



“Postmodern Rewriting and Demythologization of Fairy Tales in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*”

 **ouni, khawla**¹

¹English Department

Corresponding Author: ouni, khawla

Phone: 216 29 499 667

e-mail: ounikhawla@gmail.com

Article citation: ouni, K. (2024). “Postmodern Rewriting and Demythologization of Fairy Tales in Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*”, *Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies*, 5(1): 19-31.

Received Date: January 4, 2024

Accepted Date: July 13, 2024

Online Date: March 19, 2024

Publisher: Kare Publishing

© 2024 Journal of English Literature and Cultural Studies

E-ISSN: 2401-1131

ABSTRACT

The study of fairy tales is dated back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, a period marked by its prolific publication. Fairy tales are marvelous episodes that enchant readers through blending magic and realism. They are “socialized”, carrying veiled morality and didacticism. Among the writers who show remarkable interest and exceptional knack in rewriting and adapting such literary genres are Anne Sexton and Angela Carter. Instead of accepting wholeheartedly the archives of such texts, they aesthetically and ideologically recycle them in response to cultural ethos and expectations. The contribution of such writers resides in their meticulous unraveling of the detrimental impact of socialization. Their demythologization of fairy tales sets forth the antagonism between male-centered beliefs and postmodern feminism. The present article sets out to explore Sexton and Carter’s sardonic adaptation and parody of such narratives in their magnum opuses *Transformations* and *The Bloody Chamber*, respectively, through a comparative study.

Keywords: Sexton; Carter; rewriting; demythologization; Fairy Tales; parody; postmodern feminism; comparative studies.

Introduction

Sexton and Carter are two writers who belong to the second half of the twentieth century (Lianez 13). Influenced by second-wave feminism, both of Sexton and Carter are so aware of the enduring power of fairy tale narratives and call for their re-adaptation for social and personal revelations. They invite the readers to question and engage with societal conventions entrenched within such dominant master tales. They denounce women’s stigmatization and oppression disseminated by fairy tales across history. Little girls are the primary targets through internalizing patriarchal ideologies by being docilized to direct their attention only to marriage as a passport to a “happily ever after” life. Nevertheless, what they truly miss is that “the tale itself is a poisonous apple, and the Wicked Queen [. . .], is unaware of her venomous part in the patriarchal plot” (Haase 17).

Carter and Sexton rewrite the themes and structures of old tales with postmodern feminismⁱ, pointing to formulas that

carry the germs of patriarchal societies. Jack Zipes distinguishes between two types of fairy tales rewriting. The first category is “duplicates,” rehearsing the standardized fairy-tale structure and strengthening sexist stereotyping; the second is “revisions” (10) with the aim of changing the reader’s conceptions of long-held codes, patterns, and ideas. The second category is revisionist. Postmodern revision is often two-fold, seeking to expose and make visible fairy tales’ complicity with ‘exhausted’ narrative and gender ideologies. It unravels the gaps and indeterminacies such tales have forgotten or left unexploited (Crowley and Pennington 300). Among the postmodern techniques they use to challenge the static and stagnant atmosphere of traditional tales are parody and irony. Carter and Sexton’s repetition of the previous stories accentuates the mutability of the former, pointing to “slips and disjunctions that reveal the parodic performances of female / male or good / evil” (69).

Notwithstanding their common goal of vehemently criticizing female’s objectification, they differ in the approach and the “narrative displacement techniques” (Martin 14) they adopted. Sexton retains fairy tales’ traditional structure in the depiction of female characters in her *Transformations* collection. Yet, her mocking appeal is noticeable beneath classical heroines’ distorted portrayal. Carter, on the opposite direction, absorbs the tenets and ideas of postfeminism through rejecting women’s victimization altogether. In this vein, Sarah Gamble (2001) affirms: “postfeminist debate tends to crystallize around issues of victimization, autonomy and responsibility”. It is “critical of any definition of women as victims who are unable to control their own lives” (43- 44). Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* collection is infused with intrepid heroines who are immersed in a self-discovery journey. They abandon classical portrayal by developing subversive behavior. The article under scrutiny sheds light on how these authors rebel against the imposition of a male perspective in the original tale in each story or poem written. With an ironic twist, they accentuate the need for rereading such fables with “gender refashioning” (Crowley and Pennington 297) to suit their feminist cause.

Literature Review

Sexton is called the “High Priestess” and the “Mother of confessional poetry” (Gill, *The Cracked* 6). Her poetry has been considered a “whipping boy” (qtd. in Gill, “Anne” 429) due to the inextricable link between the writer’s private life and the subject matters of a great number of her poems. The unique volume wherein she forsakes the personal style is *Transformations*. Published in 1971, this volume “heavily mocks the “early moral education handbook” (Liu 26), fairy tales. Such unprecedented subgenre of lyrical poetry is referred to as fairytale poetry. Despite the fact that these poems are rife with parody, satire, and cynicism, and often contain biting social denunciations that invite the readers to re-assess social problems, dearth studies and scarce academic circles have dealt with it.

