Abstract:

This essay explores the scopic economies in Angela Carter’s book *The Bloody Chamber and Other Short Stories*. Particularly, it focuses on the deconstruction of the fairytale and the male gaze in construction of the female erotic. The essay analyses how Carter’s short stories in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Short Stories* deconstruct the scopic economies present in these traditional narratives through highly eroticized imagery that liberates female sexuality and emphasizes female autonomy. It sets out to examine how *The Bloody Chamber, The Courtship of Mr. Lyon and The Tiger’s Bride* presents the deconstruction of scopic economies that are present in their origin folktales of *Bluebeard* and *Beauty and the Beast*, respectively. Specifically the essay seeks to examine this through the erotic imagery persistent in all three short stories. Ultimately the essay concludes that Carter’s stories allow a deconstruction of the genre of the fairy tale, and through it a deconstruction of the male gaze, along with the male erotic. It deduces that Carter manages to subvert numerous elements that are present in traditional tales, and are representative of traditional gender roles and binaries, in order to allow a depiction of a liberated female erotic that is separate from the pornographic male erotic.

**Key Words:**

Angela Carter, Scopic Economies, Male Gaze, Gender, Fairytales, Short Story

Scopic Economies in Angela Carter’s Short Stories: The Deconstruction of the Fairytale and the Male Gaze in the Construction of the Female Erotic

Many feminist critics argue that Angela Carter’s use of the genre of the fairy tale constricts the writer into a form that is rigid with “conservative sexism.” (qtd. in Makinen 4) Critics such as Duncker and Lewallen suggest that despite Carter’s best efforts at subverting
the traditionally sexist genre and attempting to construct a feminine erotic, her fairy tale collection merely becomes a “reproduction of male pornography.” (qtd. in Makinen 4)

However, the use of the form of the fairy tale allows Carter to suggest a dramatic feminist discourse that entirely subverts traditional folklores embedded in sexism. Specifically, Carter’s short stories in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* deconstruct the scopic economies present in these traditional narratives through highly eroticized imagery that liberates female sexuality and emphasizes female autonomy. *The Bloody Chamber* applies the feminine erotic and the deconstruction of the phallic and the male gaze to the traditional fairy tale of *Bluebeard*, whilst *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon* and *The Tiger’s Bride* present alternative narratives to the folkloric tale of *Beauty and the Beast*. This essay will examine how each story presents the deseconstruction of these scopic economies that are present in their origin folktales, specifically examining this through the erotic imagery persistent in all three short stories.

The major criticism of Carter’s attempts at deconstructing traditional narratives lies in the very genre that she attempts to subvert: the fairy tale. Critics argue about the prominent sexism that pollutes the genre, suggesting that writing within the genre, even in attempts at subversion and deseconstruction, merely juxtaposes the writer and their texts within its sexism (qtd. in Makinen). Andrea Dworkin suggests that fairy tales only offer two classifications of women: the “good woman” who is a “victim” that “must be possessed” and the “bad woman” who “must be destroyed… killed… or punished.” (Dworkin 48) However, the female characters that persist in *The Bloody Chamber, The Courtship of Mr. Lyon and The Tiger’s Bride*, fit into neither of these narratives. The unnamed protagonist in *The Bloody Chamber*, although initially presented as the “good woman,” shows penchant for corruption. This is further reinforced by the mark on the key that seems to denote her imperfections as it eventually “transferred itself to [her] forehead,” where it was destined to remain forevermore
as a defined “red mark” of her imperfections (Barzilai 112). The protagonist oscillates between these two figures that persist in traditional fairy tale narratives, neither representing the good woman to be possessed, nor the bad woman to be punished; but becoming an amalgamation of both archetypes. *The Tiger’s Bride* presents a similar alternation between the two typical feminine characterisations. Although Beauty is originally depicted as the “good woman” figure to be possessed – first by her father, and then by the beast – her growing autonomy throughout the story is notable and she eventually refuses to be a possession for neither her father, nor the beast.

