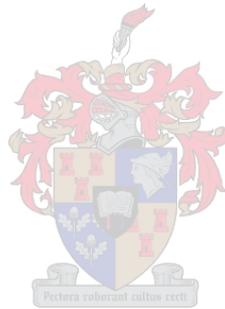


The Fantasy of Female Sexual Freedom in Angela  
Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and in John Logan's  
*Penny Dreadful*

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April 2019

## Declaration

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April 2019

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## Abstract

Despite considerable investigation into the nature of female sexuality and the manner in which it has been portrayed over the years, debate remains regarding what is acceptable and what is not. Furthermore, the manner in which it may be explored in a constructive manner is disputed.

This thesis aims to use Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* and her analysis of the work of the Marquis de Sade to understand not only the possibly perverse nature of female sexuality, but also how pornography has the potential to expose gender inequality and provide a new space for female liberatory sexual practices. Furthermore, noting the similarities between the structure and potentially subversive elements of the pornographic text and folk tales, I analyse selected texts from Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, primarily through the lens of the sexual subject positions of the female protagonists and how sexual initiation and desire play a central role in significant character development.

The *Penny Dreadful* television series is explored by noting the extensive relationship depicted between female sexuality and the otherworldly. Firstly, as remnants of the debate regarding the depiction of female sexuality in literature, the substantial dissonance regarding the role that television may play in this regard is analysed. Furthermore, in keeping with the substantial effect of revisionist myth-making, the significance of the intertextual and Gothic elements of the *Penny Dreadful* series is examined.

## Opsomming

Ten spyte van in diepte ondersoek oor die aard van vroulike seksualiteit en die manier waarop dit uitgebeeld word, is daar steeds baie debat oor wat aanvaarbaar is al dan nie. Verder, word die manier waarop die onderwerp konstruktief benader kan word betwis.

Die doel van hierdie tesis is om aan die hand van Angela Carter se *The Sadeian Woman*, gepaard met haar analise van die Marquis de Sade se werke, nie net die moontlike perverse aard van vroulike seksualiteit te verstaan nie, maar ook hoe pornografie die potensiaal het om geslagsongelykhede uit te wys en 'n nuwe spasie vir bevrydende vroulike seksuele praktyke te skep. In lig hiervan word die ooreenkomste tussen pornografiese tekste en volksverhale met betrekking tot hul struktuur en potensiële ondermynende elemente beskou. Uittreksels uit Angela Carter se *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* word geanaliseer hoofsaaklik uit die oogpunt van die seksueel onderdanige vroulike protagoniste en hoe seksuele ontgroening en begeerte 'n sentrale rol speel in beduidende karakterontwikkeling.

Die *Penny Dreadful* televisiereeks word dan ondersoek deur die verhouding wat uitgebeeld word tussen vroulike seksualiteit en die bonatuurlike. Na aanleiding van die uitbeelding van vroulike seksualiteit in literatuur, word die onenigheid met die rol van televisie in hierdie opsig ondersoek. In ooreenstemming met die aansienlike effek van revisionisme word die belang van die intertekstuele en Gotiese elemente van die *Penny Dreadful* televisiereeks ondersoek.

## Acknowledgements

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For my family, for their never-ending and patient support.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*I desire therefore I exist.*

(Carter *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* 252)

Female sexuality is a topic that has been discussed for centuries, and we have perhaps never been as exposed to depictions of female sexuality as we are today. This is in part due to the amplified visual culture through various forms of visual technology – internet, TV, and social media, to name a few. However, some of this exposure is dependent on access to the aforementioned visual technologies synonymous with modernity. Nevertheless, taboos and dualisms remain, and despite considerable progress in women’s sexual liberation, the options open to women in large social discourses around female sexuality remain limited. A large distinction is still made between a respectable and chaste wife-figure and a sexually liberated women whose sexuality may at any time be used as a character condemnation. Even the portrayal of female sexuality is a highly debated topic, and feminists cannot bring themselves to agree on whether the female body is one that should be showcased and admired, or one that should have its splendour hidden and only venerated by a select few. This study explores the ways in which female sexuality is portrayed in the revisionist works of Angela Olive Carter-Pearce, hereafter referred to as Carter only, namely “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Tiger’s Bride,” “The Company of Wolves,” “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” “The Erl-King,” and the television series *Penny Dreadful*. The prominence of television series in the modern context means that their messages are widely distributed. Television series are systematically released over a longer period than films, and have a significantly increased screen time. This time is conducive to prolonged explorations of certain subjects and themes, without the extremely short time constraints of films. The *Penny Dreadful* series is especially worthy of consideration because it is loosely based on weekly serial short stories of the same name published in the nineteenth century in the United Kingdom, and is permeated with characters from well-known and celebrated Gothic texts including Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These Gothic themes also permeate Carter’s texts, the Victorian *penny dreadfuls*, and the *Penny Dreadful* television series based thereof which especially allow for psychoanalytic interpretation. In fact, according to Diana Wallace in *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic*, the Gothic historical strain seemed to have been at its most powerful in the time of short fiction to some extent because of the publication of mass-market periodicals (13). The Gothic themes which infiltrate the *Penny*

*Dreadful* television series to such a great extent are an extension of the Gothic tropes which the *penny dreadfuls* of the Victorian era epitomised. Through the pronounced element of postmodern intertextuality, both the contemporary *Penny Dreadful* television series and Carter's revisionist texts rely on known tropes in order to create meaning in a "new" way.

The use of desire and female sexuality as a propelling force, both positive and negative, in the feminist revisionist stories of Angela Carter, and the TV series *Penny Dreadful*, is analysed. Carter herself is used as the primary theoretical frame of reference, especially her work on the ideology of pornography. I examine the abovementioned works in relation to their fantastic settings, with an explanation of why the element of the imaginary is effective in the exploration of female sexuality. This thesis explores the ways in which female sexuality remains in the sphere of fantasy. Female sexuality has for a long time been most unreservedly discovered through the mode of fantasy – make-belief has been able to explore the world of female sexual desire most thoroughly because it is believed that it *cannot* be real. It is not a threat if it is not a reality. This notion derives from the idea that "fantasy is about the construction of the impossible" (James and Mendlesohn 1 Introduction). Despite this most basic definition, the themes that fantasy literature incorporates are ones that are nevertheless relevant to "the real world." In the same way that the discussion of female sexuality found a space of free exploration in the mode of fantasy, so too the Gothic has been able to confront social problems exactly because of its connotation with the fantastic. Wallace writes that because of its connotations of the supernatural, the Gothic is seen to stand in contrast to society's ideas about history and realist novels which seem to be regarded as 'the real' (4).

Carter's feminist revisionist methods constitute one of the subjects of my thesis, and she is the primary theorist. Her study of the ideology of pornography in *The Sadeian Woman*, a book-length essay first published in 1978, is a significant study of female sexuality, and is used as the first frame of reference for my work. *The Sadeian Woman* is an exploration of the ideology of pornography and deals primarily with the work of the Marquis de Sade. His work serves as a catalyst for Carter's exploration of female sexuality and the act of sex itself. Carter brings to life the subject of sex, its history, its present, and its future by analysing de Sade's female characters and their relation to sex, but also linking these figures to the sex goddesses and symbols prevalent in contemporary society. Before such an analysis, it is necessary to note exactly who the Marquis de Sade was, and why he inspired the work of Angela Carter. Donatien Alphonse François de Sade was a French writer and nobleman born on 2 June 1740 (Gillette 31), and despite an aristocratic upbringing, most of de Sade's writing occurred throughout various prison sentences (Gillette 30). His prolific reputation derived primarily from his sexual interactions and the exposed nature of his experiences. The forthright manner

in which his writing dealt with sexualities of various kinds inspired substantial criticism, especially the manner in which violence was central to his depictions of sexual encounters. He inspired the eponymous term ‘sadist’, and yet, as recognised by Carter, his writing has much more to offer than an encyclopaedia of ‘sexual deviances,’ although his work most assuredly deals with all kinds of sexualities and their manifestations. Despite this, we could argue that to attribute all of these to de Sade personally would be considerably problematic. It could be argued that, like Carter and the television series *Penny Dreadful*, de Sade works with and within the mode of fantasy, and through it offers a critique of both sexual domination and subordination as indicative of social domination and subordination. Although the fantasy of his settings is not supernatural in nature, the practical inconceivability of certain elements of the stories warrant the classification. One might argue that the nightmarish settings present in de Sade’s work do occur in actuality, and that is part of why they are so sickening. Yet, like pornography in general, the setting is concerned with allowing the sexual act to take place and the credibility of the space itself is negligible.

Despite the reformative aspects of the texts I choose to analyse, it is nevertheless necessary to understand the many arguments formed against the use and portrayal of female sexuality in the service of feminism and the extent to which Carter was criticised for her text on de Sade and her views on pornography (a subject which remained a source of contention amongst feminists). *The Sadeian Woman* was particularly criticised, despite, as argued by Gregory J. Rubinson in *The Fiction of Rushdie, Barnes, Winterson and Carter: Breaking Cultural and Literary Boundaries in the Work of Four Postmodernists*, Carter’s criticism of pornography being as essential to her work as her promotion of the open-minded and “liberatory potential of pornography” (154). It is the method in which pornography is employed and the circumstances “in which it is read or received that can prove either liberatory or confining” (Rubinson 154). Nevertheless, there was considerable backlash against Carter’s notions of pornography, notably from Andrea Dworkin, for whom pornography could never be anything but misogynistic and detrimental to the feminist agenda. In the 1960s and 70s there was an increasing women’s emancipation movement that aimed to rectify the myths coupled with femininity accumulated through representations of women in assorted prominent dialogues:

... myths, for example, that linked virtue to virginity (as in the Christian archetype of the Virgin Mary), charm and attractiveness to suffering (as in the Marilyn Monroe-style Hollywood icon), femaleness to 'lack' (as in psychoanalysis' Oedipus Complex), and sexual agency to whorishness (as in pornography) (Rubinson 155).

Despite the fact that the women's movement of the 1970s managed to stand together in the endeavour of demythologising the bulk of these depictions, pornography remained a continuing cause of disagreement between feminists (Rubinson 155). In the text, Carter proposes the notion of a "moral pornographer" who has the ability to critique the relationship between genders through the utilisation of pornography. As Kimberley Lau notes, Carter's 'moral pornographer' suggests a pornographer that "accounts for the power relations and material realities implicit in every sexual act" rather than a pornographer whose "content might meet ambiguous determinations of arbitrary moral standards" (84). In contrast to Carter, who considers the genre as traditionally governed by misogyny but not inherently entwined with it, Dworkin regards the term "pornography" to indicate "the graphic depiction of women as vile whores," rather than writing or depictions of sex or the erotic in various forms (*Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 200). Thus, the primary dispute between the anti-porn movement and Carter is Carter's suggestion that "pornography, even in its most violent and misogynistic forms, always has something to teach us about sexual power relations and the cultural construction of gender" and that pornography may be utilised in offering alternative imaginings of sexual liberation for women (Rubinson 158). Dworkin argues that the classification of pornography as portrayals of the erotic only indicates that the degradation of women is understood to be the true pleasure of sex (*Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 201).

More in accordance with Carter's views, Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir in her essay "Must We Burn de Sade?" notes that the critics who deem de Sade "neither villain nor idol, but a man and a writer" are few in number (Part 1). She posits that de Sade induces our consideration neither as a writer nor as a sexual aberrant, but rather "by virtue of the relationship which he created between these two aspects of himself" (Part 1). Thus, his primary implication for us is not present in his deviations, but rather the way in which he accepted accountability for them and "he made of his sexuality an ethic; he expressed this ethic in works of literature" (de Beauvoir Part 1). Carter provides an analysis of de Sade that does not confine him to any definitive role.

In the essay, Carter explains that "the male is positive, an exclamation mark. Woman is negative. Between her legs lies nothing but zero, the sign for nothing, that only becomes something when the male principle fills it with meaning" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 4). The penis is assertive, but the vagina is a space to be filled, and so man aims, but woman only exists (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 4). Passivity in the female is established, using biological factors as both representations and explanations for it to be encouraged in the social context. Furthermore, it is already well founded that sexuality is not free from social constraints; it does

not exist independent of the social climate that surrounds it (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 9). We might believe that in this most primal act of fucking, we are separated from all that has come before and all that is still to come, but Carter suggests that this is a lie (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 9). Passivity in the bedroom is linked to a promoted passivity in the social sphere. The social expectations and constraints that surround sexuality – especially female sexuality – have led to an environment of sexual shame and dilemmas of morality, especially when in conjunction with a Judeo-Christian heritage (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 12). According to Carter, “it is a wonder anyone in this culture ever learns to fuck at all. Flesh comes to us out of history; so does [*sic*] the repression and taboo that govern our experience of flesh” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 12). Pornography is marketing for sex; advertising for the act of fucking that Carter notes seems redundant, because most people have the desire to engage in the act as soon as they know how to do it (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 17). As has already been noted, sex is not isolated from its social atmosphere, and thus it will change according to social conditions (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 19). This is relevant especially in relation to the way female sexuality can be expressed visually in the television series *Penny Dreadful*, unlike the literature that precedes it.

Carter contends that “women do not normally fuck in the active sense. They are fucked in the passive sense and hence automatically fucked-up, done over, undone” (*The Sadeian Woman* 31). Yet, de Sade suggests that women should be able to fuck as enthusiastically as they want to and “they will then be able to fuck their way into history and, in doing so, change it” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 31). This encouragement of female sexual freedom and its effects is still relevant to this day. De Sade’s novels *Juliette* and *Justine* are used as the primary frame of reference when discussing his work, and Carter’s analysis of it. It is necessary to note the mixed and contrary reception of his writing, as most people seem to posit him solely as an advocate of violence and he was certainly punished for it in his lifetime through various prison sentences and social ostracisation. There is no doubt that his narratives are explicit even in contemporary terms, yet in his era they were deemed criminal. Nevertheless, upon analysis, there are undeniable indications of a deep thinker and a writer brutally aware of his social surroundings and the deeply oppressive undercurrents most people either did not notice, or actively sought to ignore. His texts, read with an open and enquiring mind, reveal a subversive nature much akin to Carter’s own work and the *Penny Dreadful* television series. As emphasised in the quotation used above, de Sade was also unique in his time, and even now, by advocating female sexual exploration and freedom; this is discussed with a close textual analysis of Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman*.

Within the first few pages of *Justine*<sup>1</sup>, Book 1, de Sade addresses the nature of female sexual desire and the forces seeking to govern it. He does so by explaining the recognition of sexual desire within one of his protagonists, but also the manner in which she was forced to govern it:

Each of us now is her own mistress, free from all restraint. Since you are only twelve, you may not yet have experienced the urgings of the flesh which have come over me of late; but I can assure you that they are immensely provocative and that they create an awesome hunger which denies you rest until it is satisfied. In the past, imprisoned under the eyes of our parents and relatives, I have not been able to satisfy it fully; instead, it was my lot to buy what little peace I could by teaching my fingers to respond to the images of a feverishly desirous brain. Now all of this is behind me, and it is a fate which you can be spared entirely. Come, let us go together to take up the lives of courtesans, satisfying the hungers of the flesh whenever they arise and the thirst for material goods as well (De Sade 53-54).

As Carter is set to explore repressed female desire as defined by society, so too de Sade explores in Juliette the need of a young woman to be able to explore her own desires, sexual, in this case, but coming to represent any number of desires which society seeks to control. She tells her sister, who will come to represent Virtue, “‘Listen to me,’ Juliette continued, ‘you are too sensitive to the opinions of others; too quick to modify your behavior to adjust to their standards’” (de Sade 54). Juliette thus assumes the role of the transgressive woman that governs Carter’s texts and the *Penny Dreadful* series. She forms a part of the classification of “bad” women who rebel against the societal constrictions which they know confine them to a life of passivity, and all too often, pain. Furthermore, the excerpt noted highlights the divergent points of view that ultimately determine the conflicting futures of the two sisters whose experiences, although identical at conception, are recounted in his novels. Their paths diverge drastically upon misfortune and their fates are decided by their attitudes towards sex and how they might use it to their benefit, or how it may be used against them. Carter recognises de Sade’s *Justine* as “the holy virgin” whereas Juliette is “the profane whore” (*The Sadeian Woman* 115). The anti-porn feminists identify women embodied in pornography as symbols of *Justine*; females

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<sup>1</sup> The story of a girl who, upon her parents’ deaths, is met with continued abuse by various individuals, arguably because of her need to remain “virtuous.” Her sister, Juliette, on the other hand, indulges all of her sexual fantasies and becomes a murderess.

for whom anguish, in the pornographic setting, “is made ... to seem 'natural'” (Rubinson 160). In advocating that women should not capitulate to notions of being victims, Carter stands against the Justine prototype, and as Justine exemplifies victimhood, and consequently is the epitome of what the anti-porn feminists vigorously support, Carter believes that Juliette is the one who does not merely personify the typical prostitute and rather becomes an independent sexual being by resisting objectification (Rubinson 160-161). Juliette achieves her autonomy because she is able to become sexually and economically exploitative: like men, she 'fucks' (Rubinson 160-161). In this manner, Carter once more highlights the notion that true liberation will only become a truth for women when there is the recognition of their sexual autonomy. As representative of social situations, the folk tale and the pornographic text may be used as a primary method of revising female sexual subjectivity and subsequently female subjectivity in society. Unlike de Sade's Justine, the protagonists of Carter's text and the women of *Penny Dreadful* are not only the objects of lust, but also the subjects. They were objects of lust, to be certain, but they used it to their advantage, and they transformed their position. Carter explicates that “to be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case. To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed. This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman” (*The Sadeian Woman* 88).

The women I shall analyse refuse to become victims. They, like so many young girls in stories, frequently had idealistic expectations of sex and relationships within the institution of marriage, despite the examples they had been shown and some of the information on the act with which they had been presented. I argue that although they had had some inclination of the coming events – tales of what occurs in the marriage bed and the dire consequences of premarital sex being well established, the act itself was surprising in both its violence, and the effect it had on them. Even though some of these protagonists recognised sexual desire within themselves, violence still accompanied the sexual act and the act still had connotations of violence – even if there was some expectation or understanding of their own sexual desire. At times, only after do they recognise the desire within themselves, and decide to use their new-found knowledge regarding their own sexuality and the sexuality of the men that surround them to their advantage. Nonetheless, Carter explicates that Sade's Justine “is a pawn because she is a woman, [whereas] Juliette transforms herself from pawn to queen in a single move and henceforward goes wherever she pleases on the chess board. Nevertheless, there remains the question of the presence of the king who remains the lord of the game” (*The Sadeian Woman* 91).

In accordance with the thematic intertwining of sex and violence, as expressively explored by de Sade and Carter, previously I have written that rites of passage, sex and death

become interlinking themes in these stories through the female characters exploring their sexualities in a manner that allows them to become more cognisant of their own positions and their relation to a masculine world. This metamorphosis is accompanied by the theme of death, and *la petite mort* (the little death) has long been known as the term to describe the male orgasm.

It is Carter's re-examination of the traditional folk tales that sanctions a subjectivity to be afforded to the female voice, as well as an emancipation of the women protagonists. This is most clearly seen in how the protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber" attempts to use her own sexuality to prevent the fate decided for her by the dominant male character: "I forced myself to be seductive, I saw myself, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and I saw how he almost failed to resist me" (Carter 36). This instance highlights a subversion of both conventional gender positions and of power dynamics. Furthermore, sex and death are intricately intertwined as the protagonist postulates that: "If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then" (Carter "The Bloody Chamber" 36). Carter implements postmodern parody in an effort to uncover and undermine gender stereotypes through the usage of desire as the driving force behind action by the objectified female. This is accomplished by relating the tales from the female perspective. Carter thus entwines themes of rites-of-passage, sex and death through the reformulation of conventional folk tales to portray the unjust relationships contained therein. The female protagonists all endure a mental transformation which permits them agency and stops them from becoming like the many women who precede them; women who were made to submit to the destiny of women in a patriarchal society.

The narrator and protagonist in *Penny Dreadful* also has the opportunity to tell her story unencumbered by the mediation of a male voice. The protagonists to be analysed demonstrate a noteworthy level of self-recognition of their own desires, and they exhibit notable character development. In agreement with this, and as defined by Arnold van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage* (1909), a liminal space is one in which the initiand is removed from the ordinary life to a place of isolation where s/he experiences a tribulation that causes him/her to return to the normal life with a transformed standpoint (Renfroe 92). This space is the indeterminate middle phase when the initiand is exposed to an ordeal to be able to leave one life stage behind to arrive at another (Renfroe 92). This is the moment where the protagonist experiences a true realisation of her character.

This is true in *Penny Dreadful*, where very often the sexual initiation of the women forms their opinions of themselves and the world. Sometimes this serves as a pivotal moment where the characters become aware of their situations, but also recognise the power they could

yield by using their sexualities. Most notably, Vanessa Yves in *Penny Dreadful* experiences this in an acute manner, as witnessing (and then watching) an illicit sexual encounter between her mother and Sir Malcolm (a neighbour and close family friend), she notes that among the mix of emotions she experiences as a young and fairly sheltered Victorian girl, she cannot stop herself from being intrigued by the occurrence. In this moment, she recognises within herself desires not sanctioned by society. Even more significantly, it is when she witnesses this sexual encounter and recognises her own interest in the act that she feels the presence of the supernatural being which will continue to plague her until her death. Notably as well, she is aware of the dangerous nature of her curiosity and the knowledge she required, and she seeks to protect her innocent best friend from her new-found forbidden knowledge. As Vanessa's curiosity effects untold knowledge, so too the protagonist in "The Bloody Chamber" is confronted with secrets that are damning and explosive in nature. For both of these protagonists, the secrets have a significant influence on them and their perceptions of their surroundings. In contrast to these excursions into knowledge being portrayed as warnings against female curiosity, they are rather described as necessary events which both bring to light essential characteristics of the protagonists themselves, and the true nature of their surroundings. The protagonists are no longer deceived by social veneers and instead face the truth of human nature, but yet, like Eve, their expeditions into knowledge do not always go unpunished.

