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Feminism and Women's Fiction: A Reading of Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love"

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The aim of this essay is to provide an analysis of two of the tales in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979). The stories that make up this work have often been approached as rewritings of traditional fairy tales given a feminist twist, which is the perspective from which the above-mentioned short stories will be discussed in what follows. Thus, this essay begins by briefly commenting on the evolution of feminism and its repercussions on the development of women's fiction, situating Angela Carter (1940-1992) in the context of Second-wave feminism. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* can be seen as an illustration of the way in which feminist claims find an echo in literature and also of the way in which writing in general, and rewriting in particular, can be used as a feminist strategy. This will be shown by analysing "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love", paying attention to the connection with and divergence from their fairy-tale intertexts. In this light, the present study is structured in three sections. Firstly, an introduction dealing with the feminist movement and the connection between feminism and literature, which will provide a context for Carter's work. Secondly, the body of the essay, consisting of: 1) an analysis of "The Bloody Chamber", inspired by Charles Perrault's "Blue Beard" (1697), with which Carter's rewriting will be compared in order to see the implications for the treatment of female subjectivity and sexuality; and 2) a similarly oriented analysis of "The Lady of the House of Love", based on the comparison with "Sleeping Beauty" (Perrault, 1697). These two fairy tales by Perrault are part of a collection entitled *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (1697, in English *Stories or Tales from Past Times*),[1] which can be seen as part of the male literary canon many women writers reacted against in order to provide a view of the female character different from that endorsed by patriarchy. In the second story, Carter does this, to some extent at least, by interweaving

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[1] Interestingly, Carter translated this work by Perrault into English. The translation was published as *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* in 1977, two years before the publication of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*.

"Sleeping Beauty" with another intertext: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and the tradition of vampire narratives, since the story's main character is precisely that, a vampire. In fact, and as will be shown in the analysis, both tales use elements from Gothic fiction, which also plays its part in Carter's rewriting project. Finally, the third and last section of the essay will be devoted to the conclusions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The development of women's fiction in general, and particularly the traits of Carter's short stories, can be best understood in the light of feminism and its evolution. As Pam Morris states: "Women have suffered from a long tradition of what is generally called 'biological essentialism'" (1). This was based on the idea that the differences between men and women were the result of biology, which in turn provided a justification for certain views and rules by which women were subordinated to men as daughters, wives and mothers throughout history and across societies (Morris 2). This belief started to be publicly questioned when some revolutionary women began to fight for their rights, no matter if their struggle was criticised or disregarded. Women determined "to work for […] equality […] were […] condemned as narrow and selfish. The sexual discrimination […], which a later generation of women was to uncover in the 1960s, was either dismissed as of little consequence or even more likely passed unnoticed altogether." (Banks 162) What is known as "First-wave feminism" is connected with those pioneer feminists who organised themselves and actively combated inequality in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. This organised movement relied primarily on the various independent and sporadic activities of eighteenth-century feminists. Nonetheless, it was in the post-World War II period, with Second-wave feminism —beginning in the 1960s— that women's activism and protests reached an unprecedented level. Although they were coined earlier, the terms "feminism"

and "feminist" gained widespread use in the 1970s to refer to organized women's movements which had political aims in their fight for equality.

Highly influential for the development of Second-wave feminism was Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Written in 1949, its English translation was published in 1953, and it provided a sustained critique of the kind of biological essentialism mentioned above. As the author states in "Woman as Other", the introduction to this work: "every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity." (de Beauvoir) But she forcefully argued that femininity does not arise from differences in biology, psychology, or intellect. Rather, femininity is a construction of civilization, a reflection not of "essential" differences between men and women, but of differences in their situation. Therefore, if femininity is culturally and socially constructed, then it can be changed.

Second-wave feminism was a phenomenon which took place on both sides of the Atlantic, and it included different kinds of activism aimed at improving women's situation. Women wanted to publicly denounce what they saw as discriminatory and unfair to them in society, they wanted better working conditions for them and better living conditions for their families. There were public protests and campaigns, consciousness-raising groups were set up, etc., but also a powerful form "of activism in these years included books written by women" (Benstock, Ferriss and Woods 132). Accordingly, the French Simone de Beauvoir was not the only influence on the development of feminist activism through writing, but there were many other writers that could be mentioned, like Betty Friedan in the United States and Germaine Greer, who was born in Australia but lived and worked in England for a long time. For instance, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Friedan focuses on middle-class women and how they suffer psychologically and socially in their search for fulfilment through their husbands and children, while, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Greer deals with

the topic of the sexist and male-oriented representations of women in both literature and art (Benstock, Ferriss and Woods 132).

