



Transformation of Gender Roles within the Bluebeard Narrative

Angela Carter's short story "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) is an adaptation of the fairy tale "Bluebeard" (1697) by Charles Perrault, both of which tell the story of a female protagonist escaping death at the hands of her husband after acting against his wishes. These "wishes" take the form of a command to stay out of a particular room, the key to which the husband nevertheless gives to the woman. While the original text is intensely critical of the protagonist's curiosity that fuels her disloyalty, Carter's version blames the husband for tricking the heroine into a fate he intended to set in motion all along. Likewise, Perrault's fairy tale depicts the husband as an upstanding person despite his irrational expectations and corresponding murderous tendencies, but Carter reveals that behind her male lead's façade of honor lies a twisted debauchee. Ultimately, Perrault's version warns that feminine curiosity is purely a danger, while in Carter's version, the protagonist is rescued by her mother's same curious instincts. Although Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" originates from the rather misogynistic pages of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," Carter reverses Perrault's negativity and portrays the pursuit of female enlightenment as both righteous and rewarding. By utilizing the same basic plot as Perrault but altering the story's central meaning, Carter demonstrates how cultural notions of gender roles have evolved.

Female enlightenment is a concept that can be manifested in many ways, but in these two stories, it takes the particular form of women's deepened understanding of the world around them, as achieved through an active and internally motivated pursuit of knowledge. At the most literal level, both heroines engage in this pursuit of enlightenment by venturing into the



forbidden room, so as to satisfy an irrepressible curiosity concerning what lies beyond its ominous locked door. Furthermore, throughout both stories, the protagonist is motivated by a desire to learn more about her husband and the significance of his secrets. Despite these very similar depictions of women seeking enlightenment, the two stories assume contrasting attitudes toward such behavior, as indicated through the placement of blame, the characterization of the husband, and the ultimate resolution of the plot.

One of the primary instances of the authors' contrasting depictions of female enlightenment surrounds the concept of accountability – that is, whether the protagonist deserves to be held accountable for her transgression or if the husband is ultimately accountable for her would-be death. Perrault evidently identifies with the former viewpoint when he writes, “[Bluebeard’s] poor wife came downstairs, in tears and with disheveled hair. She threw herself at his feet. ‘That won’t do you any good,’ said Bluebeard. ‘Prepare to die’” (147). This is the heroine’s second time seeking forgiveness, and she does so through the desperate and violent motion of throwing herself on the ground, indicating great remorse. Although these extensive displays of regret arouse sympathy within the reader, they also suggest that the heroine is seeking repentance for genuinely sinful behavior. On the other hand, the husband is entirely unapologetic about his murderous inclinations; instead, he judges his wife’s transgression in an unsympathetic, detached manner. While the protagonist demonstrates the extent of her culpability through the severity of her remorse, her husband’s stoic response conveys a lack of involvement in his wife’s betrayal. This juxtaposition between the characters’ attitudes surrounding their actions demonstrates Perrault’s stance that the heroine’s meddling curiosity makes her ultimately responsible for her own near-death. In contrast, Carter clearly shows that the ultimate accountability resides with the husband. After discovering the room filled with the corpses of her



husband's previous wives, Carter's protagonist anticipates her impending doom and observes, "I knew I had behaved exactly according to his desires; had he not bought me so that I should do so?" (34). The heroine suggests that her husband continues to remarry after killing his wives because he is deliberately searching for new victims to satisfy his insatiable thirst for blood, as opposed to righteously searching for someone who is undyingly faithful to him. Therefore, the heroine's transgression is not her fault whatsoever, since her husband was bent upon luring her to her death all along. The husband bears the responsibility for his wife's would-death because he gives her the key to the forbidden room, consciously intending to pique her innate curiosity and subsequently punish her for following her instincts. Thus, while Perrault portrays women's pursuit of knowledge as reproachable, Carter portrays it as a blameless fact of life.

The two authors also reveal their attitudes towards their protagonists' knowledge-seeking actions through the characteristics of the husband who judges those actions. Perrault describes his male lead as "a man who had fine houses, both in the city and the country, dinner services of gold and silver, chairs covered in tapestries, and coaches covered in gold" (144). Despite the husband's unattractive blue beard, booming voice, and homicidal actions, no further descriptions of him are monstrous enough to overturn this image of a fairly wealthy and upstanding member of society. In fact, his brutally violent behavior is seemingly outweighed by his wealth and influence. However, the husband in Carter's story is a much less respectable man. For example, when the heroine finds a pornographic book within her husband's library, he shows "a curious mixture of mockery and relish; then, seeing [the heroine's] furious bewilderment, he laughed at [her] aloud" (Carter 17). The husband's enjoyment of pornography is enough to make him less respectable, but Carter's description of his visible delight at his wife's discovery exhibits a disgusted tone. Because the husband in each story comes into conflict with his wife's pursuit of



enlightenment, a negative description of one suggests a positive view of the other, and vice versa. As such, a character as distasteful as Carter's male lead denouncing feminine curiosity conveys that this curiosity is the opposite of his character: agreeable and virtuous. This contrasts with Perrault's story, in which the relatively honorable portrayal of the husband implies that feminine curiosity is meddlesome and improper. In this way, the two authors' characterization of their male leads demonstrates their attitudes towards women's pursuit of knowledge.

