

REWRITING GENDERS, REVISING GENRES: READING ANGELA CARTER'S "THE BLOODY CHAMBER" AS A FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN¹

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แอนเจลา คาร์เตอร์ เขียนเรื่องสั้น เดอะ บลัดดี้ เชมเบอร์ โดยรับเอาโครงเรื่องจากนิทานเก่าแก่เรื่องบลูเบียร์ด แต่เปลี่ยนแปลงรายละเอียดสำคัญหลายจุด ตั้งแต่เปลี่ยนการใช้เสียงเล่าเรื่องเป็นบุคคลที่หนึ่ง การสร้างตัวละครให้มีความซับซ้อน การบรรยายเรื่องเพศอย่างเปิดเผย ไปจนถึงตอนจบแบบใหม่ ทั้งหมดนี้ล้วนนำไปสู่ข้อโต้แย้งอย่างดุเดือดระหว่างนักวิจารณ์วรรณกรรมและนักสตรีนิยมตั้งแต่เมื่อเรื่องสั้นได้รับการตีพิมพ์ในปี 1979 จวบจนปัจจุบัน บทความนี้เขียนขึ้นโดยอ่านด้วยท่วงทิวที่ใกล้ชิดและมีส่วนร่วมกับการโต้แย้งต่างๆ ที่เคยมีมา ผู้เขียนวิเคราะห์งานชิ้นนี้ในฐานะวรรณกรรมประเภทต่างๆ ได้แก่ เทพนิยาย สือลามก เรื่องสยองขวัญหรือโกธิก (gothic) และโดยเฉพาะอย่างยิ่งในฐานะวรรณกรรมพัฒนาการตัวละครหญิง (female

bildungsroman) เชื่อมโยงกับประเด็นทางเพศ เช่น ความสัมพันธ์เชิงอำนาจระหว่างเพศ การจ้องมองชาตินิยม/มาโซคิซึม (sadism/ masochism) และการให้ภาพตัวละครชาย-หญิงอันรวมไปถึงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างกัน เป็นต้น เมื่อพิจารณาประเด็นเพศสถานะและการจำแนกประเภทวรรณกรรมเป็นพิเศษ ผู้อ่านจะพบว่าเรื่องสั้นที่คาร์เตอร์ดัดแปลงจากนิทานเก่าอย่างแบบฉบับนั้นกลายมาเป็นเครื่องมือที่แหลมคมอย่างยิ่งในการวิพากษ์ข้อจำกัดของขนบวรรณกรรมประเภทต่างๆ ที่ยอมรับและซ่อนเร้นการกดขี่ทางสังคมและอุดมการณ์ชายเป็นใหญ่มาโดยตลอด นอกจากนี้บทความชิ้นนี้ยังเปิดเผยให้เห็นว่าเรื่องสั้นเรื่องนี้สามารถให้บทเรียนที่แตกต่างไปอย่างสิ้นเชิงจากการประณามความใคร่รู้ในสตรี ตามที่นิทานเรื่องบลูเบียร์ดพยายามพรับสอน ผู้การชี้นำให้ผู้หญิงตระหนักรู้เกี่ยวกับเพศวิถีของตนเอง ให้ปรับเปลี่ยนค่านิยมและให้เข้าใจถึงความผูกพันระหว่างสตรีเพศ (female bonding) และอิสรภาพที่พวกเขาสามารถเข้าถึงได้ นอกกรอบการแต่งงานตามขนบด้วย

Abstract

Built on the storyline of the traditional fairy tale "Bluebeard," Angela Carter's short story "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) contains striking alterations in the use of the first-person narrator, ambivalent and complex characterization, explicit sexual description and a revised ending; all of which have given rise to heated arguments among feminist scholars and literary critics. This paper relies on a close reading analysis and engages in the ongoing discussions by considering the problematic categorization of the story—as a fairy tale, a pornographic

¹ “อ่านเรื่องสั้น เดอะ บลัดดี้ เชมเบอร์ โดย แอนเจลา คาร์เตอร์ ผ่านประเด็นเพศสถานะ การจำแนกประเภทวรรณกรรม และในฐานะวรรณกรรมพัฒนาการตัวละครหญิง”

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fiction, a gothic horror, and especially as a bildungsroman novel—in relation to several gender aspects such as power relations between the sexes, the concept of gaze, sadomasochism and the representation of men and women and their relationship. By focusing on gender issues in the short story and using the narrative structures of these genres as a framework, Carter's ingenious revision of the norms becomes a sharper critique of the restrictions of the traditional genres, as well as the oppressive social and patriarchal ideologies hidden in them. Also, the study reveals how the short story can be a totally different read with the education of the female narrator at the center because the lesson learnt is not a reproof of female curiosity as the traditional "Bluebeard" endeavors to deliver but is her own sexual awareness, readjustment of certain values and the realization of female bonding and realizable autonomy outside the conventional realm of matrimony.

First published in 1979, Angela Carter's short story collection *The Bloody Chamber* is "often—wrongly—described as a group of traditional fairy tales given a subversive feminist twist" (Simpson 2006:vii). Carter explained in an interview, however, that such was not the case—"my intention was not to do "versions" or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, "adult" fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories" (Haffenden 1985:84). Her assertion is reasonable enough because while the traditional fairy tale of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" or "La Barbe Bleue", which is actually "a widespread European folktale with many variants" (Lokke 1988:8), contains around 1,800 words, Carter's new story "The Bloody Chamber", which draws upon this

tale, is more than 16,000 words long. It is true that the framework of her story remains indisputably "Bluebeard" but the added material and modification give a significant new life, as well as new focuses of interest and complexity, to the old story. "The Bloody Chamber" has been approached by scholars using several disciplines; it has been read particularly against the original tale, feminist criticism and together with Carter's own essay *The Sadeian Woman*, which was also published in 1979 and received highly controversial responses. This essay, in turn, pays particular attention to the issue of gender within the multiple genres into which this short story seems to fit. The discussion of genre involves that of a fairy tale, a pornographic fiction, a gothic horror and a bildungsroman novel, with a particular focus on the last genre as it seems to have escaped critics' attention so far. Within the issue of gender, the essay includes arguments concerning power relations and the representation of men and women and their relationship in the story. It will explore how the representation of genders differs from stereotypical ones to which we have been accustomed in the genres discussed; and how using the bildungsroman structure as a framework to approach gender issues allows interpretations that would not otherwise surface.