Another significant aspect of the narratives to be analysed is the emphasis on the woman as saviour as a clear subversion of gender roles, which encourages a new perception of women as being capable of significant action in a patriarchal society. The imbalanced relationships between the sexes in traditional stories are toppled and the readers come face to face with the fact that a female protagonist can have as much importance and sway as a male one. Lorna Sage in "Angela Carter: The Fairy Tale", further encapsulates Carter's use of deviant women by stating that "the blameless woman is for Carter also the unimaginative woman" (58). In this light, Marina Warner, a celebrated mythographer and established author of various texts on feminism and myth, notes that "authentic power lies with the bad women" (*From the Beast to the Blonde* 207). Traditionally, this power is attributed to the villainous women and as a consequence, serves the purpose of an obstacle against the heroine. This is not entirely the case in the works of Carter and the *Penny Dreadful* series, where power does indeed lie with the "bad" women, except in these stories, the "bad" women and the heroines are one and the same. The women in *Penny Dreadful*, especially the protagonist, are anything but innocent, but they are strong and wield their power as necessary to succeed. There is no doubt that Carter's heroines also rarely fail to recognise within themselves desires which set them

apart from the fairy tale princesses who precede, and at times, seek to define them. Not only are the readers aware of the “foibles” which make the heroines decidedly more human, but also the characters themselves rarely fail to come to some sort of realisation of their own characters. This self-reflection is powerful in affording the heroines subjectivities often lacking in the classic folk tales, where certain character tropes constrain true character development. Carter is exceedingly skilled at piercing the gender standards that pervade society in such a unique manner that the reader cannot help but better comprehend the insidious accumulation of images of female compliance which function to establish the female role in society. Carter’s female characters defy acquiescence and instead act in a transgressive manner. It is through the use of popular fairy tales that Carter is able to subvert gender expectations by adeptly re-formulating the established tale to allow the female voice agency through her linking of the notable association between desire, gender and power. Power is gained by the women in her tales through their acknowledgment of their own sexual desires and the manner in which these desires may be useful in the fight against the men who seek to govern them. The same can be said of the women of *Penny Dreadful*, and through the elements of intertextuality and a telling of the story of the “Other”<sup>2</sup>, Carter and *Penny Dreadful* share textual themes.

As already established, Carter creates the link between pornography and fairy tale, and the ability for known tales to be utilised in the name of feminism. Dworkin in *Woman Hating*, written in 1974, argues that folk tales and pornography are indeed similar as they “tell us who we are” (53), much like the argument that Carter makes in *The Sadeian Woman*. Yet these two prominent feminists draw opposing conclusions from this similarity and see vastly different ways in which to confront it. As the focus of my study is Carter’s revisionist myth-making, the comparability of pornography and fairy tales thus takes on special significance in her work, especially since traditionally within these forms are proposed strict confines of behaviour; propositions of conduct that critics suggest are not subverted by Carter because she retains the form that first proposed them. In further contrast to Carter, Dworkin in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, issued in 1981, discards the Marquis de Sade as “the world’s foremost pornographer” and rather sees in him a rapist and writer combined whose works admired cruelty as the “essence of eroticism” (70). She notes that for de Sade “fucking, torture, and killing were fused; violence and sex, synonymous” (Dworkin *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 70). This thus sets her apart from Carter who re-appropriates folk tales exactly “through a strategic invocation of Sade, as well as Sigmund Freud” and it is this that “provides us with a glimpse of the climate of scandal – or place of provocation or locus of licentiousness – she

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<sup>2</sup> A concept that posits another entity as being in opposition to the Self, and which frequently deems that Other to be villainous or threatening.

inhabits” (Farnell 271). Merja Makinen in *Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality* states that many of Carter’s critics claim that by employing the format, Carter becomes embroiled in conformist sexism, notwithstanding her noble objectives (4). One of these critics, Patricia Duncker, contends that Carter is reformulating the stories “within the strait-jacket of their original structures” (73) and consequently merely clarifying, magnifying and replicating the “original, deeply sexist psychology of the erotic” (73). Avis Lewallen concurs, and argues that despite Carter’s quest to encourage “an active sexuality for women within a Sadean framework,” sexual options for the heroines remain restricted by Sadean boundaries (146).

In contrast, Makinen reasons that it is the critics who are unable to “see beyond the sexist binary opposition ... and the potential perversity of women's sexuality” (4). It is Makinen’s belief that when the form is employed to critique the engraved ideology, then the form is finely tailored to carve a novel set of expectations (5). It is irony that permits Carter to cast off, while simultaneously re-appropriating, the discourse that she is discussing (Makinen 5). Makinen contends that in applying a “model of ironic oscillation”, Carter’s stories do not merely ‘rewrite’ the established tales by “fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists – they ‘re-write’ them by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version” (5). Carter herself states that “[she] is all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (“Notes from the Front Line”). Carter’s purpose is thus established, and her own transgressive nature is emphasised as she makes it clear that by using the conventional formats, she is still able to deliver deeply subversive texts which have the power to detonate traditional notions regarding female sexuality and its potentially aberrant nature. Thus, as is to be discussed in subsequent chapters, there is a certain expectation placed on the reader to, firstly, recognize the strains of the traditional tale, and secondly, to recognize the differences established by the reformulation, and the purposes that these variations serve.

The *Penny Dreadful*<sup>3</sup> series' exploration of sexual taboos is substantial, and in accordance with my study of female representation in contemporary television, the series exploits the demonization of female sexuality. Throughout the course of the plot, the sexualisation of the protagonist is linked to the supernatural – and demonic paranormal activity, at that. We notice that the protagonist’s sexuality is not, in fact, linked to a heavenly higher power as her virginity might have been. Her sexual desire and experimentation are expressly

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<sup>3</sup> The *Penny Dreadful* television series is a psychological thriller that follows the attempt of Sir Malcolm and Vanessa Ives to locate the former’s daughter, and latter’s old best friend, whom they believe has been taken by a supernatural creature. Vanessa Ives’s unwilling position in the psychic realm is explored and an array of characters from well-known literature appears.

coupled with the dark matter of the world, and the Devil is the companion of her aroused sexual desire. Even in a show such as this where sexual taboos are confronted at almost every turn, the idea of female sexuality is still linked to the occult. From a more theoretical perspective, and as a continuation of the deep divide between feminists on the role of pornography in the quest for equality, Merri Lisa Johnson in “Ladies Love Your Box: The Rhetoric of Pleasure and Danger in Feminist Television Studies” elaborates on what is referred to as the “sex wars” or the “pleasure wars” (6). Instigated at the Barnard Scholar and Feminist conference of 1982, feminists argued relentlessly over women’s servility to the patriarchy (Johnson 6). Johnson elaborates that “porn, sex work, intercourse, butch/femme role play ... were key sites of struggle between separatists and sex radicals” (6). Separatists were vehemently against the participation of women in the so-called “male-identified practices” (Johnson 9). Sex radicals, on the other hand, retorted fervently at the apparent affront and “prescriptivism”, sneering at the conception of “politically correct sex” (Johnson 6). Johnson contends that “freedom, agency, power, and pleasure” were scrutinised “for the faint line between socially constructed desire (what feminists should disavow) and reconstructed sexuality (a state that feminists allegedly should achieve) – our behaviors, fantasies, and longings lining up smoothly with our political ideals” (Johnson 6).

The television series I have chosen to study is without doubt fascinating and worthy of such attention, but these issues have been raised repeatedly in the literature that precedes it. As such, television has had the opportunity to draw on various examples in literature in order to solidify its stance. This is especially true for the *Penny Dreadful* television series as it relies on texts that are already well-established. I argue that Carter is a precursor of these contemporary explorations of female sexuality, especially as her settings are infused with the element of fantasy, as are the realms of the *Penny Dreadful* television series and the *penny dreadfuls* which inspired it. Both have distorted features of the past, and involve re-imagining of historical events, as well as notable works of literature. The revisionist methods employed by Angela Carter resurface even in these contemporary forays into female sexuality. *Penny Dreadful* has the most notable examples of this, as the characters of famous literary works are incorporated into the storyline. This is something that Angela Carter did many years before, in literature, with her reworking of renowned fairy tales.

Before an analysis of Carter’s fiction and the television series, chapter two consists of a close reading of Carter’s *The Sadeian Woman* and the notion of the “moral pornographer” that she proposes. The chapter includes a discussion on the potentially reformative capabilities of pornography, as well as the aspects that create a distinct similarity between pornography and fairy tales. As such, the role that folk tales play in establishing gender roles in society is

discussed and then analysed according to how female liberation may be prompted through a deconstruction of well-known narratives.

Chapter three is comprised of a close analysis of the use of sex as a method of wielding influence by the female protagonists in Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," "The Tiger's Bride," and "The Company of Wolves." The chapter includes discussion on how the female protagonist's recognition of their own sexual desire is necessary in their quest to become emancipated from the male forces seeking to govern them (whether in the form of a husband, a father, or society as a whole).

Chapter four is an exploration of the significance of knowledge in the search of Carter's female protagonists in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," "The Tiger's Bride," and "The Erl-King" for emancipation. The notable gender subversion in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" is discussed, as well as the unique narrative voice of the protagonist of "The Tiger's Bride" who openly critiques the foibles of the males who surround her. In "The Erl-King," the journey of the female protagonist is shown from willing victim to a heroine who seeks to destroy the man who entrapped her, albeit eagerly.

Chapter five explores the *Penny dreadful* television series in relation to the television context, The Gothic imagination, and the nineteenth-century sexual framework. The protagonist's relationship to sex is discussed, as well as the agency that she is afforded. Furthermore, the fallacy of physical appearances is explored in relation to the presence of the monstrous.

## Chapter Two: The Sadeian Sexual Subject: Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*

*Charming sex, you will be free: just as men do, you shall enjoy all the pleasure that Nature makes your duty, do not withhold yourself from one. Must the more divine half of mankind be kept in chains by the others? Ah, break those bonds: nature will sit.*

(qtd. in Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 42)

### Women in Myth and the Positive Potential of Pornography

In order to better understand the purpose of and rationale for many of Carter's narratives, her own study on the work of the Marquis de Sade is essential. Her frank analysis of his work and appreciation of some of the more controversial aspects regarding female sexual freedom bring

to light her own views regarding the role of pornography and the purpose it may serve with regard to feminism. In analysing how the sexes are commonly depicted, Carter emphasises:

In the stylisation of graffiti, the prick is always represented erect, in an alert attitude of enquiry or curiosity or affirmation; it points upwards, it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled. From this elementary iconography may be derived the whole metaphysic of sexual differences – man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 4).

Carter posits that the physical features of male genitalia is substituted to represent the male figure as a whole who is affiliated with logic and the search for knowledge. The male is associated with an attitude of investigation, whereas the female is depicted as a receptor who is continually in a state of anticipation. De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* also explores how “man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man. And she is nothing other than what man decides ... she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other” (6). This message is perpetuated through sexual representations of the genders, and, considered from a sexual angle, if a woman gains meaning only when she is “filled” by the male member and if the sexual act is only sanctified within the institution of marriage, the message perpetuated is that only as a wife may a woman become someone of worth and gain some measure of subjectivity (however fabricated it may be). Should a woman openly explore her surroundings and stumble upon hidden knowledge, she is summarily punished for it. This is most highlighted in the Bluebeard stories where the “moral of the story” is a warning to women against too much open curiosity about things that do not concern them. This narrative derives from the Fall of Eve, whose transgressive desire for forbidden knowledge resulted in a separation from God and is said to have immersed the world in sin. This notion is to be explored more thoroughly upon a close analysis of Carter’s texts and Vanessa Yves in *Penny Dreadful*, as their expeditions into prohibited knowledge have severe consequences, despite the retellings asserting their right to information. In most classic folk tales, the male characters pursue adventure in order to save their heroines. In opposition to this, the romanticised concept of the waiting woman is one that is familiar, especially when considering traditional folk tales in general and the Victorian setting of the *Penny Dreadful* television series. Even when considering stories that appear to have women as protagonists, an element of anticipation often seems ever present. Waiting to be saved by a gallant prince, the woman is only given purpose through marriage and children. It is the message at the end of most conventional fairy stories and although the woman may suffer a great many indignities,

it all appears to be worth it when a male saviour arrives to ameliorate any past pain. Indeed, the greater the female suffering, the bigger the supposed recompense. Female passivity and the continued encouragement of the acceptance of subordination is naturalised and indeed applauded. If suffering almost always equals a “fairy-tale ending”, complaining seems counterproductive to attaining the elusive “happiness”. This concept of noble suffering is one that is to be explored in further chapters, both in relation to some of Carter’s protagonists, but especially the protagonist Vanessa in *Penny Dreadful*.

Physical representations of the natural body signify a much larger system of relations between the sexes, and as a continuation of the above discussion, Carter emphasises that "she is most immediately and dramatically a woman when she lies beneath a man, and her submission is the apex of his malehood" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 8). Carter highlights that the missionary position has an additional pronounced power from a mythic perspective, as it implies “a system of relations between the partners that equates the woman to the passive receptivity of the soil, to the richness and fecundity of the earth” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 8). Yet, this has the effect of producing a feeling within the woman of being so at one with nature that she cannot help but think that this is how she should always be, and Carter describes it as

the soil that is, good heavens, myself. It is a most self-enhancing notion; I have almost seduced myself with it. Any woman may manage, in luxurious self-deceit, to feel herself for a little while one with great, creating nature, fertile, open, pulsing, anonymous and so forth. In doing so, she loses herself completely and loses her partner also (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 8-9).

She highlights how all of the mythic forms of females, “from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth...” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 5). Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* furthers this notion and posits that there exist three dominant female standards which demarcate and constrict female social conduct, and which serve as the social functions inflicted on women: “mother, virgin, prostitute” and “the characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of man's 'activity'; seductiveness,” but that in none of these roles is woman afforded “any right to her own pleasure” (186 – 187). It is worthwhile to note that Carter posits this as “consolatory nonsense” and this underscores the aim of many

folk tales to confine women to specific roles and ultimately separate women into either “good” or “bad” roles – virgins or whores. As discussed in the Introduction, these roles are designated in accordance with a lack of unsanctioned intercourse or the presence of it. Carter posits that

since all pornography derives directly from myth, it follows that its heroes and heroines, from the most gross to the most sophisticated, are mythic abstractions, heroes and heroines of dimension and capacity; any glimpse of a real man or a real woman is absent from these representations of the archetypal male and female (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 6).

This is significant in that even though the heroes and heroines aren’t “real” in myths and pornography, as most readers will attest, it does not discount the fact that they then have the function of propagating decidedly “real” behaviour. The irony inherent in discussing myth and its relationship with reality is evident and the age-old question of whether art imitates life or life imitates art is shown to be decidedly more complex and intertwined than imagined. This conflation of “reality” and “fantasy” in folk tales can be seen as both damaging and constructive, because it both depicts unrealistic abstractions of stereotypical behaviour, but also has the power to instigate new ways of thinking by presenting it as something that has *already* been thought<sup>4</sup>. Warner also explains that “no one wants to be rescued. Rescue is costly because it is the unknown. Men (and women) will always prefer a familiar slavery to the terrifying uncertainty of the burden of liberty” (*From the Beast to the Blonde* 267). The propagation of folk tales as representative of societal values continue to enforce morals around (especially female) modes of conduct, since they are posited as deriving from the ‘natural’ order of things. Carter notes that

this confusion as to the experience of reality – that what I know from my experience is true is, in fact, not so – is most apparent, however, in the fantasy love-play of the archetypes, which generations of artists have contrived to make seem so attractive that, lulled by dreams, many women willingly ignore the palpable evidence of their own responses (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 7).

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<sup>4</sup> Through the mode of fantasy and in the modern context, the popular *Dr Who* franchise uses its fantastic setting to impart a message that corroborates this sentiment, by stating that “however bad a situation is, if people think that’s how it’s always been, they put up with it” (“The Lie of the Land”).

As discussed above, these tales often have the purpose and effect of pacifying the subordinated by positioning the story in such a way that submission becomes appealing. This is the tragedy of the traditional fairy tale, and the triumph of Carter's own work and revisionist myth-making in general. This conflation between whether myth should only ever be considered fantasy or if it is representative of larger social truths is the ironic twist that plagues myth-making – it is considered both an expression of social relations, and used in the service of behavioural control, but also posited as false sets of circumstances, especially when considering the fantastic settings. This production of supposedly archetypal behaviour does have real-world consequences, as does our understanding of history, and Carter notes that "our flesh arrives to us out of history, like everything else does. We may believe we fuck stripped of social artifice; in bed, we even feel we touch the bedrock of human nature itself. But we are deceived" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 9). It is significant that Carter notes how we are misled when we believe that in the act of sex, we may be removed from reality – even then society plays a substantial role. Although the sexual act may be posited as the most natural occurrence in the world, it is in actuality like any other social system. This is because of the continued social pressure and control that is exerted by social and state institutions that enforce rules regarding acceptable modes of sexuality/sexualities. Although we might consider that in contemporary society we are freer from most gender and sexual restrictions, it remains arguably true that "our literature is full, as are our lives, of men and women, but especially women, who deny the reality of sexual attraction and of love because of considerations of class, religion, race and of gender" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 11).

Through the control of folk tales, there is the reinforcement of ideologies which serve the forces aiming to govern society. If children are conditioned to behave and expect others to behave in a certain manner, then specific ideologies are perpetuated by the most innocent and naïve members of society. Although this appears to concern only children, and pornography certainly does not cater to this group, we cannot deny that certain biases remain present throughout adult life. The prejudices, modes of conduct, and societal roles propagated by these seemingly harmless stories melt into the role of pornography and its manifestation. If folk tales have the ability to set forth acceptable modes of conduct, then pornography also has the power to influence what is considered acceptable expressions of sexual desire, and consequently the need for a "moral pornographer" is emphasised.

Pornography's primary, and utmost humanly important purpose, is to "[arouse] sexual excitement" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 14). The role of plot in a pornographic story remains constant – it occurs merely to offer as many occasions as imaginable "for the sexual act to take place. There is no room here for tension or the unexpected. We know what is going to happen;

that is why we are reading the book" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 14). The same is true of folk tales as, according to Vladimir Propp, while individual folk tales may incorporate a large number of dramatis personae there remains a limited number of actions and these actions appear again and again in various tales. Yet, it is exactly this that "explains the two-fold quality of a folktale: it is amazingly multiform, picturesque, and colourful, and, to no less a degree, remarkable uniform and recurrent" (Propp *Morphology of the Folktale* 18 - 19). Despite minor alterations by individual authors, there remains a consistent storyline and that is why a story may be classified as a 'myth'. It is this expected set of events that is so significant when it comes to using the texts as behavioural norms and control, especially when we consider the roles assigned to men and women, and it highlights the subversive and restorative potential of Carter's texts. The *Penny Dreadful* television series is also inundated with characters from well-established narratives, and yet the series tells the story from different perspectives and puts the focus on the "Other". We know the characters and the stories, but through artful manipulation of the original text, new meaning may be garnered. Carter further explicates that "the verbal structure is in itself reassuring. We know we are not dealing with real flesh or anything like it, but with a cunningly articulated verbal simulacrum which has the power to arouse, but not, in itself, to assuage desire" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 15). This is in itself significant as the role of the reader is substantial – a desire may be established and entertained, but the role of the reader is always understood – only s/he may finally fulfil the purpose of the text. It is this "one-to-one relation of the reader with the book [that] is never more apparent than in the reading of a pornographic novel, since it is virtually impossible to forget oneself in relation to the text. In pornographic literature, the text has a gap left in it on purpose so that the reader may, in imagination, step inside it" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 16). Furthermore, if in myths and pornographic narratives, there is a place for the reader to situate themselves in the narrative, then it stands to reason that despite the fantastic settings which are often not wholly informed by possible or likely realistic circumstances, an element of relatability remains or else there would be no recognition of a space available for the readers to immerse themselves in. This has the effect of highlighting the subversive potential of myths and pornographic texts.

In relation to the television context and considering the changing nature of sexuality in varying social contexts, the *Penny Dreadful* television series as a visual text is significant. This is because of how sexuality may be portrayed on television, but also how sexuality is portrayed using the nineteenth-century setting despite the modern context and possibilities of television to appeal to a contemporary audience. These narratives provide a space for self-reflection, and Carter notes that "all such literature has the potential to force the reader to reassess his relation to his own sexuality, which is to say to his own primary being, through the mediation of the

image or the text" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 19). The subversive potential of these texts is highlighted and Carter's purpose and understanding of the power of her own texts is significant.

### Carter's "Moral Pornographer"

One of the more significant contentions of Carter's essay is the notion of the "moral pornographer", as mentioned in the Introduction and who is the primary cause of some animosity towards Carter's status as a prominent feminist. Carter defines this "moral pornographer" as an

artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work ... His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a pornographer would not be the enemy of women; perhaps he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 22).

Carter highlights the potential that this pornographer may have in the effort to establish equal gender relations, but also how the pornographer is able to depict gender inadequacies in the first place. Once more, despite the fact that pornographic narratives are established as a type of fantasy (as are myths), a layer of truth emerges. Whatsoever the external fallacy of pornography, "it is impossible for it to fail to reveal sexual reality at an unconscious level, and this reality may be very unpleasant indeed, a world away from official reality. A male-dominated society produces a pornography of universal female acquiescence, or, most delicious titillation, of compensatory but spurious female dominance" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 23). Upon consideration of de Sade's work, it is necessary to understand the unique circumstances of the settings used to explore the sexual freedom of the characters, and the role of the characters themselves. In many of these experiences there is an interplay between a dominant partner and a submissive one. Yet, even if a woman assumes the role of the dominant partner and is believed to carry all of the power, social circumstances still influence the relationships within the narratives and her authority is undermined. Carter states that

she is most truly subservient when most apparently dominant ... established [between them is] a mutually degrading pact ... and she in her weird garb is mutilated more savagely by the erotic violence she perpetuates than he by the pain he undergoes, since his pain is in the nature of a holiday from his life, and her cruelty an economic fact of her real life... (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 23).

The significant potential of such deconstruction by a “moral pornographer” is emphasised when we consider how Carter notes that nothing has as much control over the mind “as the nature of sexual relationships”, and the pornographer has the ability

to become a terrorist of the imagination, a sexual guerrilla whose purpose is to overturn our most basic notions of these relations, to reinstitute sexuality as a primary mode of being rather than a specialised area of vacation from being and to show that the everyday meetings in the marriage bed are parodies of their own pretensions; that the freest unions may contain the seeds of the worst exploitation (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 24).