In *Transformations*, Sexton revises Brothers Grimm’s sixteen tales with “a wisecracking Americanese” that concurrently “modernizes and desentimentalizes them” (Martin 9). While Sexton is negotiating with her editor at Houghton Mifflin about her collection, she writes, “I feel my “*Transformations*” need an introduction telling of the value of my (one could say) rape of them . . . I do something very modern to them” (qtd. in Sexton and Ames 367). Sexton’s use of “rape” as a simile to refer to her recycling of old tales is pretty sagacious. In Sexton’s opinion, terrible atrocities lie just beneath their embellished surface, waiting stealthily to break loose. Sexton’s subversive retelling and postmodern adaptation of such long-engrained fairy tales cause great stir in American communities meanwhile the book publication. Such a collection was ferociously lambasted for transforming long-held cheering children’s narratives into horror stories (Sage 629). Through reading against the grain of canonical narrative and shattering down its very foundations, Sexton has been accused of “delegitimiz[ing] the known tale”. Within the same vein, her follower the British novelist Carter has been appraised with extreme heinousness. She has been described as the “author of pornography” and “the high priestess of post-graduate porn” (Sheets 642) due to her ardent corroboration of *The Sadeian Woman*, a work written in defense of woman’s right to fuck as aggressively and equally as men do (Muller-Wood 96). Numerous critics have disparaged her ostensibly pornographic literary inclination without focusing on her anti-patriarchal demeanor.

Her true affiliation, feminist activism, and ceaseless search for female sovereignty and gender equality, particularly in her fairy tales postmodern adaptations, haven't captured the attention they deserve from literary circles.

What has been pigeonholed in prior research is the crucial roles that fairy tales as a literary genre play and, most importantly, their significance in Sexton's and Carter's rewritings. W.H. Auden, one of the most prominent literary figures, contends that they are regarded paramount books that the very foundation of Western culture is built upon. He even asserts that their utility equals that of the Bible (Yader 701). Additionally, not reading fairy tales is cautioned against as a trigger of mental impoverishment. These tales have the ability to stir dormant feelings and nurture empathy for the ostracized and the oppressed (Yader 701). Besides their outstanding worth, the "normalizing discipline" of fairy tales, which renders women docile to the version of "femininity" at work in a given society and historical context, (Martin 12) has been scarcely probed into.

1.1. Sexton and Carter's Parodic Rewriting of Fairy Tales

To make the normalizing discipline of old fairy tales noticeable for the readers, Sexton and Carter infuse *Transformations* and *The Bloody Chamber* with parody, respectively, in their modern adaptations of fairy tales. Linda Hutcheon (2000) provides an illuminating definition of parody in her book *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* as "a kind of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion" (6). It is a "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). Parody is marked by "revising, replaying, inverting and trans-contextualizing" (11) the previous tradition, a "form of recycling" (15). Each retold story is "supplemental, both following and followed by another repetition that does not contradict its predecessor, but rather substitutes for and appends it" (Brooke 69). In the perspective of Judith Butler, repetition is a highly subversive and disruptive feminist endeavor which unravels that 'an original' is merely "nothing than a parody of itself" (16).

1.1.1. The Use of the Witch Figure

Sexton exhibits a critical stance towards what is being revealed from a new perspective (Fukuda 233) in her *Transformations* collection. Far from initiating her volume with an immediate retelling of the tales, the speaker begins with an introductory poem, "The Golden Key" (Sexton 223-224). The narrator of this poem is presented as a "middle-aged witch, me", (223) a start that "disenchants the world of fairy tales" (Mohamed 232) and paves the way for the emergence of a wry and derisive angle given that the witch figure is the creature the most despised in traditional fairy tales world (Fukuda 33). The perspective behind the adoption of a witch figure is to sharpen the edge of her narration so that her poems turn out to be a "black art," or rather a witchcraft that successfully destabilizes an old frozen speech propagated by world folklore. Sexton's "middle-aged witch" is in possession of the "golden key" which she firmly holds in her hands, asserting: "Open this book of odd tales /which transforms the Brothers Grimm" (Sexton 224). The newly emerging paradigm and the newly-inscribed book, which erupt from the "odd tales" joined by "an enlarged paper clip", are alluded to as "a piece of sculpture" (224), an alternative archetype of contemporary fables. The key the speaker holds is "a deconstructive tool," which galvanizes and stimulates the reader to have a critical stance instead of accepting wholeheartedly the archive of cultural texts. Its subversive and deconstructive power lies in its ability to brush up old myths that have contributed to the old-fashioned construction of female subjectivity. Not only is Sexton known for her witchcraft resurrection of old tales, but also her follower Carter entices critics' attention by her remarkable flair of adding a touch of magic and talisman to these stories. Some critics call her a "mythical fairy-tale figure", "the Fairy Godmother" (Makinen 2). Others name her the "white witch of English literature" and a "benevolent witch" (Muller-Wood 96), whose death makes English literature lose "the magic" (96) that heals people. The use of witchcraft is telling of the alluring influence and magic spell of such tales.