"The Bloody Chamber" centers on a young pianist, the nameless narrator, who at the opening of the story is travelling away from home after getting married to a rich Marquis. Her arrival at his grand and mysterious castle is followed by the consummation and her husband's urgent departure on business to New York. Before he leaves, the Marquis hands all the keys over to his wife giving her permission to explore every room except

for the little one which he claims to be his private study. Unable to overcome her curiosity to discover the secrets of his real self there, however, she decides to enter the forbidden room. Within that bloody chamber, the discovery of an embalmed body, a skull, and a corpse pierced throughout inside a coffin—all the remains of his three ex-wives—fills her with so much horror that she drops the key in the pool of blood, leaving it with a red stain that cannot be removed. Realizing her own fate from what she has seen there, the young bride seeks refuge in the music room where she meets and confides everything to Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner, who sympathizes with her. Her chance of escape is thwarted by the Marquis's sudden return and his immediate discovery of her intrusion to the secret chamber. After pressing the key on her forehead leaving a permanent mark of red blood, the death sentence by decapitation is issued, only to be averted at the last minute by the girl's mother. She rides to her daughter's rescue on a swift horse and shoots the Marquis to death. The story ends with the young narrator, now a widow, busily setting up a new house with her lover, Jean-Yves and her mother. Generally speaking, "The Bloody Chamber" closely follows the storyline of the traditional fairy tale of "Bluebeard," which also deals with a young bride finding the dead bodies of her husband's previous wives in a forbidden room and who is about to be beheaded when her brothers come and save her. To consider how this genre bears on the issue of gender it is important to know that the fairy tale is by no means a gender-neutral genre. Joyce Carol Oates in "In Olden Times, When Wishing Was Having" (1997) contends that "the fairy tale, as a literary/cultural genre, has traditionally been associated with women" and that

although early tale archivists, Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen were male, "most of the material they collected was provided by women" (98). The fairy tale as a genre, however, is not typically seen by feminist scholars as healthy to women. It is considered to be oppressive tool informing female readers, especially children, of their subordinate role in relation to men. Due to its close similarity to "Bluebeard," Carter, as the author of "The Bloody Chamber", has thus been heavily criticized. According to Merja Makinen in "Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality," some critics argue that the old fairy tale was a reactionary form that inscribed a misogynistic ideology and in using the form, Carter has voluntarily accepted conservative sexism. Therefore, she "is rewriting the tales within the strait-jacket of their original structure," and by failing to revise the conservative form for feminist politics creates only "a reproduction of male pornography," to quote Patricia Duncker and Avis Lewallen respectively (1992:4). These assumptions have been sharply countered by Makinen who points out these critics' inability to see beyond the sexist binary opposition and perceiving Carter's work as a rewriting of the tales centering on the female protagonist with an active sexuality that subverts the earlier misogynistic version. Whichever stance one takes in this argument, it is difficult to deny that Carter, as a fairy tale enthusiast, draws attention to the flaws of the genre and the long-standing inequality between the two sexes by means of juxtaposition; and she does it so effectively via the fairy tale which is one of the most accessible genres to the general public. It is arguable, too, that no other kind of prose deals with or encounters a traditional tale better than a modernized one. A recurring female

figure in fairy tales, i.e. the damsel in distress, still persists and is very much abused in Carter's story, but her point of view, for one thing, helps us to better understand the female character's psychology and the nature of her suffering. The ending of the new tale, moreover, offers more possibilities for its heroine other than that of the limited role as a wife in the original text. This will be discussed in detail later in this essay.

Nevertheless, in terms of genre, "The Bloody Chamber" cannot simply be treated as a modern, subversive translation or an extension of the traditional fairy tale, since it also borders on pornographic literature and gothic fiction. The discussion of the former category derives from Carter's depiction of sensuality and erotic images in several scenes, such as when the narrator finds one of her husband's illustrated collections in the library—

the girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a split fig below the great globes of her buttocks..., while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like the scimitar he held. (13)³

The contentious topic of Carter's pornographic manner of expression is fully discussed by Robin Ann Sheets in "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'" (1991). Again, Carter's position as a female writer who engages her female characters in extremely eroticized and

often explicit sexual activities renders her vulnerable to several anti-pornography critics. She is blamed, for example, for supporting pornography which is a sexual practice based on domination and which is *always* violent. Pornography is violent in its content since it "involves scenes of bondage, rape, mutilation, and torture—and in its structures of representation, which silence, objectify, and fragment the female" (636-7). In opposition, a number of advocates of pornography defend it by stating that "the genre serves women's interests by offering them an escape from the repressions of bourgeois ideology: it counteracts romantic love, undermines heterosexual monogamy, and subverts procreative sex" (638). In spite of these radical but plausible arguments of the latter group, there remains the question of whether "The Bloody Chamber," with its free use of pornographic imagery, is able to achieve such objectives. The fact that the story does not provide any alternative sexuality outside that of the marital contract and that the narrator's relationship with her new lover is horribly romantic seems incongruous with what the pro-pornography critics propose. However shocking the overt pornographic description quoted above may seem, it is done entirely through a female perspective and can be seen as a necessary foreshadowing step towards sexual experience with the Marquis. Furthermore, it is indeed the *exposure* to sexuality on the female's part that makes the story most engaging and interesting. The young pianist's reaction towards the pornographic material in her hand is remarkable—she does not put it down nor shun it but gasps and turns the pages in curiosity for more, a topic we shall return to later. Aghast as she is, the book she finds serves far better as a part of her sexual education and stimulation than

³ Carter, Angela. 2011. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin Books. All parenthetical references in the text are to this edition.

what she “should have liked, best of all, a novel in yellow paper” (13) that only romanticizes idealistic love and sentimental heroism. And might not the same thrill be happening to her female readers as well? According to Cristina Bacchilega, Carter’s approval of eroticism stems from her confidence that all literature that “contains elements of eroticism... has the potential to force the reader to reassess his relation to his own sexuality” (2008:17). This view corresponds with that of Michele Grossman who, citing *Caught Looking*, a collection of essays and visual representations on feminism, pornography and censorship published in 1986, argues that “by condemning pornography as the cause of female oppression and calling for its elimination or censorship..., feminists will assist in silencing all analysis and dialogue among women in the difficult and contradictory domain of sexual expression” (1988:150). Thus, the free use of eroticism in this story might suggest that to acknowledge the existence of pornography and to be able to derive sexual pleasure from it could be a step towards self-realization, confidence, and the liberation of women. It is positively far more liberating than treating the matter as non-existent, to keep it latent as in typical fairy tales; and thus keep the female eternally pure and invariably naïve.

The question of “The Bloody Chamber” being a gothic fiction is also noteworthy, although most of the scholars mentioned have paid little attention to this aspect. The short story, in fact, is mainly about mystery and terror, and it also amply incorporates such elements as the uncanny, perversity and transgression; all of which are prominent characteristics of gothic fiction. The uncanny is a supernatural characteristic in which

unfamiliar events, objects, people or experience become strangely similar and thus create fear or discomfort, such as when the narrator knows what the book she is holding in the Marquis’s library is all about—“I think I knew, I knew by some tingling of the fingertips, even before I opened that slim volume with no title at all on the spine, what I should find inside it” (13). The murderous act of the Marquis, as well as his collection of corpses in a secret chamber, narrated in startling detail by his fear-stricken wife, are in themselves both perverse and transgressive as infringements of law and human society. Obviously, incidents of an inexplicable supernatural nature occur throughout the story—the narrator, for instance, is branded with the indelible red mark on the forehead like, in her own words, “the caste mark of a brahmin woman. Or the mark of Cain” (39). The young bride might have forgotten to mention yet another female character who suffers a similar fate in a classic gothic novel, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), although the short story makes a direct allusion to the famous text in a note written by his late wife, captioned “Typical Transylvanian Scene... [o]n the occasion of this marriage to the descendant of Dracula” (25). The resemblance, nevertheless, cannot be overlooked on the reader’s part. After the heroine of the novel, Mina Harker, is vamped by Count Dracula, Professor Van Helsing presses the Sacred Wafer on her forehead as a way of safeguarding her life. As it touches her skin, however, it “burned into the flesh as though it had been a piece of white-hot metal... she wailed out ‘Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh! I must bear this mark of shame upon my forehead until the Judgement Day’” (275). While Kari E. Lokke (1988) tries to see the mark of the

young bride in a positive light—"the heart on the heroine's forehead is not only a mark of shame... it is also a badge of courage. She is rewarded for breaking the patriarchal taboo with a knowledge of the human heart" (11), the focus on the word "shame" in both cases does imply the opposite. To both heroines, the red mark conveys a strong impression of guilt, of having committed embarrassing, disgraceful, or unforgivable acts. The permanent mark as a source of shame and agony, signifying indelible impurity, can be seen as an unjust punishment for the two female characters who must bear on their body the brand of the crime for which they cannot be wholly held responsible. Apart from this reference to a Gothic classic, other supernatural, inexplicable features of "The Bloody Chamber" include the "maternal telepathy" (44), which spurs the narrator's mother to the castle to save her and its ancient setting with a secret chamber full of medieval devices of torture—the Iron Maiden, for example, a device believed to have originated in the Middle Ages. Elaborate descriptions of the scene and instruments of torture are, particularly, recurrent in classic gothic fiction, in spite of the fact that no such violence is described in action in Carter's story.

Michele Grossman's "Born to Bleed" (1988) asserts that Carter makes shrewd use of "double play in her fiction, setting genre against genre, gender against gender... to tease out in "The Bloody Chamber" the treacheries posed by false universals" (153). Yet her discussion of genre is mainly devoted to mythology, pornography and romance. Another genre that has been largely disregarded, most probably because it is overshadowed by the above classifications, is that of bildungsroman literature. Bildungsroman

is a German term signifying a "novel of formation" or a "novel of education." In general, the subject matter of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, on the passage from childhood through varied experiences into maturity, which usually involves the recognition of one's identity and role in the world. (Abrams and Harpham 2009:229). Jerome Hamilton Buckley's *Season of Youth* (1974), a foundational study of the bildungsroman tradition in the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century British novels, lays out certain principles of this genre. The broad outline of a typical bildungsroman plot concerns a child of some sensibility growing up in a provincial town. Finding home and early schooling smothering or frustrating, he leaves the repressive atmosphere at home for the city where his "real education" begins. His experience involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters and demands that, in certain important respects, the hero reappraises his values (17). So much is quite useful to an understanding of the rough course of male bildungsroman fiction during the Victorian and modernist periods but it has proved inadequate in encompassing the more recent female novels of education. Carol Lazzaro-Weis's "The Female Bildungsroman: Calling It into Question" (1990) expands the definition of the genre through a feminist-deconstructive approach and suggests that, in contrast to the coherent self and the confidence in the possibility of self-development in most male protagonists, the female bildungsroman greatly problematizes such a certainty. In its place, "nostalgia, loss, home and community, and the generation gap, spoken predominately in terms of the mother-daughter relationship rather than the father-daughter conflict..., are all themes which characterize the more recent

exploitations of the Bildungsroman tradition by women writers” (24). Pin-chia Feng in her book *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston* (1998), which focuses on ethnic women writers builds on these earlier works of the genre and proposes that female bildungsroman authors usually prioritize “the process instead of the product” of the novels and “transform a traditionally personal and privatized genre into a political one” (36). Lastly, Laura Pressman in “The Frauenroman” (2013) engages in contemporary female bildungsroman literature and believes that female writers have been increasingly able to explore “issues that those of the past were unable to mention. Sexuality, higher education, and other aspects of society that were once off-limits to female writers... are now described and explored extensively because of the shift in cultural norms.” These are only a small selection of countless studies on this subject but they prove, I think, extremely relevant as a start of our reading of “The Bloody Chamber,” which embodies elements of what these scholars observe about the genre. First of all, while the focus of the original “Bluebeard” is not on the growth of the protagonist but on its moral dimension as a cautionary tale, Carter’s adaptation is much more prominently a bildungsroman story. It has the quality of a female bildungsroman, in which the young protagonist not only undergoes several stages of femininity but also, finally, realizes important lessons about herself and her relationship with those around her. In its framework, the story involves the narrator’s passage from girlhood towards adulthood, which consists of wifehood and widowhood; all of which reveal different nuances of the female experience. The story opens as the narrator is on the point

of leaving her girlhood. Unlike the original version of the tale, there are a number of specific references to her childhood, her childlike features and her family, stressing the magnitude of leaving this stage.

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement,... 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 quietude of my mother’s apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage. (1)

The journey motif is a prominent feature of bildungsroman literature and in contrast to “Bluebeard,” “The Bloody Chamber” contains a minute description of the passage. Here, the girl’s physical journey parallels her psychological journey to another stage of selfhood—to becoming a woman and a wife. The heroine is travelling away from a familiar environment, into not only a faraway, unknown place, but also into the strange realm of matrimony. She is young, only seventeen. She “knew nothing of the world” (4), and is clearly exhilarated by this experience. The very opening is seen by Kari E. Lokke as an irony, because from the brief use of the present tense “the reader knows from the very first word that the heroine survives to tell her tale” (1988:8). However, bildungsroman readers might be struck more by the emphasis on the emergence, in the story’s first two paragraphs, of fragmented or repressed memories from the past, which Pin-chia Feng believes is a characteristic of novels of education by ethnic women writers (18). At the same time, the opening recollection might suggest that although

the memory of that night is clearly impressed upon her, the experience has become a past—as the shift of tense indicates a distance in terms of time and indicates changes in the narrator as a person who has achieved maturity when she starts narrating her story. The lengthy description of her restless time on the train reveals her anxious expectation of the next phase of life but it is persistently undercut by the previous stage of her childhood, especially concerning her mother and old nurse. The fact that her mother's apartment is white, enclosed and quiet reflects her boredom with the pure but restricted condition of her early years, although it connotes safety and peace. Her self-portrayal as "I, the poor widow's child with my mouse-colored hair that still bore the kinks of the plaits from which it had so recently been freed" and the "young girl's pointed breasts and shoulders" and "bony hips" (2, 5) suggests not only her youth but also her physical alteration from a girl to a woman that has hardly been completed nor been fully realized in her mind. Yet the most disturbing tension that occurs throughout this stage is her anxiety over the marriage itself. It is a double-edged circumstance that at the same time means a glorious victory as well as a terrible bereavement on the part of her mother—saying that in this "bridal triumph" she also feels "a pang of loss" of her status as a daughter (1). Such awkward feelings continue in her depiction of the realm of marriage as a cold and unpleasant displacement. During the journey she sees out of her window a scene of domestic settlement where the lamplight—

promised warmth, company, a supper of sausages hissing in a pan... children tucked up in bed asleep in the brick house... all the

paraphernalia of the everyday world from which I, with my stunning marriage, had exiled myself. Into marriage, into exile; I sensed it, I knew it—that, henceforth, I would always be lonely. (7)