In a return to the focus of her essay, and the themes which are clearly evident in the *Penny Dreadful* series, it is de Sade who explicitly creates the link between sex/pleasure and violence, which Carter knits into her own narratives. It is he who first recognised that sexual subordination is most often a sign of societal subordination, and therefore:

He creates, not an artificial paradise of gratified sexuality but a model of hell, in which the gratification of sexuality involves the infliction and the tolerance of extreme pain. He describes sexual relations in the context of an unfree society as the expression of pure tyranny, usually by men upon women, sometimes by men upon men, sometimes by women upon men and other women; the one constant to all Sade's monstrous orgies is that the whip hand is always the hand with the real political power and the victim is a person who has little or no power at all, or has had it stripped from him. In this schema, male means tyrannous and female means martyred, no matter what the official genders of the male and female beings are (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 27).

De Sade was aware that the subordination of women occurred not only in the bedroom, but also in the social spheres and that although female domination could be established sexually, it could never discount female oppression as evident in everyday life. Although de Sade is

criticised by many as an advocate of violence, especially against women, and while it certainly features in his work, this is only a reflection of societal violence against women. Yet, he proposed that to take control, women should recognise the desire within them, and use that desire against their (would-be) oppressors. This destabilisation of power roles through recognition of female sexual desire is prominent in Carter's work and forms a large part of the subversive nature of her narratives. Carter highlights that de Sade was rare in his era for arguing for unrestricted sexuality for women, and "in installing women as beings of power in his imaginary worlds" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 41). This is what separates him from many other pornographers and most other authors of his era (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 41). In light of Carter's conception of a "moral pornographer", she notes that "Sade remains a monstrous and daunting cultural edifice; yet I would like to think that he put pornography in the service of women, or, perhaps, allowed it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 42). In this manner, Carter both acknowledges the horrific nature of some of his texts and the supposed messages therein, but also recognises the potential for subversion.

It is upon analysis of Justine, the protagonist of de Sade's novel of the same name, that Carter highlights the importance placed on female sexuality. It is discouraged if it does not occur within the sanctioned institution of marriage. As such, Justine's idea of virtue is an especially feminine one in that sexual abstinence is essential to it; "in common speech, a 'bad boy' may be a thief, or a drunkard, or a liar, and not necessarily just a womanizer. But a 'bad girl' always contains the meaning of a sexually active girl and Justine knows she is good because she does not fuck" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 54). A woman is confined to the purpose of her body, and her sexuality (or lack thereof) is directly associated with not only how she is perceived and treated, but also her sense of self, her very being, her subjectivity (or lack thereof). Carter states that "her unruptured hymen is a visible sign of her purity" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 54) and the small piece of skin comes to determine a woman's worth. Significantly it is not only important to how she is observed and treated by others, but also how she sees herself, and Carter states that she determines that her virtue is contingent upon her own sexual unwillingness:

... her sexual abstinence, her denial of her own sexuality, is what makes her important to herself. Her passionately held conviction that her morality is intimately connected with her genitalia makes it become so. Her honour does indeed reside in her vagina because she honestly believes it does so (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 55).

This is the effect of the dissemination and perpetuation of mythic notions regarding the function of women and their own relation to their sexuality, which then take root in society. Carter highlights the duplicitous nature of this virtue, which she states created within Justine

the same kind of apathy, of insensibility, that criminality has produced in Sade's libertines, who also never concern themselves with the nature of good and evil, who know intuitively what is wrong just as Justine knows intuitively what is right. She is incapable of anger or defiance because of her moral indifference; she feels no anger at the sufferings of her cell mates ... Her virtue is egocentric, like the vice of the libertines. And it is entirely its own reward (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 61).

Female suffering is endured because there is a promise that there will be a reward – and even if that reward never materialises, the belief is perpetuated that it is in itself the best reward. This is meant to pacify all those for whom “virtue” has brought nothing but inactivity and misery. Consequently, "Justine's virtue is not the continuous exercise of a moral faculty”, but instead a sentimental reaction to a society in which she anticipates that her respectable conduct will secure her some form of recompense,

some respite from the bleak and intransigent reality which surrounds her and to which she cannot accommodate herself. The virtuous, the interesting Justine, with her incompetence, her gullibility, her whining, her frigidity, her reluctance to take control of her own life, is a perfect woman. She always does what she is told. She is at the mercy of any master, because that is the nature of her own definition of goodness (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 62).

To be analysed in relation to the texts that follow is the notion of the perfect women and how these archetypes are perpetuated in an exceedingly damaging way. Justine comes to embody socially acceptable modes of behaviour in an effort to make her own life “better”, even as it does the opposite. In the same way, the portrayal of these archetypes in popular texts serves to paint the pain of passive women as “virtuous”, despite all the evidence to the contrary. It is de Sade, and subsequently Carter, who show the hypocrisy of popular portrayals of good and evil, especially in relation to sexuality in general, but specifically female sexuality. Emma Goldman in the Postscript to *The Sadeian Woman* notes that

the demand for equal rights in every vocation of life is just and fair; but, after all, the most vital right is the right to love and be loved. Indeed, if partial emancipation is to become a complete and true emancipation of woman, it will have to do away with the ridiculous notion that to be loved, to be sweetheart and mother, is synonymous with being slave or subordinate. It will have to do away with the absurd notion of the dualism of the sexes, or that man and woman represent two antagonistic worlds (Postscript 177).

It is this that becomes the primary theme of Carter's texts to be studied; woman as complex, and fulfilling many roles in contrast to the stereotypes perpetuated not only in myths, but also in pornography.

### Carter's Revisionist Myth-Making

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

Neil Gaiman

In the introduction to *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*, Carter herself explicates her interest in the fairy-tale genre by analysing how fairy tales have been perceived and accepted by societies throughout the ages. She notes that these historical tales may have a significant influence on contemporary life and highlights that "more and more we need to know who we were in greater and greater detail in order to be able to surmise what we might be" (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xii). This is indicative of the purpose of her re-imaginings as she uses forms that highlight oppressive gender structures and reformulates them in the knowledge that they may be used to construct a new future reality where female sexual desire is recognised as subjective. She remarks that the "the history, sociology and psychology" conveyed to us by folk tales is "unofficial" (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xii). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* corroborate this: "...myths and fairy tales often both state and enforce culture's sentences with greater accuracy than more sophisticated literary texts" (36). Fairy tales are not read or classified as endorsed reflections on societal conditions and yet they provide startling insight into cultural phenomena and gender relations throughout the ages. Andrea Dworkin notes in *Woman Hating* that "when one enters the world of fairy tale one seeks with difficulty for the actual place where legend and history

part” (32). We wish to pinpoint the exact point “when fiction penetrates into the psyche as reality, and history begins to mirror it. Or vice versa” (Dworkin *Woman Hating* 32). Yet, as discussed in the introduction, the relationship between what is mere fantasy and what we may consider to be representative of reality in folk tales is complex, and difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty.

Carter notes that fairy tales are “anonymous and genderless”, and even if we are aware of the identity of certain tellers of the story, to know the name of the original author is mostly impossible (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xii). This is in contrast to our decidedly “individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs” (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xii). Additionally, this is especially significant if we consider the attention given to the gender of the author of a version – a great deal of focus is placed on deciphering how a story is told differently depending on the gender of the teller and how the primary message of the story may be changed in this manner. Yet, it is notable that even though anyone may retell the story, many of these stories are still known as “old wives’ tales” – that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it” (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xiii). Yet, it is unquestionably a trait of the folk tale “that it does not strive officiously after the willing suspension of disbelief in the manner of the nineteenth-century novel” (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xiii). In this light, according to Vladimir Propp, “in most languages, the word ‘tale’ is a synonym for ‘lie’ or ‘falsehood’”, and Russian storytellers end their stories with the phrase “the tale is over; I can’t lie any more” (*Theory and History of Folklore* 79). The notion of what we may consider to be truthful or accurate descriptions of societal relations within texts such as folk tales is the question debated throughout this thesis and it is one without a clear and simple answer. Carter notes that upon hearing “Once upon a Time” or other deviations, the reader (or hearer) is actively aware that they are not about to be confronted by a tale claiming to be true, and so “Mother Goose may tell lies, but she isn’t to deceive you in that way” (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xiv). She is there to amuse you and to aid in passing the time in a pleasant manner – “one of the most ancient and honourable functions of art” (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xiv). Carter writes that we tell children who appear to be lying that they should not tell fairy stories; nevertheless children’s lies, similar to old wives’ tales, are more likely to be liberal with the truth, rather than cautious of it (Carter *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales* xiv). This is also part of the extraordinary nature of such stories – they are not posited as containing any semblance of truth, yet are still used as behavioural control in their primary audience, children, whose notion of acceptable

behaviour and the extreme consequences of unacceptable behaviour is formulated in a very real sense. This is especially significant when considering the often-supernatural punishments for wayward behaviour. As transgressive women are those who are generally punished, it stands to reason that passive subordination is encouraged and maintained because of the severe consequences that these tales generally entail for those who question the status quo (especially women). When discussing the significance of a female writer or narrator that when they tell the tales, they do not feel the compulsion to make the women heroines and are completely capable of recounting stories “that are downright unsisterly in their attitudes” (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xv-xvi). Whether this is because of continued perpetuation of required female passivity and transgressive women being portrayed as evil, or whether as a conscious recognition of female character complexity, is debatable.

Carter portrays her heroines as intricately balanced between characteristics which are both “good” and “bad”, and she highlights that they do not merely fulfil the role of an archetype, but instead are human and capable of innumerable character traits that do not conform to classic conceptions of good or evil. Upon consideration of one of the stories in her collection, Carter states that it is an example of the extent to which folk tales had the ability to change female desires, and how much this change might inspire trepidation in males, who “would go to any lengths to keep her from pleasure, as if pleasure itself threatened his authority. Which, of course, it did. It still does” (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xv – xvi). Her interest in these stories (and the reason for her collection) is further explicated when she notes that it was her aim to show the abundance and assortment of “responses to the same common predicament – being alive – and the richness and diversity with which femininity, in practice, is represented in unofficial' culture: its strategies, its plots, its hard work” (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xvi). Furthermore, Carter notes it is meaningful that she (as well as countless other women) examines these tales in the search for heroines, and states that it is “a version of the same process – a wish to validate my claim to a fair share of the future by staking claim to my share of the past” (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xviii). When reading these tales, we are dealing with formations of “fantasy and wish-fulfilment, which is why the loose symbolic structure of fairy tales leaves them so open to psychoanalytic interpretation, as if they were not formal inventions but informal dreams dreamed in public” (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xxii). She recognises that these tales have been scattered across the globe not because everyone has identical inspirations and frames of reference, but rather because tales are transportable, and “part of the invisible luggage people take with them when they leave home” (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xvi). As such, these tales do not arise in a singular form, but rather in a variety of styles and

varying cultures, obtaining diverse meanings for what is practically the same story (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xvi).

In order to fully comprehend and admire the subversive nature of Carter's work, it is beneficial to understand the postmodern and revisionist myth-making context which influences her writing. Rubinson notes that postmodern writing reconsiders established opinions, but that Carter's narratives are inquests into and criticisms of social values instead of being verbatim instructions on "how things should be" (148). It is evident that

She skips gaily and deviously among science fiction, dystopian fiction, pornography, the gothic, magic realism, fairy tale, burlesque, tragedy, and myth. In doing so, she demonstrates her pliability of literary genres for conveying historically changing ideas about society and culture, especially, in her case, about those related to the roles women play and are expected to play in male-dominated society (Rubinson 148).

In this manner, Carter displays that she is not confined by form and may use anything at her disposal to confront oppressive social structures, and she recognises within the form something that can be changed. Within the established forms she recognises the astonishing potential to serve a deeply subversive purpose, and we could argue that this is not only because of their considerable popularity, but also because of their considerable potential for establishing socially acceptable models of behaviour. Carter deliberately strays from narrative typecasts which noticeably allocate and uphold masculinity and femininity as distinct ideas demarcated "in opposition to each other" (Rubinson 170). One of the most culturally pervasive and destructive ideologies disseminated by these sources centres around sexual experience and conduct, specifically in relation to women (Rubinson 184). Carter consistently shows sex as a way of wielding power, especially when women are able and willing to recognise their own sexuality, before using it to enforce control over their surroundings. Through her analysis of de Sade's *Justine* and *Juliette* in *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter explores the possibilities of a sexually-liberated woman. Despite the fact that contemporary audiences have been exposed primarily to the gentle and predominantly joyful and musically-inspired Disney stories that have been culturally inscribed since their inception, the original fairy tales that inspired the enterprise are still far from innocent; those brutally condemned and punished were transgressive women. Carter's heroines defy the expectations that those who misbehave according to social structures will be disciplined for it and she exposes the fallacy of this judgement. Traditionally, transgressive women are not only punished, but are also actively denounced as the worst kind of villain.

Fred Botting explores the “subversive subtleties” conceivable in the Gothic as implemented by Carter, who utilizes it to reveal and subvert constricting constructions, especially evident in folk tales and Gothic horror:

In her late twentieth-century fiction, Carter powerfully, and often critically, demonstrates the reversal of values and identifications that occurs via the Gothic genre. Otherness takes centre stage: sexual transgression, dark desire, and fantastic deviance wonderfully subvert the restrictive orders of reason, utility and paternal morality...In Gothic times margins may become the norm and occupy a more central cultural place (285).

Carter’s exploration of subject positions that are not restricted to traditional demarcations, especially in the Gothic setting, has significant impact on the notion of ‘othering.’ Her texts offer not only a critique on gender relations and conventions surrounding sexuality, but also on what constitutes ‘normal.’ Consequently, the reader re-evaluates what is considered ‘Other’ and their relation to the term and its connotations.

Carter continually targets the fallacy of gender restrictions that are often promoted through fairy tales. Although myths often reveal deep-seated societal prejudices and oppression, they also instigate and perpetuate stereotypical falsehoods which serve to confine people to roles which are posited as natural, with the result that people are “unfree”. This is especially true in relation to female sexuality, as the restrictions related to it have been chiefly initiated and maintained through folk tales. Carter, through her recognition of the lies which serve to restrict women and her defiance at prescribing suitable female behaviour, refuses to fall into the trap of becoming yet another arbitrator of suitable behaviour. Rather she draws out the prejudices inherent in those myths in such a manner that there is the expectation that the reader will question her/his surroundings and that this new-found knowledge will inform future behaviour. Carter subverts conventions of suitable female sexual conduct and appropriate feminist conduct (Wisker 47). It is further notable that she stimulated renewed interest in Gothic horror, inaugurating it as a genre by which to confront conventions (“family, identity, sexuality, gender roles”), and depictions of what signifies ‘normal’ (Wisker 47).

As a testament to Carter’s influence on the fantasy genre, Salman Rushdie, upon Carter’s death, stated that “English literature has lost its high sorceress, its benevolent witch queen ... deprived of the fairy queen we cannot find the magic that will heal us” and finished by describing her as “a very good wizard, perhaps the first wizard de-luxe” (“Angela Carter, 19-40-92: A Very Good Wizard, a Very Dear Friend”). By mourning her work, which proves

restorative, Rushdie highlights how the narratives have the power to dismantle oppressive social structures by using the myth and fantasy genre, which has infiltrated society at large. Furthering the metaphor of Carter's possessing magic in the form of her words, Makinen observes that Carter's stories are not written by "some benign magician" (3). As discussed above, Carter is perfectly aware of what she may achieve with her texts and how she may influence her surroundings in a meaningful manner. Another noteworthy aspect of Carter's writing is her use of a diverse collection of discourses. In this manner, "the Gothic, the fairy tale and magic realist fiction are pieced together as discourses in the form of a given story" and because of this can be argued to be exceptional (Farnell 272-273). It is this amalgamation of forms, genres, and ideas that encourages a complex and engaging reading experience as the mind is engaged on several levels, before an entirely new understanding comes to fruition.

Suzette A. Henke notes how Carter has adopted and amended the folk tale genre "in the interests of feminist fantasy" (48). Recognising the significant impact that the fairy tale has upon the average person, Carter chooses to use the fantasy genre in a bid to change cultural perceptions, specifically regarding gender and sexuality. As Lorna Sage notes, "and so Carter, while registering with grim humour and clarity the awful legacy of 'the fairytale about the perfect woman,' still sees in the genre a means by which a writing woman may take flight" (56). In this we are made aware of Carter's adeptness at subversion and recognition of elements in traditional tales that require reformulation. It is significant that Sage notes that Carter recognises this with "grim humour and clarity", as this resonates in her work; it never manifests as a guidebook, but rather employs irony and dry humour to engage the reader in contesting the archetype of the ideal woman. It is also interesting to consider that "the effect of Carter's postmodern telling, with its plot sequence analogous to a rite of passage, unconventional characterization and strong associations with the biblical story of the temptation of Eve, is to induce a complex, layered experience of reader-initiation via sympathetic identification with its heroine" (Renfroe 82). Even the narrative form is reminiscent of the rite of passage and significant character development present in the narratives themselves. This has the consequence of providing compound meaning and strong identification between the reader and the protagonist or narrator. In contrast to this, as disseminated by male authors including Charles Perrault and the brothers Grimm, the corpus of admonitory stories about disgrace and vengeance were male-inscribed fables that perpetually fortified sex-role stereotypes of male competence and female helplessness (Henke 48). These stories habitually set out to impart conventional ideals of behaviour by "projecting nightmare emanations of shameful libidinal passions: big bad wolves, man-eating tigers, and most of all, duplicitous husbands who would capitally punish curious or disobedient wives" (Henke 48). In contrast to these supposedly

“moral” tales, Carter consciously overthrows the reader’s expectations by liberating female bodies from ascriptions of “cultural shame”, enabling female characters “with independence and agency, and bitterly denouncing the arrogant cruelty of human predators” (Henke 48). Her narratives serve to highlight that the true monsters are human, and that within many beasts reside an uncertainty and gentility corrupted by social strictures – by being treated as “Other”. The true monsters in her stories are those who represent and propagate the oppressive and violent patriarchy. In Carter’s texts, one is much more likely to criticise the father, than the beast.

Carter’s stories require the reader to conduct a double reading and compare both the conventional and the amended versions. One can hardly read her fairy tales without recognising strains of the traditional tale while simultaneously being confronted by the vivid distinctions ascribing new meaning. In accordance with this, the *Penny Dreadful* series incorporates a multitude of popular tales and wrings from them a new complex, layered and complete story. Yet, there remains the expectation that the viewer is familiar with at least some of the characters and storylines in their original setting, and it is with this knowledge in mind that changes may be recognised and their significance noted.

In an analysis of the nature of Carter’s narratives, and in relation to criticism of her work, Makinen states that the assets and perils of her writing can be found predominantly in a hostile subversion and vigorous eroticism that perhaps defy the propriety surrounding death (3). The debate regarding Carter’s ability to employ known forms and then re-appropriate them in the interests of feminism is a fierce one and is intricately connected with the debate prominent in second-wave feminism. The non-conformism evident in her narratives is representative of her non-conformism with regard to the feminist debates of her time. Carter is located in the context of the 1970s and at a time when there was a feminist repossessing of numerous objects – including “the streets, the night, as well as fairy tales” (Farnell 271). The focus of many of the feminist debates surrounding Carter was regarding pornography (Farnell 271).

In contrast to the tales of old used in behavioural control, Makinen notes that books written in an effort to demonstrate how the reader ought to behave were not only an affront to the reader, but also a chore to write (6). Carter’s own texts appear to be perfectly aware of their “playful interaction” with the reader’s expectations and identifications (Makinen 6). Instead of bearing the substantial “burden of instruction”, Carter frequently clarified that, in her mind, “a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms” (Makinen 6). The two components required for any debate are a cause to fight against (something that needs to be invalidated) and someone to whom the argument needs to be made (a reader) (Makinen 6). The difficulty surfaces of

whether “this deconstructive irony” is stimulated if the reader is unacquainted with feminism (Makinen 6). Makinen argues, “if a feminist writer is to remain a feminist writer (rather than a writer about women) then the texts must engage, on some level, with feminist thinking” (6). There is a large community of possible readers who fulfil the lowest prerequisites of having the belief that feminism defies sexist constructions (Makinen 6). The reader does not need to be a feminist in order to read the stories, but it is arguably true that should the reader not fully grasp the confrontation of stereotypes, then

the payback for that level of engagement, the sheer cerebral pleasure and the enjoyment of the iconoclasm, will be missing. And without the humour or the interest in deconstructing cultural gender stereotypes, the textual anger against the abuse of women in previous decades can prove very disquieting, even uncomfortable, to read. To enjoy the humour – the payback with many of Carter's texts – readers need to position themselves outside phallogocentric culture (at least for the process of reading) (Makinen 6-7).

Sex sells, and Carter's texts have continually been concerned with eroticism (Makinen 9). Highlighting the extent to which Carter's texts are influenced by the notion of sex, and how they reflect some of her own views regarding the effectivity of a socially conscious pornography, on Penguin book covers there are consistent references to “the stylish erotic prose” and “erotic, exotic and bizarre romance”; these undoubtedly are involved with her acclaim (Makinen 9). Considering her fascination with de Sade, Carter fashions a multifaceted concept of female psycho-sexuality “through invoking of violence as well as the erotic” (Makinen 9). Yet, Duncker, Palmer and Lewallen do not find it permissible to consider that women have the capacity to be “violent as well as sexually active” and that women may *decide* to be “perverse” (Makinen 9). Duncker contends that despite the message perpetuated in *The Sadeian Woman* that “the Devil is best slain with his own weapons” (75), the nature of pornography itself is not conducive to this aim. Nevertheless, Carter's power resides exactly in shattering the stereotypes of women as submissive and sedate symbols (Makinen 9). Makinen argues “that she ... evokes the gamut of violence and perversity is certainly troubling, but to deny their existence is surely to incarcerate women back within a partial, sanitized image only slightly less constricted than the Victorian Angel in the House” (Makinen 9).

In contrast to the Victorian Angel in the House<sup>5</sup> and the perfect passivity that she embodies, folk tales are commonly considered to

[deal] with the ‘uncanny’, the distorted fictions of the unconscious revisited through homely images” and beasts are effortlessly substituted for “projected desires, the drive for pleasure of women. Particularly when such desires are discountenanced by a patriarchal culture concerned to restrict its women to being property (without a libido of their own, let alone a mind or a room) (Makinen 9).