Research and scholarly writing, as represented, among others, by the works mentioned above, opened new paths of development for women's literature. Thus, the fight to change the patriarchal construction of femininity was also fought in the literary arena, as some women writers of the period shared the claims of Second-wave feminism and were interested in exploring through their works the place of women in society and the way in which women had been constructed, and could be constructed differently, in literature. In one of her articles, Angela Carter herself points out: "The women's movement has been of immense importance to me personally and I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I'm a feminist in everything else and one can't compartmentalise these things in one's life. […] For me, growing into feminism was part of the process of maturing." ("Notes from the Front Line") Literature was clearly affected by, and also contributed to, the struggle for greater gender equality. But what literature is, or is not, is defined in the light of "a body of texts that […] have certain aesthetic qualities; this body of writing is often also called the 'literary canon.'" (Morris 6) Thus, women that shared feminist claims were (and still are) in charge of what Morris calls "a double agenda" (1), involving also literature and the canon: first, they had to study and understand the mechanisms that had constructed and perpetuated female stereotypes, and then they had to change them. It is in this light that writing can become a feminist strategy.

Writing as a feminist strategy can take many forms, from the rewriting of canonical texts, generic conventions, etc., to the recourse to a feminine mode of writing, in line with what Hélène Cixous calls "*écriture féminine*" in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) –a kind of writing which remains in contact with female desire and the female body and hence

opposes phallocentrism.[2] In the case of Angela Carter's short stories, she rewrites in an attempt to subvert the female stereotypes and the ideology on which texts from the past are grounded. More specifically, she mines the structure of classical fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* in order to portray women in a different, more complex way, which diverges from, and thus questions, the patriarchal construction of femininity. This critique of a male-viewed universe is a recurrent element in Carter's works, the one analysed in this dissertation being just an example. For instance, her novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) is another work expressing "feminist concerns about female identity, history and the body" (Nowakowski 54) and has even been described as "mere propaganda in the service of feminism" (VanderMeer). Angela Carter is thus generally regarded as a writer whose works often denounce male domination of women and recurrently question traditional accounts of male-female relationships.

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[2] The term "phallocentrism" is normally used, though not exclusively, by feminist critics in order to refer to the extended Western thought that believes in "man" as the norm, and erases the presence of two genders into the singularity of the universal male (Morris 198).

II. FAIRY TALES REWRITTEN: "THE BLOODY CHAMBER" AND "THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE"

As Carter herself affirms, she chose this kind of literature –the fairy tale genre– as raw material for her short-story collection because she was highly "interested in folklore –just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree." Her intention was "not to do 'versions' […] but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories." (Simpson) By "latent content" she is mainly referring, I think, to something that is part of the story, but that has been downplayed or erased with the passing of time, remaining in latency and potentially capable of being activated again. In the "Introduction" to *Snow White, Blood Red* (1995) –a collection of rewritten fairy tales– Terri Windling reminds the reader that fairy tales have been written down since the art of literature began, but at the beginning they were aimed at an adult audience. Sex, violence, and resourceful women were very much part of these stories and it was above all in Victorian times that this was modified and the tales aimed at children. For instance, in one of the earliest versions of "Little Red Riding Hood", the wolf –disguised as the grandmother− tells the little girl to undress herself and come and lie beside him. By contrast, in later versions and Walt Disney adaptations, the girl is rescued by a convenient woodman before the wolf can gobble her up (Windling 1-3). Windling thus explains that the versions many of us are familiar with are the result of a process of bowdlerisation but, as pointed out above, the latent content –adult themes like violence and sex, more active females, etc.– can be activated again, as Carter does. In the tales to be analysed here, she subverts traditional female roles as they appear in Perrault's "Blue Beard" and "Sleeping Beauty" and creates renewed and non-traditional female characters in "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love". The protagonists of these tales can be seen as "struggling out of the straitjackets of history and ideology and biological essentialism." (Simpson) As will be

shown in what follows, women come to the fore in Carter's stories, and they are active protagonists struggling for their own welfare.

II.1. "THE BLOODY CHAMBER"

In this story, the female character not only becomes the protagonist but is also given a voice. As the tale begins, the main character is introduced as a young inexperienced girl who is about to marry a rich man. He will take her away from Paris into a secluded castle –with many things in common with the typical Gothic setting– far away from the world she knows, and from her mother, who became the family head after the untimely death of the girl's father. She does not really love her future husband, but he manages to seduce her with his wealth and mysterious attractiveness in spite of her mother's warnings. Nevertheless, she knows deep inside there is something he hides, something about him that she must fear or at least be wary of: "And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask."[3] As in the story's main source –Perrault's "Blue Beard"– marriage is followed by the girl moving to her husband's mansion, where he gives her a bunch of keys which open every door and then he leaves her alone when he goes on a journey. These men, representative of patriarchy in both tales, forbid their wives to enter one specific room, but both disobey. The difference lies in how each character is portrayed.

The traditional "Blue Beard" shows a male protagonist who appears to be right almost to the end, and who is betrayed by a wife driven "by her curiosity […]. Being come to the closet door, she made a stop for some time, thinking upon her husband's orders, and considering what unhappiness might attend her if she was disobedient; but the temptation was so strong she could not overcome it." (Perrault, "Blue Beard" 39) In Carter's tale, the

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[3]Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1995), 3. Hereafter quotations from *"*The Bloody Chamber" will be identified as BC, followed by page number in parenthetical references, while LHL will be used for quotations from "The Lady of the House of Love".

secret chamber –the "bloody chamber" of the title– also hides the dead corpses of the husband's previous wives, whom he had killed and kept there. However, in Perrault's version, it is not until he unmasks himself and shows he is actually a murderer that he starts to be seen as a wicked character and the girl begins to be regarded as "the poor wife" (43). When he discovers she has broken her promise and entered the forbidden chamber, he decides to murder her, but nonetheless the moral of Perrault's fable is that women, who tend to be too inquisitive, must control their curiosity and obey their husbands. The woman is portrayed as the one to be blamed as it is her curiosity that got her into trouble. Besides, the wife in Perrault is totally passive and can do nothing but wait for her manly, brave brothers to rescue her at the very end: "The gate was opened, and presently entered two horsemen, who drawing their swords, ran directly to Blue Beard." (43)

The basic ingredients of Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" are the same –the rich man who turns to be a psychopath, the helpless girl, and the key-related prohibition that is broken− but she writes her story from a feminist perspective. In contrast to Perrault, Carter grants the young girl the roles of narrator and focaliser, which contributes to her portrait of a character with moral complexity. She moves the story forward in time, to *fin-de-siècle* France, and she depicts the husband –whom she renames "the Marquis", thus linking him to the Marquis de Sade– as a libertine, an art connoisseur and collector of pornography.[4] Nevertheless, if the husband is inclined to sadism, the young wife shows a certain degree of masochism when it comes to her relationship with him. Even before the wedding, she discovers in her something she was unaware of: "When I saw him look at me with lust […] I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away." (BC 6) As Manley points out, the young wife "is a woman in process, someone who is exploring her subject

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[4] In 1978 Carter published *The Sadeian Woman*, her own personal reading of the Marquis de Sade and his most representative works. The term "sadism" stems from the name of the Marquis de Sade, an eighteenth-century French nobleman famous for his erotic and sexually perverse writings (Nadeau). Not only the name of the tale's male protagonist, then, but also other things about him, like his sexual preferences, connect him with this historical figure.

position and beginning to tell her own story." (83) Her entrance into married life is also an emotional journey which leads to maturity. She travels from the security of her childhood home and enters the adult world, in this case a world presented as purely patriarchal from the beginning. The Marquis is much older than her, "had been married before, more than once" (BC 4) and is "the richest man in France" (BC 8); he buys her clothes, a piano, gives her servants, and all luxuries. He thus uses his experience with women, and above all his fortune, to lure her and buy her love. Especially significant is the ruby choker he gives her as a wedding gift, and which he asks her to wear at all times, even when they make love. This suggests not only the future death her husband has planned for her (decapitation) but also the way in which he suffocates her, turning her into an object to be possessed and looked at. In this light, Carter denounces male control and objectification of women, hinting that for women patriarchy is still a villain bringing about misery. Interestingly, she also suggests that women may become complicit with their own objectification. There is something of this in the young wife's decision to marry and her behaviour immediately afterwards. In the end, she is not killed, but the Marquis presses a blood-stained key on her forehead which leaves an indelible red stain, an element that is not present in Perrault. This is an emblem of shame, "shame" being the last word in the story.

The young wife's process of maturation of course involves sex, which also serves Carter to rebel against the traditional stereotype of female purity as the protagonist in this story departs from the ideal of the sexless female. The exploration of a more complex female sexuality may have something to do with the fact that quite a long part of the narrative takes place in the married couple's bedroom. As Armitt states, the marriage chamber is a place that "carries two different connotations. On one level, it is a room (usually a bedroom) and therefore suggestive of two related behaviour patterns: the activities of the erotic and the inactivities of sleep. Herein lies the crux of the debate over female sexuality in these stories:

are the women active or passive, erotic or inert?" (91-92) From this perspective, this chamber symbolises both of these patterns. On the one hand, it is where the sexual initiation of the young girl takes place. And, on the other hand, it is where she returns the keys to the Marquis, including the blood-stained key which sentences her to death, to perpetual sleep. In the chamber, full of mirrors, she also lets him take off her clothes, passively standing while he acts and contemplates her image reflected twelve times, but she also discovers aspects of her character that are new to her: her husband objectifies her with his gaze and she finds herself not only disturbed but also sexually aroused, surprised "to feel myself stirring" (BC 11).

It is also interesting to focus on the figure of the mother. This is another major difference between Carter's and Perrault's versions of the tale. Traditionally, the character of the mother does not appear in fairy tales (she is usually dead), but Carter restores this strikingly absent figure and makes her strong, loving, and courageous. She confers on the young wife's mother traits that are typical of men, to the point that she becomes the saviour of her daughter at the end and thus replaces the brave bothers in Perrault's tale. From the very beginning, she is described as an adventurous woman, quite unlike the traditional daughter or housewife: "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?" (BC 2) As can be seen in this quotation, she is adventurous, bold and fearless, all of them qualities which are more often than not characteristic of men, especially in traditional fairy tales. Even at the very end, when she appears galloping on her horse to rescue her daughter, she is depicted as a courageous prince charming rescuing her beloved princess: "I saw a horse and rider galloping at a vertiginous speed along the causeway, though the waves crashed, now, high as the horse's fetlocks." (38) And, without hesitation, she shoots the Marquis dead. In this way,

Carter is trying to convey that women are as capable as men in everything. In addition, Carter giving more prominence to the figure of the mother also invites the reader to compare two different worlds: the mother's world is one based on women's independence and resourcefulness, where no male is needed to survive (the girl's father died in battle and, till her marriage, she lived with her mother and her nurse, a female universe). In contrast, there is the Marquis's world, clearly patriarchal, where women become passive and subordinated to men. Thus, this contributes to the critique of male domination as often predicated upon female inferiority and necessary dependence on men.

So far the analysis has shown that sex and violence are elements which are present in this story, together with blood, disturbing passions and the anticipation of terrible events in an isolated castle filled with towers and secret passages. This is connected with Carter's use of Gothic fiction, a genre related to everything repressed in the eighteenth century, as will be further explained in the following section. Traditionally, and as happens in fairy tales, the characters in Gothic novels are "black and white": an innocent victim (a passive female) and a villain (an active male, usually attractive but frightening at the same time). Carter still keeps the Gothic villain through the Marquis, very masculine and a sexual predator. But she makes changes in the female characters: one becomes more complex (the daughter), in terms of morals and in terms of sex, too; and the other (the mother) is definitely active, and even endowed with traditionally masculine traits. Finally, Carter offers an alternative to the kind of masculinity that the Marquis, and the Gothic villain, represent: the blind piano tuner that helps the girl in the castle and that ends up winning her heart. His blindness rules out the objectifying gaze associated with the Marquis, and he is, all in all, a character that suggests a more balanced distribution of power in the couple's future life together. By including a figure absent in Perrault, Carter is perhaps calling for the birth of a different type of

man/masculinity, which may be the reason why he is the only character given a name in the story: Jean-Yves.