Inherent sexualisation and feminine eroticism is central to both *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Tiger’s Bride*, often surfacing in the form of the male gaze. Robert Clark criticises Carter’s work with claims that her “glossy” writing “blunts her ideological critique of patriarchy.” (qtd. in Bacchilega 51) He views her works as stylistically “transformative” stories that are focused on the “fixed ideological and sexual dynamics of the fairy tale.” Avis Lewallen adds to the criticism with the claim that Carter creates a “female erotic [that is] badly comprised.” (qtd. in Makinen 4) Clark and Lewallen both argue that Carter’s works, although attempting to construct a feminine erotic, subscribe instead to the male pornographic image, subjugating the female characters within the stories into subjects of the voyeuristic gaze (qtd. Bacchilega 50-52). However, these arguments view Carter’s stories as “attempted” subversions of the patriarchal “erotic” that is present in the fairy tale genre initially, failing to note the sexualisation of the stories as disassociation from the male gaze and, through this, a form of sexual liberation that allows the female characters autonomy. The protagonists in both *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Tiger’s Bride* embody this.

The female narrator of *The Bloody Chamber* is recognizably a victim of the voyeuristic gaze of her rich husband, the Marquis. Her very subjectivity of herself seems to
be based on the Marquis’ perceptions of her. The reader’s introduction to the protagonist is an accurate portrayal of her own subjectivity; a vision of herself through her husband’s gaze:

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a house-wife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab… When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me. (Carter 8)

This passage depicts the protagonist’s entry into a “dominant scopic economy [where] she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation.” (Irigaray, 26) Such fabrications of the voyeur and the female protagonist subjugating herself to this gaze works to create a stereotypical male erotic since the “predominance of the visual… is particularly foreign to female eroticism.” (Irigaray, 25-25) However, this construction of the male erotic is merely set up as an opposition to the eventual subversion of this stereotypical sexualisation and commodification of the female. This is even further emphasised by the role of the Marquis as not only an active consumer of the protagonist’s objective passivity, but as an avid collector of pornography; a vigorous “connoisseur” of female objective passivity, reducing women, not merely the protagonist, as subject to his consumerist gaze. The stereotypical representation of the masculine “voyeur” in the Marquis sets up a strengthened opposition for the female narrator, who is accepting of her subjugated role of the “object” at the beginning but disassociates herself from this position eventually. This is particularly marked by the distinctive differences between the Marquis, the protagonist’s initial husband, and the piano tuner, whom she “set[s] up house with” by the end. (Carter 42) Whilst the Marquis seems representative of stereotypical masculine traits, specifically masculine hyper-sexuality, the piano-tuner is a depiction of an entirely different form of masculinity. The problem lies therein; questioning the apparent masculinity of the piano-tuner. Duncker poses the argument
that the “blindness” of the piano tuner is “symbolic castration [and] may signal the end of male sexual aggression [but] it is also mutilation.” (qtd. in Sheets 654) In regards to this, the Marquis and the piano-tuner cannot be posited as opposite spheres of masculinity. However, the piano-tuner’s innate sensitivity to music suggests an entry into the feminine erotic, as opposed to the masculine. According to Irigaray, the female erotic is based on “touching” rather than “looking” and so Carter’s presentation of the character of the piano-tuner not only depicts the female narrator’s transfer from being object to the Marquis’ gaze to equalised subject along with the piano-tuner, but it is also a portrayal of the development of the female erotic in opposition to the male erotic (Irigaray 26).

