



“Hypermasculinity and Fetishized Martyrdom in Angela  
Carter's ‘The Bloody Chamber’”

by Rosalyn Stilling

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" is a touchstone of postmodern fairy tale revisions, deftly marrying the latent content of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" with her entrancing and opulent prose. She boldly addresses the sexuality, gender relations, and biblical comparisons inherent in Perrault's tale in her prose, particularly by blending allusions to Judeo-Christian figures with sadomasochistic practices. Carter expands upon these elements present in "Bluebeard," while keeping her focus on the representation of villainous Bluebeard and his abuses towards the innocent bride. In reimagining "Bluebeard" within "The Bloody Chamber," Carter enhances Bluebeard's god-like omnipotence and his fetishistic approach to female mutilation to turn the tale's sanctioning of patriarchal traditions on its head. Carter's blending of Roman Catholic symbols and practices with the erotics of sadomasochism and the all-consuming male gaze shows that the true problem of the story is destructive hypermasculinity rather than the feminine disobedience displayed in the Bluebeard mythos. Carter transforms Perrault's Bluebeard, a symbol of absolute patriarchal rule, into her character named The Marquis, an icon of the hubristic and all-consuming male gaze, described by critic Kari E. Lokke as "the quintessence

of the negative animus archetype—the ruler of a land of death who tortures woman and cuts her off from life [...] [he] murders life for her" (11).

The Bluebeard mythos, typified by scholar Cheryl Renfroe as a "misogynistic tale frame," exists on the fringes of popular fairy tale types, riding the line between gothic narrative, rife with medieval manors and horrific violence, and morally driven folk literature, aimed to inform an audience's social practices (83). In Charles Perrault's French folktale "La Barbe Bleue," a young woman marries a mysterious and wealthy widower with strange azure whiskers and moves to his remote castle, relating to the medievalism present in the gothic and fairy tales. After they are married, the story follows the plot structure of the Garden of Eden from the Book of Genesis in the Bible. Bluebeard gives the bride the keys to his entire castle, a veritable Eden of material riches, requesting she refrain from exploring one specific chamber, acting as the fairy tale's forbidden fruit from the biblical Tree of Knowledge.

Overcome with Eve-like curiosity, the bride disobeys Bluebeard's wishes and, knowing the dangerous consequences, enters the chamber to find the decapitated corpses of his previous wives, a gothic reimagining of the



fruits of Eve's sin. As the bride realizes these are the victims of disobeying Bluebeard's orders, he catches her in her "sinful knowledge" and plans to kill her, expelling her from the Eden of his lavish gothic castle and from life itself. The bride's brothers, the *deus ex machina* of the gothic fairy tale, dash into the chamber and behead Bluebeard, a narrative move away from the biblical plot structure and back towards gothic narratives.<sup>1</sup>

Aware of the shocking gothic elements in a story aimed at a wide audience, Perrault tried to moralize the tale by claiming it as a cautionary one, warning against innate womanly curiosity, handed down from Eve. However, in much the same manner as the Bible, Perrault's moral uses the wife, or the Eve-figure, as a scapegoat to avoid condemning or questioning male avarice. Perrault sidesteps the darker, more political undertone of the story—the horror that patriarchal systems, such as marriage, allow for abuses of the power granted to men over women, originating in the totalitarian power of God over powerless Eve in Genesis, manifesting in physical and sexual violence against

women.<sup>2</sup> Cheryl Renfroe asserts that Carter's "postmodern retelling[...] open[s the way] for individual revision of traditional attitudes toward women rooted in Judeo/Christian creation mythology," noting Carter's representation and critique the Christian "doctrine of original sin" (82-83).

Carter critiques the god-like power within the patriarchy by tracing its development to its source: the gluttonous male gaze present within the Marquis. Reflected even in the "lush, erotic, rhythmic prose" of Carter's writing, the Marquis' material decadence pervades the story from his ancestral mansion to his extravagant gifts to the narrator (Lokke 8). Passed through his noble heritage, the Marquis has inherited a sea-bound "Eden," filled with all the riches and amenities one could desire. Tucked in the bosom of the sea, the Marquis' ancestral and "amphibious" home sits on a large rock surrounded by the ocean with a small highway that appears when the tide goes out, essentially isolating the space from cosmopolitan society (Carter 9). This ancestral abode is the epicenter of his sense of entitlement and narcissistic self-deification,

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<sup>1</sup> Gothic narratives often depict a daring and nearly impossible rescue of the heroine at the eleventh hour.

