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**Skeletons in the Closet: Images of the Grotesque in Late 20th
Century Feminist Rewritings of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard"**

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Abstract

The 20th century was especially prolific in the production of fairy tale literary reinterpretations. Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" is one of the fairy tales that has been particularly popular since its revival, given its uncanonical depiction of marriage as an institution haunted by murder. Academia has primarily focused on the discussion of the text in relation to marriage, gender violence, disobedience, shame, and curiosity. In this search for elucidation, however, hardly any studies have addressed the rationale behind the preservation of these themes in feminist rewritings.

This study focuses on the use of grotesque imagery and language in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) and Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983) rewritings of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard". I propose that the use of grotesque imagery from the part of the female characters in each rewriting is a narrative strategy on the author's part to disrupt Victorian tropes and ideals concerning womanhood, sexuality, and domesticity. Moreover, this study also discusses the implications derived from the rewritings' change of genre by examining fairy tales and short stories.

Keywords: Bluebeard, Charles Perrault, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, rewriting, feminism, fairy tales, grotesque

0. Introduction

Fairy tales have for generations aided in the social formation and acculturation of individuals through their depictions of oniric but relatable experiences. In many ways, they constitute one of the greatest forms of cultural heritage within a society. Historically, fairy tales have oftentimes been defined by their relationship to the oral tradition of folk tale storytelling. These oral tales managed to stay relevant across generations due to the ever-changing nature of each retelling, which was highly dependent on the beliefs the storyteller chose to reproduce, challenge or generate. For this reason, attempting to locate the origins and evolution of fairy tales with accuracy is virtually impossible. With the invention of printing, however, fairy tales progressively moved further from the oral culture into a literary and written dimension so as to meet the standards of modern literacy.

By the early 16th century, oral tradition had already undergone regularization with the selection of authorized written versions. On the one hand, this resulted in a decrease in the number of versions that circulated, while on the other, it posed the control over such narratives in circulation: some fairy tales ceased to be printed, and others were altered to satisfy social decorum (Zipes 1988; Tatar 2017). French author Charles Perrault was one of the greatest contributors to the process of fairy tale standardization during the 17th century with the publication of his collection *Contes de Ma Mère l'Oye* (1697). This anthology contains fairy tales such as “Cinderella” and “The Sleeping Beauty” whose versions are still popular at present. Nevertheless, one of Perrault’s fairy tales that has proven to stay particularly relevant by virtue of its shock value is “Bluebeard”, the subject of this study. This fairy tale turned motif has inspired major literary works such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), Charles Dicken’s *Captain Murder* (1860), as well as Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* (1987) (Lurie 2005; Tatar 2006; Juez 2016).

The essential storyline of Perrault's "Bluebeard" involves the marriage of a girl to a hideous blue-bearded man, many times a widower. After relocating to his castle, the young lady is forbidden from entering one specific room, to which she is given a key. As expected, she accesses the chamber, only to find the bodies of Bluebeard's ex-wives. By doing so, she inevitably dooms herself to the same fate, if not for her brothers, who ultimately come to her rescue. Contrary to other fairy tales, Bluebeard contains hardly any elements of conventional fantasy; no prince or princess, no witches, and no talking animals. Instead, the narrative is dominated by vivid descriptions of grotesque and macabre images, such as the floor being "covered with clotted blood [that] reflected the bodies of several dead women hung up on the walls" (226), and a grisly blood-stained key that when "cleaned from one side, it just returned on the other" (226). The tale incorporates two morals at its end, which altogether portray curiosity as a woman-exclusive frailty, and death as the punishment for bridal disobedience.

Given its raging topicality, "Bluebeard" has sparked the interest of contemporary writers and scholars, be it through the rewriting of the tale, or its discussion. In academia, readings range from feminism (Tatar 2006, 2017) to the patriarchal (Lieberman 1972), with a focus on marriage (Lurie 2005; Juez 2016), sexuality (Bettelheim 1977; Makinen 1992; Tatar 2019), disobedience (Kim 2011), and blame (Ruddick 2004). The reproduction of violence and gender norms in "Bluebeard" and other fairy tales has likewise led to the discussion of the genre itself: some scholars take a restorative approach by highlighting the need to revisit the tradition (Lurie 1970; Cosslett 1996), while others take a critical approach by dismissing it altogether (Lieberman 1972; Dobrenko 1997).

Despite the numerous insights on "Bluebeard" and its violence, hardly any studies have elucidated the relevance of the preservation of the aforementioned themes in late 20th century feminist rewritings of the tale (Moustakis 1983; Hannon 1993). Consequently, this paper aims to uncover the factors that could have contributed to the authorial choices of reproducing the

array of grotesque images in two “Bluebeard” rewritings of the time: Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” (1979), and Margaret Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg” (1983). As further developed in the next section, these two specific rewritings lend themselves to a great comparative study given their intra and paratextual similarities, for instance, similarities concerning the use of the Grotesque, authorship, and proximity in the time of publishing.

I propose that the use of grotesque imagery from the part of the female characters in each rewriting is a narrative strategy on the authors’ part to disrupt Victorian tropes and ideals concerning womanhood, sexuality, and domesticity. To that end, I will illustrate and compare the instances where the grotesque is employed in the two pieces in order to discuss their purpose. Moreover, through the examination of fairy tales and short stories as literary genres, this paper will also issue the implications derived from the rewritings’ change of genre. To this, I argue that by using a formally masculine literary genre as the short story, Carter and Atwood attempt to denounce and reclaim the long-lost feminine oral tradition of fairy tales, one whose literary regularization resulted in the neglect of feminine voices.

