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## **“A feminist subversion of fairy tales”:**

*Écriture féminine*, gender stereotypes, and the rejection of patriarchy

in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*

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## **Abstract**

Fairy tales are usually described as short narratives that end with happily-ever-afters, imposing patriarchal ideologies. The Grimm's fairy tales serve as the foundation of many other stories which promote stereotypes like woman passiveness, submissive beauty, while men are put on a pedestal for being active and violent at the same time. Angela Carter's collection *The Bloody Chamber* depicts patriarchal oppression in classic fairy tales by challenging what can be identified as patriarchal binary oppositions with a strategic subversion of gender roles. Through problematizing and critiquing the patriarchal fairy tales, Carter's texts can be read through the lens of *écriture féminine*. Following Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*, outlined in "The Laugh of the Medusa", this essay explores how Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love" can be read as a narrative that has strong echoes of the kind of female writing Cixous advocates. Moreover, this essay argues that "The Lady of the House of Love" contradicts the Western myth of femininity by resisting, exploring, even undermining the patriarchal representation of woman as "heroine"-the fairy tale princess who needs a man to save her -and "femme fatale."

Keywords: Fairy tales, Grimm Brothers, Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, patriarchal binary oppositions, patriarchal oppression, *Écriture féminine*, Hélène Cixous, heroine, femme fatale.

## Introduction

Marina Warner defines fairy tales as short narratives, familiar stories that have been passed on from generation to generation (Warner xvi). This genre is associated with folklore; therefore, many fairy tales are often called “folk tales” and are regarded as being closely related to oral tradition. Warner also notes that fairy tales are more relatable to the lower classes (1). Moreover, fairy tales often weave superstitions into the narrative, supernatural creatures introducing the reader to an imaginative world without religious or intellectual authority (1). In most cases, fairy tales share an attribute that is often referred to as “happily-ever-afters” (Bottigheimer 4).

First and foremost, despite their similarity, fairy tales often provoke a critical response given that many of them take up provocative issues through their characters and plots. Jack Zipes, for example, notes that fairy tales are overtly patriarchal and politically conservative in their structures and themes, reflecting only the interests of the dominant groups that control the inferior groups- in other words, women (2). Zipes also argues that Western culture’s classical fairy tale canon is deeply rooted in the nineteenth century, and includes well-known tales such as “Cinderella,” “The Sleeping Beauty,” “Rapunzel,” “Bluebeard,” “Little Red Riding Hood.” Canonized by aristocratic and middle class audiences, these tales promoted gender inequality and stereotypes, therefore they are considered to have reinforced patriarchal ideologies in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Zipes 1). Understandably, then, they are attacked and criticized by contemporary feminists. Indeed, feminists argue that by introducing children to fairy tales such as “Cinderella” or “Snow White” they are conditioned to view the gender roles in these tales as the cultural norm. Simply put, children are conditioned by these texts to believe that little girls must be gentle, submissive, passive, and domestic while patiently waiting for the male prince to come and rescue them from the challenges of life (Lurie 34).

Furthermore, this essay aims to analyze the gender binaries in Angela Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love” and their subversion, which is considered to be a critique of the patriarchal fairy tale ideologies. Carter was a well-known feminist writer, commenting through her oeuvre on the manifestations of patriarchal oppression. By promoting resistance and subversion of the Western myth of femininity through her writing, she critiqued patriarchal gender prescriptions. *The Bloody Chamber*; in particular, is perhaps one of her most powerful critiques of patriarchal culture. Published in 1979, the short collection consists of ten stories, which, as Carter herself stated, are relatively new stories inspired by the latent

content of traditional tales such as: “Bluebeard,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Sleeping Beauty,” etc. (Simpson 2006).

In order to analyze Carter’s feminist project, the present study focuses in particular on *The Bloody Chamber’s* seventh story, “The Lady of the House of Love” which can be read as a re-imagining of “Sleeping Beauty.” In addition, it also makes strong references to vampire stories, perhaps menacingly poking fun at the way patriarchal tales suck the autonomy out of women. The Lady of the House of Love” was chosen because it demonstrates how Carter removes the “latent content” from the traditional fairy tales and adds a feminist twist to their narrative. For instance, Carter dismissed female passivity and instead mobilized her heroine with a dominant or predator-like role. The active role that the heroine was given, overshadows the passive male soldier making the gender subversion more apparent.

Throughout this study, I consider how “The Lady of the House of Love ” offers a savage critique of the patriarchal binary oppositions manifested in traditional folk tales. With the help of the analytical tool “*Écriture féminine*”- presented by Hélène Cixous, the story “The Lady of the House of Love ” investigates the different ways of feminist resistance to patriarchy and its effects. The central thesis of this essay is that the narrative of “The Lady of the House of Love” contradicts the Western myth of femininity by resisting, exploring, and even undermining the patriarchal representation of woman as “the innocent heroine.” In other words, Carter takes the patriarchal fairy tale princess who – as traditional tales have told it – needs a man to save her and writes a different kind of woman into being, posing essential questions about the relationship between literature and representation.

### **Angela Carter and her oeuvre**

Angela Carter is arguably one of the most significant writers to have called into question the hegemony of patriarchy through her writings. Carter’s oeuvre consists of many different literary works; however, she is mostly praised for her subverted fairy tales also known as “adult fairy tales.” These tales are regarded as a provocative attack on patriarchal gender norms. Carter put together her famous subversive fairy tales into a widely read collection, *The Bloody Chamber*; in 1979; this year is said to be her *annus mirabilis* as a new authorial persona (Sage 65). However, Carter’s interest in fairy tales ultimately proved to be controversial.

