

# A Scopophiliac Fairy Tale: Deconstructing Normative Gender in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"

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## Abstract:

Angela Carter's short story collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a reworking of traditional fairy tales, or as she suggested "stories about fairy stories." Carter takes up the flexible structure of the fairy story in order to communicate the experiences of being a woman in a patriarchal society, subjected to certain ways of seeing and being seen. In this article, I explore the economy of vision in the title story of Carter's collection, arguing that she deconstructs the violent structure of seeing embodied in the two main characters in the story. I conclude by looking at two alternatives that appear in the story, both of which move beyond the violence and seductiveness of ways of seeing within a patriarchal society.

1 In 1979, after having published two novels that set out to thoroughly debunk myths – those "extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree" (Carter, *Notes* 38) – Angela Carter published a collection of short stories under the title *The Bloody Chamber*, a set of reworked fairy tales, or "stories about fairy stories" as she puts it (Carter, *Notes* 38). Unlike the falsity of myth, Carter saw fairy tale and folktale (she uses the terms synonymously) as having a radical political edge. Whilst myths have to be "argued with, dismantled through the act of writing", folklore is "a much more straightforward set of devices for making real life more exciting and is much easier to infiltrate with other kinds of consciousness" (Carter, *Notes* 38). This is thanks to the flexibility of the form of folk and fairy tales: transmitted orally, each new teller could modify the tale to suite the particular context in which it was told. Since tales are thus "embedded in social and material conditions" (Warner xvii), they are perfectly suited for the interrogation of the kind of issues that preoccupied Carter, such as the deconstruction of gender norms and ways of seeing.

2 One dominant aspect of Carter's oeuvre is a concern with the visual. An early scene in her novel *The Magic Toyshop* involves the protagonist Melanie gazing at herself in a mirror, whilst in *Love* the character of Annabel is described in terms of still images from expressionist films. Carter's interest in the visual is always in relation to the myths and conventions that structure society, and how they relate to the construction of identity. Susan Sellers notes that Angela Carter views mythic images of women as 'consolatory nonsenses', and goes on to say that Carter "attacks this mythic inscription for dealing in what she calls 'false universals,' since it ignores the complexity of individuals as well as the mutability of history" (108). The stories collected in *The Bloody Chamber* certainly explore mythic images

of women and show both their violence and attraction. They also feature many scenarios in which looking and being looked at are the central focus, along with the consequences of certain ways of inhabiting the visual world.

3 In this paper I have chosen to examine the title story from this collection, arguing that “The Bloody Chamber” foregrounds the ambiguity of the visual world, revealing both the violence and the seductiveness of certain ways of seeing or being seen. It does this by showing the relationship between ways of seeing and gendered identity, examining both how subjects take up positions within the visual world and the potentially violent consequences of such positions. As noted above, Carter uses the genre of fairy tale because of its flexible structure, the most evident demonstration of this occurring at the level of narration: Carter’s female first-person narrator is able to flood a familiar fairy story with her own form of consciousness. In this way, Carter is able to retell a traditional story and explore it from her own point of view, foregrounding her interest in the politics of gender and vision. My analysis will look at two forms of vision that relate to gendered identity, examining both the pleasure and the violence of such ways of seeing, and will conclude by considering the alternatives that Carter’s short story offers to such a violent economy of vision. Throughout my analysis I draw upon influential theories of vision, such as Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of “the look,” John Berger’s dichotomy of ways of seeing, and Laura Mulvey’s notion of “the male gaze.” These ideas will be used to shed light upon Carter’s explorations of gender and the visual.

### **Bluebeard and The Bloody Chamber**

4 Before commencing my analysis, some background information about the story is useful to note. “The Bloody Chamber” is a modern re-telling of the fairy tale *Bluebeard* by Charles Perrault. This tale tells the story of a young woman who discovers that her newly wed husband is a violent psychopath who keeps the dead bodies of his previous wives in a secret room. She discovers this fact by entering this secret chamber, against her husband’s declared wish that she not do so. Although her husband finds out about her transgression and attempts to murder her, her two brothers arrive just in time to prevent her death. As well as coming to their sister’s rescue, the brothers also kill the husband and the tale ends felicitously by noting that the woman eventually marries a “worthy man” (Tatar 156). The two central themes of the tale are thus caution in marriage and the dangerous consequences of a too-strong desire for knowledge. But this latter theme is not gender-neutral. Instead, there is an emphasis upon the dangers of curiosity for women, which draws on traditional images and

archetypes of the dangerous woman. As Maria Tatar explains, “Perrault aligns the intellectual curiosity of Bluebeard’s wife with the sexual curiosity of women in general, thus hinting that his protagonist is very much a daughter of Eve” (146). Although the tale is resolved through her being rescued by her brothers and her marriage to a “worthy man,” these two themes continue to resonate so that the tale does not simply end “happily ever after.”