<sup>2</sup> Adam also exercises power over Eve, but for the purposes of this comparison, Adam will not be

directly mentioned because he has no analogous character within the story.



granting him temporal power through his title but also passing on a tradition of misogyny; Carter notes that his ancestors used to hunt women in the village. The Marquis now “hunts” in Parisian salons for fresh meat, leading him to find the story’s narrator (33). His family history of female objectification, a nod to patriarchal sanctioning of female abuse, foreshadows the coming struggles of the narrator as his wife and also hints at the importance of sight in the Marquis’ violent perversion. Keen sight is essential to a successful hunt, and the Marquis’ gaze plays a central role in his perversions and fetishes, aimed to seek out his young victims.

The Marquis’ newest conquest is the story’s narrator, a poor girl living in a small apartment with her widowed mother. When she encounters the Marquis, he comes to represent everything she is without: financial security, power, sex, and the glamour of luxury. After she is engaged to the worldly and experienced Marquis, he begins lavishly dotting upon her, a preview of the riches she will inherit by their union. These luxuries, though, come with a price—the igniting of his lustful gaze. When he places a decadent ruby choker around her throat, seeming a “precious slit throat [...] bright as arterial blood”, the young bride notes, “I saw him watching

me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur [...] I’d never seen [...] the sheer carnal avarice of [lust]” (Carter 11). In addition to connecting avarice and violence with lust, Carter creates layers of sight within this scene to a nearly cloying degree, intensifying the Marquis’ gaze, multiplied by the gilt mirrors. The manifold gazes heighten the visual and erotic intensity of the moment, punctuated violently by the gleam of blood-red rubies. When fixed around the young girl’s pale neck, the ruby necklace, as red as virgin’s blood or a slit throat, is a physical symbol of the girl’s transformation into a violent scopophilic’s sex object, foreshadowing her impending doom.

The ruby choker comes to represent the inception of the male gaze physically upon the narrator, all carnality and rooted in the physical. Male power within “The Bloody Chamber” is correlated with sight, for the only other male character is the blind and poor piano tuner Jean-Ives, who offers no threat to the narrator because he cannot see her. The Marquis, however, is entirely threatening in the power of his gaze. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey posits,

Pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze

projects its phantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact[...] women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle (841).

Following Mulvey's theory, the Marquis, in assuming the power of his position in the patriarchy, captures the narrator's body within his gaze so he can form her passive body into the image that aesthetically and sexually pleases him most, dressing her in satin lingerie and decadent jewelry. She is no longer the poor Parisian girl because as a woman, she is made passive by the active and consuming male gaze, changing her identity to fit the male's desires. In accepting the choker, she naively renounces her sentience to the Marquis, becoming the passive object of his active gaze, inciting his desire for power over her assumed through viewing pleasure. The narrator can only have a sense of agency around the blind piano tuner Jean-Ives because he cannot assume power over her identity and body with his gaze; Jean-Ives, however, is no match for the power of the Marquis' gaze.

After the bride enters the infamous chateau, the Marquis' tendency toward aesthetic decadence, a product of his gluttonous gaze, becomes clear. Aside from the lavish adorning of his young bride, his gothic, sea-bound mansion is a physical manifestation of his insatiable visual lust. His intense voyeuristic urges are encapsulated in his home, and the rooms of the castle are overflowing with decadent and exotic amenities, even down to the smallest details. A bathtub becomes a work of art in the Marquis' chateau, complete with gold taps in the shape of dolphins with eyes made of turquoise. He owns hordes of ancient tomes, and within these books, the narrator stumbles upon a direct instance of his voyeuristic fetishism, the intersection of viewing-for-pleasure with viewing-pleasure-as-power.

The bride finds a collection of pornographic prints, the first labeled "Reproof of curiosity," depicting a young naked girl, sobbing while being whipped by masked men with large blades and erect phalluses; the girl's genitalia is red like a "split fig" (Carter 17). The imagery is a graphic display of the entwining of innocence lost, violence, pain, the submissive female form, and masculine dominance within the Marquis' sexual fantasies, extending far into sexual perversion; the image's

name also suggests a sense of relishing in the punishment of this young girl's curiosity by sexually humiliating and harming her.<sup>3</sup> For the Marquis, sex is a space of dominance, discipline involving physical repercussions, and the gaining of pleasure through the pain of a girl's loss of innocence highlighted in the pornography. When the Marquis finds his young wife viewing his private pornography, he takes her into the bedchamber to consummate their marriage, further tying his sexual fetishism to the taking of innocence. Specifically, he harnesses the visual pleasure of watching her view the porn, watching her look of horror over the images, and watching her look of shock as he initiates sex. The consummation of their marriage also links god-like dominion to the power he takes over the young wife in sex.

When the Marquis finally has sex with the narrator, days after their wedding, he does so in the light of day surrounded by mirrors. The young bride looks within the dozen gilt mirrors that surround the bed and notes that it looked as if she were amid a harem of women simultaneously "impaled" by their husbands in the bright of day

(Carter 17). She initially protests to daytime intercourse, but the Marquis salaciously comments on the advantage of sunlight saying, "All the better to see you" (Carter 17).<sup>4</sup> His comment is a blatant nod to fairy tales as well as an indication of the overwhelming presence of the male gaze within Carter's tale—even her allusions are related to the destructive and consuming power of the active gaze. The gilt looking-glasses work in the same manner as the mirrors of the Parisian salon, multiplying and heightening the Marquis' decadent and overwhelming gaze. Physically experiencing the narrator's body is not enough to sate his sexual gluttony; he must see himself conquering her over and over again, a veritable clown house of male dominance, power, and visual arousal. He takes his bride when he decides in the situation that he desires, unconcerned with her experience. His gaze in this moment, omnipotent in its clownish duplication within the bedchamber's various mirrors at various angles, translates into an assuming of god-like power over the girl's body and fate.

The Marquis assumes god-like control over his wife's life and body,

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about perversity in "The Bloody Chamber," see Becky McLaughlin's scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> Carter is referencing the Big Bad Wolf's infamous line in "Little Red Cap" or "Little Red Riding Hood,"

which is critically viewed as a tale type depicting a girl's loss of innocence and virginity to a "wolfish" man.



which becomes apparent when he moves from lavishing her with his riches to lavishing her with sexual attention aimed at his pleasure. When his gaze is translated to sexual viewing pleasure, Carter begins alluding to the Catholic Church and the power of God over women, particularly nuns and virgin martyrs, setting the Marquis as patriarchal godhead above his wife. The pornographic print foreshadows the young bride's impending loss of innocence at his hands, for when the Marquis finds her viewing the images, he mocks her innocence, saying, "My little nun has found the prayerbooks, has she?" (Carter 17). "Little nun" is a mocking pet name, not meant to simply belittle her but to totally subjugate her to his patriarchal and god-like power. The analogy of the Marquis as equivalent to the Catholic-Christian godhead begins to fall into place in this comment; if the Marquis' wife is "his little nun" viewing "prayerbooks" of sadomasochistic pornography, he is then a god to be worshipped through the female sacrifice of submission to sex and violence. In the world of his castle, his creation, he is as a transcendent divinity, and his wife is a nun devoted to the service of his godly needs. The Marquis' scopophilia is evidenced in his opulent home furnishings, stash of pornography, and mirrored

bedchamber, but his sense of entitled godhead manifests in his interactions with his young bride. He fetishizes her innocence, dragging his young "nun" into a visual and pornographic pilgrimage that ends with worshipping his whims in the bedchamber.

The cathedral-like bedchamber is abounding with lilies, which are perhaps the most critically discussed symbol within "The Bloody Chamber." Lilies have myriad symbolic connotations, all of which Carter weaves decadently and intentionally together. Flowers are generally praised for the pleasure that comes from viewing their beauty, so flower symbolism initially relates to the idea of "gazing for pleasure," a major motif of the work. The bride notes that the Marquis has the skin of white funeral lilies, denoting his alignment with death while mocking a lily's association with sexual anatomy and purity (Lokke 10). Lokke notes that within the image of the lily, "death and phallic sexuality are one," alluding to the lily's shape. In a similar manner, scholar Becky McLaughlin explores the "kaleidoscopic quality" of lily imagery in "The Bloody Chamber":

One moment the lily represents life and the next moment, death. Because of the lily's lush, white petals, it seems bloated

with fecund[ity][...] and yet lilies are known as burial flowers[...] One moment the lily looks female and the next moment, male. At first glance, for example, the lily appears to be a female receptacle, its stamen a clitoris, and the serpentine stem a phallus. On second glance, however, the penile shape of the lily begins to suggest the contours of the phallus and the coiled stem and all-encompassing vaginal “maw.” This vaginal “maw” doubles as the mysterious pale from which life emerges and that dark abyss into which man fears falling [and never returning] (404).

McLaughlin artfully addresses the manifold connotations of the lily, from sex to death to the origin of life; however, she fails to mention the lily’s Christian associations.

In addition to resembling sexual anatomy, Carter plays upon the dual natures of lilies in Catholic iconography and art. Lilies at once represent death and rebirth as Christ dies and then rises from the dead. Carter notes that lilies, a common funeral flower, crowd the bedchamber like a funeral parlor, mourning the death of the narrator’s innocence while also implying the promise of rebirth and new life as a woman in her

sexual knowledge, taking the lily’s imagery full circle back to its sexual connotations.<sup>5</sup> Carter also calls upon the lily’s connection to the divine chastity and purity of Christ, often used in Catholic iconography to link the purity of a saint to the purity of Christ. Carter aligns the narrator with the patron of music, the virgin martyr Saint Cecilia, who is often portrayed in Catholic art as wearing a crown of lilies to signify her purity and virginity (Giorgi 83).

The virgin saint is introduced into the narrative when the Marquis gifts the narrator with a painting of St. Cecilia as a recognition of his wife’s musical talent as a pianist. St. Cecilia is revered in Catholicism as a virgin martyr beheaded during the Christian persecutions of Rome. St. Cecilia spurned the marriage bed with her husband because she had already devoted her virginity to God (Giorgi 83). In the association of the narrator with St. Cecilia and her impending martyrdom at his hand, the Marquis fetishizes taking her virginity and sees himself as the godhead to which she devotes her virginity. He physically takes her virginity into his sense of hedonistic supremacy just as Cecilia symbolically gives her virginity to God. With the Marquis as the divinity

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<sup>5</sup> Lokke and McLaughlin note this connection in their respective works.



looming over his pianist-bride, he is the ruler of her life just as God guided St. Cecilia's life and actions. Essentially, within this comparison, God led St. Cecilia to her slaughter because a devotion to Him kept her in direct contrast to Rome's rule. Likewise, the Marquis leads the narrator to the edge of death to satiate his fetish for virgin sacrifice. The Marquis sets his nun in his chateau-turned-Garden of Eden, rife with temptation, to test her faithfulness to him, in the hopes that leading her to sin will ultimately lead him to pleasure in assuming God-like power over her body and fate.

As in Eden and "Bluebeard," the Marquis tests the narrator by giving her the keys to the chateau, demanding that she avoid the chamber of his inferno or "enfer" (Carter 21). His forbidden chamber likened to a circle of hell in Dante's Inferno, contains the previous spoils of the martyrdom of his other wives. Carter notes that this bloody chamber contains a rack, urns, and a spiked wheel, devices associated with the deaths of other virgin martyrs like St. Catherine, St. Justa, and St. Rufina. The Marquis' previous two wives had the otherworldly qualities of song and model-esque beauty, and his third wife, Carmilla, was a descendent of Dracula. His forbidden chamber includes their

bodies preserved in strange ways relating to their eccentricities. For example, an Iron Maiden contains the fresh corpse of Carmilla martyred in the vampiric way of having thousands of teeth-like needles pressed into her flesh to bleed her dry, showing the Marquis fetishizing her unique heritage. The Marquis fetishizes the conquering of these women's exquisite abilities and quirks, for their talents lie in the ethereal. His only talent is that of looking, hoarding, and consuming, rooted in the physical. Their martyrdoms allow him to conquer their feminine sensibilities encapsulated in their uniqueness and beauty, hoarding more "objects" he finds aesthetically and erotically pleasing. The chamber, a veritable charnel house, exists as a secret, infernal chapel of fetishized martyrdom to honor the Marquis' sadistic sovereignty and godhead.

As if he could sense her transgression, the Marquis finds the bride in her transgression nearly directly following her "sin" of entering the chamber, seeming to appear as an omnipotent and omnipresent deity. The young narrator's misstep allows him to exercise his final desire, which is to punish her curiosity just as the young girl in his pornography is punished. The narrator has no hope of survival at this point, for Jean-Ives, a worshipper of the narrator's

musical talent and her only hope of salvation is rendered powerless in his blindness, a direct foil to the Marquis' power through his gluttonous gaze. Carter relates his character to the yew tree, common in English churchyards, and as these ancient trees keep watch over graves, Jean-Ives' only ability is to keep an overnight vigil with the doomed girl before her execution.<sup>6</sup> He is powerless to intervene, just as yew trees are fated to stand as the land around them fills with the dead.

On her execution day, the Marquis disrobes the girl, a pornographic display of his fantasies and power, and demands she wear the ruby choker on her death march. The ruby choker becomes a gaudy display of irony, for it not only initially foreshadowed the girl's fate but its original intention—to demarcate noblewomen who survived the French Revolution—can now be dishonored by the Marquis. He desires to symbolically sacrifice her to his overwhelming masculine desires of sexuality and violence, his sword becoming the guillotine of the French Revolution. The Marquis wishes to martyr the narrator by the sword, aligning the decapitation of St. Cecilia with the pornography of masked men with swords and

phalluses. This grotesque scene is his ultimate fantasy nearly made reality.

He is ultimately unsuccessful in his final fantasy enactment, however. The narrator's mother, operating on her feminine intuition, storms his castle right before he tries to kill her daughter and shoots him dead. The mother proves that the Marquis' divinity is a self-propagated myth, for she easily kills him as one fells a sapling oak. From atop a stallion, she coldly lodges a bullet in his skull, foiling the close range, intimate decapitation he planned for her naked daughter. The Marquis was so obsessed with empty pleasures, void of love, that he had not considered that familial love could spoil his fantasy. The mother's intervention, a reference to the conflict between patriarchal sky god and matriarchal earth mother, ends his reign of terror through cycles of marriage, sex, and violence, allowing the narrator to leave the sordid castle and marry Jean-Ives, a more suitable husband. McLaughlin argues that the mother's use of a gun represents a woman using phallic power against an abusive man by "submit[ting him] to the phallic function" in the single true strike of the bullet (416). His hubris and corrupted, Id-driven masculinity

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<sup>6</sup> His name is French for "yew tree"

ultimately cause his downfall, for he is brought to his doom by a symbol of the virile masculinity that ruled his existence.

The Marquis, a man whose figure and form seem untouched by the hands of time as “a stone on the beach whose fissures have been eroded by successive tides,” essentially exists as an icon of the destructive capabilities of patriarchal culture—an effigy of hypermasculinity—rather than an actual person with a past, present, and future (Carter 9). McLaughlin notes that the Marquis’ “waxen” visage functions as a mask, reminiscent of Gaston Leroux’s masked and perverse Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*, but the Marquis’ waxen mask of a face hides the horror of years of female objectification, sadism, and violence (414). The Marquis is simply characterized by his gaze, his lust, and his violence, his waxen face hiding his inner corruption from the narrator. Her attempt to understand her husband, as Eve desires to be closer to God, by entering his forbidden chamber, brings her to the precipice of obliteration. In this instance of disconnect between the sexes, only death and discord can follow inequality and violence of men to women.

In “The Bloody Chamber,” Carter questions and critiques patriarchal society by showcasing the way in which traditions like marriage and religion centered on male pleasure and mobility allot space for abuse against women. She does not demonize marriage, for the narrator enters a relationship with Jean-Ives. Instead, Carter upholds marriages of equality, untainted by patriarchal constructs like power through the male gaze. “The Bloody Chamber” shows that systems and cycles that perpetuate hypermasculinity, ranging from marriages of inequity to patriarchal religious traditions which demonize women, must be obliterated for women to be free of sexual slavery and violence and for the sexes to engage in healthy, fulfilling, and meaningful relationships.

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