In addition, scholars such as Marina Warner praise Carter for her re-workings of fairy tales, claiming that Carter’s relation to fairy tales is an affair of the heart: “Fairy tales explore

mysteries of love... Angela Carter's quest for Eros, her attempt to ensnare its nature in her imagery ... drew her to fairy tales as a form" (Warner 243). On the other hand, despite the fact that many scholars situate Carter's work within the discourse of feminism; Stephen Benson notes that her association with fairy tales has come to overshadow her work on feminist issues in many ways (Benson 25).

Furthermore, Robin Ann Sheets states that Carter's works are considered to be controversial because of the way her fiction explores "the forbidden themes" of sexual agency and violence – earning her the dubious title of "Porn Author" (Sheets 633). Carter's feminist persona in the debates about pornography holds a problematic place due to the issues of sexual practice and sadomasochism that separated Anglo-American feminists (633). The feminist Robin Morgan claimed that women who support pornography are pro-male dominance and labeled them as literature's bad girls; therefore, Morgan denied their right to call themselves feminists (636). Supporting Morgan's claims, critics like James Sloan Allen and Amanda Sebestyen categorize Carter as a "bad girl" and an author of pornography because of the way she promotes sadomasochism in a romanticized way (641). These critics dismiss Carter's feminism, instead choosing to focus on the taboos that her texts depict. However, in a departure from one strand of Carter criticism, the present study does not see *The Bloody Chamber* as merely reproducing the patriarchal structures through pornography.

Since Carter was a feminist; her writings reflect her radical-libertarian feminist views following "second-wave feminism." Merja Makinen claims, in "Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality", that Carter's writings explore the physical abuse and the alienation of women caused by phallocentrism. Apart from this, she introduced women who embrace their sexuality and fight back (Makinen 3). Building upon this research, this essay argues that *The Bloody Chamber* is taken to be a feminist critique of patriarchal abuse and violence portrayed in classic fairy tales.

Due to the problematic issues that Carter plays with, Makinen points out that many feminists regard *The Bloody Chamber* as reproducing misogynistic ideology that does not prioritize the female readers' need to identify with the heroines. Makinen also mentions scholars such as Patricia Duncker and Avis Lewallen who regard *The Bloody Chamber* as not innovative. Following Angela Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Duncker claims that: "Carter's tales are re-written within the strait-jacket of their original structures" therefore, they reproduce the "rigidly psychology" of the erotic. Agreeing with this statement, Lewallen argues that Carter did not adequately edit the conservative form of feminism;

therefore her attempt to re-create an active female erotic is an impersonation of male pornography (Makinen 4).

Differing from them, Makinen claims that *The Bloody Chamber* is not only the subverted version of classic fairy tales that mobilized the female heroines with active roles and sexual agency; these re-written tales play with and upon the earlier classic patriarchal version as well (5). She asserts that *The Bloody Chamber* consists of intertwined stories that hint at classic fairy tales while reading Carter's feminist version. This combination shows how Carter takes out the latent content from the classic fairy tale in order to critique them. This is illustrated through a passage borrowed from one of the tales, "The Company of Wolves": "The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat," referring to the classic version of "Little Red Riding Hood" where the main character is passive and in need of a savior (5). *The Bloody Chamber* takes a further feminist step by promoting empowerment, overshadowing victimization, switching gender roles, and portraying the females as the aggressor and male monsters as the victims. Makinen claims that these female heroines are constructed as a complex version of female psychosexuality, invoking violence and eroticism and giving women the right to take on violent and sexually active roles, presenting a complex variation of female desire and reappropriation of female libido (Makinen 9). For example, this is evident in "The Company of Wolves," and "The Tiger's Bride:"

He went still as stone. He was far more frightened of me than I was of him.

I squatted on the wet straw and stretched out my hand. I was now within the field of force of his golden eyes. He growled at the back of his throat, lowered his head, sank on to his forepaws, snarled, showed me his red gullet, his yellow teeth. I never moved.

He snuffed the air, as if to smell my fear; he could not (Carter 108).

By subverting the gender roles, *The Bloody Chamber* promotes equal sexual transactions between the male and female characters (Makinen 9). "The Tiger's Bride" reflects these equal transactions where both characters embrace their desires and reveal their nature without overpowering one another. Makinen claims that another demonstration of the subversive narrative of *The Bloody Chamber* is the heroines' reward for curiosity instead of punishment (4). In patriarchal fairy tales like "The Sleeping Beauty", where heroines are either passive or domesticated, their curiosity or engagement in dangerous acts is usually punished; however, Carter's heroines are rewarded with liberation. The heroine in Carter's "The Erl-King" is

both curious and daring, which leads her to self-liberation and being the savior of other women.

Since *The Bloody Chamber* consists of stories that have beasts as protagonists and antagonists, Makinen argues that they symbolize the sexual desires of the heroines (11). However, Patricia Duncker interprets *The Bloody Chamber* tales as “all men are beasts to women”. Therefore, the female protagonists have no choice but to claim the roles of victims of male violence. According to Duncker, Carter’s Red Riding Hood sees rape as inevitable, and her strategy is to lie back and enjoy it. “She wants it really; they all do” (Makinen 12). Moreover, Duncker asserts that in *The Tiger’s Bride*, the stripping of the girl’s skin portrays a willing victim of pornography. Duncker reads the beasts as men in furry clothing, on that account, considers Carter’s attempt as failed, unable to paint an “anti-sexist language of the erotic” (12).

