

## The Semiotic in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"

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In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, French author Charles Perrault wrote fairy tales. His "Blue Beard" is a story about a young woman lured by wealth to marry a man with the distinctive facial hair of the title. He tests her loyalty by asking her not to open or enter a little closet. She fails the test and discovers the dead bodies of his former wives. Blue Beard is about to kill her too when the bride's brothers rescue her. The story begins, "There once was a man . . .," indicating to the reader that this tale will be male-centered.

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" revises the patriarchal telling of this fairy tale into a feminist story. She does this by several means. Primarily, Carter gives the young bride in the story a voice. The bride tells the story from her point of view. In addition, one of the key figures in the story is the narrator's mother, a heroine. Carter's use of semiotic language centralizes the mother as heroine. In "Revolution of Poetic Language," Julia Kristeva describes the semiotic as originating in the pre-Oedipal, preverbal state in which the "chora" (which is neither sign nor signifier) is "analogous only to the vocal or kinetic rhythm" (2170). It exists before patriarchal language and bonds children to their mothers (2172). Further, in Carter's story the omnipresence of music and the rhythmic movements of the sea connect the mother and the semiotic, serving to reinforce the semiotic in the syntax and music of the prose. Carter's feminist revision also follows Hélène Cixous's order that women write their bodies. In "*Le rire de la Méduse*," or "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous describes *l'écriture féminine* and insists that women write their bodies in order to break the traditions keeping them in oppression. While Perrault's moral ostensibly places blame on the young bride's curiosity to see the prohibited room—the bloody chamber—Carter's retelling shows that the young bride is guilty more of sexual curiosity than of failing a test she could not possibly pass. In Carter's version, the bloody chamber is not the for-bidden room of iron maidens and racks but instead the room of sexual torture where the narrator bleeds upon losing her virginity.

The reader is able to get inside the head of the narrator as she details the story of her marriage. In the Perrault version, the narrator is an unknown, detached entity who merely outlines events. In Carter's revision, however, the narrator conveys the story sensuously and personally with attention to details and feelings that correspond to these events. Perrault writes that the "lady of quality . . . had two daughters who were perfect beauties." Notice the interchangeability between these two daughters. Blue Beard will take either one of them as his wife, and Perrault makes no major distinctions between the women except that the youngest one changes her mind about marrying Blue Beard. On the other hand, Carter is very specific about the narrator, who is only a child. Whereas Perrault portrays the girls as shallowly rejecting the man based on his blue beard, Carter includes no such stereotypes of female folly. Perrault shows the young woman seduced by the grand wealth of Blue Beard. In Carter's story, the seduction is much more complex. Its basis is wealth, which produces new feelings in the narrator. She thinks, "I had never been vain until I met him" (12). Still, the narrator's vanity combines with

sexual self-knowledge: “a potentiality for corruption” (11). Perrault’s version bypasses an explicit discussion of sex and reduces this young bride instead to a flatly constructed character, a shallow materialist.

Carter’s more sophisticated characters include the narrator’s mother, who appears on the first page of “The Bloody Chamber” and throughout the story as well. The narrator describes her mother as someone who “scandalously, defiantly, beggared herself for love” (7-8). This defiance marks her independence and corresponds with her heroic acts. She “outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger” and all as a very young woman (7). Carter begins the story with this demonstration of female strength. When faced with the forbidden bloody chamber, the narrator summons up the courage acquired from her mother. She says, “Until that moment, this spoiled child did not know she had inherited nerves and a will from a mother who had defied the yellow outlaws of Indo-China” (28). Not surprisingly, it is the narrator’s mother who rides to her rescue at the end of the story. Absurdly, in Perrault’s version, the young bride’s brothers (a dragoon and a musketeer) act as rescuers. In no other place in the story does the narrator mention them. According to the convention for saving the damsel in distress, the saviors must be male. Carter instead makes this savior the narrator’s mother:

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds  
and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lithe legs  
exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins

of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father’s service revolver . . .  
took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband’s head.  
(39-40)

Perrault’s version lacks such female agency and heroism, not to mention narrative logic. Carter places the power in the hands of a woman, a mother, a character whose actions arise not merely from demands of a formula but out of previously established character traits. In this case, feminist concerns also produce a more convincing narrative.

The mother acts not only as a heroine but also as a method of reinforcing the semiotic language that Carter uses throughout the story. As indicated earlier, Julia Kristeva describes the semiotic as originating before the symbolic patriarchal language and “analogous only to the vocal or kinetic rhythm” (2170). As a pre-Oedipal phenomenon, the semiotic is the language that connects the child to its mother before the realization in the child of autonomy. This connection between mother and child manifests itself in “The Bloody Chamber.” While the symbolic language depends on the “biological (including sexual) differences, and concrete, historical family structures,” the semiotic is “rhythmic and intonational” (Kristeva 2173-4). Thus the symbolic is rooted in the Law of the Father and is the language that stems from identification of gender. According to Kristeva, the Oedipal process leaves girls and women behind in the development of symbolic language. Since they do not have to make a deal with the Father over possession of the mother, they never have to give her up. Perhaps this makes the semiotic a better representation of their expression. Attention to rhythm indicates that the semiotic exists within the symbolic language and is “rhythm made intelligible by syntax” (2174). Carter uses variegated syntax to form the rhythmic quality of her prose, which in turn reinforces the omnipresence of the narrator’s mother in the story.

From the beginning of the story, the long sentences add a rhythmic and musical flow to the prose, rhythms analogous to the semiotic. Short repetitive sentences often punctuate (in the sense that they interrupt) these long sentences. This technique can be seen in the narrator's recollection of her mother's questions:

*Are you sure*, she said when they delivered the gigantic box that held the wedding dress he'd bought me, wrapped up in tissue paper and red ribbon like a Christmas gift of crystallized fruit. *Are you sure you love him?* There was a dress for her, too; black silk with the dull prismatic sheen of oil on water, finer than anything she'd worn since that adventurous girlhood in Indo-China ...

*Are you sure you love him?* (7, my emphasis)

The long sentences work like sustained melodies with the interruption of a single voice that repeats the same phrase, cutting through the steady stream of sound. Notice too that it is the mother asking the question. Both content (the question) and form (the rhythmic quality of the sentence structure) support her omnipresence. This is only one example of how long sentences demonstrate the importance of the mother and the semiotic in the story. Though many male writers, especially poets, use rhythm in their work, their sex should not be confused with their gender. It is entirely possible for a man and poet to be female/feminine in his writing. Still, this is very uncommon. Remember that Cixous's *l'écriture féminine* emphasizes writing the body and that Kristeva focuses on the rhythms of the mother-child bond. Few writings made by men have addressed such topics.

The atmospheric elements in the narrative further exemplify the semiotic and the importance of the mother in this feminist revision. The music motif connects the narrator, who is a musician, to her mother. The narrator describes when she went to see Tristan, with its "voluptuous chords" (10). After her first sexual encounter with her husband, the narrator uses music as a comfort: "for the sake of the harmonious rationality of its sublime mathematics, ... I set myself to the therapeutic task of playing all of Bach's equations, every one, and I told myself, if I played them all through without a single mistake—the morning would find me once more a virgin" (31). Several important issues layer this passage. Primarily, the narrator's retrospective mood emphasizes her musicality. She finds refuge in her piano playing. At this point in the narrator's life, she thinks that its rhythms will aid her in regaining innocence. Perhaps the rhythms in Bach will deliver her back to the steady rhythm and flow of her mother's womb.

The rhythmic quality of "The Bloody Chamber" is seen further in the contrast between the maternal sea and the important masculine image of the train. If the sea becomes a reminder of the womb, the train foreshadows the impending bodily violence inflicted on the narrator by her husband. In the first paragraph of the story, the narrator recalls "the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night" (7). Carter connects the narrator's body to the story's atmosphere. The mechanized "thrusting" of the train contains an artificiality and implicit sexual violence. Carter further demonstrates the artificiality and violence of the train with its "syncopated roar" (8). This syncopation contrasts with the steady rhythms of the narrator's taste in baroque and classical music. Syncopation is the uneven, sporadic rhythm common in African music and in modern music like that of Igor Stravinsky. (In Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, a young woman sacrifices her body to the gods by dancing herself to death.) Syncopation in prose can also be found in unexpected plot points. In Perrault's story, the pacing takes on irregular rhythms with the

sudden introduction of the musketeer and dragoon at the conclusion of the fairy tale. In all, male writing and/or agency becomes characterized by (sexual) violence, sudden changes, and death. In contrast, female writing/agency becomes marked by fluid, sustained rhythms and the creation of life—birth.

