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DEMYTHOLOGYSING THE “HAPPILY EVER AFTER”

Marriage, Motherhood and Generational Oppression

in Carter's Fairy-Tale Retellings

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Ashley Merrill Riggs

Assistant Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Laura Tosi

Graduand

Elena Sofia Stacchiotti

Matriculation Number 895726

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Two of the most popular fairy tales, “Cinderella” and “Snow White”, both famously adapted into successful Disney films, follow a strikingly similar pattern. Each story is set in motion by a mother’s death: Snow White’s mother dies in childbirth, while Cinderella’s mother quietly succumbs to an unspecified illness. Either way, both mothers leave behind daughters who are just as beautiful, kind, and naive as they were. By the end of the tales, after overcoming their jealous and wicked stepmothers, these young heroines are rewarded for their virtuous behaviour with a marriage to the perfect man, noble and rich, and the couple goes on to live “happily ever after.” Although what comes after marriage is never explicitly shown, it is implied that they will go on to have children, and if they have daughters, they too will be virtuous and beautiful. The message is clear: this is the ideal happy ending every girl should aspire to. However, this wish-fulfilment fantasy overlooks an unsettling reality: the fact that both heroines’ tragic journeys begin with the death of their mothers, and that their fathers’ second marriages are not romantic unions based on mutual love, but opportunistic relations that lead only to misery, jealousy, and rivalry. Moreover, if marriage is the reward for virtuous behaviour, why did their mothers - equally virtuous - die in the first place? Will the daughters’ fates ultimately mirror their mothers’?

In her fairy-tale retellings, Angela Carter lays bare what these traditional stories only hint at: that marriage and motherhood inevitably lead to death, because this is the fate of women who passively follow a preordained script. As Carter writes in *The Sadeian Woman* (1979) - published the same year as her collection *The Bloody Chamber* - “the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman” is that “to exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case - that is, to be killed” (SW, 77). Through her retellings, Carter dissects and demythologizes the trope of the “happily ever after,” urging her readers to see it for what it truly is: a well-constructed lie designed to trap women and limit their life choices.

Selection of the topic

My interest in writing a dissertation on Carter’s fairy-tale retellings began when I attended a lecture on the evolution of fairy tales taught by Ashley Merrill Riggs. This lecture was my first introduction to the rich tradition of feminist retellings that emerged

alongside second-wave feminism and the rise of fairy-tale scholarship. What particularly stood out to me from the lecture was the analysis of Anne Sexton's poem "Cinderella", from her collection *Transformations* (1971). Sexton claims back the iconic story from the clutch of Disney's commercialized adaptation, using it to critically dissect the traditional narrative with an ironic, defiant tone. Specifically, I was captivated by the way she mocks the notion of the "happily ever after", depicting it as absurd and even unappealing: "Cinderella and the prince / lived, they say, happily ever after, / like two dolls in a museum case / [...] their darling smiles pasted on for eternity" (*Transformations*, 38).

My growing interest in fairy-tale rewritings then merged with my longstanding fascination with Angela Carter's work. I had briefly encountered Carter during my undergraduate studies, and at the time I was particularly struck by her novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), with its extravagant plot and relentless satire on gender and sexuality. Upon discovering *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carter's influential collection of fairy-tale retellings, I was drawn by the same dark satire and ironic playfulness. Carter's ability to twist the iconic fairy tales into erotic, disturbing, at times grotesque stories, solidified my interest in this specific work of hers. Thus, when it came time to decide on what I should focus my dissertation, I immediately turned to Carter's fairy-tale retellings.

Given my personal interest in the topics of motherhood and marriage explored through a feminist lens, I decided to focus on these specific themes to guide my analysis of Carter's fairy-tale retellings. Although I initially viewed these topics as only loosely connected, I soon realized that they were deeply intertwined. Carter depicts both motherhood and marriage as forced milestones on a prescribed path of life that women are coerced into following by patriarchal society - and, significantly, by their own mothers. Indeed, as I will discuss, Carter's ambivalent portrayal of motherhood and marriage reflects a deeper concern with generational oppression. As such, the text I have selected for my close readings are all concerned with these intertwined themes.

From *The Bloody Chamber*, I will analyse two pivotal texts. The first is the eponymous "The Bloody Chamber", a retelling of the folk tale "Bluebeard", in which Carter presents a positive example of motherhood and a healthy mother-daughter relationship, while also acknowledging and criticizing the material reasons behind the protagonist's choice to marry. The second story I have chosen is "The Snow Child", a brief yet impactful Snow White retelling, which tackles themes such as marriage as an escape from poverty, female rivalry, the fetishization of women's reproductive function, and the cycle of

motherhood, marriage, and death naturalized in the traditional tale. The third text in my analysis is *“Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost: Three Versions of One Story”*, a triptych of Cinderella retellings published by Carter in 1987, eight years after *The Bloody Chamber*. I included this text upon Riggs’ suggestion, and it proved invaluable for its close alignment with my dissertation’s focus, as well as for providing a broader perspective on Carter’s evolving thematization of the issues of marriage, motherhood, and the transmission of patriarchal values from mother to daughter.

While many critics have discussed Carter’s critical portrayals of motherhood and marriage in her fairy-tale retellings, the connection between these themes and cyclical oppression has, to my knowledge, received little attention, aside from a few notable essays on *“Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost”*, such as Ashley Riggs’ chapter in her Ph.D. thesis *Thrice Upon a Time* (2014), Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère’s chapter in *Reading, Translating, Rewriting* (2013), and Michelle Ryan-Sautour’s 2011 article *“Authorial Ghosts and Maternal Identity”*.¹ With this study, I aim to contribute to the already extensive scholarship on Carter’s fairy-tale retellings by focusing on this underexamined aspect, especially in relation to *“The Bloody Chamber”*, *“The Snow Child”* and *“Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost”*.

Research Questions

The research interests and aims described above led to the formulation of three key research questions that will guide my analysis:

- 1) How does Carter critique the notion of marriage as a romantic, deliberate choice, and instead expose it as a transactional union imposed on women due to their lack of economic autonomy?
- 2) In what ways does Carter portray mothers and maternal figures, and how does she subvert the traditional dichotomy between virtuous mothers and wicked stepmothers in her narratives?
- 3) How does Carter depict mother-daughter relationships, particularly in relation to the transmission of patriarchal values across generations? Does her treatment of this issue evolve over time?

¹ I am greatly indebted to these three authors for the development of my topic and the construction of my analysis.

Approaches

As I have mentioned, my motivation for writing this dissertation stems from a dual interest: the feminist exploration of motherhood, marriage, and generational oppression, and the study of fairy-tale retellings. Accordingly, my approach will combine feminist theory with fairy-tale scholarship. This interdisciplinary method is well-established, as scholars² have noted that the rise of second-wave feminism coincided with the development of fairy-tale scholarship, and how consequently many authors of fairy-tale retellings are also concerned with feminist issues. As such, in my analysis I will draw from fairy-tale scholarship to analyse aspects which are characteristics of the genre, such as adaptability, intertextuality and its utopian and liberating potential. At the same time, I will employ feminist theory to discuss themes such as Carter's critique of cultural myths of femininity, as well as women's contribution to their creation and perpetuation.

I will also incorporate insights from queer theory, particularly the concept of "gender performance" and societal grooming, to explore the way women are shaped to conform to specific standards of appearance and behaviour. Furthermore, taking into consideration Carter's materialist stance, my feminist approach will also be informed by a socialist lens. I will address how Carter's depictions of marriage as a commercial transaction reflects a critique of the capitalist systems that perpetuates women's economic subordination and commodification. This economic dependence also promotes rivalry between women, as they compete over wealthy men to marry.

Structure of the Dissertation

This chapter introduces the core themes of the dissertation, outlines the approaches adopted, and highlights how this study contributes to the existing body of critical readings on Angela Carter's fairy-tale retellings.

Chapter 2 provides the historical and literary context for my close readings by exploring the evolution of fairy tales. The discussion will focus on elements relevant to Carter's retellings, such as the works of Perrault and the *conteuses*, the collections by the Grimms Brothers, as well as the gradual sanitization of fairy tales by Victorian authors and Disney. Additionally, the chapter will acknowledge the wealth of feminist retellings produced in the second half of the 20th century and their interactions with fairy-tale

² Such as Donald Haase ("Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship"), Cristina Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*) and Martine Dutheil de la Rochère (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*).

scholarship. Finally, the chapter will delve into the specific characteristics of Carter's retellings.

Chapter 3 shifts focus to Carter's feminist theories, particularly those articulated in her 1979 essay *The Sadeian Woman*. After addressing the controversy surrounding this essay and Carter's complex relationship with the Marquis de Sade, the chapter will explore Carter's "demythologizing" approach. This analysis will draw from Carter's own theories as well as those of thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Specific sections will examine Carter's rejection of cultural myths surrounding femininity as seen in the figures of Sadeian characters Juliette and Justine, and her critique of feminist myths that sanctify motherhood and the womb. A final section will discuss Carter's more subtle critique of the myth of romantic marriage, which will present the opportunity to fully acknowledge her materialist and socialist approach to feminist issues.

Building on this theoretical foundation, Chapter 4 will focus on the three texts selected for this dissertation: "The Bloody Chamber", "The Snow Child" and "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost". It will analyse how Carter employs content and various narrative strategies to engage with the thematic concerns central to my study.

Finally, Chapter 5 will present the general conclusions of this research. It will summarize the key findings by addressing the research questions posed in Chapter 1, review the limitations of the study, and propose potential avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: The Evolution of Fairy Tales in Europe

Introduction

This chapter will explore the complex and layered history of fairy tales, with the aim to provide a framework that contextualizes the phenomenon of contemporary rewritings in general and Carter's own fairy-tale retellings in particular. Throughout my discussion on the evolution of the fairy tale, I will draw extensively on works by prominent fairy-tale scholars such as Jack Zipes, Donald Haase, Marina Warner and Cristina Bacchilega. Moreover, I will often quote a particularly insightful essay written by Carter as the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990), the first collection of fairy tales she edited.

As Carter clarifies in the essay, she uses the term "fairy tale" loosely, as a descriptor for a wide array of texts "passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth [...] without known originators" (*The Virago Book*, ix). Carter's definition blurs the distinction between folk tales and fairy tales, however in this dissertation I will adopt the same broad terminology, sidestepping the complicated issue of genre definition³. To maintain focus, I will also concentrate on elements most relevant to Carter's approach to fairy tales. Therefore, I will limit my discussion to the European tradition from the late 17th century onward, glossing over the presence of fairy tales in Classical and Medieval literature, as well as the influential Italian collections *The Facetious Nights of Straparola* (1550-1555) by Giovanni Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile's *The Tale of Tales* (1634-1636). My exploration of the evolution of the fairy tale will begin with the collections of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, which are key sources for Carter's retellings. I will then devote a subsection to women's relationship with the fairy tale and the female contributors to the genre, such is the case with the *conteuses*. I will then explore the transition of fairy tales into the English world in the 19th century and their subsequent sanitization to turn them into didactic texts for children. Finally, I will delve deeper into the phenomenon of 20th century feminist rewritings, detailing the characteristics and features of these texts and giving a brief mention to noteworthy authors which have influenced and have been influenced by Carter's work. Concluding this overview of the development of the fairy-tale genre, I will

³ For a thorough discussion of the complexity of defining the genre, I would suggest reading Marina Warner's chapter titled "The Thorny Hedge: Questions of Definition" featured in *Once Upon a Time, A Short History of Fairy Tale* (2014).

devote a final section to the unique characteristics and themes of Carter's own fairy-tale rewritings and their divisive critical reception.

Tailoring Stories: From Oral Folk Tales to Literary Collections

As observed by folklorist scholar Jeana Jorgensen, fairy tales fall under the broad category of folktales (*Folklore 101*, 144). While an analysis of the major differences between folktales and fairy tales is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is important to highlight that, as affirmed by Warner, fairy tales were originally oral stories passed down through generations by ordinary, "unlettered" people (*Once Upon a Time*, 20). Warner's observation, even though it oversimplifies the long and complex history of the fairy tale prior to its crystallization into a literary genre in the 17th and 18th centuries, echoes Carter's own interpretation of the origin of fairy tales. In the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter similarly observes that fairy tales began as "the perennially refreshed entertainment of the poor" (*The Virago Book*, ix).

In the following paragraph, Carters emphasizes the inherent anonymity of fairy tales, remarking that attempting to trace the original, primary source or teller is nearly impossible. She writes that although "we may know the name and gender of the particular individual who tells a particular story, just because the collector noted the name down, but we can never know the name of the person who invented that story in the first place" (*The Virago Book*, x). This notion is shared by several scholars. Martine Hennard Dutheil de La Rochère, for instance, notes that "nobody can claim ownership of the fairy tale; editorial transformations are an inherent property of the genre, as the familiar stories circulate and are translated, appropriated, and adapted in turn" (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 47). For this reason, a common academic approach in fairy-tale scholarship is to reject the concept of "originality" altogether, favouring instead an intertextual approach that views fairy tales as products of a complex web of hypertexts. Donald Haase writes, for instance, that the formation of a fairy tale should be conceptualized not in terms of "a linear succession or hierarchy that takes us back to an original or a primary form, but as a component in a larger web of texts that are linked to each other in multiple ways and have equal claim on our attention" ("Hypertextual Gutenberg", 225).

Carter certainly favoured this approach. She describes fairy tale as composites of different stories that have been "tinkered with, had bits added to it, lost other bits, got

mixed up with other stories" (*The Virago Book*, x). Her retellings maintain the same layered quality. Indeed, Carter's fairy tales are less about returning to an "original" version and more about playful intertextuality - a reconfiguration of "bits and pieces" from different folk traditions. As Lorna Sage aptly notes in regard to Carter's encounter with the Cinderella tale in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", "there's no core, or point of origin, or ur-story 'underneath,' just a continuous interweaving of texts" ("Fairy Tale", 72). As discussed by Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 278) Carter explores and employs the mutability of the fairy tale with two strategies: on one hand, she uses different versions of the same tale as sources for a single retelling, on the other, she often multiplies stories into two or three different versions. This is the case, for instance, of the trio of wolf tales inspired by "Red Riding Hood", the two retellings based on "Beauty and the Beast" in *The Bloody Chamber*, and the aforementioned Cinderella retelling, whose subtitle, "Three Versions of One Story", foregrounds the idea that there is no such thing as an original, singular version of a fairy tale. Moreover, in her rewritings Carter also mixes modern elements, other literary traditions⁴, as well as references to other feminist rewritings or contemporary critical readings⁵.

While the notion of originality in terms of authenticity may be irrelevant when discussing fairy tales, their anonymity allows for an incredible creative potential. Since there is no true, pure version to refer back to, each new teller can create their own version and add an element of originality or a spin on the formula that creates new meanings. This adaptability is one of the key reasons behind the fairy tale's success and durability, as they can be easily tailored to suit different cultures, values and historical contexts. Zack Zipes's *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (2006) analyses this phenomenon from an evolutionary psychological perspective, likening it to the Darwinian notion of adaptation. According to Zipes, over their long history, fairy tales have adapted to different environments in order to survive. The rise in the 1970s of feminist rewritings can be seen as an extension of this phenomenon, as a way for the fairy tale to keep its relevance during the era of second-wave feminism. The potential for creativity and the adaptability of fairy tales is also central to Carter's project. As she affirms in the essay "Notes from the Front Line", her retellings are a way of putting "new wine in old bottles",

⁴ Such is the case of the controversial union between fairy tales and Sadeian pornography in *The Bloody Chamber*, which I will explore in depth in the following chapter dedicated to Carter's feminist theory.

⁵ For example, Carter frequently critiques Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic interpretations of fairy tales in his influential work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976).

thus infusing new, liberating values into the fairy tale while at the same time calling into question traditional portrayals of men and women, all with the aim to make “the old bottles explode” (*Shaking a Leg*, 37).

Perrault's and the Grimm Brother's 17th and 18th Literary Collections

The incredible adaptability of the fairy tale can be seen in its late 17th and early 18th century developments. In this period, two literary collections, defined by Warner as the “prominent landmarks” of fairy-tale history (*Once Upon a Time*, 15), came to prominence in Europe, transposing what used to be primarily an oral form of storytelling into written form. I am referring to, of course, Charles Perrault's *Histoires et Contes du temps passé* (1697) and the Grimm Brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812–57). While there had been written collections before the 17th century, the works of Perrault and the Grimms crystallized the fairy tale as a coherent literary genre, as noted by Jorgensen (*Folklore* 101, 144).

The evolution of the fairy tale from a popular, mainly oral form into a literary text has been discussed by various scholars, such as Zipes (*Breaking the Magic Spell*), Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*) and Hennard Dutheil de La Rochère (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*). Zipes, in particular, addresses the socio-historical reasons behind this transition, which he identifies in “the decline of feudalism and the formation of the bourgeois public sphere” (*Breaking the Magic Spell*, 15). According to Zipes, the oral fairy tale was a “pre-capitalist” form cultivated both by literate and non-literate people, with a precise social function and rooted in the class conflicts and power politics of a feudal society. (30). After the decline of feudalism, the rise of middle-class readership demanded a reworking of the folklore elements and motifs to better suit bourgeois values. Thus, the *literary* fairy tale was born (31-32).

Carter echoes this perspective in her interview with *Marxism Today's* “Left Alive,” where she describes the transition from folk tales to literary fairy tales as an appropriation of “the culture of the poor” by the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Carter's connection with the popular roots of the fairy tale is crucial both to her retellings as well as to her work as editor of fairy-tale collections. As she states in the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, she is interested in collecting stories that depict “how wise, clever, perceptive, occasionally lyrical, eccentric, sometimes downright crazy our great-grandmothers were, and their great-grandmothers” (*The Virago Book*, xvii), thus

keeping the essence of the genre as the depiction of the lives and struggles of ordinary people of a “pre-industrialized past” (xvii).

Similarly to Carter, Bacchilega also frames the transition from oral tales to literary fairy tales as an “appropriation”, although she notes that in this evolution the fairy tale retained some of its earlier features, such as “traces of orality, folkloric tradition, and socio-cultural performance” (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 3). In the case of Perrault’s and the Grimms’ collections, the folkloric roots of the genre were emphasized by the collectors themselves. Perrault highlighted the oral origins of his tales by evoking the figure of “Mother Goose,” an archetypal elderly female storyteller, whose problematic aspects I will discuss in the next section. The case of the Grimm Brothers is also particularly striking, as the common stereotype suggests they recorded word for word the tales they collected from peasant storytellers⁶. However, as Bacchilega and Roemer point out, the Grimms actually sourced their stories from “literary and manuscript collections as well as in easily accessible individuals, spanning the working, bourgeois, and even the aristocratic classes” (*Angela Carter and The Fairy Tale*, 9). They then heavily reworked and edited the tales to reflect middle-class values, reinforcing “Christian themes, domestic wisdom, and violence, while removing sexual references” (10). Maria Tatar further observes that these changes were driven by a deliberate political project, as the Grimms sought to “stimulate national sentiment” by building a national literature (*The Hard Facts*, 20). An example of the Grimms’ alterations which is particularly pertinent to this dissertation, noted both by Bacchilega and Tatar, is the replacing of the folk tale’s wicked birth mother with a stepmother in Grimms’ version of “Snow White”. This change, according to Tatar, was made to keep intact the myth of the good, virtuous mother (*The Hard Facts*, 140). In her own version of “Snow White”, Carter brings back the figure of the evil birth mother through the ruthless character of the Countess, exploring the taboo subject of a mother who resents her child and rejects motherhood.

Moreover, the rise to prominence of collections by male authors also contributed to the marginalization of female storytellers and authors. While the tales of Perrault and

⁶ In an article presenting his book *The Brothers Grimm and the Making of German Nationalism* (2022), Jakob Norberg describes a magazine illustration which depicts the Grimms attentively listening to an elderly woman telling stories while she is surrounded by children, in a “crowded but cozy home while chickens walk in and out of the open door in the background”. This illustration, according to Norberg, clearly exemplifies the common yet inaccurate stereotype which frames the Grimms as faithful preservers of folk heritage (*Academic perspectives from Cambridge University Press*, retrieved from: <https://cambridgeblog.org/2022/03/the-brothers-grimm-and-the-making-of-german-nationalism/>).

the Grimm brothers have attracted significant attention and have come to be seen as the quintessential fairy tales in popular culture, female contributors have been almost completely ignored and excluded from the canon, as Elizabeth Wanning Harries extensively discusses in *Twice Upon a Time* (2001). From the 1970s onwards, many critics have worked to recover and restore in the canon the neglected female fairy-tale tradition. For what pertains to the German tradition, important research has been conducted by Jeannine Blackwell (“Fractured Fairy Tales”) and Shawn C. Jarvis (“Wicked Sisters”), who have compiled a collection of translated fairy tales by German female authors, titled *The Queen's Mirror: Fairy Tales by German Women Writers 1780-1900*. In regard to the recovery of the French female fairy-tale tradition, even more progress has been made, as noted by Haase (*Feminist Fairy Tale Scholarship*, 30). Indeed, the work of the *conteuses*, 17th century female authors like the Countess d’Aulnoy, Madame Leprince de Beaumont, and Madame de Murat, has been recognized for its influence on the fairy-tale genre, even in studies not specifically focused on feminist perspectives, such as the research by Jacques Barchilon and Raymonde Robert (30). As noted by Riggs, the work of the *conteuses* defies the long-held belief that fairy tales were predominantly “male-generated”. For instance, most of the literary fairy tales produced by the *conteuses* are contemporary or even predate Perrault’s collection, thus existing alongside his works instead of being mere “inferior imitators”, as the Grimms erroneously describe them in the introduction to the 1812 edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 19).

The case of the *conteuses*, is particularly relevant to this dissertation, as Carter herself sought to promote their works both as editor for Virago Press and in her retellings. As noted by Harries (*Twice Upon a Time*, 153-155), Carter referenced tales by the *conteuses* in some of the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, such as for instance in her rewritings of Beauty and the Beast, “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”, where she adds elements which point to a connection with the monster bridegroom tales by the Countess d’Aulnoy. For this reason, I will devote a sub-section to delve deeper into the female contribution to the fairy-tale genre, discussing the works of the *conteuses* and contrasting them with Perrault’s and Grimms’ collections.

Old Wives' Tales and the Conteuses

The relationship of fairy tales with gender is a complicated one. On one hand, for decades the fairy-tale canon has been dominated by works collected and transmitted by male authors, while female writers were largely overlooked until the resurgence of interest in fairy-tale scholarship in the latter half of the 20th century. On the other, male authors frequently claimed to adopt a woman's voice and point of view through the stereotypical depiction of an old woman storyteller, which in England is referred to as 'Mother Goose'. In the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter references this figure as the inventor of "old wives' tales – that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip", thus qualifying this label as sexist, because "[it] allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it" (*The Virago Book*, xi). The notion that oral fairy tales were passed down through generations by elderly peasant women and wet nurses who told stories to aristocratic children was popularized by Perrault, as noted by Charlotte Trinquet du Lys ("Teaching Western Fairy-Tale Traditions", 120). In the frontispiece of Perrault's 1697 edition of *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, an illustration shows an old servant spinning yarn by the fireplace while telling stories to three children, whose clothing indicate that they are of higher social standing. In the background, a plaque reads '*Contes de ma mère l'Oye*', in English 'Tales of Mother Goose', the title Perrault also used for a 1695 manuscript containing five tales (120).

However, the idea that the French fairy-tale trend originated from servant storytelling to bourgeois children was openly rejected by the *conteuses*, female fairy-tale authors of the 17th century. These authors came from an aristocratic background and were highly educated, intellectual women who met in sophisticated French salons. Reflecting this courtly environment, the tales written by the *conteuses* are often characterized by an ironic tone, social commentary, and literariness, and are frequently embedded in sophisticated narrative frames, as discussed by Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 16). Moreover, as Seifert and Stanton remark, the *conteuses* often "disguised and transformed whatever they borrowed from lower-class tales with an abundance of literary and cultural references", such as, for instance, "allusions to Greek and Roman mythology", in an effort to affirm their social status and distance themselves from peasant folk traditions (*Enchanted Eloquence*, 20). Du Lys also notes how, in the frontispieces of works by d'Aulnoy and the dedications and prefaces of L'Héritier and

Murat, there is a constant effort to legitimize the tales as part of the literary tradition through references to the act of writing. Even the creation of the term *contes des fées* (tales of the fairies) was an attempt to emphasize women's role in the creation of the literary fairy-tale tradition. As Du Lys points out, the term had a double meaning: "on one hand, it refers to tales about fairies' adventures; and on the other, it refers to tales written by fairies, who become synonymous with the women writers themselves" ("Teaching Western Fairy-Tale Traditions", 120).

Despite these authors' efforts to legitimize their works as part of the literary tradition, they have long been neglected and overshadowed by their male counterparts. Christa Mastrangelo Joyce (*Contemporary Women Poets*, qtd. in *Thrice Upon a Time*, 17) suggests that this exclusion may be due to the social commentary and subversiveness featured in the *conteuses'* tales, while male authors and collectors tended to tone down or omit these aspects. For example, Joyce notes how male authors altered the tales' endings "to reflect a less socially discursive attitude" (17), thereby erasing the *conteuses'* critiques of women's societal roles in 17th-century France and the sarcastic, ironic tone they employed, as they wrote for a learned, adult audience. This could explain why the less subversive tales of male authors became canonized, especially after the fairy tale entered the "bourgeois nursery" and evolved into a genre with a didactic function aimed primarily at children.

"The Bourgeois Nursery": Fairy tales' Sanitization in the 19th and 20th century

This chapter explores at some length the entrance of the fairy tale into the "bourgeois nursery", to borrow Carter's words from her interview with *Marxism Today* "Left's Alive". Indeed, the shift in perception of the fairy tale from a popular, folk genre to children's literature is particularly crucial to this dissertation, since this change became one of the catalysts for the re-appropriation of the popular tales through rewritings for adults in the second half of the 20th century.

As previously noted, fairy tales were not originally aimed solely at children. The *conteuses*, for instance, were writing with a strictly adult audience in mind. However, in contemporary popular culture, the genre seems almost exclusively relegated to children's literature. Why did this change occur? As Riggs observes, this shift began in mid-18th century Britain, when French and German fairy tales were translated into English and "reoriented" into didactic versions for children (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 20).