Throughout the stories, femininity is fashioned as dynamic, carnal, yearning and disorderly, but also as positive sexual relations which are based on equality and the restorative influence of acknowledging “the reciprocal claims of the other” (Makinen 9). Each story builds upon the motif of the previous one and offers commentary on another aspect of it (Makinen 10). This is done to present a multifaceted “variation of female desire and sexuality” (Makinen 10) as we notice in Carter’s stories that the protagonists themselves decide to uncover the perilous, but exhilarating, change that complements the selection of the beast (Makinen 10). The beasts in these tales “signify a sensuality that the women have been taught [that] might devour them, but which, when embraced, gives them power, strength and a new awareness of both self and other” (Makinen 10), and so societal expectations and restrictions are shed and elemental desire surfaces. Makinen notes: “Reading Carter’s fairy-tales as her female protagonists’ confrontations with desire, in all its unruly ‘animalness’, yields rich rewards” (Makinen 11). Yet, Makinen notes that Duncker merely understands the tales to state that “all men are beasts to women”, and only perceives the female heroes as inexorably “enacting the roles of victims of male violence” (Makinen 12). Carter’s re-appropriation of Red Riding Hood, in Duncker’s mind, “sees that rape is inevitable ... and decides to strip off, lie back and enjoy it. She wants it really, they all do” (73). Furthermore, in “The Tiger’s Bride”, Duncker declares that the shedding of the protagonist’s skin, “beautifully packaged and unveiled, is the ritual disrobing of the willing victim of pornography” (74). Since she understands the “beasts as men in furry clothing”, Duncker contends that Carter has been incapable of producing ““alternative anti-sexist language of the erotic”” since there is no notion of women as having independent desire (74). Makinen contends that Carter is indeed doing this, and should you understand the beasts as “projections of a feminine libido”, they transform into precisely the independent desire

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<sup>5</sup> Concept derived from the poem “The Angel in the House” by Coventry Patmore, published in 1891.

which the female protagonists need to identify and “reappropriate as a part of themselves (denied by the phallogentric culture)” (Makinen 12).

Ultimately, Makinen notes that until we can plunge into the disquieting and even violent aspects of female sexuality, we shall neither be able to decipher the complete feminist agenda of these fairy tales, nor identify “the representations of drives so far suppressed by our culture” (14). This, she emphasises, is why it is vital “that women write fiction as women – it is part of the slow process of decolonizing our language and our basic habits of thought” (Makinen 14). This, it could be argued, is the primary meaning that Carter explores through her work, and with de Sade in mind, as it posits female sexuality as multi-faceted and falling outside the general prescriptions that have been perpetuated through years of folk tales, pornography, and many other forms of popular literature.

### Chapter Three: Desire is Power – The Significance of the Recognition of Female Sexual Desire in Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Tiger’s Bride,” and “The Company of Wolves”

#### Eve’s Initiation into Sex and Death in “The Bloody Chamber”

“The Bloody Chamber” is Carter’s revision of the traditional Bluebeard story and serves as the first narrative in her collection of the same name. It tells the story of an unnamed young new bride who is taken to her aristocratic husband’s castle home, but upon the departure of her new partner, the girl defies his one order and opens the door to a hidden chamber holding the corpses of his murdered former wives. Upon his return the husband reveals that he always knew that she would transgress and defy his order, yet that he still believes the offence requires a severe punishment – her death. In contrast to the known storyline, the young girl’s mother is her saviour and the happy-ending is not one of a fairy-tale marriage. The girl, her piano-tuner lover (formerly hired by her now-deceased husband) and her mother live together happily and quietly. The wealth that her husband’s death afforded her is distributed to charities and the young girl opens a music shop.

Although the original tale is easily identified, the revisions made by Carter serve a significant purpose in the interests of feminism. Readers are afforded a female-centred viewpoint that mirrors, and is conducive to, social change “through individual liminal experience” (Renfroe 82) because of the first-person narration. This is possible should the tale be read as a young woman’s initiatory knowledge, rather than as a tale of an excessively

inquisitive girl who ends up in a calamitous marriage (Renfroe 82). Rather than reading the story as a condemnation of female curiosity, it is necessary to consider that the journey was necessary in affording the narrator true self-awareness – both of her faults, and her strengths. The protagonist “is a woman in process”, somebody who is discovering her subject position and starting to relate her own story (Manley 71). Although she “*appears* to be the blank page upon which her husband will inscribe his story of her”, she manages to break free from the story that the Marquis intended for her (Manley 72).

As the tale is presented from the young woman’s perspective by means of the “girl’s own narrative voice”, the “initiatory emphasis” is placed on her transformation through boldly obtained knowledge (Renfroe 89). By imagining a convincing female subjectivity and proposing typically unobtainable opportunities for “positive reader-identification with Eve within the standard (Perrault’s) misogynistic tale frame” (Renfroe 83), Carter’s retelling destabilises “the Christian doctrine of original sin” (Renfroe 83). The protagonist’s harrowing tribulation, which can easily be compared with that of Eve’s, is depicted as being an indispensable and daring “initiation into self – and worldly knowledge” – instead of a deed of reckless defiance (Renfroe 83). Like the original sin which doomed mankind, it is Eve’s (and the protagonist’s) decision to defy their male God and husband that has devastating consequences for them.

Carter’s revision is essential in establishing an alternative “moral of the story” in contrast to Perrault’s version, which plainly attributes the woman with the sin of disobedience and demonstrating a clear “blame-the-victim mentality” (Renfroe 87). This further diminishes the significance of this knowledge for the woman – even information which is vital to existence (Renfroe 87). The protagonist’s investigation of the chamber is explicitly desired, equally by her husband and herself, but for distinct purposes and with the expectation of dissimilar consequences/endings (Renfroe 90). As such, the story simultaneously takes on the form of a representation of the oppressive sexual introduction of a young woman by the agency of a commanding older man, but also as a story of self-initiation and endurance freely undertaken by a woman (Renfroe 90). The religious iconography prevalent throughout “The Bloody Chamber” story itself and the *The Bloody Chamber* collection is established, especially through the interaction between the protagonist and her piano tuner lover upon discussion of her coming death by her husband for her disobedience:

‘You disobeyed him,’ he said. ‘That is sufficient reason for him to punish you.’

‘I only did what he knew I would do.’

‘Like Eve,’ he said (Carter “The Bloody Chamber” 37-38).

Not only is the direct link with the biblical Fall established, but the sentiment voiced that chastisement by him is warranted and explained by her insubordination, as Eve was subject to the will of God and punished for an action that He knew would occur. Her disobedience to her husband mirrors the manifestly transgressive nature that she displays in her own response to sexuality. In this light, distinctly evident in “The Bloody Chamber”, is the recognition of female sexual desire by the protagonist as she notes that “for the first time in [her] innocent and confined life, [she] sensed in [herself] a potentiality for corruption that took [her] breath away” (Carter “The Bloody Chamber” 11). The acknowledgement of her own sexual desire is still described as “corruption”, in contrast to the “innocent and confined life” she experienced before her marriage.

She assumes that she is heading “towards sexual knowledge, wealth, power, and new status, but in the liminal phase, all alone in the castle, she has soul-searching experiences which cause her to redefine in unexpected ways who she is and what she wants” (Renfroe 85). In this manner, her real initiation is not her first sexual encounter, but rather her trial in the bloody chamber (Renfroe 85). Her true initiation occurs when she comes face to face with the truth of her husband’s murderous nature and becomes aware of her role in the story that he has written for her. Her bold and defiant examination of the prohibited chamber is the act which significantly transforms and matures her, permitting her to view the Marquis, and more crucially herself, from a more informed viewpoint (Renfroe 85). In this moment she recognises her own errors in judgement and comes to truly understand the dire nature of her situation (Renfroe 85). It is important to note, and this is evident especially in “The Erl-King”<sup>6</sup> as well, that it is through her own involvement in this individual rite of initiation that she comes to know her husband’s real character (Renfroe 85). She must come to terms with what her instinct and her “guilty self-doubt” intimated from the beginning, and the extreme sense of shame that she must come to terms with is not as a result of her defiance of her husband, but rather her own vulnerability to the corruption he represents (Renfroe 85). Yet, it is this initiation in the bloody chamber that permits her to comprehend and overcome the “deadly peril that kind of marriage holds for her” (Renfroe 86).

The recognition of her own desires, which do not necessarily accord with the typical virginal bridal trepidation, is significant in that it adds depth to her ultimate sexual relationship with her Bluebeard character. This does not mean to say that she does not experience the fear

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<sup>6</sup> The protagonist in Carter’s “The Erl-King” also recognises the threat that the Erl-King poses to her from the very beginning but is still too enthralled to resist his call.

generally associated with a deflowering and change in marital status, but rather that she is cognisant of the myriad feelings related to the act – unexpected sexual desire and anticipation included. The protagonist states that “[she] was aghast to feel [herself] stirring” (Carter “The Bloody Chamber” 15). Contrary to the innocence generally portrayed by fairy-tale female protagonists, Carter’s heroine is aware that she experiences some excitement when considering her potential exposure to the “pleasures of the flesh”. Nevertheless, even when revelling in the “ultimate goal” of women (marriage), the protagonist realises that she will be losing something, especially in relation to her mother, and states that “in the midst of [her] bridal triumph, [she] felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on [her] finger, [she] had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife” (Carter “The Bloody Chamber” 7). This loss is emphasised as her mother wears “black silk” (Carter “The Bloody Chamber” 7) to the wedding, and it is clear that she is in mourning for her lost daughter. The protagonist is always only someone in relation to another, and appears to reject an individual subject position.

As a symbol of not only the wealth that marriage affords the protagonist, but also as an indication of the violence that she is to face and conquer, she is gifted “a choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (Carter “The Bloody Chamber” 11). Violence is emphasised even when describing a seemingly inconsequential female accessory, and it is also apparently romanticised because of the use of “precious” in relation to the violence of death; as the victim is described as “precious,” murder also has the connotation of love. The necklace has a history of violence, but also the victory over certain death, and it takes on special significance in relation to the ultimate fate of the protagonist. Crafted as a lavish alternative to the red ribbons worn by members of the aristocracy to symbolise their evasion of the guillotine during the Terror, it was worn around the neck “at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through” (Carter “The Bloody Chamber 11).

When describing the protagonist, there is an explicit link established between innocence (and the loss thereof) and violence. This is emphasised by the description of what the heroine wears on the night before her wedding: “...the white dress; the frail child within it; and the flashing crimson jewels round [her] throat, bright as arterial blood” (11). It is clear that the protagonist is treated like a child, and also identifies *herself* as child, as evident above, but even more than this, she is portrayed as lacking strength (“frail”), which contradicts the courageous manner in which she faces the bloody chamber, her sexual initiation, and the prospect of her death. She is infantilised and adopts this enforced identity. It is exactly this contrast that serves to highlight her personal development from child to woman. This is interesting and problematic if we consider that she is expected to participate in the sex act and it is relevant to consider how women are equated to children because of a perceived lack of logical reasoning,

and yet, in this case, she is still expected to fulfil her husband's sexual needs as he asks: "Have the nasty pictures scared baby? Baby mustn't play with grownups' toys until she's learned how to handle them, must she?" (Carter "The Bloody Chamber" 17) upon her discovery of a book of sexual images. Additionally, as a continuance of an extremely postmodern style, Carter incorporates elements of intertextuality by using the words of the wolf in "Little Red Riding Hood", "All the better to see you" (Carter "The Bloody Chamber" 17), when describing the moment that the Marquis suggests the initiation of the sex act. This highlights the "victimhood" of the protagonist and the predatory nature of her husband, while also reinforcing the youth of the protagonist, as *Little Red Riding Hood* is generally understood to be a young girl.

There is a further link established between sex and death when the protagonist notes "a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer" (Carter "The Bloody Chamber" 27). This is especially true when we consider a woman's loss of virginity, and in this case her sexual initiation becomes inextricable from the death of the women before her. Once she has sexually satisfied him, she is disposable, and *la petite mort* takes on special significance – it is his orgasm that signals her death. Furthermore, as her sexual initiation becomes inseparable from his former wives, so too it is noteworthy that she sees in herself many other girls; this suggests that this experience is one that is not entirely unique to her, and "[she] forced [her]self to be seductive. [She] saw [her]self, pale, pliant as a plant that begs to be trampled underfoot, a dozen vulnerable, appealing girls reflected in as many mirrors, and [she] saw how he almost failed to resist [her]. If he had come to [her] in bed, [she] would have strangled him, then" (Carter "The Bloody Chamber" 35). As he has deadly intentions towards his wives, so too she recognises within herself a desire to do him harm. She does not entirely embody the passive and forgiving women of so many stories who, despite awful things being done to them, waits to be saved. This protagonist recognises within herself the desire and ability to inflict damage, and even to kill, the husband who mistreats her. In this manner, the death and power dynamics established from the start of the story are clearly subverted.

As we might argue is Carter's final goal, alongside the protagonist of "The Bloody Chamber," who experiences a momentous transformation through trying circumstances, so too the reader undergoes an ideological re-thinking of the traditional tales and their former understandings that have imprisoned her/him as s/he "enter[s] into a liminal experience that offers the erasure of shame" (Renfroe 91). It is arguable that this forms part of the strength of Carter's texts – the initiation of the protagonist into forbidden knowledge is the readers' initiation into a new understanding of themselves in relation to a gendered society.

## Beauty is a Beast: Animalistic Sexual Transformation in “The Tiger’s Bride”

“The Tiger’s Bride” tells the story of a girl who is lost in a game of cards to a mysterious “Beast.” Reminiscent of the classic Beauty and the Beast tale, the girl’s presence is required at the Beast’s home as payment for her father’s gambling debts. The protagonist in “The Tiger’s Bride,” despite initial disdain for the Beast who “won” her in a game of cards, discovers with him her own desire to shed convention and allow herself to be guided by her own sexual desire. Lefanu posits that, as in many of Carter’s texts, “social codes fall before the imperative of desire” (98-99). The protagonist acknowledges her primal being in deciding to fulfil her sexual desires with the Beast. In doing so, she recognizes the extent to which her thinking had been moulded by society to deny natural sexual desire.

This recognition occurs during a horse ride with The Beast and his valet, and Beauty is at last exposed to her own sexual desire for The Beast. Despite the animosity explored between this Beauty and her Beast (on her part), it is when he sheds the façade of a conventional man that she becomes intrigued and begins to desire him.

In contrast to the traditional Beauty and the Beast tale, where the Beast is shown to be a tame and conventional man, Carter’s revision emphasises the equanimity between the partners that both actually seek. Furthermore, it is shown that in order to be with The Beast, Beauty must be allowed to explore her inner animal desires and shed societal conventions, and the protagonist notes that “the tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 64). In contrast to being depicted as the sexual aggressor, “the tiger sat still as a heraldic beast, in the pact he had made with his own ferocity to do [her] no harm” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 64). He is shown to control any natural fierceness he might have in order to protect her, and although “nothing about him reminded [her] of humanity” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 64), she begins to undress “to show him [she] would do him no harm” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 64). As explored in the rest of her collection, Carter’s revisions always strive to highlight how both parties have the power to harm each other; this suggests a unique manner of reciprocity where neither is always either aggressor or victim. The complex nature of “human” nature is emphasised to establish subject positions that are never stable, providing opportunities for female agency to be established.

Beauty highlights her sexual interest when she dismisses her awkward undressing not as a result of shame at her actions, but rather as a manifestation of her pride, “and a certain trepidation lest this frail little article of human upholstery before him might not be, in itself,

grand enough to satisfy his expectations of us” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 64). She seeks to please him, and in doing that, please herself. She is now cognisant of her own sexual desire and she wants to inspire the same desire in her Beast counterpart. It is the fragile nature of human skin that she is anxious might disappoint him, and with this concern she indicates her own recognition of his animal exterior as not being inferior or unpleasant. It is only upon this shedding of her clothes that she feels “at liberty for the first time in [her] life” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 64). Once she removes the societal constrictions that until this point had indicated her worth, she is free to indulge her true connection with the natural world and her position as just another type of animal. She is equal to The Beast, and he to her, and yet not in a manner which indicates inferiority as perpetuated by the patriarchal society from which she comes.

Yet, it remains difficult to completely shed societal restrictions as “[she] was unaccustomed to nakedness. [She] was so unused to [her] own skin that to take off all [her] clothes involved a kind of flaying” and she cannot help but think that “it is not natural for humankind to go naked, not since first we hid our loins with fig leaves” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 66). Continuing to use religious iconography, Carter establishes that the first societal conventions regarding the natural body and its exposure arose from the Garden of Eden, and since then it has become necessary to don clothes to hide the form that disobeyed God. Such is the extent of how these expectations become a part of being, that to attempt to escape them becomes excruciatingly painful, and yet Beauty does this. She is defiant even in the face of pain, and this, in conjunction with Carter’s other heroines, signals their transgressive nature. She is henceforth surrounded by nakedness and it is this nakedness which allows her to see the true nature of those surrounding her, and the valet whom she so despised at the start of the narrative, is now described as “the gentlest creature in the world” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 66). Her transformation is significant as, notwithstanding her role as a virgin bride exchanged “by one master to another,” she transforms her position from “passive object into active subject, altering her signification and determining her own meaning and subjectivity” (Brooke 77).

In a final effort to highlight the natural state that Beauty and the Beast finally inhabit, when Beauty goes to see Beast in her naked splendour, she notes upon seeing the mask and other elements of his human façade that “the empty house of his appearance was ready for him but he had abandoned it. There was a reek of fur and piss; the incense pot lay broken in pieces on the floor” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 66). Brooke notes that her offering of herself to him is one without terror, as it is between equals, rather than “the lamb at the altar” (83). This is in contrast to the “sacrificial lamb” that Beauty in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” felt herself to be, and which speaks to the oppression of one party in favour of another. Beauty does not

domesticate the Beast, as in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” “nor is she consumed by him” (Brooke 83). The place where they now meet has no tolerance for false appearances, and she cannot help but think of the stories that littered her childhood and those of all other children: “He will gobble you up” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 67). She recognises that in him were “nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fears of devourment” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 67). Yet, the image of him as threat is subverted when she notices, “he was far more frightened of [her] than [she] was of him” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 67). The reality of The Beast is shown to be very different from the tales about him and those like him. Despite the description of him as a powerful animal, when she feels his “harsh velvet” head and “sandpaper” tongue “rip[ing] off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world” and leaving behind “[her] beautiful fur” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 67), the narrator-protagonist is shown to be content with her new form and their new relationship.

Rushdie notes that the moment appears “as though her whole body were being deflowered, allowing her submission to a new (‘animal’ in the sense of *spiritual* as well as *tigerish*) world” (Rushdie xii). Her sexual initiation is posited as a final transformation into ultimate knowledge, and not only her body is changed, but her entire subjective being.

### *Not so Little Red Riding Hood: Sex as Power in “The Company of Wolves”*

“The Company of Wolves” is the story of a burgeoning sexual subject. Rather than merely accepting her role as the object of lust, as Carter explores in *The Sadeian Woman*, the protagonist becomes the subject, as she recognizes the power that her sexuality affords her over “the beast” that seeks to devour her. It is this shift in her own thinking that allows her to escape a fate that would have her subjugated. As Lau notes, “Little Red Riding Hood is, ultimately, a sexual agent” (86), as evidenced by the desire she recognises within herself and subsequently uses to conquer the wolf.

Mirroring elements of the popular Red Riding Hood tale, the protagonist is described as being a “flaxen-haired girl” (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 113) and assumes the role of youthful innocence. Furthermore, she is posited as being a well-loved and cared-for girl as “she has been too much loved ever to feel scared” (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 113). This is in contrast to the description of her harsh surroundings, and the effect of this environment on her fellow youths who “do not stay young for long in this savage country” as “there are no toys for them to play with so they work hard and grow wise” (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 113). The protagonist, on the other hand, is depicted as being “so pretty and the youngest of her family, a little late-comer, [who] had been indulged by her mother and

the grandmother who'd knitted her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous if brilliant look of blood on snow" (Carter "The Company of Wolves" 113). In this manner, we may assume that she has led a fairly pampered life in comparison with those surrounding her, and this is the reason for her lack of any real dread when entering the woods and meeting a man unknown to her.

One of the most significant aspects of her description relates to the emergence of physical characteristics which signify her burgeoning sexuality, and "her breasts have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet and white and she has just started her woman's bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike, henceforward, once a month" (Carter "The Company of Wolves" 113). The protagonist is a young girl who, although attributed with certain innocent connotations, has a body that is beginning to reflect her entry into womanhood and that suggests the sexual desire that she exhibits when meeting a handsome stranger in the woods.

Her attractive physical characteristics are interspersed with descriptions of her recent sexual development, and we are made aware that these two are linked, especially considering the following description of how "she stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing" (Carter "The Company of Wolves" 114). Her virginity is posited as her protection against an unruly world and considering that this virginity is tantamount to receiving a good offer of marriage, the institution of marriage is postulated as a position of safety. This is in contrast to the reality of what marriage may entail, as explored in "The Bloody Chamber." In this light, Lau notes that Carter's portrayal highlights Little Red Riding Hood's "childlike desirability", and it is her virginity that is central to that appeal (85).

Carter's protagonist displays sexual curiosity, in line with contemporary understanding of the onset of adolescence, and upon meeting a handsome man in the forest is all too willing to barter a kiss. He tells her that he has a quicker way of getting to her grandmother's house, but that it strays from the path that she has been told is her only protection:

Is it a bet? He asked her. Shall we make a game of it? What will you give me if I get to your grandmother's house before you?

What would you like? She asked disingenuously.

A kiss.

Commonplaces of a rustic seduction; she lowered her eyes and blushed.

He went through the undergrowth and took her basket with him but she forgot to be afraid of the beasts, although now the moon was rising, for she wanted to dawdle on her way to make sure the handsome gentleman would win his wager (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 115).

Any fear that she might have felt is dismissed in the face of her own sexual interest and desire. As with many of Carter’s other protagonists, specifically the protagonists of “The Bloody Chamber” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” the protagonist recognises sexual desire and doesn’t balk at it, but rather embraces it, thus being in a position where some of her curiosity will be abated by the interaction between her and her handsome counterpart.