It is a strikingly ambiguous projection of marriage life. Instead of identifying herself with the one who will belong in the new domestic surroundings as a wife or a mother, her anticipation and anxiety reflect an ambivalent understanding of marriage. On the one hand, she may compare her marriage to exile with the sense of crossing the border—away from home, homeland, or the earlier stage of maiden life, to which she may never return. On the other hand, exile can be seen as an involuntary isolation, if not a form of punishment that she must endure as a consequence of her faulty decision to marry. Although it seems dubious that she projects her married life as being *always lonely*, it is actually relevant because her husband seems a complete stranger to her, as is suggested by her inability to see his real face. It is a "strange, heavy, almost waxen face," a face which seems to her "like a mask" (3). In contrast with his invisibility, her own face and body are on several occasions exposed in public or even in the limelight—when she plays piano in the salon or during the opera before the wedding day where "everyone stared at" (6) her in the sensuous white muslin dress. Besides the disproportionate exposure and accessibility that render her acquaintanceship with the Marquis shallow and distant, their relationship continues in a highly reciprocal manner. The Marquis is a wealthy man and strangely his gifts are listed and elaborated on by the narrator, in even more detail than the accounts of the giver himself. The young bride even declares that these

excessively extravagant objects are something she cannot resist—"This ring, the bloody bandage [choker] of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poirer and Worth... all had conspired to seduce me so utterly" (7). For one thing, her marriage is not wholly a result of love, for the girl does not answer "yes" when questioned whether she loves him or not. In fact, she even makes fun of the notion of love when she slights her mother's devotion to and love of her father with so little in return—"my mother herself had gladly... beggared herself for love; [but]... her gallant soldier never returned from the wars, leaving his wife and child a legacy of tears that never quite dried" (2). Thus, the daughter is now doing the opposite, banishing herself in a lonely exile in return for a tangible legacy of wealth instead of tears or, in other words, for the economic ascension from bourgeois to aristocratic standing. She seems exactly what Oates would call one of those exemplary "fairy-tale beings [who] yearn for nothing more than material comforts, a "royal" marriage, a self-absorbed conventional life in which social justice and culture of any kind are unknown" (1997:102); but this is not a fairy tale. In spite of all the assuring material implications of her marriage, the narrator looks at her coming married life not with joyful expectation but with an apprehension that reads so differently from common stories of romance or of fairy-tale princesses. Her marriage, an exile in terms of distance and a literal punishment of sort, starts to look grim and sinister even before she reaches the center of her husband's horrid mystery.

The next phase of the protagonist's rite of passage is that of wifedom, which will be discussed together with power relations in marriage and the representation of the genders of the three main characters. After

hours of travelling, the couple arrives at the castle, the ancestral establishment located "at the bosom of the sea" (9) with a causeway as the only link to the mainland, suggesting the distance, the uncertainty, as well as the isolated state of the narrator. She quickly settles herself into the new position—that of the mistress of the house—and for the moment is awed by the luxurious furniture and the many special arrangements made by the host to welcome home his wife. Inside the spacious bedroom are so many mirrors on all the walls and white lilies everywhere—

He'd fill the room with them, to greet the bride, the young bride. The young bride, who had become that multitude of girls I saw in the mirrors, identical in their chic navy blue tailor-mades...

'See,' he said, gesturing towards those elegant girls. 'I have acquired a whole harem for myself!' (11)

In this scene and elsewhere, the mirror motif is seen by Kathleen E. B. Manley as a medium that brings about the "dawning of the protagonist's sense of subjectivity" as it allows her to see herself in the way others, especially her fiancé, view her and to "have a more complete sense of herself as subject" (1998:71-3). Contrary to Manley's interpretation I believe that mirrors, instead of helping establish the narrator's identity, set a distance between her perception and her own body. Here the emphasis is given to, apart from her fashionable outfit, her youth and her status by the repetition of *the young bride* but the unusual use of third-person possessive determiner "their" suggests the unsettling effect of the setting on the narrator's mentality—as if she saw her reflections from a different person's view, a sort of uncanny displacement of herself. The

young woman has become, even in her own narrative voice, “*that* multitude of girls” and “*those* elegant girls,” losing both the possession *and* the singularity of her self. It is immediately after this very scene that she will be stripped off, leaving only the “scarlet, palpitating core” that merges in the mirror into the living image of Rops, an erotic etching of a naked girl he had once showed her. Here the narrative becomes blurred that it is impossible to distinguish which person—the narrator herself or the nude image—is “the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty” (11-2).

In this same scene we are faced with the crux of gaze⁴, another important subject in the study of power relations between genders and of pornographic fiction. Generally speaking, the concept of gaze involves the interaction between the active gazer, invariably male, and the passive, immovable object, the female. This relationship is obviously applicable to the married couple in “The Bloody Chamber.” That night before the wedding when the narrator has on a white muslin Poiret dress and a ruby choker, she sees him “watching [her] in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh” (6). Later when they are on the train, she, under the streak of first light,

senses that he is “awake and gazing at [her]... his eyes, dark and motionless... fixed upon [her]” (7-8). The other three incidents when the Marquis looks and appraises her are while she is forced to play the piano in the salon, at home when he comes up behind her blindfolding her with his hands while she is playing and when the Marquis finally takes his bride to deflower her, under protest, in broad daylight because it is “all the better to see” her (14), repeating the same power structure through the gazing between the couple. Throughout the story, the narrator is the object of the Marquis’s gaze, on various occasions and in several analogies of hunter-prey, performer-spectator, connoisseur-animal/object; all of which suggest the male’s superior power to execute, to take pleasure, to judge and to purchase. In her essay, Robin Ann Sheets looks at the episodes mentioned and finds a striking compatibility with the workings of the male gaze in pornographic films.

In both episodes—the disrobing and the defloration—the contrast between the husband’s action and the wife’s immobility seems to support the theory of male gaze articulated by film critic E. Ann Kaplan: “To begin with, men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it. Second, the sexualization and objectification of women is not simply for the purposes of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated, and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses.” (1991:646-7)

⁴ “In theories of the visual arts, such as film theory and art history, the gaze is a term used to describe acts of looking caught up in dynamics of desire—for example, the gaze can be motivated by a desire for control over its object. Theories of the gaze have explored the complex power relations that are a part of the acts of looking and being looked at.” (Sturken and Cartwright’s *Practices of Looking* 2011:355)

While it seems less relevant to identify the narrator or her sexual organ as a threat to her husband, the process of gazing in “The Bloody Chamber” can definitely be related to the first point of Kaplan’s argument, that is, as a manifestation of male power. There can hardly be any struggle for power on the female’s part because when the narrator herself acts as a gazer, it is done only on her own body. On the opera night, she notices how her fiancé is looking at her with so much lust, but “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 thin wire. I saw how much that cruel necklace became me” (6-7). She does not cast her gaze down upon her body to see herself—especially not the ruby choker tied so closely around her neck, worn solely to gratify the viewer. Instead, she looks in the mirror and perceives the sight of herself, the sight that primarily belongs to him, as he sees her. The incident is referred to again when he undresses her on their arrival at his castle—“And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh *in his eyes*, I was aghast to feel myself stirring” (12) [emphasis added]. Towards the end of the story, to avoid getting the keys from the music room, she even forces herself to be seductive in order to detain him in bed—“I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors” (37). The episodes listed here serve to affirm that a female gaze may become possible through reflection but it is still the female body that remains the sole object. Indeed, while the Marquis is always characterized by the quality of his magnitude and through the olfactory sense, with an emphasis on his size, his strength and his “opulent male scent” (3); the narrator’s representation is

purely visual as a slight, slim or fragile being. The story particularly details images of her body, especially emphasized in its nudity, and is clearly one-sided— whoever it is the gazer, the female body of hers is the object, the center of desire.

Although the relation of male gaze and female object reinforces eroticism and, as it reasserts male-female positioning in a dichotomy of active-passive roles, condones male oppression, there seems to be no model for sexual pleasure apart from that initiated and enforced by the male. This is why the narrator in “The Bloody Chamber” cannot realize her own desire through the sight of the Marquis, or of herself without his agency. Yet the matter does not simply end there, one step further from female objectifications of themselves leads us to the contentious topic of sadomasochism, another topic under heated debate among feminist scholars. On the one hand sadomasochism, seen as the product of the phallocentric ideologies initiated by the Marquis de Sade, a writer held up by Carter but much despised by many feminist critics, might serve to justify violence against women; on the other hand it is yet another channel through which female pleasure can be derived. According to E. Ann Kaplan, women, “assigned the place of object,... the passive recipient of his gaze,... have learned to associate their sexuality with domination by the male gaze, a position involving a degree of masochism in finding their objectification erotic” (qtd. in Sheets 1991:651). That the narrator is engaged in this masochistic whirlpool is revealed not only when she finds her own objectification erotic—to feel herself “stirring” (12) at the reflection of her naked body through his eyes—but also in her fascination with physical pain and bondage. After she is “impaled” (15) by

her husband, there is a certain irrepressible yearning for yet another sexual intercourse—"a certain queasy craving... for the renewal of caresses" (20). The choker that bites into her neck, his habit of twining her long hair into a rope and pulling it until she winces "a little" (16) and her admission of the validity of Baudelaire's "[t]here is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer" (28) in relation to her own sexual experience, are all examples of their sadomasochistic inclination. However radical it may seem, Carter in *The Sadeian Woman* approves of Sade's writing, seeing it as a liberating manifestation of female sexuality, because he "declares himself unequivocally for the right of women to fuck" (qtd. in Sheets 1991:633). In my opinion, the narrator's view of herself as an object of desire is unavoidable due to the impossibility of objectifying the male, from the absence of power and the lack of a desirable model for any other form of eroticization. The ability to derive pleasure from self-objectification can then be seen as a struggle for power on the female's part. In spite of its dependence on male agency, it is at least a chance to project her gaze, a step towards a realization of her desire and ultimately a better understanding of her own sexuality.

From the discussion of power relations in terms of gazing, we now turn to the problematic representation of gender in "The Bloody Chamber." The main male character is the Marquis—the most enigmatic of all due to the narrator's inability to grasp him physically and mentally and her limited knowledge of the motives behind his abysmal behaviors. What we have are only inferences—the source of his wealth is guessed to be from "bankrupt[ing] a small businessman in

Amsterdam or... to do with opium" (25); he has married such a young and inexperienced girl as herself because "it must have been [her] innocence that captivated him" (17) or it might have been because "he sensed [in her] a rare talent for corruption" (18). In spite of our lack of information about the Marquis, it remains certain that he is a figure of authority. First of all, in the whole narrative framework the story engages in a series of violence acts centered on him. He is described as inhuman or as a beast of prey with a head of "dark, leonine shape" and "dark mane" (3). While the Marquis's animal-like attributes connote his physical strength, his position as the lord of the castle, his wealth, title, connections and aesthetic taste reaffirm his superiority financially, socially, and culturally. His freedom and mobility also mark his power as a leader. He can freely and independently traverse between the outside world and the castle and within, while the female protagonist is not—being always led, "handed down" (8) from the train, dragged or driven by him so that she "stumbled on the winding stair" (14) to the bedroom. Lastly, the Marquis is infinitely superior in their sexual relationship, being not only older and more experienced with three marriages before him, but also the one who decides upon the time and place of all their sexual encounters. The wedding night would be "voluptuously deferred until we lay in his great ancestral bed" (2) and, once there, he strips her bare until she feels herself aroused simply to "close [her] legs like a book" (12) and, later, deflowers her under protest in broad daylight. His insistence that she has on the choker of rubies and his holding her twisted hair like a rope declare his ownership and claim to full control over her body, like that of a man over a harnessed animal or a pet through collar and leash.

To counter the Marquis's powerful exertion, Carter nevertheless challenges the demarcation of power between genders by adding certain unlikely qualities that seem totally incongruous to the previous depiction of him. One such moment is when the narrator, even though she realises that it is a "curious analogy" (4), compares her husband to a flower, a lily. On the one hand, the lily is a significant symbol since it is usually related to funerals and associated with female chastity, thus carrying both fatal and sexual connotations relevant to the story. On the other hand, the lily is also a phallic depiction, particularly in this context where it is described as "cobra-headed... lilies whose white sheaths are curled out of a flesh [so] thick and tensely yielding to the touch" (4). In fact, the roomful of lilies that release a weighing odor is just one among many prominent yet oppressive phallic symbols associated with him, such as the Romeo y Julieta cigar "fat as a baby's arm" (8) and the heavy, unsheathed sword with which he threatens to sever her fragile neck in the end. Another incident that undermines the Marquis's might is far more complicated. At the very moment the young bride returns the key to her husband and is found guilty, the complex character of the Marquis is revealed.

Strange. In spite of my fear of him,... I felt there emanate from him... a stench of absolute despair... The evidence of that bloody chamber had showed me 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...

The atrocious loneliness of that monster!...

"Oh, my love, my little love who brought me a white gift of music," he said, almost as if grieving. "My little love, you'll never know how much I hate daylight!" (37-8)

Here his weakness is revealed at the most unlikely instant when he should be victimizing his transgressive wife; and within these seconds their roles are reversed. In spite of his superior position as a master, he sinks into despair and draws sympathy from his young victim. Loneliness and grief, which up to this point have only afflicted the female protagonist, are suddenly upon him. The Marquis, now seeming blind and passive as if in slumber, mourns for his love and reveals his hatred of daylight. Although his weakness is betrayed only briefly before he assumes his authority again and orders her to kneel before him, the description renders him a different sort of villain—a pathetic figure behind the opaque façade of a demonic being. In fact, the Marquis's mysterious background, his aristocratic position, libertine tendencies, womanizing character, and isolated, melancholic life might even remind us of a Byronic hero. In this case, the Marquis may not be easily termed an atrocious monster who deserves to be get rid of as happens in the end. This might signify Carter's intention of defying the conventional villain stereotype in fairy tales through the vision of an antihero and to supply fascinating nuances to this passionate character so that he is more than just a formidable but heartless serial killer. In a way that the original tale does not, the scene above sharply destabilizes his previous role as an authoritative ruler and renders him a highly ambiguous character.

Almost as complicated as the ambivalent character of the Marquis is that of his young bride, the female protagonist. On the surface, it seems that her portrayal deviates not much from the general portrayal of heroines in traditional fairy tales. She is young, innocent and, unlike all the Marquis's former wives, virginal. Robin Ann Sheets, citing Roland Barthes's argument that "the master is he who speaks," sees the protagonist's "control of language as evidence of a shift in power" (1991:649) yet, to me, she is for the most part submissive to her husband. Although Carter's admitted discomfort with dialogue makes her avoid it in much of her work (Simpson 2006:x), it is nevertheless notable that the young bride has almost no voice at all in the presence of the Marquis. Except for a single occasion when she demands to know about the last key in the ring—"The key to your heart? Give it me!" (19)—she is in no position to argue or give orders but, simply, to fear and comply. That is why she speaks so little to him when compared with the extent to which she speaks to the other male character, Jean-Yves. In spite of these characteristics of the sweet and gentle heroine of a conventional narrative, at a deeper level she by no means conforms to the good-girl stereotype. To begin with, she is drawn primarily by his wealth and the entailing power as a marquise of the castle. Her attitudes towards all the other female characters are suspicious. She is condescending towards the Marquis's housekeeper, finding her "bland, pale,... dislikeable," while even her own maid whom she prefers is described as a "cosily incompetent" "snob" (10, 4). All the previous wives of the Marquis she disdains, even though they are all dead and unknown to her personally. She describes the first as a "witty, naughty monkey," the second's

face as "a common property," and the last as a "sumptuous diva" whom "you could tell... would die young" (5). After her husband is called away on business, she displays ungrounded jealousy toward him—"Might he have left me... for an importunate mistress... who knew how to pleasure him far better than a girl whose fingers had been exercised, hitherto, only by the practice of scales and arpeggios" (21). Moreover, before entering the forbidden room, she is naïve enough to disbelieve that her "disobedience might truly offend him" (26). To put it bluntly, she is utterly materialistic, vain, jealous and rather stupid. Still, that is not all—for she has in her certain rebellious and deceitful traits as well. For one thing, the Marquis sees through her and realizes her tendency to be corrupt and whorish. Apart from the scenes mentioned earlier, in which she readily admits her astonishment at her darker, lustful side or her masochistic zeal, the fact that she welcomes the piano-tuner, Jean-Yves, as a lover directly, and even asks for his assistance at the cost of his life, is also very disturbing.

From the contradictory characteristics above, it seems that the female protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber" is habitually drawn between two extremes, that of an utterly submissive girl and that of her rebellious mother. Kathleen Manley says the narrator "is not always passive,... but rather oscillates between being insecure and feeling sure of herself" because she is still in the process of developing her subjectivity (1998:71) while I would like to propose that the factor that brings about her oscillation could largely be the presence of the Marquis. Using Michel

Foucault's theory of Panopticism⁵, is it not possible to argue that the narrator's mentality is affected by the constant vigilance of her husband? Whenever she is about to do something, such as sneaking into the library for adult publications, he always seems to be lurking behind to surprise her. Panopticism is closely associated with gazing and monitoring; therefore the narrator, under the scrutinizing gaze of her husband, seems to employ a self-regulating surveillance and behaves perfectly like a meek and obedient wife. Even during his absence, the foreign surroundings somehow give her a sense of discomfort as though she is still under constant watch, such as when one of his maids eyes her reproachfully for placing the keys carelessly, and when she feels mocked at by the water tap—the "leering dolphin" that "winked at [her] derisively" (35). Even so, it is only when she is free from his presence that she can attain self-confidence and autonomy. While she seems ultimately helpless and weak when her husband is around, her capricious character is revealed at the moment before venturing into the forbidden chamber. For once she is driven by the bold, adventurous spirit of her mother—"Until that moment, this spoiled child did not know she had inherited

nerves and a will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indo-China" (28). Another brief moment that further describes her evil intention against her husband is when she plans to seduce him before he finds out about her crime—"If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then" (37), although we can rightly suspect the possibility of her success had she really done so. These two scenes are interesting because they show that while the young bride seems loving and compliant to her husband, she proves that ultimately she cannot be trusted. The Carter woman is by no mean distinguished in this quality because she is just one in a long line of Biblical and classical female characters before her—Eve, Psyche, Pandora—all of whose curiosity and disobedience are notorious causes of their downfall. In "Bluebeard," caution against female curiosity is the primary moral of the story. "Curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to deep regret. To the displeasure of many a maiden, its enjoyment is short lived. Once satisfied, it ceases to exist, and always costs dearly" (Lang 2010). Robin Ann Sheets, quoting Jeanne Morgan's *Perrault's Morals for Moderns* (1985) and Maria Tatar's *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1987), explains in depth that there was actually the second warning against the husband making impossible demands on their wives as well, but that it was superseded by the first warning in the nineteenth-century—

"Bluebeard" had branched off into two separate narratives: one a cautionary fairy tale about the hazards of curiosity [e.g. "Mary's Child"], the other a folk tale depicting the triumph of a clever young woman over a bloodthirsty villain [e.g. "Fowler's Fowl"]. Tales

⁵ According to Bertens's *Literary Theory*, the *Panopticon* was a type of prison designed by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. The ideal prison consisted of a ring of cells that was built around a central point of observation from which one single guardian could survey all the cells, while the prisoners could not see the supervisor. The major effect of the Panopticon is "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power... to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action." (2008:117)

of female triumph abound in the folk tradition, but it was the other type—the didactic story warning against female curiosity—that gained popularity on the stages and in the bookstalls of nineteenth-century Europe. Maria Tatar has found that “nearly every nineteenth-century printed version of “Bluebeard” singles out the heroine’s curiosity as an especially undesirable trait.” Thus, by the nineteenth-century the wife’s disobedience had become a much more serious issue than the husband’s violence. (1991:643-4)

The question with “The Bloody Chamber” as a feminist text of the twentieth century is whether we can still say that it posits any cautions against female curiosity. A number of feminist critics, of course, are more ready to defend Carter’s narrator and “recast her transgression as a heroic search for knowledge” (Sheets 1991:644). For example, Kathleen Manley, citing Laura Mulvey (1992), identifies the narrator’s “curiosity about the locked room as a symbol for curiosity about female sexuality. The knowledge the protagonist gains from the forbidden room is thus knowledge of herself” (1998:76). Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Ute Heidmann maintains that in “The Bloody Chamber,” the “curiosity is finally rewarded,” as the knowledge gained from opening the door “is the means through which Bluebeard’s awful secret is revealed, and it triggers a chain of events that ends his career as a serial killer and enables his wealth to be redistributed more equitably” (2009:53). What has escaped these critics is that such an act of curiosity, either courageous or foolish, fails to impress upon the protagonist as being a disagreeable attribute. Once the

narrator enters the forbidden sphere, she is fully aware of her mistake and punishment—“I must pay the price of my new knowledge” (36); still, it is not so obvious that she genuinely repents her (mis)conduct. There is a sense of sadness in her realization of her own fate once she discovers the terrible truth in that room; she “burst into a tumult of sobbing that contained both pity for his other victims and also a dreadful anguish to know [that she], too, was one of them” (30). Yet her fear for deadly punishment has in it no guilty consciousness of having done anything wrong. When the piano-tuner declares her undeservingness of the death sentence—

‘You do not deserve this,’ he said.

‘Who can say what I deserve or no?’ I said. ‘I’ve done nothing; but that may be sufficient reason for condemning me.’

‘You disobeyed him,’ he said. ‘That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.’

‘I only did what he knew I would.’ (40)

Here the narrator defends herself by diverting attention from her disobedience to her husband’s irrational request and the perverted, sadistic intention of his scheme, fully aware that she would fail. In fact, what contemporary feminist scholars should point out is her culpability in another aspect—i.e. *her decision* to do nothing against her husband’s fiendish behaviour which is a crime far more serious than her disobeying his orders. If the narrator’s rebellious act is seen as a praiseworthy display of courage or a struggle to hold a better position in gender relation, her failures to strive to escape, to speak the sentences quoted above to the face of her husband, or even to be defiant

or independent in the face of her punishment are all very disappointing. In other words, she cannot declare herself innocent of the crime and at the same time submits so easily to the punishment, to the nonsensical notion of “martyrdom,” “sacrifice” (39-40) or ever to feel ashamed of the mark if her lover could see it at all.