Additionally, the beasts in *The Bloody Chamber* are read as expressions of female desires by Lewallen as well, who argues that the female protagonists are locked within a binary prescription of either “fuck or be fucked.” He regards the masochism in the collection as too disturbing, declaring “my unease at being manipulated by the narrative to sympathize with masochism”(Makinen 12). On the other hand, Maggie Anwell analyzes how an adaptation of the film *The Company of Wolves* argues for a more complex reading of female sexuality portrayed in the tale despite the failure of getting past the binary division of victim/aggressor. The confrontation between “repressed desire” (wolf) and the “ego” (Red Riding Hood) “ends with the ego’s ability to accept the pleasurable aspects of desire, while controlling its less pleasurable aspects” (Makinen 13).

## **Écriture féminine**

The term *Écriture féminine* – or “women’s writing” – was coined by the French feminist writer and literary critic Helene Cixous in her essay “Le Rire de la Méduse” (“The Laugh of the Medusa”) in 1975. Cixous' provocative essay was instrumental in establishing herself as a pioneer of post-structuralist feminism. In order to understand Cixous’ views and concerns expressed in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” one has to investigate the source of her distress. For instance, Cixous was particularly critical of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the mind. Freud’s revolutionary theory of unconsciousness was concerned with the part of the mind, which he compared to the bulk of the iceberg, which cannot be seen but is the source of



all human desires (Wortmann 2012). Freud's interest in psychosexual development provoked many controversies because of his claims that humans develop a libido from the early stages of childhood; he then ranks the sexual progress humans undergo in five phases (Bottinelli 22).

Over the course of a few passages, "The Laugh of the Medusa" criticizes what Freud regards as the third phase – the phallic, which promotes misogyny and sexual objectification towards women. According to Freud, when children become conscious of their biological differences in male-female genitalia, the Oedipus complex emerges. He stated this complex makes women inferior and passive compared to men because of the lack of a penis. On the other hand, having a penis makes a man sexually competitive and dominant (Bottinelli 23). The idea of this absence consumes women, and the longing for a penis defines their sexuality and justifies the small number of cultural achievements by women (Wortmann 2012). On this basis, the idea of phallogocentric dominance was taken up, repressing feminine writing as a justification of the Oedipus complex (Bottinelli 23). Later on, Freud's phallic theory was criticized by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Jacques Émile Lacan is an important figure in the history of psychoanalysis, often referred to as "the French Freud" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Even though Lacan was primarily interested in the Freudian revolution of unconsciousness, he dismissed Freud's Oedipal Complex. Instead, he introduced his theory of Oedipal structure through which he aims to explain his innovative concepts of the Phallus, Castration, Desire (Sullivan 6).

First and foremost, Lacan's work is praised because of its de-biologization of Freud and attacked for its phallogocentrism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Differing from Freud, who described women to be castrated or deprived of a penis, Lacan considered all subjects to be castrated, meaning that they lack phallus which is not the same as the penis. The penis differs from the phallus because it is a biological organ, while the phallus is a signifier which points towards other signifiers. Lacan's triadic structure of the mind under the notions of the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real is used to analyze the phallus. The Imaginary is concerned with appearances-images and our interpersonal relations with other people, the Symbolic represents language, cultural norms, and also helps differentiate one thing from another. Lastly the Real is concerned with real events (SEP). Additionally, Lacan claims that with the entry into the language and law subjects become disconnected from the bodily experience therefore words and representations are used to mediate relations to things and to oneself and others (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). According to Lacan's

Oedipal Complex, human beings achieve a sexual position by submitting to castration also called the phallic function and thereby entering into signification. However, he claims that there is no sexual difference prior to representation (SEP).

Lacan is attacked by feminists due to the patriarchalism of his thought on the central role of the phallus about subjectivity and sexual difference. He claims that the phallus positions the signifier into the subject regardless of any “anatomical distinction between sexes” (SEP). Even though Lacan centers human experience on representational economy instead of biological fixity of anatomical distinction, the phallus according to him retains its association with masculinity and remains the focal point of sexual identity. He argues that masculinity is constructed to “have” the phallus therefore is the central point of which signification emerges. On the other hand, femininity is positioned “to be” the phallus and therefore is powerless (Gavin Rae 13). It is also important to note that while Freud had theorized the libido as something that belongs only to men, Lacan in his “The Signification of the Phallus,” criticized the alternative view that there might be two libidos, which he satirizes as a kind of sexual equality (SEP).

Cixous rejects this symbolic- phallogocentric order by critiquing the division and stereotypes that it has caused. This division, according to Cixous, puts men in the center and gives them the dominating role, controlling the inferior woman in different ways. In reference to Lacan’s triadic structure, Cixous regards the symbolic order of patriarchy as the enemy of femininity; therefore, she claims that women belong to the “Imaginary realm,” which is the prelinguistic phase where children identify only with themselves and their desires. For instance, language is claimed to be patriarchal because the creators of this structure are men: “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition” (Cixous 879). By calling women to writing, Helene Cixous aims to re-define the misogynistic structures and establish a language that would belong only to women. Women should write with their bodies, Cixous insists, but most importantly, they should write and invite other women to write: “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (Cixous 875).

Furthermore, Cixous argues that women have been brainwashed to believe that they are the black territory, usually compared to Africa as something dangerous. “Your continent is dark,” states Cixous, meaning that the dark scares everyone; therefore, women are taught from a young age to suppress “the dangerous” part of themselves that threatens men (877-878). Apart from this, Cixous mentions a phallogocentric tool- the reason or logos to refer to logic, as she claims is mostly used by men to support their arguments while speaking. For this reason, she calls for feminine writing that will reject logic and use the body to support arguments. “And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you: your body is yours take it” (876).