The character of Beauty is constructed interestingly in Carter’s first narrative retelling of Beauty and the Beast. Entitled The Courtship of Mr. Lyon, it seems to relate a narrative that is similar to the earlier folktales. Unlike The Tiger’s Bride, where two extremities are positioned opposite each other, The Courtship of Mr. Lyon fabricates a much more subtle critique of the scopic economy through its use of language and a shift in the focus from earlier versions of the tale. Beauty seems to fulfil the typical role of the heroine: She is a “lovely girl” who is gentle and obedient with a look of “absolute sweetness and absolute gravity.” (Carter 43) However, these descriptions become derisory when Beauty applies them to herself, claiming that she “felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial.” (Carter 49) The irony is further heightened by the narrative’s continual insistence that Beauty retained her own autonomy but merely felt “a sense of obligation… for her father.” Carter 49) Unlike the previous stories, Beauty’s subjectivity is not derivative of a male subject. Although, she feels “obligation” to her father and later to the Beast, her subjectivity is never constructed around them. This is further emphasised by her descriptions of herself in front of the mirror as “spoiled child” with “peary skin” that was “plumping out… with high living and compliments,” along with reflections of herself that she sees in the Beast’s eyes: “she saw her
face repeated twice, as small as if it were in a bud.” (Carter 51-53) Instead of being an object of the masterful gaze, it is Beauty who seems to be master of the scopic. Her characterisation becomes further interesting in comparison to the Beast, who initially depicts typical traits of a wild and “beastly” masculinity, but falters into the character of a shy, insecure being who is infatuated by the character of Beauty. At a contrast, it is Beauty who seems to pose both a feigned construction of her selfhood, along with a fabricated idea of the Beast’s wildness. (Brooke 75-76) She claims, after leaving the Beast’s mansion for London that “she experienced a sudden sense of perfect freedom, as if she had just escaped from an unknown danger, had been grazed by the possibility of some change but, finally, left intact.” (Carter 52) The intactness is suggestive of a virginity that was threatened by the Beast’s apparent wildness, despite his actual genteel nature. (Brooke 75) The narrative only manages to construct a suggested erotic through the character of Beauty and her emphasis on her own virginity against the Beast’s untamed wildness. However, the story fails to transgress any folkloric norms. The subversion of the scopic economy is construed through the mastery of the gaze by the character of Beauty, as opposed to the Beast. Furthermore, rather than transgress the male erotic, or set up a defined erotic at all, the story seems to subvert traditional gender roles by characterising both Beauty and the Beast in oscillating roles of the traditional hero and heroine binary, along with non-traditional flawed hero and heroine roles.

Furthermore, The Courtship of Mr. Lyon, lays the groundwork for the second narrative retelling, The Tiger’s Bride, which posits Beauty in a differing way to the former story. Whilst The Courtship of Mr. Lyon only constructs a traditional domesticated narrative, The Tiger’s Bride, finds entry into the Beastly nature of the relationship lacking in the former story. In many ways, the story is reflective of The Bloody Chamber. Whereas, the narrator of the latter views herself as the Marquis views her; in the former, Beauty’s subjectivity of herself is solely created from her father’s image:
She raises her arm and… thrusts towards me her little mirror. I saw within it not my face but that of my father, as if I had put on his face when I arrived at the Beast’s palace as the discharge of his debt… Now all I saw was myself, haggard from a sleepless night, pale enough to need my maid’s supply of rouge. (Carter 66-67)

The importance of this passage lies in the initial image of her father, before the construction of Beauty’s own image. The story suggests the idea of the mirror stage as “identification” or the “transformation that takes place in [Beauty] when [s]he assumes an image.” (Lacan, 442) Beauty’s initial subjectivity is undoubtedly a derivative of her father’s image as the story is heavily-laden with Beauty’s reminisces of her father. However, there are notable differences between Beauty’s first encounter with the mirror and her second:

I took the looking glass from her hand, but it was in the midst of one of its magic fits again and I did not see my own face in it but that of my father; at first I thought he smiled at me. Then I saw he was smiling with pure gratification. He sat, I saw, in a parlour of our lodgings, at the very table where he had lost me, but now he was busily engaged in counting out a tremendous pile of banknotes…When I looked at the mirror again, my father had disappeared and all I saw was a pale, hollow-eyed girl whom I scarcely recognized. (Carter 73-74)

In the first instance her father’s face replaces her in the mirror, suggesting their interrelated and derivative subjectivities. In the second instance, Beauty’s reference to the mirror as the “looking glass” is of importance since the mirror acts as an object for her to view her father with, as opposed to a mirror like it had beforehand. Her father’s image is separate from hers; issuing a separation of identity unlike in the previous instance where it was “as if [Beauty]
had put on [her father’s] face.” (Carter 66) Furthermore, Beauty is not only an obvious object of the scopic gaze, but she is also an apparent commodity in an innately patriarchal world. Her body is the literal commodity that is exchanged by her father in order to pay his debt. She is allowed to return to her father in exchange for her body, as the valet states that the beast’s “sole desire is to see the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress.” (Carter 64)