Then, throughout the first half of the 20th century, fairy tales became increasingly associated with Disney's adaptations, which simplified and sanitized the stories to appeal to a wide audience and dominate the market for children's merchandise and toys, as argued by Zipes in "The Instrumentalization of Fantasy: Fairy Tales, the Culture Industry and Mass media", one of the chapters of his influential book *Breaking The Magic Spell* (1979).

However, the sanitization of the fairy tale and its consequent exile into the realm of children's literature was actually a slow process, one that began in the early 18th century with the Grimms themselves. In fact, as remarked by Maria Tatar, in later editions the Grimms re-edited their own tales in order to respond to reviewers, such as Albert Ludwig Grimm, who had criticized the first collection for being unsuitable for children (*The Hard Facts*, 16-17). As previously mentioned, the Grimms had already toned down certain harsh aspects of folk tales in their 1812 collection to align with middle-class values, such as erasing the wicked birth mother from "Snow White". However, in subsequent editions, they continued to remove sexual elements. In her study, Tatar provides numerous examples of changes made between the 1812 and 1815 editions. For example, in the first edition, Rapunzel hints at the tightness of her clothes, which is an implicit confession of pregnancy, a scene which was completely deleted in the second edition (*The Hard Facts*, 197). Interestingly, despite the changes to suit a younger audience, the Grimms were relatively lenient with scenes of violence, which were largely left intact or even added. Tatar notes, for instance, that while the first edition of "Cinderella" depicted the horrific scene of toe and heel mutilation, in the second edition the Grimms added the even harsher punishment inflicted on the stepsisters by pigeons who peck out their eyes, leaving them blind (*Off with Their Heads!*, 21).

As noted by Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 22), when in the 19th century fairy tales began to be translated and adapted into chapbooks for children by English authors, the tales were heavily edited to remove any hint of "child-unfriendly" elements - such as, for instance, the aforementioned violent scenes featured in Grimms' version of "Cinderella". The cultural climate of the Victorian era, with its emphasis on respectability and decorum, certainly contributed to this sanitization. As Jason Marc Harris points out, "writers of the fairy tale in Britain created their stories with a full consciousness of [Victorian] moral expectations", thereby altering the narratives to "meet standards of respectability" (*Folklore and the Fantastic*, 53). Moreover, Victorian authors such as John

Ruskin and Dinah Maria Mulock Craik introduced elements of Christian morality and authorial commentary to guide children in interpreting the tales, whereas the original versions left the moral lessons implicit (54). Another significant change in the perception of fairy tales during the Victorian era was their length. Harries suggests that it was in this period that “the belief that fairy tales must be compact and laconic” emerged (*Twice Upon a Time*, 99). For instance, in Andrew Lang’s famous collection, *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), which includes stories from male authors as well as five from the Countess d’Aulnoy, the tales were simplified and condensed into shorter versions.

In the first half of the 20th century, the commodification and sanitization of fairy tales continued in the United States, largely through Walt Disney’s animated adaptations. Disney captivated audiences with new, groundbreaking animation techniques, but as Zipes observes, his main goal was not to create valuable artistic works but to sell consumer goods through toys and merchandise. Disney thus shaped the fairy tales he adapted into a specific formula designed to “hook” the largest audience possible and “endorse ideological images that would enhance his corporate power” (*Happily Ever After*, 87). In doing so, Disney turned fairy tales into homogenized products that repeatedly conveyed the same simplistic, saccharine values, promoting the “ideology of American conservatism” (*Breaking the Magic Spell*, 129). Disney’s adaptations, in fact, were highly conservative, with a tendency to reinforce traditional gender roles and present the heroines as beautiful, domestic and passive, while male characters got to be the heroes of the story.⁷

The increasingly pervasive sanitization and commodification of fairy tales severely damaged the genre’s reputation among many second-wave feminist thinkers. As Bacchilega notes (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 29), the surge in negative feminist criticism of fairy tales from the 1970s onward was partly fuelled by the immense popularity of films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950), whose influence has been so great that these adaptations have supplanted even the Grimms’

⁷ One might think, for instance, of the dichotomy between helpless female protagonists and their much more active love interests in *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). However, in later years, spurred by the rise of the feminist movement, Disney altered their approach and began to present a more progressive view of gender relations. Warner cites 1991’s movie *Beauty and the Beast* as the turning point, noting how this adaptation was “more vividly aware of contemporary sexual politics than any made before” (*From the Beast to the Blonde*, 312). Whether this shift was made in good faith or merely to capitalize on new audience expectations, as suggested by Zipes (*Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 145), is a question beyond the scope of this dissertation.

versions of the stories in the public imagination⁸. When the feminist movement came to prominence, many women began to criticize fairy tales⁹, associating the genre with the regressive values propagated by Disney's films. Vanessa Joosen's *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings* (2011) offers an insightful example of this trend. Joosen devotes an entire chapter to Marcia K. Lieberman's *Some Day My Prince Will Come: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale* (1972), a critical reading of popular fairy tales that became a catalyst for the rise of feminist fairy-tale criticism in the 1970s. Lieberman criticized fairy tales for reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and indoctrinating young readers into a regressive and sexist ideology (*Critical and Creative Perspectives*, 50-52). As an example, she points out how Cinderella reinforces the notion that a woman's beauty reflects her inherent virtue, as seen in "the opposition of the ugly, cruel, bad-tempered older sisters to the younger, beautiful, sweet Cinderella" (*Some Day My Prince Will Come*, 188). Lieberman used this example to critique the genre as a whole, without specifying a particular source text. However, Joosen aptly notes that Lieberman's critique is based solely on Disney's version of Cinderella: "In the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, even in the fairy tales that feminists most often criticize, beauty and internal goodness are not necessarily linked. It is explicitly stated, for instance, that Cinderella's stepsisters are beautiful but unkind" (*Critical and Creative Perspectives*, 70). This example captures, I believe, the extent to which Disney's adaptations have damaged the image of fairy tales in the eyes of many feminist thinkers. Nonetheless, the rise of feminist fairy-tale criticism, even when sometimes misguided, played a crucial role in the genre's development in the second half of the 20th century (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 25). This period saw a resurgence of interest in fairy tales, prompting many feminist authors to reclaim control of these stories and produce a wealth of rewritings. The distinctive features of these feminist fairy-tale retellings will be explored in the following section.

⁸ Zipes echoes this, arguing that Disney's versions have effectively "de-historicized" fairy tales to the point that, for members of the general public who are unfamiliar with the genre's folk origins, fairy tales have become synonymous with Disney Studios productions (*Breaking the Magic Spell*, 27).

⁹ Warner details how feminists in the post-war period began to protest against "the lies and stereotyping in the stories, the wishful thinking, the distorted values, the beauty queen fantasies, and the pervasive bad faith of the promise, 'and they lived happily ever after'. [...] Fairy tales were denounced as a blunt tool of patriarchy, the bourgeoisie, cosmetic surgeons, the fashion industry, and psychoanalysts bent on curbing girls' energies and desires." (*Once Upon a Time*, 142).

The Feminist Fairy Tale: Contemporary Retellings and their Strategies

I would like to open this section by defining the characteristics of the contemporary feminist retellings discussed. One important source in this regard is Jack Zipes, editor of one of the earliest anthologies that compiles feminist rewritings, titled *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1987). In the Preface to this collection, Zipes acknowledges that although the definition of what entails a contemporary feminist fairy tale can be nebulous, he selected texts which all have in common a dissatisfaction with traditional male-dominated narratives and seek to “challenge conventional views of gender, socialization, and sex roles,” as well as advocating for the voices of women and other marginalized groups who have been “customarily silenced” (*Don't Bet on the Prince*, 6). I believe that this description aptly captures the general characteristics of contemporary fairy-tale rewritings which are the focus of this section.

Moreover, another important quality that sets apart feminist fairy-tale retellings from other modern renditions of fairy tales is that they are generally written for an adult audience.¹⁰ Indeed, feminist rewritings often aim to retrieve the harshness of the earlier versions of the tales, erased by the process of sanitization, and in doing so free the genre from its immediate association with children's literature. Thus, authors often employ a dual strategy, as discussed by Riggs: they tend to bring back the “violent and/or inhumane scenes” featured in the Grimms' versions of the tales, as well as “taboos such as cannibalism, (sexual) assault, incest”, while simultaneously adopting the ironic tone, social critique and “sometimes ambivalent nature of narrative voices” of Perrault and the *conteuses* (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 30).

In terms of chronology, I refer to “contemporary” retellings using the distinction made by Stephen Benson in the collection of essays *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale* (2008). Benson identifies the beginning of the trend of fairy-tale retellings with the emergence of “the discipline of fairy-tale studies” in 1969 (Benson, *Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, 5, qtd. in Riggs, *Thrice Upon a Time*, 31). Indeed, the interaction between fairy-tale criticism and feminist rewritings has been extensively discussed by

¹⁰ This is not universally the case: Zipes's collection *Don't Bet on the Prince*, for instance, features feminist retellings written for children or authors who have written both, such as British author Tanith Lee. Carter herself wrote picture books for children in the early years of her career, creating fairy tales for young readers such as “The Donkey Prince” (1970) and “Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady” (1970) which, as noted by Zipes, anticipate some of the concerns of her later works for adults (“Crossing Boundaries with Wise Girls”, 147).

several scholars, such as Donald Haase (“Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship”), Cristina Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*), Vanessa Joosen (“Reclaiming the Lost Code”) and Zipes, who in *Don’t Bet on the Prince* includes a final section devoted to essays by feminist fairy-tale scholars¹¹ of the 1970s¹² who have heavily influenced the retellings featured in the collection.

The close relationship between contemporary fairy-tale retellings and feminist fairy-tale criticism is also evident in the way these retellings often reimagine traditional characters and challenge certain tropes. As discussed, second-wave feminists frequently critiqued classic fairy tales, although sometimes in a misguided way,¹³ for promoting and glorifying women’s passivity, beauty, and reproductive function. For instance, in the essay “Feminism and Fairy Tales,” Karen Rowe argues that these stories “exalt passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female’s cardinal virtues,” depicting female subordination as both “romantically desirable” and “an inescapable fate” (*Don’t Bet on the Prince*, 132). Similarly, in 1974, radical feminist Andrea Dworkin lamented how virtuous women in fairy tales often die early, typically after giving birth, while wicked stepmothers or old witches get to live and thrive. This, she argued, reinforces the notion that “the only good woman is a dead woman” (*Woman Hating*, 41). Feminist retellings often challenge the dynamics lamented by these feminist critiques by portraying heroines who possess strength and agency. For instance, Tanith Lee’s “Wolfland” (1983), included in Zipes’ collection *Don’t Bet on The Prince*, rewrites “Red Riding Hood” by casting the grandmother as a proud werewolf who teaches her niece how to claim agency and power in a “male-dominated world” (*Don’t Bet on The Prince*, 24). Another common approach is to dismantle the simplistic good/bad dichotomy in its entirety, often rehabilitating the so-called “wicked” women. Such is the case, for instance, of “The Green Woman” (1982) by Meghan Collins or “The Tale of the Apple” (1997) by Emma

¹¹ I am referring to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Queen’s Looking Glass” (1979), Karen E. Rowe’s “Feminism and Fairy Tales” (1979) and the aforementioned “Some Day My Prince Will Come” (1972) by Marcia K. Lieberman.

¹² Around those same years, in 1976, Bettelheim published his influential book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, in which he applies Freudian psychology to interpret popular fairy tales. The extent to which fairy-tale rewritings were actually answering, criticizing or expanding the concerns of fairy-tale scholarship is clearly shown in Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, which, as observed by Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*), often explicitly refers to Bettelheim’s reductive interpretations. As I will also observe in my analysis, many of Carter’s tales critique and challenge Bettelheim’s readings, which attribute universal meanings to stories that were, in fact, deeply rooted in specific material circumstances and historical contexts.

¹³ Since, as discussed by Joosen (*Critical and Creative Perspectives*), they often conflated Disney’s commodified and conservative portrayals with the earlier versions of the tales.

Donoghue, a Snow White “prequel” which provides motivation and nuance to the wicked queen, turning her into a complex character (*Critical and Creative Perspectives*, 14).

In addition to reworking characters, contemporary retellings often challenge and subvert the traditional plots of classic fairy tales. As Riggs aptly observes, many of these stories tend to question conventional tropes such as “the happy ending and simplistic morals” or “the inevitability of female rivalry” (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 28). For instance, some retellings subvert the conventional ending of a heterosexual marriage by introducing homosexual unions. The most notable example of queer rewritings is Donoghue’s collection *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997) which, as Joosen notes, is built entirely “on a chain of women who establish strong friendships or fall in love with each other” (*Critical and Creative Perspectives*, 115). For instance, in the retelling “The Tale of the Shoe” Donoghue imagines a Cinderella who rejects the prince’s proposal and instead falls in love with her fairy godmother, finding in this liberating queer union her true happy ending.

Though queer elements are absent from Carter’s work, authors like Donoghue have openly acknowledged their debt to Carter’s influence (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 32). This illustrates, as noted by Riggs, how the trend of fairy-tale retellings is built out of a specific “female literary genealogy”, where authors reference, respond to or critique earlier retellings and critical interpretations of fairy tales (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 324). In examining Carter’s influences, Riggs identifies two authors in particular, Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas, as Carter’s “literary mothers” (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 285). I certainly agree with this observation, and to further demonstrate these authors’ influence on Carter, I will reference their rewritings of “Cinderella”.

Olga Broumas’ retelling of “Cinderella” is featured in the collection of poems *Beginning with O* (1977). Broumas, like Carter, critiques the myth of the “happily ever after” by portraying the isolation and profound unhappiness of a newlywed Cinderella, now “a woman alone / in a house of men” (57). Broumas erases the original tale’s rivalry between the protagonist and her stepmother and stepsisters: the real enemy is the patriarchal environment into which the protagonist is thrust after her marriage with a wealthy man. Commodified and objectified, Broumas’ Cinderella is belittled by her husband, who values her only for her housework and her “nimble tongue” (57), a clear sexual allusion. This mirrors the fate of the bride in “The Bloody Chamber”, who, after marrying the Marquis, realizes with despair that she will be forever isolated from her

mother and old nurse and treated as an object by her husband. Moreover, Broumas' story ends on the bleak realization that Cinderella's fate is to "die young" (58), which echoes Carter's argument in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she notes that a woman who is objectified and forced to exist "in the passive case" is doomed to die (SW, 77).

An even a more striking similarity appears between Carter's retellings and those of feminist poet Anne Sexton, who anticipates Carter's themes and tone by employing a blend between ironic commentary and dark subject matter. In the collection of poems *Transformations* (1971), Sexton picks apart several of the Grimms' tales, exposing with a sarcastic tone their damaging messages about sexuality and gender relations, while also retrieving the violence which was removed from Victorian and Disney's versions. For instance, in her Cinderella retelling, Sexton "recovers" the mutilation of the stepsisters and the pecking of the eyes, commenting these violent amputations with a mocking tone: "[H]er big toe got in the way so she simply / sliced it off [...]. / The prince rode away with her until the white dove / told him to look at the blood pouring forth. / That is the way with amputations. / They don't just heal up like a wish" (*Transformations*, 37). The same tongue-in-cheek humour and ironic tone are used by Carter to mock the absurdity of the original Cinderella tale in her retelling, "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" (1987).¹⁴

While Carter drew inspiration from these authors, it is undeniable that after *The Bloody Chamber* the trend of feminist fairy-tale retellings became deeply indebted to her work. Carter's impact on feminist fairy tales is so profound that scholar Stephen Benson dubbed the wave of retellings published after *The Bloody Chamber* the "Carter generation" (*Contemporary Fiction and the Fairy Tale*, 5, qtd. In Riggs, *Thrice Upon a Time*, 32). The extent of Carter's influence can be seen in the collection of essays *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tale* (2011), which features studies on a great variety of contemporary fairy-tale retellings as well as other forms of media heavily inspired by fairy-tale tropes and imagery. The editor of the collection, Anna Kerchy, notes how "Angela Carter proves to be major point of reference in several studies of the volume because of her influential creative legacy" (*Postmodern Reinterpretations*, xvi). Moreover, Kerchy's collection is also particularly noteworthy because it showcases the more recent developments in fairy-tale rewritings. As Kerchy points out in the

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion of the similarities in word choices and themes between the two texts, see Riggs' section "Metafictional aspects: the dialogue with criticism; literary mothers and daughters" in *Thrice Upon a Time*.

Introduction, the volume captures the “range and variety of contemporary reinventions of the fairy tale in multiple and hybrid forms, styles and media” (*Postmodern Reinterpretations*, i). The essays cover a diverse array of topics, such as the stage design in Neil Jordan’s movie *The Company of Wolves*, Maguy Marin’s postmodernist ballet adaptation of Perrault’s *Cinderella*, the reimagining of fairy tales in Japanese women’s art, and a comparative analysis of Jane Campion’s 1993 film *The Piano* and Carter’s Bluebeard retelling. This wide variety demonstrates the adaptability of fairy tales, the fact that they extend well beyond literary rewritings, as well as the enduring influence of Carter’s work.

In the following section, I will delve deeper into Carter’s fairy-tale rewritings, looking into the critical reception of *The Bloody Chamber* and her legacy as a writer of fairy tales following her death in 1992.

“Into the Labyrinth of Female Desire”: Carter’s Fairy-tale Rewritings

Carter’s relationship with fairy tales has been described by Marina Warner as a “love-affair” (“The Fairy Tale”, 78). This description is certainly a fitting one, for Carter’s engagement with the fairy tale spanned her whole career and led to the birth of some of her best-known works of fiction. As recounted by Zipes, Carter had already started experimenting with the genre in 1970, writing two illustrated fairy tales for children, “Miss Z, the Dark Young Lady” and “The Donkey Prince” (“Crossing Boundaries with Wise Girls”, 147). These stories, according to Zipes, “laid the groundwork” for Carter’s future fairy-tale related projects (147). However, as Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère points out, the main thrust which sparked the inspiration for her retellings for adults is the encounter with the tales of Charles Perrault, which Carter began translating in 1976 to improve her French and which led to the publication of a collection of translated stories, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977) (“New Wine in Old Bottles”, 42). The discovery of Perrault’s “project of worldly instruction”, as she describes his work enthusiastically in the article “The Better to Eat You With” (*Shaking a Leg*, 453), led Carter to a complete revaluation of the fairy-tale genre. As observed by Dutheil de la Rochère, through her subsequent research Carter would find that “far from being confined to the nursery, the *contes* of the late seventeenth century were highly elaborate texts addressed to a sophisticated, adult, and predominantly female audience” (“New Wine in Old Bottles”, 43). This discovery served as the catalyst for the publication of *The*

Bloody Chamber (1979), a collection of fairy-tale rewritings, or, as she refers to it in the famous essay “Notes From the Front Line”, a “book of stories about fairy stories” (*Shaking a Leg*, 38). *The Bloody Chamber* became incredibly influential, contributing to the rise in popularity of the phenomenon of feminist fairy-tale retellings, while simultaneously sparking harsh criticism. After *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter continued to write, translate, and experiment with fairy tales. In 1982, she published a second collection of translated tales, *Sleeping Beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales*, which included two stories by the *conteuse* Madame Leprince de Beaumont. Around the same period, she also contributed to the screenplay of the film adaptation of one of her retellings, *The Company of Wolves*, directed by Neil Jordan and released in September 1984 (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 35). The year 1987 saw the publication of a tryptic of Cinderella rewritings titled “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost: Three Versions of One Story”, a lesser-known text which is one of the central focuses of this dissertation. Finally, in 1990 and 1992 Carter edited two collections of fairy tales, *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* and *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, which was published posthumously.

After Carter’s passing, several obituaries were published in the British press. These obituaries, collected by Edmund Gordon for his biography on Carter *The Invention of Angela Carter* (2016), all demonstrate how her legacy as a writer became closely associated with her engagement with fairy tales. For instance, in the *Observer* Margaret Atwood refers to Carter as a “Fairy Godmother”, while Salman Rushdie, writing for the *New York Times*, describes her as the “Fairy Queen” and the “benevolent white witch” of English literature (*The Invention*, xv). However, these evaluations of Carter’s career and legacy as a writer need to be qualified. As Marja Makinen (“The Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality”) points out, such idealized, mythical portrayals are actually obscuring Carter’s controversial, ruthless and inflammatory approach to the fairy tale. Sanitizing and flattening her into a well-meaning, benevolent witch/godmother figure betrays both Carter’s sharp intellectual mind and the real essence of her work, which, according to Makinen, lies “in a much more aggressive subversiveness and a much more active eroticism than perhaps the decorum around death can allow” (“The Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality”, 3). Moreover, Carter herself, as she declared in *The Sadeian Woman*, was quite weary of reducing women into glorified “mythic versions”

of themselves, because for her this was just a clever trick meant to console women for “their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate” (SW, 5).

Furthermore, I find myself in agreement with Sarah Gamble’s argument that turning Carter into a “Mother Goose” figure also misrepresents *The Bloody Chamber* itself, since “it’s not nearly as straightforward a rewriting of the traditional fairytale collection as such an image might suggest” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 131). As Gamble points out, “The Bloody Chamber” is not simply made up of several disjointed stories but is actually a complex work where each tale “‘bleeds’ into the other to form an intricately interlinked whole” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 132). Similar observations have been made by several critics, such as Lucie Armitt, who argues that “*The Bloody Chamber* functions [...] as a single narrative which uses the short story medium to work and rework compulsive repetitions” (“The Fragile Frames of The Bloody Chamber”, 96). As these insights suggest, any analysis of a single tale featured in *The Bloody Chamber* must account for its position within the broader collection, as well as acknowledge the recurring motifs and images that echo across the stories and how their meanings shift in different contexts, which the approach I will take in my close reading of three of Carter’s retellings in Chapter 4.

The departure from the traditional fairy-tale collection of “children’s bedtime stories” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 132) is further emphasized by the content of the stories themselves. As the title of the collection suggests, the tales featured in *The Bloody Chamber* are often dark, gory, surreal and incredibly violent, sometimes even downright shocking or disturbing. To name a few examples, Carter writes of the rape of a dead Snow White, a Red Riding Hood that murders her werewolf grandmother, or a Beauty that is turned into a beast herself by her lover’s licking, in a scene which has overt erotic connotations. “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost”, published eight years after *The Bloody Chamber*, similarly features violent, harsh scenes. In her interview with Kerry Goldsworthy (“Angela Carter” 10, qtd. in Riggs, *Thrice Upon a Time*, 30) Carter explains that what motivated her to write *The Bloody Chamber* was the intention “to extract the latent content of the traditional stories and to use it as the beginning of new stories” (10). This content, which she found “violently sexual” (10), had been suppressed by the process of sanitization and bowdlerization of fairy tales. In the interview with *Marxism’s Today* “Left Alive”, Carter further comments on her disdain for the appropriation and trivialization of fairy tales by the middle class, which, according to her, contributed to

the genre's loss of relevance within mainstream Western culture. Carter comments, for instance, on how "if you mention folklore in Britain, people's eyes glaze over with boredom. They associate it with people wearing white suits with bells round their legs. It is associated with the embarrassing, with the quaint". This general perception described by Carter in the interview has much to do with the general public's immediate association of fairy tales and children literature, a category of literature often viewed as less important or valuable. Yet, as Carter aims to prove with her retellings and her work as editor of fairy-tale collections, the notion that fairy tales are candy-coloured, "safe" stories for the child reader is actually a misconception. For this reason, it would be wrong to define Carter's retellings as "adult fairy tales"¹⁵, as this label implies that fairy tales are or were inherently made for children, disregarding their long and complex evolution. Carter's retellings aim to retrieve those aspects erased in the process of sanitization of the fairy tale, which is why her retellings often feature violence, sexual situations and "ghastly" aspects. A notorious example is her Cinderella retelling "Ashputtle *or* The Mother's Ghost", where she restores the violent amputation scene from the original Grimms' version, omitted in many Victorian adaptations and in Disney's movie, using a semi-serious tone that functions as both a parody and a serious exploration of the real threats of violence faced by women in patriarchal society.

In light of this, I align with Riggs when she affirms that it is understandable that some of Carter's admirers sometimes "balked at this aspect of her work" and attempted to sanitize her image into a more comforting and conventional figure (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 53). But if some of Carter's supporters chose to downplay how harsh and violent her content really was, other critics were affronted by it and openly criticized Carter's approach. For instance, Robert Clark accused Carter of writing from the point of view of the male voyeur ("Angela Carter's Desire Machine", 149, qtd. in Munford, "Decadent Daughters", 60); while Patricia Duncker claimed that Carter failed to emancipate herself from the pervasive sexism embedded in fairy tales ("Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales", 8, qtd. in Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line*, 136). As argued by Rebecca Munford, the main reasoning behind such criticism is that for Clark and Duncker the fairy tale is a conservative and misogynistic genre "inextricably embroiled in patriarchal social and cultural arrangements", thereby they assume that any engagement with it will inevitably

¹⁵ This is how the American edition of *The Bloody Chamber* described the tales, a label that Carter found "horribl[e]" (Simpson, "Introduction", i).

fail to subvert its fixed ideology (“Decadent Daughter”, 60). Duncker, in particular, argues that the “infernal trap” of fairy tales is “too complex and pervasive to avoid”, and as such she believes that it is impossible to rehabilitate the fairy tale to fit into contemporary feminist values (“Re-Imagining the Fairy Tales”, 6, qtd. in Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line*, 136).

To dispute Duncker’ and Clark’s arguments, I will first comment on the erroneous assumption that fairy tales are an inherently conservative form which inevitably reinforces the status quo. As I have discussed in the section on the evolution of the genre, fairy tales are remarkably adaptable and have historically been shaped to reflect the ideological frameworks of their authors, collectors, and translators. The shift toward conservatism in fairy tales from the 18th century onward is not due to any inherent quality of the genre, but rather to the cultural appropriation of a folk tradition by the middle class. Actually, the folk origins of fairy tales offer ample space for radical and progressive ideas. Zipes emphasizes that, prior to the sanitization and commodification of fairy tales, the stories contained a utopian impulse, being the reflection of ordinary people’s desires “to overcome oppression and change society” (*Breaking the Magic Spell*, 36). I would argue that part of Carter’s project with the fairy-genre is the restoration of their subversive and utopistic potential: by exposing the absurdity and misogyny of the “latent” content of traditional fairy tales, Carter hopes to instigate her readers to come to terms with their own acceptance of certain regressive tropes and values and finally reject them¹⁶. This is why any reading of Carter’s tales should always be informed by the source material she is deliberately twisting and subverting. Reading the tales as stand-alone stories poses the risk of misinterpreting the scenes of violence, murder, rape or mutilation as being written simply for shock value, rather than acknowledging them as provocative commentaries designed to encourage readers to pick apart, critique and denaturalize the misogynistic values upheld in the earlier versions of the tale. For this reason, in my close reading of Carter’s tales, I will take into consideration the different sources Carter is exploiting in order to share her feminist messages and finally lift “Beauty and Red Riding Hood and Bluebeard’s last wife out of the pastel nursery into the

¹⁶ As I will explore in depth in the following chapter, the notion that the critique of cultural representations is crucial to induce societal change is stated by Carter also in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she dissects the pornographic imagery of the Marquis du Sade to expose its biases, failures and progressive potential, with the ultimate goal of urging her readers to recognize their own regressive patterns of thinking.

labyrinth of female desire”, as Warner defines Carter’s project in the afterword to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (350).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined a general framework for the evolution of the fairy-tale genre. From being mainly transmitted orally to being crystallized into a literary form in 17th-century and early 18th-century, and later through their gradual sanitization, fairy tales have evolved both in form and content to suit different contexts, audiences and reflect the ideologies of their tellers or authors. While their relegation to the realm of children's literature and the widespread popularity of Disney's conservative adaptations have damaged the genre’s reputation in the eyes of many second-wave feminist thinkers, the genre’s inherent flexibility has ensured its survival in the second half of the 20th century, in particular with the phenomenon of feminist and queer retellings.

As I have observed, Angela Carter has been a pivotal figure in the process of rescuing fairy tales from the confines of children literature and transforming them into works of fiction which reflect contemporary feminist values. As Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*) has aptly observed, Carter’s collection *The Bloody Chamber* holds a central place in the female literary genealogy of fairy-tale retellings, serving as a significant influence on later authors such as Emma Donoghue while at the same time drawing inspiration from earlier writers like Anne Sexton and Olga Broumas. Yet, the collection has gathered ambivalent reactions. In particular, Carter's tendency to reimagine classic fairy tales by adding violent and erotic elements has sparked both harsh criticism and a tendency toward sanctification and mythologization since her passing. This polarized reception shows the difficulty in fully capturing the complexity and inflammatory nature of Carter’s work.

In the next chapter, I will explore how Carter was not only an unconventional fairy tale writer but also a provocative feminist thinker. I will focus on her radical ideas about femininity, sexuality, and cultural myths, as articulated in her 1979 essay *The Sadeian Woman*. Often seen as her feminist manifesto, this essay is crucial for understanding her fairy-tale retellings, as it deepens the feminist perspective that informs all of her fiction.

Chapter 3: Carter's Feminist Theory

Introduction

Angela Carter was always upfront about her alignment with feminist politics. For instance, in 1983 she contributed to the collection of essays *On Gender and Writing* with the essay "Notes from the Front Line"¹⁷, where she positioned herself as a politically engaged writer and an advocate for feminist ideas, highlighting the impact of the feminist movement on her life and work. In a 1984 interview with *The Guardian*, Carter described herself an "old-fashioned kind of feminist", focusing on issues like "abortion law, access to further education, equal rights, the position of black women" (qtd. in Buchel, '*Bankrupt Enchantments*' and '*Fraudulent Magic*', 7). However, Carter's relationship with the mainstream feminist movement of her time was marked by controversy. While many of her works feature conventional feminist ideas, Carter was not afraid to also question certain aspects of the women's movement. Specifically, she challenged feminist narratives that she viewed as limiting or harmful, even by openly referring to contemporary female writers whose books were, in her opinion, abounding in self-pity and victimhood. Marja Makinen aptly captures Carter's approach to feminism by defining her an "avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism" ("Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality", 2).

Carter's work pushed against conventions not as an empty aesthetic exercise, but as a conscious political stance. Her primary goal was to scrutinize, challenge, and dismantle the ideas that society comfortably accepts, including feminist beliefs and the work of feminist writers. Sarah Gamble fittingly describes Carter as a "cultural saboteur" (*Writing from the Front Line*, 4), someone who takes nothing at face value, not even feminist discourse. For this reason, I would suggest that Carter's brand of feminism was not only ahead of her time, but also quite an important model to navigate our current cultural climate. Her tendency to question everything, even feminist dogmas; her rejection of black-and-white moralities; her refusal to read victims as powerless and oppressors as irredeemable: these are all features of her writing that are still incredibly valuable today, in a world marked by the steady rise of cultural polarization and echo chambers.

¹⁷ The contribution has been republished in the collection of essays *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*. (1997) London: Chatto & Windus, which is the text I will use for my quotations.

To give a concrete example of Carter's nuanced approach to feminist issues, I would reference the depiction of violence against women in her fiction. For instance, in the stories collected in *The Bloody Chamber*, as well as in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", women are often object of rape, torture and other forms of violence. Some critics, taken aback by Carter's disturbing and often grotesque portrayals, have questioned Carter's feminist stance, suggesting that her fiction reinforces reactionary ideas of women as the object of male violence. Robert Clarke, for instance, affirmed that Carter's writing poses as "feminism in a male chauvinist drag" (*Angela Carter's Desire Machine*, 158). These accusations, I believe, are based on the idea that there is a "proper" and "correct" way to write feminist literature. Carter, however, openly defies the notion that there is a single template for how a feminist should write. The explicit scenes of violence – one might think of the chilling rape scene in "The Snow Child", for example – are for Carter wholly necessary to expose the underlying misogyny and violence featured in traditional fairy tales.

If Carter's feminist fiction is anything but conventional, her theoretical work is no less unorthodox. Carter explicitly discusses her ideas on women, sexuality and cultural notions of femininity in what many critics refer to as her feminist manifesto, the essay *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. It took five years for Carter to finish the essay and she herself admitted that writing *The Sadeian Woman* proved to be daunting: in an interview with Les Bedford, while still working on the book, she refers to it as an "impossible task" (qtd. in *Writing from the Front Line*, 66). The book was commissioned for the launch of the feminist Virago press in 1977, although it was first published two years later in 1979, the same year as the collection of fairy-tale rewritings *The Bloody Chamber*. Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère suggests that the two texts should be read contrapuntally, as *The Bloody Chamber* relates in narrative form the same theoretical observations on gender and sexuality that Carter explores in *The Sadeian Woman* (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 20).

For this reason, I have chosen to devote a chapter of this dissertation to *The Sadeian Woman*, using it as a starting point to delve deeper into Carter's feminist theory and to support a close reading of Carter's fairy-tale retellings. Following a general introduction to *The Sadeian Woman* and its controversial approach to the writings of the Marquis de Sade, I will explore Carter's rejection of feminist myths of motherhood, her analysis of

the social fictions of femininity through the characters of Justine and Juliette, and finally, Carter's socialist stance and critique of marriage as an economic contract.

A Controversial Feminist Manifesto: The Sadeian Woman

The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography is quite a complex text to approach. Carter was not afraid to stir controversy, and her ironic and caustic authorial voice is often times difficult to interpret. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the essay sparked ambivalent and often harsh reviews. This is due primarily to its subject matter: as the title indicates, Carter chose to "bring back" the controversial figure of the Marquis de Sade to discuss feminist issues. Critics were mainly puzzled by Carter's apparent endorsing of pornography and of Sade's sexual politics, but the ambivalent reaction is not limited to this. As observed by Hera Cook, another reason why the essay faced backlash was that it was "genuinely shocking [...] for British women to write/talk explicitly about sexuality in the 1970s" since it was still a male dominated subject ("Female Desire in England 1960–1970", 939). Additionally, although *The Sadeian Woman* was positioned as a feminist text, it was also, as argued by Lorna Sage, "aimed against a certain sisterhood" (*Flesh and the Mirror*, 12). As discussed in the Introduction, Carter was not afraid to challenge certain trends in women's fiction that she considered harmful and counterproductive, such as the indulgence in self-pity and the idealization of motherhood. However, in *The Sadeian Woman* she was questioning those feminist narratives by turning to Sade, the 18th-century libertine and pornographer known for relishing in women's suffering.

A nobleman during the French Revolution, the Marquis de Sade became infamous for his libertine lifestyle and obscene writings. His works often intertwined scenes of transgressive sexual acts with philosophical discussions on various topics, such as morality, gender and power relations, and the promotion of atheism. Throughout his life, Sade was often at the centre of public scandal. Although he faced multiple trials, thanks to his wealth and noble status he had managed to avoid jail on several occasions, but when in 1772 he eloped with his sister-in-law (an act that for the Catholic church was equivalent to incest) he was finally imprisoned for a short period of time. After that, following another series of scandalous incidents, he was arrested again in 1777, this time enduring a 13-year imprisonment. The accusations against him were mainly of a sexual nature and often involved sadistic acts of violence on prostitutes. In *Forbidden*

Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography (1997), scholar Roger Shattuck presents a list of the various charges against Sade, which included whippings and knifings of prostitutes, sodomy, and corruption of young girls (*Forbidden Knowledge*, 229). It was during his first long confinement that Sade began his writing activity. Carter interprets this fact as the proof that to turn from “rake to philosopher”, Sade needed to experience prison and oppression (SW, 32). No longer able to actively indulge in his perversions, Sade had to resort to his imagination, projecting a world of license and transgressiveness. His pornographic works are filled with wildly creative scenes of rapes and beatings, all staged to be as shocking and blasphemous as possible. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter analyses and discusses Sade’s *Justine, or Good Conduct Well-Chastised* (1788), *Juliette, or Vice Amply Rewarded* (1797–1801), *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795) and she mentions some passages of *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Licentiousness* (1785).

As this brief biography shows, Sade is quite a controversial and polarizing figure, who nevertheless has exerted a great deal of fascination on many intellectuals, especially in the 20th century. In his study on the Marquis titled *How to Read Sade*, John Philips observes that after a long period of obscurity, the latter half of the 20th century witnessed a renewed interest in the licentious writer. Sade’s novels found new accessibility with paperback editions being published in France during the 1960s, while in the US and UK, the relaxation of book censorship from the early 1960s onward eventually led to the widespread availability of his complete works by the 1970s (*How to Read Sade*, 4). Sade’s newfound popularity led to the publication of a number of critical essays on his works, such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *Must We Burn Sade?* (1951-1952) and Roland Barthes’s *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971). These essays were influential in shaping Carter’s own reading of Sade and are cited as secondary readings in *The Sadeian Woman*.

The resurgence of critical attention to Sade in the late 1970s coincided with a period where the ethic of pornography was emerging as a major issue within feminism, as noted by Cook (“*Female Desire in England*”, 939), and many opponents of pornography were strongly advocating for the censorship of any pornographic material. In such a cultural climate, Carter’s nuanced and complex opinions on pornography sparked much controversy: *The Sadeian Woman* was addressed and harshly criticized in several feminist essays, such as Susanne Kappeler’s *The Pornography of Representation* (1986) and Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981). Misreading the

intent behind Carter's ironic commentary on Sade, Dworkin and Kappeler claimed that by engaging with Sade's fictional works, Carter was endorsing harmful pornographic content under the guise of liberation.

I will challenge Kappeler and Dworkin's specific arguments against Carter in later sections. For now, my point in citing these critical readings of *The Sadeian Woman* is to highlight how they tend to oversimplify Carter's relationship with Sade, flattening it into a wholly uncritical appreciation. Yet, Carter is quite critical of Sade in many sections of the text. To claim that she views Sade's pornography as liberating simply because it sometimes depicts women in sexual scenarios as the aggressors would be a misreading. Moreover, Carter's evaluation of "traditional" pornography is entirely negative. In the introduction to *The Sadeian Woman*, ironically titled "Polemical Preface", she launches a direct attack towards traditional pornography. According to Carter, in traditional pornographic works women (and men as well) are reduced to their anatomy, while human sexual relations are also greatly simplified. For this reason, she argues that pornography amounts to a mythicization of sexuality, a harmful tool that perpetuates the patriarchal status quo and holds back women. However, Carter's ideas diverge from those of anti-pornography feminists when it comes to their attitudes towards censorship. In her texts and interviews, Carter never advocates for censorship. Despite its allure as an apparent "easy fix" solution, Carter argues that it is ultimately counterproductive: censorship would merely suppress the representations of the painful realities faced by women, rather than addressing the underlying issues. In a 1994 interview with Katsavos, Carter remarked that pornography's depiction of women's "real existential status" may be discomfoting to acknowledge,¹⁸ yet it is necessary to confront it. This critical position towards censorship is openly discussed also in *The Sadeian Woman*. Carter points out that although censorship might erase "the beatings, the rapes and the woundings" that women suffer in traditional pornographic materials, it would not eradicate the real-life violence that takes place "in a privacy beyond the reach of official censorship" (SW, 23). Thus, *The Sadeian Woman* is not a defence of Sade's pornography, as Dworkin and Kappeler have argued, but a complex analysis of his pornographic works aimed at critiquing and challenging the real-life sexual dynamics they reflect.

¹⁸ In the interview, Carter affirms that "it's not very pleasant for women to find out about how they are represented in the world. They find out much more about what their real existential status is from pornography, and it's very unpleasant. It really is. It's enough to make women give up on the human race." (A *Conversation with Angela Carter*, in "The Review of Contemporary Fiction")

Moreover, another element to consider when approaching this text is Carter's highly satirical and ironic mode of writing. In her analysis of Sade, Carter often employs provocative claims which are primarily aimed to shock readers. I owe this point to scholars such as Gamble¹⁹ and Sage²⁰, who have highlighted Carter's use of irony throughout the essay, and especially in the "Polemical Preface", whose title already gives a sense of the semi-serious tone that Carter adopts. For instance, Carter asserts that Sade might be a liberating figure because he urges women to "fuck as actively as they are able" and in doing so, they might one day "fuck their way into history and [...] change it" (SW, 27). If one takes this assertion at face value, it comes across as insensitive and paradoxical, especially considering the horrifying portrayals of rape, aggression, mutilation that characterize much of Sade's fiction. It is clear, however, that Carter is playfully exaggerating to provoke her readers. This is perfectly in line with Carter's way of approaching complex subject matters: her intention, as stated by Sally Keenan, is to "provoke and discompose" ("Feminism as Treason", 146) rather than trying to convince or provide easy answers. Never one to conform to pre-made systems of thought, Carter uses controversial and contradictory statements to encourage readers to question their fixed positions and habitual patterns of thinking. Elaine Jordan ("The Dangers of Angela Carter") echoes similar sentiments, encouraging readers to reconsider their knee-jerk reactions when their preconceptions are challenged and instead delve into the reasons behind their offended feelings. She highlights that "it is the moment of disturbance and anger which may produce a new consciousness and a new order of things" ("The Dangers", 121).

The Sadeian Woman is an emblematic example of Carter's authorial voice. Carter's provocative and ironic tone is not confined to her theoretical works but permeates her fiction as well. Interpreting the tales of *The Bloody Chamber* as wholly serious portrayals of the female struggle with a moral and didactic intent would do a disservice to the author. In her other fairy-tale retelling, "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", the narrator similarly adopts an ironic and flippant attitude, despite the often-gruesome details of the story. Provoking discomfort was certainly one of Carter's methods to elicit a reaction

¹⁹ Gamble asserts that irony is "the dominant mode of expression in this text, although it is indeed a risky one to adopt, in the circumstances. As Dworkin's scathing critique shows, Carter's dry, mocking tone leaves her open to accusations of callousness and collusion by those, such as Dworkin and Kappeler, who either miss the irony, or see it as an inappropriate response to the subject matter" (*Writing from the Front Line*, 100)

²⁰ In regard to some of Carter's statements in the introduction of the essay, Sage writes: "These sweeping, abstract assertions have an ironic air about them" ("Introduction", *Flesh and the Mirror*, 33)

and shake consciousness. Thus, it is characteristic of her role as a “cultural saboteur” and a “literary terrorist of feminism” that she explores her intricate feminist ideas by engaging with a controversial figure such as the Marquis de Sade, with the intention, as Carter half-jokingly says, of using him “in the service of women” (SW, 37).

Sade “in the Service of Women” and Moral Pornography

In the previous section, I discussed how *The Sadeian Woman* is by no means an apology of Sade or an attempt to salvage his reputation. On the contrary, Carter is actually quite critical of Sade and ultimately rejects his worldview. Nevertheless, it is undisputable that Carter held a certain fascination for Sade. His profound impact on Carter has been widely recognized by critics: for instance, Rebecca Munford affirms that “the Marquis de Sade is perhaps the most significant-and certainly the most notorious-of Carter’s literary influences” (*Decadent daughters*, 14). Carter’s fascination with the Marquis even predates *The Sadeian Woman*. Scholar Heide Yeandle traces back Carter’s initial approaches to the licentious writer to her two-year long stay in Japan, when she first read *Juliette* (1797), a text she would keep on returning to throughout the 1970s (*Angela Carter and Western Philosophy*, 166).

Notoriously, Carter claimed that Sade could be considered an advocate for certain feminist issues, allowing herself to think that, in a way, Sade put his pornography “in the service of women” (SW, 37). She genuinely admired Sade’s perspective on women, sharing with Lorna Sage that “Sade’s ideas about women, when he’s not being mad and ironic and satirical, are very progressive for the time, and indeed are still quite progressive” (*The Savage Sideshow: A Profile of Angela Carter*, 168). This view sparked much controversy among critics, yet Carter certainly had a point. For instance, while eighteenth-century society confined women’s sexuality to reproduction, Sade portrayed women as sexual beings with active desires. Moreover, since Sade refused to regard women as breeders, he even advocated for abortion rights, a crucial issue to advance women’s autonomy and freedom that is still being debated today. Indeed, one of Sade’s female libertines proudly asserts women’s autonomy over their bodies, declaring: “We are always mistress of what we carry in our womb” (SW, 121). Carter finds this aspect significant: as a feminist, she wholeheartedly recognizes the importance of contraception and abortion rights as necessary steps toward women’s sexual and social emancipation. In “Notes from the Front Line”, she affirms that reproductive rights are

crucial to ensure that women can live a sexually active life while also pursuing a career, without the burden of continuous pregnancies (*Shaking a Leg*, 39).

Most importantly, Carter finds Sade useful for the feminist cause because he is a political writer, and as such he treats sexuality as something inherently political. Through satire, Sade unveils the power imbalance that characterized 18th-century society, an issue that Carter felt was still relevant. In Sade's novels, the power to abuse is always held by those who have real political power, such as "the statesmen, the princes, the popes", shown to be "the cruelest by far", while the victims are those who have "little or no power at all" (SW, 24). In his attempt to desecrate and challenge societal institutions, Sade does not refrain from attacking even the undisputed power of the catholic Church, which Carter found liberating.²¹

It is important to note that Sade's cultural attacks were not, according to Carter, an end in themselves. She argues that the Marquis is "capable of believing, even if only intermittently, that it is possible to radically transform society" (SW, 24). I believe that in the use of satire to instigate a social change lies another affinity that Carter felt with Sade. Carter, too, uses her fiction as a tool to address social issues and promote a radical change in society. Scott Dimovitz rightly underlines Carter's pragmatic intent by stating: "she would hold an x-ray up to society, yet always with the sincere hope to change it" (*Angela Carter: Surrealist, Psychologist, and Moral Pornographer*, 34). Carter's pragmatic drive to effect social change is at the core of *The Sadeian Woman* as well. For Carter, the analysis of Sade's violent pornographic imagery to critique current sexual relations and patriarchal power dynamics is a necessary step to induce social change. This idea is openly stated right in the opening lines of *The Sadeian Woman*, where she argues that gender and sexual relations are not static or predestined by history, but rather fluid and deeply embedded in the social context, which means they can be transformed.

The main thrust for social change should come, according to Carter, from women themselves. This point is underscored both in the very first page of the introduction to *The Sadeian Woman*, where she affirms that women are the "makers" of history, not its slaves; and in the postscript of the book, where she quotes Emma Goldman, encouraging women to achieve liberation "through their own efforts" (SW, 151). The fact that Carter chose to illustrate this idea both at the start and at the very end of the essay is a way, in

²¹ Interviewed by Lisa Appignanesi, Carter affirmed that she is "very sympathetic to Sade, because of his complete, his proselytizing and vigorous atheism" who she believes is "the most honorable course a human person can take in the face of religion" (interview with Appignanesi, retrieved from Youtube).

my opinion, to highlight the core purpose of her work: urging women to take active steps to shape society, rather than simply lament their circumstances and portray themselves as victims or martyrs.

With this in mind, Carter puts forward the notion of “moral pornography”, a type of pornographic work that could potentially help the feminist cause. A moral pornographer would project in his pornographic works the model for “a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders”. Moreover, he might use pornography “as a critique of current relations between the sexes” and aim at the “revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind” (SW, 19). The pornographer who deliberately uses the provocative nature of pornography to express deeper views about society will thus reveal and critique the real conditions and power dynamics of the world, portrayed through the lens of sexual encounters.

Many readers, coming across the definition of moral pornographer, assumed that Carter was suggesting Sade as a perfect example of it, especially because Carter opts for male pronouns. Carter herself admitted during an interview with Anna Katsavos in 1988 that “moral pornographer was a phrase that got me into a lot of trouble with the sisters, some of the sisters”. However, Carter never states outright that Sade is a successful example of a moral pornographer. On the contrary, throughout the essay, Carter proves that despite all the positive and liberating aspects of Sade thus mentioned, he ultimately fails to be one. When Sade “is on the point of becoming a revolutionary pornographer”, he finally “lacks the courage” and “reverts [...] to being a simple pornographer” (SW, 132). Sade fails because while he successfully parodies the relations between the sexes and women’s culturally determined roles, he is incapable of projecting a world that subverts those roles. He recognizes that society works on the premise of a dichotomy between powerful abusers and economically disadvantaged victims, but he fails to realize that there is a third option: dismantling the dichotomy, liberating both women and men.

For these reasons, I believe that Carter did not have Sade in mind when describing the “moral pornographer”. With Sade set aside, however, the question of whom Carter was envisioning as an example of moral pornography remains. One might note that Carter’s definition of the moral pornographer always remains conditional and, therefore, hypothetical. Thus, it could be reasonable to assume that the moral pornographer is only a possibility envisioned by Carter, a provocative claim that is not referring to any

specific real-life author. However, I tend to agree with those scholars, such as Gamble and Dimovitz²², who claim that Carter is envisioning herself as the real moral pornographer. Carter's ironic use of male pronouns could even be seen as a subtle commentary on the bias of anti-pornography critics, who often stereotype pornographic media as a strictly male-dominated space. However, as Carter shows in her fictional works and in *The Sadeian Woman*, female authors can discuss and depict sexuality in highly graphic terms, without reducing men and women to their anatomical parts. The collection *The Bloody Chamber* can be even read as Carter's attempt at moral pornography, "using pornography to make her readers think", as Nicole Ward Jouve puts it ("Mother as a figure of speech", 165).

Moreover, even *The Sadeian Woman* aligns perfectly with Carter's description of the functions of a moral pornographer. By exploring the cultural significance of Sade's pornographic works, Carter is set to expose the underlying misogyny that permeates Western culture. She uses Sadeian pornography "as a critique of current relations between the sexes," revealing the underlying issues of power hidden behind naturalized gender relations. Moreover, she aims to achieve the "total demystification of the flesh" by critiquing contemporary myths on gender and sexuality, as well as the "culturally determined nature of women" that stem from these myths. As a successful moral pornographer, Carter does not limit herself to a cultural critique: she also takes the step that Sade did not dare take and she proposes a way to transcend those issues, envisioning "a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders" in the "Speculative Finale".

"The Total Demystification of the Flesh": Carter's Demythologizing Business

As discussed, *The Sadeian Woman* could be read as Carter's attempt to be a "moral pornographer", an artist who uses pornographic material to advance the feminist cause. One of the objectives of the moral pornographer is the "demystification of the flesh", a crucial step to free women from the shackles of myths about women's bodies and identities. Demystifying/demythologizing is at the core of Carter's work as a feminist. In

²² For instance, Gamble writes that by stripping Sade's pornography "of its superficial glamour", Carter "uncovers and contests the issues of power and control which it disguises. In so doing, she reveals herself, rather than de Sade, as the real moral pornographer" (*Writing from the Front Line*, 103) For Dimovitz, "although Carter [...] distances herself thinly with the use of the pronominal "he," it is hard to read these lines without hearing a reference to herself" (*Angela Carter: Surrealist, Psychologist, Moral Pornographer*, 33)

the interview with Katsavos, Carter famously described herself as being in the "demythologizing business". As she affirmed in the same interview, her own interpretation of myth is rooted in Roland Barthes' influential work *Mythologies* (1957), where the author states that myth is an abstraction that reduces the self to a simplified essence: "In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth" (*Mythologies*, 143).

In *The Sadeain Woman*, Carter offers a concrete example of the way myth operates by analysing a mythologizing of sexuality, sexual graffiti. These crude representations "scrawled on the subway poster and the urinal wall" (SW, 4) may seem juvenile and innocuous, but are actually selling a myth by reducing human beings to a single, overarching essence, which, in this case, is their anatomy. For instance, women are reduced to their vaginas, which are represented symbolically as an empty hole, or, in Carter's words, "the sign for nothing" which gains value only "when the male principle fills it with meaning" (SW,4). This gross and crude representation automatically influences and is influenced by reality, which means that also real-world women are subjected to a mythic reduction, by being historically associated with archetypes defined by patience and abnegation.

Dismantling myths, however, is not an easy "business". Carter describes them as "extraordinary lies *designed* to make people unfree" (*Shaking a Leg*, 38, italics mine). Myths are particularly pernicious and enduring because they are made to be appealing. They are comforting fantasies that conceal the material condition of women's life, which might be scary to confront. It is far easier, argues Carter, to retreat into the "consolatory nonsense" (SW,6) of patronizing and infantile myths. This is of course not a viable option for a socialist and materialist such as Carter. As she resolutely affirms in her essays, "*this world is all that there is*" (*Shaking a Leg*, 38) and, as such, must be approached "with sufficient seriousness" (SW, 110).

Carter's "absolute and *committed* materialism" (*Shaking a Leg*, 38) might seem at odds with her choice to rewrite fairy tales, given their imaginative setting and fantastical characters, which may appear disconnected from the reality of women living in the UK in the 1970s. Yet, interviewed by Haffenden in 1985, Carter insists that "there is a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite

seriously" (*Novelists in Interview*). It is also worth noting that Carter's fairy tales always openly acknowledge the material realities of their characters and give a concrete historical setting. While Carter may write of magical transformations into animals or children made of snow, her fairy tales are not so fantastical as to dismiss the huge threat of poverty, and they depict women as economically independent from their spouses or male relatives.

Finally, I would like to remark on the fundamental difference between mythic narratives and folklore or fairy tales²³ as defined by Carter. In "Notes from the Front Line", Carter affirms that, unlike myths, "folklore is a much more straightforward set of devices for making real life more exciting and is much easier to infiltrate with different kinds of consciousness" (38). While myths are static narratives which claim to have universal significance, folk stories and fairy tales, as mentioned in Chapter 2, possess a unique flexibility that allows them to be reshaped and tailored for various audiences and contexts.

I find that Carter's distrust for myths is in line with the general postmodernist refusal of metanarratives and universal notions of truth. In the essay *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) Jean-François Lyotard famously identifies the scepticism towards metanarratives as one of the key aspects of the postmodern condition. According to Lyotard's definition, "metanarratives" are overarching interpretations of the world that claim universality, with the purpose of legitimizing their own version of "the Truth". Lyotard proposes to reject these narratives on the premise that there is no such thing as a single, overarching truth when dealing with human experiences. Similarly, in her quest against myths, Carter aims to prove that notions of universality cannot be applied to human matters. On this account, Carter's fairy tales are not trying to teach something universally true to the reader. On the contrary, they urge readers to ask questions and infer possible meanings. Indeed, a specific quality of Carter's texts is that they open themselves up for different interpretations. As she affirms in "Notes from The Front Line", when writing fiction she tends to "present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions" (*Shaking a Leg*, 37). Each reader can infuse the

²³ As mentioned in Chapter 2, Carter uses the term "folklore" and "fairy tale" interchangeably. This is made explicit in the Introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, where Carter clarifies that she uses the term "fairy tale" loosely, to describe those narratives "passed on and disseminated through the world by word of mouth" (*The Virago Book*, ix). This definition encompasses folk narratives but excludes literary fairy tales.

stories with her own meaning and put, as Carter famously said, “new wine in old bottles” (38).

“The deluded Priestesshood”: Feminist myths and Mother Goddesses

I would like to start this section by comparing Carter’s demythologizing approach to that of another incredibly influential feminist, Simone de Beauvoir. In the seminal work *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir includes an analysis of the myths surrounding womanhood which shares many points with Carter’s theorization on myth. Beauvoir defines myths built around women as an attempt to “summarize [them] as a whole”, even if “in concrete reality, women manifest themselves in many different ways” (*The Second Sex*, 275). Myths oversimplify the complexity of individual women and ascribe to them an “essence” presumed to be immutable and universal. Beauvoir argues that archetypes of womanhood are not based on biology, but they are rather a construct of society and culture. She famously states: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (*The Second Sex*, 293). Similarly, Carter affirms in “Notes from The Front Line” that myths on women are solely the products of human imagination and they are influenced by historical and societal circumstances, having nothing to do with biological “truth” (*Shaking a Leg*, 47).

However, there is a key difference between Beauvoir and Carter’s arguments. Beauvoir believes that mythic archetypes of womanhood are all created by the patriarchy. Carter argues instead that women and even feminists contribute to the mythicization of women by creating their own harmful myths. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter accuses the contemporary feminist movement of relying on reassuring myths by imagining “hypothetical great goddesses” (SW, 5) as a consolation for women’s subordination and economic dependency, rather than addressing these issues up front. As Carter told Katsavos, she was “getting quite ratty with the sort of appeals by some of the women’s movements to have these sort of ‘Ur-religions’ because it did not seem to me at all to the point. The point seemed to be the here and now, what we should do now”.

In the *“Polemical Preface”*, when discussing some of the consolatory myths that have “seduced” certain feminist thinkers, Carter mentions twice the mythic notion of motherhood: first, she affirms that the myth of “the healing, reconciling mother” is nonsensical; then she attacks the notion of “Mother goddesses” stating that it is “as silly a notion as father gods” (SW, 5). By referring twice in the same paragraph to the myth of

motherhood, it seems clear that Carter is particularly inimical to this notion. Before publishing *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter had already parodied the mythic mother archetype with the character of “Mother” in her novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), a ruthless cult leader of a group of violent radical feminists. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter offers a theoretical discussion on the many reasons why the mother-myth is particularly harmful.

One of the points that Carter finds against the celebration of the mother-myth is the subsequent reduction of women to their reproductive function. Buchel observes that one of the key points of Carter’s demythologizing of motherhood is precisely aimed at “separating a woman’s identity from her fecundity” (*Bankrupt enchantments’ and ‘fraudulent magic’*, 15). As observed, Carter is particularly interested in distinguishing female sexuality from its reproductive function, which is also one of the reasons why she found Sade useful for discussing feminist views. When feminist narratives celebrate the “mythic mother” archetype, Carter argues, they actually reinforce patriarchal ideologies that reduce women’s worth to childbearing, undermining the progress made in women’s sexual liberation. As Jennings Hope puts it, “matriarchal myths are more often than not just as oppressive as their patriarchal counterparts” (*Journey towards the (M)other*, 110).

Moreover, Sally Keenan notes that Carter is also particularly critical of the “eco-feminists’ reassertion of Nature as Mother” (*Feminism as Treason*, 134). This trend of feminist thought²⁴ associates reproductive abilities with a closeness to nature, which in turn would mean that women are fundamentally superior to men. In *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (1988) psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin observes that women have “long been held captive” (78) by the idea that they embody nature due to their reproductive abilities. Carter, being a supporter of gender equality, is also particularly averse to any notion of biological supremacy. Thus, she argues that the idea that women have access to an ancient generative power that empowers them and renders them superior to men is only a fantasy. She points out that the notion of maternal superiority “springs from the timeless, placeless, fantasy land of archetypes where all the embodiments of biological supremacy live” (SW, 106).

Furthermore, Carter argues that when women place such high value in motherhood, they impact negatively those who wish to become mothers but are infertile. If one

²⁴ Keenan identifies texts such as Mary Daly’s *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women’s Press, 1979) and Susan Griffin’s *Women and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (London: Women’s Press, 1984, first published 1978) as part of this feminist trend.

presents maternity as a woman's highest purpose and birthright, women who are unable to conceive may be harshly affected, being deprived at once "of children; of the value of [themselves] as mother; and of [their] own self, as autonomous being" (SW, 106). I find this argument particularly compelling and modern: womanhood does not translate to motherhood, and a woman should feel complete regardless of whether or not she has children.

For these reasons, Carter urges women to abandon "the deluded priestesshood of a holy reproductive function" (SW, 110) and argues instead for a secularization of motherhood. Specifically, Carter calls for a demystification of the womb, an organ that has been upheld as "the most sacred of all places" while it is actually an ordinary organ like any other, useful only if a woman wishes to have children.

Carter's interest in the mythic ideas surrounding the womb is also displayed in her fairy-tale retellings. Interestingly, in *Postmodern Fairy Tales* Cristina Bacchilega lists the womb as one of the different meanings for the collection's title. Images of the womb frequently appear both in the short stories of *The Bloody Chamber* and in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost". In "The Snow Child", a young girl is born from a hole in the ground filled with blood, which could be interpreted as a disembodied womb. The scene could be a fictional parallel to the commentary in *The Sadeian Woman* on the way in which the womb, when mystified and elevated to sacred status, loses its attachment to a real female body, becoming "an imaginative locale", placed "far away from my belly, beyond my flesh, beyond my house, beyond this city, this society, this economic structure" (SW, 107).

"Defiling the Sacred": Mothers and Mother-daughter Relationships in Sade

Carter finds in Sade an ally for demythologizing motherhood. As observed, Carter shares with Sade some of his more progressive ideas, such as the separation of female sexuality from reproduction and the advocacy for abortion rights. Moreover, while Sade acknowledges the concept of "moral mothering" and includes various mother figures in his narratives, such as the abbess Delbène or Madame de Saint-Ange, he dismisses the significance of physical motherhood and rejects the idea that motherhood is inherently virtuous or holy. The desacralization of motherhood, however, takes an extreme turn in his writing: Sade often depicts fantasies of matricide and violent assaults on the maternal body. Indeed, in *Thinking Through the Body*, feminist critic Jane Gallop notes

that in Sade's texts "the mother is a privileged victim: many libertines start their life of crime by killing their mother; others view the murder of their mother as their greatest accomplishment" (*Thinking Through the Body*, 56). Carter underscores that the libertine's attacks on mothers are particularly vicious precisely because society reveres them as sacred figures. The libertines violently reject that sacredness out of spite, challenging the notion that "nothing can defile the sacred" (SW, 107). This observation has been echoed by many scholars of Sade. Mary Jacobs, in her analysis of the mother figure in Sadeian texts, affirms: "Sade makes it clear that the mother is the object of abomination in exact proportion to her conventional sacredness" (*First Things*, 114). By envisioning Sade as an ally in her demythologizing quest, Carter is deliberately choosing to read Sade's violent and often grotesque attacks on mothers and pregnant women as a parody and an ironic provocation. Thus, despite the misogynistic and matrophobic themes in Sade's work, Carter proposes that his "hatred of the mothering function" leads him to "demystify the most sanctified aspects of women" (SW, 36), a goal that she herself supports. Moreover, by violently removing the air of mystique and "holiness" that surrounds mothers and maternal bodies, Sade, argues Carter, is also affirming the importance of women's sexual freedom.

Another Sadeian theme that fascinates Carter is Sade's portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship. In her interview with Appignanesi, Carter observed that the relationship between mothers and daughters is "one of the side-shows" of Sade. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter tackles Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* ("Philosophy in the Bedroom") to discuss the complexities of mother-daughter relationships. They are also a core topic in Carter's fiction, frequently thematized and problematized in her fairy-tale retellings. Mother figures feature prominently in *The Bloody Chamber* and have often an ambivalent relationship with their daughters. "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" also focuses heavily on the complexities of "mother love" and the conflicting feelings that daughters harbour for their mothers.

Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, written as a dramatic dialogue, details the story of a young girl, Eugénie, initiated by libertines into a life of sexual debauchery. As her final act towards sexual freedom and autonomy she violently assaults her own mother, who has attempted to repress her sexual desire. Eugénie's repudiation of the maternal figure is thus framed as a necessary step towards maturity. This idea could be linked to Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva elaborates on the

process of abjection, necessary for a subject to establish boundaries between the self and others. During the early stages of infant development, the child still has not developed an identity and exists in an imaginary union with the mother. In order to develop subjectivity, the first object to be abjected is the maternal body, which represents the child's own origin (McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 47-48). The abjection of the mother is described by Kristeva as "a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back" (*Powers of Horror*, 13). In Sadeian fashion, Eugénie's rejection of the maternal body is depicted through a monstrous and perverse act of violence: the young girl rapes and infibulates her mother. Through this horrific act, she is asserting her independence and denying what the mother figure stands for, that is, sexuality "placed at the service of reproductive function" (SW, 124). Desecrating and violating the maternal body, Eugénie reaffirms that the purpose of sexual activity is purely pleasure, rejecting any association with reproduction. Moreover, by sewing up the mother's genitals, Eugénie exorcises her own fear of "falling back" into the maternal body.

This section of *The Sadeian Woman* has faced significant criticism. Sade's violent fantasies are undeniably disturbing, and by reading Eugénie's actions as a manifestation of autonomy that transforms her into an "enlightened" female Oedipus (SW, 117), Carter has offended many readers. Nicole Ward Jouve, for example, accused Carter of prioritizing the daughter's perspective and framing the assault against the "censoring mother" as liberating ("Mother is a figure of Speech...", 154). However, I align with Rebecca Munford's view, who argues that Carter's reading actually takes into consideration the mother's prospective (*Decadent Daughters*, 155). After describing the gruesome rape, Carter criticizes Sade for denying the mother the possibility to experience sexual pleasure, thus portraying her solely as a sexual object for the libertine to inflict pain upon. She notes that Sade's failure as a truly transgressive pornographer lies in his dismissing of the mother's potential for pleasure and his refusal to regard her as a sexual subject. From this passage, I believe that it is clear that Carter is not advocating for feminists to assault and reject mother figures in the guise of liberation. Instead, she invites women to question the validity of the mother-myth and to privilege narratives that depict mothers as complete beings with their own wants and desires, for whom motherhood is only part of a larger, more layered identity. This perspective is echoed by feminist scholar Luce Irigaray, who argues that to restore the mother's subjectivity we do not need to "kill the mother", but instead "give her new life" by

affirming her rights “to pleasure, to *jouissance*, to passion, [...] to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger” (“The Bodily Encounter with the Mother”, 43). In the short story “The Bloody Chamber”, Carter aligns with Irigaray’s call, by portraying an active and courageous mother who is able to rescue her daughter from a violent and murderous husband, even if, in line with her ironic attitude, this emancipatory portrayal could be interpreted as a parody.

Another harsh attack on this section of *The Sadeian Woman* has been launched by Susanne Keppeler, who comments that “women [...] neither produced nor sanctified the mothering aspect of their patriarchal representation” (*Pornography of Representation*, 134). In making this claim, Kappeler falls into a fallacy that Carter denounces in the “Polemical Preface”: the notion that women are entirely blameless and that their societal roles are solely thrust upon them by the patriarchy. Carter challenges this notion, emphasizing that women do play a part in shaping their identities and are often complicit in their own oppression. Mothers, in particular, often perpetuate patriarchal values by imposing them on their daughters. As Lorna Sage comments, “it’s Mother who makes her daughters this way” (“The Fairy Tale”, 71). The idea that oppression is cyclical is best explored by Carter in the Cinderella rewriting “Ashputtle or the Mother’s Ghost,” which depicts mothers actively participating in their daughters’ oppression by enforcing the same limited set of choices they learned from their own mothers, such as the societal expectation of marriage. Yet, in the final tale, Carter introduces a glimmer of hope for breaking this cycle, with a mother exhorting her daughter to “Go and seek *your* fortune, darling” (AG, 120, italics mine). This line could be read as a plea to break generational oppression, which is a central theme in *The Sadeian Woman*, where Carter urges women to recognize that many social rules and “social fictions of femininity” are precisely that - fictions.

Moreover, Kappeler accuses Carter of asking feminists to replace the mother-myth with the ones of “the victim or the inverted pornographic sadist” (*Pornography of Representation*, 134). When mentioning the “pornographic sadist”, Keppeler is referencing Eugénie, as well as another Sadeian character, Juliette, while the “victim” is instead the passive and innocent Justine. As observed also by Lorna Sage in “The Fairy Tale”, here Kappeler is completely misreading Carter’s real intent. Carter never glorifies the cruel actions of Juliette and Eugénie, and she certainly never endorses Justine’s passive behaviour. Contrary to Keppeler’s suggestion, Carter argues that the patriarchal

archetypes of the virtuous victim or the female sadist are as harmful as the feminist myth of the Mother, and they all should be equally rejected.

The next section will delve deeper into Carter's dismantling of these pervasive myths of femininity, through the analysis of two Sadeian "daughters", Justine and Juliette.

"The Social Fictions of Femininity": the Sadeian daughters Justine and Juliette

As observed in a previous section, a central aspect of Carter's feminist approach is her effort to "demythologize" and question universally adopted cultural imagery, particularly those myths of femininity that the patriarchy (or, sometimes, feminist themselves) are "palm[ing] off" on women (*Shaking a Leg*, 38). This section focuses on another mythic portrayal of women: the narrative of the virgin/whore dichotomy, which Carter dismantles in *The Sadeian Woman* through her analysis of Justine and Juliette

Recurring characters in Sade's novels, Justine and Juliette are sisters who embark on different paths after childhood and embody two contrasting approaches to life. Justine, who constantly congratulates herself for her virginity and good nature, embodies virtue, while Juliette, a ruthless libertine, embodies vice. The first condemns herself to a life of pain and poverty; the latter is rewarded for her wickedness with riches and pleasure. Carter suggests that both characters, far from being truthful representations of real women, are actually nothing more than "social fictions of femininity", examples of the restrictive roles society imposes on women (38).

As Lorna Sage rightly states, Justine and Juliette belong to a certain mythology about women which Sade "extrapolates, rather than invents" (*The Fairy Tale*, 71). Carter interprets Justine and Juliette not as a Sadeian invention, but as a sexual parody of the polarized perception of women that has long existed in the Western imagination. Historically, female characters have often been portrayed one-dimensionally as either "virgins" or "whores". This trend persists in contemporary portrayals of female characters, resulting in a multitude of what Carter calls "spiritual great-granddaughters" (SW, 101) of Justine and Juliette, such as the innocent blonde and the seductive brunette often seen in Hollywood films. Carter argues that assimilating these static identities is damaging because they alienate women from their real, complex identities while also preventing the possibility of transformation, reducing the self to a static "state-in-itself" with no potential for redemption or change (SW, 129). Carter's argument is in line with Barthes' theorization on myth. In *Mythologies*, Barthes writes that the ultimate purpose

of myths is to “immobilize the world”, turning inherently complex entities into static objects that can be easily controlled and possessed (*Mythologies*, 156).

It would be reductive, however, to say that this polarized depiction of womanhood is solely proposed by men, as Kappeler claims in *The Pornography of Representation*. In fact, women actively participate in their own mythicization by portraying themselves in similar terms. For instance, in the influential essay *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)²⁵ Gubar and Gilbert trace the same dichotomy in 19th century fiction written by female authors. The two scholars examine various Victorian novels who perpetuate stereotypical portrayals of female characters, depicted as either an “angel in the house” or a wicked “monster” or madwoman. The aim of the book is to urge women to “examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’” (*Madwoman*, 17).

A very similar objective lies at the heart of Carter’s fiction, which urges women to recognize their own contribution to this limiting narrative and move past it. In her fairy-tale retellings, Carter fashions several characters after either Juliette or Justine. For instance, Bluebeard’s bride in “The Bloody Chamber” or the heroine of “The Erl-King” could be read as Justine prototypes, while the countess of “The Snow Child” and the Red Riding Hood of “The Werewolf” are as cunning and self-serving as Juliette. While all these characters have been seduced by the allure of an identity specifically created to entrap them, some of them go through a journey of maturation and finally break free from the moulds “palmed off” on them, such as the heroines of “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Erl-King”. Other characters never develop this awareness and for this reason they remain trapped in their static identities. This is the case of the Countess in “The Snow Child,” who, after getting rid of the child, fails to emancipate herself and continues to be subordinate to her husband. Carter employs a similar formula in her 1987 retelling of Cinderella, “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost.” In the first two stories, Ashputtle and her stepsisters are static Justine archetypes who passively accept their fate of mutilation and humiliation, following in their mothers’ footsteps. However, the final story introduces a potential break in this cycle and the possibility of change and maturation.

I will now devote two sub-sections to a closer analysis of the static identities embodied by Justine, which I chose to refer to as “The Female Martyr”; and Juliette, which I have titled “The Female Sadist”.

²⁵ The famous work by Gubar and Gilbert, who aim to uncover two other “social fictions” palmed off on women, was published the same year as *The Sadeian Woman*.

Justine, The Female Martyr

Carter uses the character of Justine to problematize the myth of the “female martyr”, an existential position of self-appointed victimhood. Carter views Justine as “the start of a self-regarding female masochism” (SW, 57), a dangerous mindset that likens the silent endurance of suffering to virtue. Justine, notes Carter, is an ironic commentary of the typical “fairy-tale princess”, who is incredibly beautiful, naive and sticks to a rigid moral code (SW, 39). She is described by Carter as “a good woman in a man's world” (SW, 38). This means that her idea of what is “good” and “virtuous” is determined by the patriarchal standard of the ideal woman: self-sacrificing and good-natured, but also passive and weak. Justine, states Carter, has been given no other tool to navigate the world than this rigid sense of morality imposed by a patriarchal authority. Subscribing to her social role, Justine congratulates herself for remaining pure and virtuous despite all the abuse and humiliation she faces in Sade’s bleak novel *Justine, or Good Conduct Well-Chastised* (1791). Carter depicts her as an incredibly narcissistic character: she *chooses* to subscribe to the fantasy of the “virtuous martyr” because it grants her a sense of moral superiority and a reassuring consolation. She openly embraces her role as victim and finds “a sense of being through suffering” (SW, 72). Carter notes that in adhering to this pretence, Justine only mystifies herself: “She has no notion at all of who she is except in fantasy” (SW, 73). Stuck in her passive identity, Justine never learns to deal with the world and face her problems head on.

To show how damaging this self-serving fantasy really is, Carter quotes an episode from the novel *Justine, or Good Conduct Well-Chastised*. In this scene, Justine is asked by Roland, one of her torturers, to assist him in one of his masochistic games. He plans to hang himself during masturbation and wants her to cut the rope at the moment of climax. This scenario gives Justine the opportunity to kill her torturer without taking direct action: she can simply remain passive and watch Roland choke. However, even though Roland has lashed her to a wheel and has beaten her and other women with no remorse, Justine ultimately decides to spare him. She believes she has no choice but to do so, because “he is her master and masters exist only in order to be obeyed” (SW, 53). According to Justine, being a good woman means doing what you are told without rebelling, even if it leads to more pain and torture. She is content nevertheless, because she considers her virtue to be its own reward. Additionally, Carter notes that Justine’s

stubborn adherence to virtue is purely self-centred. She does not demonstrate any empathy for the other women trapped by Roland: when one of them is killed during the perverse games, the only emotion she feels is relief, because it is not her who had to die. This, according to Carter, demonstrates how narrow-minded it is to blindly identify as “virtuous”, especially if one’s morality is entirely based on patriarchal notions of femininity and not on true compassion and kind-heartedness.

Justine's skewed definition of virtue not only includes obedience and passivity, but also sexual abstinence. She feels that her honour is "intimately connected to her genitalia" (SW, 48). Carter characterizes this concept of virtue as being "specifically feminine" (SW, 47). Indeed, feminists have frequently highlighted²⁶ that in Western societies, also influenced by the Christian myth of the Virgin Mother, a virtuous woman must also be chaste and virginal. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, explores the patriarchal fascination with virginity, referring to it as “the highest form of feminine mystery, [...] dreaded, desired or even demanded by the male” (*The Second Sex*, 176). After having been raped, Justine believes her virtue remains intact because she has not felt any pleasure. Since she can’t place virtue in her virginity anymore, she instead decides to suppress her sexual desire. Even when faced with seduction, she firmly rejects it. Carter suggests that by denying herself the opportunity to actively experience passion, Justine lets herself be objectified and commodified as the object of others' lust (SW, 49). Her "flesh" metaphorically transforms into "meat" to be consumed by male sexual desire. Thus, Carter argues that Justine’s life is a paradigmatic example of the consequences of objectifying oneself and living a passive existence: “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. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman.” (SW, 76-77).

In her fairy-tale retellings, Carter acknowledges the power and allure of the myth of the “female martyr” and, at the same time, debunks the idea of the blameless victim. For instance, in “The Bloody Chamber” she explores the complex feelings of Bluebeard’s wife, a young and innocent virgin who, after being seduced by the lustful gaze of the Marquis, feels within herself a “potentiality for corruption” (BC, 7) and decides to marry him, going against her mother’s teachings. Moreover, several phrases and metaphors used by Carter in her retellings comment on the association between female bodies and meat.

²⁶ See for example Beauvoir’s analysis of the cult of virginity in *The Second Sex*, p.176-179

For instance, in “The Erl-King”, the protagonist is undressed “like a skinned rabbit” (BC, 72); in “The Bloody Chamber” the bride finds herself naked and “bare as a lamb chop” (BC, 16); in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”, Beauty compares herself to “Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial” while she perceives the paws of the Beast as “the death of any tender herbivore” – thus, her death (BC, 45). Yet, Carter’s heroines, unlike Justine, are able to move past this objectification and gain agency, either by rebelling and killing their oppressors or by establishing a new relationship, based on mutual love and equality. For instance, the Red Riding Hood of “The Company of Wolves”, proudly asserts that she is “nobody’s meat” (BC, 158) and ends up lying in bed with the wolf.

While in her fiction Carter repudiates the myth of the virtuous martyr, while also recognizing its allure, in *The Sadeian Woman* she argues against depictions of female characters written by female novelists which, according to her, have accepted this dangerous “social fiction”. As many scholars²⁷ have rightly pointed out, Carter is explicitly set on discrediting a specific trend in women’s fiction which privileges melancholy and introspection over taking active steps to change one’s condition. To criticize this trend, Carter uses a provocative tone, openly referencing other contemporary female authors. She writes that Justine is “the ancestress of a generation of women in popular fiction [...] such as the heartstruck, tearful heroines of Jean Rhys, Edna O’Brien and Joan Didion who remain grumblingly acquiescent in a fate over which they believe they have no control” (SW, 56). This section may appear quite harsh, however, as observed by Lorna Sage, Carter’s writing style is deliberately “against sympathy and against niceness, because they collude with suffering” (“Introduction”, 34). Carter has no interest in being “nice”, a trait that is characteristic of the virtuous woman – as the patriarchy fashions her – who suffers and endures, keeping a surface level good-heartedness which only demystifies her and immobilizes her into a subordinate role.

To better illustrate Carter’s rejection of feminist victimization narratives, I have chosen to quote the two distinct approaches that Andrea Dworkin and Carter take in relation to the story of one of Sade’s victims, a point also emphasized by Sarah Gamble (*Writing From the Front Line*, 99-100). In *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin attacks and discredits Carter, even refusing to openly quote the title of *The Sadeian*

²⁷ I owe this point to Gamble, who points out that “one of her primary purposes in [The Sadeian Woman] is to urge women to repudiate the dubious status of passive, suffering martyr” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 100); as well as Elaine Jordan, who states that Carter actively questions “the subject position of the virtuous victim, and its adequacy as a position from which to resist oppression” (*Dangers*, 120).

Woman, only referring to it as a “pseudofeminist literary essay”. In particular, Dworkin condemns a passage in which Carter recounts the story of Rose Keller, a prostitute who was deceived and whipped by Sade. After being freed with “compensatory” money and food, Keller decided to report Sade to the authorities. Consequently, he had to bribe her with a significant amount of money to persuade her to drop the charges. Carter describes the incident with fascination, stating: “The affair enchants me. [...] A woman of the third estate, a beggar, the poorest of the poor, turns the very vices of the rich into weapons to wound them with” (SW, 29). Dworkin criticizes Carter for seemingly disregarding the suffering of the victim and treating the story as a spectacle. However, this interpretation misreads Carter’s true intent in retelling the story and shows, as Sarah Gamble has noted, “that the two analyses are fundamentally incompatible in their feminist orientation” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 100). Dworkin considers Keller a powerless victim, further victimized by biographers and apologists of Sade who overlook her suffering. Carter, on the contrary, portrays Keller as someone who asserts her agency and turns from “victim” to “victor” (SW, 29). Carter's fascination is about Rose Keller's ability to use her experiences to her advantage despite the hardships she faced. Thus, the Keller passage in *The Sadeian Woman* is a paradigmatic example of Carter's constant refusal to portray women as passive victims, preferring to craft narratives of women holding power and taking concrete steps to change their condition.

Many readers of *The Sadeian Woman* have interpreted Angela Carter's critique of Justine as an endorsement of her opposite sister, the assertive and aggressive Juliette. However, as the following subsection will explore, Juliette, while more progressive than her sister, is also not a suitable role model for women.

Juliette, the Female Sadist

Juliette, the complete antithesis of her sister Justine, has many qualities which, on a surface level, can be read as empowering. While Justine is a hypocrite who thinks of herself as good-hearted and virtuous while actually being selfish and self-righteous, Juliette makes no pretence of virtue. She devotes her life to the pursuit of her vices, seeking money and sexual gratification without any moral qualms. She is not afraid to express anger or to use violence to achieve her goals and she indulges her sexual desires freely. Although she is incredibly self-centred, she has many female friends, unlike Justine, who lives her life in pure solitude.

Moreover, another positive aspect of Juliette, according to Carter, is that she uses her brain more than her heart. Juliette is framed from the beginning of her story as a woman of reason and intellect. During her childhood, she is initiated to a life of perversion and crime by a mother figure, the abbess Delbène, a learned woman. Delbène provides Juliette with an unconventional education for a young girl in the eighteenth century: she teaches her Spinoza's philosophy and Stoicism, and gives lectures on women's sexual autonomy and the nature of justice. Consequently, Juliette's intellect is nurtured from an early age, and as an adult, she becomes the embodiment of cold, calculating reason. She is, in Carter's words, a woman "who never obeys the *fallacious* promptings of her heart" (SW, 79, italics mine); which differentiates her from Justine, the "perfect" woman according to the patriarchy, who blindly follows a skewed morality and is incapable of action. Juliette never falls prey to introspection or melancholy; she *acts* and inflicts pain while her sister passively endures. This aspect of Juliette's character is particularly empowering for Carter, as she argues that modern women are still downplaying their rationality. I believe that Carter is alluding here to the gender bias that portrays women as emotional and men as the more rational, thinking gender. Carter defines the association of women with heart and emotions as one of "the more crippling aspects of femininity" (SW, 79). A similar sentiment is expressed in the *Polemical Preface*, where Carter references with disdain the myth of the occult priestess, who "hint[s] at dreams, [...] can even personify the imagination; but that is only because [she is] not rational enough to cope with reality" (SW, 5). Given Carter's outright rejection of myths portraying women as emotional, delicate, passive beings, it is clear why she frames Juliette's Machiavellian rationality as "a model for women, *in some ways*" (SW, 79, italics mine).

While acknowledging some positive qualities in Juliette that could make her a feminist role model, adding "in some ways" gives a sense of Carter's nuanced approach towards the character. Moreover, citing Guillaume Apollinaire, who in his monograph on Sade *L'Oeuvre du Marquis de Sade* (1909) defined Juliette as the New Woman, Carter adds that she represents such a figure only "in the mode of irony" (SW, 79). Some critics of Carter have chosen to overlook these nuances. Kappeler, for instance, assumes that Carter is inviting women to blindly follow Juliette's example. She accuses Carter of falling into "the fallacy of equal opportunities", by mistakenly believing that Sade is offering his "strict binary" - to suffer or to cause suffering - as genuine options to choose

from liberally, thus proposing that women should “cause suffering, ‘just as men do’” (*The Pornography of Representation*, 134). On one hand, it is true that Carter interprets Juliette as a far more positive representation than her sister Justine. Margaret Atwood aptly notes that for Carter “a certain amount of tigerishness may be necessary if women [...] are to avoid – at the extreme end of passivity – becoming meat” (“Running with the Tigers”, 137). However, Carter openly rejects Juliette’s cruelty. She asserts that “rationality without humanism founders on itself” (SW, 35). In Sade’s “eat or be eaten” world, in order to become predator Juliette renounces kindness, sympathy and love; thus becoming, at the far end of the virgin/whore dichotomy, a “monster” (SW, 27).

Although Juliette has significantly more agency than her sister Justine, she is still subject to restrictive patriarchal social roles. Carter defines her as a “free woman in an unfree society” (SW, 79). To be a truly positive role model for women, Juliette would need to reinvent herself outside of the patriarchal role that she has adopted. Instead, she subscribes to its fiction wholeheartedly because it offers her a relative amount of freedom and power. However, Carter notes that this power is merely *lent* by the patriarchal order, and Juliette is allowed to prosper only because she has aligned her interests with this order. Thus, her supposed freedom is an illusion: the “hangman”, which symbolizes the patriarchal power of “god, the king and the law”, still rules over her life and choices (SW, 99). This pattern holds for all of Sade’s female libertines. For instance, Eugénie in *Philosophy in the Boudoir* frees herself from her mother’s inhibiting control but remains subject to her father. It is the father who instructs Eugénie to punish her mother, rendering what could be seen as an act of defiance towards a symbol of repression into mere obedience to patriarchal power. This, according to Carter, is Sade’s greatest failure: despite the transgressive nature of his work, he is “still in complicity with the authority which he hates” (SW, 136) and fails to envision a truly free society, where women do not need to conform to restrictive identities. As observed by Yeandle (*Angela Carter and Western Philosophy*, 184), Sade thinks of virtue and vice as two completely separate modes of being, immutable and innate. For instance, when describing the indoctrination of Juliette by Delbène, Sade writes that the abbess is looking for a “natural propensity for vice” in her pupils. Sade’s “straitjacket psychology”, affirms Carter, makes his characters fall back into mythic abstraction and hinders any possibility of transformation or transcendence. Eugénie and Juliette are “naturally

vicious”, Justine is “naturally virtuous”: all three are perpetually locked in their social fictions; their essence is a “state-in-itself” (SW, 128-129).

Thus, it would be a complete misreading of *The Sadeian Woman* to claim that Carter is offering either Justine or Juliette/Eugénie as models for women. She is actually urging women to transcend Sade’s rigid virgin/whore dichotomy and define themselves outside of the reductive roles allotted by the patriarchy. The true role model for women should be a synthesis between Justine and Juliette, a female character “neither submissive nor aggressive, capable of both thought and feeling” (SW,79). It is the description, I believe, of the kind of heroines that Carter is offering in *The Bloody Chamber*: flawed characters who, although initially chained to specific “social fictions”, are then able to mature and grow out of them, achieving the kind of synthesis that Sade never contemplates.

“A Delusive Refuge from the World”: Marriage as an Economic Contract

Although only briefly mentioned in *The Sadeian Woman*, marriage and the economic subjugation of women are other themes touched on by Carter in her analysis of Sade which are of crucial importance to her feminist project and fictional works.

In a 1991 interview with *Marxism Today’s* “Left Alive”, Carter identifies as a socialist feminist. A key tenet of socialist feminism is the belief that the capitalist economic system plays a major role in women’s oppression, since it enforces economic inequality and unpaid household work. These issues are denounced by Carter in the “Polemical Preface” of *The Sadeian Woman*. While she acknowledges that most English women in the 1970s work, nevertheless she argues that “the economic dependence of women remains a believed fiction and [...] is taken for granted as a condition inherent in the natural order of things” (SW, 7). These issues remain highly relevant today, nearly fifty years after Carter's writings: according to 2022 data²⁸, women in the EU earn 12,7% less than men on average. Women are also much more likely to leave their jobs, as they are often held responsible for domestic labour or the care of children and elderly relatives. As a result, women face a higher risk of poverty, and they often have to rely on a partner's income.

²⁸ Eurostat (2023), retrieved at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20200227STO73519/gender-pay-gap-in-europe-facts-and-figures-infographic>

A point in common between Sade and Carter is that neither gloss over the importance of material conditions and economic power in determining a women's role in society. Carter observes that in Sade's world, although some women are relatively independent, this is true only for those who "have become very rich through prostitution, speculation, murder and usury" (SW, 25). For instance, the relative freedom achieved by Juliette is made possible only by her economic independence. She does not need to marry or be tied down to any man because she has money - gained through prostitution and theft - and she is constantly using her cold, calculating rationality to generate more wealth. For this reason, Carter refers to her as "a woman capitalist" in the interview with Lisa Appignanesi. On the contrary, her sister Justine, parody of the virtuous woman, lives according to the feminine values instilled in her upbringing as the daughter of a wealthy banker. However, after her father's death, Justine is left with no male protection and no tool or trade to support herself financially. Too tied to morality to resort to stealing or prostitution, she is condemned to a life of abuse and deprivation. From this perspective, both Justine and Juliette are a commentary on the limited options available for women in a society where economic inequality is a "believed fiction" (SW, 7): if they fail to gain protection through marriage, they must either achieve financial freedom through prostitution and theft or resign themselves to living in absolute poverty.

In Sade's effort to desacralize and disrupt societal norms, the other, more respectable option given to women, marriage, is often ridiculed and criticized in sermons given by the libertines, or grossly parodied. Carter reasons that in his attack on the institution of marriage, Sade proves to be once again a sort of "unconscious ally" for women. He acts as a "terrorist of the imagination" (SW,22), forcing women to face the uncomfortable truths about the hypocritical nature of the sexual encounters within marriage. If marriage is necessary for women to escape a life of poverty or prostitution, there is no room for genuine love and mutual respect between partners. Marriage between partners who do not stand on equal economic footing is a contract comparable to prostitution, though much more insincere, a "delusive refuge from the world" (SW, 9).

The hypocrisy of marriage is a theme which Carter also tackles in her fairy-tale retellings. For instance, Carter points out how many classic fairy-tale heroines, while wishing for great romances, are actually covering the fact that they are forced to seek advantageous marriages to secure a comfortable life. The fact that behind the supposed love of fairy-tale marriages there is actually an interest for a man's financial status is one

of the core themes of Carter's Cinderella retelling, "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost". In the first story, "The Mutilated Girls", two mothers are obsessed with marrying their daughters off to a wealthy prince, going to great lengths, even mutilating their daughters' feet, to achieve this goal. The mothers themselves are tied to a single wealthy man, but no love exists between them: the marriage bed becomes a symbol of economic power, completely unrelated to sexual pleasure or affection. In the second story, "The Burned Child", the protagonist exploits her mother in order to seduce a man not because of love, but only to do "all right" (AG, 119) and secure the bare necessary to live comfortably, a house and money. Similarly, it is not love that drives the heroine of the tale "The Bloody Chamber" to marry the Marquis, but only the desire to be corrupted and to have access to his great wealth. In this story, the marriage bed is again a crucial symbol, being the place where the newlyweds engage in sexual encounters. Yet, what happens in this marriage bed resembles more "the ministrations of a torturer" (BC, 21) than acts of mutual love and affection. Moreover, it is also interesting to note that after marriage, the heroines of Carter's fairy tales are often stripped of their identity and described as their husband's wives, symbolizing their dependence on their spouses. This is the case, for instance, of Bluebeard's *bride* in "The Bloody Chamber" and the *Countess* in "The Snow Child".

However, while Sade presents only a bleak portrayal of marriage and sexual relations, Carter offers a glimmer of hope. As discussed in the previous section, Sade conceptualizes a world of extreme dichotomies, where the strong rule and inflict pain over the weak. For this reason, he completely denies the idea that sexual relations can be based on reciprocity and love. For Sade's libertines, "tenderness is false" and "all beds are minefields" (SW, 25). In the conclusion to *The Sadeian Woman*, titled *Speculative Finale*, Carter challenges Sade's conception of sexual relations and his rigid dichotomy between victims and abusers, contrasting it with relationship between partners who stand on equal footing and share a "reciprocal pact of tenderness" (SW, 145). In line with this, *The Sadeian Woman* ends with a quotation from Emma Goldman's 'The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation', which, according to Susan Sellers, is Carter's final "condemnation of the tyranny of Sadeian sexual relations" (*Myth and Fairy Tale*, 116). In the excerpt, Goldman states: "A true conception of the relation of the sexes will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but one great thing: to give of oneself boundlessly, in order to find oneself richer, deeper, better" (SW, 151).

While many of Carter's fairy tales expose the darker aspects of relationships bound by economic dependence and contractual obligations, her stories also propose the possibility of mutual bonds between partners, transcending the dichotomy of "conqueror and conquered", as theorized by Goldman. The tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, observes Atwood, can be read as a "writing against de Sade, a talking-back to him" that proves the possibility of having sexual relations rooted in reciprocity ("Running with The Tigers", 136). For instance, the heroines of "The Company of Wolves" and "The Tiger's Bride" offer themselves freely to their beastly partners and, by doing so, they shift the relationship from one of mutual exploitation to one of tender love. The equality of the new relationship is underscored by a literal transformation: while the protagonist of "The Tiger's Bride" turns into a tiger herself, the predatory wolf of "The Company of Wolves" becomes "tender" (BC, 139), and the story ends in a sweet embrace between lovers. Yet, remarking her socialist positioning, Carter also points out that, in order to have reciprocity and tenderness between partners, there must also be equal economic power. This idea is best showcased in "The Bloody Chamber", which contrasts the deeply unequal marriage between the Marquis and the protagonist with the positive relationship she later establishes with the piano tuner. The key difference between these two relations lies in the protagonist's newfound economic power. While before she was completely dependent on the Marquis, after his death she opens a music school and she becomes able to provide for herself. This economic independence is at the basis of the healthy marriage with the blind piano tuner.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed Carter's feminist theories, using her essay *The Sadeian Woman* as a foundational text. I have primarily focused on Carter's rejection of various myths of femininity, whether created by patriarchy and accepted by women, such as the myths of the female martyr of the female sadist exemplified by Justine and Juliette, or supported by feminist themselves, such as the Mother-goddess myth. As shown, Carter argues that all these myths are equally harmful, as they obscure the real conditions of women and prevent social change. I have also examined Carter's consideration of marriage and its exploitative nature, reflecting as it does the economic inequality imposed on women, as well as Carter's plea for relationships based on equality and reciprocity.

In the following chapter, I will analyse three of Carter's fairy-tale retellings: "The Snow Child", "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", and "The Bloody Chamber". These stories, I believe, are especially suitable for shedding light on these issues, particularly in their depiction of motherhood, the alluring social fictions of femininity, marriage and economic inequality.

Chapter 4: Close Readings

Analysis of "The Bloody Chamber"

Introduction to the text

The very first story of the collection as well as the longest, "The Bloody Chamber" lends its evocative title to the entire anthology. The story is based on the traditional folk tale AT312, commonly known as "Bluebeard", put into written form by Perrault in 1697. According to Hennard Dutheil de La Rochère, Carter likely drew inspiration for this retelling from her experience translating Perrault's tales into English in 1977 to "brush up" her French ("New Wine in Old Bottles", 42). Rediscovering Perrault as an adult, Carter became captivated by the practical wisdom embedded in his stories. In "The Better to Eat You With", she celebrates Perrault's tales for their "well-mannered scheme[s] of good sense" and their materialist perspective, set in a world where "money and self-advancement are the roads to happiness" (*Shaking a Leg*, 453). Her appreciation of Perrault's practical attitude is also based on a rejection of psychoanalytical interpretations: she states that before attempting to interpret the world, one must first "learn to cope with [it]" (453).

Moreover, I align with critics such as Sheets ("Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism," 644) and Buchel (*Bankrupt Enchantments*, 29), who argue that "The Bloody Chamber" is written by Carter to challenge the conventional reading of the tale as a warning against female curiosity and sexual transgression. The leading advocate of this interpretation is Bruno Bettelheim, who in his influential psychoanalytical analysis of fairy tales *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), which Carter had certainly read before writing *The Bloody Chamber*, reads the plot of "Bluebeard" as a metaphor for marital infidelity. He interprets, for instance, the image of the bloodstained key as a symbol of the bride's newfound sexual knowledge after an extramarital affair, while the torture chamber represents her "anxious fantasy" of guilt, filled with the corpses of women punished for similar transgressions (*The Uses of Enchantment*, 300). Instead of this simplistic interpretation, Carter employs the Bluebeard story to delve into the intricate dynamics of sexual relations, framing them within a predator-prey dichotomy heavily influenced by economic factors. For Carter, Perrault's tale serves as a cautionary lesson to young women, emphasizing that "marriage itself is no party. Better learn that the

right way” (453). The chamber, in this context, symbolizes the tangible dangers and violence women face under patriarchal control. Furthermore, in “The Bloody Chamber,” the key’s stain is not a result of the bride’s betrayal or curiosity but rather a visual manifestation of her inherent corruption, present even before her marriage to the Marquis. In regard to this reading, David Calvin makes a compelling point: “Bluebeard’s wife does not stain the key by her betrayal; rather, she herself is already stained. Predestined to fall and set up to do so, it is clear that Bluebeard’s wife is tarnished [...] by a mythology that determines their respective roles before the fact” (“Anti-fairy tale,” 190-191). The story thus explores the cultural and economic forces behind the bride’s masochistic acceptance of a submissive role as the wife of a powerful man and her eventual rejection of this role.

“The Bloody Chamber” opens the collection by immersing the reader into the depths of Carter’s feminist theories and her controversial interpretation of Sade in *The Sadeian Woman*. As several scholars have noted, placing the tale of this tale at the beginning of the anthology is certainly a deliberate choice, serving as an in-depth exposition of Carter’s ideas on femininity, corruption, the dangers of the Sadeian predator-prey dichotomy, and the interplay between sexuality, violence, and economic power. As observed by Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 155), the significant influence of *The Sadeian Woman* on the collection is explicitly underscored in this first tale through the Sadeian figure of Bluebeard. Referred to as “the Marquis” by the protagonist, he is portrayed as a devotee of Sade’s cultural mythology. His sadism is not that of a brute but of a man steeped in decadent culture: he is a collector of art and pornography, an admirer of Baudelaire, a listener of Wagner, and a reader of Huysmans’ *Là-bas*²⁹. By depicting her modern Bluebeard as a learned man with sophisticated tastes, Carter underscores the inherent misogyny embedded in certain prestigious trends of Western literature and art, misogyny that is thus legitimized and culturally authorized³⁰; a theme she also explores in *The Sadeian Woman* through her study of Sade. However, Carter’s choice to narrate the story through the eyes of the female protagonist, rather than the more conventional third-person perspective, shows that the true focus of “The Bloody Chamber” lies on the

²⁹ Carter’s reference to this particular novel is an important intertextual reference to Gilles de Rais, a warrior who fought with Jeanne D’Arc and is known for his cruelty and the murder and abuse of children. The figure of Gilles de Rais has often been conflated with Perrault’s Bluebeard, even if there is no factual evidence that he served as a direct inspiration, as noted by Reginald Hyatte in *Laughter for the Devil: The Trials of Gilles de Rais, Companion-in-Arms of Joan of Arc*, Rutherford, NJ, 1984.

³⁰ I owe this insight to Ashley Merrill Riggs.

protagonist's journey of self-discovery. Like the Marquis, the heroine has also been captivated by the allure of a specific cultural identity "palmed off" on her, yet over the course of the story she slowly gets to break free from it, in a gradual path towards maturity. The reader, too, follows the same path, as the narrative urges her to question her own romanticization of submissive feminine roles and how these roles contribute to self-commodification and self-objectification.

In light of all this, I have chosen "The Bloody Chamber" as the first retelling to analyse in this chapter, both for its "propaedeutic" nature and its close connection to Carter's feminist theories discussed in the previous chapter on *The Sadeian Woman*, as well as for its engagement with the core themes of this dissertation, motherhood and marriage. Indeed, throughout the story the protagonist's mother is given significant prominence, appearing from the beginning and occupying a large space in the protagonist's mind even in her absence. Marriage is another central theme in the story, particularly through the critique of unions marked by stark economic imbalances, as exemplified by the protagonist's marriage to the Marquis. In the story's resolution, Carter presents an alternative model of relationship through the character of the piano tuner, a gentle and sensitive man, much different from the cruel and sadistic Marquis. As I will explore, the protagonist's relationship with this new character is based on mutual respect and equality, both sexually and economically. In this way, "The Bloody Chamber" stands in contrast with the ambiguous or dark endings of the other retellings that I will analyse in this chapter, "The Snow Child" and "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", as Carter envisions a "happily ever after" for her protagonist, offering a rebuttal to Sade's black-and-white view of human relationships. However, this is not meant to suggest that Carter is entirely transparent and sincere in the ending. There are elements in the text that point to a layer of irony or sarcasm beneath the candid surface of the first-person narration. For this reason, throughout my analysis I will be cautious not to take every element at face value, highlighting moments of ambiguity which blur the boundary between sincerity and parody. This dual approach is consistent with Carter's tendency to embrace ambiguity and offer multiple layers of meaning in her storytelling.

"A potentiality for corruption": Marriage and Self-commodification

As observed, the portrayal of marriage and heterosexual relationships in "The Bloody Chamber" is particularly intriguing due to its inherent ambivalence. On one hand, the

protagonist's marriage to the Marquis exemplifies a transactional union marked by a severe power imbalance. On the other hand, the story introduces positive examples of enriching partnerships where both individuals are equals, akin to the relationships Carter envisions in the "Speculative Finale" of *The Sadeian Woman*. Both the mother's marriage and the protagonist's union with the piano tuner reflect this ideal, and it is noteworthy that both women have renounced wealth in favour of a more modest lifestyle.

A positive example of romantic relationships between men and women is not limited to this story. The *Bloody Chamber* offers a variety of healthy unions between loving partners – one might think, for instance, of the final embrace between the wolf and Red Riding Hood in "The Company of Wolves", the Duke's transformation through Wolf-Alice's care, and the conclusions of "The Courtship of Mr. Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride" all reinforce this theme. However, unlike "The Bloody Chamber", these stories often feature a "conversion" or a literal metamorphosis of the beastly libertine, transformed by the heroine into a kind and tender partner, revealing his intrinsic humanity. In contrast, "The Bloody Chamber" offers no redemption for its monstrous male protagonist. Instead, Carter introduces a new male character, the piano tuner Jean-Yves, who serves as a foil to the Marquis. While the Marquis meets his end without redemption, Carter provides a moment of empathy where the protagonist, sensing his "stench of absolute despair", feels pity for him: "When he raised his head and stared at me with his blind, shuttered eyes as though he did not recognize me, I felt a terrified pity for him [...]. The atrocious loneliness of that monster!" (BC, 35). The Marquis, a figure emblematic of patriarchal violence, is also trapped in a fiction of masculinity, too deeply entrenched in Decadent culture and Sadeian mythology to realize that the world need not be divided into victims and torturers.

The protagonist's motivations for marrying the Marquis are much more complex than a girlish infatuation. When her mother questions her about the marriage, asking, "Are you sure you love him?" the protagonist replies, "I'm sure I want to marry him" (BC, 2). This response confirms that the protagonist is not in love with the Marquis; instead, she is interested in marrying him for different reasons. There are, first of all, economic motivations: she wants to "banish the spectre of poverty" (2). She is informed in her decision by the experience of her mother's love marriage, for which she had fallen from her station and "beggared herself" (2). Since the protagonist knows first-hand the

hardness of poverty, she rejects the mother's decision and seeks instead wealth and upward social mobility – which she believes are attainable for a woman only through marriage with a rich and noble man.

The Marquis' opulent gifts highlight the great economic disparity between the two: he gifts her a wedding ring with “a fire opal the size of a pigeon's egg set in a complicated circle of dark antique gold” (4). In contrast, the mother couldn't even keep her modest wedding ring, having sold all her jewellery to pay for her daughter's musical education at the Conservatoire. The Marquis also provides a wedding dress made by French stylist Poiret and a “choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (6). While the protagonist is fascinated by the stares and attention that her new jewellery attracts, the choker ominously foreshadows the decapitation the Marquis has already planned. His gifts subtly hint at his controlling nature, as he dresses the protagonist as if she were a living doll, or rather, in anticipation of the moment when she will become a corpse³¹, finally at his complete mercy.

Yet, socio-economic considerations are not the only reasons behind the protagonist choice to marry the Marquis. In her young naivety, she is also fascinated by stories of dramatic romances and forbidden love, wishing she could replicate the same intensity in her love story with the Marquis. In particular, her captivation with Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* lets her briefly mistake her wish-fulfilment for real love towards the Marquis: “my heart swelled and ached so during the Liebestod that I thought I must truly love him” (5). It is clear that the protagonist identifies with Isolde, desiring on some level to be the object of great passion and desire. Yet, Wagner's female protagonist mirrors the trend of feminine fiction criticized by Carter, with “heartstruck, tearful heroines” (SW,56) bemoaning their fate instead of taking action. Just as the Marquis has chosen to adopt a specific masculine role, influenced by his immersion in Decadent culture, the heroine has tuned her desires according to a certain cultural phenomenon “palmed off” on her, which ultimately traps her into a dangerous fantasy.

Moreover, the heroine is also not completely innocent. Seeing herself through her husband's gaze, she feels a “potentiality for corruption” within herself. She is, in fact, sexually attracted by the Marquis and aroused by the “sheer carnal avarice” of his gaze, which she mistakenly interprets as a display of passion: “Oh! how he must want me!” (6). The reader should sense Carter's irony behind this excited exclamation: the Marquis

³¹ This observation was originally suggested to me by Riggs.

does want her, but not in the way the protagonist expects. Like Sade's Justine, the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber" is pleased to be objectified/meatified (as Bluebeard looks at her as if "inspecting horseflesh") and commodified (she rejoices in being chosen to join his "gallery of beautiful women"). She happily sells herself to him because she is conditioned by the myths of the grand dramatic romances she has been led to desire.

Of course, her hopes of a happy union filled with great passion and wealth are doomed to disappointment, just like Carter had sagaciously written in *The Sadeian Woman* in regard to those women who "wis[h] for nothing better than a happy marriage" (SC, 50). The bride quickly learns that the opposite is true, and that "marriage itself is no party" (453). Her first crucial mistake is isolating herself and treating marriage as a "refuge from the world": "Into marriage, into exile; I sensed it, I knew it--that, henceforth, I would always be lonely" (BC, 7). The protagonist abandons the sheltered safety of her mother's apartment for the Marquis' Gothic castle, a symbol of patriarchal power and of the Marquis' complete control over his bride. As Seller observes, "the male-governed domain of marriage is depicted as a realm apart" (*Myth and Fairy Tale*, 118), where the Marquis has all the power and control, and his brides have none. The protagonist is alone, trapped within his castle and surrounded by his vast wealth - a constant reminder of the disparity in their socio-economic positions.

The portrayal of the first night is particularly significant, because it shatters the heroine's romanticized ideal of marriage and makes her realize the real consequences of the inherent power imbalance that characterizes the union. The Marquis sets the scene, makes her wear the choker and arranges her hair, while she passively complies. There is no hint of reciprocity, the act is described as an "one-sided struggle" (14). The violence is brought at the forefront with the metaphor of the bride being "impaled" (14) by her husband: while the protagonist has been reduced to a piece of meat, the husband feasts on her body to satiate his desires. Moreover, "The Bloody Chamber" employs another of Carter's motifs, the image of the marriage bed, as a symbol of the violence that taints sexual relations when they are conceived through a predator-prey dynamic: "'There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer', opined my husband's favourite poet³²; I had learned something of the nature of that similarity on my marriage bed" (26). The first wedding night solidifies the protagonist's realization

³² The quote is a citation from Baudelaire.

that she had been naïve to accept his marriage proposal and that it was, in fact, only her innocence and virginity that had attracted the Marquis. The discovery of the torture chamber, where the bodies of the Marquis's ex-wives are displayed "as if they were items of statuary" (27), serves as the ultimate testament to how the Marquis views women: as trophies to add to his collection, meat to be consumed and then discarded. As Munford describes it, these are "bodies [...] used to play out pornographic scripts of femininity" (*Decadent Daughters*, 157). The discovery of the chamber is the turning point in the protagonist's path to maturity. She is finally aware of her own helplessness and the need to act, for remaining passive would be her demise. As Carter wrote of Sade's Justine, "[t]o 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." (SW, 76-77). Determined to escape this fate, the protagonist reclaims her agency and takes decisive action: she first attempts to contact her mother, then confides in the only person she can trust, the piano tuner. Finally, when the Marquis returns, she tries to seduce him to distract him and even contemplates killing him: "If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then" (35).

The shift in power dynamics between the bride and the Marquis reaches its culmination at the story's conclusion. The Marquis is revealed to be a weak and lonely man, paralyzed by fear at the mother's arrival and helpless against her "irreproachable bullet" (41). In this final manifestation of female power, the Marquis is completely stripped of his authority: "The puppet master, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns" (40). The chess metaphor here seems to be a deliberate reference to *The Sadeian Woman*, where Carter uses similar imagery to describe the subordination of Juliette and Justine under male authority. In fact, the ending of "The Bloody Chamber" finally answers "the question of the presence of the king, who remains the lord of the game" (SW, 80), by showing that the king's (or, in this case, the Marquis') patriarchal power is actually only an illusion: behind his wealth and reputation, he is only a lonely and pathetic man. This reading is reinforced by Carter herself, who, in a letter to Elaine Jordan, writes that by the end of the story, Bluebeard is shown to be "only cardboard – a construction – an invention – nothing. Like the authority of the father" (quoted in *Decadent Daughters*, 160). In contrast, the bride emerges as the undisputed victor,

inheriting his wealth and castle and going on to live a more sombre yet fulfilling life with her mother and the piano tuner. This reversal of power relations connects the story, in a way, with the episode of Rose Keller recounted by Carter in the “Polemical Preface” of *The Sadeian Woman*. Keller, as Carter affirms, was able to turn from “victim” to “victor” against Sade’s violence, using her own agency and power to overturn her bleak situation (SW, 29). The heroine of “The Bloody Chamber” follows a similar path, navigating the threat of patriarchal power and ultimately triumphing, despite the vast imbalance in power, wealth, and experience between her and the Marquis.

After the Marquis’ death, the protagonist finally embraces her mother’s values and finds a new partner who, while not wealthy, loves her deeply and is loved in return. Interestingly, it is never stated that Jean Yves and the protagonist marry, but only that they are “setting up a house” (42). No longer Bluebeard’s bride, the protagonist appears to reject the notion of ever becoming a bride again, choosing instead to define herself as an independent person while still sharing her life with those she loves. I agree with Cheryl Renfroe, who reads this ending as “a radical view on fairy-tale marriage” (“Initiation and Disobedience”, 98). Carter subverts the societal imperative for women to marry well by suggesting that actually, they don’t need to marry at all to have successful and happy relationships. Although the relationship between the protagonist and Jean Yves may seem to lack passion, it exemplifies the ideal heterosexual relationship theorized by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*: a “reciprocal pact of tenderness,” based on mutual respect and trust.

The equality between the two partners is emphasized by two aspects. First of all, there is no economic imbalance, since the protagonist has achieved financial independence by using the Marquis’ money to open a music school on the outskirts of Paris. Secondly, Jean-Yves’s blindness sets him apart from stereotypical male love interests and offers an interesting point of contrast with the Marquis. Unlike the Marquis and his lustful, objectifying gaze, Jean Yves does not have the ability to physically see the protagonist; instead, he appreciates and loves her for her character and musical talent, thus *seeing* her real, true self. This point is remarked also by Sellers, who notes that the alternative to the Marquis has to be someone who is “physically incapable of mirroring any imposing images of the way [the heroine] should be” (*Myth and Fairy Tale*, 120). Thus, “The Bloody Chamber” explores the possibility of an enriching union between equal, loving partners.

Carter also introduces in the final happy ending a third element which destabilizes the fixed duality of the couple, the presence of the mother. “I do believe my mother loves [Jean Ives] as much as I do” (40), affirms the protagonist, proving that the trio shares a mutual love for one another. Gamble proposes that the inclusion of the mother in the finale serves as the ultimate deconstruction of Sadeian mythology, which upholds a world defined by binarism and oppositions. By adding a third element to the couple, Carter dismantles “an entire pattern of binary thought, thus opening out the possibility of a conceptual space in which one need not always be ‘either/or’, but can instead move between the poles of opposing signifiers in order to form a creative, consistently mobile, synthesis between them” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 155). I find this argument particularly compelling, standing in contrast to critics who view the return of the mother as a regression on the part of the protagonist. Nevertheless, Carter’s choice to give so much weight and agency to the mother is certainly interesting, given her usual tendency to cast mothers in a much less favourable light. In the next section, I will delve deeply into the figure of the mother in “The Bloody Chamber”, highlighting her uniqueness in contrast to other portrayals of motherhood in Carter’s fairy-tale retellings.

The “eagle-featured, indomitable mother”: A Positive Portrayal of Motherhood

In “The Bloody Chamber”, the mother plays a pivotal role. Just like the protagonist of the tale, the mother is given no name, but this does not mean that she is reduced to a flat character whose only role in the story is being “a mother”. On the contrary, she is given depth outside of her maternal identity. From the beginning of the tale, when she is described as “indomitable”, to the rescue in extremis of the protagonist, this mother figure is set in striking contrast to the absent, passive birth mother of traditional fairy tales. This characterization makes her almost a unicum in Carter’s depiction of mothers. Gamble, for instance, observes that “the redemptive role [the story] allocates to the mother [...] makes ‘The Bloody Chamber’ unique, not only in terms of the collection itself, but within Carter’s fiction as a whole” (*Writing from the Front Line*, 154).

The importance of the mother in the narrative is immediately emphasized at the beginning of the tale: the story opens with the daughter wondering longingly what her mother might be doing now that she has embarked on a new life as a wife. She imagines her mother experiencing “the half-joyous, half-sorrowful emotions of a woman on her daughter’s wedding day” (BC, 1), projecting, in a way, the same ambivalent emotions she

is experiencing. Indeed, while excited for her upcoming wedding, the heroine is also mourning the loss of her identity as a daughter: "in the midst of my bridal triumph, I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife" (1). It is interesting that both mother and daughter view the wedding with ambivalence, perceiving it as a loss of a part of their identities. At this point, both of them are still thinking strictly in binary terms. However, by the story's conclusion, this rigid division of identities is rejected. Recognizing the limitations of being defined solely as a man's wife - the phrase "his wife" is likely used by Carter intentionally; to underscore the possessive nature of marriage - the protagonist ultimately merges these two identities, balancing a healthy relationship with both her lover and her mother.

The first pages of the story also introduce the reader to the formidable adventures of the mother, with the protagonist recounting with fascination how "[she] had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I" (1). With this introduction, Carter contrasts the active and courageous mother of "The Bloody Chamber" with the passive and delicate mothers of traditional fairy tales, challenging at the same time the myth of the virtuous birth mother who dies at the beginning of the narrative. However, I believe that in this passage there is also a subtle hint of irony which complicates this straight-forward reading. Notably, all of these adventures occurred before the mother became a parent. Her life after having a child became much more reserved and modest, which casts a shadow of doubt on the idea of her as an active, courageous mother. Moreover, the incredible nature of these deeds makes them almost unbelievable. In this case, I believe that Carter is purposefully infusing a sense of child-like fascination in the recounting of the mother's life. The daughter's retelling reflects her deep admiration for her mother; she even admits to boasting about these stories to other students at the Conservatoire. This suggests that she may be embellishing her mother's feats. The true purpose of this recounting might be to highlight how much the daughter loves and looks up to her mother, anticipating for the reader the strong bond they share. Finally, to further complicate the interpretation of this backstory, while the adventures may seem exaggerated, the story's ending ultimately validates them. The mother does take decisive action to save her daughter, killing the beastly Marquise with a gun, just as she once killed a "man-eating tiger" in her youth.

Given the strong influence the mother has on the protagonist, her choice to marry the Marquis for money might seem perplexing. After all, the mother had set a very different example: while she was born into privilege, as the “daughter of a rich tea planter”, she ultimately defied societal expectations and chose love, despite the threat of poverty and the loss of status. The protagonist describes with admiration the mother’s choice, recounting how she had “gladly, scandalously, defiantly beggared herself for love” (BC, 2). Yet, the heroine goes against the mother’s teachings and chooses to marry the Marquis, driven primarily by the prospect of wealth and a fascination with submission, not love. To explain this contradiction, Bacchilega highlights the influence of another maternal figure in the protagonist’s life: her old nurse, who embodies traditional and regressive values and has “unwittingly nursed the protagonist into victimhood” (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 127). As a conservative woman who reads “back copies of society magazines” (4) and “holy books” featuring “woodcuts of the martyrdom of the saints” (28), the nurse may have contributed to the protagonist’s acceptance of a submissive role. Unlike the mother, the nurse holds a more pragmatic view of marriage. She teases the protagonist about the Marquis’s lack of mourning for his last wife: “Indeed, was he not still in mourning for his last wife? Tsk, tsk, went my old nurse” (4). The old nurse’s ironic remark points out how she sees marriage as transactional: she believes it is only natural for the Marquis to marry young, beautiful women just to satisfy his sexual desires. When she hears of the “marital coup” that will transform the girl into “her little Marquise” making her into a submissive – but rich – wife, the old nurse is quite pleased. In contrast, the mother, with her more progressive outlook, recognizes the dangers of the power imbalance in the marriage and expresses concern for her daughter. Nevertheless, she respects her autonomy and, after asking some sceptical questions about the marriage, she lets her make her own choices. By the end of the story, the progressive mother’s influence ultimately triumphs, while the old nurse dies “in a sorry state of disillusion” (41), never fully realizing the harm in her traditional views of marriage and woman’s roles.

The ending of “The Bloody Chamber” is quite memorable. Subverting the traditional narrative of the damsel-in-distress saved by the male love interest, Carter gives the role of avenger to the mother, while Jean-Yves, due to his disability and gentle nature, remains a comforting yet powerless figure. The mother arrives at the Marquis’ castle on horseback, a “wild thing” wielding her late husband’s revolver. Overpowering the

Marquis, who is paralyzed with fear as if she were Medusa, she shoots him in the head (40). In my opinion, this ending highlights the strength and capability of women to overcome oppression “through [their] own efforts”, echoing Carter’s conclusion in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she cites Emma Goldman’s *The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation* as a rebuttal to Sadeian philosophy (SW, 151). However, the highly melodramatic nature of the ending could also lead readers to wonder if Carter is being ironic. Notably, the mother defeats the Marquis using the phallic symbol of the gun: despite her heroism and apparent emancipation, she is still wielding a man’s violent tool. Additionally, her timely arrival is so convenient to appear almost implausible. For this reason, the ending borders on wish-fulfilment fantasy. However, while the daughter explains the sudden arrival of the mother as “maternal telepathy”, Sellers suggests that a more plausible explanation lies in the phone call between mother and daughter (*Myth and Fairy Tale*, 119). The mother, deeply attuned to her daughter, senses her unease even though she tries to conceal it: “I never heard you cry before,” the mother says by way of explanation. “Not when you were happy” (41). This shows the strength of their connection, a rare instance of a positive female bond in Carter’s fiction that ultimately triumphs over patriarchal violence.

As briefly mentioned above, some readers interpret the ending as a “regression” for the protagonist. For instance, Sheets notes how the return to the maternal “womb” is a step backward, which inhibits the heroine’s growth (“Pornography, Fairy Tales and Feminism”, 654). In my opinion, however, this is far from the truth. As discussed, the protagonist has grown and matured throughout the story, finally realising the harm in transactional marriages and self-imposed submissive identities. Moreover, her mother, while being a positive role model, has also shown how much she respects her daughter’s autonomy and choices. In light of this, their choice to live together does not appear as a regression, but as a conscious choice between two adult women who share a deep love and respect for each other. While her decision to live with both her mother and her lover might appear “trite,” as Riggs suggests (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 42), it is also a positive reimagining of mother-daughter relationships. In light of this, I believe that the ending also provides an alternative to the Sadeian dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed, recontextualized within a mother-daughter dynamic. Both women view each other as individuals, free from the need to control, overpower, or exploit one another. This mutual respect and autonomy are possible only because they have both rejected

patriarchal norms dictating how a woman should live her life. The protagonist admits that their unconventional lifestyle is “the source of many whisperings and much gossip”, yet she cares more about her happiness and well-being than “mere chatter” (41). Instead of adhering to a predetermined script, this mother and daughter have embraced lives that fit them, even if they might be considered unconventional.

“My mother’s spirit drove me on”: The Importance of Intergenerational Feminism

While my dissertation focuses on the depiction of marriage and mother-daughter relationships in Carter’s fairy-tale retellings, another central issue inherently linked to these themes is the transmission of oppressive practices and values from one generation to the next. The theme of intergenerational oppression is central to Carter’s feminist project, especially the way a mother who adheres to patriarchal narratives is bound to limit her daughter’s life choices, coercing her into a preordained cycle of marriage, motherhood, and eventual death. As I will explore, in “The Snow Child” and, even more strikingly, in “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost”, Carter proposes as a solution to this dilemma the rejection of maternal teachings, thus breaking the cycle of oppression and allowing women to carve out their own life paths. However, in “The Bloody Chamber” Carter offers a different outlook. In the story, Carter envisions a mother-daughter relationship that exists outside the constraints of patriarchy, made possible by the progressive and feminist attitude of the protagonist’s mother. As pointed out in the previous section, this woman has rejected patriarchal narratives and decided to live on her own terms, marrying for love and pursuing adventures. Moreover, she continues to be active and bold even after motherhood; as shown by her final rescue of her daughter. While motherhood is a significant part of her identity, it does not define her entirely. Due to the mother’s emancipation, she is able to become a positive role model for her daughter while being neither controlling nor abusive. On the contrary, she is able to transmit feminist ideas to her daughter, while also allowing her to make her own mistakes and choose freely for herself what path her life should take. Thus, the story does not propose to push away the mother, but instead to integrate her presence in the protagonist’s life even after she has found a male partner.

Moreover, the mother in “The Bloody Chamber” has equipped her daughter with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate a world often inimical to women. For instance, she has given her the means to be financially independent by investing in her

musical education. If by the end of the tale the protagonist is able to open a music school, it is only because her mother had “sold all her jewellery, even her wedding ring”, to afford the expensive fees at the Conservatoire (9). Moreover, the mother has also given her a sexual education: the innocence that the Marquis attributes to his young bride stems from her lack of experience, not ignorance. When she discovers his pornographic illustrations, she already has an understanding of the meaning of those images. As Sheets (“Pornography, Fairy Tale, and Feminism”, 651) points out, while the illustrations unsettle her, she is still informed by the factual knowledge provided by her mother: “My mother with all the precision of her eccentricity, had told me what it was that lovers did; I was innocent but not naïve” (13). Furthermore, the mother has passed down to her daughter not only knowledge and education but also a sense of curiosity and vitality. Her eventual rebellion against the Marquis is driven by the courage and strength she has inherited from her mother. She herself admits that what drives her to go into the secret chamber and discover the depths of the husband’s perversity is her “mother’s spirit”. In that moment, she feels “no fear, no intimidation of dread” because, she realizes, she has “inherited nerves and a will from the mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indo-China” (26).

Thus, I would argue that “The Bloody Chamber” offers a more optimistic – and perhaps less nuanced – portrayal of mother-daughter relationships. The ending of the story shows that complete separation between a mother and a daughter is not always needed. In fact, a progressive mother can actually improve a daughter’s life, transmitting feminist values across generations and showing that it is possible to forge a life path that transcends the limiting roles imposed by patriarchal society. This optimistic outlook, however, will be challenged in “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost”, published eight years after “The Bloody Chamber”: in the story, Carter does not present any positive mother-daughter relationship, and instead advocates for the importance of rejecting mothers’ teachings in order to develop autonomy as an adult woman.

Analysis of "The Snow Child"

Introduction to the text

Placed at the heart of *The Bloody Chamber*, "The Snow Child" is a very short text, only two pages long. Nevertheless, the tale leaves a strong impression, so much so that Helen Simpson defines it "the most shocking piece of all" ("Introduction", xvi). This retelling shows Carter at her most grotesque and macabre, detailing an incestuous and necrophiliac rape over a young girls' corpse, while the matter-of-fact tone heightens the unsettling feel of the story. Moreover, Carter's choice to position the text right in the middle of the collection is certainly significant. According to Riggs, its location highlights the story's "prime place" within the anthology (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 54). The fact that "The Snow Child" is a retelling of what can be considered the best-known and famous of fairy tales is, I believe, the reason for its central placement. Indeed, from the title of the tale and the description of a child with the colour scheme of white, red, and black, it is evident that Carter is drawing inspiration from the German fairy tale "Snow White", published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812 and bowdlerized by Disney in the famous 1937 animated movie. While Carter's retelling does not feature magic mirrors or poisoned apples, she retains the fundamental elements of the story, condensing the narrative to a single scene with three central characters: a Count, "his" jealous wife, and a child born from a hole in the snow.

Many scholars have noted that "The Snow Child" also references other, less famous versions of "Snow White". Jacques Barchilon, for instance, notes parallels with various versions of the Italian folktale "The Three Oranges" ("Remembering Angela Carter", 27). In the folktale, instead of a woman wishing for a daughter figure, we read of the erotic wishes of a young man who is looking for a wife. Additionally, Rebecca Munford observes that "The Snow Child" also resonates with "Sleeping Beauty", finding similarities in the theme of necrophiliac desire and the wishing of a rose. Interestingly, Munford points out that in an early draft Carter had actually chosen to title the piece "The Sleeping Beauty" (*Decadent daughters*, 62).

However, I believe that Carter based "The Snow Child" primarily on a specific variant, found in an early manuscript of the Grimm brothers' work and reported in detail by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976). The version, as Bettelheim

recounts it, shares a remarkable similarity with the “The Snow Child”, both in its tone and its linear, simple plot elements:

“Some versions of “Snow White” begin: “A count and a countess drove by three mounds of white snow which made the count say, ‘I wish I had a girl as white as this snow.’ A short while later they came to three holes full of red blood, at which he said, ‘I wish I had a girl with cheeks as red as this blood.’ Finally three black ravens flew by, at which moment he desired a girl ‘with hair as black as these ravens.’ As they drove on, they encountered a girl [...] The count immediately made her sit in the coach and loved her, but the countess did not like it and thought only about how she could get rid of her.” (*The Uses of Enchantment*, 200)

As one can see, this version follows closely the events of the first half of “The Snow Child”. In his book, Bettelheim references this specific version as a springboard for his psychoanalytical reading of “Snow White”. He interprets the story as the exploration of Oedipal relationships between father and daughter and the consequent jealousy of the mother. Dismissing any socio-economic factors that might explain the mother-daughter rivalry, he writes: “In “Snow White” it is not any external difficulty such as poverty, but the relations between her and her parents which create the problematic situation” (*The Uses of Enchantment*, 201). In my view, Carter’s retelling is a reply to Bettelheim’s simplistic interpretation. In “The Snow Child”, the jealousy between the Countess and the child does not stem from an Oedipal complex, but it is the result of an oppressive system that pits women one against the other in a struggle for economic stability through marriage.

“How shall I be rid of her?”: Marriage as the Source of Women’s Rivalry

As discussed in the previous chapter, Carter is a “committed” materialist (*Shaking a Leg*, 38) who believes that material circumstances heavily influence human relations. As a socialist feminist, she points to economic inequality as the main source of women’s oppression. She discusses her materialist stance in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she states that “relationships between the sexes are determined by history and by the historical fact of the economic dependence of women upon men” (SW, 6-7). “The Snow Child” is based on this premise. As observed by Mary Kaiser (*Fairy tale as sexual allegory*), the story is set in Medieval Europe, in a period where a woman’s financial status heavily depended on her male relatives and husband. The Countess of the story

has secured for herself a good marriage, yet she does not have autonomy or control over her financial situation. Because her wealth is not really hers, but only vicariously lent by the Count, her material situation could change depending on the Count's whims. Her condition of subordination is underscored by Carter from the start: when the Countess is first mentioned, she is referred to as the Count's property. In "the Count and *his* wife go riding" (BC, 105, italics mine), the syntax and the possessive pronoun reinforce the idea that the Countess is merely an extension of the Count. The fact that she is referred to only as the Count's wife or by using the noble title of Countess also gives a sense of how her identity is intrinsically tied to the Count.

Although the marriage with the Count is not explicitly depicted as a Sadeian predator-prey dynamic, their relationship remains profoundly unequal. All the Countess's attempts to get rid of the child are thwarted by the Count, who clearly has the final say in their relationship. The power imbalance between the two is further emphasized by the distribution of direct speech. The Count speaks several times, because he holds ultimate control and power: he can freely express his wants and desires without fear of repercussion. On the contrary, the Countess speaks directly only three times. The Countess' limited dialogue shows how her opinion matters little to the Count, and for this reason she must resort to trickery and scheming to get rid of the child instead of confronting her husband directly. Nonetheless, she still possesses more power than the helpless child, who speaks no lines at all. However, despite being powerless and having no agency, the young girl poses an immediate threat to the Countess because she is desired by the Count. This is underlined by the sentence "she was the child of his desire and the Countess hated her" (105), which emphasizes that the Countess's hatred is a direct consequence of the girl being the manifestation of the Count's lust for another woman. The child is seen as a rival not out of simple jealousy, but because the Count's favour directly translates to economic power. Thus, Carter's retelling contrasts completely Bettelheim's psychoanalytic interpretation, because the rivalry between the two women is given a concrete and materialist source: the fear of poverty.

The issue of poverty as the basis of the rivalry is made evident by the symbolic image of the clothes. At the beginning of the tale, the Countess is fully clothed in expensive garments, while the child is "stark naked" (BC, 195). The nakedness, as remarked by Margaret Atwood ("Running with the Tigers", 143), is a symbol of poverty, while the clothes represent wealth, status and power. The expensive garments, however, are not

the Countess' possessions. They have been lent to her by the Count, just like her status is a projection of the Count's. Consequently, as soon as he shows signs of preference for the child, the initial condition immediately shifts and the Countess' clothes fly off her and go towards the child. As Kari Sawden ("No Magic Mirror Required", 2) remarks, the Countess is slowly stripped both literally of her clothes and metaphorically of her power, being pushed aside by the Count. In the end, it is the Countess who finds herself naked, "bare as a bone", while the child, now the count's favourite, is "furred and booted" (BC, 105). The "flying off" of clothes from one woman to the other renders explicit the inevitable rivalry the two are made to act on. The clothes, in fact, can be worn only by a woman at a time and are never shared. Cristina Bacchilega points out that "[their] socio-economic fortunes mirror each other in reverse - as the one gains, the other loses" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 37). With the image of the clothes, Carter underscores the idea that female bonding and sisterhood are remote possibilities in a male dominated society, because women are actively encouraged to turn against other women and compete for males' validation.

Unlike the two female characters, the Count always remains clothed. As a man, his power is undisputed: the Countess never questions patriarchal authority; her hatred is addressed only to the powerless child. It appears to me that by portraying the Countess—a character who is clever and artful—as passively accepting her subordinate condition to a man, Carter is commenting on those women who, despite having the resources to challenge the patriarchal order, instead comfortably accept their position within that order because it affords them a relative amount of power. In this sense, the Countess configures herself as a perfect replica of Sadeian Juliette. In contrast, the child could be interpreted as a Justine prototype. In the next section, I will explore the broader connections between the two characters of "The Snow Child" and their Sadeian counterparts, exposing the virgin-monster dichotomy present in the original "Snow White" and parodied by Carter in her retelling.