Above all, Cixous regards the self-hatred that phallogocentrism has forced upon women as the greatest crime, which imposes the logic of anti-love in their identities: “Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be executants of their virile needs” (878). Cixous argues that phallogocentric dominance and control have oppressed women in three ways, which consequently makes it difficult for them to express their desires: first and foremost, culture, where women are considered inferior to men. Secondly, the social/political domain which rejects women’s needs, and lastly, psychology, which depicts women as emotionally incapable. As a result of patriarchal oppression, women experience a negative emotion – guilt – that appears when a woman expresses her inner desires through libido or writing (877-878).

Cixous encourages women to write despite the difficulties that they face because as she states, writing can bring women back from “afar,” “where witches and “ill-mannered” little girls are kept alive, describing them as the exile of the phallogocentric domain because of their self-awareness and self-unawareness: “Now women return from afar, from always: from without, from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture’: from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget. The little girls and their “ill-mannered” bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror”.

According to Cixous, women can be liberated from the phallogocentric structures in two ways:

a) Firstly, by reclaiming their bodies, which have been kept hostage for years, and by expressing and embracing the needs of their bodies. “Censor the body, and you censor breath and speech at the same time” (880). Cixous regards writing as the antidote of phallogocentrism

and the way to liberation. She argues that by writing, women will regain their strength, including their desires, their organs, and also access to their sexuality. By writing, women will separate themselves from the “superegoized structure” where they were only allowed to feel guilt for controlling and not controlling things: “For having desires, for not having any, for being too frigid, for being “too hot”; for not being both at once, for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and not nursing” (880). In her essay, which aims to promote emancipation and illumination, Cixous urges women to find their voices as soon as possible and to step outside their roles as the shadows of the dominant male. This, she argues, can be accomplished only through the body, and a woman without a body cannot be a fighter and is therefore doomed to be inferior.

b) Another way to reach liberation from phallogocentric oppression is by forging the “anti-logos” or anti-reason weapon when talking or writing to achieve the taker’s role and the initiator for her right in every symbolic system. Cixous mentions the daily struggles that women have to go through when they get up and speak in public, and in case a woman dares to speak, it is not appreciated by the male ear that hears only masculine language and does not want women to break their silence. She argues that when women speak, they support the logic of their speech through the body because their flesh speaks the truth. Even though this speech is theoretical or political, Cixous views it as complex, far from simple, linear or objectified. Unlike the patriarchal language that has different rules for oral and written language, Cixous claims that women resonate through a voice of love, alive in every woman and present both in their speech and writing. Women have a privileged relationship with the voice because of the mother-like role, which Cixous uses as a metaphor for motherhood, and to refer to a source of goodness. “She writes in white ink” because of the mother milk within her (881). Moreover, the new history which extends beyond men’s power and imagination is approaching, claims Cixous, and the woman is an integral part of the liberation (882).

Nevertheless, when talking about *Écriture féminine*, Cixous declares that this writing cannot be defined; therefore, it gives rise to many challenges that will endure because of the inability to theorize it, yet that does not mean that feminine writing does not exist. Most importantly, Cixous advises women to primarily begin writing about sexual opposition, which has been used by men in order to reduce feminine writing (883). Cixous insists that women should write in feminine language and men in masculine (883). However, she claims that writers, readers, and critics hesitate to admit or deny the relevance of the distinction between feminine and masculine writing because they are ignorant. Discarding sexual

differences leads to discussions that either all materialized writing is feminine or the act of writing is equivalent to male masturbation, hinting that the woman who writes has to cut herself out a paper penis. Lastly, she brings up another idea about writing being bisexual-neuter (884). Women benefit most from this bisexuality for historico-cultural reasons, which does not invalidate differences but instead stirs them up and increases their number. Cixous argues that while there are no issues with identifying women as bisexual, men have to maintain their phallic monosexuality (884). Along with women, Cixous claims that men are victims of the phallogentric structure as well. Women were made to believe that they should accept what they cannot change; on the other hand, men are brought up with the fear of being a woman (884).

Hélène Cixous mentions the two horrifying myths that women were subjected to by patriarchy: Medusa and the abyss. However, Cixous suggests women re-claim a free spirit like the mythical Medusa, who was cursed by the goddess Athena, who turned her locks into snakes and gave her a fatal gaze that would turn any man into stone. What is so impressive about the myth of Medusa is that even after she gets beheaded, she is still laughing; therefore, Cixous reads into this laughter a sense that she is not deadly, but beautiful (885). Through the myth of Medusa, Cixous advises women not to give in to feelings of guilt; instead, they should express revenge through their laughter, because that will help them reach liberation. To be liberated from the oppressive phallogentric chains, women should avoid the influence of the male Sirens. These male Sirens have been oppressing and controlling women through their sound for ages.

Lastly, Cixous states that there are two unrepresentable things for men: death and women, which threaten phallogentrism through their hidden strength (885). Men consider women as a threat because of their inner strength; therefore they are compared to the dark continent that needs to be dominated by patriarchy. And since history claims that men are greedy for power, death can end their dominance. “When I write, it’s everything that we don’t know we can be that is written out of me, without exclusions, without stipulation, and everything we will be calls us to the unflagging, intoxicating, unappeasable search for love. In one another we will never be lacking” (893).