The wolf’s position as the object of sexual appreciation is highlighted when the grandmother describes his naked form before he devours her: “His genitals, huge. Ah! huge” (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 116). This concurs with Makinen’s identification of the beasts as symbols of female sexual libido. Direct references to the original Red Riding Hood stories occur with the classic phrases:

What big eyes you have.

All the better to see you with (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 117).

In true Carterian fashion, however, the rest of this well-known passage is changed to subvert gender roles, and with significant consequences for the female protagonist:

What big arms you have.

All the better to hug you with.

Every wolf in the world now howled a prothalamion outside the window as she *freely* (my emphasis) gave the kiss she owed him (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 118).

As foreshadowed in the Beauty and the Beast retellings, the Beast/Wolf is shown to have a gentleness that appears contrary not only to common conceptions of who/what monsters are, but even different from what a man should be. In the face of this sweetness, even though he had just eaten her grandmother and by all accounts was going to do the same to her, *she* makes the decision to give him the agreed-upon kiss. The most significant aspect of this is that she *chooses* to sate her sexual curiosity, even knowing the darker aspect of his nature. In fact, we may also argue that this complex characterisation only increases her awareness of him as a

potential sexual partner. The final part of the well-known phrase is the one that highlights her agency the most:

What big teeth you have!

...

All the better to eat you with.

The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing (Carter "The Company of Wolves" 118).

Lau notes, "the fact that Little Red Riding hood is 'nobody's meat' removes her from the realm of patriarchal pornography – the dominant tropes with which Carter first describes her" (87). Her new position resonates with "a world of absolute sexual license for all the genders" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 22) as presented by a 'moral pornographer'. She does not cower in the face of his seeming threat, or his obvious sexuality, just as she did not cower in the face of her own. In fact, she embraces it fully and "in choosing to burn the stranger-wolf's human clothing, Little Red Riding Hood opts for the bestial" (Lau 87-88). This is because legend dictates that if one burns the human clothes of the wolf, he then remains forever in his wolf form (Carter "The Company of Wolves" 113). She not only embraces the bestial for a short time, but rather for a lifetime. Her choice of the bestial does not arise from a position of ignorance, as she is fully aware what her acceptance of the wolf entails. This choice comes after the stark realisation that she might die and recognition of how she was fooled by his handsome exterior: "She knew the worst wolves are hairy on the inside and she shivered, in spite of the scarlet shawl she pulled more closely round herself as if it could protect her, although it was as red as the blood she must spill" (Carter "The Company of Wolves" 117). The distinctive red shawl of Little Red Riding Hood is representative of the fate awaiting her had she not recognised her own power over the wolf, and the shawl is less representative of blood spilled through death, and more symbolic of the menstrual blood which signalled her sexual burgeoning and desirability which ends up saving her life. Furthermore, one might even argue that her shedding of the shawl signals the shedding of her old and sheltered life, as it was made especially for her by her grandmother who sought to protect her. She removes the shawl, and so removes the fear instilled by society of the consequences of sexual desire: "She closed the window on the wolves' threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid" (Carter

“The Company of Wolves” 117). Little Red Riding hood makes the decision “to act upon her own animal drives to enjoy a certain sexual agency” (Lau 88).

Her ultimate acceptance of the beast results in her “sweet and sound sleep[ing] in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf” (Carter “The Company of Wolves” 118). She sleeps comfortably in the place where her dead grandmother used to lie, and by accepting the bestial she subverts the older generation’s religious expectations (as evidenced by the mention of the position of her grandmother’s Bible and the importance it held for her). She lies in the place where the oppressive sexual systems that her grandmother represented were murdered, and she does so alongside the beast which others condemned.

## Chapter Four: She Knows Who the Beast is... - Female Knowledge and Power in Angela Carter’s “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” “The Tiger’s Bride,” and “The Erl-King”

### The Beastly Beauty: Gender Subversion in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon”

“The Courtship of Mr Lyon” is another variation on the Beauty and the Beast story. Once more, in order to ameliorate debt, Beauty is made to stay with Mr Lyon (The Beast) by her father. She does so with contentment as she feels duty-bound to aid her father in his quest for wealth. Beauty fulfils her obligation to the Beast, and soon leaves him to return to her father who now provides her with every luxury. In her absence, the Beast’s health fails and he nears death. Only the return of his Beauty restores him and they live together happily.

The gender subversion evident in “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” is significant in light of Carter’s “parodic exaggeration of gender stereotypes” and her habitual emphasis on the “precarious distinction between appearing and being” (Brooke 74). As a variant on the story of “Beauty and the Beast”, Carter’s “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” is an exercise in parody and epitomises a postmodern telling. Using a modern setting, Carter manages to highlight the pervasiveness of oppressive structures and the patriarchy that remains present throughout the eras of the different versions of the story.

Before an analysis of the specific manner in which gender is subverted in the story, it is also helpful to consider one of the most prevalent themes throughout Carter’s narratives: the emphasis on the change from innocence to self-awareness for the female protagonist. It is hinted at even upon consideration of the seemingly innocuous description of the path leading to the home of the Beast: “...the road is white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 41). The mention of “bridal silk” implies the path leading from the control of the father to the household of the husband. It serves to highlight the

pervasiveness of a culture where the institution of marriage is loaded with grave significance, and also to situate Beauty in relation to her predecessors, for whom movement from one man to another is central to the storyline. In further correspondence with the established version, it is the father who brings about the necessity for Beauty to pledge herself to the Beast, albeit in a manner that appears to absolve the father of guilt because of the naïve and endearingly incompetent manner in which he seeks to please his daughter, but only contributes to her imprisonment. This is evident as all he appears to want to do is give his daughter what she wants; however his description ultimately associates femaleness with childlikeness, and he notes when he is unable to afford her gift that he does “not even [have] enough money to buy his Beauty, his girl-child, his pet, the one white rose she said she wanted” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 41). In accordance with common portrayals, and despite the characteristics which emphasise the manner in which Mr Lyon and Beauty belie commonly accepted gender stereotypes, their physical appearances are shown to conform to them.

The description of Mr Lyon further serves to highlight his monstrous association, as monsters are frequently portrayed as being enormous. Men are also generally associated with great physical size, and have more “presence” than women: “There is always a dignity about great bulk, an assertiveness, a quality of being more *there* than most of us are” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 44). Although, in this light, the monster is a man, and a subtle correlation is established between the Beast and the human male that we could argue serves to insinuate Carter’s common purpose of highlighting the shaky difference between what is *considered* a monster and what a man. With regard to Beauty, on the other hand, and in accordance with the general appearance of fairy tale heroines, “the camera had captured a certain look she had, sometimes, of absolute sweetness and absolute gravity, as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul. When he handed the picture back, the Beast took good care not to scratch the surface with his claws” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 44). The presence of the camera signifies the modern context, but her “absolute sweetness” belies the perfect heroine. In contrast to this, his monstrousness is contrasted with her sweetness, as he is cognisant that he would not like to sully her purity with his claws – even if only through the external mediator of a photograph. Yet, the effect of her sweetness is mildly marred when later she describes herself: “And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 45). It is this description of herself that highlights the parodic nature of the text. This depiction also has the function of noting “the special thrill of persecution, bordering at once upon self-pity and self-righteousness” (Lieberman 390) that often appears in fairy-tale heroines and which often has the consequence of hindering any attempts at emancipation. Even the description of the castle is cannily

reminiscent of descriptions of heroines: “bright, sad, pretty place” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 47).

We could argue that she recognises her own role in the narrative and appears to relish it. Her position under patriarchal rule is emphasised when upon realising what she needed to do to save her father and her own lack of a desire to do so, “she stayed, and smiled, because her father wanted her to do so...” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 45). She appears to embody the customary submissive role, and she posits herself in the position of a good, obedient daughter, whether by aspiration, routine, or requirement, in order to attain marriage and wealth (Brooke 74). Yet, Carter refuses to confine her heroine to a one-dimensional characterisation, and it is made clear that the reader needs to understand that “do not think she had no will of her own; only, she was possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree and, besides, she would gladly have gone to the ends of the earth for her father, whom she loved dearly” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 45-46). Despite her description as having a measure of independent thought, her sense of obligation to her father overrides any significant subjectivity. This is posited as a deep love for her father, despite his failings. In this manner, submissiveness to the patriarchy is understood to be born not of feelings of inferiority or societal oppression, but rather to be a positive manifestation of filial adoration. Upon her return, and with their newly established affluence, she becomes a symbol of his prosperity, “so she could step out on his arm to parties” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 48). The transformation that her newfound wealth has upon her constitution is noteworthy:

She smiled at herself with satisfaction. She was learning, at the end of her adolescence, how to be a spoiled child and that pearly skin of hers was plumping out, a little, with high living and compliments... You could not have said that her freshness was fading but she smiled at herself in mirrors a little too often, these days, and the face that smiled back was not quite the one she had seen contained in the Beast’s agate eyes. Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterises certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 48-49).

This description speaks to a self-absorbed Beauty whose interest in her own role as a beautiful victim becomes warped. There is an arguable recognition of beauty as self-consciously imitating “feminine virtue in its various incarnations” (Brooke 74). It is through her absorption of her own state of victimhood and prettiness that she loses the qualities that inspire sympathy or admiration. Nevertheless, a significant character development takes place as she finally

comes to know what the reader has known all along, and she finally recognises her own self-absorption upon her return to Mr Lyon when she questions, “How is it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 50). This is in deep contrast to the manner in which the heroine had been shown to understand Otherness as being threatening, as she noted “she found his bewildering difference from herself almost intolerable; its presence choked her” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 45). That she feels it to be practically “intolerable” is indicative of the extent to which Otherness has been vilified, and the extent to which it becomes a physical threat is noted as “its presence choked her”. Furthermore, even after spending more time together, “his strangeness made her shiver” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 47). There is physical revulsion upon consideration of him and “...she could not bring herself to touch him of her own free will, he was so different from herself” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 48). The complex nature of what constitutes a monster, or a beast, is explored when she states that “fascinated, almost awed, she watched the firelight play on the gold fringes of his mane; he was irradiated, as if with a kind of halo, and she thought of the first great beast of the Apocalypse” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 46). In this description we are made aware of two different aspects to his appearance – the “halo” suggests a heavenly attribute and purity of soul inconsistent with her further exploration of him as the “first great beast of the Apocalypse”, which situates him as the opposition of the heavenly being the halo describes.

In contrast to this physical beastliness, when describing Mr Lyon, she observes within him “a hint of shyness, of fear of refusal...” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 45). There is a clear subversion of gender roles and fairy-tale archetypes, and his approach to her is indicative of a gentleness expected of the girl: “hesitantly, as if he himself were in awe of a young girl who looked as if she had been carved out of a single pearl...” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 46). Her perfection is emphasised, and in the face of this, he displays an uncertainty inconsistent with the conventional Beast. Yet, as we would expect from a young *female* protagonist intent on securing a love match, “*he* [emphasis my own] forced himself to master his shyness” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 46). The gender subversion is evident as traditional masculine/feminine attributes are mingled. There is an effort on the part of the Beast to overcome his supposed weakness in a bid to woo Beauty – this shyness is also something that is associated with women, where male assurance is typical. The “feminine” attributes of the Beast are highlighted when considering that “the Beast sunk his great head on to his paws. You will come back to me? It will be lonely here, without you” (Carter “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” 48). In this moment he displays his sensitivity to Beauty, and further

highlights the power that she has over him – her presence is necessary to his survival, and she is afforded a pivotal control over him. In this, she does not appear to be a victim to his whims – rather he to hers, and Brooke argues that she is the one to ultimately “seduce the Beast, who ‘courts’ (and indeed creates) ‘Mr. Lyon’” (70).

In this manner, although conventional versions of the Beauty and the Beast story posit each as only “good or beastly”, Carter’s version exposes the unfeasibility “of such constructions, presenting an ironic performance of gender and its stereotypes” (Brooke 72). Carter offers a tale where the constant vacillation between compliance with gender expectations and deviance from gender stereotypes highlights the fluid nature of gender constructions in general.

### The Beauty of Knowledge: A Transgressive Female Protagonist in “The Tiger’s Bride”

The protagonist in “The Tiger’s Bride” is notable because of the manner in which she faces tribulation. Unlike de Sade’s Justine, who “always does what she is told,” and who is “at the mercy of any master, because that is the nature of her own definition of goodness” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 62), the protagonist describes her surroundings, including its people, with a dry humour and sarcastic wit which signals her transgressive nature. This portrays her as an intelligent woman for whom the hypocrisy of the world is blatant, but also as a protagonist who is thoroughly engaging to the reader who recognises the irony that she continually employs. Despite the fact that she does do what is necessary to survive, she does not do so with the false idea that it will make her “a good daughter,” but rather because it is required for survival.

Recognising that “a ruined woman is one who has lost her capital assets...and hence has nothing tangible to put on the market” (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 67), the protagonist “wished [she]’d rolled in the hay with every lad on [her] father’s farm” in order to escape the bargain made between her father and the Beast (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 61). The price for her father’s debt is her flesh, but once more virginity was essential to the desirability of Beauty (as it is in “The Company of Wolves”), as The Beast craves “the sight of a young lady’s skin that no man has seen before” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 61). In accordance with the idea perpetuated by de Sade, “they demand the spirit of a whore, but in the body of a virgin” (de Sade 23). Her innocence is required as it asserts her position as a possession of men. Virginity is praised as being the true virtue of a woman and the sole means by which she may take her place in the world as a respectable married woman – the perpetuated true aim of the female species. Yet, Beauty understands that it is exactly her virginity which has placed her in a

situation where she is treated like a prostitute. Once more, she shows recognition of the hypocrisy surrounding female sexuality, but also a deep desire to disrupt the expectations placed upon her.

Furthermore, as a variation of the classic Beauty and the Beast tale, and in accordance with the importance placed on the father in the original story and Carter's "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", the father of Beauty in "The Tiger's Bride" is critical to the story. It is the actions of the father that have direct consequences for the daughter, and Brooke notes that his activities and the relationship between father and daughter highlight the notion that "ownership prevails over affection" (77). Yet, it is the manner in which the protagonist reacts to his thoughtlessness that truly separates her from those who come before her. In this light, the daughter's principal defence against her father is linguistic in nature, establishing the "self-awareness, -containment, and -respect" that is revealed throughout her narrative (Brooke 78).

She is helpless in the face of her father's gambling and regards it, and him, "with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly" (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 52). Like others in the patriarchal realm, she must silently bear witness to actions which have dire consequences for her. She realises that she will have to suffer for his foolishness – and quite literally she pays the price in his stead. As she does ultimately go to the Beast, we might afford her the position of the silent and obedient daughter who will continue to adore her father even as he ruins her, but her mocking comments belie this and depict a woman of acerbic wit. Yet, this Beauty, unlike many other versions, is fully cognisant of her father's many faults. Despite her still going to The Beast to satisfy his debt, one could argue that she does not do this because of a naïve sense of obligation to her father, but rather because she understands how his poverty will affect her because of her non-economic-subject status.

In accordance with the idea that her position is one that has been occupied by women for centuries, the protagonist relates the similarity between herself and her mother, especially in relation to her beauty. As with Beauty in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", the narrator-protagonist of "The Tiger's Bride" also recognises her own beauty, but unlike the former, does not appear to take as much pleasure in her own attractiveness. She relates how she was "always the pretty one" with "nut-brown curls" and "rosy cheeks" (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 52). Furthermore, being born on Christmas Day resulted in her being named "Christmas rose" by her nurse (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 52). It is this continual reference to her in relation to a rose that further foreshadows her role in a narrative already well established as having roses as significant imagery in the plot. Additionally, upon an account of her mother, the narrator-protagonist relates "[her] mother did not blossom long; bartered for her dowry to such a feckless sprig of the Russian nobility that she soon died of his gaming, his whoring, his

agonizing repentances” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 52). In this manner, and in conjunction with the description of her mother and their physical likeness, there is an indication that her fate was established well before the events that led her to The Beast. While the narrator and mother alike are vulnerable to the faults and impulses of the father/husband, instead of mutely yielding to them, the narrator’s voice guides the narrative and conveys her story (Brooke 77).

Yet, as an inversion of the traditional Beauty and the Beast tale, “[her] tear-beslobbered father wants a rose to show that [she] forgive[s] him”, but as she separates a stem, “[she] prick[s] [her] finger and so he gets his rose all smeared with blood” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 55). The presence of the blood on the rose firstly signals the violence that is anticipated and also the blood of broken virginity accompanied by former innocence; the red blood against the startling white rose is emphatic. More than this, the act of defiance is what is significant, as it disavows any notions regarding her passivity. As mentioned above, Beauty is not predisposed to unnatural and unreciprocated feelings of solicitude towards the father who mistreats her by his absolute lack of care. As a final act of rebellion against him, “[she] drew the curtain to conceal the sight of [her] father’s farewell; [her] spite was sharp as broken glass” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 55). Her dismissal of her father’s unnecessary portrayals of seeming anguish at her departure sets her apart from many other fairy-tale heroines for whom the father remains a symbol of care – despite most of their actions pointing to the contrary. She reflects an awareness of the faults of the symbol of the patriarchal order that has the power to control her and her body.

Upon consideration of the Beast, and representative of her deeply thinking mind, she cannot help but wonder about “the exact nature of his ‘beastliness’?” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 55) as if she recognises that the nature of what constitutes a beast or animal is more complex than most people give it credit. She expounds some of the tales which have influenced her understanding and expectations of the term by considering how “[her] English nurse once told [her] about a tiger-man she saw in London, when she was a little girl, to scare [her] into good behaviour, for [she] was a wild wee thing and she could not tame [her] into submission” (Carter “The Tiger’s Bride” 55-56). We are aware that she recognises that the tales she was told were recounted in an effort to control her behaviour by instilling fear, and she is able to question her own reaction to what she remembers as being the ‘truth’. That she could not be tamed evokes the idea of her as an animal needing to be trained to be acceptable. We notice that she does not quietly submit to the injustices against her, and her ultimate transformation into a physical animal such as the one she comes to care for, are indicative of a nature that will not be overcome. However, as told to her by a nanny, the threat remained that “if this young lady was not a good little girl and did not eat her boiled beetroot, then the tiger-man would put

on his big black travelling coat lined with fur, just like [her] daddy's, and hire the Erl-King's galloper of wind and ride through the night straight to the nursery and – Yes, my beauty! GOBBLE YOU UP!" (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 56). The fact that the threat – which would be exceptional to a young child – is used in relation to something as arbitrary as eating vegetables is astonishing in itself. It highlights the extent to which the tales were used to mould a perfect woman; rather more significantly, by comparing the coat that the tiger-man wears to the coat her father wears, a subconscious connection is made between the two. It is not the tiger-man or the Erl-King that brings about her ruin, but the father meant to protect her. The notion of devouring is emphasised and used as the most emphatic threat. Yet, upon hearing the story, the narrator-protagonist notes her own "delighted terror, half believing her, half knowing that she teased [her]" (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 56), and through a story such as the one posed to Beauty, "dread was cultivated as an aesthetic thrill" (Warner *Monsters of Our Own Making* 4).

Beauty shows a nature that is intrigued by 'otherness' and not easily cowed. She laments the "old wives' tales, nursery fears!" which "[she] knew well enough the reason for the trepidation [she] cosily titillated with superstitious marvels of [her] childhood on the day [her] childhood ended" (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 56). She is fully cognisant of the fact that her consciousness had been sculpted by the stories that infiltrated her childhood, but it is exactly this knowledge that allows her to escape the restraints that they otherwise might have placed on her. The most important realisation is that "for now [her] own skin was [her] sole capital in the world and [that day] [she'd] make [her] first investment" (Carter "The Tiger's Bride" 56). We become acutely aware of what Carter discussed in *The Sadeian Woman* regarding the manner in which, in a society where women are possessions, the woman who declines "to sell herself will have the thing she refuses to sell taken away from her by force" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 62-63). This is emphasised by the manner in which the prostitute "has made of herself her own capital investment" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 66) and may one day, after a torn hymen, "put her capital to work for her" (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 66). Yet, the loss of her virginity also strips her of any capital value for potential paternal exchange, as a 'sullied' daughter is of no worth in the marriage mart (Brooke 80).

The protagonist in "The Tiger's Bride" sets herself apart from others, not only because of her ultimate affiliation with the Beast, but because of the self-recognition that appears throughout the tale. It is this self-recognition of her own character, the world that surrounds her, and her sexual desire that allows her to forge a new space in a tale as old as time.

## She Knows Why the Caged Birds Sing: Female Entrapment in “The Erl-King”

“The Erl-King” is a foray into sexual exploration, but also female entrapment and, notably, female agency in dispatching the threat seeking to contain it. The woodland setting is suited to the fantastic tale, as so many classic fairy stories evoke this beautiful but dangerous scenery as the backdrop to their tales that concurrently mingle the pretty and the perilous. The reinterpretation tells the story of a young girl lured into the woods by the beautiful sound of the Erl-King – the well-known Germanic mythic figure notorious for stealing children. Here, Carter provides a tale that moves far beyond common conceptions regarding the nature of the Erl-King. The original Erl-King character appeared in a Germanic poem written by the poet Goethe in 1782 (Warner *Monsters of Our Own Making* 23). In conformance with certain elements of the revision by Carter, the poem revolves around the Erl-King’s “wooing a boy who is riding with his father through the dark forest” (Warner *Monsters of Our Own Making* 23). As does the protagonist in Carter’s retelling, the young boy is aware of the threat that the Erl-King poses, but his father does not believe him and discounts his fears as being manifestations of the mystical nature of the woods (Warner *Monsters of Our Own Making* 23). While generally understood to be a manifestation of Death, Warner posits that Carter recognises the Erl-King as Eros and presents the fear through the captivated viewpoint of the Erl-King’s victim. To Warner, “she is a Carter heroine, in thrall despite herself to the woodland spirit’s feral, eldritch charms: ‘He is the tender butcher who showed me how the price of flesh is love; skin the rabbit, he says! Off come all my clothes’” (Warner *Monsters of Our Own Making* 25). In accordance with what is noted in Carter, the poem itself “leaves its subjects nameless, thus bidding for universality and widening the reach of the menace” (Warner *Monsters of Our Own Making* 24). The threat present in the poem is one that is not clearly defined and can be applied to any reader in a personal capacity. The threat may thus take on various forms according to the peculiar fears of the readers.

