of penetration, rather than condemning it, her protagonist’s true power does not lie in transforming the beast with her purity, instead it lies in accepting her own desires.

In “The Snow Child” roses take an even more active role. This tale is about a Count who wishes he had a girl as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as a bird’s feather and so a girl with “white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked” (92) appears in a snowy field. The Count’s wife hates this child, conjured from his desires, but the more jealous she becomes, the more the Count dismisses his wife, and with each dismissal an article of clothing from the Countess flies off and dresses the girl. After trying and failing to leave the girl behind, the Countess loses all her clothes to the child, feeling bad for his cold naked wife, the Count accedes to her last request, for the girl to pick her a rose, “[s]o the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls” (92). As with sleeping beauty, a sharp object which pierces her causes her demise. This seems to be a reference to the typical cautionary tale that hides behind

the metaphor of the needle to denounce penetrative sex, but Carter depicts it in an exaggerated way, poking fun at the original tales that depict female sexuality with such tragic consequences for the female protagonists, while they actively ignore the obsession with perverse forms of penetration and pedophilia she so crudely represents with the dead body of a child made of snow, conjured from the perpetrator's own desires. Unlike traditional versions, Carter describes the dead child's penetration, "weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl" (92) after her penetration, the girl's body disappears, and the rose is left behind. At this moment, "the count picked up the rose, bowed and handed it to his wife, when she touched it, she dropped it. 'It Bites!' she said," (92) this establishes the rose as an active penetrator, the rose seduces, bites, and kills. This abrupt show of agency likens itself to a vampire.

Roses also figure conspicuously in "The Lady of The House of Love" one of Carter's stories based on vampire lore and loosely related to the popular tales of Nosferatu and Dracula, only in this case a Countess, "the beautiful queen of the vampires," (93) plays the role of predator who seduces unwise adventurers to feast on their blood. Living in an old manor in a remote part of Romania, she is visited by a young British officer, who stays the night but does not encounter the same fate as her other victims because the Countess encounters in her tarot cards "the Lover" and surmises it might be her guest. The first thing this British officer from the army pays attention to are the roses, which are described as carnivorous as the Countess because they feast on the bodies of her victims, "the food her roses feed on gives them their rich colour, their swooning odour, that breathes lasciviously of forbidden pleasures" (105). These roses are not merely smeared with blood, nor do they spill it in their defense. The blood which is part of their diet is part of them; they are predators.

Once again, the roses are represented as seductive, with life and will, their seductiveness speaks of that long held belief of the rose as a sensual but potentially dangerous symbol, this symbol comes to life:

A great, intoxicated surge of the heavy scent of red roses blew into his face as soon as they left the village, inducing a sensuous vertigo; a blast of rich, faintly corrupt sweetness strong enough almost, to fell him. Too many roses. Too many roses bloomed on enormous thickets that lined the path, thickets bristling with thorns, and the flowers themselves were too luxuriant, their huge congregations of plush petals somehow obscene in their excess, their whorled, tightly budded cores outrageous in their implications. (98)

There is an evident connection with these roses and sex, and their description can also double as the description of the female body and genitalia, engorged and swollen, with their “budded cores” exposed. Yet this is also described in a negative perspective. It might be sensual, but it is nonetheless experienced as vertigo since the sweet smell is one of corruption. The “implications,” whatever they are to this virgin officer, are outrageous and obscene. This description is typical of a cautionary tale, yet with the narrative, Carter shifts this perspective of the roses but still leaves their essence by offering a similar description to what we see in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon.” About to devour him, the Countess fumbles the ritual she performs when she consumes her victims, her finger is cut, and the officer brings her finger to his mouth to stop the bleeding. The next morning the British officer wakes up to find the Countess had passed away but had left him a rose, “as a souvenir the dark, fanged rose I plucked from between my thighs, like a flower laid on a grave” (107). Following Francisco Vaz da Silva’s logic,

the contributions of Ovid, Shakespeare, and the Grimms suggest that red flowers stand for the fruitful aspect of the womb blood as well as for youth, that most fruitful time in life, whereas thorns symbolize the leftovers of both: the monthly flux and life past its prime. (245)