II.2. "THE LADY OF THE HOUSE OF LOVE"

As in "The Bloody Chamber", the protagonist of "The Lady of the House of Love" is a female character, but in contrast to the former story, she is not an average girl but a vampire. The story is realistically set in Transylvania in connection with a historical event –the First World War– while simultaneously incorporating supernatural elements. Unlike the remote past that constitutes the setting of fairy tales, the setting here (as in "The Bloody Chamber") is moved forward in time and adds to the story an element of believability, but realism is significantly combined with fantasy in a way that may be reminiscent of Magical Realism. Like the story previously analysed, this one also makes use of Gothic elements: a supernatural protagonist, a tenebrous mansion where the action takes place, the ominous atmosphere of the tale, and several events that defy all reason and logic. In fact, the main character is a vampire girl doomed to live isolated in a castle in order to survive in its sheltering darkness; the only company the Countess has is that of her maid –actually a crone– that helps her with her feeding. The witty woman attracts the few men who come across the shadowy village and leads them to the chateau with her smiles and welcoming gestures (LHL 96). Then the girl, who is "so beautiful she is unnatural" (LHL 94), easily lures them into her chamber, where she ends up bleeding them to death.

As Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère points out: "Carter's vampire stories thus trace the 'dark' underside of the reception of the tale in Gothic fiction […] where the Sleeping Beauty figure is revived as a *femme fatale* or *vamp* who takes her fate in her own hands." (337) The Gothic genre emerged as a form of rebellion against the worldview and beliefs of the Enlightenment, an era in which reason was advocated as the primary source of truth, which explains why the period is also known as "the Age of Reason". The realm of the intellect has

traditionally been a male dominion, which somehow accounts for the period's view of women as passive and inferior, mere objects for men's benefit. During the Enlightenment, writers "continued to separate women as the opposites of men. Women were still perceived to have designated roles in society, particularly as mothers and wives." ("Women from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment" 3) Certain Gothic elements constitute a rebellion against these prototypical female roles, which Carter subverts by turning her protagonist into a *femme fatale* who uses men at her will in order to feed off them and survive. She is a vampire in the tradition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), although not a male vampire that enthrals impressionable women, but a female vampire that enthrals men, the other main character of the tale being a remarkably naive man, a young soldier on leave from his regiment. The vampire girl reads the Tarot cards every day, and these always show the same configuration: wisdom, death and dissolution (LHL 95). However, the arrival of this young man, an officer of the British army who "has the special quality of virginity" (LHL 97), is preceded by the Tarot showing something different: love. "The house of love" of the title thus makes reference to a Tarot card that announces a change in the protagonist's life connected with the young man's arrival, a change in the vampire's fate and, somehow, her awakening, which points to the tale's main intertext: Perrault's "Sleeping Beauty". Thus, "Gothic horror and the fairy tale [are linked] through the Countess, […] thereby fusing two powerful myths of femininity: the *femme fatale* and the *belle endormie*." (Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère 340).

In Perrault's story, the protagonist is portrayed as beautiful, feminine and passive, just waiting for the manly prince to rescue her. Perrault's gentle princess illustrates the traditional traits of the fairy-tale female protagonist, which are reflected, for instance, in the gifts that the fairies give to the girl:

> The youngest ordained that she should be the most beautiful person in the world; the next, that she should have the temper of an angel; the third, that she should do everything with wonderful grace; the fourth, that she should dance to perfection; the fifth, that she should sing like a nightingale; and the sixth, that she should play every kind of music with the utmost skill. (Perrault, "Sleeping Beauty" 1)

Each of the gifts makes her desirable from a male perspective. The princess is designed to be physically beautiful, accomplished, and submissive. In her version, Carter subverts this patriarchal view of femininity by making a drastic change in the girl and giving the young vampire the power to manipulate men:

> When she was a little girl, she [...] contended [...] with baby rabbits [...] But now she is a woman, she must have men. (LHL 96)

> When she takes them by the hand and leads them to her bedroom, they can scarcely believe their luck. (LHL 96)