Upon description of the rustling of the trees, the narrator already foreshadows the theme of female helplessness as “the trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt round hopelessly for the way out” (Carter “The Erl-King” 84-85). In contrast to the natural setting, the taffeta skirts of the women (representing domestication) already signal that they are out of place – the woods are no place for them – and once more evoke the image of the classic Little Red Riding Hood and her naïve wander through the woods to her grandmother. The metaphorical (and literal) darkness of the setting is emphasised as “this light admits of no ambiguities and, here, she will be trapped in her own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems” (Carter “The Erl-King” 85).

Harriet Kramer Linkin, in her article “Isn’t It Romantic? Angela Carter’s Bloody Revision of the Romantic Aesthetic in ‘The Erl-King’”, observes the significance of the lack of artifice of the woods. They still manage to ensnare those who seek to enter; and so “the wood functions as a pure sign signifying nothing beyond what the encoding human consciousness imposes” and enfolds a person “in an unchartable space” (Linkin 311-312). It is unmanageable for human beings to go into the woods unaccompanied by “their own sociocultural maps” (Linkin 311-312). While recognising the forest “as an unmotivated sign, her cultural encoding functions as an interpretive screen through which she reads nature ... while she knows that these images of endangered girls and abandoned women read as vacancy to the nonsignifying wood, that ‘she will be trapped...’ (85), she cannot help modelling her own experience on these encultured expectations” (Linkin 311-312).

The setting of this story – *her* story – cannot be separated from the setting of most others that have influenced her thinking – not because they are necessarily identical, but rather because she encodes her own story with meaning garnered from the stories of others. In this same way, and as discussed in previous chapters, a double reading occurs when analysing Carter’s revisionist texts, as the symbols of the traditional story inform our understanding of the new texts. In accordance with the prominent theme of self-recognition that remains constant throughout Carter’s texts, Linkin notes how the narrator concedes her own involvement in the tale she is on the brink of expressing (312). The narrator-protagonist establishes that she is unable to “stand outside her own cultural encoding to point to the way she is encoded” (Linkin 312). Her anticipation of confinement by the Erl-King is informed by the stories she has encountered and she “already ‘knows’ the warning she repeats from her fairy tale books: the erl-king – or the Romantic male poet – will do her grievous harm” (Linkin 314). This foregrounded echo of the caution does not only serve to remind the narrator-protagonist to be suspicious of the universally expected consequence of her stroll through the woods, but it also introduces similar narrative expectations in the reader (Linkin 314).

Despite recognizing some of the danger that awaits her, her excitement at a new experience overrides any fear she might have. She describes how “the trees threaded a cat’s cradle of half-stripped branches over [her] so that [she] felt [she] was in a house of nets and though the cold wind that always heralds [his] presence, had [she] but known it then, blew gently around [her], [she] thought that nobody was in the wood but [her]” (Carter “The Erl-King” 85). This feeling of solitude resonates with her earlier description of how she was enthralled by the sound heralding the Erl-King, which called to her loneliness. She retains a thrilled anticipation at being with the Erl-King, even though she shows awareness of the dangers of the woods and notes that the “Erl-King will do you grievous harm” (Carter “The

Erl-King” 85). The use of the direct address to the reader is important to note as this serves to universalise the threat from the Erl-King and all like him. It is a fair enough assumption from the author that every reader will have their own version of the Erl-King, either as a threatening figure meant to dissuade from transgression, or as a symbol of forbidden desire, and quite often, as both. The sound calling her to him is “the call of the bird, as desolate as if it came from the throat of the last bird left alive. That call, with all the melancholy of the failing year in it, went directly to [her] heart” (Carter “The Erl-King” 85).

Upon description of the Erl-King, it becomes clear that he represents nature and the woods in a very real way, as “his eyes are quite green, as if from too much looking at the wood. There are some eyes can eat you” (Carter “The Erl-King” 86). His eyes can “eat you” signals his sexual readiness, as Warner notes that “in myth and fairy tale, the metaphor of devouring often stands in for sex” (Warner *From the Beast to the Blonde* 259). Furthermore, his eyes hold the allure that the woods hold. This description, with a later description of his eyes being “green as apples” (85), is contrasted by the subsequent line comparing them to “dead sea fruit” (85). While originally ascribing life-giving attributes to his eyes, as the protagonist follows her path to killing him, she starts to describe his eyes in terms of the fate she has in store for him.

Further descriptions portray Carter’s continuing mission of producing accounts where gender roles are reversed, and this is evident in “The Erl-King” with the description of the Erl-King as “an excellent housewife” (Carter “The Erl-King” 87). Yet, in an effort to ensure that he is not considered perfect, the narrator-protagonist describes his trapped birds to “contextualize these signs of domesticity as entrapment” (87) (Linkin 315). The entrapment that is to follow is foreshadowed by the protagonist’s description of “...the little cages in which he keeps his singing birds” (Carter “The Erl-King” 87) and “...a wall of trapped birds” (Carter “The Erl-King” 87) that surrounds her – and even encloses her. This appears to be indicative of her fate. This idea of entrapment is further emphasised as the narrator describes the trapped birds “...with the pretty wedding rings round their necks” (Carter “The Erl-King” 87). This proposes the notion of marriage as a prison, and a further description that “the sweetest singers he will keep in cages” (Carter “The Erl-King” 87) indicates that it is those who are most appealing (and some might argue innocent) that will be the most imprisoned.

The transgressive woman is the one who manages to remain outside of the cage. The manner in which the transgressive woman accomplishes this is myriad in method and complex in nature. Furthermore, as briefly discussed in relation to the protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” and her shame at her own susceptibility to the intriguing façade of the Marquis, the narrator-protagonist of the Erl-King fears most of all her own desire to be with the Erl-King, despite her possible incarceration.

## The Erl-Queen: Female Replacement of Male Entrapment in “The Erl-King”

As established, the protagonist in “The Erl-King” shows a shrewd understanding of the threat that the Erl-King poses to her. We might argue that despite wanting to experience sexual desire, despite wanting to love and be loved in return, her knowledge of what marriage entails for the woman makes her wary of her own heart and prompts her to take fatal action against the figure who symbolises her imprisonment. This is despite the allure that the Erl-King has for her, even as she recognizes the threat of entrapment. After consideration of her own desire to stay with him and become consumed by him, the protagonist is unable to conceive a way of surviving without trading the woman for the man: “rather than die into emblematic nature or turn into a reflection”, she plans to murder him (Linkin 310).

Linkin notes if it were only a situation where the protagonist needed to evade the Erl-King’s plainly wicked desire, her situation would have been much easier. Yet, “her own desire to be desired” and to be “drawn ‘towards him on his magic lasso of inhuman music’ (Carter “The Erl-King” 89) as the fetishized beloved” warns her of her own vulnerability to the “cultural vertigo” that tempts the woman to forgo aspiration and function only as “seedbed for the male imaginative vision” (Linkin 309). She fears that her eager participation in yielding to an exceedingly erotic desire destroys her selfhood and renders her reliant on “the Erl-King’s pleasure for her existence” (Linkin 309). She recognizes within herself a ‘weakness’ that would allow the Erl-King to prosper over her. In the way that the protagonist in “The Bloody Chamber” felt shown her own ability to be ‘corrupted,’ so too the protagonist in “The Erl-King” recognizes her own desire to put *his* pleasure before her subjectivity.

Despite her fear of what he represents, she cannot but desire to be a part of him. Yet, she will not be trapped by the Erl-King, as on an ideological level, she will not be trapped into a conventional marriage like the little birds with the wedding rings around their necks. She fears that she will become so entrapped by him that she becomes a part of him and lose her independent subject position:

Your green eye is a reducing chamber. If I look into it long enough, I will become as small as my own reflection, I will diminish to a point and vanish...I shall become so small you can keep me in one of your osier cages and mock my loss of liberty. I have seen the cage you are weaving for me; it is a very pretty one... (Carter “The Erl-King” 90).

She is aware that the cage he weaves for her is appealing – just as the trappings of marriage and conventionality are dressed up to seduce women into accepting their subordination. It remains a cage, but it is a gilded one, and she describes the sound that beckons her as “...lullabies for foolish virgins” by birds who “have lost their flesh when they were dipped in the corrosive pools of his regard and now must live in cages” (Carter “The Erl-King” 90).

She cannot find a way to reconcile her subjectivity with his, and she is exceedingly wary of her own vulnerability to “falling subject to his enthralling gaze” (Linkin 316). Even though she pronounces and understands the expected suppression of the woman to the man, she also recognises her vulnerability “to his seductive song; she does not trust him, but she does not yet know how to resist his call” (Linkin 316).

The desire that he evokes in her and his embraces are described as the precise way in which his trap becomes appealing to so many, and even to her, yet she cannot discount her own fear at being trapped and will not allow herself to be placated into submission to a life of subordination. Yet, her desire for him is highlighted by the description of their joining: “His skin covers me entirely; we are like two halves of a seed, enclosed in the same integument. I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me...Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me” (Carter “The Erl-King” 89). In accordance with her belief that she cannot reconcile her subjectivity and his, in their sexual encounters, she desires *to be a part of him*. She would like to be consumed by him.

The threat her desire poses is evident, and so even when describing an arguably sexual moment between the two, she highlights the line between pleasure and pain: “I feel your sharp teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses...you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream” (Carter “The Erl-King” 88). In the moment of sexual abandon, an element of violence remains ever-present, as per usual in Carter’s texts. One cannot be completely sure whether her scream is one of pleasure or pain, but we might argue it is a scream of both. In her unique circumstances, the two are not always separated. The social circumstances of those she represents also have the same conflicting nature.

When she describes how “he strips [her] to [her] last nakedness, that undersign of mauve, pearled satin, like a skinned rabbit” (Carter “The Erl-King” 89), the moment is slightly marred by her position as a skinned rabbit as it is an indication of death – her death. This is, however, subverted when she decides how she will kill him: “She will carve off his great mane with the knife he uses to skin the rabbits” (Carter “The Erl-King” 91). She will use his sexuality against him, and like Samson, steal his power by removing his hair.

Interestingly, Linkin notes that there is the possibility that because of her understanding of the perils she faces, it forms her expectations of the Erl-King and serves to produce a self-

fulfilling prophecy (319). Transforming from Sadeian victim to victimiser, she nevertheless remains observant of “a model of development that privileges separation over dependence” (Linkin 321), and an “epistemology that insists on the culturally gendered dualism of subject/object or presence/absence distinctions” (Linkin 321). In order to protect her whole ‘self’, she shifts the Erl-King as object without trying to find an alternative path to the binary opposition of gender that forms the feminist endeavour (starting with Simone de Beauvoir’s crucial identification of the woman as ‘other’) (Linkin 321). So the path that she follows only results in “a dead end for both herself and the Erl-King” (Linkin 321). It becomes clear that her reasonable fear of entrapment in his gaze results in her complete refusal of the “potentially exhilarating giddiness that looking into his eyes produces;” yet it is exactly this terrible denial that ultimately also fates her to solitude (Linkin 321-322). Her means of acquiring “a voice as the speaking subject” demands “a heavy price...she destroys her possibilities for love to flesh out the Romantic model of the poet in her substitution fantasy” (Linkin 321-322). She believes that her own conquest of him will be the release of her predecessors who ultimately were unable to resist his call, and she decides that

[she] shall take two handfuls of his rustling hair...and wind them into ropes, ... and, softly, with hands as gentle as rain, [she] shall strangle him with them. Then she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls, every one, each with the crimson imprint of his love-bite on their throats (Carter “The Erl-King” 91).

Recognising her own position in the story, she strikes back, and takes with her all those for whom escape proved elusive. Instead of the reconciliation between the genders that occurs in various forms across the other texts in the collection, in “The Erl-King” there is no compromise, but rather a more direct substitution of the position of power.

## Chapter Five: To Watch or Not to Watch – An Analysis of the *Penny Dreadful* Television Series

### Female Sexuality in the *Penny Dreadful* television series

The following chapter analyses the representations of female sexuality in the popular television series *Penny Dreadful*, especially taking into consideration the current feminist debates regarding the function of television in the feminist agenda. The story centers around a young woman, Vanessa Yves, who is possessed by a demonic force and whose sexuality proves

essential to the tale. She and an assortment of companions search for her best friend, Mina Harker née Murray, who has been captured by a vampire Master. Furthermore, the significance of the Victorian setting is explored, alongside the prominence of other notable works of literature, which inform the reading of the visual text.

The primary consideration for this chapter is the protagonist's exploration of her own sexuality, which comingles with Gothic ideas of the supernatural. In order to do this, specific moments have been chosen which relate not only to how her explorations of sexual knowledge always bring mention of the supernatural Other, but also the substantial punishments for these 'transgressions', especially in the medical context.

Furthermore, despite the horrific consequences for her actions, her agency is examined. This is accomplished by examining agency as defined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. She is established as a character who constantly (*repetitively*) deviates from cultural gender norms and instigates herself as a Subject, especially in relation to her male counterparts whose own agency is questioned. The lack of male agency is explored especially by taking into consideration the significant position of Brona, a prostitute who although apparently without any agency, in actuality serves as a saviour of Vanessa, however indirectly. Her role as prostitute is analysed according to Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*, especially as she technically serves as the counterpart of Vanessa, who forms part of upper-class society, despite her own struggles with sexual transgression.

Finally, the significance of appearances is analysed, especially taking into account Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde*, as it serves to highlight the subtle art of physical depictions being representative of ideological and culturally inscribed concepts regarding good and evil.

### The television context

Resonating with the literary debates regarding female sexuality, the relationship between feminism and television is one that is fiercely debated: "the history of feminist television criticism reveals both continuities and discontinuities over time as scholars have struggled to make sense of why media matter and what women want the media to do" (Brunsdon and Spigel 4). This history correspondingly matches disputes within feminism itself, for example, disputes regarding precisely who is considered a 'woman', who qualifies and who does not, and progressively who even has the desire to be a feminist in any capacity (Brunsdon and Spigel 4). Furthermore, Spigel formed part of the original group of academics who first sought to critically engage with television with regard to "other 'low' or 'debased' forms of culture"

which had previously been disregarded as unworthy of thoughtful consideration (Sharp 281). As Carter's own expedition into fairy tales highlights, there was (and still is) much to be learned from folk tales, although they were considered entertainment for the masses and formed a part of what we might term 'popular culture'.

In this light, even in 1990, Carter notes, "now we have machines to do our dreaming for us" (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xxiii), and yet she recognises that through these media arises a method of an extension and revolution of "storytelling and story-performance" (Carter *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales* xxiii). Television has the ability to confront the misogyny often prescribed to it through subversion and re-imaginings that afford women novel subject positions. Considering the ability of television to show eroticism and female sexual relations in graphic new ways, it is necessary to ponder the possibilities of these depictions. It is exactly this consideration that forms a divide between many feminists who cannot agree on whether this graphic representation *can* be used in the interest of women's liberation from misogyny, especially as the depictions so often cast the female body as eroticized object for the male viewer.

Despite considerable advancement in representation of women in television, there remains the unsettled question over the "politics of pleasure" (Johnson 6). Carter counters many arguments from prominent feminists who question "why and how sexuality in women is ever other than masochistic" (MacKinnon 340). She accomplishes this by exploring female sexuality as complex and encouraging the understanding of a female sexual subjectivity which cannot be confined to a mere relation to male sexuality which supposedly always seeks to oppress it. Yet, in feminist film studies, numerous classifications of the female spectator have appeared, "toying with the gender and sexuality of watching" (Johnson 9). This spectator is, by most standards, "giving something up, in thrall to the flickering images of patriarchy. Picture her down on her knees, redefining her pleasure in terms of the available subject position of subordination" (Johnson 9). Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is significant as she notes that cinema presents us with a selection of potential pleasures (806). Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality* first noted voyeurism as one of the constituent drives of sexuality subsisting as instincts entirely autonomously of the erotogenic zones. He makes the connection between voyeurism and accepting others as objects, and exposing them to a domineering and inquisitive gaze. Thus, in a society regimented by sexual inequality, "pleasure in looking" divided by "active/male and passive/female" and "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure" (Mulvey 809). In their conventional exhibitionist position, women are concurrently "looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*"

(Mulvey 809). Mulvey adds that Budd Boetticher once explained that in herself, woman has no especial significance; what is truly important is what the female protagonist incites, or what she signifies, and “she is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does” (Mulvey 809). Conventionally, the exhibited woman has performed on two planes: “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator” (Mulvey 809). The heroine only serves a purpose in relation to her male counterpart (or male viewers). Yet, here it is necessary to understand the female character and viewer, and her role in this transaction. Vanessa’s agency in the television series is thus notable.

It is necessary to comprehend the notion of agency before understanding its significance in relation to Vanessa, and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* provides a framework. Butler deems gender to be “performatively produced” and bound by the supervisory “practices of gender coherence” (Butler 25). Within the hereditary “discourse of the metaphysics of substance”, gender becomes performative, constituting the very identity that it is professed to be (Butler 25). In this manner, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler 25). The concept of a subject being established simply entails that the subject is a result of precise “rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity” (Butler 145). Thus,

The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat: ‘agency,’ then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition (Butler 145).

Butler deems the necessary intervention to be discovering tactics of subversive repetition facilitated by the discussed constrictions, in order to assert the “local possibilities of intervention” by participating in exactly those “practices of repetition” that form identity, thereby offering the opportunity to challenge them (Butler 147). Ultimately, “the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (Butler 148). In this manner, although Vanessa often superficially *appears* to fall within the parameters of conventionality, her agency is established not by one act of transgression, but rather her continuous subversion of the expectations placed upon her. The agency of Vanessa in *Penny*

*Dreadful* and Carter's heroines is significant, especially in relation to their sexual desire and their willingness to either fulfil their own desires, or to use desire to attain what they need.

Returning to the unique challenges facing feminist television criticism, it is still important to consider that despite the recognition of the feministic approachable subject matter of modern television, "sluts die first", and to recollect the "blowjobs in the glow of late-night television" (Johnson 10). These bring to light the myriad ways "women's pleasures in popular culture" are irrefutably interlaced with learned capitulation to prevailing power constructions and restricted female imagery (Johnson 10). Many feminists continue to ask, "whether watching television is in some sense, frankly, like sucking the dick of patriarchy" (Johnson 10). The question is posed of whether, even by passively, *innocently*, enjoying television in its current state, women capitulate to the power structures which continue to subjugate women by posing them as only useful in relation to their sexuality. The feminist debate regarding television and its subversive potential echoes the feminist arguments that surrounded Carter, and which continues to prove controversial.

What remains evident is that the dualism of pleasure and danger is prominent and it is this dichotomy that continues to splinter women's studies, alongside generational struggles (Johnson 14). This dichotomy is one that we could argue fractures not only feminists but women in general. The idea that it is either/or presents a difficult task to the feminist viewer of television who has to confront the possibility that the pleasure she experiences is *wrong*, because it originates from a form that, as Dworkin argued about pornography, is inherently tied to misogyny and the patriarchy. Johnson claims that numerous third-wave feminists accentuate 'danger' and focus completely on the "patriarchal capitalist white supremacist media manipulation and commodification" (14). Cristina Lucia Stasia finds that it is easy to be "seduced by images of strong women fighting, but these images capitalise on a basic belief in feminism evacuated of any consciousness of why girls still *need* to 'kick ass'" (Johnson 14). She continues:

This language of seduction replays the terms of debate in the feminist sex wars, reaching all the way back to the social purity doctrines of nineteenth-century feminism, positing media culture as a threatening man and the female spectator as vulnerable maiden. We might call this group *separatist feminist media critics* because they ultimately encourage women to turn off the television, give pop culture the cold shoulder (Johnson 14).

This argument, despite arguably good intentions, serves to diminish the viewer as a thinking subject capable of wading through the remnants of patriarchal influence in an effort to identify spaces for feminist subversion. This does not mean to say that the viewer should remain blind to the continuing presence of misogynistic images which infiltrate even the most supposedly “feminist” films and television shows. Rather, the viewer must be afforded the opportunity to identify problem areas for herself. Despite this, it does remain problematic that of the ‘strong’ and ‘empowered’ female characters that grace our screens, many still rely on the sexual titillation of the male viewer for their success and remain subordinate to male characters because of diminished screen time devoted to them. Although I argue that to completely discard television is as problematic as accepting it without question, it is still important for the feminist viewer to be able to establish when the male dominated media industry attempts to pacify her through forced representation, and then to formulate novel ways of creating television that takes into consideration the feminist agenda.

In contrast to the separatist feminist media critics, other third-wave feminists more adamantly identify with the ‘pleasure’ side (Johnson 15-16). These *sex radical media critics* or *visual pleasure libertarians* are called such because of their positive approach to “viewer agency and productive pleasures” (Johnson 15-16). In accordance with the negotiated reading required in Carter’s texts, so too these critics, according to Johnson, conduct negotiated readings (16). Especially in keeping with my study and as a recognition of the importance of fantasy, Johnson finds that that these media critics “import sex radical theories into television studies, valuing fantasy as a space of free play, advocating acceptance of our darker drives, and indulging in fascination with imagery that queers gender, decenters heterosexuality, and valorizes the erotic” (Johnson 15-16)

It is this recognition of the role of the viewer (or the reader), which resonates with Carter’s work, and the above description perfectly depicts the *Penny Dreadful* series and what the erotic imagery may accomplish. Ultimately, this argument seeks to affirm the viewers as subjective beings capable of understanding their own desires, even as they are aware of patriarchal influence. To discard any desire, which some feminists may classify as originating from the pervasiveness of oppressive patriarchal control, is merely another way of patrolling women’s bodies. This is because it defines what is considered appropriate to feminist desire and condemning any other source of pleasure. As de Sade and Carter recognised with pornography and folk tales respectively, much may be learned from analysing the popular culture which infiltrates every society at a foundational level.

## The Intertextual Gothic Setting and The Nineteenth-Century Sexual Context

In the same way that the revisionist texts of Carter require a double reading, as discussed in previous chapters, the use of intertextuality in the *Penny Dreadful* series significantly contributes to the message of the tale and the viewer's understanding of the story as a whole. Firstly, it is apparent to the viewer that the setting is Victorian London, where the never-identified serial killer "Jack the Ripper" haunted the city. A space is established where fear and horror infiltrate every atom, and the tone for the series is set. As the victims of the Ripper were women the threat for females is emphasized. Yet, it is significant that the fear he inspires is not confined to only women, but rather remains universal. The bloody and gruesome nature of "Jack the Ripper's" crimes meant that although there was a distinct *modus operandi* with female prostitutes as the primary targets, there remained a general fear at the cruelty of one man.

One could argue that the setting of the visual text is decidedly classifiable as "the Female Gothic mode" as it is a form largely alienated from the conventional Gothic. This is because it places its focus on "a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood" (Davison 48). In this manner, the Female Gothic employs "the supernatural for political ends" (Davison 48), and "[t]he 'fear of power' embodied in Gothic romance is a fear not only of supernatural powers but also of social forces so vast and impersonal that they seem to have supernatural strength" (DeLamotte 17). Even as the threat in *Penny Dreadful* is in actuality supernatural, the perils of the Victorian space for women remain as hazardous as if magic did not permeate the setting. Furthermore, the two fears that rule the Gothic setting are epitomized by Vanessa: "the fear of terrible separateness and the fear of unity with some terrible Other" (DeLamotte 22).

It is Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that prominently determines the storyline, with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* intricately interwoven into the new tale that centres on the stories of monsters, whatever form they may take. Dorian Gray, from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, becomes a prominent character, and the primary context of that novel further highlights the deceptiveness of appearances. Upon discussion of the popularity of the series, Benjamin Poore in "The Transformed Beast: *Penny Dreadful*, Adaptation, and the Gothic" notes that the series recompenses the well-informed fan "with enough reference-points for it to be clear that the subversions of various canons are deliberate" (17). In this sense, not only does the double reading encode significant new meaning; this understanding of the new text acts as

a reward all on its own. As such, as already evident with folk and fairy tales, readers and viewers constantly repeat these stories, with diverse elements, but also set features (Tibbetts 6). Especially evident in the *Penny Dreadful* television series, in postmodern Gothic manifestations, we are faced with contemporary unease over, amongst a few, gender-crossing and transgressive sexualities (Tibbetts 6)

Concomitant with the Gothic context, the sexual context of the nineteenth century is essential to understanding the true significance of the *Penny Dreadful* series. Carl N. Degler states in *What Ought To Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century* that “as every schoolgirl knows, the nineteenth century was afraid of sex, particularly when it manifested itself in women” (1467). The use of the word ‘afraid’ corresponds spectacularly to the spaces where female sexuality has been explored most prominently – the Gothic. This understanding of fear in relation to female sexuality is emphasised when one considers the trepidation with which most gently bred ladies faced the marriage bed in the nineteenth century. Degler explores the way in which the male-dominated medical society posited female sexuality and states how an American doctor, Theophilus Parvin, once assured his medical class in 1883 that “[he] do[es] not believe one bride in a hundred, of delicate, educated, sensitive women, accepts matrimony from any desire for sexual gratification; when she thinks of this at all, it is with shrinking, or even horror, rather than with desire” (1468). Once more, the notion of the horrific accompanies the sexual act as experienced by women. What was not medically considered as a viable source of this anxiety was, as Treichler notes, a system of social and economic reliance on men which diminishes women to “domestic slavery” (64). Instead, they sought to explain away this justified sense of fear of the institution as a fear of the sexual act itself. Notable is the qualifications that the above-mentioned doctor used to distinguish exactly *which* women fear the act. Differences in socio-economic status are important when we consider the exact nature of female sexuality in the nineteenth century. As with most things, desire was influenced by society and Vickery finds that the veneration of domestic womanhood became concomitant to the decline in women’s public power (384). The Victorian middle-class woman led an insulated existence devoid of economic determination and public obligation - “a delicate creature,” she was “cramped by custom, corset and crinoline” and in dire need of masculine safeguard (Vickery 387). This supports the idea of ‘Victorian’ being synonymous with “oppressive domesticity and repressive prudery” (Vickery 386). Sexual desire became wholly linked to “the male, with prostitutes, and women of the lower classes” (Goldhill 1468). Vanessa and Brona become symbols of this distinction, as their social classes determine the extent to which they could be influenced by sexual desire, and the extent to which they may exhibit their own sexuality.

In contrast to the concept of repression, nymphomania arises as the indulgence of female sexual desire. Carol Groneman, in “Nymphomania: The Historical Construction of Female Sexuality”, states that “the term nymphomania resonates with a sense of the insatiable sexuality of women, devouring, depraved, diseased. It conjures up an aggressively sexual female who both terrifies and titillates men. Surrounded by myth, hyperbole, and fantasy, the twentieth-century notion of a nymphomaniac is embedded in the popular culture” (Groneman 337). There were rising parameters established regarding what was thought of as indecent or extreme exhibitions of female sexuality, and consequently, even minimal acts of disobedience against the social constraints that outlined feminine discretion could be categorised as diseased (Groneman 341). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, “woman’s nature was increasingly defined as inextricably bound up with her reproductive organs” (Groneman 341). This allegedly “objective, scientific ‘fact’” shaped a novel basis for the validations of confines of “women’s social and economic roles” by doctors and authorities (Groneman 341). It was imagined to be “only natural” that women found satisfaction exclusively through “the roles of wives and mothers” (Groneman 341). The ideology was resolutely recognised that women had less sexual desire than men and that the positions of wife and mother governed their identity (Groneman 345). The traditional positions of daughter, wife, and mother were understood to be indispensable in standing against the ambiguities of a shifting society (Groneman 342). As such, the disease of nymphomania personified Victorian feelings of terror regarding the hazards of even miniscule misbehaviour by women who were “...out of the control of their husbands, mothers, and doctors; and out of the control of the ‘natural laws’ that supposedly determined women’s passive response to male desire” (Groneman 342). It remains clear that “...women’s sexuality is conceptualised as the interaction of several factors, as opposed to being solely biologically or socioculturally determined” (Wood et al. 242).

Especially in keeping with my study, it is significant that while demonology was predominantly disbelieved, it remained a consideration for a limited number of “medical theorists even into the eighteenth century” (Groneman 344). The escalation of evangelical Christianity facilitated the revolution regarding mind-sets about women’s sexuality and inspiring the notion of women’s ‘passionlessness’ (Groneman 345). The rejuvenated churches insisted on the “moral restraint” of females as a signal of a “noble character” (Groneman 345). They argued the lack of this moral restraint was integral to the notion of nymphomania, as it arose from “‘from the struggle between mental purity and the physical impulses of sex,’ as well as from organic causes” (Groneman 353). While men were freely allowed to see to their baser sexual needs, were a woman to do the same, it could lead to incarceration in an asylum, as Groneman argues that nymphomaniacs, like homosexuals, were progressively determined to

be a specific kind of deviant (353). Similar to Carter's *The Sadeian Woman*, Groneman highlights that women were perceived to be "closer to nature" and consequently more unstable and unreasonable than their male counterparts, and because of this, women's sexual desire was considered exceptionally perilous, as they were more susceptible to being overcome "by the power of their sexual passion" (Groneman 353). As "sexuality is a form of social power" (Lindisfarne 83), desire becomes central to a true emancipation of women: if desire is power, it is a significant method of liberation.

Yet, women are socially obliged to govern "their own bodily appetites" and to quell their desires because they are considered to be "unnatural" and inappropriate (Holland et al. 29). It is exactly this "self-surveillance of their own bodies and desires" that results in women "[losing] control of sexual encounters to men" (Holland et al. 29). It is the control over female sexual desire and the punishment for any transgression against societal prescriptions that enforce male control and continue to highlight gender inequality.

### Sex as the Devil: Vanessa's Lost Virginity in the *Penny Dreadful* television series

*I know you've been with a man, so you're closer to the beasts than the angels...*

(*"The Nightcomers"*<sup>7</sup> *Penny Dreadful*)

Highlighting the supposed relationship between the supernatural and female sexuality, Simon Goldhill in *Foucault's Virginity* notes, "virginity with but a bare change of letters is divinity" (1). In this light, our first encounter of Vanessa Yves, the protagonist in the *Penny Dreadful* series, is significant. She is wearing black and kneeling in front of a cross, but although she is praying, she is not portrayed as a classic virtuous virginal woman in pastel colours meant to announce her innocence. She is not the venerated Virgin as discussed above, and does not seem serene in her prayer, but fearful. This is in contrast to the supposition that the praying woman is the epitome of peace and tranquillity, and thus the image of the perfect woman. Yet, in true Gothic fashion, the arrival of a spider signals the dark supernatural, inspiring concern, rather than admiration. We are made aware that the protagonist will not be presented as a symbol of purity, but rather that the story to be told will contain dark and dangerous elements. In relation to the protagonist, it is evident that fear is the dominant emotion, not devotion. This 'pious' woman kneeling on the floor, her head bowed in submission, should be, by society's standards,

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<sup>7</sup> (09:33)

an image that inspires admiration. Rather, the viewer is immediately aware that the protagonist of this tale will be complex and defy traditional one-dimensional archetypes.

In this manner, with the unique agency that Vanessa epitomises, it is the level of self-recognition evident that puts her in the same discussion as Carter's protagonists. In accordance with this, Vanessa's liminal phase occurs when she sees her mother having sex with Sir Malcolm, and admits that "More than the shock, the sinfulness, the forbidden act, there was this. I enjoyed it. Something whispered. I listened" (*Penny Dreadful* "Closer than Sisters" 11:21). She is intrigued by sex, but also surprised by her own interest in it, and it is something that she feels she must hide – even from her best friend and closest confidante. Vanessa is cognisant that the subject of female sexuality is taboo and already she associates it with the devil. In relation to Mina, it is evident that Vanessa has taken on the role of protector, and thus she does not tell her of their parents' indiscretions. She explains later in a letter that she writes to her that "there was no need for [her] to grow up so fast" (*Penny Dreadful* "Closer than Sisters" 12:09), but notes that "In [her], there was a change. [She] marked it from that night in the hedge maze. Perhaps it was always there. Little acts of wickedness." (*Penny Dreadful* "Closer than Sisters" 12:36). More importantly, it is because of this confrontation with sexual indiscretion that she experiences a deep change within herself and recognizes the mischievous actions that accompanied her indirect exposure to intriguing sexual knowledge. The sexual induction that follows is the most prominent aspect of the series, as it is the action that not only results in Mina's capture by the vampire Master, but also Vanessa's true communion with the demon inside of her.

There is a significant passage of time, and Mina's position as a (former) proper Victorian lady is highlighted when she "valiant[ly]" "conquered" her Captain Branson (*Penny Dreadful* "Closer than Sisters" 14:09). Important to consider is the fact that the pursuit of an acceptable marriage entails a very different type of strength or sense of perseverance, and one that would be more sanctioned by society for the female partner. A woman's persistence in finding a husband is admirable, but in any other endeavour it is condemned. In this enterprise, Mina may be fierce and determined as the quest will ultimately ensconce her in the domestic space. Yet, it is the prospect of being left behind that truly unsettles Vanessa - more passive than she is comfortable being. Prompted by this, Vanessa instigates a kiss with Peter, but her first kiss again brings mention of the demon as she mentions that although she prayed to God to protect Peter (who was going to Africa with his father), it was not He who answered, but another. All her sexual experiences thus far come hand in hand with mention of the supernatural Other who stands in opposition to God.

It is the subsequent action that is established as the primary conflict of the tale and identified as the deed that most inspired the communion between Vanessa and evil incarnate. As she relates the story, she is wearing red as a symbol of her own shame at her action and how she feels that her sexual "transgression" is the cause of all her and her companions' strifes. The indiscretion occurred the night before Mina was to marry Captain Branson, when he and Vanessa meet, and among the dead stuffed animals that entertained them as children, they have rough and quick sex. Once more, the ideas of sex and death are intricately linked. It is the reaction of Vanessa to their being found by Mina that is most significant, and which we might argue relates directly to the idea of the gaze. Instead of showing any remorse for her betrayal, Vanessa only looks into Mina's shocked eyes as the sex continues. Directly in contrast to the shame that then infiltrates her life, in the moment, the direct gaze at Mina suggests that Vanessa feels no shame at what she is doing. Her loss of virginity in such shocking circumstances is the moment of wanton wickedness that serves as the transgression that changes her entire life. This instance will always be remembered as her downfall; her fall from grace which, considering the supernatural evil that appears at this moment and which arguably serves to separate her from God, assumes a more literal meaning.

Despite the lack of remorse identified in the actual moment of sexual transgression, Vanessa attempts to make amends with her friend, but is prevented from doing so by her mother, who shows her deep disappointment in her daughter's actions by asking, "Have you no shame?" It is only Vanessa's response of "How dare you speak to me of shame?" (*Penny Dreadful* "Closer than Sisters" 23:15) that finally alerts her to the fact that Vanessa knows her secret. In symbolic accordance with her role as Sir Malcolm's lover, Vanessa's mother is wearing a dress in a shade of red. In this, they have both transgressed the sacred bonds of friendship, and her mother's condemnation reeks of hypocrisy that Vanessa fully recognises. The blame for Mina's despair is placed solely on Vanessa's shoulders as Sir Malcolm tells Vanessa he had always imagined that it would be his travelling and negligence that would destroy his family and not the actions of "a cruel little girl" (*Penny Dreadful* "Closer than Sisters" 24:20). Despite her sexual activity declaring her position as that of an adult woman, in this situation she is seen as a girl. Interestingly enough, he does show some awareness of the repercussions of his own actions and neglect, but he continues to pursue his own interests, and despite his many familial mistakes, he remains respected. In contrast, Vanessa makes one true error and she is condemned for eternity.

It is useful to consider the disparate sexual standards for men and women, especially in relation to sexuality and infidelity. Glennis Stephenson in "Forsaken Woman: The Voice of Frustrated Female Desire", find that male adultery is "reduced to little more than a test by

which the true nature of woman's love can be revealed in all its glory" (4). It is the female's quiet and submissive tolerance of her destiny that becomes testimony to the force of her love: something which Landon calls the "woman's creed of suffering" (Stephenson 4). Any effort to retaliate or even to protest "throws doubt upon the purity and authenticity of love" (Stephenson 4). This notion of suffering as essentially feminine is further emphasised as Rocha highlights that Vanessa is suspicious of her own agency, "casting it as abject" (37-38). When Vanessa visits a priest to discuss the demon that she fears is a part of her, his reply is confused when discussing her power, saying that "it makes her 'sacred' and 'unique', calling it a 'kind of glory'" (Rocha 37-38). Nonetheless, "the glory the priest refers to is the glory of suffering", which, apart from Christ, is a conventionally female trait, and "his question of whether Vanessa wants to be normal is moot, as she exhibits the traditional female gender norm of the suffering female" (Rocha 37-38). Mrs Murray becomes testament to this, as she is depicted as the perfect waiting woman wearing white and weeping as her husband comes home after months away, even as it is evident that he does not share the same emotion. She makes sure that the home is perfect in preparation for his return, and one that is brimming with happiness, despite his evident neglect of his role as husband and his (as discovered and discussed later) numerous affairs. She comes to represent the Angel in the House, as defined by Virginia Woolf as "intensely sympathetic", "immensely charming", and "utterly unselfish" (Woolf 2). This woman shone in the challenging "arts of family life" by "sacrifice[ing] herself daily" (Woolf 2). Despite Mrs Murray's outward love of her home and husband, Vanessa and more contemporary viewers, recognise that this "home", instead of affording security, rather signifies a limiting and damaging force that women are incapable of challenging (Hague 73). Yet, what was most important about this woman was the fact that "she was pure" and this purity was intended to be her principal beauty (Woolf 2). We might argue that as Vanessa could be said to have made the same mistakes as her mirror, so too Mina, by marrying Branson, would have followed in her own mother's disastrous footsteps. Furthermore, like Woolf, Vanessa kills the Angel in the House by telling her own story.

Yet, the extreme nature of Vanessa's guilt manifests in such a way that she is taken to an institution known for "women's disorders", but recognising it as an asylum, begs for death. Her extreme pain and mental stress are referred to as hysteria of a psychosexual nature, which is posited as being treatable in the facility. In this light, medical diagnosis presents as a crucial example of "an authorized linguistic process (distilled, respected, high-paying) whose representational claims are strongly supported by social, cultural, and economic practices" (Treichler 69). The series is an exploration of supernatural forces, and her illness *is* linked to the presence of a demon, but it is significant that at the time, her illness is posited as deriving

from sexual transgression. It is also notable that it is signified as such in a sanctioned medical space.

It is useful to consider that mental distress, as the result of sexual action, is not an opinion of only one doctor, but rather a classification prominent at the time. The ‘diagnosis’ is subsequently a symbol

for the voice of medicine or science that speaks to define woman’s conditions. Diagnosis is powerful and public; representing institutional authority, it dictates that money, resources, and space are to be expended as consequences in the ‘real world’. It is a male voice that privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable. It is the voice of male logic and male judgement which dismisses superstition and refuses to see the house as haunted... (Treichler 65).

Feminist readings of such situations highlight the social and economic circumstances which result in madness (Treichler 64), in contrast to official verdicts which discarded gender oppression as being capable of manifesting in a significant physical way. Instead, as the woman remained confined to the function of her body, manifestations of sexuality was most often attributed to madness.

As previously discussed, sex and death are often intricately linked, and when Vanessa returns home after her incarceration in the asylum, she is a shadow of a being. After eating the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge, Vanessa must now pay the price of her indiscretion. In accordance with the theme of death, a mirage of Sir Malcolm appears in Vanessa's room and he quotes John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale". The line that resonates the most is “I have been half in love with easeful Death”. Love and Death are intertwined, and for Vanessa, her enquiries into love and sex have only resulted in a greater yearning for the everlasting Death. Sex and death are physically linked as Vanessa and the demon, disguised as Sir Malcolm, imitate sex as her mother walks in on a naked Vanessa gyrating on the bed – alone. Subsequently, her mother dies. What is important to note is that the image of Sir Malcolm tells Vanessa “she sought [this] out and fucked it” (*Penny Dreadful* “Closer than Sisters” 41:12). The blame is placed on Vanessa for the presence of the demon and by saying that she fucked it, the emphasis is placed on how her sexual activity is what allowed his manifestation.

An outing between Dorian Gray and Vanessa culminates in a sexual encounter that once more invokes the demon in a significant manner. They engage in intercourse, and Dorian takes a knife out from under his pillow and cuts her corset. Symbolically, male power restricts and regulates, “like a corset”, but in acquiescing to this restriction, “in tightening the laces to

enhance femininity, women lose the power of their muscles – the power of expressing their desire” (Holland et al. 29). As a symbol of the confining strictures of Victorian society for women, his cutting of the corset symbolises her release from societal conventions through the sexual act.

Emphasising her reciprocity in the encounter, she cuts his chest and licks the thin line of blood that appears. Not only does this indicate her willingness to participate in an act that others might consider “abnormal”, but it also signals the transgressive nature that appears throughout Carter’s work. In contrast to Kristeva’s concept of abjection, Vanessa actively ingests that which would generally be expelled. Her consumption of the blood which signals impurity (as it derives from another and *not* from within herself), places her in a position similar to vampires who are expelled for their horrific interest in other’s blood, and as Creed notes, depictions of blood, vomit, pus, and so forth are fundamental to “culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific” (73). Yet, the presence of bodily wastes in the contemporary setting may have the result of instigating pleasure “in breaking the taboo on filth – sometimes described as a pleasure in perversity” (Creed 74).

The wild coupling that follows speaks to a deep passion that is present in both parties, but as she climaxes, the shot enters slow motion and the demonic voice echoes, “Hello, my child, I’ve been waiting. What games we will have now” (*Penny Dreadful* “What Death Can Join Together” 45:15). She is at once posited as subservient to the demon by being compared to a child, but also shown to be under the influence of a Being that understands her pain to be nothing more than a part of a game. As explored in relation to Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”, it is significant that she is called a child even as she participates in an act that most assuredly signals her position as a woman. All the while, the anguish is present in her face, and she is breathing heavily, not from the force of her climax, but from her fear of the voice that spoke to her in that moment. For her, and even perhaps for him, the moment of pleasure is tainted with fear. Shocked, Dorian can only watch as Vanessa rushes from the room. Her sexuality cannot be distinguished from the demon. They are one. Here we see the demonization of sexuality in another acute sense. Her climax is noted as the moment when the demon assures her that now she is his. Her sexual peak is her downfall. Dorian’s surprise in the moment actually mirrors the mystery that surrounded the female orgasm at that time. It was often said that in women “it is psychic and subjective, and that in man it has also a physical element and is objective” (Goldhill 1471). The outpouring of seminal fluid in the man is a physical manifestation of his orgasm, whereas in the female it is less noticeable. This mystery surrounding the female orgasm and female sexuality mirrors the mystery that we witness in the series. Rocha notes that “her possession acts as a sort of supernatural gateway into what is known as the demi-

monde, a world ‘between what we see and what we fear, a place in the shadows’” (36). It is significant that as the demon occupies her, it warns that it will transform her into ‘The Mother of Evil’ and the appearance of the demon through sexual episodes together with the demon’s aim of “use[ing]Vanessa for reproductive purposes points to the gendered emphasis on her body” (Rocha 36). Judged for her sexuality, one could argue that “the demon could also be called her sexual desire; controlled, it does not pose a threat, but when it takes over, she becomes dangerous to those around her, especially men” (Rocha 36). This control, and the dire consequences if she should lose it, is blatantly obvious to Vanessa, and could be argued relates to the moral restraint required of women in the Victorian era.

In keeping with the exploration of female sexuality, the Irish prostitute Brona Craft is significant. In contrast to the control that Vanessa has to exert over her own sexual desires, Brona has to use her sexualised body to survive economically, and she recognizes that “there is always a living if you have a bit of flesh” (*Penny Dreadful* “Séance” 09:16). The sale of sex remains omnipresent and lucrative, and as Carter notes:

At least the girl who sells herself with her eyes open is not a hypocrite and, in a world with a cash-sale ideology, that is a positive, even a heroic virtue. The whore has made of herself her own capital investment. Her product – her sexual activity, her fictitious response – is worth precisely what the customer is willing to pay for it...But the whore is despised by the hypocritical world because she has made a realistic assessment of her assets and does not have to rely on fraud to make a living (Carter *The Sadeian Woman* 66).