## The classic “happily ever after”

*Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.*

G.K. Chesterton

According to Ruth Bottingheimer, fairy tales are a problematic genre due to the lack of historical evidence of their origin (Bottingheimer 2). However, as mentioned before, it is believed that the unlettered folk created and passed on fairy tales from generation to generation, from one country to another and from language to language (3). Later on, these folk-invented tales were written down and collected by different literary authors such as Giovan Francesco Straparola, Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, Charles Perrault, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (7). The mentioned authors represent different national traditions and different versions of well-known fairy tales such as “The Sleeping Beauty” and “Red Riding Hood.” However, this essay focuses mainly on the German or the Grimm fairy tales because they contain elements or ideologies that are relevant and subverted in Carter’s fairy tales.

Due to the resemblance that “The Sleeping Beauty” has to “The Lady of the House of Love,” and since Carter’s tale is fundamental to this study, a brief comparison will be done in order to explain why Grimm’s fairy tales are important to this essay. Firstly, there are many versions of “The Sleeping Beauty,” but only two will be mentioned: Perrault’s narrative “The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods” and Grimm’s “Little Briar Rose.” It should be noted that both versions share similarities in the ways they promote patriarchal ideals. For instance, both versions regard beauty as the most important quality that a female can possess, but the Grimm’s also introduce the societal reward for beauty: “The queen gave birth to a girl who was so beautiful that the king could not contain himself for joy, and he ordered a great celebration” (Little Brier-Rose). Secondly, unlike Perrault, the Grimm brothers involve blood and death as part of the curse in their narrative. Carter developed further and subverted these themes so that they represent more complex issues than just the bleeding from thorns or the prick of a finger. Lastly, since the princess is cursed with 100 years of sleep in both versions, Perrault’s heroine wakes up because 100 years passed; meanwhile, the Grimm’s heroine wakes up from the kiss of true love. Although the meaning of true love’s kiss is subverted in Carter’s tale, it is still regarded as one of the most significant elements in the story.

Apart from this, many readers often associate fairy tales with the Grimm brothers. Scholars such as Donald Haase claim that Western culture is reflected through their tales, which are arguably almost as significant as the Bible. The Grimm tales are considered both sacred texts and national property (Haase 383). As mentioned before, the fairy tales of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are relevant to this essay for two reasons: firstly, they are taken as a point of reference, and paradigmatic of how culturally established “classic” fairy tales reinforce the patriarchy and patriarchal notions of gender. Secondly, it is against this backdrop that this study considers how Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) reworks and reimagines the classic fairy tale in order to pose a feminist critique. As this study will demonstrate, Carter does this by equipping/depicting her heroines with agency and autonomy; they reject the passive, powerless objectification of classic fairy tale princesses. These female mechanisms that Carter presents in her tales, regarded as examples of *écriture féminine*, show that by subverting gender roles and promoting female resistance and rejection, they pose a threat to phallogentrism.

The famous *Nursery and Household* tales edition by the brothers Grimm consists of animal tales, tales of origins, burlesques, and moral tales. Their primary sources for the texts written by Grimm were women from different social classes, but mainly servants such as milkmaids, goose girls, and shepherds. (Bottingheimer 31). The Grimm brothers’ main purpose was to associate the fairy tale collections with children and childhood, creating images that would identify the fairytales to “childness” (34).

According to an empirical study conducted by Kristin Wardetzky in 1986, fairy tales were predominant among 15 genres with the Grimm tales as the most preferred by children from ages eight to ten (Wardetzky 158). Wardetzky notes that most children treasured fairy tales mainly for their happy endings and the punishment of evil (157). However, in these tales, children are exposed to a so-called “hegemonic manuscript” that conditions them to think of having power over women and gender inequality from a very young age. In other words, children are introduced simultaneously to sexuality and violence through gender prescriptions (Nekirk 38).

Along with many other controversies, Grimm’s fairy tales, which form the basis of many of the tales we know today, such as “Cinderella,” “The Sleeping Beauty,” “Snow-White” are said to depict female characters as passive and submissive beauties while male characters are seemingly put on a pedestal for being strong heroes that are capable of great actions. As mentioned before, Zipes is among the scholars that regard classic fairy tales to be patriarchal

at their core because they manipulate societal ideals and perpetuate patriarchal concepts to maintain gender hierarchies. More specifically, what makes fairy tales patriarchal is the construction of female characters: “The queen gave birth to a girl who was so beautiful that the king could not contain himself for joy, and he ordered a great celebration” (Little Brier-Rose). This passage portrays the patriarchal beauty standards and the way beauty is rewarded. Relevant examples of patriarchal beauty standards and role prescriptions can be found in Grimm’s “Little Snow-White.” In most cases, the female character is portrayed as a beauty who overshadows and makes others unpleasant to the eye, a character that has a magical association with animals, and a future domesticated wife who takes care of everyone (Rhyme 10). To demonstrate the unrealistic constructions of female characters in most fairy tales, passages from “Snow White” will be quoted: “Snow-White grew up and became ever more beautiful. When she was seven years old she was as beautiful as the light of day, even more beautiful than the queen herself” (Little Snow-White). Multiple passages refer to the beauty of Snow White throughout the tale, referring not only to the appearance of the princess but also to her passivity and domestication, which are a part of her beauty, rewarded by patriarchy:

Then she told them that her stepmother had tried to kill her, that the huntsman had spared her life, and that she had run the entire day, finally coming to their house.

The dwarfs said, "If you will keep the house for us, and cook, make beds, wash, sew, and knit, and keep everything clean and orderly, then you can stay with us, and you shall have everything that you want. "Yes," said Snow-White, "with all my heart."

The following passages illustrate how the stepmother is regarded as evil because she symbolizes subversiveness; meanwhile, the princess is a role model because she maintains her submissive role (Rhyme 10). “A year later the king took himself another wife. She was a beautiful woman, but she was proud and arrogant, and she could not stand it if anyone might surpass her in beauty”. In other words, because of the diverse role that the stepmother has, she is portrayed as a villain for not being as passive and submissive. By highlighting women’s passivity and beauty, Baker claims that these tales play the role of gendered scripts that support patriarchy (Baker 711).