Fairy tales' magical influence is noticeably articulated in Sexton's "The Golden Key". This poem is filled with allusions to earlier periods wherein children are gathered around their grandmothers,

attentively listening to fairy tales' fascinating, nay, magical twist and glamorous culmination. This is perceived through the recurrent expression of "once there was" and "once more", serving as "linguistic parodies" of earlier versions (Martin 20). The version created by Sexton follows the plot of the Grimms' stories, but is spiced up with a scornful and contemporary twist (Yader 703). Sexton mentions the names of different kids, including "Alice, Samuel, Kurt, Eleanor, / Jane, Brian, and Maryel". She "reminds" all of these to "draw near" and ponder on the tales they "were read to at "ten p.m.," "where the wicked king / went up in smoke" (223). Sexton revisits the past to articulate children's indoctrination and brainwashing by the cultural discourse. In her retelling, Carter, on the other side, sounds pretty occupied with the refashioning of the present moment. She intermingles the past with the present moment which endows the reader with the sensation of being inside the female heroines' memories and feelings, a process remindful of the stream of consciousness technique (Martin 10). Her skillful mixture of tenses engenders a feeling of credibility. She writes: "[f]ather said he would be home before nightfall. The snow brought down all the telephone wires; he couldn't have called, even with the best news. The roads are bad. I hope he'll be safe" (Carter 41). Carter adds a touch of modernity to her fairy tale's version through the presence of modern devices, namely "telephone wires", in her subversion of patriarchal doctrines.

1.1.2. Subverting the Domestic Bliss through Male Figures' Demythologization

In sheer contrast to traditional Brothers Grimm's tales which depict the prince figure as excessively attractive by over emphasizing his majestic scale, the male figure is studded with trivialization in Carter and Sexton's poignant rereading of such stories. This idea is noticeably perceived through Cinderella's passivity, accentuated in the tale by being depicted as an object of decoration and desire waiting for the Prince as a master and savior. The ceremony that happens at the royal place is comparable to "a marriage market," (Sexton 256) and the prince to "a shoe salesman" (Sexton 258). Actually, the struggle to "put on the slipper" (Sexton 258) becomes pernicious among Cinderella's stepsisters as one of them "slice[s] it [i.e. her big toe] off" and the other "cut[s] off her heel" (258). The stepsisters, along with their mother, are portrayed as Cinderella's antagonists, subjecting her to severe sufferings and ill-treatment. This antagonism brings to the fore the wreckage women cause themselves out of recklessly adhering to patriarchal creeds (Fukuda 35). Notwithstanding their physical attractiveness, they have hearts as cold and ruthless as blackjacks (28-29). The stepmother's brutality towards Cinderella is depicted as something usual, with the poet sarcastically mentioning, "[t]hat is the way with stepmothers" (55). Such rivalry to gain the male privilege has been referred to by Adrienne Rich as "horizontal hostility" (qtd. in Martin 15). It goes without saying that the male perception existing in women's subconscious impedes all possibilities of female attachment within patriarchy. Put differently, the social significance of this feminine rivalry is "devised by modern power so as to materialize and warrant women's tacit contribution to their colonization" (Martin 14).

Instead of reproducing the fairy tale soothing comfort with its trouble-free world that culminates with a promising end by the happy marriage of the protagonist with the charming prince, Sexton presents a more "adult oriented" (Mohamed 232) version bombarded with mockery. Her derisive critique is accentuated through the successive incorporation of a list of idioms in "Cinderella," (255-258), including "From toilets to riches," "From diapers to Dior," "From homogenized to martinis at lunch" and "From mops to Bonwit Teller" (Sexton 258). The writer mocks the abrupt metamorphosis marriage brings, from misfortune to luck, loss to gain, and anguish to happiness. Whereas the Grimm's fairy tales spot light on marriage without focusing on it as a real condition, Sexton surprises the reader with a dismal portrayal of the after-marriage life. Following the prince's encounter of Cinderella whose feet fit "the glass shoe," (Sexton 258) a lack of revision and an absence of any critical stance are quite noticeable. Instead, we deduce the poetess' entire withdrawal (as narrator) from the poem, a removal revealed through the recurrent phrases-"they say" and "that story" (255). The poet's withdrawal from the process of narration underlines her revulsion of the romantic doctrine suggested through the anaphoric "never" in "never bothered", "never arguing", "never telling" and "never getting" throughout the ultimate stanza. This repetition reinforces Sexton's mocking appeal, which overlooks the reality of marital life conveyed through "diapers," "dust," and "the timing of an

egg" (258). This idea is further reinforced through fixing the couple in time and space "happily ever after" "like two dolls in a museum case," dehumanized and crippled (Fukuda 38). Notwithstanding retaining the original plot through the marriage of Cinderella with the prince, the poem takes an unexpected twist in its ultimate line, where the couple is depicted as figurines incarcerated in the midst of a museum display case. Such description creates in the reader a feeling of skepticism and lack of authenticity regarding the plausibility of this outcome. Instead of being portrayed as living, breathing individuals, they are presented as mere "Bobbsey Twins" (Sexton 258). This depiction makes of them illusory figures much like the narrative of a fairy tale.

"Cinderella" is made stagnant because the femininity it displays is steady and the message is "historically" stable, being in harmonious tune with socially prescribed ideals of feminine identity. Another notable poem that delineates the dark side of marriage and destabilizes the "happily ever after" (Sexton 258) ending is carefully spotlighted in "The White Snake," (Sexton 229-232) which dwells on the union of a man from a humble origin with a noble woman. Instead of the Grimm's version, marriage turns out to be "a box /, "a kind of coffin, / a kind of blue funk" (Sexton 232). This poem is filled with sardonic humor and cynicism, noticeably perceived through Sexton's playfulness with the recurrent adjective "blue" suggestive of far-fetched expectations. Sexton's sharp satire and somber wit shake the very grounds of the assurances of traditional fairy tales. At first glance, Sexton's retelling sounds to perpetuate Brothers Grimm's prescriptive and didactic underpinnings; yet, it becomes obvious that the maintenance of the Brothers' structure is only meant to embrace troubling gender assumptions. Sexton's retelling debunks Grimm's idea that women depend on men and are unable to thrive without their support.

In Carter's adaptation, on the other hand, the anchored symbols based on the supremacy of the male over the female are thoroughly subverted. She sounds in favor of a negation of sexual constraints altogether. Carter shows a vehement criticism towards patriarchal doctrines and casts a bleak shadow over androcentric conventions that look down at women as victims. Ironically enough, several are the instances whereby she unravels the demise of the masculine power that has long been grandiosely accentuated in traditional myths. According to Sage, "fathers and male figures" are "attacked, deconstructed, and shown to be hollow or vulnerable in Angela Carter" (155). Any symbol of patriarchal archetype, which materializes and stigmatizes women, is ferociously attacked. Carter debunks the parameters of encomium and love traditionally associated to the father / daughter bond. The father figure in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" is depicted with an aura of revulsion and negativity. His tightfistedness brings about the destruction not only of himself but of the whole family. Carter writes that he does not have " even enough money left over to buy his Beauty . . . the one white rose she said she wanted" and further adds "Beauty had asked for so little and he had not been able to give it to her" (41-42). This is further revealed through the remodel of the long-held classical rescue plot. Instead of being saved by her father, the bride is rescued by her mother, who unflinchingly breaks the gate and saves her. Contrary to Perrault's version, which champions the boldness of the father figure, Carter sheds the light on the mother's stout heartedness and fearlessness. This stands in sheer contrast to Grimm's attitude towards the mother figure as irrelevant to the progress of the plot. She is either absent, dead or evil (Lianez 25). The young pianist describes her mother as follows: "You never saw such a wild thing as my mother" (The Bloody 40). She further adds: "My eagle-featured, indomitable mother . . . had outfaced a junk full of Chinese pirates . . . shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand and all before she was as old as I" (The Bloody 1-2).

Carter further captivates the reader's attention through her sardonic transfiguration of the male figure as it is eloquently depicted in "The Courtship of Mr. Lion". At first glance, the Beast is portrayed through his "mighty, furious roaring" (The Bloody 146), and nagging demand for reparation for his rose's theft. Yet, it becomes noticeable that his threat is elided as he becomes in dire need for Beauty's domesticating power. Remarkably spellbound by her whim and charm, his tone shifts as he turns out to be an enamored suitor meekly asking: "you will come back home to me? It will be lonely here, without you" (150). This challenges the reader's conventional perceptions about the Beast's malevolence and threat. Upon her return, Beauty finds him on the brink of starvation as he explains that, "unable to kill the gentle beast, I could not eat" (The Bloody 153). At his death, Carter

accentuates the Beast's powerlessness by making a noticeable contrast between his past state and his present one, arguing: "he had always kept his fists clenched but now, painfully, tentatively at least beg on to stretch his fingers" (The Bloody 54). The roaring passion he shows at the outset of the story is vanished, paving the ground for the appearance of a courted English man. The gender polarities separating the female and the male are parodied. Borrowing the insightful words of Lucia Morera Lianez, "both protagonists become subjects in an egalitarian relationship: --Mr and Mrs Lyon" (27). Such deconstruction exemplifies the fallacious binary splitting the characters, nodding to the fraudulent pretenses of previous readings built on social and interpretative stability.

1.1.3. The Deconstruction of Classical Female Models

Besides ridiculing the canonical positions ascribed to male figures in traditional fairy tales, both of Carter and Sexton are concerned with the reduction of women to commodities. A plethora of examples inside Sexton's collection nods to the horrendous plights of female members and their lack of agency. Such an attitude is illustrated through Cinderella's description. She asserts: "She slept on the sooty hearth each night / and walked around looking like Al Jolson" (Sexton 256). This protagonist is the archetype of the passive and over submissive female figure who accepts being objectified, dehumanized, and muffled. The fact that the heroine chooses to sleep on "the sooty hearth" is symptomatic of her willingness to masochistically belong to the lowest social class (Fukuda 36). This highlights that the original tale idealizes some qualities, namely beauty, modesty, and meekness, as a roadmap towards finding a virtuous husband and living happily ever after (Yader 705).

The rewriting of "Snow White" is much more sardonic and subversive than "Cinderella". "Unsoiled" and "as white as a bonefish" (224), Snow White has "cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper". She is materialized as her "arms and legs" are "made of Limoges and her "lips" are like Vin Du Rhone" (229). She is further reduced to being a "dumb bunny" (228), accentuating her lack of shrewdness and critical thinking skills. This sardonic and biting interpolations run against the reader's conventional expectations regarding Snow White's beauty. Instead of being depicted as a universal role model for women due to her iconic beauty, the poet makes it clear that Snow White is not a faultless persona, stressing the limitations and defects in her physicality and character alike. Snow White's marginalization is amplified through yielding "like small czars" to the subtle power of those ostensibly "gentle seven dwarfs" to "keep [the] house" (226).

Carter's heroines, on the other side, refrain from being reduced to the state of objects and being intimidated. In her rewriting of Perrault's "Red Riding Hood," Carter traces the evolution of the female figure from innocence to full-fledged power. In sheer contrast to the traditional submissive female who surrenders to the wolf in Perrault's original tale, Carter exhibits an opposite version. She writes: "When she heard that freezing howl of a wolf, she dropped her gifts, seized her knife and turned on to the beast. [. . .] It went for her throat, as wolves do, but she made a great swipe at it with her father's knife and slashed off its right forepaw" (127). The heroine fights the animal with the same ferocity and courage commonly attributed to males. She is remarkably and astonishingly daring and courageous, defending her female being and never yielding to the wolf's ferocity. Such a portrayal tears down the hermetically-sealed patriarchal myth which stigmatizes women as passive and vulnerable human beings.

Carter's goal, as a feminist postmodern writer, veers sharply from Perrault's, as an epitome of the metaphysical thinking and an advocator of the androcentric sovereignty. Her transformation of the heroine into an emblematically wolfish girl can be considered as a biting reversal and scathing diatribe to Perrault's depiction of the same character as docile and innocent. This echoes her firm belief in the human capacity for alteration and perpetual growth. Carter hankers to subvert all sort of binarism which strengthens the male over the female. Borrowing the insightful words of Catherine Burgass, "Carter was obviously acquainted with the theories that deconstruct the concept of the essential self or soul and posit instead a subject in process. She foregrounds the intermediate stage in the process of metamorphosis from one state to another, thus deconstructing binary opposites and the principle of mutual exclusion"(135). In the aftermath of the wolf's confrontation, the girl "wrapped up [its] paw in the cloth in which her mother had packed the oatcakes and went on

towards her grandmother's house" (The Bloody 127). The image of the paw is sagacious and telling of her triumph and strong determination.

Driven by an extreme hanker to revolutionize women's past representations and alter Charles Perrault's ideological goals, Carter impregnates her story with heroines who never cease from displaying sensibility and resourcefulness. This motif finds great resonance in "The Company of Wolves", a story within the same book, *The Bloody Chamber*, and which highlights Carter's cynical and satiric perception of the fairy tale. The heroine of this tale is exceedingly vigilant, having "her knife and . . . is afraid of nothing" (133). On her way to her grandmother's house and in the midst of the jungle, she sounds alert to the looming danger threatening her. Hearing the frightening howl of a wolf from a distance, "her practiced hand sprang to the handle of her knife, but then she heard a clattering among the brushwood and there sprang on to the path a fully clothed one, a very handsome young one" (The Bloody 134). Rather than the depiction of a terrified girl in the presence of a stranger, Carter surprises the reader with the laughter and joke of the girl and the handsome man as if they were "old friends" (The Bloody 134).

Besides their arduousness and strong resilience, Carter's female characters renounce being treated as sexual objects. While the wolf-hunter asks for a kiss (The Bloody 135), in "Red Riding Hood", the girl relinquishes being a sexual puppet and shows sexual power. Carter subverts the fairy tale's depiction of women as passive sexual victims. Red Riding Hood is a sexually mature and free girl who "deliberately loses a wager with the hunter-wolf in order to forfeit a kiss to him. [Consequently] she plays a willing part in the game of seduction" (Burgass 136). Upon her arrival to her grandmother's house, Red Riding Hood becomes cognizant of her entrapment when no trace of her grandmother is found, apart from "a tuft of white hair that had caught in the bark of an unburned log" (The Bloody 137). The metamorphosis of the handsome hunter into a wolf, standing for the male animalistic side, isn't a difficult trap for the heroine to evade. She boisterously imposes her sexual subjectivity. She "went directly to the man with red eye", "stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt", and "freely gave the kiss she owed him" (The Bloody 138). Carter sheds light on female's freedom and free will. Far from yielding, she perceives herself on equal terms with the hungry wolf and takes avail of her expertise and shrewdness in taming him. "The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat" (The Bloody 138). Her feminine vigor, along with her unexpected daring attitude, endows her with the ability to vanquish the wolf's bestiality and hold sway over his animalistic desire. Carter's real innovation "consists in foregrounding certain other aspects of the folk-tale, namely the sexual subtext which lurks behind modern sanitized version" (Burgass 136).