5 Carter’s short story takes up both of these themes but gives them a feminist twist. Firstly, the theme of caution in marriage is shown to be haunted or complicated by the privileged status of masculinity – for example, the young woman is rescued from poverty by her wealthy husband. Secondly, the theme of cautioning women about the desire for knowledge (linked to the myths of Pandora and Eve) is revealed as a fiction that supports the hegemony of male desire and the inequalities of patriarchal society. Carter brings out these ideas through the use of vision – through visual encounters and visual metaphors. The different ways in which characters see and take pleasure in seeing is the central mechanism in her short story, as I will demonstrate in my analysis.

6 Carter makes a number of changes to the tale of *Bluebeard*. Firstly, the young woman is rescued not by her brothers, but by her mother, who is presented as a strong, independent, fearless and loving woman. This change alone shows an alternative characterisation of women – as active, courageous and capable. Secondly, as noted above, Carter presents the theme of temptation differently. Instead of seeing the young woman’s entering the forbidden chamber as proof of a dangerous feminine curiosity (as in the myth of Eve or Pandora), Carter turns it around and presents the act of transgression as conditioned by the sadistic and dominating desire of man. As the young woman says towards the end of Carter’s story: “I knew I had behaved exactly according to his desires [...] I had been tricked into my own betrayal [...] I had played a game in which every move was governed by a destiny as oppressive and omnipotent as himself, since that destiny was himself; and I had lost” (137).

7 Thirdly, Carter fleshes out the character of the “worthy man” from the fairy tale, giving him a more substantial role in her story. She writes this character as a blind piano tuner and by doing so gives us a character that can be read as offering an alternative to the economy of the violent male gaze, as represented by the husband. Lastly, Carter’s rewriting of the tale of *Bluebeard* emphasises the material conditions of the lives of the characters, as opposed to the timeless or mythical quality of many fairy tales, or at least their modern, educational versions. For example, Carter renames the violent husband “the Marquis,” following a tradition of linking the figure of Bluebeard with Gilles de Rais (1404-40), a Breton knight who was a companion-in-arms of Joan of Arc and an infamous child-murderer.

Likewise, by setting his castle in Brittany and describing the villagers' fears of the Marquis, Carter also "evokes the brutal feudalism of the historical Gilles de Rais" (Sheets 645). At the same time, as Sheets goes on to point out, Carter clearly sets her story in the modern age with its references to telephones, the stock market and drug trafficking, and these also help to ground the story in material reality.

8 Carter sets up the relationship between the Marquis and his young bride as one that is typical within a patriarchal society: the man assumes an active and dominant role whilst his bride is positioned as passive and timid. Although the differences between them partly concern wealth and age, Carter foregrounds their differences in terms of the visual. The Marquis represents the dominant scopic position within patriarchal society: the active, gazing position, the one who looks. His perspective dominates his wife's and their relationship is conducted in such a way as to satisfy his desires. His visual engagement can thus be seen as a form of scopophilia or pleasure in looking, and is characterised by both voyeurism and fetishism. By contrast, his bride occupies the passive role of the object gazed at, assuming her husband's perspective on herself (seeing herself as he sees her) and identifying with the self-images he offers her. I will begin by analysing the Marquis as fetishistic voyeur and then turn to the young bride's way of looking in order to examine how it is that she is seduced by her husband's way of seeing, given that it is so violent. In the conclusion, I will look at the two alternatives to this visual economy of voyeurism and identification: the blind piano tuner's economy of the ear, characterised by openness and attentiveness to the other, and the figure of the strong mother, an image of independent and active femininity, and who shares a kind of maternal telepathy with her daughter.

### **Fetishistic Voyeurism**

9 The Marquis' scopophilia is established in several important ways, including the history of his previous wives, his adorning of his young bride, his way of looking at her, and his obsession with pornography. To begin with, his scopophilia is hinted at from the description of his previous wives, which we learn about throughout the story. One of his previous wives was a lady of high fashion, whilst another was famous for being a nude model for painters (112, 113). Both of these roles illustrate what Laura Mulvey describes as the primary function of woman in patriarchal society: exhibitionism (Mulvey 19). It also illustrates the primary role of man as voyeur. This is further confirmed by the young woman when she notes that her husband had "invited me to join his gallery of beautiful women" (113), and that when sitting with him ("on his arm") at the opera, "all eyes were upon me"

(114). Through this exhibition of his fiancée (and his previous wives before her), the husband takes pleasure not only in gazing upon her, but also in receiving recognition from others – from the gaze of others. In this way his desire is not for her as an individual but for what she signifies, what she is worth in the eyes of others. As Mulvey succinctly puts it, women “are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with women, everything to do with man” (13). The young woman clearly fits this idea, for it becomes apparent later in the story that she is just one in a line of women whose most important function is as object of the Marquis’ selfish desire and, in visual terms, as object of his gaze.

10 An illustration of the way in which the Marquis fetishizes his bride can be seen in the lavish clothes and jewellery that he gives her. Not only does he buy her an expensive dress, but he also adorns her with two family heirlooms: an opal ring and a ruby choker. Commenting on the dress the young woman says: “I wore a sinuous shift of white muslin tied with a silk string under the breasts. And everyone stared at me” (114). In this way she has been turned into an object of display, with particular attention drawn to her breasts, a typical object of male fetishism. The jewellery he gives her is more complex. The opal ring and ruby choker not only place her within his family tradition, thereby subjugating her individuality to the formal structure of lineage (in a similar way to how she is merely one wife in a line of wives), but also focus attention on her hands and neck respectively. Firstly, the opal ring is captivating and therefore distracts her from her piano playing: as she says, “I could not take my eyes off [the opal ring] when I played the piano” (115). The ring therefore not only fetishizes her, but also distracts her from her musical talents and encourages her to focus her attention on her appearance. It is thus a metaphor for her husband’s desire to turn her into a visual object and to coerce her into adopting his surveying perspective of her. His fetishization of her conceals his fear – fear of her becoming an independent subject, fear of her sexual difference, perhaps even fear of castration. This latter idea is hinted at by the ruby choker: another family heirloom, originally worn by his grandmother to signify her escape from the guillotine during the Terror of revolutionary France. This object in particular seems to prefigure the bride’s death sentence: when her husband discovers her transgression he instructs her to wear the choker for her decapitation. The choker as fetish object is heavy with signification. In a footnote to her essay “Perverse Pleasure and Fetishized Text,” Becky MacLaughlin notes that what is “[m]ost striking about this fetish is its paradoxical potential

for castrating (death by strangulation) and at the same time concealing castration (a cover for the mark of the guillotine – or, perhaps, for a vampire bite)<sup>1</sup>.

11 One of the best illustrations of how the Marquis' voyeuristic gaze is both violent and seductive occurs in an early scene in the story, when he takes his young bride to the opera. Here, adorned in expensive clothes and jewellery, his bride is shocked at encountering his violent gaze: "I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it" (115).

12 This passage highlights the different positions that men and women have traditionally occupied as visual subjects within a patriarchal society. John Berger captures this distinction in a famous and succinct passage in his book *Ways of Seeing*: "*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). I will return to this distinction later on in the analysis of the young woman's particular form of seeing. For now I wish only to note the distinctions Carter creates in this passage, with the Marquis taking the active, gazing position and his young bride passively reflecting on his look at her. The sense of his gaze as active is emphasised by the violence of his look in the metaphor of her body as dead meat. By contrast, the passivity of her own look is highlighted by the fact that she is looking at herself not only through his eyes but also through the reflection of a mirror, an object traditionally associated with women's vanity, as depicted in the tradition of the nude painting.<sup>2</sup> As we will see in the course of my analysis, part of Carter's aim in this story is to reveal how this opposition is both violent and conventional (or normal), and that deconstructing this power-structure is both possible and important. The significance of this gesture lies particularly in the comment above that the young woman had perhaps noticed the Marquis' gaze before, but had not acknowledged it. This distinction reveals the normality and therefore invisibility of certain ways of looking, despite the violence in them. It is this opacity that writers like Carter, and feminist theorists like Mulvey, have sought to bring to light.

13 The power of this way of looking is also revealed in a couple of other key passages. Here, we get a sense that the Marquis' gaze is not tied to him as an individual but is rather an abstract position of power that is assumed by him, a generalised way of looking within a certain form of society, and also in part a condition of being part of the visible world. This

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<sup>1</sup> In this context it is also worth noting that Freud associated decapitation with castration. See his short piece entitled "Medusa's Head."

<sup>2</sup> The hypocrisy that constitutes the association of women with vanity in the nude tradition is well analysed by Berger in chapter 3 of *Ways of Seeing*.

idea can be found in many theories of the relationship between subjectivity and the visual: both Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Lacan argue that the gaze of the Other is a kind of formal structure that both constitutes and haunts subjectivity, so that we come to feel that we are always in the presence of the Other's look. Similarly, for Mulvey and Berger the gaze is assumed by the male subject within patriarchal society as a means of domination over female subjects, but in principle it need not be this way – the roles could be reversed so that women occupy the dominant scopic position. One main difference between the two sets of thinkers is that Sartre and Lacan are more interested in the way in which the subject, male or female, exists in the presence of the Other as an existential condition of being – we all inhabit a visual world and are all subject to being seen at any moment. By contrast, Mulvey and Berger are more interested in conventional ways of seeing, tied to particular art-forms, that place gendered subjects in different positions so that the structures of patriarchal society tend to place men in the position of subject of the gaze, whilst placing women in a passive, self-reflexive position, or object of the gaze. Nevertheless, they all seem to share the notion that subjects internalise the structure of the gaze (the condition of visibility), whether this be an abstract and universal gaze that derives from being part of a visual world, or a gendered gaze that derives from the unequal distribution of power within a particular form of society, highlighted by paintings and films.<sup>3</sup>

14 As mentioned before, “The Bloody Chamber” contains at least two important scenes which can be read with respect to this notion of a disembodied gaze that is internalised, in this case the Marquis' gaze that is internalised by his young bride. Firstly, en route to the Marquis' castle by train at night, the young woman, who cannot sleep, has the feeling that her husband is looking at her through the darkness. Despite the fact that she detects no change in his breathing, nonetheless her “heightened excited senses told me he was awake and gazing at me” (116). It turns out that he is in fact awake, but this passage hints at the fact that his gaze is starting to exercise an almost omnipotent power over her – that she feels the presence of his gaze independently of the recognition of his eyes on her. A later scene demonstrates this

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<sup>3</sup> The relevant texts are: Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Mulvey's “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, and Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. Whilst there are considerable differences between each of them, such as their different disciplines and backgrounds (philosophy, psychoanalysis, film theory, art theory), they all seem fascinated with the distribution of power within the visible world. Sartre's account of the look stresses the inter-subjective battle of looks between two people, whilst Berger and Mulvey both argue (in their own ways) that women are subjected to the gaze of men, a gaze that places them in a passive, self-reflexive mode of being. What I find most relevant in these accounts for the passage above is the shared conviction that such a structure is internalised by subjects, so that one feels watched as if by objects – that gaze being not tied necessarily to the eyes of another, but manifesting its power all around us.

notion even more strongly. After entering the forbidden chamber and discovering the bodies of his previous wives, she notes that “[t]he light caught the fire opal on my hand so that it flashed, once, with a baleful light, as if to tell me the eye of God – his eye – was upon me” (132). Even more than in the previous passage, here the Marquis’ dominating male gaze is revealed as a kind of all-seeing eye, tied not to his body but manifesting its power and presence in objects associated with him. In his account of what he refers to as ‘the look’, Sartre argues that the feeling of being looked at is not necessarily tied to the eyes of another person, but can be triggered by any number of phenomena: “a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain” (Sartre 257). A phrase from Peter Wollen’s essay on the gaze captures this idea succinctly: “[w]e cannot see the look, but we can feel its force” (96). John Berger’s argument in *Ways of Seeing* that women internalise the look of men in order to try and master how they are seen in a bid for power within a patriarchal society seems to agree with this general point about the location of the look of the Other.<sup>4</sup> In all these different accounts, there is a recognition that our lives take place within a visual field, and that because of this we internalise the notion that we are always open to the look of another. What Carter does in these passages, in a similar way to Berger and Mulvey, is to highlight the power of a (conventionalised) male gaze, to show how it manifests itself in multiple ways, and to communicate both its violence and its seductiveness to us.

15 Further confirmation of the Marquis’ scopophilia can be found in the sexual confrontations between him and his bride, which highlight the pornographic nature of his way of seeing. In a first scene, in the woman’s bedroom, the Marquis seems to place his young wife into a highly visible position, as if putting her on show for the purpose of exciting his desire. The bedroom contains an enormous, gothic-style bed, surrounded by many mirrors which have the effect of reflecting and multiplying her image. Upon seeing this “multitude of girls” the Marquis jokes that he has “acquired a whole harem” for himself (118). Despite her shyness, he undresses her “as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke” (118), a metaphor that conveys both the violence of his selfish desire and the pornographic sense of wanting to see everything – to penetrate behind the façade and see all. Further emphasising the visual dimension of his desire, she describes him as an “old, monocled lecher” who

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter three of his *Ways of Seeing*. Lacan’s famous example of the gaze emanating from a tuna-can floating in the sea also develops this point about the location of the gaze. For him, the gaze is not tied to the eyes but is located at the level of the object. Hence the gaze is something that slips past us, eludes us. As Lacan writes, “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 72)



examines her like “a lamb chop”,<sup>5</sup> and refers to the situation as “[m]ost pornographic of all confrontations” (119). Despite the Marquis’ desire to strip his wife bare in this pornographic fashion, this mode of seeing paradoxically fails to encounter the object aimed at. For as his wife remarks, “when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, the living image of an etching by Rops from the collection he had shown me” (118). From the woman’s point of view, being stripped naked reveals not herself but a generic pornographic representation.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, since the young woman has been coerced into adopting her husband’s point of view (seeing herself as he sees her) we can infer that this pornographic image by Rops is what he sees when looking at her naked too. The Marquis’ desire is both mediated through and caused by this pornographic etching, and the young woman is only necessary in so far as she helps realise this image – making it/her ready for consumption/consummation.

16 Surprisingly, perhaps, the act of consummation does not then take place and the scene ends abruptly with the Marquis telling his bride that “[a]nticipation is the greater part of pleasure” (119), thus demonstrating further that she is playing his game of desire. Becky MacLaughlin argues that the Marquis’ desire is based in perverse fantasy so that he needs a fantasy screen to consummate his desire. The pornographic etching by Rops clearly functions in this way. However, as she goes on to say, “[i]t is not until the marquis finds his wife looking at a pornographic book that he is able to perform the sexual act” (MacLaughlin 412). Furthermore, she explains that the pervert needs the object of desire to be seen as innocent. Both of these conditions are met in a later scene that takes place in his library, and it is then that she can finally be projected into his fantasy long enough for consummation to take place (MacLaughlin 6). The Marquis finds his young bride perusing some of his pornographic

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<sup>5</sup> These metaphors of the artichoke and the lamb chop are also worth remarking on for their domestic quality and recall the earlier metaphor of dead meat. All three metaphors not only place the young woman firmly in the domestic sphere, a traditional move in itself, but also transform her into an object for consumption. In this set of associations, it is also noteworthy that the French word “consommation” means both “consumption” and “consummation.” It is clear that the Marquis is not just one who takes pleasure in looking (scopophilia) but also pleasure in consuming. As I will go on to argue, the Marquis’ ability to consume/consummate is dependent on his ability to enjoy visually the object of his desire.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Brooks makes a comparable point in his analysis of Zola’s *Nana* in his book *Realist Vision*, arguing that we never truly see Nana naked. In his analysis of the scene in which Nana undresses and is naked in front of Muffat, Brooks makes the following point: “At this moment of *maximal* seeing in the novel, there is an *avoidance of seeing* what is there. Nana’s *sex* is presented as hidden, an occult source of power, as of heat and energy, all the more powerful for not being seen, or seeable. And the descriptive prose veers into the mythic, toward the biblical beast, and a larger-than-life monster” (119). In “The Bloody Chamber” we find something similar: a moment of “maximal seeing”, to use Brooks’ phrase, but also of unseeing. Instead of seeing the young woman’s naked body we see a pornographic sketch. This is not just what we and the young woman see, but also what (we infer) the Marquis sees. It is another mythic image of woman, which veils the actual naked body of the woman. Later on, we will see further evidence of this repression of the female body in the symbol of the blood-stained key.

books, and in particular an image displaying a violent sadomasochistic scenario. Upon seeing her shocked face the Marquis appears excited and takes her up to her room again, where the act of consummation finally takes place. The image itself is further evidence of his voyeurism and fetishism, and also foreshadows the events that take place later on, when the young woman falls into the Marquis' trap, enters his forbidden bloody chamber, and is then caught and sentenced to death. The theme of dangerous curiosity, of a too-strong desire for knowledge, is thereby related to and emphasised by the theme of ways of seeing. The Marquis' voyeurism and pornographic obsession actually seems to fuel the young bride's desire to see what is in his secret chamber. Throughout the story then, it is the Marquis' way of seeing that determines the sequence of events up until the finale when the mother rescues her daughter.

17 In addition to the different facets of the Marquis' voyeuristic gaze, it is equally important to examine the young woman's way of seeing in order to better grasp how it is that she is seduced by it, adopting his point of view, internalising his gaze, and identifying with the mythic images he provides for her. For it is clear that the dangers Carter writes about concern women just as much, or perhaps even more so, than men. Although the Marquis is clearly oppressive in the ways in which he gazes at his bride, turning her into a fetish object, and projecting her onto a fantasy screen for the purpose of exciting his own desire, to a certain degree she is complicit with this. How and why she comes to occupy this position is the focus of the next section.

### **Seduction through Narcissism**

18 The second mode of vision in "The Bloody Chamber" that I will consider is that of narcissistic identification. This way of seeing is adopted by the young woman and is partly responsible for her complicity with the Marquis' violence. For the Marquis is able to gaze at her, fetishize her, and project her into his fantasy screen precisely because he preys upon the structure of narcissistic identification, seducing her with flattering images that promise her a level of mastery and control she lacks.

19 Returning to the scene at the opera analysed earlier, we find an example of how his gaze seduces her into assuming his way of looking at her, his image of her: "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" (115, emphasis added).

20 Here we see how the Marquis' gaze, whilst clearly violent and voyeuristic, nevertheless appeals to the young woman because of the way in which it stirs something within her, giving her a sense of empowerment – that she has the power to excite the gaze of others. In a later scene, as her husband is watching her naked, she notices this “potentiality for corruption” again: “And, as at the opera, when I had first seen my flesh in his eyes, I was aghast to feel myself stirring” (119). Both these passages reveal how her desire has been incited and remoulded by his. When she sees his desire for her she takes pleasure in it because she feels a sense of control and mastery. These two passages tie in with John Berger's argument in *Ways of Seeing* that in a society that privileges men and their ability to act upon the world, women learn to see how they are looked at by men in a bid to determine how they are treated. As Berger puts it, “[a] woman must continuously watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually” (46). Through the figures of the sadistic Marquis and his young bride, Carter shows us the violence of this power-structure: his visual domination, his way of seducing her into seeing herself as he sees her, is exposed for what it really is when she discovers his bloody chamber and finally recognises his character. But Carter also shows us how it is possible that women are persuaded to adopt a man's perspective on themselves. The young bride is attracted to her husband's point of view of herself because these self-images promise her a level of beauty and mastery that she feels she lacks. Part of Carter's brilliance, displayed in “The Bloody Chamber” and the other short stories in this collection, lies in her unflinching exploration of the dynamics, social and psychological, of human relationships. She shows that violence is not always and straightforwardly abhorrent and repellent, but also sometimes seductive and opaque.

21 Another relevant example of this structure of narcissistic identification is to be found in the painting of Saint Cecilia that the Marquis hangs in his bride's music room. This painting provides her with another image with which to identify. As she says: “I saw myself as I could have wished to be” (118). Here, the young woman reveals the way in which images are seductive because they flatter one's narcissism. This passage can be productively read alongside Lacan's work on the Imaginary, in particular his concepts of the ‘mirror stage’ and the ‘ideal ego.’ Lacan's idea is that the formation of subjectivity begins with the attempt to overcome a deficiency (the infant's motor unco-ordination) by identifying with a specular image of oneself that creates a compensatory fantasy of self-mastery. In short, the dependent infant misrecognises her image of herself as a whole, complete and independent being because she is motivated by the desire to overcome the actual deficiency or lack experienced

corporally. The ideal ego is thus the image of ourselves as we would like to be seen, and what is most important is that this process of identification is a never-ending one: throughout our lives we continually identify with images that give us a kind of narcissistic pleasure. We take pleasure in this process because it allows us to fantasise that we have obtained a level of self-mastery which we usually lack.<sup>7</sup>

22 In Carter's story, the numerous images that the Marquis provides for his wife, such as the painting of Saint Cecilia and the mirror-scene at the opera, function in a similar way. They are offered to (or forced onto) her ego, the part of herself which desires wholeness and autonomous agency. The Marquis thus exploits the situation that Lacan outlines, playing on the structure of identification and the assumption of images in order to coerce his bride into adopting images and a view of herself that excites or plays into his desire. Carter's story thus shows the seductiveness as well as the explicit danger of identifying with man's, or to be more precise, patriarchal society's, image of woman. The young woman is clearly seduced by the self-images that the Marquis gives her, as well as his wealth and power. As she notes, "This ring, the bloody bandage of rubies, the wardrobe of clothes from Poiret and Worth [...] all had conspired to seduce me..." (115), though she neglects to add the painting of Saint Cecilia and the Marquis' gaze, which she internalises.

23 Whilst her ego is offered seductive images that flatter her, the price the young woman pays for this is her freedom as an independent subject, highlighted in the strongest possible way in the story by her sentence to death by her husband. But the image of Saint Cecilia hanging above the piano also demonstrates a more concrete and less extreme aspect of what she sacrifices in internalising such flattering images: the young woman sacrifices her project of playing the piano. As Berger argues, in an attempt to create a successful life for themselves within a patriarchal society, women internalise the perspective of the surveyor and thus become both surveyed and surveyor. The price they pay though is that they can never just act – they will always be accompanied by the image of their acts. As Berger puts it, "[woman's] own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another" (46). This has the consequence that her social presence is constituted by this treatment of herself by herself. Her presence is not based on what she does, but on how she treats herself and by implication how she would like to be treated. In the case of "The Bloody Chamber", the young woman has devoted herself to years of study of the piano, her mother even selling her own jewellery in order to pay the fees of the conservatoire – sacrificing part

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<sup>7</sup> See Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage" in his *Écrits: A Selection*.

of her ability to look beautiful in order to help encourage and develop her daughter's talent. In contrast to the mother's self-sacrifice and encouragement of her daughter's independent and active project, the Marquis hangs a seductive image in the music room as if to distract his bride from her piano playing and encourage her to spend more time on her outward appearance.

24 Before moving on to consider alternatives to this visual power structure, one further visual detail with respect to the young woman warrants attention. Whilst inside the Marquis' bloody chamber, the young woman drops the key to the door in a pool of blood, and no matter how hard she tries, she cannot remove the stain. This detail is intriguing for what it simultaneously reveals and conceals. Upon discovering this bloody key, the Marquis recognises her guilt in entering his forbidden room and then presses the key to her forehead, leaving a red mark there which we learn at the end of the story has forever remained imprinted on her. What is of particular interest in this visual stain, though, is that it can be read as signifying not just her guilt but also sexual difference, the former revealed explicitly whilst the latter remaining concealed or repressed. McLaughlin argues that the stain signifies menstrual blood and therefore reminds the Marquis, as pervert, of what he has repressed, namely sexual difference (MacLaughlin, 6). This visual stain functions therefore as a condensed signifier of the central issue of vision in Carter's short story, bringing together the seen and the unseen, sexual difference, and the power structure of property, ownership, and desire.

### **Alternatives to the Gaze**

25 I conclude by considering two alternatives to this destructive economy of vision in "The Bloody Chamber." The first alternative is glimpsed briefly in the figure of the mother. At the beginning of the story, we read that she had once "outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates; nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand" (111). The mother is thus a fearless, independent, and successful woman. But she is also unselfish and generous: we read just a few lines down that she had "beggared herself for love" (111), such as selling her jewellery to pay the conservatoire fees for her daughter as noted earlier. At the end of the story the mother comes to the rescue of her daughter and saves her from imminent death, thus occupying a heroic figure that is usually the province of male characters. The young woman describes her mother as "wild", her hair like "a white mane", confidently holding onto the reins of her rearing horse with one hand only while her other hand "clasped my father's service revolver" (142). Before she successfully shoots and

kills the Marquis, her confident, assertive image paralyses him, and he stares at her “as if she had been Medusa” (142). This reference recalls not only Freud’s famous remarks on the myth of Medusa (about castration anxiety and the repression of sexual difference) but also Hélène Cixous’ influential essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” with its call-to-arms for an affirmative feminine mode of being and “écriture féminine.” The mother is thus both strong and sensitive. Both of these qualities are also evidenced by her decision to come to the rescue of her daughter in the first place. Earlier in the story, the young woman had telephoned her mother, clearly upset but not revealing anything about her husband’s violence – she had not yet discovered the secret of his bloody chamber and had not thus recognised the true violence of his character. On the basis of this telephone call though, the mother seems to have had an inkling of her daughter’s true distress and therefore made a decision to come to her daughter’s aid immediately. The young woman refers to this sensitivity as “*maternal telepathy*” (143), which can be read as an attentiveness to others, by contrast with the Marquis’ self-centred character, focused only on turning others into objects of visual pleasure. This first alternative is thus an alternative image of femininity: unlike her daughter, who is seduced by the Marquis’ powerful and violent male gaze, the mother recognises the violence of this economy of vision and confidently asserts an alternative way of being. Whereas the Marquis adorns his bride with expensive jewellery, the mother sells her own jewels for the betterment of her daughter’s skills at the piano. This example reveals a difference between mother and daughter at the level of the visual: the latter a model of passive femininity seduced by the male gaze, the former dispensing with this form of unfreedom and affirming a more active mode of being.

26 The second alternative to the visual economy of the gaze is represented by the blind piano-tuner. One way in which he represents an alternative lies in his blindness, which precludes any form of scopophilia – he is unable to subject others to a voyeuristic gaze. Some critics, such as Becky MacLaughlin, have read his blindness as a form of castration. As she explains, “Once [the young woman] escapes the clutches of her murderous husband, she gives herself to the blind piano-tuner, a man whose blindness signifies him as castrated. Though a man who could offer emotional support to her at the castle, he is completely ineffectual in saving her from the marquis” (408). Contrasted with the powerful mother-figure, the blind piano-tuner appears powerless and a maimed figure. On this reading, he represents an alternative to the Marquis’ violent scopophilia in so far as he is unable to look,

rather than in the conscious choice not to. In this sense, he cannot easily be read as a heroic figure that challenges patriarchal norms, but rather as a disempowered male figure.<sup>8</sup>

27 A more positive way of reading this character lies in his choice of profession as piano-tuner, as well as his developed sense of hearing caused by his blindness. His skill in tuning pianos demands that he listen carefully and exercise patience, qualities wholly absent in the Marquis. Indeed, we can even read the piano-tuner's blindness in a similar fashion: it forces his hearing to become more proficient, thereby encouraging qualities of receptiveness and attentiveness. When the young woman and he first meet, he demonstrates these qualities by asking to hear her play sometimes, for "he loved music," and upon hearing her affirmative answer he "seemed to know that I had smiled," demonstrating his sensitivity towards her (126). Later, he remarks that "When I heard you play this afternoon, I thought I'd never heard such a touch. Such technique" (134). Instead of turning the young woman into an object of visual pleasure, the piano-tuner listens to her "touch" and "technique," impressed at her skill rather than her appearance. The difference between the Marquis and the piano-tuner is also revealed in their eyes. Although the piano-tuner is blind his eyes are described as "singularly sweet" (134), and he has a "tender look" (135). By contrast, the Marquis has "eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light" (112). We might also recall the Marquis' "assessing eye" that the young woman sees in the mirror at the opera. The contrast between the Marquis and the piano-tuner also shows that the male gaze is not tied exclusively and necessarily to the male gender. Carter's story works against essentialist accounts of gender and the visual. Rather, the piano-tuner demonstrates that there are alternatives to this visual economy of active-male and passive-female.

28 In his essay on storytelling, Walter Benjamin argues that the storyteller communicates experience through his/her tales. Despite his fear that this is becoming a thing of the past, Angela Carter seems to reassert the power of storytelling, communicating the experience of being a woman in a society that places women in a position of passivity, forced to reflect on their appearance, and turned into objects of a male gaze. The fairy tale genre is thus harnessed by Carter for the purposes of consciousness-raising, adapting a familiar tale for her own purposes, as well as implicitly commenting on the traditions and uses of such tales. Her female first-person narrator communicates her experiences and the social and material conditions of her life through the flexible structure of the fairy tale. To be sure, this tale does not present a violent economy of vision as set in stone for all time, and neither does it suggest

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<sup>8</sup> Somewhat similar to Mr Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre*.

that the gaze is always male. The figures of the mother and the blind piano-tuner suggest that there are alternatives. But what stands out most about the “The Bloody Chamber” is its dark and bloody journey into the seductive power of a violent economy of vision. The dominant experience communicated through this fairy story (that is also a fairy story about a fairy story) is that of the dangerous ease with which one is seduced by powerful structures of vision.

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