However, Carter uses the construction of this female objectivity to further emphasise Beauty’s eventual liberation, both from her father, from whom her own subjectivity is constructed, and the beast, who acts as the consumerist gaze. Whilst Beauty’s initial rejection of the Beast’s request to see her “unclothed nude” is a testament to her autonomy, her latter decision to disrobe herself is in immediate juxtaposition with the idea of a pact “that… is… reciprocal.” (Carter 71) Her disrobing as a response to the Beast’s nakedness furthers Beauty’s own autonomy, along with her sexual liberation. Although this could be assessed as a subjugation to the male erotic of the scopic economy once more, this male erotic is quickly subverted by the end of the short story, where Beauty’s willing emergence into the Beast’s chamber not only depicts her willing separation from her father, but also the deconstruction of the male erotic for an entry into the female erotic. Unlike the scopic economy at play during the disrobing of Beauty and the Beast, the ending passages of the short story disregards visual pleasure for the emergence of a more sensual sexuality through the transformation of Beauty’s selfhood into a Beast:

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulder; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (Carter 75)

Unlike the majority of The Tiger’s Bride which continually emphasises the immensely visual nature of the story through multiple images of mirrors and the construction of a visual
sexuality, this last passage completely deconstructs that structure to create an entirely different erotic from the stereotypical male ideology.

The two narratives of *Beauty and the Beast* take on separate meaning when considered in accords with each other, especially in the case of the representations of the beast as a female sexuality to be embraced, as opposed to another male character that is eager to consume the female object. Makinen reads the Beast as an “autonomous desire which the female characters need to recognize and reappropriate as a part of themselves.” (Makinen 12) The representations of these desires separately in both narrative retellings of *Beauty and the Beast* further prove Mekinen’s interpretations. Whilst the former story suggests a domesticated, normative sexuality, the latter depicts a wild, untamed and beastly one. However, the appearance of both narratives, set up entirely separate ideologies, suggest the ultimate autonomy of female desire; that Beauty is free to choose either the normative narrative that ends with “Mr. and Mrs. Lyon walk[ing] in the garden… in a drift of fallen petals,” or the socially and sexually transgressive narrative that ends with Beauty’s transformation into a Beast herself. Lewallan argues against these narratives, claiming that Carter transposes the female into either of two categories, the sexual aggressor or the victim. (qtd. in Mekinen 12) However, such a claim is ignorant and dismissive of the mutual sexual transaction existent in all three of stories that has been examined in this essay. In neither retellings of Beauty and the Beast does Beauty work as either aggressor or victim. Rather, in *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon*, Beauty attempts to construct a victim complex surrounding her, especially in accordance to her virginity as opposed to the Beast’s untamed wildness. However, in actuality Beauty is neither the sexual aggressor, nor the victim, as both Beast and Beauty are “courting” and being “courted” by the other throughout the story. Likewise, *The Tiger’s Bride* depicts the mutual exchange between Beauty and the Beast, specifically through the disrobing of both characters. Both characters are willing to construct this “reciprocal”
sexualisation; and neither works as simply aggressor or victim. Mutual sexual transaction is more blurred in the case of The Bloody Chamber, where there is certain unease about the sexual transactions between the Marquis and the virginal female protagonist. Nevertheless, the craving of sexual encounter by the narrator cannot be ignored or dismissed: “I felt both a strange, impersonal arousal at the thought of love.” (Carter 11) Undoubtedly, Carter’s portrayal of female sexuality does not merely depict the “victim” and “aggressor,” but rather a mutual transaction that is sexually liberating and embraces the female erotic.

Angela Carter’s collection of short stories, entitled “The Bloody Chamber and Other Short Stories,” provide a feminist retelling of traditional fairy tales. Specifically, Carter’s stories allow the deconstruction of scopic economies, with stories that are heavily laden with imageries of the double and mirrors; setting up continual dichotomies in order to bring into focus the existent scopic economies. Furthermore, Carter’s stories allow a deconstruction of the genre of the fairy tale, and through this a deconstruction of the male gaze, along with the male erotic. Carter manages to subvert these numerous elements that are present in traditional tales, and are representative of traditional gender roles and binaries, in order to allow a depiction of a liberated female erotic that is separate from the pornographic male erotic.
Works cited:


