

## Motherhood, Sexuality, and the (Fe)Male Gaze in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

ANNA PATRICIA WYNN  
wynnannapatricia@gmail.com

In my paper, I want to explore the idea that the heroine in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* is a "woman in process" (Kathleen E. B. Manley 1998, 71), focusing on three main aspects connected to this journey of self-discovery. One is the presence of the mother and the mother-daughter relationship. Another is sexuality and how the heroine's attitude towards it changes over the course of the story. Finally, the third is the significance of gazing, proposing that by the end of the story, a female gaze emerges.

*Keywords:* motherhood, sexuality, gazing, female gaze, Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*

### 1. Introduction

Fairy tales have been a part of everyday life and growing up for a long time. They serve as a kind of instruction guide for children to learn the appropriate behaviour for a man and a woman. Merja Makinen (1992) describes them as "parables of instruction for children" (4). Since women have been in charge of raising children throughout history, storytelling also fell mostly on their shoulders. It is important to note, however, that these stories, the so-called 'old wives' tales', existed only in oral form for centuries; it was only later that "Charles Perrault, the Grimm Brothers, and other compilers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries transposed oral folk tales into fairy tales" (Mary Kaiser 1994, 30). So, a genre of sorts that had an "essentially feminine form" (30) suddenly became a part of masculine culture, that of "the published text" (30). According to Angela Carter (1990), old wives' tales are "worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it" (xi). Taking this into consideration, perhaps it is not surprising that, today, fairy tale retellings are an important part of women's writing and the feminist discourse. First of all, it is a way for women to take back control over these stories that are centuries old and contribute to the "literary 'official' culture" (Kaiser 1994, 30). They also serve to draw attention to the stereotypical representation of women and men in traditional fairy tales, usually depicting heroines as passive, with no

real power or agency, whose greatest attribute is their beauty, as opposed to villainous women—evil stepmothers and old witches—who, in fact, are active and have power, something these stories teach girls to avoid. They also have damaging messages about sexuality, the relationship between women, as well as what a ‘real’ man is supposed to be like. In the words of Jackie Morris (2015), “stories that live for thousands of years, handed from storyteller to audience over time, mouth to ears to heart to head, should change to fit the modern world” (par. 8). Therefore, fairy tale retellings aim to call into question the traditionally accepted values in these stories, usually doing so through a twist (be it a shift in point of view, gender reversal, or the introduction of a new character, for example), ultimately changing the “implied values” (McDermott 2017) of the originals.

Angela Carter’s 1979 short story collection entitled *The Bloody Chamber* is made up of ten rewritten fairy tales. Carter uses several techniques to put a spin on the well-known stories, and they also work on a level of intertextuality. According to Makinen (1992), “Carter’s tales do not simply ‘rewrite’ the old tales [...]—they ‘re-write’ them by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version” (5). They also touch on subjects that were previously not discussed or that were uniquely discussed from the male point of view. As Seda Arikan (2016) puts it, Carter was one of the female writers who “started to decode the latent meanings in texts narrated by ruling sexist male ideology and to retell some earlier writings from the female point of view” (118). Since many of these tales are male-directed “narrations about female experience” (119), a fresh perspective was very much needed.

In my paper, I want to develop further the idea presented by Kathleen E. B. Manley (1998) that “The Bloody Chamber” story is a tale of a “woman in process” (71). I want to analyse how the mother-daughter relationship’s evolving contributed to the journey of self-discovery the heroine experienced over the course of the story. In addition, another aspect I want to consider is to look at how sexuality is portrayed and how the heroine’s attitude towards it changes as the story progresses. Finally, I want to explore the phenomenon of gazing and the positions of power associated with it. Through analysing the stages of the heroine’s journey, my claim is that by the end of the tale, the heroine has developed a kind of female gaze that allows her to occupy a position of power and break away from the expectations set for women by a patriarchal society.

## 2. Motherhood and Mother-Daughter Relationships

### 2.1 *The Introduction of the Mother Figure*

In traditional fairy tales, a seemingly compulsory element is depicting mothers in one of two ways. Either they are the perfect birth mother who tragically dies at the very beginning of the heroine's story, thus becoming an unattainable ideal who provides no comfort or help and is not present for the heroine's journey, or they are the evil stepmother, "greedy, ambitious, and ruthless" (Andrea Dworkin 1974, 38), who is usually the one in the way of the heroine reaching her happily ever after and so needs to be defeated by the end of the story. They are also seen solely as mothers; they exist (or do not exist) in relation to the main character, but there is no mention of their past or any deeper insight into their psyche. However, in Angela Carter's rewritten fairy tale, "The Bloody Chamber", there is a birth mother who is alive. As Robin Ann Sheets (1991) puts it, Carter "restores to prominence a figure who is strikingly, ominously, absent from fairy tales, from pornographic fiction, and from the Freudian theory of female development: the strong, loving, and courageous mother" (645). In this paper, I want to explore the effect the mother's presence has on the story and how her relationship with her daughter influences the heroine's journey of self-discovery.

The most obvious consequence of this change is at the end of the story. In the 'original' Bluebeard story (the one eventually written down by Charles Perrault, which Carter later translated), the brothers come to the rescue of a helpless sister: "He recognised his wife's two brothers; one was a dragoon, the other a musketeer. He fled, to save himself, but the two brothers trapped him before he reached the staircase. They thrust their swords through him and left him for dead. Bluebeard's wife was almost as overcome as her husband and did not have enough strength left to get to her feet and kiss her brothers" (Hallett and Karasek 2009, 226). However, in the rewritten version, Carter not only keeps the mother alive but even has her save the heroine: "I cast one last, desperate glance from the window and, like a miracle, I saw [...] A rider, her black skirts tucked up around her waist so she could ride hard and fast, a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds. [...] Every moment, my mother drew nearer" (Carter 1993, 45). She gives hope to her daughter to hold out a little longer, and then, at the crucial moment, she is the one to cast the bullet that frees the heroine: "Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head" (48). The fact that another character introduced by Carter—Jean-Yves, the (blind) piano tuner—is also present in this scene yet is not the one to save the heroine is crucial. In my opinion, it emphasises the outdated nature

of notions such as women's dependence on men to save them and suggests the alternative of women helping each other instead of the usual depiction in which women frequently go behind one another's back, mostly in order to get to a man – Elizabeth Johnston (2005) calls this the “trope of female rivalry” (4). The fact that the heroine grew up without a father but had a strong mother figure as well as a loving nurse in her life also emphasises the importance of women supporting each other and draws attention to traditional fairy tales' frequent attempts to remove supportive female figures from the heroines' lives and portray them growing up without a positive female adult role model. As Dworkin (1974) puts it, in these stories, “the only good woman is a dead woman” (41).

In addition, the mother gets a concise backstory from Carter. She clearly has had a life before becoming a mother, and she is described as a tough, warrior-like woman: “My eagle-featured, indomitable mother; what other student at the Conservatoire could boast that her mother had outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I?” (Carter 1993, 6). This description also complies with Sheets's (1991) idea that the mother should be seen and accepted “as an independently existing subject, one who expresses her own desire” (654). In Carter's (1993) story, the heroine can count on her mother: “Assistance. My mother. I ran to the telephone” (34), even if they do have their differences and arguments, just like any regular mother and daughter. Carter adds nuance to the mother character and thus presents a mother-daughter relationship that is not perfect but feels truly lifelike and infinitely relatable for most female readers.

Moreover, the positive influence of the mother is present throughout the text. She is a source of inspiration, a role model of courage for her daughter: “When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother” (Carter 1993, 45). When the heroine discovers the bloody chamber, it is her mother's thought that helps her go on and urges her to look for an out: “My mother's spirit drove me on,” (33). Furthermore, the mother is not only an excellent inspiration but also crucial in the heroine's journey of self-discovery. According to Manley (1998), “the bride becomes aware of and begins to use the material in her character provided by her mother” (75). She recognises the traits she inherited from her strong, independent mother who chose a marriage founded on love instead of money, which helps her shed the passivity that is characteristic of her at the beginning of the story, especially in her relationship with the Marquis. However, this does not happen completely and all at once; she does not instantly get magically confident and infinitely powerful. She does experience setbacks, “[l]ater she does lose courage as she and Jean-Yves await her husband's summons to her execution, relapsing into passivity and despair” (75), which, I believe, challenges the stories in which heroes and heroines become

brave and undefeatable at the snap of a finger and provides readers with a more relatable and accessible model, empowering them as they most likely also struggle with something.

Furthermore, a crucial change to the story is the fact that it was the mother who made it possible for the heroine to learn music and “ultimately provides her with a career” (Manley 1998, 76). This not only allows the girl to make a living on her own at the end of the story, but it is also crucial for her survival. Because there is “a field in which she is more knowledgeable than her husband” (76), she is able to get an ally into the palace in the form of the piano tuner. Of course, the significance of this is revealed only later in the story; however, it all comes down to the mother’s raising of her daughter, “the little music student whose mother had sold all her jewellery, even her wedding ring, to pay the fees at the Conservatoire” (Carter 1993, 14). The heroine’s mother also made sacrifices for her daughter; nevertheless, her aim was to allow her to get an education and learn a skill that would allow her to provide for herself and be independent. She thus instilled values in the heroine that are vastly different from those possessed by women in traditional fairy tales, who, according to Dworkin (1974), “have one scenario of passage [...] First they are objects of malice, then they are objects of romantic adoration. They do nothing to warrant either” (42). In fact, it was the heroine’s talent in music that captured the Marquis’s attention at first, not her beauty: “my little love who brought me the white gift of music” (Carter 1993, 42), emphasising that women have more to offer than their looks and that they can do something to change their fates themselves: “if my music had first ensnared him, then might it not also give me the power to free myself from him?” (35).

## ***2.2 The Mother-Daughter Relationship***

The introduction of the mother character clearly affects the outcome of the story. Her relationship with the heroine is crucial when it comes to the journey of self-discovery upon which the heroine embarks. When considering the relationship between mother and daughter, I found Sheets’s (1991) idea about the “Oedipal models of development which privilege separation over dependence” (654) to be an interesting starting point. Despite the fact that “some readers see the protagonist’s reunion with her mother as a regression” (654), I would argue that the relationship has been through a lot over the course of the story, and it is not the same mother-daughter relationship as it was in the beginning. In the beginning, mother and daughter disagree, among other things, about what the right reasons for marrying someone are: “Are you sure you love him? [...] She sighed” (Carter 1993,

6). By the end, it turns out the mother was right. However, she does not treat her daughter in a way that makes her feel inferior or like someone who must suffer for her mistakes. At the end of the story, they live on as equal partners who each retain their subjectivity. The heroine still has her voice and her independence: “I felt I had a right to retain sufficient funds to start a little music school here, on the outskirts of Paris, and we do well enough. Sometimes we can even afford to go to the Opéra” (48). The use of pronouns in this sentence reveals a lot about the evolution of their relationship. The daughter still makes her own decisions; it is her inheritance, and the mother does not take over control because of her daughter’s past mistakes or the fact that she moved back in with her. However, they do share the rewards, and everybody brings something to the relationship. From a traditional mother-daughter relationship where there is typically some form of hierarchy, their relationship, in my view, transforms into a true partnership by the end of the story.

On the other hand, the fact that the mother had doubts about her daughter’s marriage yet still took a step back and allowed her to follow her own path, suggests that she treated her as an equal at the beginning as well, and saw her as someone capable of rational decisions on her own – or at least allowed her to make her own mistakes. This signals that the daughter needed to grow and change in order for them to reach a partnership built on equality, though the mother’s development is also worth mentioning. Although the daughter is proud of her mother’s defiance and her decision to marry for love, she also seems determined – perhaps unconsciously assuming the same defiance as her mother had – to do the exact opposite and marry for money: “‘Are you sure you love him?’ ‘I’m sure I want to marry him,’ I said. And would say no more. She sighed, as if it was with reluctance that she might at last banish the spectre of poverty from its habitual place at our meagre table” (Carter 1993, 7). She is also very curious; in the words of Manley (1998), “she is not only curious about the locked room, but she is also curious about marriage [...] and about sex” (76), and, unlike in Perrault’s version, where curiosity is presented as “the most fleeting of pleasures; the moment it is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive” (Hallett and Karasek 2009, 226), here, “her curiosity actually helps her in her process toward womanhood” (Manley 76). The mother seems to understand her daughter’s need to find her own path instead of following in her mother’s footsteps. She treats her as an equal, recognising her subjectivity and that she is completely capable and should be allowed to make her own decisions, even if they turn out to be mistakes in the end, as that is part of the learning curve. Carter thus makes a powerful statement against traditional fairy tales where parents (mostly fathers) often treat their children as commodities and always seem to know better, hence providing an alternative – that the parents have to learn to let go just as the children have to learn to take responsibility for their

decisions, only to come out on the other side as more mature, more understanding and equal partners.

As I mentioned before, both the mother and the daughter go on a journey of self-discovery in the story. The heroine's journey, compared to the original, is presented as "a young woman's initiatory quest for knowledge rather than as the story of an overly curious girl who makes a disastrous marriage" (Cheryl Renfroe 1998, 82), evoking "strong associations with the biblical story of the temptation of Eve" (82). Carter thus gives a different interpretation not only to Perrault's story but also to the age-old story of the original sin that is usually blamed entirely on Eve, depicting both as a "necessary and bold initiation into self- and worldly knowledge rather than as an act of foolish disobedience" (83). Even though the mother's journey is less pronounced and happens more in the background, I would argue it is just as important for the feminist discourse since it describes the experiences of a mother learning how to let go of her child, how to transform her 'mother-role' and rediscover herself as a woman whose daughter has grown up and moved away and therefore does not need full-time care anymore. Considering birth mothers rarely make it to this point in traditional fairy tales—Dworkin (1974) describes Cinderella's birth mother, for example, as "good, pious, passive, and soon dead" (38)—Carter's inclusion of the mother's experience and the different stages connected to it is especially significant:

I tenderly imagined how, at this very moment, my mother would be moving slowly about the narrow bedroom I had left behind for ever, folding up and putting away all my little relics, the tumbled garments I would not need any more, the scores for which there had been no room in my trunks, the concert programmes I'd abandoned; she would linger over this torn ribbon and that faded photograph with all the half-joyous, half-sorrowful emotions of a woman on her daughter's wedding day. (Carter 1993, 1)

This is a topic rarely discussed<sup>1</sup> in fairy tales, partly due to the fact that they usually end with marriage, not start with it. Here, Carter describes beautifully the mixed feelings a mother experiences when she witnesses her daughter getting married. She has to learn to balance her worrying with her wish for her daughter to find happiness on her own. The heroine senses and shares these conflicted

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<sup>1</sup> Just four years after *The Bloody Chamber* was published, Carol Ann Duffy won the National Poetry Society Competition with her poem entitled "Whoever She Was", describing the experiences of a mother as her children are growing up. Despite Duffy winning the prize, her poem, exploring a similar theme as Carter presents, was not received very positively: "This is quite an effective evocation of some eerie moments in the relation between motherhood and childhood, but much of the detail is predictable, and the language is not very interesting, so that the poem doesn't improve with repeated readings." ("Woman Wins", 1984) To me, this is clear proof of how underappreciated a mother's journey is and how innovative and crucial Carter's handling of the matter is.

feelings: “And, 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” (Carter 1993, 1). In my opinion, this describes a strong bond between mother and daughter who are clearly in tune with each other (so, it is no surprise that the mother senses there might be something wrong towards the end of the story and goes to rescue her daughter). Instead of propagating the idea of constant rivalry between mother and daughter, which, featured in her non-fiction book entitled *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Carter describes by saying “[i]n this enforced and involuntary relationship, how can mother and child be anything but enemies?” (Carter 1979, 1865), in *The Bloody Chamber*, she emphasises the importance of supportive, equal relationships between women, going against the expectations set by a patriarchal society. This also defies Dworkin’s (1974) claim that there are only “two definitions of woman” in fairy tales: “There is the good woman. She is a victim. There is the bad woman. She must be destroyed. The good woman must be possessed. The bad woman must be killed, or punished. Both must be nullified.” (48), presenting characters in the rewritten story who are much more relatable. Neither woman is totally good nor totally bad, they both have a journey ahead of them; however, they work together and rely on each other, so neither of them is destroyed—in fact, it is the strong, powerful man who ends up being punished and ‘nullified.’ Ergo, supportive relationships between women, especially among mothers and daughters, play a crucial part in women’s journey of self-discovery. Mother and daughter each play a part in the other’s personal development, allowing one another to change, grow, and turn into life-like characters who have agency over their decisions.

### 3. The Portrayal of Sexuality

The second aspect to consider when analysing the heroine’s journey of self-discovery is how her relationship towards sexuality changes as the story progresses. Arikan (2016), in her essay entitled “Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*: A Feminist Stylistic Approach”, discusses the importance of a female writer taking back control over the discourse about sexuality, especially female sexuality, that is inherent in traditional fairy tales. Even though these messages are usually disguised in the original versions, conveyed through metaphors or word associations, considering fairy tales “have the significant effect to reflect the background of a society, and also to contribute to the creation of a collective unconscious” (Arikan 2016, 118), meaning they and the values communicated through them are “known and even internalized by many people” (118), Carter’s refreshing approach is very much

needed to provide a different point of view. In this paper, my focus will be on how she uses language to question ideas about sexuality that our patriarchal society has accepted as the norm, as well as how female and male sexuality are presented in the story.

### 3.1 Language Use

First of all, as Arikan (2016) points out, “the power of language and discourse, as many intellectuals have foreseen, is the main weapon in Carter’s stories” (118). In fact, Carter (1983) herself expressed the significance of language use: “Yet this, of course, is why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women—it is part of the slow process of decolonising our language and our basic habits of thought [...] to say things for which no language previously existed” (75). In *The Bloody Chamber*, sex is discussed and described openly and, according to Makinen (1992), “Carter’s texts have always engaged with eroticism” (9). Carter tackles crucial issues in part through the language she uses, thus communicating a message wildly different from what we are used to from the traditional stories. Carter gives the heroine the opportunity to tell her own story, from a first-person narrative, making sure that the “female voice *exercises power* in these stories” (Arikan 2016, 119). It is worth comparing the situation she describes with the words and phrases she uses. In much of the story, the heroine is in a subordinated position; she succumbs to her older, wealthy, and experienced husband’s wishes, whether it is about what she wears: “He made me put on my choker” (Carter 1993, 18), or about her first sexual experience: “I had heard him shriek and blaspheme at the orgasm; I had bled [...] I had been infinitely dishevelled by the loss of my virginity” (19). According to Kaiser (1994), “[w]atching herself being disrobed by him, the bride perceives herself as a pornographic object” (33). She describes this scene as one where “the bride has been reduced to an unaccommodated body, while Bluebeard retains all the accoutrements of power, wealth and taste” (33). Kaiser’s description suggests that the heroine is entirely passive in this scene and just fulfils the role prescribed to her by centuries of female passivity held up as an example to be followed. However, I disagree with the reduced role she presents and claim that, in fact, the heroine is aware of her objectification, the type of role her husband assigns to her and, through the language she uses, she disempowers the ideals of male activity and female passivity, ultimately “raising questions about the cultural constructions of femininity” (Makinen 1992, 6). The following passage, where the heroine compares the image of herself and her husband to a piece by Rops, is very indicative of this: “the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button

boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations” (Carter 1993, 16). In this passage, the heroine is aware of how she herself, and women in general, are objectified. By comparing the role she fills in this scene to that of a “lamb chop”, she takes away some of the power of the objectification and points out the absurdity of her husband seeing her as a piece of meat and finding pleasure in it. She describes the act as if she were impartial, a simple bystander, and certainly not like someone who is consumed by passion: “He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke—but do not imagine much finesse about it; this artichoke was no particular treat for the diner nor was he yet in any greedy haste.” (Carter 1993, 15). The word use and the distancing evident in this passage can be explained by Carter’s comments on the topic of pornography, saying how the plot is “always the same [...] There is no room here for tension or the unexpected” (Carter 1979, 208). Thus, the roles each person fills are already assigned. The woman endures what the man inflicts, there is simply no questioning these pre-determined roles. However, in my opinion, an effective tool Carter employs to call attention to the existing, harmful power-relations at play between men and women that society considers to be the norm, showcasing how deeply this idea can be internalised by women, is her language use and her powerful metaphors. It reinforces the idea that knowledge is power and suggests that once the women are aware of what is happening and how they are objectified, they can free themselves of such cultural constraints.

While the previous example was more about how women are seen, I believe the different objects and adjectives associated with the Marquis reveal a great deal about the nuances that Carter adds to the original story. As Arikan (2016) points out, traditionally, “flowers are related to females with some connotations such as naivety, pureness and fragility” (124). By associating the scent of lilies to the Marquis, Carter flips this metaphor on its head. The lilies also signify something dangerous and potentially harmful: “The lilies I always associate with him; that are white. And stain you” (Carter 1993, 16). Unlike the purity that flowers used to signify, the lilies are a source of danger here that can even cause ruin. She does acknowledge how “it must seem a curious analogy, a man with a flower, but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily” (8), pointing to the heroine’s awareness of traditionally accepted metaphors and implied gender roles. However, she cannot help but compare her reality to the values she, too, inherited from stories and cultural conditioning, recognising that perhaps it is not as black-and-white after all. She also describes the Marquis as cat-like, “though he was a big man, he moved as softly as if all his shoes had soles of velvet, as if his footfall turned the carpet into snow”

(7). His 'manly' size is put opposite his ability to move about quietly and delicately. It seems to me that these instances hint at a bit of androgyny, a mixing up of traditional gender associations. In a way, this aligns with Arikan's (2016) claim that Carter "decodes the gender roles that are strongly established in the reader's unconscious from the beginning of childhood by fairy tales, the book appears as a resistance against them" (120). My contention is that the language used by Carter clearly establishes a type of resistance, both when it comes to the assigned roles regarding sex and male as well as female sexuality.

### ***3.2 Attitude Towards Female Sexuality***

Carter also addresses the topic of female sexuality. Throughout history, female sexuality has always been seen as something demonic, something not to be discussed. Very early, in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, women and female sexuality were associated with demons and the devil. An influential church father, Tertullian, claimed that women are "the Devil's gateway. *You* are the unsealer of that forbidden tree" (qtd. in Miles 2008, 28). Later, in the Victorian period, the 'angel in the house' ideal was widespread, and women had to be seen and behave as saint-like, chaste women. In the words of John Ruskin (1865), for example, women were described as "enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise" (149). It was around the 1970s, at the time of the Second Wave of Feminism which, in part, focused on sexual liberation and "redefining women's sexuality" (Anne Enke 2003, 637), that these topics started to come to the forefront. Although some things have changed since the 1970s, I believe Carter's portrayal of female sexuality has many layers and is relevant even today, decades later.

First of all, she does not deny that the heroine is interested in experiencing "white-hot passion" (Carter 1993, 10) and that she is curious about sex: "I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him" (24). At the same time, she also manages to "break the ideological link between sex and romance" (Sheets 1991, 641). We learn early on that the heroine does not love the Marquis, yet she still experiences physical attraction: "my heightened, excited senses told me he was awake and gazing at me" (Carter 1993, 12). Granting women the opportunity to embrace their sexuality, and breaking away from the double standard that still exists between men and women when it comes to sex and desire is crucial in itself; however, in my opinion, there is another, perhaps more important aspect of this that one has to consider: how the heroine herself reacts to her feelings. The way I see it, she seems to have rather conflicted emotions about how her body reacts. This is a reoccurring theme throughout the text: "I was aghast to feel myself stirring" (16);

“I longed for him. And he disgusted me” (24); “And, in the red firelight, I blushed again, unnoticed, to think he might have chosen me because, in my innocence, he sensed a rare talent for corruption” (22). I believe that these statements are important to consider as they draw attention to how deeply-rooted the patriarchal ideas of female chastity and passivity are, and how difficult it is to overcome women’s “own sense of their ‘lack’” (Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya, Emily Abd Rahman and Zainor Izat Zainal 2010, 28), “especially when all we have to inscribe our own sexual identities from are cultural constructions” (Makinen 1992, 13). In my opinion, the appearance of pornography in the text also proves this point. The heroine finds a book of the Marquis’s that contains “nasty pictures” (Carter 1993, 18). A girl is displayed in a subordinate position to a man, reinforcing the typical roles that men and women traditionally assume in a sexual relationship and that are featured in pornography. In Carter’s (1979) words, “She is most immediately and dramatically a woman when she lies beneath a man, and her submission is the apex of his malehood” (135). The girl has “tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls” (Carter 1993, 17), and the heroine’s reaction to this is “painful, furious bewilderment” (18), while the husband simply laughs at it. This suggests to me that the picture reinforces what the heroine has already known and likely even feared—after all, she was “innocent but not naïve” (17)—, that female sexuality equates “female masochism”, which is a myth “based on a conscious willingness and desire to be dominated” (Wan Yahya, Rahman and Zainal 2010, 35). According to Wan Yahya, Rahman, and Zainal (2010), this myth is the basis that the porn industry is built on and that leads to the spreading of images about intimacy that depict a dominant man and a woman who submits to him, who has no choice but to enjoy being dominated. The heroine’s first sexual experience is no other: “A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides” (Carter 1993, 18), which left the heroine “infinitely dishevelled by the loss of my virginity” (19). Despite her expectations that “her sexual initiation will bring her from childhood to womanhood, from innocence to full sexuality” (Renfroe 1998, 84), what she experiences is more what Makinen (1992) describes as “the damage done by the old inscriptions of femininity as passive” (5). After all, the language use is important here again; “impale” is not a word that implies consent or mutual pleasure. It also demonstrates Carter’s (1979) description of how “[w]omen do not normally fuck in the active sense. They are fucked in the passive tense and hence automatically fucked-up, done over, undone” (424). However, this is all part of the heroine’s process of becoming more mature and defiant against the expectations of society: “the girl’s changing attitude toward wealth, sexuality, and marriage then, while signalling progress in her own personal value system and a return to many of her mother’s ideals is, at the same time, a reversal of the expectations held for her by society at large” (Renfroe 1998,

86). Ergo, over the course of her journey of self-discovery, the heroine experiences her sexuality first according to the expectations held up to women, by learning to enjoy her objectification, but later, as she evolves as a person, she develops tools to deviate from this and take back control over her own body and what happens to it.

### ***3.3 Attitude Towards Male Sexuality***

Besides tackling the controversial matter of female sexuality, Carter also calls attention to the problems of masculinity and male sexuality widely accepted by society. One of the most significant ways Carter does this is the introduction of the character of Jean-Yves, the poor, blind piano tuner. He can in no way be considered a traditional male hero who is normally described as “handsome and heroic [...] What matters is that he is both powerful and good [...] What matters is that he matters, acts, succeeds” (Dworkin 1974, 43)—he is described as a gentle, shy boy: “‘I can be of some comfort to you,’ the boy said. ‘Though not much use.’” (Carter 1993, 44), and he is not the one to save the heroine in the end, at least not entirely on his own. This in itself is a significant point to remember. The introduction of a character so different from what is typical in traditional fairy tales and so different from the typical idea we have of what an ‘ideal’ man is like points to Carter’s intention to change and add nuance to the portrayal of men in folktales that can be just as harmful in setting up unreasonable expectations as the traditional perceptions of women are. By traditional standards, the piano tuner cannot be considered ideal at all. However, he turns out to be a much more suitable and preferable partner than the rich, powerful, and ‘manly’ Marquis who possesses typically desirable male qualities. So, it is of great importance that the person who ends up being the life partner of the heroine, Jean-Yves, “has neither the power of the Marquis nor the glamor of a fairy tale prince” (Sheets 1991, 654).

The fact that the piano tuner is blind emphasises this diversion from traditional male ideals. Because he does not have the ability to watch her, the power imbalance is not present in their eventual relationship. As Sheets (1991) points out, “in a culture that eroticizes domination, it is not surprising that some readers are reluctant to accept Jean-Yves as the hero. His relationship with the narrator does not appear to have a sexual dimension” (654). It is true that the way we are socialised, sex is a crucial part of a romantic relationship, and if that part is lacking, it is seen as unusual and inherently dysfunctional. These ideas are somewhat supported by the way the heroine describes Jean-Yves; there is nothing sexual in it, no hint of (physical) attraction: “Though they were blind, his eyes were singularly sweet” (Carter 1993, 36). According to Patricia Duncker (1984), “blindness, as symbolic

castration, may signal the end of male sexual aggression” (11). This, then, suggests that the alternative to a dominating, powerful husband is a sweet, harmless hero who ultimately lacks any sexuality. Taking into consideration the traditional way we view sexuality, this may be true. However, as Sheets (1991) puts it, “perhaps if Carter were to continue the story, she would develop a male sexuality centered on smell, touch and sound; indeed, this is already implicit in Jean-Yves’s extreme sensitivity to music” (655). So, it is not that their relationship lacks a sexual dimension but rather that the type of sensuality that characterises their relationship is so foreign in today’s culture that we as readers find it hard to recognise it. However, that does not mean that it is a bad thing; in fact, it could be seen as the way forward. I agree with Sheets’s views but would add that, besides drawing attention to the fact that there is not only one way of being intimate in a relationship, it is also significant that Jean-Yves and the heroine started the relationship as friends. They were cordial towards each other, then became allies in the face of danger. Then, gradually, they became life partners: “He seemed to know that I had smiled” (Carter 1993, 25). This suggests that Carter saw friendship as a better basis for a relationship than sexual attraction. Their relationship, this way, is founded on trust, mutual respect, and equality; qualities that should, and are here, valued more than physical attraction. According to Makinen (1992), this suggests that, for Carter, “successful sexual transactions are founded on an equality and the transforming powers of recognizing the reciprocal claims of the other” (9). Whether it is the non-traditional hero that led to here or someone or something else, the end result is the same: Jean-Yves and the heroine have a much healthier relationship, whether the reader completely understands all aspects of this relationship or not. Therefore, it can be said that Carter challenges the reader’s perception of what is traditionally considered to be male and female sexuality, and, with the help of language use and metaphors, she goes against such cultural constructions, offering a possible alternative instead.

#### **4. The Significance of Gazing**

##### ***4.1 Traditional Direction of the Gaze***

The third aspect important for the heroine’s journey of self-discovery is gazing. An objectifying male gaze is ever-present throughout the story. My argument is that, at the culmination of the heroine’s journey presented in the story, she learns to ‘look back’, developing a female gaze that grants her agency and is crucial for the

outcome of the story. Laura Mulvey (1999) wrote extensively about visual pleasure and the male gaze in her essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, claiming that “looking itself is a source of pleasure” (835), and it is “essentially active” (835). Traditionally, it is a man who is the gazer, the one who looks, and a woman is the one being looked at. Moreover, gazing usually comes with a sense of power and is often connected to sex and desire. The male as the onlooker is an active participant while the woman is seen as an object, “simultaneously looked at and displayed” (837) as a source of pleasure for the man. This type of gazing is very much present in *The Bloody Chamber*: “his eyes, dark and motionless as those eyes the ancient Egyptians painted upon their sarcophagi, fixed upon me. I felt a certain tension in the pit of my stomach, to be so watched, in such silence” (Carter 1993, 12).

The way I see it, at the beginning of their courtship, the act of looking was already used as a tool to exert power over the heroine: “He had loved to surprise me in my abstracted solitude at the piano. He would tell them not to announce him, then soundlessly open the door and softly creep up behind me [...] and clasp his hands over my eyes as I was lost in a Debussy prelude” (Carter 1993, 8). The husband seems to like being the only one with the power of the gaze. He actively seeks out situations where the heroine is preoccupied and his sudden appearance causes her shock. However, a fascinating twist on this is the fact that the heroine finds a way to balance out this unequal power setup with the use of additional sensory organs: “But that perfume of spiced leather always betrayed him” (8). By being able to prepare for his appearance with an acute sense of smell, she lessens the imbalance of power. She still feels obligated, though, to hide this shift in power: “after my first shock, I was forced always to mimic surprise, so that he would not be disappointed” (8). I find this aspect of the relationship fascinating. The heroine is forced, partly by her internalised patriarchal values and partly by the expectations of her suitor, to keep up the illusion of a more pronounced power imbalance than exists in reality, just to keep the Marquis happy. The suitor thus has a lesser image of the girl, and the girl chooses to keep him in the dark. Even though she claims it is for his benefit, keeping up the façade of being less skilled and smart than she really is benefits her in the long run. It also points to a trend centuries-old where the woman is taught “to accept those constraints as “natural,” inevitable—as “given” (Kaplan 1983, 36), and to learn not to show her real talents if they are greater than the man’s so as not to harm his image of himself.