She is ill with tuberculosis, but rather than blaming the illness on horrific work conditions that we understand to be attributed to the Industrial Revolution, she blames God for being “a playful fucker” (*Penny Dreadful* “Séance” 09:16). This evokes the original sin and of Eve, the perpetrator’s role. Woman is perpetually punished for the first transgression into forbidden knowledge. What is notable about Brona is that she blatantly believes she is not deserving of a seemingly innocent courtship by Ethan, because of her role as a prostitute. She feels that she does not deserve respect and kindness as he offers it. When he requests dinner with her, she makes her position clear to him and tells him that he should not mistake her for a “sweet debutante at a Summer Fête” (*Penny Dreadful* “Séance” 42:57). His simple reply is that he doesn’t mistake her for anything other than what she is, but she takes this as an admission that he likes it “back-alley”. He only makes it clear that he likes things to be what they are. Ethan shows his ability to look beyond outer facades and his willingness to accept what is hidden to

most. What is most important, and what Carter highlights as most damaging regarding the myths surrounding female sexuality, is that she sees *herself* as someone who is not worthy of love and honest admiration.

Brona's almost predestined pain is emphasised upon consideration that Brona means 'sadness' in Gaelic, and the life of a prostitute may be miserable and brutal. For her, there is no hope of happiness. It is upon her sharing of her past with Ethan that we are made aware of the dire options open to women. Despite her vicious treatment by a man from her hometown, she was still expected to marry him. She chose, rather, to sell herself for sex. Neither option available to Brona is a happy one, and she dies having been viciously acquainted with the horrors inflicted upon lower-class women. Nevertheless, Brona indirectly serves as a release from the demon for Vanessa. When possessed, Ethan presses the medal of St Jude given to him by the dying Brona against her forehead, and subdues the demon by praying in Latin (Rocha 36). This is noteworthy because of St. Jude's position as the patron saint of lost causes, and as it was gifted to him by Brona, further serves to highlight that the idea of a male saviour of women is a false one (Rocha 36-37). Ethan serves as a character that emphasises "this failing of masculinity since he is not only unable to fully save the woman he loves, but unable to save himself as well" (Rocha 37). Even at this moment, where he allegedly, and by all appearances saves Vanessa, this liberation is only possible through the indirect aid of Brona: only woman can save woman, even if through a male mediator.

### Vanessa's Agency in the *Penny Dreadful* television series

In a further effort to analyse the series from a feminist perspective, and with the aim of determining its cultural value, it is vital to understand the significance of Vanessa as a female protagonist. Thus, her agency is notable, especially in comparison with other female characters. It is Vanessa's autonomy of movement which distinguishes her; her composed and self-assured conduct as well as her capacity to move around unreservedly and unimpeded, especially during the battle between Ethan, Sir Malcolm and the vampires (Schäfer 45). This signifies "performative differences to other gendered identities" (Schäfer 45). This is especially significant because of how her dress is virtually identical to that of other women within the limits of Victorian clothing conventions (Schäfer 45). In addition to this element of movement, it is also important to note the extent to which Vanessa's tendency of inspecting those and that which surrounds her contravenes Mulvey's notion of the gaze. Firstly, as a female protagonist, Vanessa is distinguished by her ability to truly *see* everyone and everything around her, and by her unashamed watching of all that surrounds her. This gaze is also emphasised when we

consider her reaction upon being photographed for the first time with Dorian Gray. The photographer tells her that she may look away or look into the camera – the choice is hers. The fact that she decides to gaze straight into the eye of the camera suggests how she faces the world in a forthright manner, and furthermore has the effect of a direct line of sight with the viewer.

In another encounter between herself and Dorian, and in accordance with the original *The Picture of Dorian Gray* text, they discuss the portraits that occupy every space in Dorian's house as he says that he likes to be looked at. In contrast, Vanessa states that she does not. This is in keeping with the discussion on concepts regarding the gaze, as it is expected that women appreciate being the object of a male subject's gaze. Nevertheless, Dorian counters by asking, "Yet you wear that dress?" (*Penny Dreadful* "What Death Can Join Together" 32:30). Nevertheless, Vanessa only replies that it was for his eyes that she wore it and sexual tension permeates every particle of the room, and while Dorian praises her poise, Vanessa relates that it is a control that she may not lose:

There are things within a soul that can never be unleashed.

What would happen if they were?

They would consume us. We would cease to be, and another would exist in our place without control, without limits (*Penny Dreadful* "What Death Can Join Together" 34:25).

Reminiscent of the control expected of women, she may not lose composure and must remain a virtuous and 'good' woman. In contrast to Vanessa's agency, the men in the series' disjointed identities contradict the concept of "the self-composed man, a Victorian masculine ideal" (Rocha 33) and "in their not being self-controlled, composed men, the characters' masculinity is put into question" (Rocha 34). Incapable of classifying themselves within the societal masculine model, they are not depicted as independent, but rather their agency is inadequate, spoiled by "their contested identities" (Rocha 34). This absence of control is exhibited when Vanessa has a vision that "There cannot be a happy end. For claw will slash and tooth will rend", which is a prediction of the season finale where the group goes to the theatre as the ultimate setting of their search (Rocha 35). The words originate in a play that Vanessa had attended formerly in the series, "a penny dreadful about a suitor who reveals himself to be a werewolf to his beloved before ripping her throat out (Rocha 35). As appropriate to the theme of deception that permeates the series and explored in the next section, Rocha notes that the

theatre is the suitable setting for the ending as it becomes apparent that Mina's illusory yearning for rescue was merely a trick to bring "the group to her vampire master" (Rocha 35).

It is clear that Mina has been lost to them, that she cannot be "saved" from the vampire master, neither that she necessarily wants to be. Despite Vanessa and Sembene's recognition of the possibility that they will not be able to rescue Mina, Sir Malcolm originally has a masculine confidence and arrogance in his own ability to save her. This is evident when Sembene poses to him the possibility, that even if they find her, "she cannot be saved" to which Sir Malcolm only replies that "if [he] find[s] her, she will be saved" (Penny Dreadful "What Death Can Join Together" 14:20). In line with notions regarding not only the patriarchy, but also the role of the father in folk tales, he believes that no matter what, he (and only he) can save his irreproachable daughter because, as the Father, he is the ultimate Saviour.

Yet, Sembene remarks that no matter the length of her relationship and the extent of their experiences together, he recognises that there are some people that cannot be saved. He is cognisant of the fact that this knowledge stems from his culture, and it is here we are again made to understand how far away from home Sembene really is. His understanding of the world originates from a non-Western space. In this setting, he is also Other. This interaction between Sir Malcolm and Sembene "speaks to the national and racial division between the characters; a former African tribe member, Sembene is implicitly subservient and emasculated beside the British imperialist, Sir Malcolm" (Rocha 34). Yet, despite Sir Malcolm's position of social power within the strictures of the patriarchy, Sembene and Vanessa recognise that in this he does not have the ultimate authority, and we are made to understand the limits of the Father's power and the significance of Vanessa's agency, and her own recognition of both her strength and her weakness.

### The Monster Within and the Monster Without: The Significance of Appearances in the *Penny Dreadful* television series

*She herself is a haunted house...*

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

In a world of symbolic meaning, especially related to the Gothic and the fantasy genre in general, in contrast to the maidenly blondeness of the Virgin, Vanessa Yves has dark hair and eyes that contain fathomless depths. Even in a more modern context, bell hooks notes that in the context of a white supremacist culture, women are not only required to be white in order to inhabit "the space of sacred femininity, [but] she must also be blond" (22).

Vanessa's appearance has subconscious connotations, as well as suggestions of certain characteristics.. In accordance with the general colour scheme of the series, she is most often clothed in black and red. This is especially significant, as black is generally associated with darkness and evil, and red with love and desire, but also with blood, death and danger. In this series, as in the tales revised by Carter, the two cannot be separated. Red is a well-known symbol of desire, and the wanton woman often wears red, either to display her sexual position in life, or as a mark of shame; one only has to think of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne to ascertain its significance. Both the shame and violent connotations of red are remarkable well placed in this setting, as Vanessa is plagued by the guilt of her own sexual transgression and its consequences, discovered later in the series.

Although more prominent in the twenty-first century, the female protagonist as hero(ine) remains significant in establishing female agency, and while Vanessa is often portrayed in a state of utter despair, she never quite fits the image of the victim. Despite situations where she is no doubt being persecuted, she does not fall victim to her circumstances and the viewer cannot help but anticipate that she will save herself, rather than waiting for someone else to deliver her from her suffering. As a heroine, she is reminiscent of Carter's protagonists who, despite what some may consider harrowing circumstances, remain active participants in their own rescue (even when this 'rescue' is not quite what the reader or viewer might expect). Furthermore, it was Carter who thoroughly explored the idea of a female hero(ine) who, by some standards, could very easily have been cast as the villain. As Carter explored in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* long before the *Penny Dreadful* series first graced the screen, the notion of whom or what constitutes the beast is muddled and subverted. Especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is a reconceptualization of "the monster and the fear it embodies...Now, it is no longer solely about how to fight a monster, but how to be one" (Schäfer 53-54). As Creed notes in relation to modern horror films, the monstrous is established

at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast; ... between the normal and the supernatural, good and evil; or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not; or the border is between normal and abnormal sexual desire (71).

In this light, Kristeva's concept of abjection once more proves useful in understanding the borders (and their breakdown) in the series, as Creed notes that the task of the monstrous stays the same – to incite "an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (71).

In contrast to this Other that Vanessa represents, Mina has blonde hair and wears a formerly white dress, but now slightly yellowed by strife. Together with the significance of her appearance, to be explored fully, because we already *know* Mina from *Dracula*, certain expectations are established in the viewer. Stoker's story becomes inextricably intertwined with the tale to be told in the series. Thus, the "yellowing" of the dress manages to convey the fact that she has been through some sort of ordeal, and that her purity has been sullied in some manner. Her hair and dress are physical manifestations of her supposed goodness. As Marina Warner explicates in *From the Beast to the Blonde* upon description of the painting *Spinola Hours*, "virgin martyrs and other female saints in heaven consist only of dazzling blondes" (*Spinola Hours* c. 1515, in Warner *From the Beast to the Blonde*). This blonde colour has a symbolic purpose and does not only serve as a physical description, because fairness was tantamount to an assurance of superiority, and as the illusory opposite of filthiness, it signified everything uncorrupted, virtuous, and unsoiled (Warner *From the Beast to the Blonde* 364). This blondeness is a part of a value system that is crucial to challenge and examine because its repercussions, "in moral and social terms" are exceedingly ominous and continue to be entrenched in the most commonplace and well-liked "materials of the imagination" (Warner *From the Beast to the Blonde* 364). One only has to consider the Nazi Aryan ideology, encapsulated ideals, which "in this ancient, enduring colour code which cast gods as golden boys and girls and outsiders as swarthy" (Warner *From the Beast to the Blonde* 364). Of further note is that although the most lasting connotations of fairness are of attractiveness, love and decency, erotic desirability, worth, and fecundity, its glow also contributed to its being hailed the customary "colour of virgin's hair" (Warner *From the Beast to the Blonde* 367). This serves to posit Mina as the ideal and Vanessa as the Other. This is significant in that women needed to arouse desire without possessing it or flaunting it *too* much. Notably, she looks frightened and epitomises the image of an innocent who requires rescue by an outside party. We could argue that her crying suggests a certain lack of courage and seems to point to an element of weakness. Yet, it is exactly because of the above points that she comes to represent the classic fairy-tale protagonist as her redemption lies with another, and as Lieberman notes, "the girl in tears is invariably the heroine" (390). Despite the fact that these tears tug at the heartstrings of her father, and even the viewers, the sudden appearance of her blood-red eyes indicates that within her is a monster. In this manner we are made aware that appearances can be deceiving, and that horror can lurk even beneath the most beautiful exteriors. Of course, this is a prominent message of postmodern retellings of tales – the monsters are not always those who *look* like them. In this manner, red prevails and serves to further highlight the violence that surrounds,

but is also within, Mina. Yet, it is only at the climax of Season 1 of the series that as a result of her now obvious vampirism,

Mina becomes the Other since, to cite Julia Kristeva, ‘the body’s inside ... shows up in order to compensate for the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one’s “own and clean self” but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents’. Revealing herself to be a vampire, Mina’s physical body showcases her internal monster, consequentially expelling previously held notions of her innocence (Rocha 35).

Upon consideration of Vanessa’s “treatment” at the asylum, it looks more like physical and mental torture, and her hair is cut to the scalp as she is lobotomised. This is especially significant, as we have seen how important hair is to the human’s, especially woman’s, sense of being, and of power. Marina Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, contends that “the language of the self would be stripped of one of its richest resources without hair: and like language, or the faculty of laughter, or the use of tools, the dressing of hair in itself constitutes a mark of the human” (271). In the pursuit of identity, both subjectively and in its larger relation to society, hair has the power to aid (Warner 271). In support of this, Ethan ruminates later in the series that one of the most heart-breaking things that he has ever seen is how the Americans destroyed the native tribes by confiscating the children and removing their hair – “source of spiritual strength for them” (*Penny Dreadful* “Possession” 34:44). They gave them new names and incorporated them into white society. Sometimes children would escape and go home to their tribe, but by then they had “forgotten their language; their stories. they are unwelcome...they don’t fit in either world...they roam, and they die” (*Penny Dreadful* “Possession” 34:58). Similar to Vanessa, they don’t have a place in either space. As Vanessa represents the blurring of borders between known and unknown, so too the children have enough of each culture within them to be abjected by the other, but not enough to be accepted in either. The removal of Vanessa’s hair is not only necessary for the purpose of lobotomy, but also as a symbol of her stolen strength, or sense of worth.

Finally, the true deception regarding appearances is highlighted when Vanessa and Dorian discuss “the duplicity of flowers – beautiful on the outside, deadly within” (*Penny Dreadful* “Demimonde” 11:00). It is significant that even in this subtle encounter between characters, sexual tensions run high and the deadly nature of the exchange remains sensual. Emphasising the extreme nature of passivity expected of women in order to be accepted into

society, and the hazardous nature of what is considered Beauty, following her sexual encounter with Dorian and the subsequent presence of the demon, the seventh episode opens with Vanessa reposing on a couch and saying:

To be beautiful is to be almost dead, isn't it? The lassitude of the perfect woman, the languid ease, the obeisance, (spirit reigned), anaemic, pale as ivory and weak as a kitten. There is a brisk trade for photographs of dead women, did you know that? In certain quarters the corpses are improved with cosmetics and posed in postures of abject surrender and photographed. The men circulate the pictures and pleasure themselves (*Penny Dreadful* "Possession" 03:11).

To be beautiful is to be so without action, as to be virtually without life. In this moment, Vanessa highlights the extreme nature of the subservience expected of women in a male-dominated society – even dead women are better to them than a spirited one. As Dworkin notes in relation to fairy tale heroines: “the only good woman is a dead woman” (*Woman Hating* 41).

The passivity expected of women is highlighted by the above quotation, but the contrast that Vanessa poses to this perfect obeisance is significant, especially in relation to the agency which she represents. Yet, despite this agency, she is still shown to suffer under patriarchal control and societal conventions which posit her interest in sex as indicative not only of dark supernatural influence, but also of her position as a “bad” woman. She becomes a symbol of the horrific consequences for transgressive women and serves as representative not only of the double standards for men and women, but also of the extent to which her position as woman undermines her authority.

## Conclusion:

*...it is never easier to oppress than when a people are repressed.*

(de Sade 39)

Using the mode of fantasy, Angela Carter and the *Penny Dreadful* television series have been able to explore the notion of female sexuality in a space that allows for free investigation into the indefinable nature of this sexuality. It is specifically through a revisionist myth-making style of writing that Carter effectively subverts understanding regarding female sexuality and its prescriptions, and Rushdie notes that “Carter wears her influences openly, for she is their deconstructionist, their saboteur. She takes what we know and, having broken it, puts it together in her own spiky, courteous way” (Rushdie xv). This situates her as a writer consciously able to recognise and amend forms and content for feminist purposes. The importance of her writing is clear upon consideration of the argument that “unrevised fairy tales serve a mythic function; we ‘return to them time and again for counsel and guidance, for hope that there is some divine order and sense to a chaotic world.’ All the more important, then, to read or view a revised tale carefully, asking what values are being presented, to what end, to whose advantage” (Hallissy 443). Her ability to take what is required from what she is presented with is evident in her analysis of the potential in the work of de Sade, and especially her exploration of the feminist potential of pornography. She does not say that de Sade is not a monster; merely that he is no more monstrous than most men. The link is consequently established between folk tales and pornography, as both operate within a sphere of the imagined where gender relations are depicted, but also where gender expectations may be subverted by a presentation of varying understandings of female sexuality in particular. Carter not only presents a new reading of the texts; she simultaneously brings awareness that they were destructive in the first place. Carter’s reshaping of established folk tales in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is a model of amending a common form in the interests of feminism, since fairy stories have played such an instrumental role in imparting androcentric principles to children (Rubinson 150). Carter’s texts, while using subtle criticisms to the discerning reader, are also known for their exorbitance, and, “far from being gentle, Carter’s texts were known for the excessiveness of their violence and, latterly, the almost violent exuberance of their excess” (Makinen 2). Once more, violence accompanies an exploration of feminine sexuality, and this description cannot help but resonate with common descriptions of de Sade’s narratives. Christened “the high-priestess of post-graduate porn”, although not in an appreciative manner, she has still unfailingly confronted “representations of the physical abuse of women in phallogentric

cultures, of women alienated from themselves within the male gaze, and conversely of women who grab their sexuality and fight back, of women troubled by and even powered by their own violence" (Makinen 3). As established in the above chapters, Carter presents not only variations on traditional folk tales, but also a myriad gender relations regarding sexuality in an effort to highlight the potentially "perverse" nature of female sexuality. There is a constant alteration in power relations between the male and female protagonists, and not only is the "monstrous" nature of the Beast often disputed, but Beauty's beastly potentiality is explored. Beauty saves Beast in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon", and Beauty becomes like Beast in "The Tiger's Bride", and yet Rushdie notes that in "The Erl-King", Beauty and the Beast do not reunite, and "there is neither healing, nor submission, but revenge" (Rushdie xii). In "The Company of Wolves", Little Red Riding Hood could be considered to be "as amoral, as savage as the Wolf/Beast" and she overpowers him through her own voracious sexuality, "her erotic wolfishness" (Rushdie xiii). In "Wolf-Alice", there is no classic Beauty, only a female protagonist raised by wolves and who considers herself to be a wolf, who is as beastly as the cannibal Duke with whom she lives (Rushdie xiii). She is "drawn towards self-knowledge by the mystery of her own bloody chamber; that is, her menstrual flow. By blood, and by what she sees in mirrors, that make a house uncanny" (Rushdie xiii). The female protagonists reject the position of victim, "stopping short of sacrificing themselves completely for the good of their father's future (Brooke 86). The female protagonists in her stories "exist beyond their fathers" and although they cannot stay clear of the patriarchy completely, they do conquer cultural categories and sexist philosophies that served to regulate their subjectivities "by making the choice their own" (Brooke 86).

Despite arguments that Carter's female protagonists are still stuck "within a binary prescription of either 'fuck or be fucked'", it is disputable that these arguments themselves incorporate this binary division when proclaiming that "'Sade's dualism is simple: sadist or masochist, fuck or be fucked, victim or aggressor'" (Makinen 12). This argument utilises a reading of Carter's reading of de Sade that posits females as "sexual aggressor (Sade's Juliette), rather than victim (Sade's Justine)" (Makinen 12). Rather, in agreement with Makinen, I argue that Carter, in her use of de Sade, merely allows for broader understandings regarding female sexuality and debates that this sexuality may include "perversions" *together* [emphasis my own] with "normal" sex (Makinen 12). Furthermore, to dispute the argument that by using the form itself she is unable to escape the connotations of the form, "when the form is used to critique the inscribed ideology ... then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions" (Makinen 5).

In relation to the *Penny Dreadful* series, it is inundated with subtle, and not-so-subtle, explorations of the nature of female sexuality and its often-horrific consequences. It exploits the way in which the dark fantasy world that serves as the setting correlates with a much more sinister, and realistic, space of female sexual taboo. The violence of this fight against the demonic mirrors the violence women experience on a daily basis. The connection between female sexuality and the otherworldly has been explored by writers and artists since time immemorial, or so it would seem. The Virgin's power has been praised, and the fallen woman's weakness been denounced so vehemently that it would seem the alpha and the omega lay between a woman's legs – or rather, with whether she spreads them, and for whom. The series' allusions to other well-known literary works further function to highlight the dominant ideologies that can't seem to be escaped or overthrown with enough force to encourage a permanent change. But more than this, it serves to highlight how we may take what we know and create something entirely unique. The series toys with form, and mirrors the work of Carter. Scattered throughout are links to literary works that most viewers recognise, even if only at a basic level. As discussed above, this means that a double reading takes place – a new story is created using the strands of a multitude of others. Both Carter and the *Penny Dreadful* series rely on a deep notion of intertextuality – both use forms and characters that most people are intimately familiar with and reimagine them to create new meaning.

In light of the television series, television culture needed to be explored, especially relating to the feminist dissent regarding its purpose. Despite arguments that television should be avoided in its entirety because of the misogyny supposedly inherently tied to it, Johnson posits that the answer might be to “take what we need from the available culture, sieve out the rest” (Johnson 11). She argues that this ‘negotiated reading’ is not an example of disregarding “the hard work of personal and cultural transformation”, as many third wave feminists have contended, but rather a recognition that incremental changes in power may be the best that we can expect, and that the types of pleasure accessible to women in the present media culture “include the pleasures of oppositional reading as well as the pleasures of seeing feminist concepts dramatized on television. The least compelling pleasure on hand is, however, ‘the wry pleasure of recognising patriarchy up to its tricks yet again’ (Fiske, “British Cultural Studies,” 266)” (Johnson 11). This negotiated reading of television can be compared to the double reading that Carter's revisionist texts induce in the reader. Rather than disregarding the forms available to us, whether literary or through television, feminist readers and viewers may use the available formats to produce new meaning.

In this light, both the Carter texts and the *Penny Dreadful* series rely on sets of assumptions garnered from various other texts and their connotations to produce novel

meaning. Women's sexual desire is predominantly used to create a new space for female liberation. The texts explore female sexuality in various ways, not only to depict the multi-faceted nature of female sexuality, but also to highlight the myriad ways in which it may be used to topple oppressive forces and to instigate a new sexually (and otherwise) subjective being.

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