In Carter's story the female is empowered. Instead of Perrault's delicate and beautiful woman, which is but an object, the reward of the male prince that rescues her, Carter's vampire girl –daughter of Nosferatu– can stand on her own. Men are the ones placed in a subordinate position, and they foolishly obey the woman here. This fits the way in which female characters often appear in Carter's fairy tales as wise and able to overpower male characters, or at least able to take the initiative, in contrast to Perrault's portrait of women as passive. Moreover, as Rodríguez-Salas points out, Carter's intention is to present artificial notions of "femininity as a site of terror and to demystify the negative stereotype of the *femme fatale* by showing that it is a role tailored for women, but with which they do not identify themselves" (121). That the protagonist is a vampire is as clear as the fact that she does not want to be one. Carter thus rebels against female stereotypes, but this rebellion is accomplished in two steps. First, Carter discards traditional portraits of women as pure,

innocent and passive by turning "Sleeping Beauty" into a vampire, the typical fairy-tale protagonist into a *femme fatale*. Then, she questions this other portrait of women, the stereotype of the female as an evil creature, manipulative and dangerous to men, a temptress and a monster –like the uncanny females in Gothic fiction– by making the protagonist a vampire who feels that what she is has been imposed on her and tries hard to re-define herself out of that role.

The reader is made to understand that the protagonist's long life has been made possible by sucking her victims' blood: this "queen of terror" (LHL 95), apparently doomed never to know love, has been preying on men for ages. However, although she has the typical attributes of the vampire or the Gothic *femme fatale*, she is also disturbingly portrayed as a victim. She is sad, forever locked in her castle, suspended in an eternal present from which she would like to escape, confined through her vampirism. Both Sleeping Beauty and the Countess are, so to put it, frozen in time, trapped in an unwanted state. These characters can be compared in this line, although they differ from one another. While to Sleeping Beauty release from slumber means awakening to life, to the Countess the release from her vampiric state –from her never-ending life in the darkness and solitude of a rotting castle– can only be effected through death, her own death. But only human beings can die. Although she is a supernatural creature, she is also given human attributes, so she is not so different from Sleeping Beauty, it seems, as the latter is equally able to survive for ages without getting old.

On examining the Countess's supernatural character, one can conclude that she is not portrayed as a monster but rather as a girl incapable of escaping her fate, just the same as the princess in "Sleeping Beauty". In Perrault's version, the girl falls asleep under the bad fairy's spell: "Partly because she was too hasty, partly because she was a little heedless, but also because the fairy's decree had ordained it, no sooner had she seized the spindle than she

pricked her hand and fell down in a swoon." ("Sleeping Beauty" 51) For her part, Carter's Countess awakes to mortal life in a way that reminds the reader of Sleeping Beauty's fall into slumber. She leads the young soldier into her chamber, as she always does in her ritual of death, but she drops the dark glasses she wears to protect her eyes from the light: "When she kneels to try to gather the fragments of glass together, a sharp sliver pierces deeply into the pad of her thumb." (LHL 106) She starts bleeding and this marks the beginning of her awakening: seeing her own blood for the first time makes her feel both fear and fascination. The process is completed by the young man, who goes from being her prey to her nurse: she lets him lovingly kiss her wound to soften the pain, which reminds of the kiss Sleeping Beauty is given, and this makes her crave being human. So, on the one hand, Sleeping Beauty's pricking her finger makes her fall asleep, creating a passive female character who can do nothing but wait for the prince to rescue her. And, on the other hand, the vampire's pricking hers awakens her, completing the picture of an active female character who is more and more determined to change her fate. That night, she will not kill the man because now she knows things can be different. She is fully aware of what she is doing, and so, Carter's character consciously decides she prefers dying to living the way she has lived so far: "The end of exile is the end of being." (LHL 106) When morning comes and the young man wakes up, dreaming of a future life with her, he finds her sitting at a round table near the bed, and notices first that she looks older, and then that she is dead.