As the story progresses and we get closer to the wedding night, descriptions of the husband having a possessive gaze become increasingly present: “I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh” (Carter 1993, 11). She herself feels as though she was now

becoming his possession, and she succumbs to his needs: “And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain” (16). These descriptions show her passivity: “[a]t once he closed my legs like a book [...] Not yet. Later” (16), which calls to mind Carter’s (1979) characterisation of the pre-determined roles men and women take on in sex: “woman has no other function but to exist, waiting. The male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning” (87). The basis for aligning herself with the idea of such a strong power imbalance between husband and wife may be the traditional male-female societal roles. Moreover, the difference between their age, experience, and wealth also forces her into a submissive role: “He was older than I. He was much older than I” (Carter 1993, 8); “how it must have been my innocence that captivated him” (20). This is reinforced by the roles inherent in the traditional direction of gazing: “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession” (Kaplan 1983, 42). Nevertheless, the fact that it is the heroine’s words, her description we read, suggests that she is aware of how she is perceived, and she seems to have a deep understanding of the reasons behind it. Since there is power in knowledge, I would argue that the fact that we read these objectifying descriptions from a female point of view serves to lessen their effect and the power position that these sentences are supposed to describe. Thus, by using the words and expressions we associate with how men think of and see women, the heroine takes away some of that power and attempts to create an equilibrium.

#### ***4.2 The Experience of Being Looked At***

Apart from portraying the traditional direction of the gaze, Carter also plays on Mulvey’s (1999) idea that “there is pleasure in being looked at” (835). The heroine is aware of all the eyes she attracts when appearing with her powerful fiancé: “Yes. I did. On his arm, all eyes were upon me. The whispering crowd in the foyer parted like the Red Sea to let us through” (Carter 1993, 10). She seems to enjoy the jealous gazes and the power that her newly acquired position comes with, evidenced by the special position she is now in when entering a crowd. This way, it seems like the power is not with the onlooker for once but rather with the one(s) being looked at. The one described above is a special situation, though. In this scene, it is the couple versus the crowd in awe. The distribution of power is rather different when the main characters are alone. Throughout the text, the reader gets to know hardly anything about the actual conversations that take place between the heroine and her husband. The story is told through the heroine’s point of view and, the

way I see it, she chooses to focus on her feelings and perceptions and describe their relationship thus. So, since a recurring theme of their interactions is him looking at her, without saying anything, gazing receives an additional significance. “I felt a certain tension in the pit of my stomach, to be so watched, in such silence” (12), describes the heroine one of their interactions of tension-filled silence. However, this does not seem to make her recoil. In fact, the idea that she managed to capture his powerful gaze seems to empower her: “I swear to you, I had never been vain until I met him” (12). However, at this point, this pleasure and empowerment, to some extent, come from Kaplan’s (1983) idea that “[h]er sexual pleasure in this position can thus be constructed only around her own objectification [...] given the male structuring around sadism, the girl may adopt a corresponding masochism” (38). Kaplan thus suggests that the heroine’s behaviour so far complies with Mulvey’s initial idea that women had learned to get pleasure out of their own objectification. While both Kaplan and Mulvey associate passivity with this, I would argue that, eventually, the heroine is able to use her objectification for her own good, gaining agency and breaking out of the passive role assigned to her.

Another interesting aspect of the gazing described in the tale is that, as the story progresses, the heroine starts to appropriate her husband’s gaze more and more. The first time she sees what he sees is a memorable experience for her:

I’d never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me, [...] And, for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away. (Carter 1993, 11)

Following this experience, however, instances where the heroine appropriates the male gaze—and gets pleasure from it—become more and more frequent: “And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring” (16). His gaze and what she presumes to see in his eyes allow her to get to know a new side of herself, no matter how scary what she thus finds is: “No. I was not afraid of him; but of myself. I seemed reborn in his unreflective eyes, reborn in unfamiliar shapes” (22). She seems cautious and reluctant to really get to know this side of herself. However, this is where mirrors and their significance come into the picture. Whenever she is afraid to look or is not supposed to see what (who) is behind her, there are usually mirrors to step in instead of her actual eyes: “I could not meet his eye and turned my head away, out of pride, out of shyness, and watched a dozen husbands approach me in a dozen mirrors and slowly, methodically, teasingly, unfasten the buttons of my jacket and slip it from my shoulders” (15). Even

though the mirrors are there in the master bedroom for the Marquis to see his prey better, they also turn out to serve the heroine in her learning about the male gaze.

Although Kaplan (1983) claims that “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession which is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act upon it” (42), meaning the heroine is not capable of achieving anything with her gaze, I would argue that, with the help of the mirrors, there is one instance where she almost succeeds. At the crucial point of the story, when the heroine’s visit to the bloody chamber has not yet been revealed to the Marquis, she attempts to delay the moment of truth by trying to seduce her husband: “I forced myself to be seductive. I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then” (Carter 1993, 41). I believe that, in this scene, the heroine grabs hold of the power by creating an image, with the help of the many mirrors, that appeals to her husband’s male gaze. What she displays—a weak, powerless girl—is in stark contrast with what she thinks—that she is ready to kill him, should she get the chance—, suggesting how aware she is of the situation. As Carter put it, “great women [...] once they have tasted power, once they know how to use their sexuality as an instrument of aggression, they use it to extract vengeance [...] These women murder” (Carter 1979, 424). The heroine is clearly manipulating the male gaze here, therefore I disagree with Kaplan’s (1983) notion that “women are left merely with the limited control they can wield through their sexuality” (44). True, the heroine is attempting to take full advantage of the power provided by her sexuality, but my contention is that she actually succeeds in transgressing these limitations and occupies a position similar to that of the powerful male gaze’s, not least thanks to the additional sensory organs and the countless mirrors available to her to utilise. In the words of Anna Pasolini (2016), “self-awareness and action stem from a mirroring process where a transformation in the way of looking underpins the reconfiguration of gender relationships. Thus the other [...] is no longer perceived as ‘object’, and both characters are allowed to become subjects of the gaze” (52). Ergo, the heroine is no longer constrained by the passivity forced upon her both by her husband and wider society, but she is able to secure a powerful position with the help of her female gaze. Accompanied by mirrors and additional sensory organs, she is able to ‘look back’.

### 4.3 *A Twist on the Male Gaze*

The fact that Jean-Yves is blind is a clear twist on the male gaze. As the eventual partner of the heroine, the fact that he does not possess the powerful male gaze is significant in terms of the future of their relationship. Unlike her relationship with the Marquis, her new relationship seems to lack the obvious power imbalance and anxiety-inducing subordination. Instead, the heroine is “busily engaged in setting up house with a piano-tuner” (Carter 1993, 49), the word choice indicating that the two are on equal grounds.

Moreover, the twist is especially interesting in relation to the permanent mark branding the heroine’s forehead: “when I involuntarily glanced at myself in the mirror, I saw the heart-shaped stain had transferred itself to my forehead, to the space between the eyebrows, like the caste mark of a brahmin woman” (Carter 1993, 42). The heroine attempts to remove the stain; however, she soon gives up and seems to accept it as a punishment she deserves for her behaviour: “but this red mark would not go away, either, no matter what I did, and I knew I should wear it until I died” (44). Even at the end of the story, when some time has passed since the events at the castle occurred, she still feels shame for having been marked. The last sentence raises interesting questions about the source and motivation behind this sense of shame: “No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it—not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart—but, because it spares my shame” (49). Her newfound partner cannot see the mark, perhaps he is not even aware that it is still there. Yet the heroine is forever aware of it and regards it as a reminder of her past mistakes. On the one hand, I believe the fact that her partner cannot see the mark suggests that she is not influenced by the male gaze and, by extension, by the values of a patriarchal society. Her sense of shame does not come from the fact that he constantly reminds her of it or that she sees it reflected in his eyes. It is her own shame; however, one has to wonder where exactly this determination of having made a mistake and having to then suffer for it comes from. According to Sheets (1991), “the narrator feels ashamed of the materialism that drove her to marry the Marquis and of her complicity in sadomasochism” (650). Sheets adds that the heroine “achieves a much more complicated sense of morality” (650) by the end of the story than the heroine in Perrault’s version; however, to me, Sheets’s idea suggests that the heroine internalised this shame based on male-centric ideals: she defied tradition and was open to sexual pleasure, and she was also curious and active, so she has to suffer. I disagree with this interpretation and much prefer Renfroe’s (1998) suggestion, that “shame has been pressed upon women by the dominant interpretations” and that “women’s disobedience [...] is seldom ad-

mired" (91) by society. So, those who defy the long-held societal beliefs and decide to go against the norms will likely be excluded from their community. However, by the end of the story, the heroine "has attained a future life of independence and self-respect" (Renfroe 1998, 91), even if that does mean that she has to endure other people's malicious comments. In my opinion, this is what explains her never-fading mark: she "must pay the price of my new knowledge" (Carter 1993, 40), that new knowledge being, according to my interpretation, that it is possible, maybe even preferable, to go against certain traditions and societal norms in order to grow and evolve as a person. The heroine goes on a journey of self-discovery and ends up among people (her mother and her partner) who accept her for who she is, which is far more rewarding than being accepted by a whole community but having to live a lie. According to Pasolini (2016), "the scar left on the body signifies a change that has taken place in the identity of the girl" (65), which simply means that she learned and evolved over the course of the story. The fact that this change has left a visible mark on her simply signals that she is no longer a stereotypical, passive heroine in a fairy tale, learning instead to embrace change and gain agency over her own life and decisions, continuing her journey of personal development.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the issues Angela Carter's rewriting of the Bluebeard story deals with are still relevant today and form an important part of the feminist discourse. First of all, the introduction of the mother character not only affects the ending of the story but is also crucial when it comes to the journey of self-discovery the heroine experiences over the course of the story. Carter also offers an insight into the rarely-discussed experiences of a mother who has to learn to let go of her child. By depicting the close relationship between mother and daughter and how each of them evolves throughout the story, Carter points out how crucial good female role models are and how significant their lack of representation in traditional fairy tales is. Secondly, sexuality and sexual liberation were heavily debated topics at the time Carter wrote the short story collection. Besides openly discussing female desire and sexuality, she also points out how damaging traditional depictions and therefore expectations of sexuality can be, both when it comes to men and women. With the help of metaphors and the language she uses, she allows the heroine to gain some power in spite of her reduced role as someone to be objectified. Finally, while the traditional direction and power-relation connected to the male gaze are, without a doubt, present in the story, my argument is that, with the help of mirrors and other sensory organs, Carter presents a kind of female gaze as well;

a position of power for the woman that helps her 'look back', leave behind the societal constraints imposed on women, and continue her journey of self-discovery.

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