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THE ARCTIC  
UNIVERSITY  
OF NORWAY

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

## **“But you can’t get me out of the story”**

*Feminist Revision of Fairy Tales in Short Stories by Margaret Atwood  
and Angela Carter*

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**Paula Ryggvik Mikalsen**

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter are but two of many authors who have appropriated the fairy tale genre and used its plethora of tales as intertext and playground for their artistic vision. This thesis will look selected stories from *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) and *Good Bones* (1992). These collections engage with the fairy-tale canon, in both form, content and intertext, and underlines the efficacy of using fairy tales to offer critique of patriarchal mechanisms and harmful practices. This thesis will examine seven short stories from these collections by using poststructuralist and feminist theory to analyse the process. The focus will be on whether it is possible to revision fairy tales using the traditional elements and topoi of the genre and still create narratives that can satisfy feminist values, without simply reversing the gender roles, i.e. the recipe for a “fractured fairy tale. Moreover, the thesis will give an account of the fairy-tale genre, the folktale, the fantasy genre and the Gothic fairy tale, to adumbrate the traits and elements that Carter and Atwood employ. The main theoretical framework will consist of using theories by poststructuralist feminist theorists like Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, and poststructuralist Jacques Derrida. By giving an account of their theories on deconstruction of language, *l'écriture féminine*, *jouissance*, and meaning-making, this thesis will the framework to examine whether Carter and Atwood manages to rewrite fairy tales implemented with feminist values, without adopting the style of male writers. Furthermore, reception theory will be used to explain the popularity and tenacity of the fairy-tale genre, exemplified by contemporary Disney movies and the genre of fan fiction. Finally, reception theory will demonstrate the obstacles the fairy tale genre's popularity presents for feminist revision.



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*“People think that stories are shaped by people.  
In fact, it's the other way around.” Terry Pratchett<sup>1</sup>*

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## 1 Introduction

What this thesis aims to explore is the rewriting of fairy tales into feminist fairy tales. The main issue is whether any attempt at rewriting leads to the text becoming a “fractured fairy tale” (Kuykendall and Sturm, 40), that is, a rewritten classical fairy tale with reversed gender roles. This type of revision was predominantly the fashion in feminist rewritings in the 1970s and 80s, but in the current gender political climate of the 2010s, this carnivalistic strategy does no more give a positive contribution to the fairy tale tradition so much as promote cisgender, stereotypical representation. This means that a successful revision of one or several fairy tales requires a makeover in style and content, or, to use folkloric jargon, modern *contamination*. However, should the fairy tale genre fail to support modern *contamination*, one must then write new tales using imagery and the format of the fairy tale tradition as a way to develop the genre as a whole into something “new and genuine in its own right” (Jack Zipes qtd in Kuykendall and Sturm, 39). Judging by the works of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, this is the only way to bring fairy tales into the modern age. The question then remains; will these new tales carry the same function of the original fairy tales; will it moralize or try to educate its readers?

Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter have both injected themselves into this project of rewriting fairy tales, and as magic realists, they are well acquainted with the elements of the supernatural. Carter’s translation of *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* influenced her to write her own versions, a collection of short stories called *The Bloody Chamber*. Atwood uses fairy tales, myths and legends as intertexts in her books, poetry, paintings and short stories. The short story form has proved to be instrumental in feminist rewriting, as will be discussed further in section 2.4. One might say that Carter’s and Atwood’s literary project is the promotion of gender empowerment, and the exposing of patriarchal mechanisms in literature

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<sup>1</sup> (*Witches Abroad*, 1)

and popular culture. Their method is deconstructive writing, as part of poststructuralist approach. This allows for revision of sexist patterns and stereotyping of characters.

The thesis will use four short stories from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), namely "The Bloody Chamber", "The Snow Child", "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride"; two from Margaret Atwood's *Good Bones* (1992) "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women" and "Unpopular Gals Speak Up"; and "Bluebeard's Egg" from *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) as the primary sources of analysis. I will analyze the content of the respective tales in relation to their original fairy tale intertexts, from *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, *The Beauty and the Beast*<sup>2</sup> by Leprince de Beaumont and *The Collected Works of the Brothers Grimm*<sup>3</sup>, in order to examine whether feminist rewriting is possible through poststructuralist theory and deconstructive writing. I will show that through the use of parody, deconstruction, and humor, Carter's and Atwood's approach contributes to empowerment; focuses on true representation; suggests alternative endings and possibilities for the genre. In employing revision, both authors are opting for a change in the way we perceive fairy tales as a conduit to a deeper understanding of the world. Furthermore, I will use Stuart Hall's reception theory to explain the lingering tenacity and popularity of the fairy tale genre; the consequences of the naturalization of perception using Disney-movies as examples, and discuss whether this process interferes with feminist rewriting.

I chose Angela Carter primarily because of *The Bloody Chamber*, my first meeting with her, so to speak, and our shared fascination with fairy tales. Her prose is mercilessly pointed and beautiful, leaving room for interpretation but also bafflement. The tales of *The Bloody Chamber* affected the way I read other postmodern and rewritten fairy tales, in the sense that her focus is on the infinite potential of language, agency and intertextuality. Carter's words are laden with meaning and purpose, thus providing a rich and enigmatic bibliography of topoi worth examining further. Similarly, Margaret Atwood's humor and satiric tone sharpen her feminist polemics without coming across as morose or bitter. Her short prose is genuine and tongue-in-cheek in a format that imparts meaning and intertextuality in a flash, hence the name "flash fiction" (Gina Wisker, 65). Her touch and grasp on the universality of her subject matter is impressive. She reworks fairy tales with the agenda of giving her characters the

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<sup>2</sup> First published in 1756.

<sup>3</sup> First published in 1812.

chance to speak up, and to expose the unfair treatment and perpetuation of derogatory stereotypes.

It is interesting that two authors from different literary national traditions have chosen to rewrite fairy tales. Although they are not the only ones to do this, both Carter and Atwood are literary giants, and they have contributed much to the fabulist tradition, and magic realism on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Their works have drawn critical attention to a genre that has primarily supported and perpetuated patriarchal values for centuries. Where they differ, is in tone and perhaps in definition of what they classify as feminism. Nevertheless, by rewriting and re-imagining well-known fairy tales they enable exposure of how sexism and phallogocentric behavior pacifies the reader. Rewriting demands that the reader take an active part in evaluating the implications of these “ideologically harmless” stories (Susan Koshy, 81). If the tales of Perrault and the Grimm Brothers may be said to perpetuate images and stereotypes that are unfit for our time, then Carter and Atwood would say that it is high time to let someone else tell new stories.

### **1.1 Angela Carter (1940-1992)**

Born May 7<sup>th</sup> 1940, Angela Olive Carter (née Stalker) would grow up to work as a journalist like her father, and later study English Literature. Her work as a writer places her as a fabulist and a magical realist, compared to Latin American writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. She spent several years travelling widely from 1969 to 1972, staying in Japan for two years, experiences which inspired *Fireworks* (1974). In 1978 she published her feminist treatise on Marquis de Sade (*The Sadeian Woman*), which was controversial to say the least, but her argument was no less a contribution to feminist criticism of female sexuality and empowerment. By presenting female sexuality on an equal footing with its male counterpart, Sade, Carter theorized, was supporting a more positive attitude towards female desire. Women were not passive baby-factories, but sensuous and sometimes sexually aggressive beings. Throughout her writing career, Carter presents a similar attitude (perhaps not as graphic as Sade’s, but not far from it) concerning the subversion and liberation of female sexuality. She has nevertheless been criticized for her positive reading of Sade’s work, particularly by radical feminist Andrew Dworkin.

Carter’s characters are seldom passive, but searching, yearning, expanding out of themselves, and sometimes even larger than life (*Nights at the Circus*, 1984). Matters of the flesh are upfront and graphic, but her gaze focuses on the female body as subject, not object, thus empowering and vocalizing women who dare to take up space in more than the literal sense.

Carter's early death at 51 was tragic, but her passing attracted more critical attention to her work, and thus she became established as one of England's most influential writers, post-mortem<sup>4</sup>. Salman Rushdie writes in his introduction to *Burning Your Boats* that Carter's cult-status has made her the most studied contemporary author at British universities, a fact she would have enjoyed immensely had she lived to experience it (xiv). Her "puddings" might be "overegged" at times (ibid), but her place in literature is nevertheless cemented.

Carter's feminist views provide an essential backdrop that becomes apparent when reading her short stories in particular. She weaves landscapes of magic and horror, interlacing the Gothic with the satirical, and the exotic with the mundane. Her female characters are active and assertive beings who refuse to be intimidated by aggressive male sexuality. The imagery in her tales is instrumental to her agenda, to "[make] the mystery sexually explicit" (Koshy, 82). The mystery in question is how *experience* is structured, a scope of inquiry which takes Carter deeper into the fundamentals of the moral tale than Perrault ever did (83). The tapestry of *The Bloody Chamber* does not attempt to hide the effects of the historic injustice inflicted on women. It is a baldachin of authority symbolizing women as autonomous agents in their own lives. As she read Charles Perrault's *Contes de temps passé*<sup>5</sup>, and Marquis de Sade simultaneously, she realized that the former's project was to educate women in the ways of the world, lending experience to gain experience, as it were. Although the latter, Carter argued, "complicate[d] the reductionism of pornographic archetypes", there was still a fundamental connection between fairy tales and Sade's work (Soman Chainani, 219). She wrote *The Bloody Chamber* as an amalgam between the *The Sadeian Woman* and Perrault's tales, and the short story combined with the fairy tale genre proved to be the perfect format for her ideology.

## 1.2 Margaret Atwood

Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1939. Her literary career has won her several awards, national as well as international. She spent her childhood years in the Quebecois woodlands, which instigated her environmental activism, and influenced her writing on the metaphorical and literal use of wilderness for instance in *Wilderness Tips* (1991). Although initially known through her work as a poet, her novel *The Handmaid's Tale*

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<sup>4</sup> List in The Times, "The 50 greatest British Writers since 1945", accessed 20.04.2015

<sup>5</sup> First published in 1697.

(1985) is perhaps her best known and most highly acclaimed piece of writing that keeps demonstrating its relevance concerning women's reproductive rights (Wisker, 1).

Atwood is a writer who wears many hats, and her exuberant genre-play has placed literary Canada on the map. She is a magic realist, weaving the fantastic into the fabric of reality, like Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson and Toni Morrison (Wisker, 2). Her feminist writings explore what it means to be a woman, and how the perspectives, experiences and values pertaining to women matter. She nevertheless contests the reasoning for labelling her work "feminist", arguing that she is a writer who, before anything else, writes for people who read books (5)<sup>6</sup>. *The Edible Woman* (1969) for example was, in her own words, a protofeminist work, and even though she had read Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan "behind locked doors", there was no active women's movement at the time, and therefore no formal framework to work with (Reingard Nischik, 19).

One might ask why use her works as examples of feminist fairy tales, when Atwood denies any affiliation to a feminist framework, but that does not entail that Atwood is not a feminist writer. Atwood's concern with promoting women's perspectives is a given characteristic of feminist writing. Canadian folklore has clever grandmothers, fierce fighters and mothers galore, and Atwood is only one of many authors recognizing this fact. Her works reveal a strong awareness of her own identity as a white, female Canadian writer, and her connection to political and human rights issues, but most of all; it reveals her ability to look at the bigger picture. As far as feminism is concerned, Atwood is acutely aware of the changes within the movement itself and therefore in a position to question the shifts in trends.

Her interest in fairy tales was inspired at an early age by a copy of the unexpurgated version of the Grimm Tales; a meeting she recalls scared her parents, but thrilled her (MPRdotORG, Youtube-clip, accessed 20.02.15). Later she would defend the Grimms on the topic of sexism in the collected stories, "Racist, yes...But sexist? It seems to me that various traits were quite evenly spread" (qtd in Haase, 291). Although some of Atwood's work makes explicit fairy tale references, more often they serve as intertexts to highlight sexual politics and, in the broader sense, to expose dominance-, and submission hierarchies. She deconstructs the fairy tale intertext by using a known fairy tale topos, reversing the gender of the hero, thus shifting female perspectives into a subject position and displacing the original plot (Koshy, 86-87).

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<sup>6</sup> Which is in itself, a very feminist statement.

Sarah Wilson identifies five connected purposes for Atwood's intertexts;

1. to indicate the quality and nature of her characters' cultural contexts; 2. to signify her characters' - and readers' - entrapment in pre-existing patterns; 3. to comment self-consciously on these patterns – including the embedded fairy tales, myths, and related popular traditional stories – often by deconstructing constricting literary, folkloric, and cultural plots with “transgressive” language and filling gaps of female narrative; 4. to comment self-consciously on the frame story and other intertexts; and 5. to structure the characters' imaginative or “magical” release from externally imposed patterns, offering the possibility for transformation for the novel's characters, for the country they partly represent, and for all human beings. (*Sexual Politics*, 34)

Using and mixing traits from the Gothic, fantasy and science fiction, Atwood projects scenarios from this, or another, world into the future. In so doing, she actively encourages speculation in the hope that her readers will elicit change before disaster occurs. Many scholars have condemned her for appropriation of non-Canadian folk tales and source material (*Sexual Politics*, 6), thus allowing for much of her work to be harshly criticized. Nevertheless, her contribution to Canadian literature and literature in general is a force to be reckoned with. Her short story fairy tales found in *Good Bones* are not as widely known as Carter's, and have therefore received little criticism, the exception being essays on *Bluebeard's Egg* and Sarah Wilson's *Margaret Atwood's Fairy Tale Sexual Politics* from 1993. Koshy has also done work on her short fiction, however there is little academic writing to be found on the selected Atwood short stories in this thesis, therefore, most of the interpretations concerning her short stories will be my own.

## 2 Theory and Criticism

Fairy tales deal with power, says Jack Zipes (qtd in *Sexual Politics*, 33). The power of the fairy tale is contingent upon its literary heritage dating back centuries, from Boccaccio's *Decameron* in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and extending onwards past C.S Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* from the 1950s. But what are fairy tales, and why is the genre so popular among feminist writers? Primarily because fairy tales are ubiquitous not just in the literary sense but also across media platforms. Traditional fairy tales are rewritten as screenplays, movies and for the theatre these days; and well-known fairy tale themes and topoi are used as intertexts in postmodern novels and poetry. Utilizing a genre that already has a foothold with most readers, the familiarity of the fairy tale lends the writer both an extended audience and raw source material. This chapter will present the fairy tale as a genre before elaborating on why the genre gained popularity with feminist writers, despite heavy feminist *criticism*. This is not an attempt to establish a taxonomy of fairy tale tropes, or branches of the genre, but it is important to understand the literary tradition both Carter and Atwood are building on. This, along with an account of feminist criticism of the genre and post-structuralist theory, will lay the foundation of my discussion of rewriting fairy tales, and why the phenomenon acts not only as a continuation of the literary tradition as such but something new entirely.

### 2.1 Fairy tales

According to 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and 20<sup>th</sup> century literary critic and writer John Updike (Marina Warner, xiv), children have enough imagination between them and should be discouraged from indulging in fairy stories. Both argue that fairy tales are just children's stories replete with senseless fantasies and an excuse for escapism. What neither critic takes into account is the popularity and the adaptive tenacity of the fairy tale. It is to this day one of the most popular literary genres for children and grown-ups alike. Stuart Hall would attribute this tendency to the naturalization of the fairy tale imagery; the coded language of the fairy tale has been adapted and adopted into a discursive practice, which, if introduced at an early age, becomes a product not of deconstruction but of nature to the recipient (qtd in Durham & Kellner, 167). In other words, if young children keep hearing fairy tales, the encoded messages in them concerning gender patterns or behavioural cues will become inextricable from their perception of the world. I will return to Hall's theory in section 2.2.1, and there discuss the consequences of the naturalization of perception and particularly how it represents a major obstacle for feminist writers.

### 2.1.1 Fairy tale vs. folktale

What separates the fairy tale from similar genres like the folktale, *the fantastic*, fantasy or the Gothic? In his monograph *Kunstmärchen* from 1977, Jens Tismar defines the fairy tale as separate from the folktale in the sense that it is *written* by a single, identifiable author and that it is a synthetic, elaborate construction in comparison to the simple, community-inspired folktale. However, these differences do not mean that one genre supersedes the other, quite the contrary. The nature of the fairy tale defies definition unless its relationship to other genres like oral tales, legends, novels etc. is examined as well, and this includes other literary fairy tales that it “uses, adapts, and remodels during the narrative conception of the author” (*Companion to Fairy Tales*, xv).

The crux of the fairy tale is the art of appropriation, which means that it borrows and embellishes motifs and signs from the folkloric tradition. This was a necessity for the genre to survive in the modern world, therefore the “wonder tales” or *contes merveilleux* were prolifically put to paper in the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, thus legitimizing their introduction to the literate public sphere. Although the tales were adapted to address the aristocratic and middle classes, the themes, beliefs and topoi originated with peasants, and it was their material that founded the new literary tradition (*Companion to Fairy Tales*, xvi), a tradition that permeates magic realism, fantasy, and young adult (YA) fiction to this day.

*The Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928) by the Russian structuralist Vladimir Propp has become a key reference text in fairy tale studies, particularly his focus on the paradigmatic construction of the “wonder tale”, a form that is still popular in Russian folktales. Propp locates a pattern of 31 *functions* that make up the fairy tale. They are however not elements of the narrative, “they *are* the narrative” (Richard Harland, 154). Although he meticulously outlines these *functions* that drive character and plot, his approach, albeit useful as a reference, is irrelevant to other non-Russian traditions (Steven Swann Jones, 15). Propp does grant that his *functions* do not apply to later *literary* fairy tales (Harland, 154). The only constant trait that passed on from the wonder tale to the fairy tale, is the transformation, “the wondrous change” (*Companion to Fairy Tales*, xvii-xviii), which not only instils wonder but distinguishes the literary fairy tale from other modern short literary genres (xviii). Warner also argues that transformation or metamorphosis defines the fairy tale genre, more so than any supernatural presence or the promise of a happy ending. The *wonder tale* being what it is, a happy ending is almost guaranteed as a reward for the naïve hero’s tribulations. Ultimately

the power of definition lies with the author/narrator and how he or she arranges their story to induce wonder (xix).

### 2.1.2 The fantastic

The French-Bulgarian philosopher, Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic* (1975), coins the terms *the fantastic*, *the marvellous* and *the uncanny*. Each represents a direction a story may take when dealing with supernatural or paranormal elements. The fantastic occurs in the moment when the reader suspends disbelief, but it is a fleeting phenomenon, existing on the borders of its companions *the uncanny* and *the marvellous*, rather than being a genre on its own. Todorov argues that the Gothic genre supports these terms, considering that tendencies of *the uncanny* and *the marvellous* are prominent in the works of Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole respectively, but the Gothic carries only adjacent evidence of *the fantastic* (41-42). Despite the occurrence of fantastic elements, there is a distinction between *the fantastic* and fairy tales as there is between fantasy and fairy tales. Disregarding the penchant for the supernatural, the fairy tale never requires the reader to suspend disbelief; the reader simply accepts that another set of laws govern fairyland. On the other hand, we can connect fairy tales to *the marvellous*:

...the marvelous (sic) corresponds to an unknown phenomenon, never seen as yet, still to come – hence to a future; in the uncanny, on the other hand, we refer the inexplicable to known facts, to a previous experience, and thereby to the past. As for the fantastic itself, the hesitation which characterizes it cannot be situated, by and large, except in the present. (Todorov, 42)

The connection between a genre that deals with the ephemera of the unknown and one that uses the knowledge of the past to predict future outcomes is found in the subtle hint of optimism in the fairy tale. The future, essentially, is uncharted territory and by extension, frightening territory. Nevertheless, if no explorer ever set foot on new land, the world would have been a smaller, and perhaps poorer, place. One has to believe, or at least be encouraged to believe that the world has more to offer than what exists within the confines of our lives. This “heroic optimism” (Warner, xvi) serves two purposes in the fairy tale; it demands that the reader or listener is open to change; and the belief that this change can influence the hero’s/heroine’s, and by extension, the reader’s circumstances.

### 2.1.3 Fantasy

Fantasy is a genre in its own right, with a hegemonic structure that supports multiple sub-genres. The argument is that fantasy only emerged as a genre in response to the emergence of mimesis (realism) as a genre. However, the presence of fantasy tropes like magical creatures,

wondrous and strange beasts, spells and dragons can be found as early as ancient Greek and Roman texts, and in ancient Mesopotamia ca. 2100 BC (Mendlesohn and James, 7). The earliest written forms of fantastic encounters known to most of the literate population is the *epic, the epic poem and the saga*. *The Iliad, Prose Edda, Gilgamesh* and *Beowulf* are the prime sources of inspiration and influence with many modern fantasy writers (7-8).

Farah Mendlesohn proposes a system in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* that classifies works of fantasy into five categories. *The portal-quest fantasy* is where the protagonist leaves his or her world through a portal to enter an unknown place, the most famous example being *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (1). *The immersive fantasy* constructs a world through ironic mimesis, and assumes that the reader is part of this world, like in China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (63). *The intrusion fantasy* is usually connected to the Gothic genre, like *Dracula* (128). *The liminal fantasy* estranges the reader from the fantastic elements described by the protagonist, like the short story "Yes, But Today is Tuesday" by Joan Aiken (191); and lastly *the irregulars*, works that could fall in line with all and none of the above. Mendlesohn would place most magic realists as creators of immersive fantasies (228), but places the fairy tale with the intrusive fantasy (146) because it functions as an intrusion into the life of the protagonist and thus forms a trait within the fantasy genre. However, she claims that the fairy tale pertains more to the world of fancy than fantasy (ibid).

Scholars like Bruno Bettelheim, Axel Olrik and Max Lüthi argue that fantasy rules the fairy tale genre, a trait that helps to further distinguish the fairy tale from other forms of the folktale. The introduction of magic and fantasy to a narrative plays a crucial role in the trials of the protagonist; it may take the form of a magic mirror, a cloak of invisibility or a talking cat, and it becomes an invocation of the fantastic<sup>7</sup> and the marvelous (Jones, 10-11). This enables the fairy tale to use "the poetic and exaggerated symbolism" (11) of fantasy to map the emotional turmoil of any individual in dealing with reality. Jones postulates that the *raison d'être* of fairy tales is to provide an outlet for subconscious feelings, fears and desires, which would be yet another reason why fairy tales are so appealing (ibid). Furthermore, the use of fantasy also acts as a manifestation of a spiritual awareness; the world depicted in fairy tales (and by extension, our world) is a moral one, as evidenced by it rewarding those who are good and punishing the wicked. By showering gold and jewels on the kind protagonist and forcing wicked queens to jump in to a pit of snakes, the supernatural aid enforces a kind of cosmic

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<sup>7</sup> Not to be confused with *the fantastic* (Todorov)

karma (13). However, we cannot expect this kind of accountability from reality. The reward-system in our world, insofar as its existence can be verified, is far from as fair as the fairy tale world.

Despite his Russian-centric paradigm, Vladimir Propp agrees with Bettelheim, Lüthi and Joseph Campbell on the typical characteristics of the fairy tale genre, in addition to the use of fantasy: the protagonist must be confronted with and solve a problem, usually by going on a hero's journey<sup>8</sup> (Jones, 14); upon solving the dilemma, the protagonist will experience a happy ending (17); and thirdly, the audience is strongly encouraged to identify with the unambiguously positively depicted protagonist (ibid). However, the fairy tale's crucial defining feature is found not in its theory and magical get-up but in its core; the inherent call to make us wonder.

#### 2.1.4 The Gothic fairy tale

I mentioned earlier that both Atwood and Carter make use of Gothic elements, and primarily those pertaining to the Gothic fairy tale, a sub-genre of Gothic fiction. Notably, the genre emerged because of feminist and psychoanalytic discourse, which makes sense if one was to read motifs like windswept castles, dungeons and dark rooms as metaphors of suppressed erotic and neurotic emotions. Giving voice to the narratives of the oppressed and suppressed is very much a feminist endeavour. Other motifs of the Gothic fairy tale include dark forests, murderous maniacs, rape, incest, insanity, torture, demons, ghouls, vampires and werewolves (Koshy, 132). Ellen Moers comments: "in Gothic writing fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, all with one intent" (qtd in Koshy, 134), namely to frighten its readers. Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* employs several of the above-mentioned motifs, and more, as I will show in my analysis of the eponymous short story (see section 5.2) as opposed to "Bluebeard's Egg", where Atwood primarily uses the mood and tone of the Gothic and modernizes traditional images of horror to de-familiarize her readers (6.3).

Lorna Sage argues that Carter's play with genres – particularly the Gothic fairy tale - is influenced by Sade (qtd in Roemer and Bacchilega, 68), in reference to the nature of female characters, or more specifically the passive fairy tale heroine. *The Bloody Chamber* is a

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<sup>8</sup> Although Campbell stresses that this is not a defining characteristic, but rather a psychological pattern of separation (a call to action or adventure), initiation (encountering the antagonist), and return (reinstatement in the community) (qtd in Jones, 15)

dichotomized renegotiation of two of Propp's "functions": the transference of the hero, and the patterns of signification for female characters. Transference is another term for the object the hero seeks, and his journey usually takes him into another realm. This figure does not appear in Carter's or Atwood's fiction – e.g. Puss in Boots being the exception for Carter (Sage, 67) – primarily because the authors' aim is shifting the focus from the object to the subject. According to Carter this means that to "be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case- that is, to be killed" (ibid). This is the fate and the moral for fairy tale women. Powerful fairy tale women are not equal to powerful men within the same genre; charisma and ambition are admirable traits only when applied to male characters (67). In other words, Propp's "functions" do not apply to female readers and writers.

Propp's taxonomy also fails to include the women whose forced silence drives them to lash out and rebel, i.e. the New Woman. Sade's influence in the Gothic fairy tale turns the tables; his "long-suffering heroine" (Sage, 68) Justine, is a New Woman, an avatar of two centuries' history of women who come to realize that the mechanisms of puritanism and patriarchy alter the world, making it an place unfit for women. The suffering that ensues is the result of a lack of resourcefulness, for which Carter has no need. *The Sadeian Woman* and Carter's fairy tales are a literary reckoning and vindication of women's artistic and creative roles. Atwood employs the stereotype of the "character who "dance[s]" for others", the ones who were offhandedly silenced (*Sexual Politics*, 100), and she makes them evolve and experience metamorphosis into power of perception; how they view themselves and how they present themselves to others. The Gothic fairy tale with its murky cellars and windswept castles, its neurotic and sexually frustrated characters provides literary release; a chance for the silenced to speak up and be heard; to be transformed and become enlightened. The horrors of the Gothic genre is emphasized when mixed with the familiarity of the fairy tale, even more so when placed in a condition that sparks recognition amongst its readers; "what happened to her could very well happen to me".

## **2.2 Post-structuralism and deconstruction**

This section will focus on post-structuralism and modes of deconstruction of language and meaning. I will give an account of post-structuralist feminist theory, and then show how methods of deconstruction support feminist rewriting by analyzing the theories of poststructuralist feminist theorists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and poststructuralist

Jacques Derrida. The objective is to examine whether it is possible to rewrite fairy tales in accordance with feminist values without, for example, adopting the style and tone of male writers (Luce Irigaray qtd in Koshy, 76).

French philosophers and critical theorists in the 1960s established post-structuralism as a counter-reaction to structuralism. The theory is defined through an anxiety and skepticism towards language, namely the concern that our words might convey meanings and impressions we did not intend, which in turn implies that we are not in complete control of the linguistic system in which we operate (Peter Barry, 60). The field is generally thought to have emerged with Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" from 1966, where he connects the philosophical work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and the psychoanalytical work of Freud as catalysts of the "decentering" of our intellectual universe (64).

Poststructuralist feminist theory highlights gender as a construction (Mary Klages, 91). Poststructuralist feminists examine the consequences of perpetuating a binary system of gender roles through a genre able to reach many young minds, and how it is a way of enabling constructions and mechanisms to effectively support the dominant hegemony, and the suppression of the *Other*.

The theory is not only about women, though. It is about "men" and "women" as subjects within the structure of language, a binary opposition that favors "male" over "female" and constructs "woman" as *otherness* (96). Therefore, feminist theory explores how to deconstruct this dichotomy, and any other binary construction in support of or maintained by it.

The principle is based on Jacques Lacan's structuralist ideas; "woman" as subject is positioned outside the Symbolic center, and is as such less governed by it. This indicates that "woman" is in a position not fully structured or controlled by language (Ibid). Both Lacan and poststructuralist feminist theorists name this capacity to evade and avoid the rules of the center and of language, *jouissance*, which is the French word for orgasm. In poststructuralist terms, *jouissance* signifies an unfathomable pleasure, a joy beyond words that disrupts the structure of language, and it is considered a feminine pleasure. It functions as a type of deconstruction by shaking up the "fixity and stability of the structure of language" (Klages, 97). It also connects the experience of being female to something definitely positive, if we look at it in binary terms with "pain" being the opposite function. The "female condition" – by which I mean the various anatomical changes and bodily functions for those born

biologically female – is fraught with painful experiences and landscapes, but the female *experience* should nevertheless be described as something creative and empowering.

Hélène Cixous coined the phrase *phallogocentric* in “The Laugh of Medusa” (99) to conjoin Lacan’s structure of language (phallogocentric) and Jacques Derrida’s term for the Western preference for “speech over language, for logic and rationality over madness” (logocentric) (98). This construction is denoted by a slash<sup>9</sup> that places all the favored terms on the left, and all that must be repressed and controlled on the right. The question Cixous asks is whether it is possible to write or speak as a woman, when language itself is a phallogocentric structure that by its definition excludes women (99). Does a writer who identifies as female write from a masculine position? If so, does that confirm Freud’s and Lacan’s theories of the interconnectedness of bodies and language? How is a woman supposed to write within a system that only recognizes her as *other*?

Cixous proposes to deconstruct the phallogocentric system and create a new one that relates the female body and language differently. She coins the phrase *l’écriture féminine* as the opposition to its phallogocentric equivalent, but stresses that only some genres allow for feminine writing, poetry first and foremost. Language is free in poetry, meaning is mercurial and signifiers flow haphazardly, since poetry is connected to the unconscious, and by extension to what has been repressed; the female body and female sexuality. Despite this line of reasoning, all feminine writers listed by Cixous are men (102). She claims that feminine writing will create a rupture that will reveal the phallogocentric system to be just that: a system and not a portrayal of absolute truth (ibid).

So what does feminine writing look like? According to Luce Irigaray, who builds on Cixous’ concepts, female *jouissance* (which Irigaray connects to sexual pleasure) should be defined in its own terms, separate from the phallogocentric system (106). If male writers write with a pen (the penis, in psychoanalytic terminology), psychoanalysts like Freud have struggled heavily in attempting to name the female counterpart. Irigaray argues that men have *a* sexual organ, while women have sexual organs. If the phallogocentric system dictates that the binary requires only one signifier on each side of the slash, then what would serve as the pen(is)’s opposite? Irigaray claims that if the system cannot determine the appropriate signifier, then

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<sup>9</sup> Male/female, masculine/feminine, light/dark, culture/nature etc.

the system collapses (107). This entails that the female body can speak from everywhere, because *jouissance* is experienced everywhere<sup>10</sup>.

How does this position affect feminist writers? Is it possible to write within a deconstructive framework in genres other than poetry and still propagate feminist views? The answer lies between the lines, so to speak, in the interpretive possibilities of the poststructuralist discipline. Friedrich Nietzsche said “There are no facts, only interpretations” (qtd in Barry, 61). Therein he encapsulates the sceptical nature of not only philosophy but also post-structuralist procedures, thus paraphrasing Socrates in an ironic paradox: all we know for certain is that we can know nothing for certain. This also pertains to what we are able to produce in terms of meaning. Meaning is fluid and is always subject to interpretation.

The *sign* is an arbitrary entity that defies attaching itself to a singular meaning without a context, according to Derrida. This negates the existence of an absolute truth and a final meaning behind a text than the one we contextualize. Susan Koshy says that the possibility for infinite meanings, and the processes that opens up the narrative weave to these meanings is an empowering notion for feminist writers (76). It enables women to re-write narratives by male authors. Here we return to Cixous, who argues that the feminist writer’s task is “to actively inscribe the heterogeneous promptings that are thrown up by the process of writing, an endeavour that will bring into being an alternative mode of perception, relation and expression to that decreed by the prevailing schema” (qtd in Koshy, 77).

This approach, according to Julia Kristeva, suggests that despite the rigidity of a phallogocentric language system, female writers can employ deconstructive methods to inscribe multiple meanings to any work of literature (qtd in Koshy, 77), thus destabilizing the mythos of a recalcitrant patriarchal structure. The rewriting of myth enables intertextuality, and “inclusion of unanticipated meanings generated by a word” (ibid) disrupts the text further. Female writers can in fact create their own mouthpieces by deconstructing texts already in place within a literary canon. To paraphrase Nietzsche, it is all about the interpretation.

What about Cixous’s argument that there is no such thing as a feminine literature, except for poetry? How can Carter and Atwood rewrite fairy tales unless they adopt the poetic form? Diana Purkiss has identified three modes of re-writing in poetry that may be applied to

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<sup>10</sup> Irigaray’s criticism of the phallogocentric system is more radical than Cixous’s, mainly because heteronormative sexuality is for Irigaray “irredeemably patriarchal”, and thus only lesbian sexuality will function as a proper deconstructive force (Klages, 109).

women's fiction in general, which should solve this predicament; shifting the male focus to a female focus; transposing negative connotations and terms into positive versions; and finally; placing the role of narrator in the hands of a minor character (qtd in Koshy, 77-78). These strategies frequently occur in the writings of both Atwood and Carter, many of whose short stories are poetic in appearance and tone. Sexuality and femininity is never phrased as shameful, nor are men the focus of their tales, except as inhibitors or instigators of conflict (as seen in section 4.2). Atwood's short stories are structured in such a way that the subject seems to be addressing the reader, thus destabilizing the narrative we are familiar with. Carter takes on a more narrative role, guiding us, describing and suggesting, but ultimately leaving us make up our own minds.

Thus stands the challenge of feminist rewriters of myth; a seemingly insurmountable task of giving voice to the silenced, altering taken-for-granted patterns and promoting voices marginalized by patriarchal bias. Presently we move to discuss another obstacle for feminist writers, and it has to do with reception theory.

#### 2.2.1 Reception Theory and Fan Fiction

Reception theory is the historicizing process of assessing the altering responses, and interpretive and evaluative reactions to literary work or works of art over time. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall proposes an alteration of the paradigm, so that it primarily focuses on media and communication studies, but the main principle stays the same: a body of meaning, be it a book or a movie, is determined through the medium's relationship to its audience/readership. The reader or viewer interprets and negotiates the encoded message latent in the work based on his or her cultural background and experience. This exchange of meaning is based on discourse; "Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse" (Hall, 166-67).

Hall differentiates between encoding and decoding; the encoding is the production of a message, and it is the creator's job to present the code based on his or her understanding of how the audience comprehends the world. The decoding of this message is up to the audience. At the core of this relationship lies a complicated and comprehensive understanding of how meaning is made, expressed and perceived.

Hall presents a four-tiered model that explains the *production, circulation, consumption* and *reproduction* of coded media messages. The first stage, *production*, is where the creator

emulates society's cultural beliefs and values, and presents his/her encoded message to an audience. How this message is *circulated* affects how the audience receives and incorporates it into their own discourse. The audience must then actively try to decode the message through *consumption*, and these underlying processes are very complex. After the audience has decoded the message in congruence with their own cultural beliefs and values, we enter the stage of *reproduction*, where the actions of the audience expose how they relate to the now decoded message. An example of this would be the Harry Potter books, a franchise that to date includes a theme park, companion books, eight completed movie adaptations with a spin-off trilogy in the making, and an immeasurable amount of fanfiction.

Fanfiction is an interesting phenomenon because it may be said to confirm Roland Barthes' theory about the death of the author, and the autonomy of the text. The consumer/reader takes control of the text and deconstructs the original narrative, using the literary universe as a background for rewriting the original piece. This could entail a different romantic coupling, a different ending, the murder or resurrection of a character; all according to the consumer's power of definition, and their personal desires. In the young adult novel *Fangirl*, the protagonist writes fanfiction, but is accused of plagiarism when she hands in one of her pieces for a creative writing class. Consider the following conversation between two of the characters:

“Are you sure?” Levi asked after a few miles. “About the fiction-writing? Are you sure you don't have that inside you? You're fathomless when it comes to [the characters in your favourite book-series]—”

“They're different. They already exist. I just move them around.”

[...]“The point is...,” he said softly... “There are different kinds of talent. Maybe your talent is in interpretation. Maybe you're a stylist.”

“And you think that counts?”

“Tim Burton didn't come up with Batman. Peter Jackson didn't write Lord of the Rings.”  
(Rowell, 331-32)

What Levi suggests underlines the power the audience possess after the release and distribution of a text, or a movie. Once the material is out there, it is up for grabs, for anyone to tinker with and reshape however they like. As long as there is no monetary gain and due credit is given to the original artist/writer/creator, the genre of fanfiction exists as a legitimate form of poststructuralist deconstruction. Just because the original idea belongs to someone

else, this does not deny a fan's potential or creative talent, nor the originality of his or her interpretation. Furthermore, fan-fiction enables readers to rewrite characters to resemble them, to resemble life as it actually is and most importantly, this depiction is not questioned, negated, or blamed for being "inaccurate". Fan-fiction familiarizes the reader with un-familiar perspectives, thereby naturalizing them. Fan-fiction is not written so readers can read it in lieu of the original material; it is written for those who want to stay connected with the original material after the reading (or consumption) of the book is over, or in between books. By altering the parameters, yet keeping the core intact, the story can live on. Not all authors find fan-fiction empowering for the publishing business, nor satisfactory for the sanctity of their own work, but the genre is not about selling something. It is about propagating truths that resonate with a wider audience. The literary world (and the real world) is not inhabited solely by White, rich, beautiful, heterosexual people, and fan-fiction is but one of many processes which encourage a wider, more accurate representation of cultural diversity.

Depending on the background of the audience, the coded language in the message is comprehended in one of three ways. If a member of the audience shares the same cultural bias as the creator, the encoded message is mediated without fault, thus falling into the *dominant/hegemonic position*. Should the audience member acknowledge the dominant message, but reject the intended encoding, he/she takes a *negotiating position* that modifies the decoding process based on their personal experiences. In an *oppositional position* the audience member is perfectly able to understand the intended message, but rejects the dominant code because it represents values in diametrical opposition to his/her own (Hall, 171-73).

This is all very technical and theoretical, but Hall's theory presents a crucial point of criticism of relevance for the fairy tale as well as for feminism as a political field. What we know, we come to know through language, Hall points out, and this knowledge is in turn mediated to others through discourse. Discourse cannot exist without the operation of a code (qtd in Kuykendall and Sturm, 167), and these codes represent "real" relations and conditions which we articulate through language. Some of these codes appear to be unconstructed, because they have achieved a near-universality due to their wide distribution. In other words, the distribution and reception of fairy tales over the years have naturalized the embedded codes up to the point where we, the readers/audience, no longer question them or realize the extent to which they have been naturalized (ibid). The articulated "signs", particularly iconic "signs", look like objects in the real world because they reproduce the necessary codes to the

audience; meaning that any image latent within a culture, like say, the image of a coffee-mug, will reproduce the codes or conventions associated with a real coffee-mug.

Hall claims that visual “signs” are particularly at risk of being “read” as natural due to the widespread distribution of televisual or photographic “signs” (ibid). That means that *written* fairy tales and the linguistic signs in them do not possess any of the actual qualities of the images they produce in a reader’s mind. However, the movie adaptations of fairy tales by Walt Disney Studios for example, appear to possess some of the properties (which we might dub “movie magic”) pertaining to the tales’ content. That includes the norms, gender roles and preferred “Hollywood” ending. The images produced by a fairy tale have thus become part of our understanding of how the world works, with particular emphasis on how we expect to be rewarded for good behaviour. Moreover, our expectations of happy endings pertain to movies and books as well, because that is the nature of fairy tales; they should end with “happily ever after”. Again, reality is never this consistent, a fact Atwood and Carter highlight in their tales.

The above-mentioned cycle – from production to reproduction – proliferates coded signs alongside a culture's semantic paradigm into a new ideological dimension. These codes denote and connote a culture’s dominant discourse of power and ideology. So in terms of televisual signs presented by Disney, their *denotative* level is closed or fixed by complex codes, but their *connotative* level enables exploitation of polysemic (sic) values (169). This means that coded messages of heteronormativity or gender roles can be presented to an audience who are less likely to reject them if they sympathize with the dominant hegemony of preferred meanings. However, this is contingent upon the visual signs conveying codes, and that they cohere with the dominant ideology of the target culture. In other words, the audience accepts the images on the screen if they convey norms and themes that are acceptable at the time of the screening.

The current wave of feminist criticism of Western culture and the heteronormative hegemony has opened up the debate for critique of not just Disney movies but also any televisual code with representation of gender. The current focus on feminism in the media is a mercurial subject, and being called a feminist is often used as an insult. One cannot criticize patriarchal structures and emerge unscathed these days: images of so-called angry feminists are

perpetuated online, and the origin of the “meninist”<sup>11</sup> group could be construed as a setback for equal rights. This is nevertheless a positive sign in poststructuralist terms; it indicates that things are changing and the subsequent resistance met by various audiences who find themselves disturbed by the changing paradigm, substantiates that the current gender political climate is under duress. I am not suggesting that *feminism* is a deconstructive strategy, although one could argue that the current media-uproar surrounding the movement is a deconstructive force. Rewriting the existing paradigms of gender - be it in a movie, a play or a fairy tale - is necessary in order to continue the process. Allowing patriarchal designs to define female expression is counterproductive in both post-structuralist and feminist theoretic terms. Men cannot know female experience any more than women can theirs, but opening up the possibilities for understanding, sympathy and preferably empathy, should always be the embedded code of feminist rewriting.

To recapitulate, postmodern culture represents a break with traditional gender roles (although cissexual heteronormativity is still the norm in most of the world), and as mentioned in the previous section, post-structuralist thought represents a sceptical paradigm wherein everything is in flux. However, the existing literary tradition is based primarily on a phallogocentric paradigm, meaning that women writers might not be able to write as women in a plainly masculine tradition. However, the poststructuralist approach offers a framework that allows female voices to be heard; *jouissance* is a thoroughly feminine pleasure, and thus capable of expressing feminine joys through discourse. Deconstruction entails a ripping of seams that exposes the underlying system, and reveals a comforting truth; there are no final meanings, and no absolute truths. It is up to the writer to re-inscribe meaning and present alternative endings. This way, feminist writers can reclaim the tradition of storytelling and transform the coded messages therein to balance the scales. The term feminist, at present, will be a disadvantage when writing against the dominant discourse, but only insofar as one pays heed to meninists, or fairy tale purists. The fairy tale and the folktale are not genres at war with each other; they are simply part of a larger tradition.

### **2.3 Feminist Critique of the Fairy Tale.**

Traditional feminist criticism of fairy tales elucidates the detrimental effects of tales that depict women as exaggeratedly shallow, passive and naïve, and how the propagation of such

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<sup>11</sup> What started out as a Twitter-exchange between men, evolved into a hashtag that constitutes misogynistic slurs and rebellion against feminist expression (Warren, accessed 20.04.15).

patriarchal values shackle “real” women to conform to traditional gender roles. Marcia Lieberman notes that countless women must have been influenced by their favorite fairy tales in the construction of their identity, while subconsciously emulating the kind of “good behavior” that elicits rewards in the form of a husband and financial security (Kuykendall and Sturm, 39). Karen Rowe adds that the popularity of the fairy-tale romance carries the notion that female fairy-tale virtues like passivity, dependency and self-sacrifice are the keystones in our society’s structure, and as such cannot be transmuted (Rowe, 210).

Just how potently folklore contributes to cultural stability may be measured by the pressure exerted upon women to emulate fairy tale prototypes. Few women expect a literally ‘royal’ marriage with Prince Charming; but, subconsciously at least, female readers assimilate more subtle cultural imperatives...In short, fairy tales are not just entertaining fantasies, but powerful transmitters of romantic myths...(Rowe, 211)

The following sections will give an account of feminist criticism of the fairy tale and dissect the politics and framework of the feminist fairy tale. Feminist critics have many bones to pick with the fairy tale genre, so this thesis will mainly focus on four key points. First, the portrayal of women as the weak, passive gender and men as the active, virile gender. Secondly, any female character that defies this binary construction is ultimately either characterized as ugly and monstrous/and or evil, the exception being the fairy godmother or the wise woman (because they are not considered entirely human) (Kuykendall and Sturm, 39). Thirdly, female identity and sexuality exists only as a receptacle for aggressive, male sexual desires. Lastly, the cultural valuing of youth leads to dissolution and disruption of female cooperation; older, sexually experienced women feel threatened by and pose a threat to the innocence of younger, sexually inexperienced girls. I will use Disney movies to exemplify the changing trend of how Disney Animation Studios are currently portraying female characters, female interpersonal relationships, and female achievement and agency. Additionally I will show how the popularity of Disney arguably supports feminist revision.

The prominent feminist critic of fairy tales in the 1970s, Andrea Dworkin, presented the following dichotomy of fairy tale women; the good woman and the bad woman; the paragon, and the bad seed. One needs to be possessed (i.e. become a possession), the other must be destroyed lest she destroy others; either way, the agency of both characters is negated. When “happily ever after” came about, these women were either “passive, victimized, destroyed, or asleep” (ibid). From a contemporary point of view, these female characters would only experience a happy ending when they placed their autonomy in the hands of male characters.

Dworkin's dichotomy however, does not fit every tale in the collections of Perrault or the Grimm Brothers, where many of the princesses are naturally good, even witty (although perhaps a bit naïve). Most of them – some do get supernatural help – make sure they have a say in the outcome of their story. “Bad” women are still classified as such, and their one-dimensionality is still obvious, but we will return to this dichotomy in the analyses. One could of course criticize both Grimm and Perrault for ending their tales at the wedding and saying nothing of the struggles sure to ensue. Nevertheless, Perrault, at least, does include a moral epilogue in which he, amongst other things, emphasizes that a beautiful face and a domesticated nature do not guarantee a “happy ending”.

According to Ruth MacDonald, there are three acceptable solutions available for feminist fairy tales;

[o]ne may present the tales, unaltered, with their traditional endings, and the devil take the consequences of the possible damage to a young girl's career expectations; one may rewrite the tales, de-emphasizing physical beauty and marriage, but thereby violate the objectivity of the folklore collector by imposing one's own language and bias on the narrative; or one may write new tales, using folkloric motifs with less conventional endings (113).

MacDonald argues that it is close to impossible to rewrite a fairy tale into a narrative that is both satisfying and acceptable from a feminist point of view. Her premise is based on an arbitration of J. R. R. Tolkien's scheme concerning the correlation between a satisfactory ending to a fairy tale and Tolkien's "vision of heaven", i.e. marriage. Fairy tales originally emphasize beauty and goodness, the rewards for which are marriage and wealth, and this places the modern feminist in a difficult situation: how does one create satisfactory narratives, using the conventions of the fairy tale, to suit the modern woman whose autonomy is not disbanded at the altar? Although MacDonald claims that the first option is the only viable one, her arguments, as mentioned, are based on the foundation of the “happy ending” paradigm, with the ultimate reward being marriage. Her position is nevertheless useful as a tool for analysis, and it also demonstrates the then-current perception of gender and the genre.

### 2.3.1 Portrayal of Women in Disney Movies.

Most powerful women in traditional fairy tales tend to be described as evil and/or ugly, the exception being the fairy godmother, who, as mentioned, is somehow not recognized as a “proper” fairy tale woman because of her otherworldly nature (Kuykendall and Sturm, 39). This portrayal contributes to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of aging women, Rebecca Sullivan claims. This in turn allows patriarchal values and gender roles to survive

and influence the minds of children and grown-ups alike, especially through modern media like TV, movies and the internet. Sullivan's arguments fall somewhat in line with Kuykendall and Sturm's when considering the consequences of appropriating these values and norms into children's stories. Sullivan claims that by impressing the idea that aging women are a negative force in society on children through singing and dancing cartoons, one promotes the ideology of a youth-driven, age-fearing culture (3). However, the success of books and adapted movies/TV shows like *Twilight* and *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (where all the vampires are immortal and impossibly beautiful) makes it apparent that such ideas already have a foothold in Western culture. Kuykendall and Sturm, on the other hand, emphasize the negative influence of the oversimplified gender role stereotypes (39), of the man as the heroic problem-solver and the (young) damsel as being constantly in distress due to the machinations of an older, jealous witch/queen. Even the latter must be rescued from her own jealousy and wickedness, preferably by annihilation.

A study made four years prior to Sullivan's article, shows that most elderly Disney characters (both male and female) are generally portrayed in a positive light, even when they are peripheral to the story (Robinson et al., 207-09). In addition, while Sullivan's article focuses on two rewritten fairy tales<sup>12</sup>, the study by Robinson et al. analyses 34 Disney movies in total. This entails that their study describes the Walt Disney Company's position on the matter far more adequately. It must also be noted that male characters were more often portrayed in positive terms than female characters (209). The results indicate that young children are heavily exposed to a high percentage of negative stereotypes before they reach primary school age, but the attitudes they absorb depend largely upon what movies they watch.

As mentioned, The Walt Disney Company has not remained faithful to the portrayal of powerful or elderly female characters in purely negative terms. The majority of the movies' plotlines are based on the original Grimm and Perrault material, and have been polished by the ruling cultural norms of contemporary America (Davis, 10), and are as such a product of their time. Nevertheless, as mentioned in section 2.1, rewriting fairy tales is a popular trend, and although we find examples of stereotypes like the "evil, powerful woman" and the passive dotard princess in earlier movies (e.g. "Snow White" (1937), "Cinderella" (1950) and

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<sup>12</sup> "Enchanted" (2007) and "The Princess and the Frog" (2009)

“Sleeping Beauty” (1959)<sup>13</sup>, this does not mean that the new era of Disney movies follow the same pattern.

Moving into the 2010s, "Brave" (2012), “Frozen” (2013) and “Maleficent” (2014) have all been box-office successes, and present, in comparison to their predecessors, a more feminist or positive portrayal of inter-women relations. "Frozen" for instance plays on the “all powerful women are witches” theme. Loosely inspired by H. C Andersen’s “The Snow Queen”, Queen Elsa of Arendelle possesses cryokinetic abilities, which she hides for fear of estrangement. Upon releasing her powers under duress, she places a curse on the land to fall into “eternal winter”, and is proclaimed a monster and a witch. In the end, however, the love of her sister Anna helps Elsa to save herself in more than one sense of the word, and she breaks the curse (Buck). However, it can be argued that Elsa’s resolute character juxtaposed to Anna’s whimsical persona is just an attempt at a feminist fairy tale, for even though both characters are female, there is still one clever protagonist and one ditzy sidekick. There is also the issue of biased representation of indigenous people, and the lack of constructive dialogue, but I will not delve further into this debate because it does not pertain to my topic.

Nevertheless, “Frozen” is praised for its *feminist* ending, demonstrating that sisterly love is more powerful than the desire to be loved by others. Everyone experiences a happy ending, with no matrimony involved.

Another version of this theme is “Maleficent”, a retelling of “Sleeping Beauty”. The Sleeping Beauty is the narrator, but her focus is on the perspective of the antagonist, and thus provides an alternative background story for the villainess’ vendetta. Portrayed by Angelina Jolie, Maleficent is the winged, horned guardian of the Moors, a magical place separated from the world of mortal men. She is kind, warm and selfless, protector of all magical creatures. She has a childhood romance with a stable-boy named Stefan, who initially is just an enamored, albeit ambitious child. However, he betrays Maleficent at the behest of his king; he cuts off her wings and leaves her bleeding in the woods, a metaphor for sexual trauma. His reward is the princess’ hand in marriage and right of succession. When Maleficent finds out the reason for his betrayal, she curses his newborn daughter, Aurora, in retaliation. However, unlike the

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<sup>13</sup>Stephanie Davies identifies a series of cultural signifiers in “Sleeping Beauty” and argues that they represent Walt Disney’s personal view of female sexuality (3-4). The “evil” fairy, Maleficent, is the epitome of the seductive female, unapologetic and ambitious in her desires, and in stark contrast to the round, feminine fairies Flora, Fauna and Merryweather (10). The perfect woman during the 1950s was the housewife, and as such, Maleficent represents everything the housewife should not be; Tall, mysterious and middle-aged, Maleficent denies objectification by wearing long, androgynous black clothing, and besides being pointedly sarcastic.

1959 version, Maleficent grows to care for Aurora on a maternal level, and ultimately, it is Maleficent who manages to break the curse through a kiss of true love. This version is a good example of a rewritten fairy tale, in the spirit of both Carter and Atwood. First, the narrative comes from the “evil fairy’s” point of view, thus establishing her identity prior to exterior, male involvement. Secondly, it presents an alternative connection between Aurora and Maleficent, one that makes Aurora collateral damage in a war between man (as a species) and women (magic), as a reaction to Stefan’s betrayal and Maleficent’s trauma. Thirdly, the movie subverts the notion that love needs to be romantically charged. The princess is not awakened by a prince, or after a hundred years, but by the love of a guardian who is neither hero nor villain (Stromberg).

“Brave” (Andrews) is the story of princess Merida who rebels against her parents’ (primarily her mother’s) wishes that she be married to a son from one of the other ruling clans of the Scottish Highlands. Merida is impulsive, adventurous, a skilled archer and has no desire to be married. In her refusal to conform, she breaks with a long tradition that has kept the tribes from war, but Merida will not surrender her freedom for custom’s sake. She seeks the help of a wood-witch to help “change her mum”, and the spell does change the Queen; into a bear. To lift the enchantment, Merida and her mother, Elinor, must “mend the bond torn by pride”, and they must do so before the second sunrise, or else the spell becomes permanent. Mother and daughter must work together to prevent Elinor from becoming a beast, and Merida must appease the tribes by proposing that the children of the chiefs be allowed to choose their own spouse. In breaking with tradition, peace is made, and the clans move on with the proposition. Elinor regains her human form and mother and daughter are reconciled. In direct opposition to the Snow White tale, for example, the underlying theme of “Brave” indicates that it is not only possible but essential that we break with conservative patterns. Only then can harmony and cooperation be accomplished.

"Snow White", "Sleeping Beauty" and "Cinderella" all represent the first option suggested by MacDonald in terms of fairy tale reproduction, but neither of them are feminist tales. Granted, they are the products of their time, and Walt Disney (as the creator behind these movies) knew that his movies would act as a medium for his opinions on how women should act, and that he would gain support by the majority of his viewers (Davis, 3). One could then argue that the company, long after Disney’s death, is rewriting fairy tales to reflect the current zeitgeist, which is basically the same approach. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Walt Disney Studios and Pixar are moving in a direction that promotes female agency. With

taglines like "change your fate" and "don't believe the fairy tale", *Brave* and *Maleficent* for instance, are challenging the audience to critically view the stories they know and by extension, the veracity of the norms they contain. Not all women dressed in black are evil fringe-dwellers, and not all mothers are absent or cruel. What these stories are suggesting, I would argue, is that the battle for female agency is not just about patriarchy but also against the internalized notion that women must fight one another to become autonomous beings.

“*Brave*”, “*Maleficent*” and “*Frozen*” all portray strong women who actively seek their own happiness. Although they are far from satisfactory representation of feminist values, the effect of their influence is a force to be reckoned with. Fairy tales attract a massive audience; therefore, the powerful effect of telling new stories in visual media is not to be underestimated. The popularity of these movies show that the audience supports the new paradigm, which, in turn, aids literary rewriting. The distribution of media content that portrays powerful fairy tale women in a positive setting is a valuable asset to feminist writers, and, ultimately, to women.

## **2.4 The Feminist Fairy Tale**

The magic of the fairy tale is that it can both remove us from, -and connect us with our daily lives. However, we need to feel a connection to the content, the characters or the themes. As discussed in 2.2.1, the decoding of a production depends on how well the creator knows his or her audience. Most of the Western world is familiar with the works of the Brothers Grimm, even more so because of Disney movies, toys, games and clothes. However, the dream of becoming fairy tale royalty, or finding fortune and glory by following an arbitrary set of rules relays a set of behaviors and patterns of socialization which do not correspond with a feminist point of view, nor a realistic one. The “once upon a time” epithet would have us believe that these patterns are practices from a bygone era, the Past. The patriarchal themes of its legacy, though, are still very much alive, to the dismay of feminist critics. As shown in the previous section, the fairy tale must again adjust to the times in order to survive in the new gender-aware political climate. The task seems to Camille Paglia to be insurmountable (qtd in Koshy, 78); fortunately, not all writers are as easily put off the challenge.

Jack Zipes explains the origin and function of the feminist fairy tale;

Created out of dissatisfaction with the dominant male discourse of traditional fairy tales and with those social values and institutions which have provided the framework for sexist

prescriptions, the feminist fairy tale conceives a different view of the world and speaks in a voice that has been customarily silenced. It draws attention to the illusions of the traditional fairy tales by demonstrating that they have been structured according to the subordination of women, and in speaking out for women the feminist fairy tale also speaks out for other oppressed groups...(*Don't Bet on the Prince*, xi).

Roberta Trites has defined the core of the feminist children's novel (and by extension, feminist fairy tales) as a narrative where the protagonist is empowered no matter what gender they identify with (qtd in Crew, 82-83). A fractured feminist fairy tale on the other hand, rely on a reversal of gender roles that substitutes the passive female with a strong female character. Other than that, patriarchal stereotypes and ideologies remain untouched (82).

During the late 1970s and 1980's feminists would sometimes argue that women were by far the superior gender (Kuykendall and Sturm, 39), and the rewritten fairy tales of the time reflected this idea, with fairy tale collections pairing strong leading ladies accompanied by the village (male) idiot. In light of contemporary feminism however, we see that this kind of carnivalistic strategy only substitutes one power regime with another, thus perpetuating corrupted mechanisms instead of installing new ones. The feminist zeitgeist at the time was to prove female superiority and strength, while also working to recover the "collective female voice" in the search for cultural diversity. However, professing one's superiority over another being is not the same as showing strength. Whatever else can be said on the matter, the concepts of feminism will always be one step ahead of feminist fairy tales.

Jane Yolen voices the suspicion that the true magic and meaning of the fairy tale is lost, even falsified (qtd in Kuykendall and Sturm, 39). Perhaps MacDonald and Camille Paglia were right to suggest that no amount of feminist rewriting could ever come close to the original format, or could this simply indicate an impasse? Folklorists use the word "contamination" to describe the external influence on the original codex of narrative, but Zipes argues that this phenomenon can be the saving grace of the fairy tale (qtd in Kuykendall and Sturm, 39). *Revision* is a form of contamination found in feminist poststructuralist ideology, referring to an author's prerogative to scrutinize the original material, and choose which elements are worth keeping. As society changes accepted conventions face review, says Anny Cranny-Francis (qtd in Crew, 77). By encoding discourses with messages that contradict the conventional patriarchal dogma, feminist rewriters can push the fairy tale forward, leaving these conventions in the past.

Many feminists would argue that it is only right and proper that women should be the rightful executors of the fairy tale tradition and its rewritings, given that the mother-child bond is where the oral tradition originated (Kuykendall and Sturm, 39-40). Poststructuralist feminist theory, and the thematic core of the feminist fairy tale, however, question this position. First, the mother-child bond is a cultural signifier, not a universal parent-construction, and does therefore not apply to narratives that operate outside this norm. Secondly, it is not necessary for a woman to be *a mother* to be a creator. Thirdly, it is counter-intuitive to assign the custodial rights of the genre to *one* gender, when the purpose of the feminist fairy tale is to empower female agency, not exclude narratives because men wrote them. It is noteworthy however, that women have been recognized as propagators of truth-telling and wisdom when they served as narrators in ages past. While recognizing the “transformative artistic intelligence” of women (Karen Rowe qtd in Keyser, 160), men have claimed the power of retelling and distribution to the masses - masses that include the very women storytellers from whom the material originates. Feminist rewriting of fairy tales is therefore a way of reconceptualising “Madame d’Aulnoy, Mlle. L’Héritier, and Madame de Beaumont, not as pseudo-masculine appropriators of folkloric tradition, but as the re-appropriators of a female art of tale-telling” (Keyser, 160).

#### 2.4.1 Carter’s and Atwood’s Feminist Strategies

How does one rewrite a fairy tale to satisfy feminist critics? Susan Sellers proposes a dual approach of *deconstruction* and *construction*, where the former is the act of exposing harmful stories and the latter the cultivation of alternative beginnings and endings (qtd in Koshy, 78). Sellers postulates the necessity of the following traits in a feminist retelling: *ironic* and *revealing mimicry*, *clever twists*, *explorative* and *exposing tactics* that should leave the myth wide open, with just enough *keywords* for the reader to recognize the format, but offering *new perspective and opportunities for reflection* (79).

As mentioned above, *re-vision* is one form of contamination; it is also one of two strategies of rewriting. The author could transpose a well-known tale in an unfamiliar manner, thus revealing the negative aspects of the tale and forcing the reader to consider the consequences of these aspects. The tale of Snow White receives this treatment in “The Snow Child”, where the victim truly has no voice, and those who have the opportunity to speak, remain silent in the face of abuse (4.2). Atwood, however, lets the unpopular characters dish the dirt about how their stereotypical portrayal has masked their humanity in their respective tales. The other route is to rewrite the tales into a fusion of the traditional topoi with contemporary

settings and alternative storylines that would introduce new perspectives for the reader. This happens in Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" and Carter's "The Tiger's Bride". (Koshy, 93). One of the main reasons why Carter and Atwood make use of revision, is to destroy the patriarchal myths that falsely represent female experience, and they do it by creating characters that refuse victimization and are able to assert their identities in a new scheme of parables (94).

Another important asset to a deconstructive rewriting-process is the parody, a typically postmodern strategy that both mocks and makes use of the traditions of the form. Despite its negative connotations, the parody effectively ridicules and contests patriarchal authority and convention. It is the perfect instrument for unravelling falsehood, criticizing marginalization, and revealing "linguistic reformation", according to Koshy (124-125). Atwood and Carter employ linguistic deconstruction to not only "subvert the authority of language" but to enforce the notion that interpretation and contextualization define meaning. The purpose of feminist fiction is to tear at the seams to show how deeply sexism is stitched into the textual fabric of Literature, says Cranny-Francis (Koshy, 151).

So how does one bring the tales of yesteryear and "long ago" into the present? Atwood's punchline in "There Was Once" sets the tone for the literary project at hand; "What's this *was, once?* Enough of the dead past. Tell me about *now*" (*Good Bones*, 24) A simple enough request; *tell me about now* is a clever imperative, considering that skills in communication are, in Atwood's opinion, a woman's forte (Koshy, 150). Never mind the old contention that "women have no experience of the real world" and are therefore more limited, or should one say more *boring*, than men. Carter and Atwood not only show but tell their audience exactly how little gender restricts a person's ability to experience the world fully, and to recount this experience to others. Being female does not bar women from gaining experience, but prejudice and censorship have barred women from having their written experiences broadcasted (ibid).

There are many branches of feminism and there are many different versions of a fairy tale, a fact we sometimes we need to be reminded of. Carter and Atwood might define their feminist approach in different terms, but their endgames are only different shades of the same color. Where Atwood sees an interdependence of genders as the ideal, Carter is unequivocal in her stance on complete gender equality and she argues that women should not allow patriarchal structures to exploit them (qtd in Koshy, 156-57, 160-61).

If we recognize both Atwood's and Carter's argument that fairy tales are the politics of experience presented in symbolic form, then there is little mystery to the genre's survival or

revival, alternatively. It is not so much deceptive to dress up the truth in fantastic and dramatic accoutrement, as it is necessary for the message to get across. Koshy chimes in and says that the true literary value of the fairy tale lies within its immeasurable potential for interpretation (32). Even though “everyone” knows the story, nobody reads it the same way and thus we create our own versions. Feminist fiction presents an alternative system where the importance of women is recognized and valued, whether or not the writer is female (80).

#### 2.4.2 The Evil Flowers of Charles Baudelaire

While Carter primarily retains the original format of the fairy tale<sup>14</sup>, Atwood uses the format of flash fiction, which is defined as a 750-word story, as differentiated from “sudden fiction” at 1,750 words (Wilson, *Textual Assassinations*, 20). The purpose of this format is for the reader to apprehend meaning in a flash, without any distracting elements. The brevity of the story excludes superfluous language or “filler-words”, and the meaning-making process relies heavily on the reader’s ability to detect the intertext. Additionally, the form connects all the stories in *Good Bones* to the Baudelairean prose poem, thus making Atwood a contributor to genre hybridization, where genre as well as language and convention are deconstructed (Wisker, 63-64). Thus, Carter can be said to play within the fairy tale genre; Atwood plays with the genre itself.

Baudelaire’s work is influential to anyone working within the relatively unknown genre of the prose poem. However, Atwood’s approach is that of selective appropriation and deconstruction. She retains Baudelaire’s ironic tone, while inverting the misogynistic tone of his prose poems by a reversal of gender (Nischik, 54). This reversal does not conflict with the rules of the feminist fairy tale; the feminist approach is to place a voice with marginalized and suppressed communities. Therefore, Atwood’s approach exposes and subsequently rewrites misogynistic portrayals of women (See 5.3 for further discussion).

Furthermore, feminist revision in Atwood’s case takes the form of satirical wit, where she turns traditional tales inside out, and plays with the narrative structure as a whole. As mentioned, flash fiction is only an effective mediator if the reader is aware of the way “familiar narratives play out in different cultures” (Wisker, 65), but if that is the case, Atwood

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<sup>14</sup> Although she never once uses the stock phrase “Once upon a time”, and almost always places her revisions in a parallel époque to one we historically identify with.

successfully conveys criticism of culturally produced values, like gender roles and hegemonies of power.

Interestingly, both “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” and “The Bloody Chamber” refer to lines from Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857). Carter uses the quote “Of her apparel she retains/Only her sonorous jewellery” (*The Bloody Chamber*, 14) to draw attention to the Marquis’ fetish of collecting paraphernalia later used to fuel his murderous fantasies, and she moves on to say that Baudelaire is the Marquis’ favorite poet (26). This underlines the tone of the story with the form of the Gothic relationship between the erotic and the morbid. Carter could be implying that there is a thin line between the horrific and the titillating aspect of the Gothic genre, and the purpose of the Gothic fairy tale is therefore to mediate these circumstances. Atwood, on the other hand, boldly rewrites Baudelaire’s closing line of the volume’s introduction to subvert his misogyny and perhaps to re-appropriate the use of the prose poem for feminist purposes<sup>15</sup>.

## 2.5 The Search for Truth in the Myth

At this chapter’s end, we return to the concerns of Rousseau and Updike regarding the relationship between fairy tales and its “target audience”, namely that children will grow out of them at some point. Bettelheim makes the same statement, arguing that fairy tales are appealing to children only (Koshy, 143) and implying that fairy tales have no lasting value to its readers regardless of their age. If that is the case, can Atwood and Carter offer something new of value, or is it just a regurgitation of pithy tales for their primarily adult audience?

Carter in her essay “Better to Eat You With” (1976)<sup>16</sup>, notes that the attitudes of both Rousseau and Updike are based solely upon this false assumption; that fairy tales consists only of fairies and magic, and as such, are too removed from reality. As demonstrated in section 2.1.1, the prerequisite stock characteristics of the fairy tale do not include fairies at all. One needs a hero/heroine, a journey in search of a desired object or truth, and the aid of some supernatural force guiding them to a happy conclusion. For example: Todorov’s analysis of Perrault’s “Riquet à la Hoppe”, a fairy tale in which an ugly prince has the ability to make others smarter, and a stupid princess that can make others beautiful, shows that although the prince becomes beautiful and the princess more clever, it is not a result of magic or fairy

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<sup>15</sup> See sections 5.2.2 and 5.3 for further discussion.

<sup>16</sup> From the anthology *Shaking a Leg: Journalism and Writings* (1998).

involvement. Perrault also makes this explicitly clear “to an extreme degree” (Todorov, 65) in the tale’s epilogue. The allegory of magic must in this case be read as the transformative power of love. No need for fairy dust when beauty, in the words of Voltaire, is as relative for a toad as it is for the devil.

The stories we tell connect us to a shared past and prepare the next generation for the future. One could of course criticize the fairy tale for tricking children into believing that they will experience a happy ending in real life, thus cultivating a perception of the world built on false pretences. The fairy tales of Charles Perrault therefore surprised Carter as she was translating them, with their fortitude and worldliness unprecedented in other children’s literature; their “succinct brutality...modified by the first stirrings of the Age of Reason” (*Shaking a Leg*, location 9393) were perfectly capable of teaching children about the world, happy ending or not. “The seventeenth century regarded children, quite rightly, as apprentice adults” (location 9384). There is no need, Carter argues, to sugar-coat the truth. She criticized both J. R. R. Tolkien and Hans Christian Andersen for using the wonder of fantasy and fairy tales to seduce children away from the thematic core of the original material, and scaring them half to death (loc 9367). Nevertheless, Carter invokes Andersen’s imagery in several stories, “The Tiger’s Bride” for instance.

For Carter, fairyland is the place where our hopes and fears, desires and dreads are personified in non-human beings without the pretense of divinity or superhuman qualities (Roemer and Bacchilega, 70). By introducing elves and armies of evil, Tolkien removes the possibility of recognition for its readers. Carter’s position is understandable, but I disagree with her reasoning. Both Tolkien and Andersen struggled immensely with what life had to offer in terms of war, loss of friends, ostracism and other hardships. Nothing about reality could assuage their sorrows. Tolkien never forgot the “animal horror” of trench warfare and the psychological dismemberment of his fellow comrades and friends (Humphrey Carpenter, 91), which inspired his Middle Earth saga. Andersen focused on the innocence of childhood, but his prose was both dark and melancholic, a fact that permeated his fairy tale collections. These two male authors projected their experiences into a perilous literary landscape that offered them relief and comfort despite any description of bloodshed and suffering. In their books there is indescribable beauty, humour and truth which have brought readers escape and comfort for years. Carter may be allowed to disagree with their methods, but her prose is just as bloody and full of suffering characters, but also of great beauty. It would seem that there are many ways to achieve the same goal.

Atwood, however, could be said to defend Tolkien's, and Andersen's approach to the fairy tale; her rewriting of such tales acknowledges the fact that they are not just juvenile stories. Fairy-tale characters are surrogates for our own adventures in the real world. It therefore makes sense that the fairy tale genre should reflect failure, loss of identity or sense of self, trauma, and that sometimes being "good" is not enough to overcome "evil". Susan Sellers also argues that fairy tales can influence adults through the emotions stirred by the memory of the tales, be they feelings of childlike ambition or terror (qtd in Koshy, 143). Jack Zipes chimes in with the historical origin of the literary fairy tale as a parlour game for aristocratic men and, primarily, women. It was a way of circumnavigating their social situation and the opportunities available to them. The fairy tale was a way of imagining their lives differently and improved. Does it matter if that life involved a dragon or two? The marvellous is often preferred over the commonplace.

Propp, in his time, joined the fairy tale and the folk tale under the same parabola, drawing on the German *Wundermärchen* or "wonder tales" (Warner xiv). To wonder, says Warner, is the state of marvelling, and it compels the reader to actively inquire and search for the knowledge on how to get ahead in the world. In a realm where anything can happen, the potential boundlessness makes fertile ground for stories, but can also emphasize and teach where boundaries actually lie (xvi). Despite the vague and sometimes anonymous description of peoples and kingdoms far, far away, the fairy tale offers a stage to contemplate and make predictions about the future. By visualizing a world where fantastic and supernatural things can happen, we enable a deeper understanding of the world we actually inhabit (ibid). That is not to say that the fairy tale is a medium for divination, but rather for speculation, a forum for exploring possibilities for disaster, love and fortitude. The "what might be" is a warning, but also a promise, a promise of happiness; "One day, we might be happy, even if it won't last" (xvi). Carter's and Atwood's fairy tales represent a continuation of this wondrous tradition where they value truthful and realistic representations of gender, and transform the experiences of real women into fairy tale narratives, and vice versa. The value of these stories can be summarized in Philip Pullman's words; "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book" (qtd in Gray, 154).



### 3 Method

This thesis will discuss seven fairy tales as examples of how Carter and Atwood rewrite fairy tales, either as intertexts or as the major narrative background. Their rewritings are heavily intertextual, and therefore one may find traces of several fairy tales within a single narrative frame. The reason for this is to underscore that the dissemination of fairy-tale themes makes the genre eligible for deconstructive writing. I have therefore arranged them “thematically” according to the themes I am examining in them; a lack of female cooperation leads to internalized female misogyny and silences narratives; female agency can be encouraged through storytelling and the destruction of stereotyped women through subversion of the male gaze and finally, the wondrous transformation and personal autonomy. Thus, this thesis will develop from *Woman Silenced*, to *Woman Speaking Out* to *Woman Transformed*. In addition, I will draw parallels and examples from other rewritings by other authors to flesh out my analyses, in order to demonstrate the multiplicity of the tradition.

Chapter 4 examines “The Snow Child” and “Unpopular Gals Speak Up”, and the structures that enable and breed female misogyny. “The Snow Child” is Carter’s short, but pointed fable that demonstrates the damage of keeping silent about injustice and exploitation. Atwood lets all the ugly stepsisters, hags and witches have their say on the matter. Just like the stupid girls, there would be no action, no powerful heroines, if not for these “evil” women. Although the two authors seem to be on opposing sides, that is not the case. They are both speaking up for stereotyped women, hellish or angelic. I will use the original “Snow White”-story as a background to emphasize how destructive the patriarchal norms and practices in this fairy tale really are, and that it condemns and prohibits female cooperation. I will also introduce the fairy tale image of the “mirror”, and show that this image is the most important image to perpetuate, especially in feminist revision. The purpose for placing it with the analysis and not in the theory chapter seemed the logical and more organic choice, considering the extent of my discussion of the topic.

Chapter 5 will analyse the “The Bloody Chamber” paired with “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women”, because thematically they are concerned with gaining experience through agency and with relating that experience in the role of narrator. Both texts reference Eve and Pandora, women who were punished for indulging their curiosity, and both function as intertextual models for the Bride in “The Bloody Chamber” and the “Stupid women” of Atwood’s story. Stupid women are the harbingers of adventure, of change, of objection to objectification and false representation. Without their lack of judgement, we would not have stories, says

Atwood. Through these narratives, both authors deal with the dangers of letting others control one's perspective and self-image, stressing the importance of passing on their experience.

I have placed "Bluebeard's Egg" with "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and its twin-piece "The Tiger's Bride" in Chapter 6, the reason being that even though the former appears to bear connection to "The Bloody Chamber", I am not comparing them. Thematically, I propose that these fairy tales are about transformation, not just about the "horrors of marriage". I will read the stories in light of the original themes and images found in Madame Leprince de Beaumont's and Madame de Villeneuve's versions of "The Beauty and the Beast", because the metaphor of the animalistic husband connects Carter's and Atwood's tales. Traditionally, it is the man that is in need of transformation, but the woman must first come to love the Beast before she can live happily ever after with the Prince. Therefore, the internal transformation within the heroine is really the crux. I will look at the way Carter and Atwood construct their heroines' transformation as part of their personal identity, and how it makes a powerful statement about gender equality, about making honest choices and being true to one's nature.

#### 4 The Snow Child and Unpopular Gals Speak Up.

This chapter will look at versions of the “Snow White” tale as presented by The Brother’s Grimm and Perrault. It will also give an account of the critique directed at the representation of elderly women in fairy tales. This is necessary, as mentioned above, because this chapter introduces the fairy tale image of the mirror, whose significance will prove to be paramount in feminist revision. Using Vanessa Joosen and Soman Chainani’s arguments, I will investigate the thematic core of the “Snow White” tale, and consider how the representation of “wicked women” causes internalized misogyny and a misrepresentation of mature sexuality and identity. I will move on to analyse “The Snow Child” (*The Bloody Chamber*) and “Unpopular Gals” (*Good Bones*).

Feminist criticism of “Snow White” is primarily the critique of the mechanisms of patriarchal ideals and values that prevent a girl’s path into womanhood through experience. It might not come as much of a surprise, but the primary danger on the road to female cooperation and community is female enforcement of these ideals. Joosen in her essay looks at the dangers and polemics of assigning blame in retellings of Snow White where the culprit (patriarchy) has long since fled the scene. What began as a way of keeping women manageable has been re-appropriated and turned into a vicious circle guarded by the very women victimized by the process. Chainani proposes that the true thematic core of the tale is not dependent on its heroine, but rather on its villain and the demonization of mature sexuality, and thus calls for a re-examination of how we understand Carter’s version as well as the original.

Albeit the shortest tale in *The Bloody Chamber*, “The Snow Child” is one of the key texts through which to understand Carter’s vision of appropriation. Walking the line between the pornographic, and the fairy-tale genre, Carter juxtaposes sexual interaction and “the realities of patriarchal authority” (Chainani, 221). Although the rest of the texts in *The Bloody Chamber* can be separated into either a fairy tale or a pornographic tale, “The Snow Child” never goes one way or the other, so it reads as an erotic fable. Disturbing as it is, this story presents an all too real image of how patriarchy benefits from preventing female bonding.

Atwood might not agree with their methods, but she hands the allegorical pen over to the stepmothers, and -sisters of fairyland, letting them, if nothing else, explain themselves. The short story emphasises their hopes and ambitions as part of their nature, in other words their humanity (even the witch, who strictly speaking falls into the supernatural category). Their

voices tell of loneliness, ostracism and always getting the sharp end of the stick, all because they are always portrayed as the antagonist.

#### **4.1 Better Dead than Middle-Aged**

Let us start at the beginning with a child being born out of desire. Not through a desire a mother and father might have for one another, but simply through a desire for a progeny. “Then said he: ‘How sad it is that we have no children!’” (Grimm, 15); “There were once a man and a woman who had long in vain wished for a child” (88); and finally, “Would that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood and as black as the wood of the window frame” (340). The last quote is from the Grimm version of Snow White, and shows how her mother’s desire for a child comes when she pricks her finger on a sewing needle. The blood can be interpreted as either her first menstrual cycle or her first encounter with a phallic object, although both mark her as a child bearer. It also marks her death sentence, as the story informs us of her death – the cause is never explicitly stated - shortly after Snow White is born. With her purpose fulfilled, the Queen is resolutely written out of the story. In her place, the King reinstates a new beautiful bride, haughty and vain. Experienced readers know the plot, and so expect jealousy to make the new Queen capable of murder. However, despite our prejudice, she is not the truly “evil” agent in the story.

Consider the cause of the new Queen’s hatred towards Snow White. It is a question, as it turns out, that proves difficult to answer, for two reasons. First, the original Grimm version outlines the conflicted relationship between two oppositional binaries, which only guides us in a thematic direction; to the core of the story i.e. female jealousy. This means that scholars have looked outside the text to find sufficient motivation, and so many believe that the Queen’s motivation is founded in struggle for the father’s/King’s attention. Thus the second difficulty; the father/king character does not figure in every retelling of the story, the same way that others forfeit the poisoned apple, the dwarfs and the kiss of life. Most retellings dispense with the magic mirror as well. Carter stays true to of the fairy-tale form, having simply used a different version of the story than the published Grimm version. Although neither mirror nor apple figures in the “The Snow Child” to symbolize female rivalry, it is nevertheless necessary to understand the consequences of how such symbols have been used by writers, particularly the magic mirror<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> As discussed in section 2.4

The Grimm text contains several items (a poisoned apple, a magic mirror, a comb, a corset, dwarfs) that support not only the form of the fairy tale but also become symbolically connected to the Queen's hatred. The Mirror told the Queen that Snow White was more beautiful than she was, therefore Snow White must die sooner rather than later. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify the voice in the mirror as the voice of patriarchy, in their paper "The Queen's Looking Glass", tracing how it dictates the Queen's perspective on her own self-worth (qtd in Joosen, 8). This view is echoed in many postmodern variants of the story, because it supports the argument that this is a strategy to "control and put aside mature women" (ibid). Mature women are not as easy to control, thus youth becomes synonymous with beauty, rendering any attempt at companionship between Snow White and her stepmother stillborn<sup>18</sup>. Any such attempts are always absent in the original tales, but the theme has been explored in contemporary retellings in televisual and cinematic media<sup>19</sup>, where the Evil Queen either sees Snow White as a direct rival to the King/father's affection, or Snow White indirectly betrays her. Her hatred explained in this way, one might sympathize with the Queen, because it implies that the mirror distorts as well as reflects. This does not negate the existence of her hatred, however (Chainani, 217). Some retellings maintain the possibility of the mirror being passed down to Snow White after her stepmother's death, thus establishing the pattern as part of the canonized reading (Joosen, 10). Snow White's fate is to replace the Queen, and in time, her daughter will replace her. In the battle to stay in power and in favour with the king, the youngest and most beautiful will always win.

In another contemporary version of "Snow White" by The Merseyside Women's Literature Collective, the Mountain Queen has no kinship to Snow White, but holds the girl captive for her jewellery craftsmanship. Looking into her magic mirror, The Queen asks not if she is the most beautiful in the land, but if she is the happiest (qtd in Bjørhovde, 165). Tellingly she tries to push the mirror's standards of happiness, i.e. possessions and power, onto Snow White, whose only wish is to reunite with her friends, the dwarfs. The Queen is outraged, "Foolish girl!...I know you are unhappy, yet you only have to ask and you can become a princess" (169).

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<sup>18</sup> It is also an attitude apparent in Western culture today, with youth and beauty superseding maturity and experience.

<sup>19</sup> "Snow White and the Huntsman", film (2012), "Once Upon A Time" (TV, 2011- )

#### 4.1.1 The Magic Mirror

The seemingly narcissist ideals of the Mountain Queen are not so much a choice since the voice in the mirror has become inextricable from her own. The mirror establishes the hegemonic dominant position, and the Mountain Queen enforces this position. Snow White however, stands in the oppositional position because she knows the mirror is mendacious. The Mountain Queen and Snow White's stepmother are both framed by the illusions of the mirror; their only option is to obsess over their appearance, or their happiness. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim calls this inward focus narcissism, but as Victorian poet Mary Elisabeth Coleridge suggests in "The Other Side of the Mirror", it is the only available position<sup>20</sup>. All other prospect are barred from them (Gilbert and Gubar, 202). The absence of a male (the King's) presence in both of these stories confirm the solitary states of these women and exclude other forms of affirmation. With only the mirror and the catechisms of patriarchy left, there are no other impulses for the Mountain Queen or the Queen-stepmother to form their own autonomous identities. They are perpetuating the system, and unless they deviate from their position, neither will ever experience true happiness<sup>21</sup>.

The pattern found by Gilbert and Gubar tells us two things; in most retellings of Snow White, writers have placed their focus on the mirror's malicious intent, thus vindicating the New Queen as a victim of patriarchal tyranny. Secondly, all mature women will suffer if this pattern is perpetuated as the norm (9). This circle has yet to be broken, and some who attempt to rewrite the story fail in their stride (see Joosen) by pointing fingers at necrophile princes and the innocent princesses pacified by evil spells. Others, like Carter and Atwood, depict the mechanisms at play and show that although patriarchy has created obstacles for women (real and fairy tale), the ideology is not solely to blame for maintaining the injustice. It takes courage to change the status quo, be it from imprisonment to freedom, or from inertia into chaos. Although the path to change seems dangerous, the alternative is much worse. So who is brave enough to stir things up? Atwood and Carter both write strong, active heroines, but the real powerhouse is found in the traditional "wicked woman" who is infinitely cunning and

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<sup>20</sup> (in Bjørhovde (ed.), 12)

<sup>21</sup> Looking back at the Grimm version we can see that in marrying the King, the New Queen takes the role of Mother, but she is no longer valued for her childbearing duties, and is only briefly the centre of admiration. As for Snow White's mother, according to Dworkin, she has passed into the state most favored for women in line with patriarchal desire; dead (Joosen, 6). Carter pursues this line of thought, not only to expose necrophiliac desires but the nature of male desire in general.

ambitious, as we will discover now when I move on to discuss “The Snow Child” and “Unpopular Gals”.

## 4.2 The Snow Child

A Count and a Countess go riding in midwinter, a twilight period of death and rebirth<sup>22</sup>. The Countess is dressed in black fox pelts and black boots, riding a black horse, in stark contrast to the icy white landscape. The Count on his grey mare wishes aloud that he had a girl as white as snow, as red as blood and as black as that bird’s feather. As soon as the words are spoken the child is brought into the world, “...the child of his desire, and the Countess hated her” (*The Bloody Chamber*, 105). As they continue their journey into the forest, the Countess tries to rid herself of the girl by dropping her glove and brooch and telling the girl to fetch them. Her efforts instead cause her own undoing. The girl ends up being clothed and booted, sitting silently at the Count’s pleasure, but the sight of his bare-boned wife elicits pity from him. He indulges the Countess’s last request: “So the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls” (106). The Count weeps, but still rapes the dead girl. When he is finished, the girl melts away. The Count offers the rose to his wife, but as she takes it, it bites her.

It is interesting to mark Carter’s monochromatic use of colour, which lends powerful symbolism to this retelling. Black is the colour of wealth, associated with magic, evil and power. It is the colour of royalty, the clergy and of mourning<sup>23</sup>. The Countess is clothed from head to toe in the colour of magic, wearing red heels and besides in fox pelts, lending her a seductive air of mystery, sexuality and the supernatural. She is sexually dominant, and the “real” woman in the story, but the Count’s proclivities prevents her from securing her position<sup>24</sup>.

The Count is represented through the colour of his horse: grey, the intermediary colour between white and black. He literally stands between the Countess and the snow child, taking no obvious side, and feeling the pull towards both. His appearance is not described, making it easier for the reader to visualize any man in his stead, a trait found both in the pornographic- and fairy tale genre. Grey tends to be considered the colour of old age, of boredom, and of poverty, which is strange considering his status. It puts him in contrast to his wife, who is

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<sup>22</sup> According to Girardot’s theory of seasons (qtd in Chainani, 224)

<sup>23</sup> In Western tradition

<sup>24</sup> Ironically it is the adage of the fairy tale that “[w]omen who are powerful and good are never human (Zipes qtd in Sage, 67), but there is no apparent “goodness” to be found in “The Snow Child”.

dressed lavishly in colours of power, and yet, she is powerless compared to him. One might also suspect that Carter is subtly suggesting that he is operating in a grey area of morality, even sexuality. Characters like him benefit greatly from patriarchal values that allow him to take what he wants simply because he is male and of aristocratic status. Additionally, although the text gives us little information concerning his wife's reaction to the rape, the Countess does not stop him or lecture him. She merely reigns in her horse and watches him; "he was soon finished" (106), indicating that she knows not to interfere. Her position is more precarious than anticipated.

White is associated with purity, cleanliness and of course innocence. Interestingly, it is also the colour of death and mourning in Eastern tradition<sup>25</sup>, which adds another layer of mirroring between the Countess and the snow child. Death is a constant companion, regardless of geographical location or position, especially for women living in congruence with hegemonic patriarchy. The landscape in which the couple is riding, is white and untarnished. The snow child is the beginning, a *tabula rasa* (Chainani, 224). She is the child of the Count's desire and the opposite of his wife. Already having a sexually experienced wife, he seeks someone he can control, someone to dominate, a creature not fully developed enough to know desire of her own. The snow child is of his own making, as Snow White came into the world by her mother's words, but unlike the mother, he does not have to die so the snow child can live. When he refuses to comply with his wife's requests towards the girl, the child is clothed in the Countess' pelts, although none of them possesses magical powers (227). The Countess might be domineering in appearance and powerful in her mature sexuality, but in the presence of the coveted norm of innocence, her power is literally stripped from her. The Count is preparing the girl for the transition from childish innocence into his wicked mistress, by layering her with the accoutrements of experience. However, experience leads to knowledge, and as soon as the girl matures, he will lose interest. Only in the pale clutches of death can he truly possess her.

Red is the colour of blood, passion, rage, lust and sacrifice. It features in "The Snow Child" in the pool of blood, the lips of the child and the heels on the Countess' boots. The latter might be a nod to the fashions of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in France and Great Britain, where powerful, primarily royal, men wore red heels as a sign of authority and power. The fashion was later

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<sup>25</sup> Carter did live in Japan for several years before *The Bloody Chamber* was published, which lends credulity to this interpretation.

adopted by women, and is now the trademark of Christian Louboutin. It might also be a reference to the red-hot shoes from the original story, the shoes forced upon the wicked step-mother, which compels her to dance herself to death (Grimm, 349). An attentive reader might catch the reference and assume that the wickedness of the Countess will be rewarded accordingly. Carter does not believe in that kind of consolation, however (Koshy, 141). Through blood, Snow White is born and through blood, the snow child perishes. In other words, “The Snow Child” can be read as a tale about generations of women and the terrible processes and politics that govern them, which forces the women in question to do unspeakable things in order to survive.

In summary we have a Countess clothed in two colour symbols affirming her power and position as an aristocrat; a husband whose main characteristic is his anonymity; and a child as white as snow. Carter cleverly runs circles around the conventions of the familiar story, while keeping true to the form of the original fairy tale. Snow White is tempted by the New Queen three times in the Grimm version, first with a corset, then a comb – fashion accessories -, and finally with an apple, a supposedly healthy and harmless gift of nature. The Countess follows the same pattern, by “offering” the girl a glove and a brooch, but her husband offers to recompense her for “her losses”. He can however not see the harm in a rose, and the girl is struck dead by the sting of a thorn. There are no dwarfs to display her in a glass coffin and no prince to revive her (and later deflower her); the Count creates a powerful exhibitionist spectacle of himself by raping the child in front of his wife, and by extension the reader (Chainani, 227).

#### 4.2.1 Cruel Reflections

There is no denying that “The Snow Child” is a dark fairy tale. Carter is using her reading of Marquis de Sade and her views on pornography to put the sexual mechanisms of male desire on the frontline in order to offer some poignant social critique (218). However, Chainani argues that Carter’s version does not function as a feminist retelling, because neither the heroine nor the villainess is empowered or redeemed, and the status quo power structure remains intact at the end (219). Furthermore, Chainani questions whether the fairy tale genre is capable of supporting explicit criticism of conventional notions of gender, and furthermore alongside a genre producing content primarily for men’s pleasure (220). A legitimate question, so being a pragmatist Carter considers the solution to come in the form of an unveiling, in other words, a deconstruction of the ensemble. By removing the velvet drapes and shining a light on sexual practices that enable escapism and keeps “sex in its place outside

everyday human intercourse” (ibid), she would make us realize the innate limitations of pornography to embody all sexuality. That is where the fairy tale comes in; it provides the context where a juxtaposition of patriarchal authority and sexual encounters is not only possible, but can expose readers to its moral complications.

Considering Chainani’s arguments, and recollecting Sellers’ list of elements found in feminist rewriting<sup>26</sup>, I disagree with Chainani in the following instances. “The Snow Child” is the most difficult short story to defend as a feminist retelling, admittedly due to its content. I do however not agree that “The Snow Child” offers nothing a reader might interpret as beneficial in a feminist sense. My reading suggests that “The Snow Child” is Carter’s exposé of male desires in all its horror. Female sexuality and sexual desires have been dictated and contained by patriarchal values for most of Western history. As girls mature into women and learn to take charge of their own desires, they immediately pose a threat to this hegemony. So if one is to be desired, one must be as “ephemeral as snow” (Jordan, 127), or a vicious minx - Madonna or Whore. Granted, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been good to many women, at least in the Western World, but as long as this sexual dichotomy remains intact in the collective mind as the only relational terms of female sexuality, it will continue to disempower and dehumanize women. Carter’s approach therefore is only part of the strategy for demolishing the norm, not the solution in its entirety (ibid). She has presented us with a tale that makes use of the very mechanisms that enable male desire to permeate our culture and society, and she lets us see it in all its perversity. In other words, Carter is trying to shock us out of our apathy.

Additionally, Carter’s feminist point of view has always been about complete gender equality (Koshy, 156-157). Why should she limit her revision to simply calling the men out on their patriarchal misgivings? She also shows us that although some women may not like what patriarchy allows men to do, they do nothing to change them, being, like the Countess, too suppressed by their authority. The Countess fights tooth and claw to keep what is hers, and would happily throw the girl to the wolves should it help her cause. If any woman in the real world were to nod her head and support the Countess’ actions, Carter has not only exposed the blind cruelty of male desire but the equally cruel dangers of female non-cooperation.

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<sup>26</sup> To refresh our memories: ironic mimicry; clever plot twists; explorative and exposing tactics that enable investigations of the myth; enough keywords for the reader to recognize the format; offer new perspectives and opportunities for reflection (See Koshy, 79).

Following Sellers' list, there are just enough keywords in the text to alert the reader to the terrain they are about to enter. The title, for one, gives us a direct association. Secondly, the tripartite summoning-, and tempting of the child echoes the original Grimm tale. As for the lack of combs, corsets, apples and mirrors, Carter digs to the core and lets patriarchy speak for itself and not through a proxy. This gives the sentiment a face and the speaker accountability, thus opening the myth up for proper scrutiny. As for the irony, I find it lies in the very end of the story. Just as the Countess has vanquished her competition, her husband presents her with the innocuous murder weapon, and it bites her. It is akin to the punchline of a joke; thinking she has had the last laugh, the Countess accepts a symbol of the system that envelops her, and it literally comes back to bite her. Whether or not the rose kills her as well, Carter leaves unsaid. It is up to the reader to decide if justice has been served.

### **4.3 Unpopular Gals Speak Up**

“Unpopular Gals” invokes a tripartite mythic congregation of tricksters; a maiden, a stepmother, and a crone. Tricksters are artists and cultural heroes. Wilson says that although they “may lie, like Odysseus; or steal, like Prometheus; or be cunning, like Deadalus” (*Textual Assassinations*, 26), a trickster's essence is the art of subversion and transgression, in other words; it is its nature to stir things up. By using tricksters as narrators, Atwood parodies the archetypal hero and the mythic scope of his deeds, which usually includes vanquishing female monsters. Atwood shifts the perspective from the customary archetypal narrator, so that the lines between hero and villain, victim and victor are blurred and made inconsequential.

#### **4.3.1 It's Bloody Unfair**

“Unpopular Gals” is comprised of three parts, the first in which the ugly stepsister speaks. Like a scorned child, she begins by crying out against the injustice done to her. She never received a “turn” or a chance, and claims to be unfamiliar with possessive pronouns, like “mine”. She is nameless, except for the moniker “*ugly* stepsister” and as we all know, there is no room for ugliness in fairy tales, at least not in terms of happy endings. Her plain features stunt her progress in society, “...no matter what I did, how virtuous I was, or hardworking, I would never be beautiful. No like her...” (*Good Bones*, 26). In comparison to the girl who will eventually end up with the prince, be it Cinderella, or Beauty, the stepsister will always finish last.

Discrimination based on physical inadequacy teaches the stepsister to be cunning, cruel and just as unfair as the world she inhabits. She takes drastic measures to make herself worthy of the prince's love; she cuts off her foot, she murders, she disguises herself and takes the place of the "rightful bride". Because she "loved [the prince] more than anything, and she would do anything to be with him. "Who wouldn't, in my position?" (ibid), she says by way of blaming her circumstance. The only problem is that the object of her affection might not share her feelings. Unrequited love is similar to torture, she says, it cuts and makes one bleed as much as it did when she held the knife. The possibility of having children is off the table for her, too, so she is truly solitary in her misery.

The confessional style of the section almost reads like a prison-interview. She admits to having committed murder, and had her story taken place in our time she would have been prosecuted and incarcerated. However, the pathos of her character indicates that she is a product of the norms that govern societal conformity. If one is not physically attractive, one is not worthy. Being overlooked, neglected and discarded, not just by men but also women, is sufficient cause to make anyone resort to unsavory acts.

I would argue that there is an uncanny parallel between the stepsister's plight and that of "The Little Mermaid" by H. C Andersen; both are prevented from being with the one they love, and they make painful alterations to their bodies in order to meet the beauty standards of their time, but in the end, their love remains unreciprocated. While most people consider the Little Mermaid to be "good" heroine<sup>27</sup>, the same cannot be said for the stepsister, who is ultimately a selfish creature due to neglect and hardship. Nevertheless, she is entitled to be heard, and her story is just a drop in the ocean of tales that reveal the harsh and detrimental effect of perpetuating exclusive beauty standards.

#### 4.3.2 You Are What You Eat

«A libel action, that's what I'm thinking... Just because I'm old and live alone and can't see very well, they accuse me of all sorts of things" (27). Thus opens the cannibalistic witch as seen in many stories, like "Hansel and Gretel". However, by her account, she is actually Gaia, Demeter/Ceres and Persephone/Proserpina in crone-form. Granted, she did eat a few children, but they "were left in the forest by their parents, who fully intended them to die. Waste not,

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<sup>27</sup> Primarily because she cannot make herself harm the prince despite his rejection, but, instead of being turned into sea-foam, she becomes a daughter of the air, and in doing kind, selfless deeds for 300 years, she will gain a human soul and may enter the Kingdom of God (Andersen, 95-96)

want not, has always been my motto”. Times, however, have changed; she used to be offered fully-grown men and women “stuffed full of seasonal goodies” at both seed- and harvest time. In return, she “made things germinate and grow and swell and ripen”, in other words, she was a source of fertility and reproduction. Nowadays, her powers are limited and her form shrivelled and “parched” (28).

The juxtaposition of people with food makes for an interesting intertext by confirming that while the earth provides humans with food, humans become food for the earth, thus establishing the circle of death and rebirth. Nevertheless, the goddess/witch is perplexed by all the “pregnant women trying to clamber over the wall” to her garden and “munch up my fecundity, without giving anything in return” (28). This signals the end of a community-based reciprocity; “Life was a gift...not something to be stolen. It was my gift. By earth and sea I bestowed it, and the people gave me thanks” (ibid). Like *The Little Red Hen* (11-14), the people scorn the witch for her industry and fortitude. People are no longer willing to barter, bargain or simply make offerings for any service. Much wants more and loses all, comes to mind.

The tone of the witch is not bitter per say, it is nostalgic but far from maudlin, proud and without regret. All she ever wanted was her due diligence, but society feared her more than they admired her. Therefore, they “hid” her away from their company, and into isolation, so it is no wonder that she took what “offerings” came her way. Her story is yet another example of ostracism caused by the latent patriarchal fear of powerful women.

#### 4.3.3 «Good Parenting»

Speaking of powerful women, the last section is related by the “wicked stepmother”, whose opinion of men is similar to her opinion of their daughters. There are no “evil stepfathers” however, only “lily-livered widowers” who are never around to witness his new wife pester her stepchildren (28-29). They only feign ignorance, she claims, implying that the men are too weak to speak out against abuse, because of either fear or apathy. We have no way of knowing whether this is true, but considering the tales of “Hansel and Gretel” or “The Juniper Tree”<sup>28</sup>, we can only deduce that fathers rarely sees the abuse until it is too late, despite being affectionate and caring. One might attribute this to the cunning subterfuge of his wife’s schemes. The raising of children has long been considered a woman’s business in several

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<sup>28</sup> (Grimm, 269-77)

cultures, which might excuse the fathers of not always being there. Neither parent, however, seems to be able to put their own feelings aside and put their children's well-being first.

Being born "good" is no good, according to the stepmother. There is no gumption in sniveling, obedient and passive girls (29); however would they make it in the real world if it were not for her intervention? Life would indeed be dull, and they would be stuck in their role as "dutiful wife" for all times, and so would their daughters after them. The stepmothers of the fairy-tale world stirs things up by taking advantage of gullible and diligent creatures; "Go play in the traffic...Put on this paper dress and look for strawberries in the snow'. It's perverse, but it works" (ibid), because regardless of what the stepmother does, the good daughter's kindness will always be her ticket out of poverty, and into the arms of a prince or a king. The blame, however, will always fall to the stepmother's lot. She will never be thanked for her "parenting skills".

From our contemporary perspective, one might sadly agree that there are mothers who are jealous of their own daughters for implicitly being the younger, prettier versions of themselves. No one takes kindly to be reminded of their own mortality, because what better symbol of "memento mori" than children? In a way, sacrificing ones children is an offering to the witch/goddess in the previous section, and in killing the progeny, one hopes to trick death. The evidence that shows that one is aging is therefore visible in one's appearance only, but a face can be masked and cut into and reshaped; like stepmother, like stepdaughter. The effect of perpetuating patriarchal values could run in families for generations in this way.

It appears that the stepmother's project is not so much to invoke sympathy as to stand her ground. She understands her place, and emphasizes the importance of not changing her character; "No Devil, no Fall, no Redemption" (30). If we see the antagonist in those terms, their significance to the plot far outweighs that of the protagonist. Without interference, fairy-tale events will unfold quietly, interrupted only by the arbitrariness of the weather, and there would be no story. She concludes by saying "[y]ou can wipe your feet on me, twist my motives around all you like...but you can't get me out of the story. I'm the plot, babe, and don't ever forget it" (ibid)

Atwood keeps returning to this type of character throughout her authorship, *Good Bones* in particular, to those who *tell* stories and those whose life *make* for good stories. However, the crux of this tale is that no matter their faults, these women are who they are because of nurture, not nature. Their nature is either nursed or oppressed by the level of tolerance exerted

towards women in a given time-period. The intertexts in these three stories intertwines with anachronistic references, which make them applicable to contemporary life, for example; at the time when the girl in the paper frock went to look for strawberries, traffic was probably scarce or non-existent, and her father were more like to be a merchant or farmer than an office- employee.

The tale of the maiden, the mother and the crone are ubiquitous and timeless stories, the contents of which have never changed; only the context is different. In juxtaposing the past with the present, Atwood endorses their right to speak; to give accurate representation; and to assert that blame is as fluid as conventions of gender. One needs be neither one nor the other to begin with, but our peers and societal conventions informs our actions, and the norm is to place people in nicely labeled boxes. The necessity of placing these stories up for revision is one way of changing public perception. As discussed in section 2.3.1, by telling stories from the conventional “bad guy/gal” position, one cuts through the myth in order to explore alternatives paths of characterization, and narration. Stereotyping characters, as we have seen, means sacrificing multiplicity of self, and instead of scrutinizing of the mechanism that enable this practice, one assigns blame to those whose voices are, and will be, discredited as words of a witch or a jealous hag. Atwood gives them a chance, which, one might safely say, is all they ever wanted.

#### **4.4 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter examined “The Snow Child” and “Unpopular Gals Speak”. The former is Carter’s revision of the “Snow White” theme, and despite being the shortest tale in *The Bloody Chamber*, it is Carter’s daring attempt at centering the “villainess” and “heroine” as central characters. The Count who covets the Snow Child lieu of a “Prince Charming” is caught in an erotic triangle, where the Countess tries to get rid of the competition for her husband’s affection. Her fear of replacement can be traced back to the “Evil Stepmother/Queen” of the Grimm versions, whose position is dictated by patriarchy both physically and metaphorically. In most retellings of Snow White the King/Father figure is absent, and the magic mirror becomes the voice that dominates the Queen’s discourse and world-view. The mirror distorts as well as reflects attitudes that lead to fear, jealousy and isolation. The Queen’s only option is to maintain her position as long as she can, by any means necessary.

Carter's uses of color-imagery common to fairy tales to convey structures and ideologies: power is signaled through red and black (the Countess), morality through grey (The Count) and innocence (victimization) through white (the Snow Child). Through keywords like "snow", "blood", "raven", "thorns" and "rose" Carter interlaces the Snow White theme with Sleeping Beauty – another princess known for her passivity – in order to expose the myth and reveal the harmful doctrines of the original material. The story does not conclude happily, but revision does not concede that as a criterion. The important thing is that even though the Countess benefits from the girl's destruction, the mechanism that govern them both (represented by the rose) are harmful and perpetuate misogynistic fallacies. By promoting beauty and youth the only qualities worth having, men like the Count will profit from lack of female cooperation.

"Unpopular Gals Speak Up" deals with some of the same issues. Three different tricksters reveals the truth behind the scenes of the conventional stories. The stepsister recounts how she always came second to the prettier, diligent sister. The stepmother does not deny that she did horrible things to the children in her care, but stresses that her interference is the cause of their happiness today. The crone, the earth-goddess in witch-like garbs, reminisces a time when she and the people lived harmoniously together, but now they steal from her and ostracize her. Any children she might have eaten, were intended to die by their parents, anyway.

Atwood parodies the archetypal hero by transferring the role of narrator and focalizer to the "villain" of the story, thus blurring the lines of fairy-tale dichotomies like good/bad, witch/fairy godmother etc. These characters rebel against stereotyping and disassembles the myth of the one-dimensionality of their portrayal. Their powers, motives or virtues have always been reduced to pettiness, black magic or jealousy in the face of bigotry and fear. This story is Atwood's reminder to us that we should not judge a book by its cover, nor put our fate in tales that paint the world in black and white. Her tale offers an alternative to the passive, self-less princesses, whose goodness is a rare commodity and does not always resonate with real people. Female agency is not encouraged by placing docility and silent obedience on a pedestal; like the stepmother says, "I stir things up, I get things moving" (29). The juxtaposition of the Countess and the three tricksters reveals that the only way to instigate change is to speak up.

## 5 The Bloody Chamber and Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women.

### 5.1 Brides, Beards and Boxes.

This chapter looks at “The Bloody Chamber” and “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women”, where Carter and Atwood debunk myths about the dangers of female curiosity and female disobedience. Using material from Perrault’s “La Barbe bleue”, Biblical themes of Eve and the Fall and, Greek topoi of heroes and Pandora’s box, Atwood and Carter open up a dialogue with conservative narrative forms whose misogyny is barely concealed, moving on to criticize and subvert them.

“The Bloody Chamber” is a revision of the Bluebeard myth, and therefore the analysis will draw its thematic intertexts from there. The narrative content and characters included in the Bluebeard myth vary from version to version, but in all simplicity: One upon a time there was a man who married a young girl. He killed her and took a new wife, whom he also killed. He wanted to kill his next wife too, but members of the girl’s family vanquished him. The Grimm Brothers collected two variants of the tale, namely “Fitcher’s Bird”, in which a wizard kidnaps three sisters one by one, but is outsmarted by the third, and in “The Robber Bridegroom”<sup>29</sup>, a rich suitor is revealed to be a cannibal, and is subsequently defeated by his quick-witted betrothed. As for positive portrayal of female characters, these versions at least feature strong, active women. Perrault’s version, however, is more grotesque and concludes his tale with a warning concerning the dangers of female curiosity, and as such, seems to be more in need of impeachment for its non-feminist values. However, Angela Carter (undoubtedly a feminist writer) translated Perrault’s *Contes*, and wrote the *The Bloody Chamber* while arguing against the consensus that Perrault’s tales were misogynistic. Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère and Ute Heidmann in *New Wine in Old Bottles* propose that her revision is “less a debunking of her predecessor than a genuine dialogue” (42) based on Carter’s understanding of Perrault’s project to educate his readers.

There are naturally significant differences between Carter’s tales and Perrault’s, but the most important difference is her shift in focal point; the Marquis, whom we presume to be the reincarnation of Bluebeard<sup>30</sup>, features as an antagonist, but the narrative is focalized through

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<sup>29</sup> Atwood also rewrote this fairy tale, in her book *The Robber Bride*, McClelland and Stewart, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Carter’s translation of “La Barbe bleue” is inconclusive regarding Bluebeard’s death, and it is suggested that the intention was to allow Bluebeard to return to life “in keeping with the rich literary and cultural afterlife of the tale” (Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, 118).

the eyes of the young girl he weds. The Bride compares herself to Eve and Pandora (the original “Stupid Women”), and demonstrates her awareness of the cultural pressure denoted by the traditional interpretations of the Bluebeard tale. These conservative interpretations are the ones Carter and Atwood deconstruct, in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women”.

## 5.2 “The Bloody Chamber”

The first, and also the longest, short story in Carter’s collection, is narrated by a young woman called the Bride (Dutheil de la Rochère, 137)<sup>31</sup>, who looks back on her trials and tribulations with a mien of elation at its end and of shame that it ever happened. The whole story is really a battle of perspective, with the young Bride trying to tell her story while the Marquis manufactures the way she, and by proxy the reader, sees herself. Her voice, however, is the first defining feature we encounter, which cements her as a narrator and her perspective becoming our guide as Carter sets the scene. The first paragraph consists of one long sentence, which gives the feeling of recollecting an incident years after it has happened, detail upon detail as it emerges from memory;

I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage. (1)

The passage emulates movement, as if the reader too is being borne through the night, and into unfamiliar territory, and the machinery of the train in relation to her body creates a heavy sexual subtext. Carter revels in this stream of consciousness, where adjectives pile one atop the other and supports the story’s historic placement, at the *fin de siècle*. Decadence and elation intertwine with the unfiltered perspective of a young girl on the brink of discovering womanhood. Thinking of the mother she left behind in Paris, the Bride vocalizes the beginning of her transformation into a piece of art through the eyes of her husband; “I felt a pang of loss as if...I had, in some way, ceased to be her daughter in becoming his wife” (1). Her brave, unsubduable mother who battled pirates and shot tigers (2), who would happily

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<sup>31</sup> Most of Carter’s characters are nameless in order to enable the reader to identify with them, but it is important to note that the girl in TBC never calls herself Marquise. This indicates that she has left that part of her life behind, and would rather not be associated with the Marquis. Her anonymity also encourages the reader to identify with her.

beggar herself for love, finds that her daughter would happily marry without it to secure their financial future. The mother knows the world and is familiar with its ugliness, unlike her offspring, who grew up with tales of her mother's adventures, and as such harbours romantic notions. The girl daydreams of her husband-to-be's ancestral home by the sea, and swaddles it in the stuff of myth, legend and fairy tales, and the progeny she might bear him; "Our destination, my destiny" (ibid). She resigns herself to be his wife in all things, and to "carry" on the family legacy. She is compelled to say yes to his proposal, not by the violence of his desire, but by its gravity (4). In other words, she cannot say no to his desire, because she is attracted to his attraction to her. Being an innocent, she does not know how to exert authority over her own body nor her mind.

The Marquis, first described as having a dark, leonine head (ibid), with silver wings in his hair (3), is despite fine breeding and manners a cold and controlling man. Carter hints at his disposition in describing his face, saying "experience seemed to have washed it perfectly smooth, like a stone on a beach whose fissures have been eroded by successive tides" (ibid), and furthermore that this face is a mask of something psychologically darker. The Marquis is a collector of artistically crafted objects, but most importantly of women (Dutheil de la Rochère, 112). He was last married to a Romanian countess, an animalistic, wild beauty who supposedly died in a boating accident, yet her body was never found (4); before that to an artist's model, whose face was "common property", but she supposedly succumbed to the viles of absinthe (ibid). His first wife was an opera singer, whose passion on stage was the tell-tale sign that she would die young, surmises the young Bride (5). The Bride, upon hearing of her husband's previous marriages, mythologizes this tripartite female gallery in naming them "graces" (ibid). Considering the powerful number 'three' in fairy tale lore, this could indicate that she considers herself fortunate to be chosen by her husband-to-be, as she considers herself to be no one in particular. In summary, the Bride is consumed by the idea that her life is becoming part of an ongoing fairy tale, despite every warning-sign of her husband-to-be's obsessive yet secretive character and the mysterious circumstances surrounding the deaths of his other wives. This is indeed a tale that advocates caution on curiosity, but it also advocates the virtues of being curious. Growing up is metamorphosis in its own right and it can manifest itself in the yearning for knowledge; about oneself as well as about others.

### 5.2.1 Siren Songs and Sonorous Jewellery

During their courtship, the Marquis insists on paying for his Brides *trousseau*, or hope chest, and its content (6). Usually such chests contains items collected by a young woman in anticipation of marriage, such as linen and clothes. In buying it for her, he does make up for her lack of proper attire for a higher class, but it also removes a part of the Bride's personal touch. She accepts his choices and his tastes, which result in her going to the opera in nothing but a muslin shift with an empire waistline and a "his wedding gift, clasped around [her] throat" (ibid). The image of a pale child with a slit throat is disconcertingly ominous. It becomes apparent that the Marquis is slowly grooming his new bride to become part of his collection; a collection where the subject is killed into art. He gives her a ruby choker, like "an extraordinarily precious slit throat" (6), and buys precious furs, petticoats, and flashy rings to make her properly attired as his wife. Both he and his gifts seduce the Bride; her romantic notion of love is charged by emotions invoked by passionate artistic expressions; "my heart swelled and ached so during the Liebestod that I thought I must truly love him. Yes. I did. Upon his arm, all eyes were upon me" (5). The Bride is slowly falling prey to the corruptive, but beguiling feeling of being the centre of attention. The Marquis is like a will-o-the-wisp who dazzles her with pretty things to lure her off the safe path and to her death.

The Marquis' second wedding gift to the bride is a painting of Saint Cecilia<sup>32</sup>. As the young Bride watches the blind patroness, she - in addition to feeling an increase in sentiment towards her husband - sees herself in this image. This is the Marquis' intention; he is subtly implementing his own view of women into their marriage, under the guise of showing interest in his Bride's musical activities. Women are only worth admiring when art immortalizes them, and only in martyrdom can the Marquis' murderous fantasy be fulfilled.

Furthermore, the Marquis collects salacious books about sadistic sexual relations. The representation of women in high art and books may have fostered his misogyny, and this perspective is the only lens through which he can perceive women. He can only see them "dead as art, or alive as saints (Dutheil de la Rochère, 116). His collection of (invented) paintings include "*Sacrificial Victim*" whose skin bear faint resemblance of being chained (*The Bloody Chamber*, 16) and Ensor's "*The Foolish Virgins*". He is attracted to the martyred

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<sup>32</sup> The blind patroness of musicians who suffered martyrdom. The legend says that she was stabbed in the neck three times, but lived for an additional three days. From [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Cecilia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Cecilia) . Accessed 14.05.15

woman who must die, not for any sin on her part, but as a manifestation of the wicked pleasure of others. Even though the Bride browses his books and has an understanding of the aesthetic pleasure found in art, jewellery, fine clothes and fine dining, she is oblivious to the subtexts and licentious undertones of such a lifestyle.

The rich and powerful Marquises of the world are anarchists in their own way, by creating spaces wherein the laws of man do not take effect. In this sense, it would not be too farfetched to compare his ancestral home by the sea to a threshold into fairyland<sup>33</sup>. Even though the *transference* of a hero does not figure in Carter's fiction, I would argue there is a slight transfiguration of this theme in "The Bloody Chamber", in the transference of a heroine. If we juxtapose the Bride with "traditional" fairy tale heroes (see section 2.1.4), whose journey would take them into another realm, we find that the Bride makes such a comparison, only she travels (initially) into the "unguessable" realm of marriage. Her husband's castle is the very epitome of Gothic and fairy tale elements:

And, ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics, the casements opening on to the green and purple, evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from land for half a day ... that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits, endlessly, for a lover who had drowned far away, long ago. That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place! (8-9)

The Bride is on a journey, of that there can be no doubt. What she discovers and ultimately learns cannot be measured by scales or quantified in riches; it will nevertheless pay her passage into adulthood.

### 5.2.2 The Better to See You With

Carter uses mirrors and looking-glasses in TBC as a way to emphasize the degree to which society, and men in particular, objectify women. The consummation-scene happens in a room full of mirrors, where "[a] dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides" (14), and can be read as a metaphor for the universality of the Bride's circumstance. The Marquis wears a monocle, which indicates a tapered, voyeuristic perspective.

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<sup>33</sup> Where, as we recall from section 2.1.2, the laws of fairy tales supersedes those of man.

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh...I'd never seen...the sheer carnal avarice [of his gaze]; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. (6)

He places the mirrors, so he can view his “prize” from every angle, and thus the Bride cannot avoid emulating this image of herself in her own mind. One example of her transformation through his gaze, is when her reflection is caught in the opera house; “...I saw myself...as he saw me...[and also] how much that cruel necklace became me. And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away” (6). He is so convincing that the Bride suspects that she might also be as wicked as he is, even if the evidence lies in conjecture. She is nevertheless faltering in maintaining her own identity. The Marquis undermines her subjectivity by dominating her as an object, hence manufacturing the way she, and by proxy the reader, sees herself. The ruby necklace becomes part of their sexual intimacy and the Bride’s identity as a sexual object; the Marquis demands that his bride wear it as he takes her virginity, and he cites his favourite poet Baudelaire, from *Les Fleurs du Mal*; “Of her apparel she retains/Only her sonorous jewellery” (*The Bloody Chamber*, 14). Any follower of Freud would attribute the Marquis fetish for paraphernalia to his murderous desires, as part of an unsolved oedipal complex, suggests Ann Blakeney<sup>34</sup>. Nevertheless, the ruby necklace serves as a collar, along with the Bride’s “uniform”, the “chaste little Poiret shift of white muslin” (15), and her hair loose so “this grave satyr” can ‘martyrize’ it (16). This is how he likes to see her; the innocent girl in the sexualised garbs of a woman. She remains silent for most of their time together, like an obedient dog sitting meekly at her master’s side. Her “sonorous” jewellery does not allow her to speak.

While the Marquis sees the Bride as an object for making art, the Bride sees him as a flower. She compares the Marquis to a lily, interchangeably in romantic and disgusted terms. Her first memory of lilies were as a welcoming-bouquet, but she associates him and his “heavy, white flesh [with] those undertakers’ lilies with the heavy pollen”, the ones that “stain you” (11). Her retrospective remarks indicate that she is marked by these events in more ways than one. Lilies are usually associated with innocence, but calla lilies are the most popular flowers at funerals, but also, strangely, at weddings. In the language of flowers, as popularized during

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<sup>34</sup> From the website; “We are told earlier in the story that the red necklace belonged to an aristocratic survivor of the Terror, and in an example of ‘guillotine humour’ wore it around her neck to demonstrate her avoidance of execution. Fetishism is often argued to be linked to the trauma of the mother withdrawing from the early closeness with her child in his early years. Freudians would no doubt agree that the Marquis’ singular treatment of women demonstrates ‘issues’ with Mama...” note to page 14.

the Victorian era, the calla lily was a symbol of magnificent beauty, with a subtle sexual message since it bears resemblance to the female genitalia. The Marquis de-flowers her in broad daylight, while quoting the infamous wolf, “[a]ll the better to see you” (13), further validating his need for visual confirmation of his sexual dominance to the chagrin of his bride. In a way, one might dub him a “flower of evil” in Baudelairean terms.

In her thesis “Flower Symbolism as Female Sexual Metaphor” (2010), Andrea Frownfelter says that de-flowering constitutes a “plucking” of a girl’s essence as a virgin, which leaves the girl free to “blossom” as a woman (28). In “The Bloody Chamber”, the Bride is innocent, but not about what married people get up to. But she is nevertheless “dishevelled” by the loss of her virginity (14). There is no mention of pleasure or mutual satisfaction, which is not surprising, since her husband’s sexual gaze and prowess almost eradicates her. Carter could be suggesting that the bridge between innocence and knowledge requires some form of sacrifice or renunciation. In order to enter the bloody chamber (knowledge, in metaphorical terms), an acolyte must offer blood of his/her own.

The Marquis clearly does not distinguish sex from torture, as evidenced by another quote from Baudelaire; “There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer”<sup>35</sup> (26). I would not go so far as to say that the Bride is a submissive masochist, but her reaction to his post-coital tenderness offers cause for reflection: “I clung to him as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could comfort me for suffering it” (15-16). She is both repulsed and excited by him, and in order to reconcile these feelings, she is willing to endure pain to earn his affection, like wearing the ruby choker even though it hurts, and letting him twine his fingers in her hair, making her wince (15), all without saying a word.

### 5.2.3 A Room of One’s Own

Before he leaves on the pretext of a business-trip, the Marquis gives the Bride the keys to his castle, indicating that it is all hers to do with as it please her. Only one key is off limits, and the Bride asks if it is the key to his heart, and begs that he give it to her. He says it is the key to his “enfer” (18), but it is only a boring, little room “at the foot of the west tower, behind the still-room, at the end of a dark little corridor” (ibid), a room that is for his eyes only. It is a den, he explains, where he might “savour the rare pleasure of imagining [himself] wifeless”

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<sup>35</sup> From *Fusées*, III (1867): “l’amour ressemblait fort à une torture ou à une opération chirurgicale.”

(19). The double entendre and intertext of this chamber is clear to the reader, since this room is the last resting place of his other brides, but to the uninitiated, it hints at a secret so great, that the Bride, naturally, cannot keep away. Looking back at the Perrault and the Grimm version, both Bluebeard-figures warn their wives not to enter this private room for fear of incurring the husband's wrath, even on penalty of death. The Marquis, however, is orchestrating the discovery of the chamber's content by practically taunting the Bride with descriptive directions on how to find it. He wants her to be "disobedient", so he can punish her, as he has done with his other wives.

The symbolism of the key<sup>36</sup> is particularly interesting in "The Bloody Chamber" because it is an instrument meant to uncover that which is hidden, and in this tale, the Bride essentially unlocks the components of love, sex and power. She enters the bloody chamber, driven on by her mother's spirit (26) and finds the remains of the women who came before her. Lorna Sage suggests that this room, and by extension the story's title, refers to the chamber of the heart, and not a meat-locker or even a womb/tomb (78). This chamber is a still life of the Marquis' feelings on love, women, sex and death, as well as a distortion of all of them.

The heroine finds that her own special set of magic or power lies with another set of keys. She tries to calm herself by playing her piano, and Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner, interrupts her. The Bride opens up to him, with his "singularly sweet" (30) eyes and "ingenuous" (31) smile, which one might suspect equally attracts the Bride with its innocence as her own did the Marquis. The boy is smitten by her through her musical talent. After her meeting with the bloody chamber, the Bride's character has changed. She comports herself differently; she tries to seduce the Marquis to keep him distracted, but her thoughts are on murder: "If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then" (35); even though she is frightened, she faces him as he condemns her to die as a martyr. In an ironic twist of the fairy-tale genre, it is not any male relation, but her mother that rides in to save her. "The Marquis stood transfixed...as if [the mother] had been Medusa, the sword still raised over his head as in those clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard that you see in glass cases at fairs" (40). Carter mentions the Greek myth as a nod to feminist artists and critics of the period (like Cixous) who appropriated the myths for feminist purposes. The ironic twist is that invoking Medusa, Carter reclaims power

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<sup>36</sup> "Le Barbe bleu" and "Fitcher's bird" both contain the key motif, but in the latter, the new mistress of the house must carry an egg with her as well as the keys to the house. The significance of this will be elaborated in section 6.2.

of the female gaze through the female narrator, and subsequently it is the Marquis who is killed into art (Dutheil de la Rochère, 137).

The blind piano-tuner ultimately becomes the Bride's lover, and one might say that Carter is undermining the problem of objectification by pairing the Bride with a partner whose handicap automatically prevents him from doing so. However, his blindness is not the issue. The Bride actively chooses him for his virtues the same way he does hers; kindness over condescension, an audile sense of beauty over visual manipulation. But perhaps some of the beauty of his blindness for the Bride is that he cannot see the mark of shame on her forehead, left by the key she dropped in a pool of blood. Neither Pandora, nor Eve were marked after their "transgressions", and the girl in Perrault's tale does not seem to have changed after her ordeal in Bluebeard's secret room. Carter alludes directly to Perrault's tale, with the "clockwork tableaux of Bluebeard", but in so doing she makes it clear that the Marquis is *not* Bluebeard. After all, Perrault does state that such barbaric actions could not have occurred in our time, but Carter places her story somewhere in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>37</sup>, thus opposing him in the notion that history *and* fairy tales are composed of singular events: All this could have happened before in one shape or another, and it can very well happen again.

Curiosity and knowledge are volleys of change, and they should be encouraged, not punished; the Hope at the bottom of Pandora's box means a second chance to set things right, or to make better choices. Carter's revision of the Bluebeard myth is not a condemnation of the foolishness of young marrying for all the wrong reasons. It is a request, or perhaps even an invitation, to make the journey into secret, dark chambers of our own, and use our creative energy to manufacture other, less bloody, forms of art. The journey might leave a stain, but it will be the mark of a survivor; one that will continue to create subversive mechanisms in opposition to patriarchal norms.

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<sup>37</sup> Although her tales are often infused with anachronistic elements, see section 6.2.



### 5.3 “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women”

The following section examines “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women” (abbreviated to “Stupid Women”), a flash fiction story that invokes the poetics of Baudelaire as well as multiple pop-culture and fairy-tale references. The purpose of the analysis is to consider whether Atwood succeeds in re-appropriating a genre belonging predominately to a male (misogynist) poet, and thereby creating feminine literature. There has been little academic attention given to this collection of stories, as mentioned in 1.2, therefore most of what follows will be my own interpretations. However, Reingard Nischik’s *Engendering Genre: The Works of Margaret Atwood* and Sarah Wilson’s *Margaret Atwood’s Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* will be prudently consulted.

“Stupid Women” does not resemble a fairy tale, in the sense that there is no “once upon a time there lived such and such a person”; the narrative is colloquial in phrasing and invokes the poetic form more than the novel or the fairy tale form. The imperative of the title is satirical, and serves as an *in media res* preamble to a recitation of all the silly women known to humankind; the “airheads, the bubblebrains, the ditzzy blondes: the headstrong teenagers too dumb to listen to their mothers:” (*Good Bones*, 31). At first glance, the women Atwood describes seem like hollow caricatures, but the familiarity of the descriptions invokes sympathy and recognition, encouraging the reader to respond affirmatively: “I know a girl like that”, or “yes, I know exactly who you mean”, just like we recognise evil fairies, stepmothers and peddling old crones. However, one may question whether this is enough to qualify the story as a fairy tale. Yes and no. Atwood’s short stories are not strictly speaking fairy tales in terms of genre or appearance, but as mentioned in section 1.2, the fairy tale is part of her plethora of intertextual references, and like Carter, Atwood uses them promiscuously.

#### 5.3.1 Silly girls

The narrative flow of “Stupid Women” reads like a speech, or a soliloquy, and Atwood could be doing this to make the reader imagine herself or himself in the speaker’s stead. This however implies that we are dealing with a first-person narrator, i.e. an unreliable narrator, and we must be critical of whatever follows. We nevertheless get the indication that she is female; “Let’s face it, she’s our inspiration! The Muse as fluffball! And the inspiration of men, as well!” (36). One might tentatively suggest that in using a female narrator in a male-

dominated genre, Atwood has employed one of the strategies listed by Diana Purkiss<sup>38</sup> that circumnavigates Cixous point concerning female authors as creators of feminine literature.

Atwood mixes pop-culture (of the then 80s, 90s) with mythology, psychological cues marking indecision with vaudevillian slapstick, which set the tone of the story. Tongue-in-cheek she points out all the stupid women worthy of our scorn and our praise: primarily those gullible and indecisive souls who let themselves be led astray by boyfriends, witches or wolves; the ones who microwave-dry their poodles; those who believe men's advice on "chewing-gum contraception"; and the ones who are dumbstruck by their inability to choose the one thing or the other (31-32). "*They don't live in the real world*, we tell ourselves fondly: but what kind of criticism is that?" (32). Most people, if given the choice, Atwood remarks, would prefer to live in another world too, but the reality is that these women listed, are fictions, "composed by others, but just as frequently by themselves" (ibid). The reality is that these women are performers, acting out a fantasy-image – for love. Even if these women's careers range from stewardess to nurse, *actress* will be their first and primary vocation, in their pursuit of making stupid men feel less stupid (32). The implication is that these women are more clever than their counterparts, but the system in which they live will does not enable female agency to come forward.

Men may love such women for making them feel superior, and other women love them even more for the same reason. In reading about stupid women, the perceived reader of the story experiences a sense of *schadenfreude*, but also a recognition of his/her own mistakes. Nobody is perfect, but there is a particular glee in seeing those who pretend to be, fail to do anything "ordinary people" take for granted. Nevertheless, these women are far from useless, Atwood says. They are the reason we tell stories. Because, "if all the women were wise" (ibid), there would be no tales to tell around the campfire, in the nursery or the parlours. Wise women (like us, the narrator implies), never let their lamps go out, and as such, enable no comedy of errors. There is no case of mixed identities, no slips of the tongue and, most importantly, no story. These wise women are too cunning, too skilled at maintaining an air of non-divulgence, of prudent silence. Their lack of narrative vices makes them too clever for us (33), and thus removes our opportunity to amuse ourselves, or move us towards empathy. This is however, only the narrators take on things. The reader might perceive this as jealousy from the narrators part, and therefore will in fact be moved to sympathize further with the "silly women". The

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<sup>38</sup> (see section 2.2, pp. 15-16)

lack of foresight or the ability to spot a wolf in sheep's clothing are not qualities one should encourage, but the results are nevertheless a very positive thing.

We love Foolish Virgins as much as we detest Wise Virgins, the narrator proposes (ibid). The convoluted schemes that trick Eve into "eating the free sample of...the Tree of Knowledge" (34) and Pandora into believing that all is not lost as long as Hope lives, these schemes are just the sort of con-artistry the audience loves to see. Atwood draws a parallel from Eve and "the con-artist yarns of the plausible snake" (ibid), to the modern, but gullible woman who listens to sales-pitches and ignores the small print, thus unwittingly signing off on more than what they bargained. As for Pandora, "hope" is a powerful emotion, and can often be anthropomorphised in fairy tales in order to guide the hero or heroine through their darkest hour. However, hope, for all its redeeming qualities, is not practical. Hope does not pay the bills, nor does it offer protection from the lasciviousness of wolves. Still, the metaphorical and fantastic<sup>39</sup> interaction between Foolish Virgins and wolves dictates that the Foolish Virgin be made an example of, for posterity's sake. The wolves with their golden tongues disguise their beastly nature through romantic language. "*Where have you been all my life?*" (34), the wolves declare, to which the Virgin can only respond that she knows no more the answer to that question than she knows *herself*. The readers, however, can spot a wolf for miles, and despite silent warnings, the Foolish Virgin "goes prancing and warbling and lolloping innocently towards her doom" (35). The Little Red Riding Hoods of the world are no match for the lewdness of wolves.

The way in which Atwood writes the following passages creates an air of unease. Thus far, our hapless Virgin has been unaware of the dangers surrounding her, but we now come upon a paragraph that reads as if she is to be tested, and we, the readers, are the overseers. The narrator remarks that the subject could not "tear her way out of a paper bag" (35), and is incapable of saving herself, except for through sheer, dumb luck. Everything she does is inevitably wrong:

Leglessly she flees, taking the wrong turn at every turn, a white chiffon scarf in the darkness, and we flee with her. Orphaned and minus kind aunts, she makes inappropriate marital choices, and has to dodge ropes, knives, crazed dogs, stone flower-urns toppled off balconies, aimed at her head by suave, evil husbands out for her cash and blood. (36)

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<sup>39</sup> As in the phenomenon of fantastic events

In an almost cartoon-like fashion, the girl is showered, not with gold or riches, but with her due diligence; not knowing the danger of the wolf is the same as choosing the wolf (*Sexual Politics*, 279). Atwood places us right next to the heroine, yet tells us not to pity her. Fear will protect her. Fear is power, but the Foolish Virgin will never exact that power, because it holds her captive. Fear locks the image of her in a stereotype, in the nonsensical binary opposition to the worldly hero, even to the Wise Virgin. But as long as she is silly, the audience will love her. For, as the narrator would have us agree, she is “the Muse as fluffball!” (36), the inspiration for both men and women. As long as there have been Foolish Virgins, there have been poets, heroes and explorers eager to dedicate their narratives to said Virgins. Our narrator then predicts the Virgin’s fate; she will swoon and moan at her “admirer’s” attention, she will be taken advantage of, and her calamity will find its way into the tabloids and into our hearts. “*We forgive you, we cry. We understand! Now do it some more!*” (ibid).

From the dungeons of deadly husbands in a country far, far away, Atwood has expertly segued from the realm of the fairy tale into media-crazed contemporary times. The format of flash fiction is built upon the intertexts it carries, to impart meaning through references onto the reader in a flash. This notion is in turn built upon the supposition that the reader is aware of this demand, and is able to decode the intended message. Most of the fairy tale references in this story are easily extracted, but unless the reader is familiar with Baudelaire, the primary force of feminist deconstruction might be lost. Nevertheless, Atwood’s fairy tale intertexts are at the centre of the story, and are the main conveyors of meaning.

### 5.3.2 The Female Lecteur

*Good Bones* as a whole interacts with Baudelaire, but in this text in particular, the closing lines are akin to throwing the gauntlet in opposition to Baudelaire’s textual portrayals of women; Atwood modifies Baudelaire’s famous gambit from “Au lecteur” (“– Hypocrite lecteur, - mon semblable, - mon frère!”) to their feminine forms<sup>40</sup>, placing “the emphasis firmly on the female sex” (Nischik, 54). Baudelaire mainly writes from a male perspective, thereby denying not only female agency but also subjectivity, so Atwood’s intertexts takes on a near didactic quality. Her narrator in “Stupid Women” appeals to us all, the collective “we”, indicating that we all commune in a shared experience and perception of the afore-mentioned airheads and bubblebrains. Furthermore, it suggests that we are all contributors to the continued shaming of Foolish Virgins (and Wise Virgins, for that matter). Whether the reader

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<sup>40</sup> «*Hypocrite lecteuse! Ma semblable! Ma soeur!*” (*Good Bones*, 37)

is encouraged to discontinue this practice is perhaps speculative at best, but what else could Atwood's point be than to make the reader question his/her perspective?

Recollecting Luce Irigaray's statement from the introduction<sup>41</sup>, one might ask if Atwood's revision of Baudelaire's work hinders her as a feminist writer, given that she does employ his ironic "voice" (Patricia Merivale qtd in Nischik, 54). Atwood's subversion of his methods indicates that this is not the case. I would argue that the ironic voice is entirely her own, considering the inversion of gender, of narrative voice and of subject matter. Baudelaire did not promote female narratives of experience of any kind; Atwood, in "Stupid Women" and *Good Bones* as a whole, presents a multitude of female experiences, inspired by fairy tale or reality. "Stupid Women" is not a tale of female misogyny; it simply mirrors the tendency to laugh and revel in the misfortune of others, and that these women have inspired us in spite of their own ineptitude.

Furthermore, the narrator ends this story with a symmetric repetition of the title; "Let us now praise stupid women, who have given us Literature" (*Good Bones*, 37). It is unlikely that Baudelaire would have suggested that women are the creative force behind literature, regardless if they were stupid or not. The origin of literature is not a subject for this thesis; however, one might remark that Atwood makes a point of *pretending* to write in a misogynistic manner, by using stock characters and an unreliable narrator, whose intents we cannot be sure of, and by playing with a genre that was principally known through a male writer. Her fairy tale intertexts here functions as a way of re-directing our attention to the supposedly stupid women, the ones whose misfortune we try to avoid, and instead give them some credit for making it out alive. They are not role models, insofar as one should not endeavour to protect children and young girls by keeping them innocent about the ways of the world. These stupid women are however, as the narrator says, part of us; they are our sisters and our equals. Their voices still echo throughout history, reminding whoever listens that their mistakes were once ours. We need not say "that could have happened to me", because we have already been there.

Together, these narratives have brought Literature to the world. Eve, Pandora and Red Riding Hood are portrayed by the narrator as "the headstrong teenagers too dumb to listen to their mothers" (31), but we must not forget that they are connected to the Great Goddess and to

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<sup>41</sup> That women cannot rewrite or write without adopting the style and tone of male writers.

matriarchal power (*Textual Assassinations*, 32). Their actions have defamed them and made them victims, seemingly with only themselves to blame, but their stories have been told and distributed by male authors. Their curiosity has therefore become short-sightedness and their journey to discover themselves makes them gullible and susceptible to exploitation. Atwood's subversion of Baudelaire does not give the impression that she explicitly negates or argues with that view, but that is because she is dismantling the idea from the inside. She uses the language and the form of the prose poem within the imbued meaning-making system of flash fiction, thus deconstructing the patriarchal stereotyping and re-constructing something new within the genre at the same time. Atwood rewrites stories of women who knew nothing of the world, and makes them re-tell their plight to us, so that we might forfeit judgement of their stupidity in remembering our own.

#### **5.4 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter looked how Carter and Atwood revisions tales of gaining experience through storytelling, and the subversion of female objectification in "The Bloody Chamber" and "Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women". Carter's story is based on Perrault's "La Barbe bleue", but her narrator is the young woman he marries. The girl is nameless, like many of Carter's characters in *The Bloody Chamber*, to encourage identification between protagonist and reader. The girl is seduced into marrying him by artistic representations of love (operas, art, gifts and so on), and the Marquis uses artefacts to slowly turn his new bride into erotic/morbid art. The girl's mother rides in to rescue her in the eleventh hour, and the Marquis is almost petrified by the sight of her. Carter subverts his objectifying gaze and invokes the Greek myth of Medusa, who subsequently kills the Marquis into art.

Where Carter delves deeper into and subverts the moral tale, Atwood uses the Baudelairean prose poem form not only to deconstruct language, but also the genre of the prose poem. Baudelaire did not possess a favourable view on women, so in appropriating this format, Atwood engages with a tradition that has negated women as storytellers and human beings for centuries. She thereby appropriates the form for feminist purposes, in the sense that she revisions its functions; the feminist fairy tale is supposed to promote the voices of marginalized communities, which Atwood does both in "Stupid Women" and in "Unpopular Gals". In poststructuralist terms, Atwood has successfully managed to write outside the phallogocentric system. She places the focus on a female narrator, whose focus is on the silly women of the world; she is parodying the portrayal of such women and interestingly the narrator herself remains anonymous, meaning that she could be anyone. Atwood does not

write in a “male” voice; her ironic tone and parodic imagery is emblematic of her own narrative style.



## 6 Bluebeard's Egg and The Tiger's Bride.

This chapter will examine Carter's versions of "The Beauty and the Beast" (henceforth referred to as BB), "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" (*The Bloody Chamber*), and Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (*Bluebeard's Egg*) to show how these stories reveal the shackles of masculine dominance over female identity and sexuality. By rattling the Beast's cage, Carter and Atwood hope to release the beast, not in man, but in woman. The *wondrous transformation* in the original tale of "Beauty and the Beast" takes place on the outside, in accordance with the happy-ending motive; the Beast becomes the Prince to reward the heroine for overcoming vain principles of beauty. Carter and Atwood revert this gaze and sends it inward, placing the self-reflexive powers and transformation within the female protagonist. This strategy means that we as readers must exercise caution. First-person narrators can be unreliable at the best of times, and both authors are aware of this. They play with this concept and rewrite instances of female suppression with subtle (and not so subtle) overtones, hoping their readers will see the warning signs and unlock their own cages.

I will first give an account of the two original versions of "Beauty and the Beast", and the thematic core of transformation, which will serve as a guideline for further analysis.

### 6.1 "Animal Husbandry"

Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve wrote the eldest known version of "La Belle et la Bête" in novel form in 1740, inspired by other folktales of Animal Bridegrooms. She was part of the "second wave" of French fairy tale writers writing for adult audiences, continuing the tradition of Perrault and Madame D'Aulnoy. What is important to note, is that while her inspiration came from the folkloric theme, the novel and its content was entirely her own original material, imbued with her quotidian (proto-feminist) concerns. In her version, Beauty's father offers her to the Beast in order to save his own life. The Beast is beastly through and through, as far removed from humanity as could be. The core of the tale is the journey of transformation from the inside, where the monster returns to the realm of man through "civilité, magic, and love" (Windling). Only after this transformation can Beauty ever love him. The external transformation however, does not occur until the morning after the wedding, and Beauty awakens to find a human Prince next to her.

Villeneuve's criticism of the limited rights afforded to women in all matters matrimonial (before, during or after the fact), was diluted by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont sixteen years later in her rewritten version, which is the one known to most audiences today. The

burgeoning sexual imagery was also toned down, the Beast became hideous, but gentle and learned, and the need for transformation was placed with the heroine instead of the Beast. The aim was to teach young ladies to de-emphasize the value of external beauty<sup>42</sup> and learn to love the man underneath. The new “Beauty and the Beast” (1756) became a moral tale, in accordance with the move of the fairy tale genre away from the parlour and into the nursery. The rebellious tone was snuffed out and replaced with a set of virtues for young ladies with which to comport themselves upon entering marriage. Carter summarizes this edict in her review of Betsy Hearne’s treatise on the matter; “...a man should be loved for his inner qualities alone, especially if he has an outwardly repulsive appearance but pots of cash” (“Visions and Revisions”, 124).

Beaumont’s version seems to demand psychoanalytical interpretation; meaning that the inherent value is supposedly the humbling of Beauty through a similar process to the one the Beast went through to become a gentle, nurturing and respectful person. There is a sense of balance to this method, that in order for the couple to be compatible, they must see each other as equals, not as *other*. The process should nevertheless demand the same of both genders, a *quid pro quo*, as it were. However, Carter notes that this method “is a sign of the story’s irreducible literariness, its over-determined quality, that it seems to demand interpretation on this level rather than a response of simple pleasure, or wonder, or surprise” (Ibid). It is a valid feminist ideal that man and woman should not judge the other based on appearance and construct relationships based on personal compatibility. If one rewrote “BB” with the roles reversed, with a female Beast and a male “Beau”, this tale would probably struggle more than the original to be supported by any post-modern wave of feminist criticism, and not just because it would be a fractured feminist fairy tale. Characterizing either gender as a beastly figure is a product of a psychological undercurrent of society, empowering neither men nor women. The subsequent transformation of one’s sensibilities and personality, however, does.

How do Carter and Atwood go about rewriting this tale? Primarily by adding layers of intertextuality and irony. Carter plays with the notion that her heroines might be as bestial as their male counterparts, and Atwood negotiates the parameters of the happy ending by transforming the sheep-like Prince Charming into a cold automaton. In all three stories the transformation takes place in the heroine, parallel to Beaumont’s version, but the course of

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<sup>42</sup> One might say that Leprince de Beaumont employs the second strategy of retelling, as proposed by MacDonald, see section 2.3.

this change is different for all three heroines. One finds comfort in an inverted Garden of Eden; another discards her human form; and the third quits the story standing on the brink of rebirth.

Carter, throughout *The Bloody Chamber*, has focused on the animal aspect of human sexuality, and her characters therefore embody traits that emphasize their animalistic nature, particularly in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride”, where the heroines are faced with actual lions and tigers. Atwood, on the other hand, employs the use of animal imagery mostly as metaphors, with Ed in “Bluebeard’s Egg” supposedly dumb as a sheep, and therefore harmless. His inane innocence thus masks his true character, at least from Sally’s point of view. These stories mirror the “Beauty and the Beast” formula (both Villeneuve’s and de Beaumont’s) in terms of where the transformation of the self actually takes place; in the internal instead of the external. The following analysis will focus on the wonder of transformation, and its promotion of equality of gender and character. We will look at how Carter and Atwood advocates gender equality and criticizes stereotypes of women and men, be they beastly or simply flawed.

## **6.2 The Courtship of Mr. Lyon and The Tiger’s Bride**

The following section will analyse “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and its twin “The Tiger’s Bride”<sup>43</sup> interchangeably, because where the one chooses to resemble the Beaumont version (third person narrator, and all), the other focuses on the subject matter as seen from a more outwardly feminist point of view in addition to being narrated by the protagonist. Instead of forgoing an analysis of just one of them, the primary focus will be on CML as it is the most subtle in terms of subversion, and TB will then function as the more radical, speculative text. In them Carter explores the “shifting boundaries between the human and the non-human”, as allegories for women’s condition under patriarchy, either as pets or automatons (Dutheil de la Rochère, 257).

“The Tiger’s Bride” is a truly elaborate work of intertextuality and poetic beauty. The story invokes gothic images in a much larger degree than its lighter twin does. The main character, often referred to as Bride to separate her from her twin in *CML* (but must not be confused with the Bride in “The Bloody Chamber” from the previous section), and also to explicitly emphasize her status in the tale and in society as a whole. Her story begins with the ominous

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<sup>43</sup> CML and TB for short.

words “[m]y father lost me to The Beast at cards” (56), thus establishing her lack of power in an economy where people function as currency. CML begins with Beauty, and her father. The father lost most of the family fortune before Beauty was born (51), and now they live on the brink of bankruptcy. Similarly, The Bride in TB is left with one parent; her mother was “bartered for her dowry to [a repugnant nobleman and] she soon died [because] of his gaming, his whoring, his agonizing repentances” (57).

Like Snow White’s mother, Beauty is first introduced while looking out a window at the snow, and yet her “skin possess that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too was made all of snow” (43). The Bride is called the “Christmas rose” by her nanny, and is “the living image of her mother” (57). Carter paints Beauty as the dutiful Cinderella child, awaiting her father’s return, doing her chores, but the Bride is a proud, intelligent but cynical girl fed up with her father’s vices. The journey of these two women are interchangeably a journey inward and subsequently becomes an external transformation, either by shedding one’s skin, or grow comfortable into the old one.

#### 6.2.1 The Beast’s Lair

CML begins when the father’s car breaks down on the road. He finds a house in a splendid garden and goes to look for help. The snow-covered landscape and the atmosphere of the garden seem to be frozen in time, and this tension, the father surmises, is due to the wealth and privilege of the master of the house. The gate shuts behind him, and the reverberations appear to “[bar] all within it from the world outside the walled, wintry garden” (44). The father enters the house, its hallways filled with fresh flowers, but there is no human presence. An intelligent, jewel-collared Spaniel, however, comes to take the father to a room where he receives food and drink. Carter invites us to remember *Alice in Wonderland*, with the image of a tagged whiskey-bottle that says “Drink me” and an engraved silver dish saying, “Eat me” (45). The reference to falling down the rabbit hole is an expression of the sense of stepping into a different landscape where things are neither completely the same nor completely different, in accordance with a fairy tale ambiance. It also foreshadows the transformation of the Beast (Anny Crunelle-Vanrigh, 130). The luxurious surroundings and the excellent hospitality comfort the father, and he believes the master of the house to be very altruistic and magnanimous, albeit eccentric. On his way out, the father notices that the eyes of the doorknocker are agate. It is interesting to note that agate is a cryptocrystalline variety of silica, classically associated with metamorphic rocks, which further foreshadow the transformation of the Beast.

Before leaving, the father picks a white rose from the garden to give to Beauty, her one request, but his host takes offence and reveals himself as a great leonine beast, who seeks to punish the father. To save his life, he shows the Beast a picture of his child<sup>44</sup>. Her eyes seem to possess the ability to pierce through facades and bare one's soul, and the Beast studies her picture with a sense of wonder (*The Bloody Chamber*, 47). The Beast agrees to let him live and bring her the rose, but implores that Beauty be brought to dinner. "...and what else was there to be done?" (ibid). The father's character is here revealed to be similar to the father in Villeneuve's version; avaricious and cowardly. He justifies his actions as an expression of devotion to his daughter, "his Beauty, his girl-child, his pet" (43), but he views her more in a covetous way, as property for bargaining. The jewelled Spaniel serves as Beauty's double in this regard, in terms of the Spaniel's servant-master relationship to the Beast (Koshy, 110), as well as the mechanical maid in TB actually mirrors the Bride (*The Bloody Chamber*, 66).

Beauty agrees to remain with the Beast while her father returns to the city, where the Beast will aid him in his financial troubles. She is not a hostage per se; more like collateral security. The paragraph following the father's acquiescence reads like stream of consciousness, where Beauty muses over the otherworldly nature of their benefactor. Although the Beast seems courteous enough, Beauty cannot bear his *otherness*. In his presence, she feels like a sacrificial lamb awaiting his pleasure (48). However, his agate eyes, that look as if they are "sick of sight" (47), move her to bear the arrangement, for her father's sake. This love, Carter emphasizes, is the path from which Beauty cannot stray; starting with the oedipal attachment to her father, ending with the transference of these feelings into mature love for the Beast as a partner (Crunelle-Vanrigh, 135). Bettelheim reads the original tale as woman's growth into adulthood; Carter reads it as an idolization of the commodification of women as valuable – but primarily exchangeable – objects (Koshy, 109-10).

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TB follows the Bride into "captivity" after her father lost her in a game of cards to "la Bestia" (57), an imposing figure wearing a mask "with a man's face painted most beautifully on it" (58). Judging by his character and his moniker, the Bride suspects that he is not entirely human. She must therefore travel to his derelict palace, in stark contrast to Mr. Lyon's

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<sup>44</sup> Crunelle-Vanrigh notes that «the camera» is a tip of the hat to the 1946 movie adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* by Jean Cocteau, where the Beast also takes a leonine form, and thus includes the film into the intertext of the story (130).

Palladian house. The Beast gives her a white, impeccable rose from his “outmoded buttonhole” (ibid), and gives her the command that she must be ready to depart the following morning. Her father is in shock. Where he had been “red as fire, now he was white as the snow that caked the windowpane” (60). He quotes the last words of Othello in lament, and The Beast’s valet simply replies that if he wanted to keep his treasures, he should not have gambled with them. In the morning, the father begs forgiveness from his daughter in the form of a rose. She hands him the flower, but can no more forgive him than she can change the coming events.

As they travel, the Bride muses what the exact nature of her new master’s beastliness might be. She is aware of the “animal” urges of man, and she knows that the only power she has in the face of it, is her own skin (62). Her character is vastly different to Beauty’s – who is all innocence at first-, and her cynicism mixed with her stubborn attitude gives her an aura of strength. Her soul is cold and steel-like, like the cold winter-landscape. The Beast’s palace is not a place of luxury, but of solitude; a place where all manner of animals enter the human spheres; “The Beast had given his horses the use of the dining room. The walls were painted...with a fresco of horses, dogs and men in a wood where fruit and blossom grew on the bough together” (63), and yet it is an uninhabited place, with no human servants, just like the Palladian house of Mr. Lyon’s. The Bride gets a good look at the neglected state of the palace as they ascend to the Beast’s eyrie. Inside she is informed that the master of the house has but one request, which if granted, will secure her passage back to her father with enough furs, jewels etc., to recompense her; The Beast desires to see the young lady naked.

“I let out a raucous guffaw; no young lady laughs like that!” (65). The Bride then gives her acidic reply, that he may “visit” her, if she is put in a room with no windows, with her torso and face covered. Afterwards she must be taken to the church, in the public square. Should he like to offer her money, she would accept it, but if he does not, then that is just as well. A single, glittering tear forms on the Beast’s cheek. The Bride is taken to her room, “a veritable cell” (ibid), where a mechanical soubrette waits to keep her company. The clockwork doll has the Bride’s face and a “musical box where her heart should be” (66). The Beast’s valet repeats the Bride suspicion; no human dwells in this place.

### 6.2.2 Living with Animals and Automatons

After the father in CML goes back to London, life with the Beast proves to be quite agreeable. We begin to suspect that Beauty herself might not be as innocent as her original namesake.

Every night she converses with the Beast “as if she’d known him all her life” (50), but only because the Beast - who is shy and withdrawn, presumably, because he is infatuated with the girl - makes himself engage in conversation. Although she has had little experience with small talk (49), she now has an outlet, and comes to dominate their discourse. At midnight, the mood abruptly changes, and they both feel compromised, being alone with no chaperone but the Spaniel<sup>45</sup>. The hour alludes to Cinderella’s enchantment, which ends at the stroke of midnight. To Beauty’s horror, their evening concludes with the Beast licking her hands. Crunelle-Vanrigh suggests that this is Carter’s way of portraying the Beast as an inexperienced – even inadequate – kisser, which gives Beauty the upper hand in their courtship (131).

Her father rings the following day with splendid news of new wealth, and Beauty returns to the city. She promises to visit the Beast before spring comes, but life in the city is just as timeless and consuming as the “Palladian house” (44) of the Beast. This adds to the expansion of the fairy-tale atmosphere by blurring the lines between where the enchantment begins and ends. The text as a whole refuses attachment to any given time period, as seen through a series of anachronisms; The Beast lives in a “Palladian house” (44), with a “Queen Anne dining room” (47). Beauty’s world has twenty-four car rescue services, as well as slow trains, and flower shops that keep the same flowers all year, thus diffusing the changing of the seasons. Beauty’s father buys her expensive clothes, takes her to the opera, and potential suitors shower her with compliments. The “sacrificial lamb” has become a pampered cat (52).

Albeit a metaphorical transformation, Carter’s description of Beauty as a sexually manoeuvring feline nevertheless deconstructs Beauty’s function as the catalyst for the Beast’s transformation (Crunelle-Vanrigh, 133). Having established Beauty’s ambiguous nature this way, one might surmise that even though Carter has followed Beaumont’s text this far, Carter includes a defiant element from Villeneuve’s version. Carter’s Beauty is far from innocent; like the bride in TBC, Beauty has the potential to be just as sexually forward as (if not more than) her host. The twinned image of the sensual cat paired with the wild lion leaves the reader to suspect that the two might be a match for each other on a transcendent level rather than the physical.

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<sup>45</sup> As discussed in section 2.3, female presence in any fairy tale falls into the “good”/“evil” dichotomy, except for wise women, or fairy godmothers, whose supernatural nature exempts them. Therefore, the Spaniel, albeit very intelligent, is not considered a viable “human presence”.

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The Bride's mechanical twin carries a magic mirror, which shows the Bride the image of her father, drunk and weeping. It is as if the mirror can only show her the ugly truth of her circumstance, from which there is no escape. The Beast's valet brings her food, and a teardrop shaped diamond earring, which she rejects. When it is time to meet the master of the house again, she asks why all The Beast wants is to see her naked, and his valet half stammers that his master's reasoning is founded on the seeing of skin no other man has seen before. The Beast cannot communicate in any language known to man, and therefore his intentions must be mediated through his valet. "That he should want so little was the reason why I could not give it..." (*The Bloody Chamber*, 68). The Beast cries another tear, and the Bride now has a full set of diamond earrings. Having reached yet an impasse, the Beast buries his masked face, and thus reveals clawed paws and bits of fur. He is not a man in beast-form, he is a beast wearing a human-mask.

One day, he asks if the Bride will come ride with him. She is fond of horses, so they journey out. They stop by a river, and the valet declares that if she is not ready to let his master see her unclothed, then she must prepare herself for the sight of his master unrobed (71). Suddenly a great wind blows, and the Beast sheds his garments. "The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers" (*ibid*). The Beast is indeed a great, hulking tiger with eyes like two, vehement suns. There is nothing human about him, but the Bride is struck with the magnitude of his form. She unfastens her jacket, and stands naked from the waist up. Afterwards, the wind dies down and the moment is over. When they return, she is taken to a lush apartment, and upon looking in the mirror, it is "in the midst of one of its magic fits again" (72), and it shows her father, smiling, counting a pile of banknotes. Again the mirror shows her all that is wicked in the world, similar to the Snow Queen's mirror (Hans C. Andersen, 264-94). The Bride feels destitute as the valet brings a fur-coat and luggage for her journey back. Her father cares more for money than he does for her. She does not recognize herself in the mirror, and the clockwork maid no longer bears the same face. "I will dress her in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter" (73). She has had enough of the avaricious nature of men and she decides to renounce them altogether.

### 6.2.3 Of Beasts and Women

The final passage is the epicentre of CML where it converges with the original tale, but diverts from the fairy tale genre. Beauty returns to the Palladian house to find the Beast dying in his bed. She throws herself onto the bed with the Beast – Carter dispenses with metaphorical language here – and kisses his paws<sup>46</sup>. Her tears initiate the transformation; enter Mr. Lyon. He was never cursed, though. The “transformation” occurs in Beauty’s eyes, and this “psychologization” of the metamorphosis destabilizes the narrative, and the reader’s assumptions of how the story plays out (Crunelle-Vanrigh, 139). “How was it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?” (*The Bloody Chamber*, 54). We come back to the image of the mirror, and that suggests that it was Beauty who was cursed, with a beautiful face in lieu of a monstrous one. The course of the “curse” was not to be confined in eccentric solitude but to be coveted and to covet, to have one’s gaze only skim the surface, and to let the pleasures of the world bypass moral obligations. “Her trance before the mirror broke; all at once, she remembered everything perfectly. Spring was here and she had broken her promise” (52). The charms of city life are just as mesmerizing and tempting as those of an enchanted garden. It nevertheless is up to Beauty discard her vanity in order to secure herself financially and socially through marriage.

The transformation’s only purpose, was to bring their polymorphous natures together. This happy-ending is not a feminist ending, which is precisely why Carter wrote this story as an example of what this system embodies; both characters are removed from normality, but they do not stray from the norm. CML creates a rupture in the phallogocentric system. TB is Carter’s release of the true animality of her characters, and without a closed ending. The Bride, however, goes through a complete transformation; from woman to beast. She goes to the Beast in nothing but her fur coat and the diamond earrings. The touch of his tongue rips off her skin, “all the skins of a life in the world” (75) and leaves behind shining hair. The earrings return to their watery form, and the Bride shrugs them off her beautiful fur. In renouncing her humanity, she frees herself from convention, obligation and fear. TB’s

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<sup>46</sup> Carter has explicitly stated that CML cuts through the original BB, and depicts the Beast blackmailing Beauty to stay with him (qtd in Koshy, 111), but in light of reception theory and Barthes axiom, I will only mention her statement in passing. The text as an autonomous source is the focal point of this thesis, not the author’s explicit intent.

message is simple: no tiger recognizes a pact made by sheep, and neither woman nor man should follow suppressive doctrines blindly.

### 6.3 Bluebeard's Egg

“Bluebeard’s Egg” (BE) is part of a collection of short stories where Atwood rewrites stories of everyday life where we meet struggling partners and the terminal stages of their relationships. Unlike *Good Bones*, these tales belong to the genre of short stories, not flash fiction. In them lies a hopeful sentiment permeating the collection as a whole, with open endings and alternate paths opening up for the (usually female) characters to pursue (Nischik, 78). Due to the narrator’s perspective, BE is full of fairy tale intertexts, and although Atwood stages the narrative in a modern environment, there are several parallels to the traditional forms. This section will focus on how Atwood uses fairy-tale intertexts to displace perspectives, and how this affects the protagonist’s and, subsequently, our own interpretation of events. BE has been compared to a detective novel in form and metaphoric language, but Elisabeth Keyser contradicts Jack Zipes in calling it is a feminist fairy tale (Keyser). I will therefore examine Keyser’s statement to see whether the elements of the detective genre cancels any feminist message, visible or implied.

#### 6.3.1 Fairy Tale Intertexts

Similarly to Snow White’s mother and Beauty in CML, “Bluebeard’s Egg” introduces its protagonist, Sally, looking out of a window while doing a household chore. Where they differ, is in Sally’s marital status; she is the third wife of a cardiologist named Edward, whom she explicitly states she practically “hunted down” (*Bluebeard's Egg*, 135), unlike previous heroines we have seen, who have undoubtedly been chosen. This indicates that she is fairly ambitious and dominant in character, and not particularly passive. She is clever, organized and skilled, but her professional ambition is to maintain her status quo, even though she could rise in the ranks should she desire. “But she’s just fine where she is” (141). She takes night classes, initially so Ed will find her more interesting, but she dejectedly notes that Ed takes no notice (143). He is a mystery to her, despite their years of marriage. He is so perfectly stupid and innocent in Sally’s mind that she admits it to be the reason for her affection for him. Ed is “a child of luck, a third son who, armed with nothing but a certain feeble-minded amiability, manages to make it through the forest with all its witches and traps and pitfalls and end up with the princess, who is Sally of course” (134-135).

It is interesting to note that Sally’s love life is influenced by “Agatha Christie murder mysteries” (135), with plots that resemble the feminist fairy tales of the 1970 and 80s. “...the clever and witty heroine” chooses the “second-lead male, the stupid one, the one who would have been [sentenced to death] if it hadn’t been for her cleverness” (ibid). In other words,

Sally might be the fictional representation of the attitudes of these tales, and the effects thereof. While Sally considers herself to be the “brains” in the marriage, Ed is not as stupid as she would like, he is after all a cardiologist. To her friend, Marylynn, Sally confides that Ed is only stupid in matters of the heart. In other areas of life, he is perfectly capable. The irony of Sally’s perspective informs the reader that Atwood has reversed more than just the focus in terms of the fairy tale, but also the narrator’s perspective on the gender roles they inhabit. Sally imagines herself superior and in control of Ed, in order to nurture her mirage of their marriage, but in reality, she has very little control over Ed at all.

Sally and Ed have no children. Sally is stepmother to Ed’s children from previous marriages, but has had little to do with them “in their earlier incarnations” (133). We may assume that she is not as malicious as the Queen in Snow White or the “Unpopular Gals”. She is however, hostile towards others of her own gender, the exception being her friend Marylynn. She calls her husband’s ex-wives “quagmires” and “sink-holes” (136), but despite being (in her own mind) the third wife, and therefore the “rightful” bride, she fears Ed will deem her false (136). Ed is a handsome cardiologist, and therefore he is always “beset by sirens” (139) at parties and gatherings. His status and good looks make him desirable, a fact that is not lost to Sally. Her issue is partly that women ostentatiously flirt with him in front of her, but mostly with the fact that she remembers herself doing the same thing so *she* could catch Ed’s attention.

His previous wives are out of the picture, but their fates did not coincide with their fairy tale equivalents (i.e. murdered), so Sally is free to think of them as drug-addicts or insane (150), in other words, Ed is better off without them. Marylynn is the only friend Sally confides in, and one detects a touch of envy of in the way Sally talks about her. Marylynn is aging with grace; she does not dye her greying hair (138), and stylishly wears silk blouses and delicately arranged scarves in a way Sally can never replicate. Meanwhile Sally is both aggravated and thankful that Ed does not notice how Sally looks either way, because he cannot see that she too is aging. When she does dress up, Sally sagely notes that Marylynn is the intended audience, given that Ed is oblivious to any external change (138). The fear of being replaced due to growing older that drives the Countess in “The Snow Child” is equally present in BE.

Sally negotiates the fairy tale intertext similarly to the Bride in “The Bloody Chamber”, but Atwood’s heroine is older, wiser, and not in need of the journey through the chamber to gain experience and knowledge. Instead, Sally’s negotiation of her understanding of fairy tales indicates that they partially cloud her perspective, and this mutates our interpretation of what she is revealing to us. However, Atwood presents us with the allusion to the Bluebeard myth

in the story's title, which means that we are also looking for the ways this intertext informs Sally's and Ed's perspective. A dual intertextuality suggests that, first, Atwood encourages critical scrutiny of information given by the third-person narrator and secondly, she demonstrates the level of influence fairy tales have upon modern times by weaving several myths into each other. Additionally, Sally's latest project is a night class on fiction writing, so she has to do some revision of the Bluebeard myth of her own. She chooses the perspective of the egg, because it reminds her of Ed, who could certainly not be the wizard in the story, nor have a secret chamber. "...if it were Ed the room wouldn't even be locked, and there would be no story" (159). This could mean either that Sally tries to take Ed's character at face value or that she is complimenting herself on being a good judge of character.

The title of the story refers to the Grimm version of Bluebeard, "Fitcher's Bird", where the wizard gives his young bride-to-be both the keys to his house and an egg to carry with her at all times. Symbolically the egg represents fertility or "something the world hatched out of" (ibid). Ironically, Sally pictures Ed as an egg, "blank and pristine and lovely. Stupid, too. Boiled, probably, Sally smiles fondly" (ibid). In this context, Sally plays both Fitcher, and Fitcher's bride. She fears being replaced by other women, and is merciless in her description of them as sirens whose hearts should be removed, thus removing their cause to pester her husband (140). The images of hearts, blood and organs float in juxtaposition to the daily rhythm of Sally's life, and thus brings her life closer to the Bluebeard myth.

Sally's character is influenced by the mirror-intertext as well. Wilson compares Sally to H. C Andersen's Snow Queen, and Kai, the boy who falls in love with her due to a troll-mirror splinter lodged in his eye, and tasked with finishing a puzzle on a frozen lake (267-268)<sup>47</sup>. Sally fears what putting all the pieces of Ed's character will entail, for she has indulged in creating simulacra of her marriage. What will become of him (and of her) if she ever solves the puzzle? Essentially, Atwood's heroine is insecure and afraid of being too successful; in a way she's keeping her full potential unfulfilled, and the puzzle incomplete. Most of all, she fears that Ed is not the perfectly stupid man she imagines, and that there are hidden depths to him that she can never reach. Consequently, Sally's outer shell cannot hold her together even when she feels like she might burst from simply existing (147). Upon entering Ed's "forbidden room" (examination room with a machine that can show images of the heart better

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<sup>47</sup> The Devil's troll-mirror (that distorts everything it reflects) is broken into millions of pieces and the splinters lodge themselves into people's eyes, which freezes their hearts and makes them see only the evil things in the world.

than an echocardiogram) Sally's heart is nothing like she imagines. Her heart, notes Wilson, is indeed in need of repair (267).

### 6.3.2 Cracking the Case

"Bluebeard is a criminal-author, writing his stories of murder in his secret chamber, while his (latest) wife is a detective-reader, whose reading enables her to write her way out of Bluebeard's deadly authorship" (199) writes Heta Pyrhönen about Angela Carter's Bluebeard-tales. The allegory works in Atwood's version too, given Sally's literary proclivities. However, Elisabeth Keyser states that while BE is a psychological detective novel, it is not a feminist fairy tale, but she does not explain this position further. She says BE is *feminist* in "the manner of Doris Lessing's "To Room Nineteen"...that is, it features a heroine who is almost wholly dependent for her identity upon her husband and her marriage, and it exposes the horror of such dependence" (162-63). One can suggest that Sally, to some degree, exemplifies the housewife whose identity is dominated by her husband, and adding the fact that she does it of her own volition, makes BE a strange choice for a feminist fairy tale. However, the message of the story is not to think of Sally as a role model, quite the contrary. If Sally is trying to "crack" the case that is her husband, then the "moral" of the story is to realize the detrimental effects of complete dependency upon another person. Dying for love is a romanticized notion brought to us by poetry and epic literature, but living for the illusion of love makes for equally frightening reading.

"Detective" Sally tries to gain access to her husband's inner world by appealing to his heart. He is not completely dismissive of her affection, but he is not as dependent upon it as Sally is. Nevertheless, Sally tries to elicit a response from him, anything that might indicate passion. She taunts Ed about his female admirers who hide in the bushes, ready to pounce on him, but he only patiently, albeit tiredly, brushes her off. She cannot gain passage to his "inner world" this way, so she tries to be interested in things that consumes Ed's attention, like his work.

Unlike "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Bloody Chamber", Ed's "room" is an examination room with a machine designed to detect faults in the human heart. It is a sexual room in a way Sally does not fully understand. There are no dead bodies, nor any trace of blood that is not where it is supposed to be. Therefore, one might postulate that Ed is the chamber, or rather, the chamber constitutes his inner world. It is the only room into which he shows an active interest in something that pertains to Sally; the black-and-white image of her heart. Their interaction in the examination room is nearly as clinical as the procedure, yet their roles are reversed;

Sally needs only to “lie there” and Ed prepares the machine and gains access to the inner parts of her, so to speak. Ed is not what one would call sexually adventurous, and the marital intimacy is a repetitive pattern. Hence, the erotic undertone of the examination room stands in stark contrast to their marriage.

Little information is given concerning Sally’s previous relationships, although we know Ed is not her “first and only man” (148). The interesting thing is that she remarks on the meaning of the egg in “Fitcher’s Bird” as a symbol for virginity, deducing that girls with clean eggs get married, but girls with dirty eggs get murdered (159). It is from this assumption that she gets the idea to write from the perspective of the egg for her assignment in her fiction writing class; the egg being the passive, yet innocent cause “for so much misfortune” (ibid). But how does one write from a perspective that is “closed and unaware” (ibid)? Really, this egg suffices as a metaphor for Sally’s own life. She is unaware despite being precocious, and withdrawn in spite of her role as attentive hostess. She does not draw this parallel to herself, however, having no desire to reflect inwards.

One might suggest that Ed only performs his spousal obligations out of routine, but one might also suppose that he is not entirely interested in sex as a recreational activity. His clinical, almost automaton-like manner deflects Sally’s attempts at intimacy on a deeper level. He is practically the opposite of the Marquis, whose proclivities dominate him as a sexual being. Ed is far from a monster, but his indifference cuts deeper than any sword, and it makes him unpredictable. He is constantly wearing a mask that Sally cannot remove with all her skills combined. The stereotypical Gothic man, brooding and mercurial, is absent from this Bluebeard tale. In his place, we find his reserved, egoistic brother. Both are misogynist characters, Ed is simply more tempered due to the cultural conditions of their time. He belittles “feminist” (160) and gives every indication that he does not harbour affection for either gender; only his work and his solitude give him comfort. Sally is more often than not left unsatisfied. She is no closer to Ed now than before, and after her visit to his “forbidden chamber” her heart is metaphorically torn from her chest. She must look elsewhere for answers.

### 6.3.3 Unravelling Matters of the Heart

Although Ed is not the overtly romantic type, he is good with hearts, just not the kind Sally calls “real hearts”, “the kind symbolized by red satin surrounded by lace and topped by pink bows...[hearts] with arrows in them” (139). Ed’s colleagues, however, are excited by the

innovation of plastic hearts, the new and improved version (164). It is no wonder that Sally is drawn to the notion of love and romantic sentiment dictated by what one might call “Hallmark-Valentines”, meaning the commercialization and dilution of romantic ideals; one that includes hearts pierced by arrows and stuffed, pink animals, and egregiously clichéd cards. One might suspect that Sally’s understanding of love is a reproduction of these ideals to the same degree that she is emulating her husband’s misogyny (hence the “quagmires” and “sink-holes”). This could indicate that Sally cannot pretend nor know her own heart either, seeing as she often represses her true feelings, and struggles to make others see her point of view. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the comparison and subversion of Sally’s synthetic hearts to the plastic hearts. The symbol of love and commitment is replaced with a man-made material, and is thus stripped of its power to transform or to invoke marvel. The synthetic representation of love subverts the mythic, and reverses the use of “love” as a source of magic. Atwood therefore anchors the element of transformation in the fairy tale aspect of the journey. One must journey into one self and trust not in love to reveal one’s true form but one’s own self-awareness.

It is at a dinner party that the unthinkable happens; Sally finds Marylynn and Ed in a compromising position. From the reader’s perspective, we cannot be completely certain of Sally’s account, because one moment Ed’s hand is touching Marylynn, and then it is not. The ambiguity and, frankly, confusing description of their position gives cause for doubt. Sally has told the reader that she is prone to seeing what she wants to see throughout the narrative. Why should she be truthful now? Because all along, she has really been trying to mask the cracks in her own shell, by looking the other way. Her husband is not who she thinks he is, whether he is faithful to her or not.

He is not blameless, though. If what Sally saw is true, then her perception of Ed’s character is an illusion that has been perpetuated by them both, by Sally as a means of building an identity outside of herself, and by Ed for some mysterious purpose which remains unsolved (*Bluebeard's Egg*, 164). Sally’s inner world needs to come to terms with what is happening outside it. In other words, the heroic persona she fashioned for herself is not really committing self-sacrifice on Ed’s behalf so much as she is trying to keep the state of their marriage as it is, frozen as it were. Sally is gifted and hardworking, but the only one who is incapable of seeing it is Ed. She locks her place in her career, and she tries to emulate an effortless grace by buying things emblematic of a bygone era. But no amount of make-believe can keep her

from the dawning realisation that parts of her life is a construction of her own making, and the fundament is now decomposing.

“Just as the detective novel asks “Whodunit”, so the fantasy novel asks “What do I seek?” says Charlotte Spivak in *Merlin’s Daughters* (4). The former is question directed at the external world, but the latter directs its query inward. Even though there is no explicit elements of fantasy in BE the intertext of this journey inward is nevertheless the main focal point of this section. Sally’s journey to Ed’s centre is the metaphorical “quest” inward, but she is essentially asking the wrong question; if Ed’s heart is no longer the nexus of her existence, what will she find as she journeys inward?

Sarah Wilson argues that Atwood’s images of gender are often misinterpreted, because most critics fail to recognize the doubling, and mirroring of each gender of each other; “Atwood’s male power figures are sometimes dark reflections, anti-selves, or even Frankenstein creations of the female persona”, and consequently gender roles do not limit Atwood’s metaphoric language (270). Furthermore, Atwood’s works embody the concept of possibility because it actively makes her characters, and her readers, face truths or reveal falsehood. On the matter of whether or not this is a feminist fairy tale, I would argue that Keyser compares Atwood’s work to the original sources, rather than appreciating how Atwood has revised them. If we recall Zipes’ definition of the feminist fairy tale and Trites’ core (see section 2.4), then one could suggest that BE is indeed one such tale, because Sally is set on the path on self-empowerment, even if this is not typed out on the page. The “wondrous transformation” could be interpreted literally; as being a contemplative state. Zipes does say something further that might speak in favour of this interpretation; “the aesthetics of the feminist fairy tale demands an open-ended discourse which calls for the readers to complete the liberating expectations of the narrative” (*Don’t Bet on the Prince*, xi).

Sally’s musing at the story’s end symbolizes the transition from perceiving the heart as the centre of the human condition to the tentative realisation that the black-and-white heart on Ed’s monitor might just be a muscle. The egg, however, Sally’s inner world and creative potential is the real mystery that needs solving. The egg is, as mentioned, a symbol of fertility, and frequently associated with the heart, particularly at the end of BE. The egg Sally imagines is “golden pink”, then “rose-red, crimson” (165), and draws parallels to the egg as being a container of the soul, and the source of transformation (*Sexual Politics*, 269). If Ed’s heart or soul is in the egg, then he has lost his powers over Sally. Sally fears having nothing inside her, nothing from which something new might spring. But she has encountered her inner world,

and is slowly being disenchanted. The open ending of the story promises a rebirth, not a magic transformation as such, but a change, nevertheless.

#### **6.4 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has analysed “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”, “The Tiger’s Bride” and “Bluebeard’s Egg”, looking at how the fairy-tale element of “wondrous transformation” is envisioned by feminist writing. Both CML and TB criticize the unbalanced gender politics that govern human interaction by uncovering the truth of the original tale. CML emphasizes this by negating the need for the male lead to change his appearance or behaviour; it is Beauty who must change her standard and definition of beauty and only after having been thus humbled, can she take her place next to a powerful mate. TB, however, does not humanize the Beast, but allows the Bride to embrace an animal state of tactile and olfactory sensation in lieu of language and sight (Dutheil de la Rochère, 257). By becoming a beast, she conjoins a dual “otherness” – that of being an animal, and being a woman- and rallies against the anthropocentric and phallogocentric culture that would repress this otherness (ibid). Neither Bride nor Beauty are lambs anymore.

BE presents a difficulty due Keyser’s denial of it being a feminist fairy tale. However, Keyser gives Atwood credit for having written a good psychological detective novel, but one might suggest that Keyser is not looking deeply enough into the fairy-tale intertexts. Atwood displaces her narrator so that our perspective is from that of the protagonist, but the narrator also gives us reason to scrutinize Sally’s account of events. Although Atwood does not spell out that Sally is empowered, that does not mean that BE is not a feminist fairy tale. Arguably, the final page of the story is the springboard for Sally’s new journey, not just into herself, but to her liberation. As her illusions of love as a transformative power are debunked, the mythic properties of love are not enough to induce transformation. This powerful statement says something to the effect of the values of self-dependency and personal grit. The journey to this realization is the key. The “wondrous transformation”, like any process or journey, begins with taking a step in the right direction.

## 7 Conclusion

This thesis has investigated seven revisions of fairy tales by Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter to determine whether it is possible to rewrite fairy tales that maintains the elements of the original tradition, but can satisfy feminist values of equality, accurate representation and avoid stereotyping characters. Poststructuralist and feminist theory is used to provide a framework from which to understand revision as a process of deconstruction, and reception theory is used to discuss the naturalization of fairy-tale morals and imagery and whether this process hinders feminist revision.

The fairy-tale genre can be traced back as a precursor to fantasy and sci-fi, but it in turn owes its legacy to folk-tales and oral tales. What is interesting is why the genre has been adopted by many feminist writers. Firstly, because by employing a canon of literature recognizable to most of the Western world, the writer gains not only an audience which will grasp the intertextual references, but also a canon of material to revise as he/she pleases. That is the prerogative of revision. Secondly, by altering the traditional tales the writer actively re-inscribes meaning to a genre that has mostly perpetuated patriarchal norms and values. Ultimately, it is a win-win scenario to rewrite for the sake of rewriting, in continuing the tradition of the fairy tale.

Poststructuralist feminist theory explores the ways in which language can deconstruct (essentially) patriarchal binary structures. These constructions have repeatedly construed “women” as Other and “men” as Center, and thereby indicate that “women” are not entirely subject to the control of language. This deflection of the Centre is called *jouissance*, and denotes a complete feminine pleasure of creative energy, that also functions as a deconstruction of language. Furthermore, Hélène Cixous proposes that in order to deconstruct phallogocentric language, one must utilize *l'écriture féminine*, but stresses that this type of literature must avoid the types of language that supports phallogocentric structures. Poetry seems to be the only existing format where female writers avoid writing in the style of men.

Julia Kristeva suggests that female writers who employ deconstructive writing enables them to inscribe new meanings to any piece of literature. Meaning, in poststructuralist terms, is as mercurial as it is abstract, and can therefore only be anchored in context, not in culture or any universal concept. By rewriting myth, one creates a sub-milieu of intertext, which further disrupts the original material, and creates several possible interpretations. Diana Purkiss also argues that by employing three modes usually used for rewriting poetry, female and feminist

writers can circumnavigate phallogocentric language by shifting the male focus to a female focus, transposing negative connotations into positive versions; and placing the role or narrator with a minor character.

Reception theory is the historicizing assessment of the responses to a literary work or works of art over time. Stuart Hall recalibrated the theory to be used in culture and media studies, but it also functions as a tool for literary analysis. The theory basically posits that the meaning of any type of medium is determined by the audience. The popularity of fan fiction as a genre for interpretive literature could be said to symbolize the validity of this theory. However, the primary use of this theory for this thesis is to determine the detrimental effects of the naturalization of traditional fairy-tale stereotypes and values. Hall explains that in order for the intended meaning of the embedded codes to be decoded by its audience (for instance, women must be docile, passive creatures in order to be rescued by strong, active princes), the content of the medium must appeal to the contemporary dominant norms. Disney-movies have proved instrumental to this effect, as most of them up until the 21<sup>st</sup> century were rewritten with the dominant American cultural norms in mind. Therefore any feminist revision of fairy tales, will be working against the dominant decoding of the fairy-tale genre, but also of the dominant perception of feminism as an ideology.

This thesis employs four highlights of feminist criticism of traditional fairy tales; the portrayal of women as the weaker sex in both faculties and physical strength; powerful women are either ugly or evil; female sexuality and identity exists only as a receptacle for male, aggressive sexuality; and lastly, the cultural valuing of youth and beauty creates walls between generations of women. Using Disney movies as examples I showed how the more contemporary movies are moving in a different, but ultimately more egalitarian, direction. The popularity of movies like “Brave”, “Frozen” and “Maleficent” (all with female protagonists) shows that the majority accepts this change.

The feminist fairy tale according to Jack Zipes and Roberta Trites, empowers the protagonist, draws attention to the illusions that constitutes the framework of the traditional tales and speaks in voices of groups that have been marginalized by patriarchy. To this effect, Susan Sellers proposes some guidelines on how to accomplish this. A feminist fairy tale should include ironic and revealing mimicry, clever twist, employ tactics that cuts the myth wide open, and enough keywords for the reader to identify the original, but then provide alternative perspectives and conclusions. Parody is also effective as a deconstructive force, since it is in the nature of the form to criticize and subvert. However, in promoting feminist values through

the fairy-tale genre - that is, imbuing it with more modern attitudes and characterization – one makes the genre subject to *contamination*, a term used by folklorist. This, however, does not constitute a problem for feminist revision. The fairy-tale genre has made use of appropriation of imagery and topoi from the folklore tradition, therefore it stands to reason that in order to survive, it must adapt to the times. *Contamination*, therefore, is to be encouraged because it creates something new out of some ancient.

Chapter 4 looks at the Snow White theme, “The Snow Child” and “Unpopular Gals Speak Up”. Using two critical essays by Vanessa Joosen and Soman Chainani to first, understand the harm of patriarchal interference into a girl’s journey into womanhood, and second, to reveal the consequences if women continue this process as a means of survival. The chapter also places the “magic mirror” as one of the most important fairy-tale element, which serves as either a replacement of a male presence, or as a metaphor for the need to critically review the original tale.

“The Snow Child” is the shortest tale in *The Bloody Chamber*, and reads as an erotic fable, as Carter mixes pornographic elements with the fairy-tale genre. The mechanisms that govern them all, Count, Countess and snow child, are harmful and perpetuate misogynistic patterns of behaviour. Carter’s approach is not an attempt to demolish these patterns, but to shock her readers out of their apathetic acceptance of the norms the Snow White myth and other such tales perpetuate. Therefore, she does not empower the protagonist, because arguably there is no single protagonist, but the erotic triangle functions as a single unit. Carter deconstructs the myth in order to effect change in the way we read this myth. In that sense, it is a feminist fairy tale.

“Unpopular Gals Speak Up” is Atwood’s parody of the mythic hero, and she gives the narrative control over to three tricksters whose voices have rarely been promoted or heard before. The stepsister, crone and stepmother speak out against stereotyping women as either completely evil or completely good, when the truth is much more faceted. Furthermore, it portrays their motives, hopes and wishes as culturally based, since their traditional portrayal has focused purely on their relationship to the pretty, young people, whose goodness outshines everyone else. Society does not look kindly upon outsiders, so Atwood’s tale offers alternative perspectives and encourages female agency, making it a feminist fairy tale.

Chapter 5 looks at the Bluebeard theme, experience through storytelling and subversion of female objectification in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Let Us Now Praise Stupid Women”. The former tells the story of Carter’s nameless heroine, who makes a poor choice of husband,

and is almost made to pay for her mistake with her life, but her mother rides in to rescue her from the Marquis. Carter makes an explicit reference to Bluebeard as a part of the story's universe, which entails that the Marquis is not Bluebeard, and that "The Bloody Chamber" is just a revision, albeit one that presents the thematic core of the tale as female experience and not female disobedience. By reverting the male objectifying gaze, and focusing of the girl's journey through the bloody chamber as a journey of enlightenment, Carter digs deeper into the moral tale than Perrault's version. Her revision contains several feminist approved elements, but serves dually as a warning and an invitation to enter bloody chambers of our own.

Atwood's story employs the form of the Baudelairean prose poem as a means of deconstructing phallogocentric language and as a contribution to genre hybridization. She engages with a form that negates women as creators by re-appropriating the form to promote voices of marginalized communities. Despite using a male-dominated genre, she does not adopt the tone or style of a male writer. Her use of parody and irony to promote the creative energy of women is entirely her own, and she even goes so far as to rewrite Baudelaire himself. Both these tales satisfy and support feminist criticism.

The final chapter looks at "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon", its twin-piece "The Tiger's Bride" and "Bluebeard's Egg", and how the fairy-tale element of the "wondrous transformation" is interpreted by feminist revision. Where "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" places the transformation in the female protagonist similar to Beaumont's version, it functions as a critique of the eschewed gender-political norms that govern women and demands that *they* must change, not the system. "The Tiger's Bride" effectively proposes that in order to battle beasts, one must become a beast. This, however, is not an invitation to adopt violent behaviour, but to embrace a natural, animalistic state that transcends language, culture and tradition.

"Bluebeard's Egg" is yet another genre-hybrid of Atwood's, where her "detective" protagonist goes in search of her fairy-tale ending, only to realize that the illusion of love will not transform her husband from a cold automaton into a devoted, albeit less intelligent knight. The plastic hearts have no power to transform, but the journey to self-realization does; the "wondrous transformation" in "Bluebeard's Egg" is perhaps only in the contemplative stage as the story ends, but it is still a beginning, and indicates the journey ahead. Arguably, it is a feminist tale, even if just to show the detrimental effects of letting the idea of happy-endings and fairy-tale romance guide our perspectives.

Ultimately this thesis concludes that it is possible to rewrite traditional fairy tales using poststructuralist theory and feminist theory. Despite the popular opinions of how fairy tales should begin and end, Carter and Atwood prove them unnecessary for the fairy tale intertext to emerge. While Carter plays within the genre and its many conventions, Atwood interlaces several genres, using the fairy-tale materials as intertexts to make her point. Both women have laid a substantial groundwork for other writers to build upon, as well as contributing to an already expanding tradition. Currently, revision benefits not just female writers and the fairy tale genre but the literary tradition and its readers as a whole. These tales focus on female experience and creative energy as positive forces and provide inspiration for the female role as storyteller.

Future study of this tradition could benefit from focusing on revision as a strategy over multiple platforms, like video games, TV-series, graphic novels, other films, poetry, music and Internet-adaptations. Moreover, other studies could make comparisons between authors who adapt the same myth, theme or plot, to determine what features of the fairy-tale tradition and genre seems to generally be considered adaptable to modern times. Should one forgo stereotyping, stock phrases or the use of magic altogether? What makes a modern fairy tale? Will feminist revision ultimately reduce the genre altogether in the future? Even if the fairy tales in the future look nothing like their traditional form, one would be remiss if one did not consider that its greatest feature is the ability to adapt and withstand the erosion that comes with age.

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