While the plots of both stories are incredibly similar, the authors further develop their views on female enlightenment through the ultimate resolution of their respective stories. Although adjusting the end of the storyline may appear to be a superficial alteration, Birgit Spengler explains in *Literary Spinoffs*, "Literary spinoffs re-read and rewrite their pretexts in order to participate in broader cultural discourses" (29). Thus, even such forthright modifications can have substantial thematic ramifications. In Perrault's tale, the heroine is rescued by her two brothers, having no responsibility for her own survival. Afterwards, Perrault explicitly states the moral of the story: "Curiosity, in spite of its many charms, can bring with it serious regrets; [...] Women succumb, but it's a fleeting pleasure; [...] And it always proves very, very costly" (148). Thus, Perrault conveys that the heroine's curiosity is the direct cause of her life-threatening situation, from which she is powerless to extricate herself. Instead, she is saved solely by her brothers' fortuitous arrival. In the world of Perrault's story, a man is the only thing that can save a woman from her own pursuit of enlightenment. In Carter's story, however, it is a woman – the protagonist's mother – who comes to the rescue. While her daughter describes her husband's luxurious "gold bath taps" over the phone, the mother nevertheless hears her daughter cry, and her "maternal telepathy" tells her something is amiss (Carter 40). Not only does a woman save the protagonist, but this woman exhibits the same pursuit of knowledge as the protagonist



herself, feeling an instinctive urge to investigate whether or not her daughter is safe. This contradicts Perrault's aforementioned moral that feminine curiosity is always "very, very costly," instead arguing that it can save a person's life. Additionally, the heroine survives because her own behavior over the phone arouses the suspicions of her mother, so Carter's protagonist plays a less passive role in her rescue. Therefore, while Perrault describes female enlightenment as purely hazardous, Carter shows that it can be fruitful and even life-saving.

The true significance of Carter's alterations to the "Bluebeard" tale lies in the fact that these changes reflect the evolution of cultural gender roles. This phenomenon is explained in Maria Tatar's "Sex and Violence: The Hard Core of Fairy Tales," which describes how the Brothers Grimm decided upon "eliminating anything that might offend the sensibilities [...] of the reading public" (372). While the Grimms were documenting an array of traditional cultural stories, their representation of these stories was shaped by societal expectations. Thus, literature not only influences culture but is influenced by it. Carter's removal of the misogynistic elements of "Bluebeard" reflects a contemporary culture in which those elements are no longer acceptable. However, beyond merely removing these elements, Carter rewrites the story so that it actually promotes female enlightenment, strengthening feminist ideas within modern society. For example, the moral of Perrault's story states that in marriage, "It's not hard to tell which of the pair is master," (148). However, in dealing with this condescending message towards women, Carter goes beyond deletion. Once Carter's heroine is freed, she remarries the castle's piano tuner, whose eyes, "though they were blind, [...] were singularly sweet" (31). Thus, not only is Carter's heroine not "mastered" by her second husband, but she holds the more powerful position within the relationship because he requires her care. Such reversals of Perrault's



negative portrayal of female enlightenment both make the tale more socially acceptable and urge Carter's readers to have greater respect for women.

Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" and Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" begin with nearly the same premise and follow similar very storylines. As such, it initially appears that Carter's story will trace the same thematic development as its predecessor, but as the story progresses its central message becomes markedly unique. While Perrault condemns feminine curiosity, Carter shows that women's pursuit of knowledge is a noble and powerful undertaking. Moreover, the fact that "The Bloody Chamber" builds upon the same basic plot as "Bluebeard" accentuates the thematic differences between the two. Carter's feminist alterations to the "Bluebeard" tale stand out from the familiar, directly borrowed components, encouraging readers to analyze the significance of Carter's contemporary ideas and their context within the story. Not only that, but these alterations encourage further examination of the original text and how its themes are informed by the differences between the two versions. This mutual interaction between the texts ultimately makes Carter's fresh, positive outlook on female enlightenment all the more impactful.



Works Cited

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