Conversely, the sexual subtext is reinforced in Sexton's version. To accentuate women's objectification, Sexton describes the dwarfs in "Snow White" as "little hot dogs," and Snow White to "a gold piece" (Liu 21). These expressions are not ornamental, but serve to reinforce the dwarfs' extreme lust suggested through the adjective "hot". After Snow White ate the poisoned apple, they "made a glass coffin / so that the passersby can enjoy her dazzling beauty (Sexton 21). In this regard, Philip McGowan argues that the glass coffin is "for the display of this example of aesthetic if not intellectual perfection" (qtd. in Liu 23). The actions of the dwarf show that Snow White has somehow been "treated as a fetish, a non-life object placed in the showcase" that has been "employed to still and silence, bind and dominate" (Liu 24). Being inside the glass coffin is shown "as sex object, as object of the male gaze . . . despite the intentions of the woman herself" (25).

1.1.4. Subverting the Male Gaze through the Mirror Symbolism

The power of the male gaze is strongly conveyed through the symbol of the mirror, which is employed differently by the two writers. In Carter's standpoint, it stands for the heroine's self-discovery, knowledge and metamorphosis. Conversely, in Sexton's adaptation, it connotes women's docility and subservience. The poet states:

Once there was a lovely virgin
called Snow White.
Her stepmother,

a beauty in her own right,
 though eaten, of course, by age

 would hear of no beauty surpassing her own.
 The stepmother had a mirror to which she referred
 something like the weather forecast
 a mirror that proclaimed the one beauty in the land. (229)

This passage articulates that the cultural straightjacket incongruently set around women is too confining to be released from. Both of the stepmother and Snow White are victims of beauty illusion engendered by male-supremacist culture. This is perceived through Snow White "refer[ing]" to the "magic mirror" "as women do" (Sexton 229). She ends up replicating the same behavior of the Queen and presumably that of other women. This caustic parallelism leaves the question of female agency open and without resolution, which articulate that the power of cultural discourse colonizing women's bodies is too powerful to think of the world in different terms (Martin 20).

Sexton's contribution lies in her ability to lay bare the detrimental impact of the process of socialization thrust upon women, which unveils the writer's cognizance and awareness of what the French Philosopher Michel Foucault calls docile bodiesⁱⁱ. Foucault gives quintessential elucidation of this process of docilization by referring to the example of soldiers in the army. He argues that the late eighteenth century is marked by the taming and pliability of soldiers. The soldier internalizes the habit of erecting his head so high, "never to fix his eyes on the ground, but to look straight at those they pass . . . to remain motionless until the order is given" ("Docile" 179-80). The automatism of habit makes him inapt with a clay-like personality, easily shaped and manipulated. Within the same vein, women are severely controlled and self-surveilled to blindly adhere to patriarchal standard of beauty in order to gain male privilege. This is manifested in Snow White's behavior. She "rolls her china-blue doll eyes, / open and shut. / Open to say, / Good Day Mama". These lines match the features of a lifeless doll, which opens and shuts her eyes mechanically.

Snow White's posture is remindful of Sandra L. Bartky's meticulous analysis of disciplinary practices imposed on women's physicality and social behavior alike. She examines three main groups of disciplinary practices designed to produce a feminine body: The first aims at creating a body of a certain size; the second is directed towards bringing forth specific gestures, postures and movements; and the third is directed toward the exhibition of this body as an ornamental object (64). Bartky hankers to convey the idea that women are unconsciously injected androcentric beliefs. This find corroborating evidence in the daily tortures they perform through dressing properly, putting make up, behaving meekly, and yielding to men's beauty standards. As Sexton cynically contends, "beauty is a simple passion".

It is noticeable that the female body as "surfaces to be used, managed and ultimately subjected" (Martin 20) occupies a fundamental position in the configuration of Sexton and Carter alike. Yet, whereas Sexton's heroines are unaware of their materialization, those of Carter have "looked into themselves through the mirror, through other people's eyes while figuring out their being materialized by the patriarchy" (Liu 30). In *The Bloody Chamber*, the young bride comes to the realization that she is objectified through the image of white lilies overlapping with her own in the mirror of the bedroom. She fathoms that her body is "being materialized as one of the pure white flowers in a silent and decorative position" (Liu 30). In Carter's adaptation, the mirror does not only reflect the heroines' awareness of their objectification but highlights, as well, their self-acceptance and body celebration. While looking at herself in the mirror, Beauty in "The Courtship of Mr. Lion" is mesmerized by the metamorphosis that occur in her body as she contemplates her facial traits, symbol of her development and acceptance of her sexuality. She "smiled at herself with satisfaction. [. . .] 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" (49).

Carter's sporadic attitude never ceases to resurface. In "The Tiger's Bride", Carter's adaptation

to “Beauty and the Beast”, the Bride abhors being a pure sexual puppet. Being fully cognizant “of the exchange value of her body” (Brooke 77), she asserts: “my father lost me to the Beast at cards”. Such a statement sheds light on her cynicism, self-awareness and acrimony. Ultimately, the heroine relinquishes the relationship of dependence on her father when she decides to return to live with the Beast in the castle. This can be considered a pivotal moment wherein she acts on her own wishes. Carter writes: “[B]eauty scribbled a note for her father, threw a coat round her shoulders. Quickly, quickly, urged the spaniel soundlessly; and Beauty knew the Beast was dying” (156). With a mixed combination of assuredness and irony, she contends, “it was not my flesh, but, truly, my father’s soul that was in peril” (156). All elements of the tale are played with and upon and parodied thoroughly by Carter’s sarcasm. The standard tales are transfigured into constructions of feminist experience suggestive of agency and sexual development.

The set of gender polarities embedded in Carter’s and Sexton’s texts is not without a pragmatic intention. It stimulates the female readers’ critical stance as they come to fathom the futility and uselessness of their subordinated existence. They grasp that phallogentrism is appealed by the taste of subordination and powerlessness in female figures. As Sexton once announced in an interview, “what [a writer] should do—[is to] move people to action” (Selected 45). This finds resonance in an interview whereby she asserts that poetry “should be a shock to the senses” and “should almost hurt to make us become more aware” (26). The version written by Carter and Sexton invites female readers to rise beyond the statue of a decorated object to that of the subject.

Most of the poems collected in *Transformations*, along with the stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, unravel how Carter and Sexton promote certain tenets of feminism. Shedding light on Sexton’s writings, some authors, namely Shiho Fukuda, have argued that this poet is not purely feminist, yet she contributes to the cause of feminism. A vigilant scrutiny of *Transformations* unravels that she viewed her “times through a spy glass fitted with a set of lenses that were colored by the tenets of the patriarchal society at one end and by the feminist movement at the other” (31-32). Fukuda’s claims hint at the fact that Sexton’s book carries the germs of feminism. Her statement overlaps with that of Diane Wood Middlebrooke and Diane Hume George (2000), who foreground that “Sexton was the modern woman poet who first gave extended voice to issues of female identity” (xviii). Within the same vein, Carter argues, “I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I am a feminist in everything else and one can’t compartmentalize these things in one’s life” (“Notes” 40). In an intriguing article entitled “Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality,” Makinen (1992) expresses the great loss overwhelming English literature due to the death of one of the legendary figures of feminism. Carter, in his frame of reference, emasculates phallogentrism with a tongue-in-cheek gusto. Thanks to her revision, femininity is given a more complex picture. Sexton and Carter’s retellings challenge and disrupt variegated stereotypes which are restructured to suit their feminist hanker. Both of them struggle to kiss good bye the monologist closure of old tales and bump new blood into the magic charm of conventional female models. To borrow the insightful words of Carter, any woman—“be she clever, or brave, or good, or silly, or cruel, or sinister, or awesomely unfortunate”—must be put center stage and must be “as large as life” (“Notes,” xiii). In a nutshell, Sexton and Carter revive fairy tales within their writings only to offer novice identities to women.

Conclusion

This article has traced both Carter and Sexton’s transformations of fairy tales. It has revealed that their methods of rewrite diverge. Sexton impregnates her poetry with a touch of eighteenth-century fairy tale lavishness through reinforcing female backbiting and scheming. She reinforces the image of women who are ensnared by androcentric beliefs and unconsciously shackled by the male gaze. To fully grasp the meanings and innuendos that lurk beneath the surface of the poems, the reader has to be cognizant and vigilant enough. Such symbols and fantasy are key elements in her parody of the original meaning. Carter, on the other hand, traces her female characters’ metamorphoses and their journey towards agency. In her version, women hold sway over sexist conventions that thwart them from breaking cultural barriers. Despite their divergence and differences, they cross paths in many aspects. Their rewriting is a process of subversion and rebuilding rather than simply

rewriting. Each story they repeat appends and adds to its predecessor. Parody enables them to outdo and at the same time re-appropriate the discourse that they are nodding to. Sexton and Carter unravel that old folklore texts are sugar-coated lies. In their demythologizing of these long-engrained traditional narratives, they expose the hidden subtext through unraveling tediousness behind marvels, commonness behind fantasy, and evil behind beauty.

As such, they rail against fairy-tale conventions and the conservative values of male supremacy, which curtail women's personal and professional realization. They particularly denounce how women are being enforced to abandon unacknowledged parts of their selfhood. Besides deconstructing fairy tales, both of them dismantle the position female writers used to occupy in the literary canon. A revised fairy tale incorporates the critical and creative thinking of the producer and corresponds to changed demands and tastes of audiences (Zipes 9).

Endnotes

i Far from relying on previous underpinnings, postmodern feminism strives to build a new archetype of social criticism. Postmodernism highlights the cultural instead of the biological bases of gender. Feminists who embrace postmodernism adopt deconstructive strategies in favor of “multiple gender expressions” (Bin Abdul Mohd Hafiz and Ariff Aizuddin Azlan 12). They subject facts to multifarious interpretations established by individualized groups, culture, and language (12)

ii Foucault nods to the power foisted on people’s behavior, particularly women, by making them subservient and yielding to the socially established norms. The French thinker refers to “local cynicism of power” (197). In this philosopher’s frame of reference, power is neither oppressive nor it is juridical or abusive. Rather, it disciplines peoples and render them compliant subjects. He contends that modern institutions like medicine, religion and education are joined together to establish certain interdictions, prohibitions, and moral codes. Such disciplinary behaviors are so powerful that individuals are unconsciously indoctrinated and disciplined without knowing the extent of their subdual and subjugation (198).

References

- Burgass, Catherine. "Small Change? Literary Metamorphosis in Ovid and Angela Carter". Eds. Carla Dente et al. Gower: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2005. 131-140.
- Bin Abdul Mohd Hafiz, and Ariff Aizuddin Azlan. "Modernism and Postmodernism in Feminism: A Conceptual Study on the Developments of its Definition, Waves and School of Thought." *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)* 4.1(2019): 1-14.
- Brooke, Patricia. "Lyons and Tigers and Wolves - Oh My! Revisionary Fairy Tales in the Work of Angela Carter." *Critical Survey* 16.1(2019): 67-88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41557251>.
- Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*. London: Vintage, 2006.
- . "Notes from the Front Line." *On Gender and Writing*. Ed. Michelene Wandor. London: Pandora Press, 1983. 69-77.
- Cashdan, Sheldon. *The Witch Must Die: The Hidden Meaning of Fairy Tales*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Crowley, Karlyn, and John Pennington. "Feminist Frauds on the Fairies? Didacticism and Liberation in Recent Retellings of Cinderella." *Marvels & Tales* 24.2 (2010): 297-313.
- Foucault, Michel. "Docile Bodies". *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. London: Penguin, 1984.
- Fukuda, Shiho. "The Hesitancy of a Middle-Aged Witch: Anne Sexton's Transformations." *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 13 (2008): 31-47. <http://institucional.us.es/revistas/estudios/13/02%20Fukuda.pdf>
- Gill, Jo. "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics." *The Review of English Studies*. 55.220 (2004): 425- 45.
- . *The Cracked Mirror: Anne Sexton Poetics of Self-Representation*. London: Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education, 2001.
- Haase, Donald. "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Critical Survey and Bibliography." *Marvels & Tales* 14.1 (2000): 15-63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41380741>
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York: University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Lianez, Lucia Morera. *Thrice Upon a Time: Feminist, Postfeminist and Lesbian Revisions of Fairy Tales: Anne Sexton, Angela Carter and Emma Donoghue*. Zaragoza University, 2012. 3-98.
- Liu, Fenglin. "Female Objects and Feminist Consciousness for the Purpose to Awake Readers' Awareness: A Comparative Analysis between Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and Anne Sexton's *Transformations*." *Emerging Science Journal* 4.1 (2020). <https://ijournalse.org/index.php/ESJ/article/view/216>
- Makinen, Merja. (1992). "Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality." *Feminist* 42.5(1992): 2-15. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1395125>
- Martin, Matilde. *Fairy Tales Revisited and Transformed: Anne Sexton's Critique of Social(ized) Femininity*. University of La Laguna, 2003.
- McGowan, Philip. *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief*. Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2004.
- Mohammed, Nadia Fayidh. "The Indecisive Feminist: Study of Anne Sexton's Revisionist Fairy Tales." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 6.1 (2017): 31- 39. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v6n.1p.31>
- Muller-Wood, Anja. "Angela Carter." *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Literature* 1 .9 (2021): 5-104.
- Sage, Lorna, ed. *Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter*. London: Virago Press, 1994.
- Sexton, Anne. *Transformations*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999.
- . *Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose: No Evil Star*. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1985.
- Sexton, Anne and Ames Lois, eds. *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

- Sheets, Robin Anne. "Pornography, Fairy Tales, and Feminism: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1.4 (1991): 633- 657. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3704419>
- Middlebrook, Diane Wood and Diane Hume George. Introduction. *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*. Ed. Linda Gray Sexton. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000.
- Yader, Albadry Wanes. "The Fairy Tales and Anne Sexton's Transformation with Reference to Female Protagonists in *Cinderella*." *Lark Journal* 50.1 (2023): 695-715.
- Zipes, Jack. *Fairy tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. Lexington: U. P. of Kentucky, 2003.