To continue reading “The Bloody Chamber” with gender in mind, we now reach the representation of the narrator’s mother. This glorious figure, very different from any mother in traditional fairy tales, does not even exist in “Bluebeard.” She is Carter’s unique creation. What is most remarkable about her is that she displays overt masculine characteristics in order to combat the Marquis—

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, ... her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father’s service revolver. (43)

Surprisingly, the role of male warrior/savior on a horse coming to the rescue of the heroine is not only given to a woman but the description also particularly highlights her garments and body as female, albeit disheveled, wild and unfeminine. The narrator even claims that the reader has never seen her before because a lady warrior is indeed non-existent in older narratives. Finally the mother overcomes the Marquis, the figure of absolute authority so far, by way of violent and modern assertion—a bullet through his head. While it is tempting to brand her as a male imitator and disapprove of her as a commendable

female role model, her part as a protective and devoted mother is still indisputably emphasized. Although it seems too ideal to be true, Sheets has pointed out that “the mother has performed legendary feats of male and female heroism” (1991:653). She does not in any way discard the female nurturing quality at the expense of her masculine capability—“my eagle-featured, indomitable mother... 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” (2). Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Heidmann holds a slightly different opinion from Sheets and sees the mother’s function as that of a “mock-heroic figure that makes fun of alternative feminist myths” (2009:54); while Manley conversely sees her as the role model, and the provider of her daughter’s story and the opportunity to study music (1998:75). All these sound plausible, but focusing on the development of the narrator one might ask how this female character specifically contributes to the growth of the narrator. The answer, I believe, rests in the final identification of the narrator with her mother, in their similar status as widows.

To resume our journey with the protagonist, we now reach the last stage of her experience, widowhood. The story closes as the narrator, now a young widow, inherits the wealth and establishes a new life with her lover and her mother in perfect harmony. In a way this differs from several archetypal female bildungsroman of the nineteenth-century such as Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, the accomplishment of narrator’s journey here being not marriage so much as the wrecking of it. Marriage, in Carter’s vision, is nothing but a terrible state in which wife suffers a lack of autonomy and

is oppressed physically and mentally. Even before the narrator experiences horror at the bloody chamber, she is isolated and out of place in her new residence. In spite of her eagerness to marry, the fact that her whole life must be shared with this stranger is so obviously doubted and shunned that readers might rightly wonder, together with the protagonist, how soon it will come to an end. In fact, when compared with the depressing experience of marriage, her time as a widow seems particularly liberating and wonderful. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Heidmann observes sceptically that Carter's happy ending is an irony to conventional narratives as the three characters "live happily ever after in a *ménage à trois*" at the end" (2009:54). The household of three having a sexual relationship might not be an ideal feminist vision when there are two women and one man but in this case the narrator has a lover instead of a husband and, with a mother who provides love and security, it becomes a small, comfortable, matriarchal community. This idealized domestic arrangement is all the more interesting because its only male member is not a man in a typical sense. Robin Ann Sheets details the contesting receptions of this character in her essay, pointing that the second husband in "The Bloody Chamber"

has neither the power of the Marquis nor the glamor of a fairy tale prince... Despite this limitation, he is a sympathetic listener, loyal, tender, and sensitive... However, in a culture that eroticizes domination, it is not surprising that some readers are reluctant to accept Jean-Yves as the hero. His relationship with the narrator does not appear to have a sexual dimension. According to

Patricia Duncker, "while blindness, as symbolic castration, may signal the end of male sexual aggression, it is also mutilation..." [D]id Carter feel compelled to eliminate all signs of a physical attraction? Must women choose between a dangerous but exciting sexuality based on male dominance, or a sweet, safe, and utterly asexual relationship between equals? (1991:654-5)

To engage in Sheets's argument it seems that the choice has been made and the woman in the story chooses the latter type of relationship because to choose the first does not lead to an enjoyable or healthy sexual relationship but suffering and death. However, while the figure of Jean-Yves could be a potential alternative for a happy domestic life for women, it might seem strange that the narrator is drawn towards a type of masculinity so opposite to that of the Marquis. In fact, the two men have nothing in common except their sex and, perhaps, their shared notion of female transgression as a punishable crime. In terms of physical and mental strength, Jean-Yves seems to exemplify the image of effeminacy compared with the manliness of the Marquis. When the young bride is trying to restore her senses in the music room after the shocking experience in the bloody chamber, a knock on the door reveals "not the massive, irredeemable bulk of my husband but the slight, stooping figure of the piano-tuner, and he looked far more terrified of me than my mother's daughter would have been of the Devil himself" (32). While the awkward narrative choice of "my mother's daughter" instead of "I" draws us away from the gravity of the situation and reaffirms her position as a daughter instead of a wife, the fact that Jean-Yves is scared of his mistress as an omnipotent figure

greater than she is of the Devil seems ludicrous. Another point I must differ from Sheets is upon how the relationship between the young pianist and the piano tuner can really be called “between equals.” While the Marquis is much older and wealthier than his wife, the piano-tuner is young—“scarcely more than a boy” (34) and is positioned even below the narrator in terms of wealth. Above all, Jean-Yves is not only underprivileged but he is also blind and has to be led by his mistress to the execution yard and, perhaps, in most domestic matters later in their lives. His blindness does not only make it impossible for him to objectify the protagonist under a gaze but, together with his age and timidity, it also connotes impotency. In spite of these womanly qualities, Jean-Yves is still able to attract his young mistress with sweetness and heart-throbbing gentility. While the Marquis impales his bride with his phallus, the narrator says the piano-tuner “hurt me very piercingly” through “his lovely, blind humanity” (33) that makes her faint. It seems rather curious that the narrator, having undergone sadomasochistic sexual practice and so bravely witnessed evidence of the massacre, should be so delicate and yielding towards his tender looks and such a feeble version of masculinity; yet it does surely threaten the stereotype of male sexual attraction and prepare us for the union between the narrator and Jean-Yves in the end.

At this last stage of widowhood, apart from love, domestic peace and safety, the young woman finally has room for personal aspiration and creative pursuit, as can be seen in the little money she has and a business of her own. When she leaves home as a bride, she must also leave at home part of her musical career—there are “scores for which there had been no room

in [her] trunks” and “the concert programmes [she]’d abandoned” (1). As a wife she could only play in the music room for the ears of her husband but now she can set up a music school and has a real profession to sustain her life. Furthermore, this blissful model of widowhood does not apply to the narrator alone but also to her mother. Since her father never returns from the wars, her mother is freed from male domination although it entails poverty that forces her to sell all her possessions to send her daughter to a music college. In the end, the description of the mother’s victorious arrival contains the reference to her “widow’s weeds” (41) and the revolver, a legacy from her husband; both of which remind us of the absence of masculine authority over her.