This motif of birth is reinforced by Carter's use of the sea. Surrounding the narrator's new castle home, it provides a metaphor for the womb. Arriving from the train, the narrator smells the "amniotic salinity of the ocean" (12). The sea becomes a connection to the narrator's musicality as well. She says, "Sea; sand; a sky that melts into the sea . . . A landscape with all the deliquescent harmonies of Debussy" (13). Further, it is the "castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea" (13). Not only does the sea embody a characteristic of the womb with its amniotic fluidity, but it also embodies the musical ebb and flow of Debussy's music. The castle itself becomes like a child, laid out on the "bosom of the sea," providing another indication of the closeness between the narrator and her mother. Though she first thinks that there is "[n]o room, no corridor that did not rustle with the sound of the sea" (13), this turns out not to be the case. The torture chamber (that is, the one with the dead wives), is the only place where she "could no longer hear the sounds of the sea" (27). This removal from the sea signifies a removal from the mother, her savior and heroine. In this death chamber her mother cannot reach her. She finds refuge in the company of the piano tuner whose speech has "the rhythms of the countryside, the rhythms of the tides" (32). He comes to her aid in the stead of her mother and with his fluid voice, calms the narrator.

Perrault and Carter have distinct ways of treating the moral of the fairy tale, both of which deal with the female body. The second of Perrault's morals is ridiculous at best as it characterizes abusive husbands as a purely historical phenomenon (hardly a thing of the past in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or now) and claims that contemporary (that is, 17<sup>th</sup> century) women would keep their husbands in line. The first of his listed morals offers a more interesting perspective: "Curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to deep regret. To the displeasure of many a maiden, its enjoyment is short lived. Once satisfied, it ceases to exist, and always costs dearly." Read literally, and keeping in mind the plot of his version of the story, it seems to deal directly with the bride's disobedience in entering the chamber of dead wives. Perrault emphasizes a wife's duty to be obedient to her husband no matter what crimes he commits. He writes, "She was so much pressed by her curiosity that, without considering that it was very uncivil for her to leave her company, she went down a little back staircase, and with such excessive haste that she nearly fell and broke her neck." Typically, Perrault focuses on the bride's role as proper hostess in spite of her own desires.

Still, the diction in that first moral by Perrault is very sexual. He mentions the maiden's "displeasure," that the "enjoyment was short lived," and finally that once the (sexual) curiosity is "satisfied, it ceases to exist." In this context, the moral seems to be that maidens should steer clear of desiring sex. Perrault's version contains sexually coded situations. The key to the little death closet is phallic. The bride rapes the lock to that closet and, in a sense, violates her husband's space against his will. Perrault's version may not contain any explicit mention of wedding night sex, but it implicitly gainsays aggressive female sexuality. As suggested earlier, the moral seems to be that a husband's orders are to be obeyed under any circumstances. Further, female curiosity, sexual or

otherwise, distracts wives from their proper functions (taking care of their guests) and is punishable.

Carter alters the moral in her treatment of “Blue Beard.” She does this by changing the location of the bloody chamber from that of the closet of dead wives to the bedroom—the site where the narrator loses her virginity. This change alters the conventional reading of the moral of the fairy tale. Hélène Cixous writes in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” “Woman must write her self; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (2039). For Cixous, the drive for women to write also serves as a reconnection to their bodies, which are repressed by the patriarchy. The writing of women’s bodies becomes an active political statement confronting the patriarchy that represses female expression. Carter follows this order by including the narrator’s sexual desire and loss of her virginity. As aforementioned, Carter’s revision of “Blue Beard” includes many references to women’s bodies through the mother/child connection in the womb. These references allow Carter to foreground what Perrault was compelled to conceal: the sexual nature of the female body and the implications of that reality.

In Perrault’s “Blue Beard,” there is no literal mention of the bride’s loss of virginity. His disconnected, distant narrator simply passes over the wedding night and jumps in time. The narrator says, “As soon as they returned home, the marriage was concluded. About a month afterwards . . .,” and essentially skips over this important moment in a woman’s life. No direct mention exists of the bride and her sexual apprehensions or desires. In Carter’s version, textual layers outline the attraction and repulsion of the bloody chamber. Upon entering the torture chamber of dead wives, the narrator remembers the words of her husband’s favorite poet: ““There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer.”” The narrator knows this based on her first sexual experience (27). Interestingly, she is not as afraid of the death chamber as she is of her bedroom. She stays in the death chamber long enough to see how the most recent wives came to their end. She does not, however, go to her bedroom for consolation as the bride does in Perrault’s version. Why would she? It is the location where, through the magic of mirrors, “A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides” (17).

The moral of Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” alters the one suggested by Perrault. While he blames the bride for her curiosity in general and implicitly for her sexual curiosity, Carter explores the implications of the latter. The narrator thinks, “No. I was not afraid of him; but of myself . . . . I hardly recognized myself from his descriptions of me and yet, and yet—might there not be a grain of beastly truth in them?” (20). Carter recognizes that the narrator’s disobedience in going to the death chamber is not the issue at hand since the narrator ““only did what he [her husband] knew [she] would”” (37). No, the guilt stems not from disobedience, but that she was not ““truly blind to her own desires when she took [her husband’s] ring”” (38). The curiosity is not implicitly sexual as it is in Perrault’s story. Rather, it is quite explicitly so. She may be afraid of sitting in her bedroom, but she also longs for sex. This attraction continues after her husband leaves, supposedly on business. She remembers, “I felt a vague desolation that within me, now my female wound had healed there were certain queasy cravings like the cravings of pregnant women for the taste of coal or chalk or tainted food, for the renewal

of his caresses . . . . I lay in our wide bed accompanied by, a sleepless companion, my dark newborn curiosity” (22).

If the moral is not, as in Perrault’s estimation, to obey one’s husband without fail, then what is it? If it is not that women should be good little housewives and helpmates, attentive to their guests, etc., what is the moral color of Carter’s version? The moral is complicated. The blood does not wash off the key to the death chamber just as it does not wash off the narrator’s forehead once her husband presses the key there. The key, again phallic, leaves its stain on this bride. No amount of Bach can remove the emotional stain of her lost virginity. Does Carter imply that female sexual curiosity is inherently bad? No, of course not. Instead, she explores the complicated relationship that women have with their sexual selves. The narrator is grateful that her lover cannot see her, “not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart—but, because it spares my shame” (41). It is the narrator’s sexual curiosity that leads her to marry the murderer, and she blames herself for not being impervious to sexual desire. This story expresses no easy moral except, perhaps, that one should not marry for sex alone. Even this does not encompass the sense of shame women have for their own bodies and desires.

In all, Carter employs several effective methods for updating Perrault’s version of “Blue Beard” to her feminist “The Bloody Chamber.” Primarily, the story is about women by a woman: the narrator is the young bride instead of the detached, third party narrator. Carter gives much weight to the narrator’s mother as the heroine, the bride’s salvation from decapitation. Also, the text contains evidence of Kristeva’s definition of the semiotic, so rooted in the connection between mother and child, with the rhythmic quality of the prose. Even the motifs in the story—the opera, the piano, the train, and the sea—serve to reinforce these rhythms. Like Cixous, Carter knows the importance of writing about women’s bodies. If logocentric writing, embodied by Perrault’s stylistic “Law of the Father,” depends on linear, logical storytelling, it is feminist and subversive to write in a rhythmic, non-linear way (both Carter and Cixous do this) and to write about women’s bodies.

Feminism is about releasing women from the fetters of patriarchal repression, and Carter’s version releases the fairy tale from its patriarchal past. She does not treat the moral of the tale lightly. It is repulsive that women should be obedient and submissive to their husbands in all cases. It is unrealistic for women to repress their sexual curiosity. It is likely that women will still feel some shame for this curiosity because they have for so long felt compelled to hide the sexual part of themselves. Because the moral proves realistically complicated and conscious of women’s difficult position in society, Carter’s version is more compelling than Perrault’s. Feminist revisions rewrite from a female perspective, but they cannot erase the way in which patriarchy damaged and damages a woman’s concept of self.

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