"A pair of mirrors": Reimagining "Snow White" through Sadeian Pornography

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter exposes the misogynistic ideology hidden behind the characters of Justine and Juliette, Sadeian reproductions of the stereotypical virgin-monster dichotomy. The two characters are opposite on various levels, yet "they mutually reflect and complement one another, like a pair of mirrors" (SW, 78), because

both are static identities invented by men, belonging to a harmful mythology that functions as a consolation for women's condition of dependency and subordination. As many critics³³ have noted, in "The Snow Child", the characters of the Countess and the child function as replicas of Juliette and Justine, adapting the virgin-monster dichotomy to the story of "Snow White".³⁴

From the beginning of the tale, The Countess is immediately likened to Juliette. As noted by Rebecca Munford (*Decadent Daughters*, 57), the Countess's clothes are reminiscent of a dominatrix outfit and cast her as a perfect Juliette, with "glittering pelts of black foxes" and "high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels, and spurs" (BC, 105). She is cunning, intelligent, cruel. Just like Sadeian Juliette, the Countess abjures kindness and empathy because they stand in the way of her only goal: keeping the Count's affection and, thus, his money and power. However, she wholly buys into the myth of women's subordination and never rebels against the Count. Reading this character through a metaphor used by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman*, while the Countess, like Justine, may feel as if she is the "queen" of the chess board, the real power is still in the hands of the "king", or in this case, the Count, "who remains the lord of the game" (SW, 79-80). By adhering to the rules of the patriarchal order, the Countess enjoys a relative amount of freedom secured by her marriage to the Count, yet her freedom is never framed as emancipatory, because it is "a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom" (SW, 27). In the story, the Countess "exercises her freedom" on the helpless and innocent child, causing her death.

The child stands on the other, opposite end of the virgin-monster dichotomy. For some aspects, she can be linked to the character of Justine, however she is not a perfect replica, as I will expand on later. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Justine is described as a "beautiful and penniless orphan, the living image of a fairy-tale princess" (SW, 39). The child is clearly a commentary and a parody of this archetype, an ill-fated Snow-White protagonist of a "black, inverted fairy tale" (39). She is defenceless, virginal and completely passive. Her extreme passivity is highlighted by her ultimate lack of will and agency: she never speaks nor thinks. More than a fully-fledged character, she appears to be a puppet of the Count's will and the projection of his lust. Her fate, too, is

³³ I am referring primarily to Keenan ("Feminism as Treason, 136-137), Munford (*Decadent Daughters*, 57-59) and Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 36-38).

³⁴ In doing so, Carter aligns with a popular feminist reading of the tale. For instance, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar interpret the characters of Snow White and the Evil Queen as reiterations of the stereotypical angel-woman and the monster-woman which are prevalent in fictional portrayals of women.

paradigmatic of this condition: a life in passivity leads to an inevitable conclusion, death. At the end of the section devoted to Justine, Carter concludes: “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. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman” (SW, 76-77). Thus, the child is destined to die, because she is not a real representation of a woman, but a mere patriarchal fantasy of purity and obedience.

For this reason, I believe that the child is not a perfect parallel to Sadeian Justine. For Carter, Justine is the emblematic example of a woman who subscribes to a certain myth of femininity, because it provides her with emotional satisfaction, thus becoming a willing participant in her own victimization. The child, on the contrary, never chooses for herself nor is she shown to subscribe to anything³⁵; she is merely a projection of the Count’s desires, a fantasy creature that dissolves as quickly as she appears. While the snow child does not serve as a critique of the type of woman Carter scrutinizes through the character of Justine, she does reflect the idealized images of pure and angelic women portrayed by men (and sometimes women) in literature and media. After dying, the body of the child quickly decays and melts away, showing that she is not made of flesh and blood, but is actually as fickle as snow. This swift death could be read as a commentary on the absurdity and unsustainability of these idealized images of femininity. As Elaine Jordan observes, her death is not a metaphor for the violent deaths of women under patriarchy but rather the demise of “masculine representations, in which some women collude” (“The Dangers of Angela Carter”, 127).

Projecting and enforcing the myth of the virgin-monster dichotomy, the Count takes the role of a Sadeian pornographer. When imagining the child, the Count lists all the physical aspects he prefers in a woman. His wishes are soon met, but he does not immediately consummate his carnal desire. He rapes the girl only once she has become a corpse, parodying the famous kiss that the prince bestows on an unconscious Snow White in the Disney movie. However, in Carter’s tale there is no magic resurrection, and the child stays dead. When describing the rape, the narrator adopts a straightforward and impersonal tone which makes the scene even more unsettling: “[w]eeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished.” (BC, 106). The scene exposes the Countess’ apathy towards patriarchal

³⁵ Thank you Ashley Merrill Riggs for the insight.

violence as well as the violent nature of the Count. Despite his façade of reasonableness and benevolence, he is revealed to be as beastly as other male protagonists of *The Bloody Chamber*. The fact that he fulfils his sexual fantasy on a dead body shows that he is not interested in a real, active woman that he could share reciprocity with. Like the Sadeian libertines, he does not desire the flesh of a real human being, his appetites are turned towards meat, lifeless and obedient.

"Invincible Midwinter": The Cycle of Birth, Motherhood and Death

As observed, the child is born solely from the Count's desire and appears already fully formed "as soon as he completed her description" (BC, 105). The Countess takes no active part in the creation of the child, on the contrary she spites her as soon as she appears. This creates, in my opinion, an interesting link with Carter's reflections on motherhood and the mythicization of the womb.

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter warns against the danger of mystifying and fetishizing the womb. According to Carter, many women, including feminists, elevate the womb to a symbol of fertility and eternity, and in doing so they detach it from the realities of the female body (SW, 106). Carter argues that men too contribute to this mythicization: being at once attracted to and repulsed by the mythic image of the womb, men desire its power of creation but reject the "all the mess and inconvenience that goes with it" (SW, 107). By reducing the physical relevance of the womb to a mere symbol or myth, the "inconveniences" and material realities of the women who possess it get obscured. Thus, men can feel entitled to assert control over women's bodies, claiming authority over something that does not actually belong to them.

I believe that "The Snow Child" sheds light on this issue. The child is born from a man's wish through a disembodied womb, nullifying the woman's role. This metaphoric womb, described as "a hole in the snow [...] filled with blood" (BC, 105), represents a symbolic bloody chamber and illustrates how the womb, if mysticised into a symbol of creative power, becomes divorced from the woman who possesses it. The way men enforce the mythicization of the womb in order to assert control over it is reflected in the story through the actions of the Count, he alone wishes for the child and never asks for the Countess' participation. On the contrary, as soon as the child is born the Countess displays immediate negative emotions, yet the Count forces her to accept the child, disregarding her lack of maternal inclination. Thus, I think that it is reasonable to

interpret the creation of the child as an act of violence imposed by the Count on the Countess, who does not wish to be a mother.

As a woman coerced into motherhood by her husband, the Countess is trapped in a vicious cycle that society deems the natural course of a woman's life. Following a marriage pact built on unequal terms and a significant power imbalance, women are often thrust into the inevitable next step, motherhood. Once a woman becomes a mother, her identity is effectively nullified-she is metaphorically killed. Reduced to the role of a caretaker for her children, she is both exalted and scrutinized, expected to be flawless at all times. As Carter observes in *The Sadeian Woman*, "wives and mothers are sanctified by usage and convention; on them falls the greatest wrath" (SW, 75).

The erasure of real, flawed mothers from our cultural narratives is particularly evident in fairy tales, where the idealized birth mother often dies in childbirth. This pattern is seen in Grimm's "Snow White", which begins in Midwinter with the Queen pricking her finger and wishing for a daughter, only to die as soon as the child is born. Bacchilega notes that the Midwinter setting is meant to symbolize the end of a cycle and the beginning of another one, underlining the idea that "the Queen must die for Snow White to be born" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 37). In the introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter comments on this episode, defining it as a "haunting dilemma" that implies that "the price of the daughter [is] the life of the mother" (*The Virago Book*, xvi). In "The Snow Child" Carter confronts this dilemma head-on, opening with a direct quote from Grimm's "Snow White": "Midwinter-invincible, immaculate" (BC, 105). The "invincible" cycle symbolized by the Midwinter setting represents the repetitive pattern of a woman's life: marriage, followed by motherhood-the supposed apex of her existence and ultimate realization-culminating in death. The original fairy tale upholds this cycle as "invincible", presenting it as an inevitable reality or, more precisely, a myth. As Carter argues in *The Sadeian Woman*, myths are dangerous because they portray cultural practices and social relations as fixed and immutable, suggesting that "since it has always been so, we conclude that it must always remain so" (SW, 4). For a feminist committed to changing women's social conditions and roles, challenging such a notion is essential. In "The Snow Child," Carter urges her readers to recognize that what is deemed "invincible" or "immaculate" is, in fact, a well-constructed lie.

In light of this, I interpret the rose in the story as the symbol of the oppressive cycle imposed on women. Near the end of the tale, the Countess notices the flower and asks

the child to pick it for her. However, as soon as the child touches the rose, she pricks her finger and dies. Carter deliberately mirrors the fate of the snow child with that of the original fairy tale's Queen, who also pricks her finger, bleeds, and dies, having fulfilled her sole purpose: giving birth to a daughter. In light of this, I believe that the description of the child's death is meant to be read as a parody of this cycle. It is described in a short sentence, with a matter-of-fact tone: "so the girl picks a rose; pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls." (BC, 106). The purposeful contrast between the unemotional tone and the event described highlights the artificiality and absurdity of this supposedly "invincible" cycle which, far from being the "natural" course of a woman's life, is actually a constructed myth.

Unlike the doomed, voiceless snow child, the Countess attempts to break free from the oppressive cycle. Her unwillingness to conform to the role of the perfect, self-sacrificing mother sets her apart from the idealized birth mothers of traditional fairy tales and also, in a way, saves her life. In traditional fairy tales, birth mothers are often so idealized that they are made to die at the beginning of the narrative, so that their standard of perfection and virtue can never be tainted, while the more messy and complex realities of mother-daughter relationships are explored through the figure of a stepmother. This is the case also for the Grimm Brothers' published version of "Snow White", where the Evil Queen and the protagonist are not directly related by blood. As observed by Maria Tatar (*The Hard Facts*, 140) and Cristina Bacchilega (*Angela Carter and The Fairy Tale*, 10), in an earlier version of the tale, it was Snow White's own birth mother who wished for her death, yet the Grimm Brothers chose to alter this narrative. Tatar suggests that this change was made to "preserve the image of Good Motherhood" (140). By replacing the birth mother with a stepmother, the story could safely explore the complexity and ambivalence of mother-daughter relationships without challenging the idealized notion of motherhood, where emotions like jealousy and rage are inconceivable. Yet, in "The Snow Child" Carter tackles this taboo and shatters the idealized notion of motherhood through the depiction of the Countess. Indeed, the Countess embodies a blend of the Grimm stepmother's villainy and the role of a true birth mother. As Swaden notes, by witnessing the creation of the child, the Countess embodies "both the 1810 role of mother-being the one present at her birth-and the stepmother of the later version" ("No Magic Mirror Required," 3). Yet, she has no emotional connection to the child. Through this portrayal, I believe that Carter also

confronts the taboo subject of women who experience ambivalence, negative emotions, or a complete absence of maternal instinct toward their children.

Even if the Countess ultimately triumphs over the child, the ending casts a shadow on her victory. After realising that the child is lost, the Count immediately goes back to the Countess, picks up the rose and gives it to her. But when she touches the rose, it pricks her too. The tale ends abruptly, with the Countess' surprised exclamation: "It bites!" (106). In my opinion, the bite of the rose is an omen of her ultimate fate. Despite the success of her schemes, as long as she remains willingly submissive to the Count she is merely postponing the realization of the fated cycle of marriage-motherhood-death. Eventually, she will suffer the same fate as the snow child. And if she ever has a daughter, she too will likely face the same fate, perpetuating the cycle for generations to come. In the mythic winter that offers no possibility of transformation or growth, all women are inevitably forced to follow the same life path, even those who have gained a semblance of power through marriage.

Yet, I believe that the ending of the tale is not entirely defeatist. The final line of the Countess resonates as a powerful warning to the reader, urging her to recognize the absurdity of this cycle and break free from it. In this sense, this retelling could be described as a surprising "bite" (106) to the reader, offering no comforting resolutions but instead destabilizing and unsettling to induce a reflection. Provoked by the shocking scenes of violence featured in the tale, the reader is invited to confront the inherent misogyny of Grimm's "Snow White" and ultimately reject the mythic lies it perpetuates about women's life choices.

Analysis of “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost: Three Versions of One Story”

Introduction to the text

As I have discussed in the second chapter, *The Bloody Chamber* was far from Carter’s last engagement with fairy tales. Her interest in the genre run through the course of her entire writing career, from her early works to the curation of *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992), which she worked on extensively until a few weeks before her untimely death in February 1992³⁶. Stephen Benson points out that “the majority of her work as editor and translator revolved around the fairy tale, and the two film adaptations of her writing are on her own fairy-tale inventions” (“Angela Carter”, 31). While a retelling of the iconic “Cinderella” is absent from *The Bloody Chamber*, almost a decade later Carter published “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost: Three Versions of One Story” (1987), a rewriting which reimagines “Cinderella” through three different short stories. Interestingly, the three tales were not published simultaneously. The second story, “The Burned Child”, initially appeared in two 1987 periodicals, *Cosmopolitan* and *Merveilles et Contes*. Later that same year, all three versions were included in *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories* (1987), edited by Richard Dalby. Following Carter’s death in 1992, “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost” reappeared posthumously in the anthology *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders* (1993)³⁷ and in the collection *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (1995), which gathers all of Carter’s short fiction.

At first glance, someone not familiar with the content of “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost” may believe it to be misplaced in a dissertation which focuses heavily on *The Bloody Chamber* and its connection to *The Sadeian Woman*. However, upon reading the three stories, it becomes evident that they are closely connected to the themes and tone of *The Bloody Chamber*. As suggested by the title, the theme of motherhood and the complex mother-daughter relationship are central issues, yet Carter also delves into many other crucial themes found in *The Bloody Chamber*. “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost” explores, for instance, the impact of economic matters on women’s lives, rejects the portrayal of women as mere passive victims of male oppression, and critiques the hypocritical nature of heterosexual marriage. Additionally, the text presents the image of another “bloody chamber”, this time symbolized by the bloody shoe, a “hideous

³⁶ These details are recounted by Carter’s publisher, Lennie Goodings, on the first page of *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales*, published in 2005. This book unites *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1990) and *The Second Virago Book of Fairy Tales* (1992).

³⁷ For my citations of the text I will reference this collection, using the acronym “AG”.

receptacle” or “open wound” (AG, 116) that symbolizes women’s entrapment into specific societal roles and the horrific consequences caused by this conditioning.

Another point of commonality with *The Bloody Chamber* is the tripartite structure of the story, which mirrors the trilogy of wolf stories found in *The Bloody Chamber*. This tripartite division allows Carter to dissect and expand on three different key motifs³⁸ of Cinderella, as noted by Bacchilega (“Extrapolating”). Like the wolf trilogy, the three stories in “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost” are far from homogeneous, exhibiting significant variation in both length and narrative style. While the first, longer story, “The Mutilated Girls”, presents a metafictional commentary which is not present in any of the tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, the other two feature a dry, matter-of-fact narrative style reminiscent of the detached tone in “The Snow Child” and “The Werewolf”.

In particular, the second tale of the tryptic presents many similarities with “The Snow Child”, starting from its title, “The Burned Child”. Both these stories explore the theme of female rivalry between a child and her stepmother, in particular their conflict over a wealthy man, whose power and authority remain undisputed. In “The Burned Child,” even though the man is not a count, he is still affluent enough to provide “a house and money” (118). Another similar element is the association of poverty with nakedness. In “The Burned Child,” the protagonist, poor and burned by the ashes, is described as “stark naked” (AG, 117), a phrase Carter also uses to describe the snow child (BC, 105). However, there is a crucial difference between the two characters: while the snow child is completely passive and inert, the protagonist of “The Burned Child” exercises her own agency and desires. In “The Snow Child”, it is the mother/stepmother who ultimately triumphs over the child, while the Cinderella retelling inverts this dynamic: the child actively antagonizes the stepmother and ultimately wins the man, leaving the other woman impoverished and humiliated.

In light of all these connections, I have chosen to read “Ashputtle or The Mother’s Ghost” in continuity with the tales of *The Bloody Chamber*. I will also draw from *The Sadeian Woman* to comment on the feminist implication of the text. To introduce my analysis of the text, I would like to use its long and complex title, “Ashputtle or The

³⁸ In particular, Bacchilega notes that the first tale, “The Mutilated Girls”, thematizes the body mutilation to fit into the shoe; the second tale, “The Burned Child”, plays with the motif of the ashes; finally the third tale, “Travelling Clothes” focuses on the dress and the magical transformation, turning it into a macabre coercion into wearing a dead woman’s body parts.

Mother's Ghost: Three Versions of One Story", as a springboard to delve into the story's main themes and concerns.

There is, first of all, a notable difference from the fairly short titles of the tales collected in *The Bloody Chamber*: the presence of a subtitle, "Three Versions of One Story". I believe that in choosing such a subtitle, Carter is implicitly debunking the notion that such a thing as a singular true "story" exists. This aligns with Carter's overarching aim as a "demythologizer": rejecting static, all-encompassing myths and embracing instead the multifaceted nature of reality. Moreover, as noted by Hennard Dutheil De La Rochère, the subtitle also hints at the "mutability of the [Cinderella] tale and its openness to (re)interpretation" (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 263). Indeed, as she states in the introduction of *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter views fairy tales as an amalgamation of different iterations piled up, reinterpreted, retold by different authors and mixed with other stories. It is certainly interesting that when reflecting on this aspect of the fairy tale, Carter thinks specifically of "Cinderella". She affirms that "it is impossible to ascribe an original home for any individual story and the basic plot elements of the story we know as 'Cinderella' occur everywhere from China to Northern England" (*The Virago Book*, xv). As such, the subtitle serves to highlight that Carter is not proposing an original "canon" version of the tale, but only a reconfiguration of "bits and pieces" of different Cinderella traditions.

The "piling up" of intertextual references to various versions of the original tale has been observed by many critics. For instance, Bacchilega (*Extrapolating*, 178) notes that Carter's retelling revives certain aspects of lesser-known versions of Cinderella, such as Giambattista Basile's "La Gatta Cenerentola" and the tale type ATU 501B, featuring a travelling heroine. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère finds references to Indian and Celtic folklore in the animal helpers, as well as an acknowledgement to the Chinese version through the reference of the practice of foot binding (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 265). The multilayered nature of Carter's retelling is highlighted also by the title "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", which pays homage to both the German and the French version of the tale. I owe this insight to Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 284), who observes that with the name of the protagonist, Carter's title "Ashputtle" mainly references the German "Aschenputtel" by the Grimm Brothers, while the syntax of the title echoes Perrault's French version, titled "Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle de verre".

The title “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost” directly references the two central characters that appear in all three versions: “Ashputtle” and “The Mother’s Ghost.” The presence of the protagonist’s mother in the title already gives a sense of her importance in the story. In line with this, Marina Warner notes that what drew Carter to write a Cinderella retelling was precisely the crucial presence of the mother’s ghost in some variants of the tale and her role as “the daughter’s ultimate escape from pain” (*From Beast to Blonde*, 205). Indeed, Carter centres all three “versions” of Cinderella around the mother figure. The first retelling, “The Mutilated Girls,” opens with the acknowledgement that Ashputtle’s story is fundamentally also the story of her mother, even if the narrative begins with the mother’s death. The importance of the mother is explicitly stated by the narrator: “The mother’s ghost dominates the narrative and is, in a real sense, the motive centre, the event that makes all the other events happen” (AG, 111).

However, this is not simply the story of Ashputtle *and* her mother’s ghost: Carter introduces an element of tension by adding the conjunction “or” to the title, which can either imply inclusive options or suggest two mutually exclusive items. Thus, the title can be interpreted in various ways. Riggs suggests that the title indicates the identities of the two women “may be amalgamated” or “may be separate or separated” (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 284). The fact that the “or” is italicized is perhaps Carter’s way of highlighting this ambiguity, encouraging the reader to ponder and evaluate the shifts in relationship dynamics in the three stories: are Ashputtle and her mother’s ghost allies with the same goals, suggesting their story is one and the same? Are they rivals in direct opposition? Furthermore, the ambiguous “or” also puts into question who the real protagonist of the story is: is this primarily Ashputtle’s tale, with her mother’s ghost acting as aid, or is it actually the mother’s story, while Ashputtle is merely a puppet for her schemes? I would suggest that all these interpretations coexist in Carter’s retelling, proving once again her ability to engage readers with complexity, discomfort and uncertainty rather than offering straightforward, black-and-white narratives. In the following section, I will examine in depth how Carter handles the relationship between Ashputtle and her mother’s ghost across the three stories, highlighting in particular its ambivalent nature and the theme of generational oppression woven into the narrative.

"The Phenomenon of Mother Love": Motherhood, Daughterhood and their Ambivalence

"Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" is, in all three versions, a story about a mother and a daughter. While the mother-daughter relationship is a recurring theme in many retellings of *The Bloody Chamber*, it is often approached with subtlety – as is the case, for instance, with "The Snow Child". In contrast, I would suggest that "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" is perhaps the fairy-tale retelling in which Carter most explicitly explores the contradictory nature and ambiguity of this crucial relationship, which she describes as one of the most complex and multifaceted connections in a woman's life, as she affirmed in the interview with Appignanesi³⁹. Indeed, all the major themes touched on by Carter in the retelling, from the hypocritical nature of heterosexual marriage to women's enforcement of patriarchal practices, are tied to the mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, the portrayal of motherhood here is far more nuanced than in *The Bloody Chamber*, reflecting a possible evolution in Carter's feminist concerns and her own thinking on this issue. In my opinion "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" focuses more explicitly on the mother's point of view, whereas Carter's previous fairy-tale retellings (as well as her theoretical considerations in *The Sadeian Woman*) were more concerned with the daughters' prospective. For instance, the striking figure of the mother featured in "The Bloody Chamber", despite being a positive example of motherhood, is mainly described from her daughter point of view and at times heavily idealized, which adds a layer of irony to her portrayal. On the contrary, the mothers in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" are complex figures, who can be at once loving, tyrannical, caring, or even oppressive. Yet, their motivations and struggles, as well as their cruelty and manipulations, are fully acknowledged in the narrative, which does not limit itself to the daughter's prospectives.

The fact that this Cinderella retelling is more concerned with the protagonist's mother is overtly stated in the opening paragraph of the first story, "The Mutilated Girls": "the story always begins not with Ashputtle or her stepsisters but with Ashputtle's mother, as though it is really always the story of her mother" (AG, 110). Interestingly, Hennard Dutheil de La Rochère (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 293) suggests that this remark from the narrator is intentionally aimed at Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic

³⁹ In the interview, Carter praised Sade for his honest portrayal of the animosity daughters feel for their mothers. She affirmed that "a woman's relation with her mother is much more difficult, complicated and obscure than a boy's relationship with his father".

interpretation of “Cinderella”. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim limits his reading of “Cinderella” to a story about “the inner experiences of the young child in the throes of sibling rivalry” (*The Uses of Enchantment*, 297). This interpretation greatly simplifies the story, dismissing completely the overbearing presence of the mother in the German version of the tale, as well as the economic circumstances and societal conditioning that motivate her actions. Carter, who was critical of Bettelheim’s reductive readings, counters by placing the mother at the forefront of her retelling and even erasing the stepsisters from two of the stories, “The Burned Child” and “Travelling Clothes”. Moreover, the opening lines of “The Mutilated Girls” underscore the idea that focusing on the sisters offers an “easier” approach for a subversive retelling of “Cinderella”: “but although you could *easily* take the story away from Ashputtle and centre it on the mutilated sisters -- indeed, it would be *easy* to think of it as a story about cutting bits off women” (AG, 110, italics mine). The emphasis on the “easiness” of this interpretation of “Cinderella” may serve as a reminder not to overlook the mother’s contribution to the endorsing and promotion of oppressive practices, something which may be difficult to come to terms with. While Carter’s retelling does address the gruesome act of “cutting bits off women,” it also acknowledges that the person wielding the knife is not a malignant patriarchal entity, but a mother. This aligns with Carter’s call to acknowledge women’s active participation in their own oppression and her distrust of feminist narratives that uncritically portray mothering as an inherently sacred and virtuous activity.

In the first story, “The Mutilated Girls”, the actions of two mothers – the mother’s ghost and the stepmother – are scrutinized and problematized via the parallelism constructed between these two figures. Carter emphasizes that the stepmother is also a mother herself: “in the right-hand corner, Ashputtle and her mother; in the left-hand corner, the stepmother and *her* daughters” (AG, 110). A few paragraphs later, the narrator ironically remarks that Ashputtle’s “imitation mother” has “daughters of her own whom she loves with the same fierce passion as Ashputtle’s mother did and still, posthumously, does” (AG, 112). Whether this “fierce passion” positively impacts the daughters’ lives will be put into question in the story. Nonetheless, the parallelism created by Carter is worth noting. According to Lorna Sage, one of the aims of Carter is to show that both mothers and stepmother have “a good deal in common” (“The Fairy Tale”, 74). I believe that with this parallelism Carter is implicitly challenging a

particularly pervasive mother-myth typically found in fairy tales: the dichotomy between the perfect, angelic birth mother and the wicked stepmother.

Ashputtle's mother and stepmother are both multifaceted women, driven not by simple goodness or wickedness but by societal pressures and practical concerns. As noted by Hennard Dutheil de La Rochère, their motivations are varied and complex, ranging from "personal ambition and desire for revenge to concern with their daughters' economic security once they are gone" (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 270). The cruelty and violence they inflict on their daughters is, in their view, entirely purposeful. Having accepted the patriarchal framework as the natural way of the world, the mothers in "The Mutilated Girls" believe they are protecting their daughters and preparing them for the harsh reality of a world where a woman has little power or choice, and her best hope for a secure life is to marry - and to marry well. However, Carter does not excuse their cruelty. In their obsessive desire for their daughters to marry the prince, both mothers are characterized as "mad": Ashputtle's mother is described as "mad for her daughter to marry" (AG, 114); the stepmother, too, is referred to as "the other mad mother" (116). As with the "fierce passion", this madness has a clear ironic double meaning that invites the reader to question and critique these women's actions. As Michelle Ryan-Sautour points out, the story is full of ironic nuances that "render words suspect, evoking a slipperiness in meaning that fosters a sense of unease" ("Authorial Ghosts and Maternal Identity", 36).