Discussion of the different phases of the narrator’s life might have ended here as the story closes, but our reappraisal of “The Bloody Chamber” as a female bildungsroman can still stir up the question of the *absent* stage in the traditional genre—the one that usually concludes female novels of education from the nineteenth century up to present—motherhood. In fact, if all significant female phases were to be included, the young pianist should have undergone parturition and parenting, since having children has always been a very important and specifically feminine role and a prominent way of closing for a number of female bildungsroman novels from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* up to Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* and Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*. Michele Grossman makes an interesting observation that the bloody chamber might, apart from being the torture chamber of the castle and the metaphorical female heart, implicitly suggest “the bloody chamber of the

womb” (1988:157). If that is the case, the fact that, in the end, the narrator manages to “seal” the door so that the husband’s spirit “will never return” to it (44), could very well abolish the possibility of childbearing. To explain this break with tradition, one may argue that Carter is simply following the original tale whose heroine only remarries “a very worthy gentleman” (Lang 2010) but whether she has a child or not is unspecified or that, since the mother position has already been taken and exemplified in this story, the stage is dispensable. On the other hand, a childless heroine might remind one of the second-wave feminists, whose attitudes tend to disfavour motherhood, or simply of a modern-day society in which the concept of maternity is much devalued. Rosemary Gillespie, for example, studies the increasing trend of the female being childfree⁶ in recent years and describes how “the notion of motherhood as constitutive of feminine gender identity and social role, and as desirable and fulfilling for all women” began to fade away as many women’s “rejection of motherhood exemplifies how modernity

has given rise to wider possibilities for women to shape a fulfilling gender identity that is separate and uncoupled from the hegemonic ideal of motherhood” (2003:122, 134). This explanation goes well with the focus of the protagonist’s career instead of domestic role at the end of Carter’s short story. Refusing to submit to social expectation as a mother, the childfree heroine is not at all troubled by the social stigma attached to a woman being single and childless. On the contrary, she is exempted from the burden of child-raising as she finds a freer and more valuable role for herself as a music teacher in a community, as opposed to the confined and secluded existence with the Marquis. As it is often an ultimate goal of bildungsroman stories that the protagonists are able to adjust themselves, to compromise between individual aspirations and social restriction and finally to be reintegrated into the community; Carter’s heroine can be said to have achieved her goal.

Finally, as our interest lies in the bildungsroman genre, the development of the protagonist is of special importance and it is obvious that in the end the narrator is significantly a different person from that of the beginning. First of all, she has gained more self-confidence as she is finally free from the *panopticon*, the constant physical and psychological vigilance of her husband. Kathleen Manley opines that while the narrator used to be “so conscious of people’s whispering and looking at her [at the opera, a] stronger sense of her subjectivity now allows her increased freedom from caring about what other people think [in the end as she says]—“We know we are the source of many whisperings and much gossip but the three of us know the truth of it and mere chatter can never harm us” (1998:80).

⁶ As the terminology of the state of not giving birth to children has previously existed only in terms of an absence or deficiency, as in “infertility” or “childlessness,” the term *childfree* has been used by those who emphasize that childlessness can be an active and fulfilling choice (Bartlett qtd. in Gillespie 2003). Early studies of this phenomenon include Elaine Campbell’s *The Childless Marriage: An Exploratory Study of Couples Who Do Not Want Children* (1985); Jane Bartlett’s *Will You Be Mother: Women Who Choose to Say No* (1996); and Jean A. Veevers’s “Voluntary Childlessness” in *Contemporary Families and Alternative Lifestyles* (1983).

Secondly, on the narrator's part, one valuable lesson she receives from transgressing her husband's rule is the recognition of a certain level of female bonding with the Marquis's previous wives. This happens in a situation similar to that which Buckley calls "moments of insight... when the reality breaks through the fog of delusion" found in many male bildungsroman novels (1974:22) or "the awakening... [consisting of] brief internal epiphanic moments" which is common in the female bildungsroman (*The Voyage In* qtd. in Feng 1998:11). While in Perrault's "Bluebeard," that moment of revelation in the bloody chamber only strikes terror in the young wife, in Carter's it enlightens the female protagonist and thoroughly affects her intellectually and emotionally. Although the narrator at the beginning is jealous and makes spiteful observations against all of the Marquis's ex-wives, she finally identifies herself with them after their horrible encounter. She finds that she differs but little in terms of fate from those predecessors, all victims of male brutality—"one false step, oh, my poor, dear girl, next in the fated sisterhood of his wives; one false step and into the abyss of the dark you stumbled" (29). Her later sobbing contains deep pity for these female sufferers, now acknowledged as *sisters*, which connotes a common experience and an emotional bond that replaces the hostile feeling against them as one time-competitors/lovers of the same man. Lastly and most importantly, as Buckley suggests that a bildungsroman hero essentially "reappraise[s] his values" in the end (1974:17) and the young widow in "The Bloody Chamber" clearly gets over the infatuation that brings about her earlier misfortune and almost costs her her life—she lets go of material obsession and wealth. This striking change is clear when she gives up almost all her inherited

money to charity and turns the castle into a school for the blind, something that would be unimaginable for her to do at the beginning of the story. She possibly does so because she wants to disassociate herself from her late husband's property, but more likely because she has now realized something of immense value *beyond* the material level, that is herself, her autonomy and the family/maternal bond, which simply annoyed her before marriage. That she has gained knowledge about female sexuality has been discussed earlier and, together with that, she has also discovered the meaning of female compassion and has outgrown naïveté and the adolescent appetite for material matters. These are the culmination of the narrator's lesson and are the markers of her personal adjustment to enter maturity in the end; and except for the resignation of material obsession, these seem to apply much more meaningfully for the female characters and readers than males.

Having been through the journey with Carter's female protagonist, it is obvious that "The Bloody Chamber" only partly conforms to the conventions of bildungsroman novels. The use of the first-person narrator, which is "a point of view foreign to the traditional folklore" (Lokke 1988:8), is common in bildungsroman fiction as it best captures the personal experience and strong emotions of the young protagonist. The choice of narrative voice, in spite of the few words she has against her husband, can also signify the power of language of the woman, whose thoughts and expressions used to be marginal, if not altogether absent, in traditional narratives. It is even apt to say that Carter has greatly expanded the potential of the long-established genres as well as that of the female characters; and when these two combine, the short story no longer simply

preaches the flaw of female curiosity or disobedience as in the original fairy tale, nor does it trace the apprenticeship and social ascension of the traditional male bildungsroman, nor does it culminate in marriage and motherhood as in a number of female novels of education. Instead, this coming-of-age story of Angela Carter demonstrates that sexual knowledge, freedom and healthy companionship in place of oppressive patriarchy can be central parts of female education and maturity. The writer not only subverts the common stereotypical gender representation but also argues how controversial issues such as eroticism and sadomasochistic sexuality can possibly be desirable while matrimony, principally of social value, can be tyrannical. Lastly, the discussion of “The Bloody Chamber” within the framework of various genres can prove rewarding because Carter’s ingenious adaptation, as it deviates from the norm, helps to uncover the patriarchal ideologies that have always been hidden under these genres. The fairy tale, for example, usually draws a sharp distinction between good and bad women and allows no variations in between; whereas pornography perpetually eroticizes or objectifies female, or renders them thoroughly passive. Gothic fiction has almost always violently victimized and oppressed its female characters, apart from depicting them as two-dimensional afterthoughts. Bildungsroman novels normally seek to reintegrate a grown-up woman, presumably mature and sensible, back into society not through social accomplishment but through conformity—via marriage and maternity. These are only parts of convention and elements of restriction, which remain to be exposed, questioned and redefined in order to reestablish a better understanding of—and fairer relations between—genders, in literature as well as in the real world.

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