Traditionally the link between red flowers and womanhood is part of the fairy tale genre, but in this case the roses and the Countess are linked because they share their carnivorous condition. However, once the transformation takes place the “fanged” rose, having been plucked from between her legs, is in line with the reference of a “monthly flux” and her preceding death showcases how, once the Countess was capable of bleeding for the first time, she forfeited her undead state and is beyond the possibility of life, which she experiences through the consumption and retention of other’s blood. Therefore, if to stay alive the countess needs to retain blood, a period would mean hemorrhaging to death so there was no escaping this deadly outcome.

In “Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter,” Sarah Sceats argues that “the bloodily reblooming rose he takes from the countess’s bedroom suggests that what she represents cannot simply be eclipsed and that rationality ignoring the uncanny is itself lethal” (113). The British officer never realizes she is a vampire, he simply sees her as a malnourished, emotionally ill child who needs medical attention and who he must take charge of. However, after her death the British officer seems to acknowledge, at least subconsciously, that uncanniness when he considers the rose, that came from between her legs, is worthy of resurrection. Although the Countess dies, the rose survives along with its uncanny nature, it is monstrous and yet splendid, strong, and fast in its revival, “the heavy fragrance of Count Nosferatu’s roses drifted down... the reeling odour of a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower

whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity, their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour” (107-08). Nonetheless, the roses’ nature is of no consequence to the officer. He is incapable of seeing the roses’ true carnivorous nature because he does not consider her beyond a state of victimization due to his own hero complex; therefore, he is blind to her predatory nature.

The progression of the roses throughout the stories is not a coincidence. Their symbolism evolves from their traditional use and meaning into a creation of monstrosity by Carter. “The Lady of the House of Love” (which is found towards the end of the collection) presents the rose as it was first depicted in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” (which is found in the beginning of the collection). Both depictions of roses are seductive, yet the last description combines all versions of the roses to form a wild, beautiful, and dangerous characterization of this previously non-sentient flower. The representation of an adverse sexuality that acknowledges subordination while also establishing its own agency becomes part of their symbolic meaning. Not only does Carter represent the original pure and delicate version of a rose, as a “single, perfect rose... of so intense and yet delicate fragrance it seemed to ring like a dulcimer” (44), but she also dismantles and empowers it through its “reeling odour of a glowing, velvet, monstrous flower whose petals had regained all their former bloom and elasticity, their corrupt, brilliant, baleful splendour” (108). Carter rewrites the rose into a sign of a carnivorous, strong female sexuality that manages to survive.

Among the many symbols that allude to sexuality, the most direct are red mouths: big teeth, long tongues, and wet lips. The descriptions of mouths range depending on the characters; however, there is a consensus in Carter’s works that establish lips as red, wet, and carnal, to create the effect of a seductive sexuality in both female and male characters. In “The Bloody Chamber” the young protagonist bride describes the Marquis’s mouth as “the red lips that kissed

me... a wet, silken brush from his beard, a hint of the pointed tip of the tongue” (16). In “Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgression and the Writing of Angela Carter,” Sarah Sceats makes the correlation between the Marquis’s mouth and vampirism:

The Bluebeard figure of the cannibalistic Marquis has lips that are repeatedly described as red and often as wet. It is as though he were perpetually eating or drinking—but eating or drinking what? Blood? When he takes his new wife to bed, he kisses the rubies on the necklace he has given her so that the necklace metonymically bites into her neck. (109)

The Marquis’ bride narrates how the necklace gives the appearance of a neck that has been cut open, therefore, when “he turned to me and stroked the ruby necklace that bit into my neck, but with such tenderness now, that I ceased flinching and he caressed my breasts” (18), his connection to the necklace and the necklace’s connection to his bride’s neck gives the impression of a blood sucking ritual. He may have shown tenderness, but it is a part of that grotesque sexual fantasy, since he only brutalized his wives after they disobey him, which disrupts the power structure of their relationships. The disruption of their power structure was planned by the Marquis since he lures his wives into believing that in his private study, to which he forbade them entrance, they will become closer to him. Unfortunately, they do find his hidden self within the bloody chamber, baiting them into disobedience is only part of his game.

Like a vampire “his tongue ran over red lips already wet” (34) anticipating his meal, the only part of the Marquis that reveals his delight about his real intentions, “to savour the rare pleasure of imagining myself wifeless” (21). This makes the young bride nothing more than prey for his desires. Sceats argues,

Angela Carter’s writing carves out an oblique territory, using vampiric tropes to examine gendered behavior and heterosexual power relations. Carter plays with vampirism as a

way of exploring the murky recesses of the contemporary psyche, foregrounding what is habitually covert, taboo, or suppressed. (108-09)

The vampiric trope is one that establishes the vampire character in the realm of seductive violence, a character whose dominance has been sexualized, but Carter adds to the tradition by calling our attention to the overlap between vampire and werewolf tales and the fairy tale tradition. Therefore, the Marquis, although not explicitly a vampire, invokes the image of one to showcase the power relations between him and his bride, based on his sexual domination. Carter showcases that fascination the Marquis has with female bodies that have been brutalized. However, she also shows how there is a seductiveness the bride acknowledges, which is outside of romantic feelings. Heterosexual power dynamics based on sexual relations were considered taboo and, therefore, remained unacknowledged in the original versions of the “Bluebeard” tales, yet Carter successfully rewrites the story, to not only showcase the basis of the relationships of the original tales, but to create a version that questions those power dynamics and empowers, through history and sexuality, the female character whose decapitation the story is based on.

While the Marquis enjoys the power games and the victimization of others, the Countess in “The Lady of the House of Love” is enveloped in sadness and is victimized by her own state in a more overt vampire tale. While the Marquis resembles a vampire through grotesque imitation and is, therefore, a perpetrator of violence, this lady is bound by the physical need for blood, making hers a state of victimhood. Therefore, the vampiric trope from a female perspective does not evoke the same power dynamics. This Countess does not lure her victims through psychological manipulation for her sexual enjoyment, she lures them to their death through seduction because her male victims do not perceive her as a threat; rather, they tend to sexualize her vampiric state. This vampiric state is inherited from her father: “her voice, issuing

from those red lips like the obese roses in her garden, lips that do not move—her voice is curiously disembodied” (102). Her mouth seem to be a mouthpiece for the ghost of Nosferatu, her father. Her lips, likened to the carnivorous roses, are merely a representation of her supernatural state. She is still affected by the patriarchal power dynamics, unable to voice her own desires, only another’s, for she seems controlled even beyond death by her father. She still wishes for a human connection with a male figure, a “lover,” yet in her state that is an impossibility since she is condemned to devour the very thing she desires. However, in this tale the gender roles are reversed, making her wishes harder to achieve since she comes across the male virgin, the British officer, who immediately showcases his gender bias based on women’s physical appearance: “her extraordinarily fleshy mouth with wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson, a morbid mouth. Even—but he put the thought away from him immediately—a whore’s mouth” (101). Hers is the mouth of a vampire. The British officer sees it as a whore’s mouth, oddly seductive, in a morbid way. He is right to an extent since hers is a mouth that has penetrated many adventurers that passed through her village and were unfortunate enough to take her up on her hospitality, “she sinks her teeth into the neck where an artery throbs with fear” (96), which results in her victims bleeding for the first and last time through this particular ritual of consummation.

In this case his apprehension is towards an active female sexuality, which is represented by her vampirism, since the British officer also discusses his disgust towards sexual relations with dead bodies, her undead state makes her undesirable. Nonetheless, there is an act of consummation when she cuts her finger on her broken glasses and “he gently takes her hand away from her... and so he puts his mouth to the wound” (106). She does not know what sexual intercourse between lovers is, especially since her state condemns her to the only form of

consummation she knows of: penetration of an artery to consume blood. Having cut herself, his act of cleaning her wound by putting the blood in his mouth, from her perspective, is a form of consummation, the only form she knows. Penetration, combined with the consumption of blood positions the Countess in the realm of the uncanny, not just because she is a vampire, but because traditionally women shed blood instead of consuming it, and are preyed upon instead of being portrayed as predators. Both characters, the Marquis and the Countess, are represented as predators, but the Marquis' predatory behavior is a form of sexual perversion. Meanwhile the Countess hunts for the sole purpose of sustenance. The Marquis gets sexual gratification from preying on women, but the Countess sees it as a misfortune that she has to consume those she would rather give her love to. Carter makes the comparison between the two tales to showcase how being a predator usually puts men in positions of power, but women do not escape victimization, even as predators.

In "Wolf-Alice," a story that rethinks the *Little Red Riding Hood* tales as well as stories of feral children, the protagonist is a child raised by wolves as a baby, but her wolf mother is hunted down and murdered by the humans who take the child to be raised at a convent. While the nuns attempt to domesticate the girl and socialize her, the child continuously rejects their attempts, so she is sent to live with the Duke, who is also a hybrid between wolf and human, although his is a more supernatural state. The child is not exactly human since she has the characteristics of a wolf-girl, her "panting tongue hangs out; her red lips are thick and fresh" (119). While red lips are a typical description in fairy tales, as well as thickness, fresh could imply they have never been touched. However, more interestingly is the panting tongue that hangs out her mouth, an animalistic feature that sets her apart from other heroines. Ultimately, her mouth is a perfect representation of her in-between state.

While Wolf-Alice fumbles learning about her own body, which is between human and wolf, this character nonetheless accepts her animalistic features and finds that they have power by healing the Duke of the injuries caused by the humans who hunted him, “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 is a tender, almost erotic description of how she uses her mouth in an act that is not performed by socialized humans and with it heals the Duke. In “Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter’s Wolf Trilogy,” Kimberly J. Lau states that “Carter’s final description of Wolf-Alice’s licking is slow and sensual, an erotically charged literary tumescence, building, ultimately, to the Duke’s presence in the mirror. Wolf-Alice has ushered him into existence” (91). This protagonist is described by Carter as different from the reader because she is unable to speak, so, it is interesting how Wolf-Alice still has the power to bring the duke into existence, something that is usually done through language. Instead of speaking things into existence, she sensually licks them, as if this act that is beyond communication can also be transformative. In both “Wolf-Alice” and in “The Lady of the House of Love” there is a transformation instigated by the act of blood coming in contact with another’s mouth. This is reminiscent of the stories in which Princes awaken Princesses with kisses. However, Carter represents them in a more graphic, and sensual way and its consequences range from salvation to condemnation which are achieved through no clear logical process. It is a different approach to the genre than the “kiss of true love” trope—which sees the princess awakened by a stranger she supposedly loves, even though she has had no agency in such a situation—because Carter inverts the roles and gives her female protagonist’s mouth the power to break the curse.

“The Snow Child” is an example of the lack of agency in traditional fairy tales. Carter directly criticizes the approach to the characterization of female sexuality in traditional fairy tales

by creating a girl who is born of the Count's desires, "they come to a hole in the snow; this hole is filled with blood. He says: 'I wish I had a girl as red as blood'" (91). The choice of color is not a coincidence since "the purity of whiteness [snow] is there to be tainted," (da Silva 246).

Considering the western tendency to see red as "harlotry," there is no doubt that her mouth is what the Count desires it to be, a creation by and for the satisfaction of the male gaze—as in traditional fairy tales. The depiction of female characters in traditional fairy tales, such as Perrault's and the Brothers Grimm, is ultimately the product of the male gaze which holds gender bias and establishes female sexuality as taboo. In "The Snow Child" Carter addresses this type of characterization in an exaggerated version by having the Count create a child that is born of snow, which traditionally represents purity, and tainted with red, in this case red lips which symbolize the sensual potential of femininity. After the child pricks her finger and dies, the Count proceeds to violate her corpse, this is the most shocking part and yet it is met with apathy from his wife, much like the common spectator of the traditional fairy tale, which has been exposed to the hyper-sexualization of this color combination yet fails to question the reasons this sexualization takes place. Fairy tales constantly establish pureness as an object of sexual desire yet have used the genre to shame women for the desirability they are imposed through the male gaze. Carter acknowledges this imposition and represents the brutal reality of the objectified woman created by men for men.

Not all depictions of desirability end in the victimization of women as evidenced by the symbolic meaning Carter gives the red hood in her version of *Little Red Riding Hood*, "The Company of Wolves." In this tale the protagonist meets a handsome man on the way to her grandmother's cottage, they make a bargain that if he reaches the cottage before her, she will give him a kiss. The young girl, who has just come into womanhood idles to make sure the man

arrives before her, meanwhile the man turns into a wolf and devours her grandmother. When she reaches the cottage, instead of allowing herself to be devoured, she takes her own clothes off and makes the decision to embrace the wolf. Carter showcases a protagonist who, within her circumstances, actively acknowledges her own capabilities as a sexual being. This protagonist's red hood is a symbol emblematic of a type of narrative that traditionally culminates in either devourment or triumph over the beast. Many versions of Red Riding Hood "make Red responsible for her fate, paralleling the popular victim-blaming defense of rape" (Jorgensen 31). However, Carter's version explicitly culminates with the reciprocal embrace of the beast and the girl. Carter's depictions of the red hood in "The Company of Wolves" leave a lot of space for interpretation. The first, and most classic interpretation, is that the hood is a symbol of womanhood, a fact supported by the first mention of its creation:

the youngest of her family... 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. Her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month. (113)

Carter uses the phrase "woman's bleeding" which implies the social circumstances her main character is in, transforming from "girl" to "woman," a social process that is determined by a biological one, menstruation. Her physical description is of the utmost importance for the symbolic meaning of the hood since "this is a theme of passage from the purity of infancy (white) to the mature realm of procreation (red). In both perspectives, the red-on-white stain embodies a threshold" (da Silva 246) between girlhood and womanhood. This shift is also a sign

of initiation of women's sexuality, portrayed at the beginning as not yet explored since she is explicitly described as a virgin. The scarlet shawl, then, comes to represent, not her menses, but her hymen: "she stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane" (113-14). This is an overly exaggerated way to describe virginity or the loss of it, that objectifies women and establishes them as irreparable once "broken" into. Nonetheless, this description does serve a purpose, "Carter's description plays up Little Red Riding Hood's childlike desirability, and her virginity is fundamental to that desirability" (Lau 85). Because fairy tales tend to oversexualize young girls, Carter establishes a protagonist that fits the male gaze in image to create a greater contrast with the protagonist's personality. This protagonist does not hold herself to that same standard that upholds virginity as a virtue and, instead, establishes herself as a sexual being that has agency rather than existing for the satisfaction of men's sexual desires.

When Red Riding Hood is confronted by the wolf who reveals his intentions of devouring her "she shivered, in spite of the scarlet shawl she pulled more closely round herself as if it could protect her although it was as red as the blood she must spill" (117). Then, "the blood she must spill" has two possible interpretations besides the obvious result of being butchered, one is her monthly period, and the second is the blood that is as red as her hood's which is that of her membrane plug. To first discuss the latter, the woman who is "nobody's meat" (118) and knows it, actively takes off her own "scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid... she bundled up her shawl and threw it on the blaze, which instantly consumed it" (117). Therefore, by throwing her red shawl into the fire she relinquishes her seal, by taking the

hood off herself she shows agency over her own sexuality, rather than be relegated to the role of the little red riding hood who forever stays a child. This is the true process of womanhood Carter recognizes, agency over one's sexuality, "for Carter, then, the virginal, sexually precocious nymphet is not so much desired object of patriarchal projection but, rather, autonomous desiring subject, as bestial as the stranger wolf" (Lau 88). Acceptance of her sexuality, then, gives her common ground with the wolf. It becomes an equal transaction between two desiring characters that have been othered for accepting their nature. The consumption of this red shawl by the fire liberated her from the role of wolf's victim. She becomes more beastlike since "the beasts signify a sensuality that the women have been taught might devour them, but which, when embraced, gives them power, strength and a new awareness of both self and other" (Makinen, 10). She has more agency, and to gain that agency she not only breaks that seal on herself sexually, but the metaphorical role of womanhood the red hood imprisoned her in.

Menstruation is another aspect in Carter's tales that holds symbolic meaning beyond being a biological process. Often described as a biological clock, menstruation marks the body's changes that not only signal one's fertility; it also signals the social shift from girlhood to womanhood. This change marks women, socially, as sexual beings, like in "The Company of Wolves." However, in "Wolf-Alice," the biological aspect is brought forth, yet that allusion to sex is still present. First, to discuss menstruation as a social construct in "The Company of Wolves," the mother and grandmother "knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow... she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month" (113). While menstruation is a biological process determined by one's sex, it has its social ramifications in relation to gender, "her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead;

her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and she has just started her women's bleeding" (113).

Accompanied by the description of swelling breasts and scarlet cheeks, she is the depiction of youth coming into the body of a woman. Menstruation is one of the many changes that mark this transition. The red shawl becomes the emblematic symbol of woman in transition, of which the most obvious marker is monthly bleeding. Yet, socially, bleeding is described as a woman's thing, firmly establishing it within the bounds of femininity present in fairy tales.

Now, the most important marker of femininity that is presented positively in traditional fairy tales is virginity. Once her menstruation begins, she is established as a woman because she is fertile and capable of sex, and yet her virtue is to uphold her virginity as a sign of femininity in accordance with the male gaze that sexualizes the potentiality for corruption of purity. Carter depicts a traditional description of Red Riding Hood, physically at least, because this protagonist does not uphold the traditional version of femininity. Instead, she burns the symbol of virginity, the red hood, to accept the natural, more realistic, and "beastly" aspect of being a bleeding woman; she accepts herself as a sexual being. To understand the physical and biological representation of menstruation, "Wolf-Alice" is a perfect example of a young wolf-girl who has no knowledge of the social constructs surrounding menstruation. Her wolf mother is murdered by humans and the nuns at the convent she is taken to are abusive in an attempt to socialize her so her contact with society became a traumatizing experience. Therefore, her encounter with her menstrual cycle is a surprise, but not a negative experience, "her first blood bewildered her. She did not know what it meant and the first stirrings of surmise that ever she felt were directed towards its possible cause" (122). Someone who is part of society and is denied the information of the natural process of menstruation would be beyond bewildered, she would be terrified since her encounters with blood would be a direct correlation to disease, and once she does learn of

menstruation, she would have internalized it as a topic that is not to be discussed and is, therefore, shameful. Wolf-Alice does not have this view, since her contact with disease is as limited as her contact with society, her lack of knowledge would not cause her to believe menstruation has a tragic outcome. This negative view of menstruation is a learned conduct internalized through generations of Little Red Riding Hood's and has little to do with the biological process itself. Carter uses "Wolf-Alice" to question this learned conduct and frame menstruation from a positive perspective.

Wolf-Alice's first encounter with her monthly bleeding happens when "she woke to feel the trickle between her thighs and it seemed to her that a wolf who... was fond of her... must have nibbled her cunt... had subjected her to a series of affectionate nips too gentle to wake her yet sharp enough to break skin" (122). It is interesting that what she surmises results in her bleeding is a description of oral sex, the result of affectionate nibbles to her genitalia. So, while this child knows nothing of sex socially, the idea of affection shown on the body comes to her as a positive thing. It is important to note that before her period she has no notion of time. Time measurement is also a symbolic social construct, like the notions of womanhood and femininity attached to menstruation that are learned through social interaction: "the flow continued for a few days, which seemed to her an endless time. She had as yet, no direct notion of past, or of future, or of duration, only of a dimensionless, immediate moment" (122). Instead of the symbols of the clock, Wolf-Alice begins to internalize time in relation to her menstruation:

soon the flow ceased. She forgot it... Wolf-Alice was surprised into bleeding again and so it went on, with a punctuality that transformed her vague grip on time. She learned to expect these bleedings, to prepare her rags against them, and afterwards neatly to bury the

dirtied things... you might say she discovered the very action of time by means of this returning cycle. (123)

She is able to relate the state of the moon to the return of her blood, which creates a sense of time through her expectation of the repetition of the menstrual cycle. She discovers what a cycle is through her body, without the social implications fairy tales assert on female bodies. Therefore, Wolf-Alice is outside femininity and womanhood, while still experiencing the biological markers that socially determine them. Carter brings up the possibility of a destigmatized period, a possible separation between the social construct and the biological process.

The distinction between social expectations based on gender and sex is a prevailing topic in Carter's collection. Stories like "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love," and "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice" are different versions of similar story archetypes. Besides fairy tales, Carter put into her collection narratives that hold similar allegories about sexuality, such as vampire narratives and werewolf narratives. By putting these stories in conversation within her anthology she presents contrasting views and differing perspectives on the topics of femininity and female sexuality, better criticizing their stigmatization. Because, ultimately, there is no absolute conclusion when it comes to female sexuality, only different perspectives that depend on their differing circumstances.

Symbols are key to Carter's narratives, since they are representative of those traditions imposed on female bodies. Some of the symbols from this essay carry historical and cultural meanings, such as the ruby necklace, red hood, and roses; but others, such as red mouths, and menstruation represent body functions that hold social meaning. However, all have in common their relation to the representation of femininity and sexuality in fairy tales. By reclaiming these symbols, through new narratives that combine grotesque and desirable body imagery, she

showcases a female perspective that is usually ignored and stigmatized. Carter's gory representation of these symbols is in active defiance of a genre that invisibilizes the female experience through the cautionary tale, a genre that presents a female character as the protagonist, yet only determines her role based on patriarchal notions of femininity. Many traditional fairy tales failed to acknowledge women as human beings with agency, so they relegated their roles to their capability for bleeding and all the social expectations this entails. This point is brought up by Jeana Jorgensen who argues that "fairy tales belong to women, fairy tales are about women, and yet fairy tales disempower women by granting them superficial pleasure while denying them any real agency" (35). Carter rewrites these tales in acknowledgment of that patriarchal traditional view of femininity and simultaneously establishes a new narrative of femininity that empowers women within that patriarchal view by giving them sexual agency. A form of empowerment Carter uses in most of the stories is female sexuality which she sometimes represents as perverse and animalistic because women have traditionally been stripped of the possibility of awareness and agency of their own perversions and animalistic desires. Therefore, Carter's depictions give her female protagonists agency that was previously denied by traditional patriarchal narratives. Kimberly J. Lau argues that "Carter's 'moral pornography' refers more to a pornography that accounts for the power relations and material realities implicit in every sexual act than to a pornography whose content might meet ambiguous determinations of arbitrary moral standards" (84). Therefore, her pornographic depiction of sexuality serves a purpose: to make one question the power relations within heterosexual relationships that have been traditionally depicted from male perspectives for the benefit of the male gaze.

Ultimately, Carter's works have a quality of moral ambiguity that is feminist for her explicit portrayal of femininity and sexuality that is subversive to today's moral standards. Carter's most interesting quote on the subject of morality perfectly represents the effect the collection of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* has on her readers: "I haven't got a particularly quirky definition of moral. I suppose what I meant was that it's important for human beings to continually question their circumstances if they want to retain their humanity" (Carter and Bernofsky 172).

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