An interesting instance of double-edged meanings in this first tale is the ambiguous notion of "mother love", which comes up immediately after the horrifying and graphic scene of the stepsister's mutilation. Drawing on the violence of the original tale, often sanitized in modern versions of "Cinderella", Carter describes in vivid detail how the stepmother cuts her daughter's toe to make her fit into the shoe. The grotesque humour that permeates the story is heightened by the narrator's ironic understatement, juxtaposing the daughter's horrified cries ("No!" she screams. 'Mother! No! Not the knife! No!'"") with a matter-of-fact tone ("But off it comes, all the same") (AG, 115). Ashputtle then finds the severed toe in the fireplace and, looking at it, she experiences a mixture of "awe and fear at the phenomenon of mother love" (115). Her reaction is already ambivalent in its mixture of admiration and terror, yet the narrator then deepens this ambiguity by equating "mother love" with a shroud - something that both protects and suffocates, symbolizing both care and deathly constraint. Thus, the concept of "mother

love” carries a dual significance: it reflects the mother’s love for her daughter, which manifests as absolute control over the daughter’s choices and body, and the daughter’s love for her mother, which is marked by submission, fear, and a “wish to be free” (*Thrice upon a Time*, 293), as noted by Riggs.

“The Mutilated Girls” is not only an exploration of the ambiguity of motherhood. The story focuses also on the daughters’ experiences and the conflicted emotions they exhibit towards their mothers. On one hand, they are completely obedient and passive, even when subjected to suffering or mutilation. This lack of agency is underscored by phrases such as “[the mother] us[e] their daughters as instruments of war or as surrogates”; “the girls, all three, are animated solely by the wills of their mothers” (AG, 110). In this sense, the three daughters are reminiscent of Sade’s Justine, following a skewed sense of morality that equates female virtue to passivity, obedience and the silent endurance of suffering. Ashputtle obeys her mother blindly not because their desires align, but because she feels it is her duty as a daughter. When she realizes that the turtle dove is her mother’s ghost, “her heart sank a little”, yet she acknowledges that now, with her mother present, “she must do her mother’s bidding” (AG, 114). This echoes the behaviour and beliefs of Justine, who never rebels against her captors because she believes that “masters exist only in order to be obeyed” (SW, 53).

The consequence of this blind obedience is the both literal and metaphorical mutilation of the daughters at the hands of their mothers. The title “The Mutilated Girls” is especially revealing in this context, as it refers to all three daughters. While the two stepsisters have to endure a physical amputation, Ashputtle experiences a metaphorical mutilation: her agency and happiness are stripped away as she is forced into a life she did not choose. This idea is illustrated in the scene of the shoe-fitting. The narrator dwells on the gory and grotesque image of the warm blood filling the shoe, remarking with irony that “nothing in any of the many texts of this tale suggests the prince washed the shoe out between the fittings” (AG, 116). With another jarring juxtaposition of tones meant to create an effect of discomfort in the reader, the chilling line “if she does not plunge without revulsion into this open wound, she won’t be fit to marry” is followed by the comic scene of the shoe making “squelch” sounds as Ashputtle walks (116). The narrator further emphasizes the nature of Ashputtle’s predicament by describing her tiny foot forced into the bloody shoe as being “the size of the bound foot of a Chinese woman, a stump,” which makes Ashputtle “*almost an amputee*” (116, italics mine). If she

is “almost” an amputee now, then perhaps the impending wedding might seal her fate, completing her metaphorical amputation. She will transition from obedient daughter to obedient wife, and then eventually she will be forced to become an obedient mother, in a fixed script imposed on her without any concern for what she may actually want out of life. The daughter’s unwillingness to marry is certainly not an issue for the mother’s ghost, who, after witnessing the successful shoe fitting, proudly declares, “See how well I look after you, my darling!” (116). While the mother’s statement is earnest, the reader is encouraged to look with irony at her skewed perception of the situation.

Thus, it emerges that this retelling serves as a critique of the limited set of choices imposed on women, while also highlighting the mother’s role in coercing her daughters to conform to societal expectations, perpetuating the same predetermined life pattern that she herself was forced into by her own mother. As Riggs notes, “Ashputtle is destined, condemned – or bound, like her feet – to repeat the cycle that her mother and women/fairy tale heroines before her have followed” (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 287). In the next section, I will analyse how Carter addresses the theme of intergenerational transmission of oppression across all the three versions of “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost”.

Stepping into the Mother’s Coffin: The Cycle of Intergenerational Oppression

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter critiques the idea that women under patriarchy can only be innocent victims. On the contrary, she argues that women often play an active part by choosing their own self-imposed identities, promoting patriarchal values and enforcing restrictive roles. Mothers, in particular, are crucial to the oppressive system. Being a key influence in a daughter’s life, a mother can be just as oppressive as a male patriarch, forcing her daughter to repeat the same limited choices she has learned from her own mother, thus perpetuating a cycle of oppression. In “Ashputtle *or* the Mother’s Ghost”, Carter portrays mothers as the main force behind their daughters’ oppression, grooming them to better fit into a male-dominated society.

“The Mutilated Girls” depicts two mothers who both physically and metaphorically mutilate their daughters so that they will be “fit to marry” (AG, 116). These mothers, despite having personally suffered from the restrictive and harmful practices they now partake in, still choose to enforce the patriarchal norm of marriage and the inevitable female rivalry it generates. This prompts the narrator to pose a provocative question to

the narratee: “You might have thought her own experience of marriage might have taught her to be wary, but no, needs must, what else is a girl to do?” (AG, 115). This rhetorical question encourages the reader to contemplate how the cycle of oppression is unquestioningly passed from one generation to the next. The shift in register -from the archaic “needs must” to the modern “what else is a girl to do?” - reflects the narrator’s flippant attitude, as noted by Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 309). If these women enforce these oppressive practices, it is not because they are coerced by men, but because they have never questioned the misogynistic values inherited from their own mothers. Thus, Carter frames the conflict in the story as entirely female: “the entire drama concerns only women, takes place almost exclusively among women” (AG, 110). In a subversive twist characteristic of Carter’s ironic style, the narrator even casts men as the victims in this narrative: “the men seem no more than passive victims of their fancy” (110); “the men [...] are the passive victims of the two grown women” (111). The narrator further hints at the objectification of men, describing Ashputtle’s father as “the first *object* of their desire” (110, my emphasis). With this provocation, I believe Carter is subtly criticising feminist thinkers like Andrea Dworkin and Susanne Kappeler, who argue that women under patriarchy are passive victims of men, entirely without agency and thus blameless.

There is also a performative element in the way these mothers groom their daughters, dressing them to fit into specific social roles. This idea is suggested by Ryan-Sautour, who connects the mothers’ behaviour to Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a social construction and performative act in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Ryan-Sautour explains that “[the mother] haunts the feminine figures, performing on and through them the acts of motherhood, giving them the ‘travelling clothes’ that will allow them to function in society in the perpetuation of what Judith Butler has identified as the reiteration of performativity” (“Authorial Ghosts and Maternal Identity”, 40-41). In “The Mutilated Girls,” expensive clothing is essential to projecting a certain social status and fitting into society’s notion of proper femininity. The mother’s ghost transforms into a turtle dove, stealing an expensive silk dress and pearl necklace from the stepsisters to help Ashputtle “fit” the social standard. Riggs observes a shift in register when describing Ashputtle’s transformation which mirrors “her socially mobile trajectory” (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 295). Initially, she is described as having “a good wash under the pump in the yard” (115), a casual phrase that evokes a rural, humble scene. Then, she “put[s] on her stolen

finery" (115, italics mine), a more archaic expression that gives a sense of luxury. Failure to meet these refined social standards leads to complete exclusion, as seen when the stepsisters, deprived of their expensive dress and fine jewellery, "had to stay home and sulk because they had nothing to wear" (115).

In the second story, "The Burned Child," a mother again takes it upon herself to groom her daughter, making her "lovely" to attract the stepmother's man. She possesses different animals to wash the child's face, comb her hair, and dress her in red silk. Yet, conforming to societal beauty standards comes at a cost. In "The Mutilated Girls," the daughters are forced to pay the price of beauty by being literally amputated. In this second story, it is the mother who suffers and mutilates herself ("You've maimed me", 118) to help her daughter, showing how patriarchal practices can be painful for mothers as well. By the end of the tale, the mother declares, "I'm through with that bloody business" (118), seemingly renouncing her role of grooming her daughter for marriage. However, she remains with her until the child has secured the man, and by the end of the story she deludes herself into believing that "now everything is all right" (118). Thus, it appears that ultimately the mother fails to fully recognize the harm in perpetuating this cycle of grooming.

In the final and shortest story, titled "Travelling Clothes", Carter once again thematizes the cyclical transmission of oppressive and misogynistic values across generations. The dead mother coerces her daughter into conforming to societal expectations, just as she was coerced by her own mother. She instructs her daughter on how to dress, providing her with a red dress and jewels made from "worms from her eyesockets"⁴⁰. She repeatedly says she had done the same things "when [she] was [the daughter's] age" (119) emphasizing the repetitive nature of grooming daughters to meet specific standards of appearance. This cycle is highlighted further when, after seeing her daughter hesitate to step into her coffin, the mother urges, "I stepped into *my* mother's coffin when I was your age" (120).

Then, in a parody of the French version of Cinderella, the coffin transforms into a coach and horses, and the mother pushes her daughter to "go and seek [her] fortune" (120). The story ends abruptly with this sentence, which could be interpreted in two

⁴⁰ Carter could have been inspired for this repulsive scene by the violent ending of Grimms' "Aschenputtel", where the birds peck the eyes out of the stepsisters in punishment for their wickedness.

different ways, as many critics have noted⁴¹. On one hand, considering the fact that this mother too has taken part in grooming practices, despite the evident repulsion of her daughter, then the ending could be interpreted not as a break in the cycle but a continuation of it. In this sense, the “fortune” mentioned here could be interpreted as an economic one: the mother might be urging her daughter, now properly dressed, to find a wealthy husband. On the other hand, the abrupt ending could also signify a break from this repetition. Notably, the mother advises her daughter to “seek [*her*] fortune,” which could be seen as an exhortation to forge her own path in life, free from societal pressure. Supporting this interpretation is a quote Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère found handwritten by Carter in the draft of the story: “Escape the same fate!” (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 289). Furthermore, the placement of this line as the final sentence of the tale is also significant, since it could be interpreted as Carter’s last exhortation to her readers to recognize their own role in perpetuating this cycle - whether as oppressive mothers or obedient, passive daughters - and finally break free from it.

“What else is a girl to do?”: The Business of Transactional Marriages

As a committed socialist and materialist, Carter is keen on exposing the hypocrisy behind heterosexual marriage, which fairy tales often depict as a love match and the ultimate happy ending for the female protagonist. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter argues that this portrayal is far from the truth, asserting that “the free expression of desire is as alien to pornography as it is to marriage” (SW, 13). Historically, women have been economically dependent on men, making marriage the only respectable way out of poverty (prostitution being the other, far more demeaning prospect). On this premise, marriage is revealed to be less a spontaneous choice driven by mutual love and more an economic contract. Carter’s observations on the transactional nature of marriage align perfectly, I believe, with way this topic is addressed in “Ashputtle *or* The Mother’s Ghost.” Across all three stories, Carter strips away the illusion of true love to reveal the economic motivations underpinning the marriages of the original Cinderella tale.

In the first story, “The Mutilated Girls,” Carter explicitly highlights the transactional nature of courtship, referring to it as the “business of mating” (AG, 111). The mothers’

⁴¹ I am referring to Riggs (*Thrice Upon a Time*, 288), Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 142) and Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 298).

“madness” to marry their daughters off to a prince is driven primarily by the prestige and wealth that come with noble rank. The narrator’s ironic commentary invites readers to question whether the sacrifices both the mothers and their daughters make for such marriages are truly worth it, as seen in statements like “[the mother] wants a son so badly she is prepared to cripple her daughters” (115) and the provocative question, “what else is a girl to do?” (114). The narrator also points out that, in the traditional version of “Cinderella”, men’s worth is reduced to their wealth and economic power: “the men, and the bank balances for which they stand” (111); “their significance is absolute because it is (“a rich man”, “a king’s son”) economic” (110). The reduction of men to mere economic assets negates any possibility of mutual love or genuine desire in these marriages. Instead, economic security and social prestige are the sole considerations. For instance, Carter questions the authenticity of the stepmother’s feelings for Ashputtle’s father, emphasizing the transactional nature of their marriage: “the false mother sleeps on the bed where the real mother died and is, presumably, pleased by the husband/father in that bed, unless there is no pleasure in it for her” (112). This echoes Carter’s reflections on the marriage bed in *The Sadeian Woman*, where she describes it as “a particularly delusive refuge from the world,” since “all wives of necessity fuck by contract” (SW, 9).

The second story, described by Lorna Sage as “a bare peasant drama” (“The Fairy Tale”, 74), explores a different social setting. Despite the absence of balls and princes, the issues of men’s economic importance, women’s economic powerlessness and the hypocrisy of marriage persist. The child protagonist, living in absolute poverty, desires her stepmother’s man not out of love or lust but for the simple security of “a house and money” (118). This story also scrutinizes the humiliation and suffering women endure to secure marriage, however this time, as observed in the previous section, it is the mother who mutilates herself to groom the child and make her desirable. By the end, she bitterly declares, “I’m through with that bloody business” (118), a phrase which carries multiple meanings, including a reference to the “mating business” from the previous story, once again emphasizing the economic aspects of marriage. Once the child has finally secured the man, after “showing herself” (118) to him as if she were a piece of meat to be bought (which may remind of the way the Marquis of “The Bloody Chamber” looks at his betrothed as if “inspecting horseflesh”), the mother feels justified in her efforts, believing that “everything is all right” (118). Yet the narrator’s unenthusiastic

summary, “[h]e gave her a house and money. She did all right,” injects a note of doubt, prompting readers to reconsider whether the suffering women endure for the sake of marriage is truly worth it.

In these first two stories, beds acquire a significant symbolic relevance, reflecting the shift in power dynamics and the characters’ economic conditions, much like the clothes in “The Snow Child”. Access to a bed signifies economic security and patriarchal protection. In the first story, Ashputtle is forced to “sleep on the hearth” (112), while the stepsisters enjoy “clean sheets in Ashputtle’s bed” (112). Just as the clothes in “The Snow Child” shift from one woman to another based on the man’s favour, there is no sharing between women here. Thus, the bed symbolizes also female rivalry, exacerbated by the scarcity of wealthy men: in all these versions, there are multiple women fighting over the same man. In “The Mutilated Girls,” after Ashputtle’s father remarries, the stepmother sleeps in the bed that once belonged to Ashputtle’s mother, the same bed where she died, indicating that she has successfully usurped the mother’s position in the household. This rivalry extends to their daughters. However, the narrator provocatively suggests that this situation could easily be resolved if the women united to challenge the patriarchal system: “If they had been able to put aside their differences and discuss everything amicably, they’d have combined to expel the father. Then all the women could have slept in one bed. If they’d kept the father on, he could have done the housework” (113). By rejecting the father’s authority and overcoming their divisions, these women could claim power for themselves. Moreover, by suggesting that the father could do the housework, Carter ironically proposes a subversion of traditional gender roles in marriage. This liberating fantasy, however, is only envisioned by the 20th-century narrator, as the fairy-tale characters remain bound by their historical and cultural context, continuing to operate under the assumption that the patriarchal order is natural and that women are meant to be dependent and subservient to men.

However, I believe the “believed fiction” of “the economic dependence of women” (7), as Carter defines it in *The Sadeian Woman*, is rejected by the mother in the third and final story, “Travelling Clothes”. In this brief tale, no men appear and there is no mention of marriage; instead, the story focuses almost exclusively on the repetition of intergenerational oppressive practices and the mother’s role in perpetuating them. The ending, however, is highly ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. As previously stated, the mother’s final exhortation “go and seek your fortune, darling”

could be read as an encouragement to pursue economic fortune, however I don't believe this interpretation necessarily carries negative or regressive connotations. It could also be read as a potential rejection of the patriarchal rule of marriage. The mother, in fact, does not explicitly exhort the daughter to find a man and enter a loveless, contractual marriage. Seeking "fortune" could also be an invitation to achieve economic independence on her own. This reading perfectly aligns with Carter's feminist project: as she emphasizes in *The Sadeian Woman*, a crucial step towards gender equality is for women to earn as much as men and be able to live independently without the burden of transactional marriages. If, as I have mentioned, the mother's final plea to her daughter can also be seen as Carter's message to her readers, then according to this interpretation in this final line Carter is urging her readers to avoid the horrors and humiliations of "contractual" marriages and find security and financial stability through their own efforts.

Chapter 5: General Conclusions

Findings

As discussed in Chapter 1, my dissertation was guided by three research questions, which will be answered explicitly in this chapter.

I shall first address the first question I formulated:

- How does Carter critique the notion of marriage as a romantic, deliberate choice, and instead expose it as a transactional union imposed on women due to their lack of economic autonomy?

To answer this question, we must first make note of Carter's materialist and socialist stance. As explored in Chapter 3, one of the core tenets of Carter's feminist project is the critique of women's economic dependence and the exploration of how this condition - often mistakenly viewed as part of "the natural order of things" (SW, 7) - significantly shapes gender relations, pushing women into transactional marriages in order to secure financial support and avoid poverty. Traditional fairy tales often normalize this dynamic, portraying marriages not as problematic, but as love matches and rewards for the heroine. For instance, Perrault's "Bluebeard" does not question the economic disparity between Bluebeard and his bride, and ends in yet another marriage without addressing the systemic financial inequality. Similarly, stories such as "Snow White" and "Cinderella" do not frame the heroine's lack of economic agency as the root cause of her problems; instead, they typically end with the heroine being rewarded for her good behaviour by marrying a wealthy man. Thus, these tales reinforce the idea that a woman can only achieve happiness through a man who can financially support her, and at the same time they promote the notion that female rivalry is perfectly natural, since women must compete for economically advantageous marriages.

In the fairy-tale retellings I have analysed, Carter exposes the economic reasons that are the cause of the heroines' misfortunes and subsequent marriages. For instance, in "The Snow Child", Carter explicitly links the rivalry between the child and the Countess to economic dependence and the struggle to avoid poverty. Moreover, the imagery of clothes flying from one woman to the other illustrates how, in a patriarchal society where women are encouraged to compete with one another, a man's wealth cannot be shared. The theme of female rivalry driven by economic pressures is further explored in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost". In "The Mutilated Girls", the first story of the tryptic,

two generations of women compete for the same men and their wealth, without ever considering the possibility of claiming financial independence themselves. In this story, the narrator's ironic commentary underscores the real transactional nature of these marriages, which in the traditional Cinderella tale are disguised as romantic unions. In the second story, "The Burned Child", Carter critiques the limited aspirations of women who only dream of a good marriage. The way the myth of marriage damages women is further explored in "The Bloody Chamber", where the naïve bride openly admits to marrying the Marquis for his wealth and for the hope of a great, passionate romance. Yet, she soon discovers that her marriage is not so much a romantic union as a contract driven by mutual opportunism: the bride seeks the Marquis' money, while he desires her body – or, more specifically, her meat, as he plans to kill her after taking her virginity.

By pointing out the transactional nature of marriage, Carter is urging her readers to realize that the fairy-tale wedding is a damaging fiction, and that instead of hoping for a great romance with a wealthy man, they should pursue financial independence. This is the message that Carter leaves to her readers in the third and final story of "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", in which the mother urges her daughter to "seek [her] fortune" (AG, 120). As I have pointed out, this phrase, rich with meaning, could also imply that the protagonist - and, by extension, the reader - should gain economic power through her own efforts, rather than relying on the institution of marriage for financial support.

The second research question guiding my analysis was the following:

- In what ways does Carter portray mothers and maternal figures, and how does she subvert the traditional dichotomy between virtuous mothers and wicked stepmothers in her narratives?

As I discussed in Chapter 3, Carter is highly critical of the myths of femininity that have been "palmed off" on women. Much like the virgin/monster dichotomy embodied by Sadeian characters Justine and Juliette, the binary opposition of virtuous mothers versus wicked stepmothers is rejected by Carter as a "false universal" that denies the complexity of human beings and obscures their material realities (SW, 5-6). In the fairy-tale retellings I have analysed, Carter deconstructs this mother-myth by either merging the two figures - such as with the Countess in "The Snow Child" - or by highlighting how mothers and stepmothers actually mirror each other, as in the first story of "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost". By rejecting this harmful dichotomy, Carter acknowledges that there are neither completely perfect nor totally wicked mothers, but rather individuals

who make mistakes driven by various motivations, shaped by their material circumstances.

Furthermore, Carter rarely idealizes mother figures. As she explains in *The Sadeian Woman*, she is critical of the feminist tendency to mythologize and sanctify motherhood. According to Carter, the celebration of maternal power, which is supposed to elevate women, in fact reduces their value to their ability to reproduce. Thus, in Carter's fairy-tale retellings, mother figures are stripped of their "holiness" and instead depicted as complex, flawed individuals who can be at times particularly cruel, especially to their own daughters. In "The Snow Child", for instance, the Countess harbours no maternal instinct, and not only rejects her child but even actively contributes to her death. Similarly, in all three versions of "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", mothers are highly ambivalent figures, who either suffer or cause suffering, because they have internalized patriarchal expectations of what a woman should look like and what paths she should take in life. Yet, with sagacious comments, the narrator does not excuse their behaviour or paint them as indoctrinated victims of the patriarchy; instead, they are depicted as willing participants in their daughters' oppression and as such entirely culpable.

A notable contrast to these unfavourable portrayals of mothers appears in "The Bloody Chamber", in which, almost a unicum in Carter's fictional works, the mother is depicted as a liberating and positive force. However, Carter layers this more optimistic portrayal with hints of irony, both in the idealized and fantastical way the daughter recounts her mother's past and in the fact that this mother's power ultimately derives from a patriarchal source, since she uses her late husband's gun to kill the Marquis. Similarly, the ending of the story, where mother and daughter reunite and go on to live together harmoniously, offers a rare happy ending so uncharacteristic of Carter's usual harsher conclusion that it could also be read as a parody. Still, if taken at face value, this conclusion could be interpreted as a rebuttal to Sade's rigid dichotomies and an alternative to the typical fairy-tale "happily ever after", with the trope of the heroine marrying and becoming isolated from her female peers.

Finally, my third and last research question was the following:

- How does Carter depict mother-daughter relationships, particularly in relation to the transmission of patriarchal values across generations? Does her treatment of this issue evolve over time?

Although the chronology of Carter's works does not necessarily align with their publication dates⁴², there is indeed a clear evolution in her thinking on the issue of the transmission of patriarchal values and practices from mothers to daughters.

In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter remains more optimistic, and her portrayal of the cycle of patriarchal oppression is somewhat less complex. For instance, in "The Bloody Chamber" the mother-daughter relationship is depicted as wholly positive. The mother, an empowering influence and a role model for the protagonist, not only saves her daughter's life but also invests in her education, which enables her daughter's financial autonomy. In contrast, "The Snow Child" is deeply concerned with the cycle of marriage, motherhood, and death and far gloomier in its conclusion. In the story, the Countess is a mother figure who rejects traditional maternal roles to the point of playing a part in the child's death, all to ensure her own survival and keep her husband's favour. Yet, while the Countess embodies a woman who has internalized female subordination as the natural order, the text does not explicitly link her beliefs to her own mother's teachings, although one can guess that it is likely so.

Carter's most nuanced exploration of the transmission of patriarchal values from mothers to daughters appears in "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost". Across all three versions, Carter depicts mothers grooming and commodifying their daughters, pressuring them to marry wealthy men and adhere to prescribed life paths, regardless of their own aspirations. While "The Bloody Chamber" suggests that breaking the cycle of intergenerational oppression does not necessarily require severing ties with one's mother, "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" reflects a less optimistic outlook, as exemplified by the ambiguous ending of the last tale, "The Travelling Clothes". In the story, after coercing and grooming her daughter, the mother urges her to leave on the coach to "seek [her] fortune" (AG, 120). Though it's unclear whether she encourages her daughter to find independence or simply marry a wealthy man, the protagonist must leave her mother regardless, breaking the cycle and venturing into the world alone.

Despite these varying outcomes, whether more or less optimistic, in her fairy-tale retellings Carter consistently urges readers to recognize the damage caused by perpetuating oppressive practices which limits women's choices to the repetition of the

⁴² For instance, as noted by Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Carter had plans for a "very primitive, very archaic" Cinderella retelling as early as 1977, suggesting she may have conceived at least a preliminary idea for "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost" during her drafting of *The Bloody Chamber* (*Reading, Translating, Rewriting*, 263)

marriage-motherhood-death cycle. As such, she advocates for a rejection of these traditions, even if taught to us by our own mothers, and for a life lived in accordance with one's own desires, without being pressured into a "happily ever after" which is, after all, merely a myth.

Shortcomings of the Study and Future Directions

With the present study, my aim was to contribute with a fresh perspective to the extensive research on Carter's fairy-tale retellings. However, my work inevitably encountered certain limitations; the most notable challenge was the restricted number of retellings I was able to analyse. Initially, I had planned to include an analysis of the triptic of Wolf stories from *The Bloody Chamber* ("The Werewolf", "The Company of Wolves" and "Wolf-Alice"), which all deal with relevant themes such as oppressive motherhood, rejection of Sadeian dynamics and the way material circumstances influence human behaviours. However, due to constraints in the time and the scope of a master's dissertation, I ultimately chose not to delve into them.

Further research could expand on this shortcoming by incorporating a broader range of Carter's retellings and exploring how they challenge the myth of the "happily ever after", how they reject the cycle of marriage-motherhood-death upheld in fairy tales and how they problematize the generational transmission of oppressive practices. I find these themes particularly compelling, and I believe that further analysis, perhaps even extending beyond fairy-tale retellings to examine Carter's novels, could highlight additional layers in Carter's work. Moreover, I believe that these specific topics remain relevant in today's highly polarized cultural climate. With the resurgence of conservative politics, the study of feminist authors and feminist values is now more essential than ever.

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