In the book *Grimms’ Bad Girls and Bold Boys*, Bottigheimer argues that the Grimm brothers constructed their female characters around sinful and dangerous themes, and therefore they had to be silenced and punished (Jack Zipes 175). Whether intentionally or not Grimm tales impose patriarchal ideals, such as comparisons of women with nature that are



used to degrade female concerns (175). In addition, she explains how speech deprivation reflects the domestic, political, and social experiences of women (175). More than that, the patriarchal fairy tales promote stereotypes such as unhealthy sex, conveying a message that a woman should “play dead” until she meets the prince who rules the world (Rhyme 11). These examples glorify the passive and inferior position of women, illustrated in the following passages:

Snow-White lay there in the coffin a long, long time, and she did not decay, but looked like she was asleep, for she was still as white as snow and as red as blood, and as black-haired as ebony wood.

Now it came to pass that a prince entered these woods and happened onto the dwarfs' house, where he sought shelter for the night. He saw the coffin on the mountain with beautiful Snow-White in it, and he read what was written on it with golden letters.

As mentioned before, besides passivity, patriarchal fairy tales choose beauty as a complement to the main female characters, whereas a man's handsomeness is not as significant. Baker identifies how a woman's most important characteristic is physical attractiveness, a constructed notion rooted in patriarchy used to suppress and degrade women (Baker 711). According to a discourse analysis provided by Lori Baker-Sperry and Liz Grauerholz, who explored tales that survived throughout the centuries, they claim that 94 percent of the tales mention physical appearance. Baker-Sperry, and Grauerholz note that there are about five times more references to women's beauty per tale than men's handsomeness (717). Fifty-seven percent of the fairy tales promote the feminine beauty ideal describing younger women as beautiful or “the fairest,” and only 5,2 percent of tales that include older women refer to them as beautiful. By associating youth with beauty and ugliness with evil, these tales promote attractiveness as the most crucial attribute that a woman can have in order to be socially rewarded (Baker 718). While beauty is rewarded, lack of beauty is punished, linking beauty to race and class (719). Even though the patriarchal Grimm tales award the beauty attribute, they do not exclude the dangers associated with it. The majority of fairy tales associate physical attractiveness with danger which results in 89 percent “harmed beautiful female characters” who have inscribed the role of a victim, obligated to run away or disguise because of their beauty (719). “When the queen heard the mirror saying this, she shook and trembled with anger, "Snow-White shall die," she shouted, "if it costs me my life!” (Snow White). The cases where a man represents harm to the pretty heroine are replaced by jealous

women who compete against other women, hinting that females should always prioritize beauty and not trust each other (Baker 719).

### **“The Lady of the House of Love”**

“At last the revenants became so troublesome the peasants abandoned the village and it fell solely into the possession of subtle and vindictive inhabitants” (Carter 154). The story’s opening line marks the departure from the traditional “Once upon a time,” which is used in most classic fairy tales. Although this tale is usually known as Carter’s feminist version of the Grimm’s “Briar Rose” or “The Sleeping Beauty,” it is essential to note that it is not a pure re-working of a fairy tale despite the elements that are incorporated or removed from the traditional story. Moreover, “The Lady of the House of Love” is a complex tale because of the combination of fairy tale elements with vampire legends and feminist twists. Through these elements, Carter constructs a female character that undermines the traditional fairy tale heroines.

Due to the dark themes and elements that Carter introduces in her story, a brief discussion of her work with the Gothic genre will be done. Greg Buzwell, in his “Angela Carter, Gothic literature and *The Bloody Chamber*,” appraises Carter as a great author of Gothic because of her dark imagination expressed, especially in *The Bloody Chamber* (Buzwell 1). *The Bloody Chamber* incorporates Gothic themes such as moonlit forests, graveyards, isolated castles, and guttering candles, showing Carter's talent and interest in Gothic literature (1). In “The Lady of the House of Love” can be encountered many gothic themes; however, the story’s most significant gothic element is the vampire countess herself.

Although the stories from *The Bloody Chamber* are claimed to have their origins in fairy tales, Carter’s radical feminist twist gives the reader the possibility to view her stories through different lenses. Buzwell claims that Carter's combination of fairy tales with Gothic literature provides a traditional framework for exploring modern fears (3). In “The Lady of the House of Love,” Carter ridicules patriarchal ideologies through her vampire character, representing what people fear and desire. Sarah Sceats describes vampires as highly sexual, yet their penetration is nongenital (107). The penetration by biting and the exchange of blood was a model of Victorian vampirism, which provided women with a “powerful vehicle” to express their anxieties about uncontrolled libido (108). Following this Victorian model of

vampirism, Carter constructed her heroine as both desired and feared and also a savage that expresses her libido through her hunger for blood.

As mentioned before, this study considers Carter's "The Lady of the House of Love" as a complex story due to the incorporated elements of fairy tales and vampirism. In other words, this story can be read as a subverted fairy tale and a vampire legend, depending on what the reader chooses to focus on. However, this essay is mainly concerned with patriarchal stereotypes and gender roles, and the way Carter subverts the mentioned issues is considered to ridicule and critique the classic fairy tale. For instance, the stereotypical description of the male character (the soldier) mocks classic fairy tales' usual descriptions of women, making the connection between this story to the fairy tale genre more significant.

Moving further, "The Lady of the House of Love" takes place in an abandoned village in Romania during the first world war. The tale is narrated in an omniscient third-person, following the shift of narratives between the two main characters: the vampire countess representing the older times and the British soldier as the symbol of modernity. This shift of narrative shows the two different realities that the main characters identify themselves with, and at the same time can be interpreted as *Écriture féminine* due to the new events that appear and disrupt the flow of the story. Nevertheless, since gender roles are essential to this study, it is worth naming some of the themes that enhance or indicate both prescription and subversion of gender roles: violence and sexual themes, virginity and innocence, power and objectification.

A cross-over between two different centuries characterizes the story. On the one hand, we have the 19th century characterized by a gloomy Gothic atmosphere present in the abandoned village where supernatural inhabitants move around freely. On the other hand, the hero's 20th-century world of modernity. Unlike the traditional fairy tale that revolves around a sleeping princess usually admired for her beauty, here we have the queen of vampires, a predator with a unique appearance. The vampire countess lives in her dark, disintegrated castle with her mute governess, the souls of her wicked ancestors, and the haunting ghosts. Since the sun is the worst enemy of vampires, the countess sleeps and lives mainly in a coffin, hiding her nature and needs throughout the day and embracing her predator side in the nights. She spends most of her days counting out her tarot cards and despising her fate (Carter 154-155). Although young, she wears an old wedding dress and a blood-stained negligee contributing to her eccentric, beautiful appearance. Throughout the tale, the narrator

describes the vampire's hunger as something that increased with time and something that she cannot overcome:

The Countess wants fresh meat. When she was a little girl, she was like a fox and contented herself entirely with baby rabbits that squeaked piteously as she bit into their necks with a nauseated voluptuousness, with voles and field-mice that palpitated for bare moment between her embroideress's fingers. But now she is a woman, she must have men (159).

The governess is the one that takes care of her needs; she is the one who invites male travelers into the castle after spotting them drinking water from the fountain since the countess needs men in order to be satisfied: "... if an unwise adventurer pauses in the square of the deserted village to refresh himself at the fountain, a crone in a black dress and white apron presently emerges from a house. She will invite you with smiles and gestures; you will follow her" (15). As mentioned, the countess despises her nature and regrets killing both rabbits and men but somehow fails to listen to her inner voices and ends up obeying her hunger. In addition, the countess's castle is somehow portrayed as a female chamber where the visitors enter willingly, expecting to spend a fun night with the countess but end up bleeding in her bridal bed:

Countess in her satin finery as she pours from a silver pot and chatters distractedly to put them at their fatal ease. A certain desolate stillness of her eyes indicates she is inconsolable. She would like to caress their lean brown cheeks and stroke their ragged hair. When she takes them by the hand and leads them to her bedroom, they can scarcely believe their luck. Afterwards, her governess will tidy the remains into a neat pile and wrap it in its own discarded clothes (160).

On the same page (160), Carter incorporates an English Fairy tale, "Jack and the Beanstalk," in order to introduce the approaching new prey. "Fee fie fo fum I smell the blood of an Englishman." A summer night brought a young soldier to the village who is described as a blonde, heavy muscled visitor with remarkable qualities like virginity and rationality. In the story, his choice of transport is described as rational- challenging superstitions. With his arrival at the village, the countess gets a card that involves love, giving her hope for the future. Like every other traveler, he is invited into the castle by the governess, who served him dinner and did not bother him while he ate. Afterward, he follows the governess to another room, where he notices grotesque family portraits that scare him. The young soldier finally meets the countess, and despite the darkness in her room, his eyes manage to see her

as a pale young girl dressed in a bridal dress with an unnatural appearance that attracts him (164-167).

Because his presence poses a threat to the countess, the governess gives her a pair of dark glasses which she will have while they drink coffee together. As she explains her sorrows to the soldier, she imagines him as the long-awaited bridegroom who will end up bleeding on her marriage bed like the rest of the men she led there. “See, how I’m ready for you. I’ve always been ready for you; I’ve been waiting for you in my wedding dress, why have you delayed for so long.. It will be over very quickly” (172).

This time it is the countess that bleeds after cutting her finger in the broken glasses. Her bleeding takes away immortality, turning her into a human that dies from the kiss of true love, leaving behind a single red rose that the soldier takes with him in war. “He gently takes her hand away from her and dabs the blood with his own handkerchief, but still spurts out. And so he puts his mouth to the wound. He will kiss it better for her, as her mother, had she lived, would have done” (177). Unlike the kiss that brought back to life “The Sleeping Beauty,” this one took the life of the vampire countess.

### Reading Carter as *Écriture féminine*

As mentioned in the previous sections, *Écriture féminine* is regarded as indefinable writing because of the patriarchal oppression towards women and their voices, which according to Cixous, resulted in women writing and talking in a “ patriarchal borrowed language” (Cixous 879). Despite the difficulties in defining this feminine writing, Cixous suggested strategies that oppose patriarchal writing, and some of these elements can be found in Angela Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love.”

First and foremost, the tale’s two main characters are products of gender role subversion. Carter strategically depicts stereotypes that are rejected and resisted mainly by the female character- the countess. Contrary to the stereotypical fairy tales that start with “*Once upon a time* there was a beautiful princess” Carter describes her heroines in a ferocious way: “Wearing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors” (155). On the other hand, the traditional prince is replaced through a stereotypical representation that classic fairy tales use for describing princesses: “One hot, ripe summer in the pubescent years of the present century, a young officer in the British army, blond, blue-eyed, heavy-muscled... He has the special quality of virginity, most and least ambiguous

of states: ignorance..“(161). It should be noted that due to the stereotypical portrayal of the male character, this essay regards “The Lady of the House of Love” as a re-working of the “Sleeping Beauty” instead of vampire legends like Le Fanu’s “Carmilla.”

The representation of women is one reason why Cixous is so disapproving of phallogocentric traditions and urges women to write in a feminine language to elevate women and their position. Carter creates a new woman in line with *Écriture féminine* by embracing the title of monster usually given to women who are different, powerful, and especially those who know their strength. Because of their power, women are made to believe that they are dangerous or compared to the dark continent, and in order to be rewarded by phallogocentrism, they have to reject the strength within and be divine creatures. “The Lady of the House of Love” is the opposite of this divine passive creature; she is the one in charge, the new Medusa. Because the countess knows her power and almost predicts what is going to happen she warns her “prey” not to be scared: ”Vous serez ma proie-you will be my prey. I do not mean to hurt you. I shall wait for you in my bride’s dress in the dark” (171).

Carter’s description of the story’s characters through humor, irony, and devices such as oxymoron can be regarded as a way of contradicting reason. For example, the irony that Carter composed the tale’s title leads to stereotypical interpretations, which would hint that the story is about a lovely passive, domestic lady, a social climber; characteristics that Cixous regards as phallogocentric products. By breaking the patriarchal norms twice, Carter created a heroine at odds with the tale’s title. She is a savage far from innocent and passive, the body opposing reason-the virgin soldier: “She drops, now, on all fours. Crouching, quivering, she catches the scent of her prey.. She will creep home, whimpering, with blood smeared on her cheeks (158). Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror...” (159).

As mentioned, the countess is described through oxymoron as well; she is alive and dead; beautiful yet abnormal: “.. the perennial sadness of a girl who is both death and the maiden. She is so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity.. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness” (156). Through humor, Carter describes the countess’s looks: her claws and teeth that are sharpened on her victims: “Her fingernails are longer than those of the mandarins of ancient China and each is pared to a fine point. These teeth as fine and white as spikes of spun sugar are visible signs of the destiny she wistfully attempts to evade via the arcana” (156-157).

As mentioned before, Cixous claimed that writing could give women access to their sexuality and their bodies that have been censored for years (880). “The Lady of the House of Love” being considered a feminine text shows how the heroine resists the gender binaries through the sexual agency she is mobilized with. “The bridegroom is come, he will go into the chamber which has been prepared for him. I am condemned to solitude and dark; I do not mean to hurt you. I will be very gentle” (172). This passage shows that the countess is not the typical virgin heroine that bleeds in her lover’s bed; instead, she is the aggressor that makes men bleed differently. Patriarchy, or the male sirens, in this case, are disguised as the wicked ancestors who expect the heroine to be consumed only by the need for blood and nothing else. “She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening” (172). What is more, throughout the tale, the countess wears an old wedding dress and a negligee stained with blood. Carter uses these two pieces of clothes to undermine, subvert and mock the patriarchal representation of woman as a heroine- the fairy tale princess who needs her prince to save her and femme fatale.

Finally, by analyzing “The Lady of the House of Love” as *Écriture féminine*, one cannot help but notice the resemblance between Carter’s protagonist and the mythical Medusa. They both share an unnerving power that can be regarded as a threat to patriarchy. This unnerving power overshadows the male character who is portrayed like the typical princess in fairy tales. This portrayal once again relates to Cixous’ claims that a feminine text should not fail to be subversive (888).

Above all, the concept of feminine writing is described as problematic and contradictory; therefore, Carter’s work can be partially read through the lens of *Écriture féminine*. Some might argue that despite the elements that are encountered in Carter’s tales which contradict the reason, her writing, an entrance into the language, is a part of the patriarchal order. Moreover, Cixous herself stated that writing was constructed by phallogentrism, but at the same time promoted a different feminine writing which would oppose it. With that being said, despite the anti-logos encountered in the story and the mentioned contradictory terms, Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love” might be interpreted as a possible *Écriture féminine*.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this essay regards Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* as a critique of the patriarchal

notions of gender. More specifically, “The Lady of the House of Love,” read through the lens of *Écriture féminine*, can be seen as a fictional narrative that, by undermining typical constructions of the female gender, poses a savage critique of patriarchal social constructions.

Moreover, the various role representations and developments encountered throughout the collection convey criticism towards patriarchy and depict the oppressed role that women have been prescribed in traditional fairy tales. Crucial to this study are the gender attributes that Carter both prescribes and subverts. Unlike classic fairy tales where women are portrayed as the weaker gender and men as the strong ones “The Lady of the House of Love” has a savage female character and a virgin male. By de-victimizing the heroine and reversing the gender roles in the tale “The Lady of the House of Love,” Carter creates a new woman approved by Cixous’ *Écriture féminine*. Challenging the phallogocentric views that Cixous continuously criticizes, Carter molds the story’s heroine as the aggressor and the power source that “explodes” patriarchal logos. The portrayal of the heroine throughout the story is at odds with the Western feminine myth of beauty. The “different” attributes that characterize the countess indirectly mock the fairy tale princesses that promote beauty through passivity and hide real issues like menstrual and virginity blood.

Carter’s view that fairy tales are “sugar-coated lies” can explain why she chose to take another road and depict taboos such as gender binaries and themes such as virginity, menstrual blood, sexuality and so on. “The Lady of the House of Love” in the context of the collection has a powerful position because it highlights the mentioned themes in a way that it naturalizes them. Through these themes, one can interpret Carter’s tales as a manuscript to reject gender inequality, embrace sexuality, and also to naturalize taboos such as menstrual blood.



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