In a way, the young soldier plays the same role as the prince in "Sleeping Beauty": while the prince has to go through "the middle of a great thick wood" filled with bushes and brambles to reach the castle (Perrault, "Sleeping Beauty" 55), the advance of the blue-eyed British soldier is similarly made difficult by "too many roses [...] on enormous thickets that lined the path, thickets bristling with thorns" (LHL 98). Besides, they both are essential to the girls' awakening, although there are differences here, as well. While the princess just

waits for a hundred years till the prince arrives –she is completely passive, he takes the initiative– the vampire lady is the one that takes the initiative, she is able to decide her destiny –whether she continues living or not is up to her– and it is the young man who is led by her to play a role he is completely unaware of.

Once again, then, Carter plays with stereotypes in this story, where Gothic elements are used in order to question male ascendancy over women and the passivity that usually defines traditional female roles. In important respects, she reverses gender roles by giving the common attributes of one to the other, and vice versa. The vampire girl thus becomes active, witty, and resourceful. She is manipulative through seduction, but she escapes not only the role of the passive woman but also, eventually, that of the devourer of men. For his part, the man, who is the one presented as a virgin here, is ignorant and just a means to fulfil the woman's wishes, which do not include a future together, but just freedom for her.

III. CONCLUSIONS

So far the analysis has shown how Angela Carter tries to subvert traditional female stereotypes, especially by rewriting fairy-tale conventions. In "Blue Beard" –and in line with the patriarchal attitudes of Perrault's time− the girl's curiosity and impertinence is what sentences her to death, rather than the fact that her husband is a psychopathic murderer. It is her courageous and manly brothers who save her. Similarly, in "Sleeping Beauty", the ingenuous and delicate princess is doomed to a hundred years' sleep, from which she awakes only when the brave prince rescues her. In this light, the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber" is linked with her predecessor in that she is still innocent due to her age and lack of knowledge, but at the same time Carter creates a much more complex character, aware of her own potential for corruption. Besides, at the end it is her mother who saves her and not any man. Similarly, evil and innocence combine in the protagonist of "The Lady of the House of Love", as she is both a *femme fatale* and a miserable girl trapped in a vampiric life she does not desire. In order to give depth to her characters and generate more meanings, the writer resorts to the strategy of extracting the tales' latent content, as explained in a previous section, and gives the stories a feminist twist to tell the tales anew: Carter significantly changes female roles and adds elements from Gothic fiction which destabilise the original fairy tales. She denounces the genre's sexism, and the way female roles were tailored by male writers and critics. To confront that, she gives the female protagonists of "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Lady of the House of Love" a second chance and the opportunity to choose their destiny, respectively.

It should be mentioned at this point that there are critics who argue that Carter should have been more radical, since taboos are perpetuated if they are not completely exploded. Patricia Duncker, for instance, states that "shifting the perspective from the impersonal voice to the inner confessional narrative as she does in several of the tales, merely explains,

amplifies and reproduces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic." (6-7) I do not believe this is the case with Carter's stories. The change of perspective she carries out lets the reader ponder on the traditional roles in which women have been cast since the earliest times of literature, and this therefore allows us to see that changes are possible and must be fostered. In my opinion, Angela Carter is using precisely the same genre that has so often diminished women in order to denounce and criticise this traditional construction of femininity; it seems her way of counter-attacking it. The stereotypes of innocent and naive girls at the core of Perrault's fairy tales are transformed in such a way that Carter's work "caused shock waves when it appeared, and it continues to shock." (Simpson) In fact, what Carter is doing is just the opposite of what Duncker states: she is subverting this stereotypical view of women from within a genre which has traditionally devalued them. Thus, the stories should be analysed in the light of what they are trying to convey: what is relevant is not so much the fact that they are fairy tales, but rather what they do with fairy-tale conventions. In *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Carter "was using the forms of fantasy and fairy tales with conscious radical intent" (Simpson). In line with this, Merja Makinen declares that narrative genres "clearly do inscribe ideologies (though that can never fix the readings)", and she insists that "later rewritings that take the genre and adapt it will not necessarily encode the same ideological assumptions. […] When the form is used to critique ideology, I would argue, then the form is subtly adapted to a new set of assumptions." (4-5) Given all this, I do not consider strictly necessary for Carter to be more radical, or burst more taboos. She does highlight elements which were not present before, such as violence, sex or active female characters, and she succeeds in making her readers, me at least, ponder on the power of literature to foster an artificial view of women as well as its power to subvert patriarchal constructions of femininity.

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