

THE HEROINE'S SEXUAL MATURITY IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE BLOODY CHAMBER**

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Writer Angela Carter is one of the precursors of the present-day trend of rewriting fairy tales. In "The Bloody Chamber" she retells the popular tale of Bluebeard. This article focuses on the way Carter uses sexuality in order to break the patriarchal canon established by male writers such as Charles Perrault. Tradition sets heroines as naïve, passive and unsubstantial characters whose roles are almost reduced to being saved by their male counterparts. As long as they keep their naïveté, their sexual innocence, they will be rewarded with a happy marriage and true love. However, Carter creates a different heroine who grows in sexual knowledge throughout the story; she enjoys sexual perversions and pornography and, eventually, she finds her true love in a piano tuner with whom she forms a new family in which she becomes the strongest member, not the weak one.

Keywords: *Angela Carter, fairy tale, rewriting, patriarchal canon, tradition, to break, sexuality, heroine, Bluebeard, The Bloody Chamber.*

La escritora Angela Carter es una de las precursoras de la tendencia de hoy en día de reescribir cuentos de hadas. En "La Cámara Sangrienta" se las ingenia para recontar el cuento popular de Barba Azul. Este artículo se centra en el modo en que Carter emplea la sexualidad para romper el canon patriarcal instaurado por escritores como Charles Perrault. La tradición establece heroínas inocentes, pasivas e insustanciales cuyos papeles se reducen prácticamente a ser salvadas por sus homólogos masculinos. Mientras conserven su

inocencia sexual, serán recompensadas con un matrimonio feliz y un amor verdadero. Sin embargo, Carter crea una heroína diferente que crece en conocimiento sexual a lo largo del relato. Ésta disfruta de perversiones sexuales y pornografía y, finalmente, encuentra su amor verdadero junto a un afinador de pianos con quien forma una nueva familia en la que se convierte en el miembro más fuerte, no el débil.

Palabras clave: *Angela Carter, cuento de hadas, reescritura, canon patriarcal, tradición, romper, sexualidad, heroína, Barba Azul, La Cámara Sangrienta.*

Fairy tales constitute a timeless genre that still continues to engage children in reading habits and which helps in their process of imagination and creativity. Perhaps, due to the strength of such a genre, media such as the cinema and television, have joined the tendency of remaking popular films and stories. Just think about Disney's latest release of *Cinderella* in March 2015, in which we can see the traditional characters in flesh and blood; or think of its former production, *Maleficent*, a superb remake of the popular fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*, where some of those unanswered questions that arose when reading this tale as children are answered.

Maleficent serves to exemplify what in literature is called *rewriting*: a revision and reinvention of something written before. This has become a widespread trend in recent years, popularized thanks to the cinema and television, as has already been mentioned. However, such a tendency is not so new in literature, since it had already been put into practice in the twentieth century by writers such as Angela Carter. Carter managed to break the patriarchal canon established two centuries ago in the genre first of all because it was dominated by male writers and it was they who made it famous, and secondly, because male writers set a series of rules that dictated how characters should behave and what the general settings for these tales should be.

The most widespread technique used in re-writing these narratives in order to break the canon was, and still is, the reversion of

roles, transforming unsubstantial heroines into active ones, snatching the active roles from male characters. But Carter went beyond this when she turned “Bluebeard” into her “Bloody Chamber.” Here she made a wise use of another device that was almost forbidden in such a genre and which we would have never thought of including in tales of this kind as we know them today: sexuality. To talk about this tool that Carter makes use of, it is necessary to remember that the fairytale genre was not originally conceived for children and its content was constructed with an adult audience in mind. For that reason, writers also had adult sexuality in mind together with the latent depravity that adults could hide. In this light, Walter Benjamin pointed out in his article on the works of Nikolai Leskov that “[t]he fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children . . . was once the first tutor of mankind” (102). And to highlight this idea of adult-addressed production, I want to include Marina Warner’s words referring to fairy tales as “the television and pornography of their day” (xiv).

“Bluebeard” is a tale engendered by and within the patriarchal tradition of possession, economic dependency, submission and prescriptive female behavior;¹ and the re-reading and re-writing of traditional fairy tales offered by modern authors such as Angela Carter are a diatribe against sexual activity in females, and activity against the patriarchal agent, respectively.² Considering theories about sex, it could be said that fairy tales constitute a censure against active female sexuality in a social circle in which the main participants have traditionally been male writers giving male characters the necessary freedom to explore, practice and feel all of what sex might provide. These male writers have punished female sexuality, if we interpret a tale such as the one we are dealing with from that point of view. So, it can be claimed that Carter’s general use of the fairytale genre does not disrupt the patterns of the traditional genre, of female alienation through age and beauty, at least superficially,³ but from within these arrangements, she manages to break the patriarchal canon. For that purpose, she follows some basic patriarchal rules from the very beginning: her heroine is nameless, recognizable by qualities denoting male fetishistic desire; and the setting is established in a remote place, with a castle as the main scenery; her marital household is set in a “sea-girt, pinnacled domain that lay, still, beyond the grasp of [her] imagination... that magic place, the fairy castle whose walls were made

of foam, that legendary habitation in which he [, heroine's husband,] had been born" (Carter 8).⁵

Nevertheless the question of sex is not tackled abruptly, but there is certain process of maturation, or acquiring of knowledge instead, which can be observed in the way the heroine faces *sex/uality*.⁴ The heroine, as she narrates her story, refers to herself as a child. However, although she is a child in many ways, she actually lives a situation typical of an adult's life, for she is married and must fulfill her patriarchal marital role: she must please her husband in sexual terms. Carter here reproduces the patriarchal canon, for which the maturity of the male is a must. Terri Windling points out that "Perrault was writing at a time, and in a social class, when arranged marriages were commonplace, and divorce out of question. A young woman could easily find herself married off to an old man without consent . . . [and] [r]emarrriage was commonplace for men who'd lost a wife (or wives) in this fashion" (24). That is, the traditional canon and traditional styles of marriage state that, within a couple, the man must be older than the woman; men can freely marry whenever they become widowers, but the same rules are not applied to women, and Carter, in setting her tale in a traditional frame, follows these rules at the beginning to break the patriarchal canon in the end, since the heroine will live with the piano-tuner and her mother, and this fact is "the source of many whisperings and much gossip" (Carter 40).

But as opposed to traditional fairy-tale heroines, Carter's one is not so naïve in terms of sex, as she asserts that her "mother, with all the precision of her eccentricity, had told me what it was that lovers did; I was innocent but not naïve" (Carter 17). Carter's heroine is not as naïve as she pretends to be and the writer partially turns her into a liar, since she says that she "was seventeen and knew nothing of the world" (9), but she already knows *what lovers do*. Before she marries the Marquis, her mother asks her if she is sure she loves him and she implicitly answers that she does not love him, but she is "sure [she] want[s] to marry him" (7). She wants to marry him because of economic reasons. Carter reproduces the same reasons for the marriage as Perrault does, but hers are magnified. In Perrault's version, the heroine belongs to high class society; in Carter's version, however, her father dies "leaving his wife and child a legacy of tears . . . , a cigar box full of medals

and the antique service revolver" (8). So, marriage here is the only, desperate way of leaving poverty aside and entering a status that allows her to wear refined jewelry. With this, Carter gives our heroine a touch of humanity: egoism and desires for wealth and richness. Traditional fairy tales tend to reward the heroine's innocence and pure heart with true love and a happy marriage, but here, though the author follows the original tale, the heroine's needs to get married are exaggerated to the point of trading with her life to accomplish her *needs*, to "at last banish the spectre of poverty from its habitual place at [their] meager table" (7). Before the wedding, when she remembers the night the Marquis took her and her mother to the opera, she even refers to her clothes as "[t]wice-darned underwear, faded gingham, serge skirts, hand-me-downs" (11) to justify the fact that the Marquis, as part of her trousseau, had bought a Poiret dress for her to wear that night.

In her role as submissive and pleasant wife, the heroine is subjected to a certain kind of corrupted sex/uality. Makinen suggests that Carter looks for "a wider incorporation of female sexuality . . . that it too contains a whole gamut of 'perversions' alongside 'normal' sex" (12) in her fiction. With this inclusion, Carter breaks again the patriarchal canon when this corruption is desired and expected by the heroine, she really wants to unmask her groom and know who he really is: "[E]lsewhere, I might see him plain. Elsewhere . . . In, perhaps, that castle to which the train now took us, that marvelous castle in which he had been born" (Carter 9). First of all, she forms part of the Marquis' fetish world, in which he selects and buys the clothes his bride must wear: "the wedding dress he'd bought me," "[m]y satin nightdress . . . he'd given me" (7, 8). He also gives her magnificent and dazzling jewelry, which he does not buy for her specifically, but belongs to his inherited patrimony. In fact, her wedding ring was an "opal [that] had been his own mother's ring, and his grandmother's, and her mother's before that, given to an ancestor by Catherine de Medici" (9) and the choker of rubies that she wore to the opera, indeed, had been ordered by his grandmother in representation of the red ribbon that the aristocrats who had escaped the guillotine in the early days of the Directory had tied round their necks. Furthermore, she describes his regard as "the sheer carnal avarice" (11) when observing her wearing the Poiret dress and the choker of rubies. But it is precisely here when she confesses that "for the first time in my

innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away” (11). Thus, she recognizes that she is able to be as corrupt as the Marquis. Moreover, she sees her own image in the mirror, giving her a reflection of herself in the same way the Marquis observes her; therefore, “[b]y seeing herself through his eyes, even as an object, she becomes subject by turning her eye on herself” (Goertz 218). Carter not only corrupts the heroine, but she also makes her confess and admit her corruption without regret: “This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poirer and Worth . . . all had conspired to seduce me so utterly that I could not say I felt one single twinge of regret for the world . . . that now receded from me . . . I swear to you, I had never been vain until I met him” (Carter 12). Thus, Carter makes the heroine become aware of the fact that she has sold herself to her husband in order to improve economically. She is seduced, but this seduction is allowed by her, so she is not so passive and as objectified as the patriarchal world dictates. She even shares the role of observer with the Marquis, becoming an active subject rather than a passive object.

Secondly, she lives moments of *pornography*. Even before the marriage is consummated, she lives what she considers the “[m]ost pornographic of all confrontations” (15). In this scene she is inarticulate, she has no will, and she is completely objectified. The Marquis enjoys that situation. He takes her to their marital bed where she sees that the walls are all covered with mirrors; next, feeling proud of her discomfort and perplexity, and observing that she is reflected in every mirror, offering in each one a different view of herself, the Marquis claims he has acquired a whole harem for himself, showing off his virility, his supremacy. But when she sees that her husband is also reflected, a similar feeling of superiority does not arise in her; instead she feels hounded, she feels like an object: “[I] watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors and slowly, methodically, teasingly, unfasten the buttons of my jacket and slip it from my shoulders. Enough! No; more!... The blood rushed to my face again, and stayed there” (15). The pornographic momentum is more and more intensified when she identifies this scene with “a ritual of a brothel” (15), and when she feels like an artichoke whose leaves were being stripped off to finally be devoured by a *gourmand*. Furthermore, the objectification is so intense that she considers that her “purchaser

[her husband] unwrapped his bargain," (15) where she is the bargain. Finally, once the Marquis has obtained what he was looking for –that is, to demonstrate who rules, whose desires must be satisfied, his wife's initiation in such sexual games–, he suddenly interrupts the action: "At once, he closed my legs like a book... 'Not yet. Later. Anticipation is the greater part of pleasure, my little love'" (15). He really enjoys playing with her, exposing her to situations in which she feels uncomfortable, perhaps for the sake of playing, or maybe to initiate her in his world of lust. But Carter breaks the tradition once more by making the heroine "feel... stirring" (15), since she enjoys the situation unexpectedly, becoming not only an object but also a participant in the action.

Thirdly, she is exposed to books and illustrations that contain *pornography*. In the library, although she finally opts for pornographic books, she also finds other significant titles such as *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, and *The Secret of Pandora's Box*.

They are significant for the tale and a hint for the reader. *The Initiation* may well be understood as the heroine's initiation in sexual affairs, lust, or even any kind of libidinous practices, as I have pointed out above, the Marquis being the person who initiates his wife in sexual matters. *The Key of Mysteries* may be an anticipation of what is going to happen later in the tale and a reminiscence of what happens in Perrault's version: the little key reveals a bloody chamber which hides Bluebeard's dead wives and leads the heroine to her death. *The Secret of Pandora's Box* might be understood as the representation of the curiosity that the heroine will present later in the tale and what leads her to open the forbidden chamber. In fact, almost at the end, she identifies herself with Pandora (34). But those works seem to be boring to her and, instead, she opens a book without a title on its spine. But she herself tells us that she thought that "[she] knew by some tingling of the fingerprints . . . what [she] should find inside it" (16) and despite knowing its content, she opens the book. Its title is *The Adventures of Eulalie at the Harem of the Grand Turk* and she tells us that it is "a rare collector's piece" (17). As she examines the book she finds an engraving entitled "Reproof of curiosity" –again a possible clue for the reader as well as for her, warning the heroine not to be curious– in which she observes a scene that is totally disgusting to her, as is easily

observable in the language used to describe it: “[T]he girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a split fig below the great globes of her buttocks on which the knotted tails of the cat were about to descend, while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like the scimitar he held” (16-17). The words ‘cunt,’ ‘fig,’ ‘globes,’ and ‘prick’ are neither precisely refined words nor are they used without intention; just the opposite. The heroine is here being vulgar for two reasons: on the one hand, because she is observing something apparently unpleasant for her and on the other hand, because she is getting excited with such an illustration, she is already *corrupted* and she just enjoys observing the pictures that let her imagination run free, awaiting for the consummation of her marriage. Actually, she reveals her temper when, in order to fill time until her husband beds her, she sits at the piano to play it and discovers it is out of tune. Then she “flung down the lid in a little fury of disappointment” (16). She is desperate for two reasons. First, because she cannot use a piano under such conditions, since she is a professional pianist (although she has to continue her studies); and second, because she really wants to have sexual intercourse with her husband and has to wait. For Emma Parker, the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* demonstrate “a shift from a feminism that focuses on women’s pain, to a politics that stresses female pleasure. In making this shift, Carter eschews simple role reversal to create a synthesis between binarisms: masculine and feminine, predator and prey, consumer and consumed” (155). This fact of desiring sexual intercourse with her husband reveals a change in the female protagonist, who is looking for her own pleasure now. But she continues to look at the book and when she turns over the page she finds another engraving entitled “Immolation of the wives of the Sultan.” Then, she confirms that she already possesses the knowledge of such a world, that she is already *corrupted* because she admits that “I knew enough for what I saw in that book to make me gasp” (Carter 17). Thus, Carter is offering us a heroine not as innocent as she pretends to be, not as innocent as the patriarchal canon establishes; her heroine is a woman with a certain knowledge about sex and sexual matters and with a temper that comes to life when things do not take place in the way she wants them to.

Moreover, the Marquis also plays role games with the heroine in order to *initiate* her in his world of sexual lust. He addresses her as

'my little nun' or 'baby.' In both cases, he plays with her. In the first one, he treats her as chaste and pure, and he refers to the books in the library –especially the one she has just been looking at– as her prayer books: “My little nun has found the prayerbooks, has she?” (17) and he is delighted with the situation, then he laughs at her aloud and gets closer. It is in that moment that he adopts the role of daddy: “Have the nasty pictures scared Baby? Baby mustn't play with grownups' toys until she's learned how to handle them, must she?”(17). Then, he kisses her with lust and puts his hand on her breast and they go to the bedroom. Once there, as the fetishist he is, he orders her to put on the choker and kisses it before kissing her mouth. What with that role-play of daddy-baby, and the sight of the rubies, he is so excited that he impales her. He uses such games for his own excitement, with which he sets free his animal instinct. Indeed, the heroine reveals that she “had heard him shriek and blaspheme at the orgasm” (18).

At this point of the tale, the heroine's transformation has taken place although she is not aware of it yet. Carter has reversed her, and from now until almost the end of the tale, little by little, she acquires some of her husband's features. After their consummation, she reflects about it and considers that he behaved “as if he had been fighting with me. In the course of that one-sided struggle . . .” (18). That means that sexual intercourse is not disgusting or a threat for her anymore, that he has been fighting because he believes she is still as innocent as during his courtship, but she isn't. Then he comments that the maid surely will have changed their sheets, and after that he starts a brief speech in which he shows how proud he is of the fact that his wife had been a virgin: “We do not hang the bloody sheets out of the window to prove to the whole of Brittany you are a virgin, not in these civilized times. But I should tell you it would have been the first time in all my married lives I could have shown my interested tenants such a flag” (19). Obviously, he is trying to say that her virginity was not exactly what had attracted him. And that provokes another reflection on her that she shares with the readers, trying to mislead us about her true reasons for marrying the Marquis: “You [addressing to the reader directly] must remember how ill at ease I was in that luxurious palace, how unease had been my constant companion during the whole length of my courtship by this grave satyr [referring to her husband]. . . .” (19). In order to deceive us, she pretends that luxury had always made

her feel uncomfortable, and that it was he [the satyr] who flagellated and misled her with the idea of jewels, money, economic power... But with her comment and her husband's previous words, she also becomes aware of what she could use to seduce and manipulate him: "To know that my naïvety gave him some pleasure made me take heart" (19). Thus, if he uses fetishism, *pornography*, and role-plays to discomfort her, she will use her innocence to please him and obtain what she needs from him. Therefore, it can be argued that Carter puts the heroine on the same level as the Marquis. The heroine is transformed to such an extent at this moment of the tale that in the same way she seemed to be scared of him, now she is scared of herself: "I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes" (20). She does not recognize herself under such a new form, such a transformation. She knows that something is happening, something is changing inside her, but she is still not aware of the fact that her transformation is a fact, that she is already different. But this conversion is so evident that she is even about to become a sex consumer:

[N]ow my female wound had healed [she refers to her wounded genitals after her first intercourse with her husband], there had awoken a certain queasy craving . . . for the renewal of his caresses [which end in a sexual act]. Had not hinted to me, in his flesh as in his speech and looks, of the thousand . . . baroque intersections of flesh upon flesh? [And] I lay in our wide bed accompanied by . . . my new born curiosity. (22)

In the way in which Carter carries out her re-telling of the traditional Bluebeard tale, it could be understood that a process of maturation, a kind of *bildungsroman*, is being developed. The heroine is not the child she claims to be throughout the tale anymore and becomes an adult: she becomes a wife, she experiences sex, she faces other sexual matters such as pornography, role-plays, and she grows in character and personality, turning her more self-confident.

But in this process of maturation, a new employee, the piano tuner, has appeared in the castle and with him, another facet of sexuality is experienced by the heroine, which breaks the canon once

again, and role reversal becomes evident. She is attracted to the same qualities the Marquis felt attracted to her: innocence. In that way, she also becomes a kind of dominant character; now, she is the wise and cunning protagonist, while Jean-Yves replaces her former position as weak. She explicitly admits that Jean-Yves is her lover after the Marquis condemns her for her disobedience: "But my lover lifted me up and set me on my feet" (38); and she also gives evidence of his love: "My lover kissed me, he took my hand" (38). So, she has even gone farther than the Marquis in sexual matters, she has even become an unfaithful wife, satisfying her sexual desires not only with her own husband, but with another man with whom she eventually establishes her family and lives *happily ever after*.

On the whole, Carter makes use of tradition to break it and rewrites both the traditional tale and the female character. To do so, she presents an apparent traditional heroine born into the position of passive and victim. I say apparent because she decides to marry him and become an object to improve economically, and she is victim of her own desires rather than of her husband. Carter also achieves her goal by the use of sexuality in her tale, as the heroine is emotionally and physically persecuted by her husband, but she is not as innocent as she pretends to be since she already knows what marriage entails (sex, among other matters) and she really wants to be *impaled* by her husband, carrying away the patriarchal vulnerable and fragile woman. Moreover, Carter develops the character of the heroine, as she gets transformed as long as the tale moves forward. She acquires typical male qualities such as a pornography consumer or sex addict. In the end, she refuses these because in her way toward maturity she learns that such qualities only involve adverse consequences: her loss of identity and even physical annihilation.

NOTES

¹ For Amy Kaminsky, one of the possible representations of Bluebeard is that of "una figura que ejemplifica el fenómeno del abuso doméstico" (131).

² Linden Peach points out that Carter's fiction explores "the need for a wider view of female sexuality" (119).

- ³ Stephen Benson considers that Mary Kaiser “sees “The Bloody Chamber” as a retelling of “Bluebeard” deliberately staged in a *fin de siècle* environment which historically contextualizes Carter’s depiction of the “woman-as-victim” and “woman-as-avenger” (31-33)” (36).
- ⁴ Alice Morrison Mordoh considers that Kathleen Manley sees “Bluebeard’s wife as “a woman in process,” one who oscillates between passivity and action, rather than commonly perceived passive heroine of traditional fairytales” (345).
- ⁵ Leila Rasheed considers that “[t]he mixture of the material and the ethereal in Carter’s tales is one of their more fertile aspects” (121).

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