1. Images of the Grotesque

The literary movement of fairy tale revisionism saw its peak during the second and early third waves of feminism (circa 1960-1990) after a fruitful period of female contribution to academia with the publication of revolutionary works such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* (1949), and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). These shaped a new collective feminine identity whose concerns included the exercise of their newly outspoken intellectual faculties, as well as the indictment of patriarchal constraints on femininity and gender. Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood were two of the most prominent and active voices of the movement, and by the late 70s, their interest converged on the production of two distinct “Bluebeard” retellings.

Both Carter and Atwood's retellings draw upon Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard", yet the approaches taken in its revision are strikingly dissimilar amongst one another. Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" (1979) is perhaps most faithful to the accounts in the original fairy tale: it presents Bluebeard's fourth wife, who, after opening the forbidden chamber, is eventually rescued by her mother. Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983), however, is barely recognizable to the unknowing reader, presenting a story that feels very contemporary with Sally and Ed at the center of a death-free marriage filled with secrets and lies. It is important to note how a simple comparison of the two stories fails to take into consideration the intimate connection between the texts.

Thematically, both texts explore the limits and assets of femininity, sexuality, and gender performance within a patriarchal discourse. To do so, both stories are narrated or focalized through a feminine voice as opposed to Perrault's heterodiegetic narrator. As women writers themselves, Carter and Atwood's deliberate choice to give an active voice and room for development to their female protagonists confers them a complexity of character that is remarkable no longer for their weaknesses, but for their wittiness and agency within their own experiences. Further parallel elements can be found between the retellings, such as the introduction of original female characters—the mother and Marylyn in Carter and Atwood's respectively—who are crucial for the resolution of each story, the rewriting of the fairy tale as short stories, as well as the time of their publishing, which was only four years apart.

These intertextual similarities can be partly explained through the similarities found in the authorship of the short stories: both of their authors were¹ white middle-class women born in the late 1930s in two of the most advanced countries of the time, England and Canada. The experience of World War II (1939-1945) and its socio-political aftermath had thus been a part of their upbringing, and by the start of the second wave of feminism, they already were fairly

¹ At the time of the publication of the short stories. Angela Carter died in London in 1992 to cancer, while Margaret Atwood is currently based in Ottawa, Canada.

successful writers with an established political consciousness. In this regard, both Carter and Atwood had witnessed the regression of women's power in the years following the war, that is, the expectation on women to remain housewives after having tasted self-sufficiency and economic independence.

Taking their backgrounds and ideology into consideration, their Bluebeard rewritings (amongst other of their works), could have been an attempt at denouncing society's latent "problem that has no name"², as well as manifesting the need for a new narrative model that illustrated the essence of this new womanhood. In her book *Secrets Beyond the Door* (2006), Maria Tatar points out that

this was, after all, a time of crisis, when women in great numbers were marrying men who were real strangers - soldiers going off to war. [...] It was also a time when women were realizing that the men to whom they had been married were becoming strangers. After experiencing the dark horrors of combat, veterans returned home disaffected and alienated. [...] The Bluebeard story, with its heroine who lives with a sinister stranger in a remote castle, provided the perfect plot apparatus for working through the marital crisis experienced by men and women whose lives had been unsettled by the war experience. (89-90)

In the attempt to reflect a new feminine mentality and marital angst, "The Bloody Chamber" and "Bluebeard's Egg" avail themselves of a great myriad of narrative strategies and devices, the most notable of which is Carter and Atwood's unexpected use of the Grotesque in language and visuals, as voiced by their female protagonists. Given that the women in these tales are presupposed to be beautiful, young, innocent, and pure, their outspoken morbid fascinations and normalized use of grotesque expressions create a clash that is hardly dismissable for the 21st-century reader.

² "the problem that has no name"⁽⁹⁾ is Betty Friedan's main concern in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and is described as the widespread yearning and feeling of perpetual unhappiness felt by middle class white women after WWII in their roles as wives, mothers and housekeepers exclusively.

The Grotesque primarily deals with the distortion and transgression of boundaries, —whether physical, psychological or in between—through the use of exaggeration and association of extraneous ideas (Gremlin 2016). It combines that which is familiar, with what is unfamiliar, “evoking [...] a sense of radical alienness of the world” (Steig 253), hence frequently eliciting feelings of disgust and discomfort, as well as sympathy and humor. Thus, the Grotesque essentially reflects a state of liminality where reality meets fantasy, and comedy meets horror. Northrop Frye, Wolfgang Kaiser, and Mikhail Bakhtin³ established the grounds of the grotesque in contemporary literary theory, though its nomenclature and usage date back to centuries prior to Perrault’s infamous fairy tale.

Despite “Bluebeard”’s violent nature, the fairy tale written by Perrault contains two central instances where the Grotesque can be identified: the first one takes place with the introduction of the character whose blue beard “made him look so ugly and frightful that women and girls alike fled at the sight of him” (Tatar “*The Classic Fairy Tales*” 225). The second one occurs in the conception and discovery of a chamber with “all the women Bluebeard had married and then murdered one after another” (Tatar 226) hanged up in the walls. The descriptions offered in the tale about characters, settings, and scenes are generally vague, which confers the reader a greater command of the visuals of the tale. As a result, the Grotesque, though visible in the language choice, is primarily enhanced by virtue of the reader’s imagination.

As opposed to Perrault’s association of the Grotesque with death, in Atwood and Carter’s rewritings, the Grotesque usually takes place in juxtaposition to sex, and it is too a defining feature of the characters’ personality and psyche. What is more, the Grotesque appears in these rewritings more frequently than it does in the original tale, and interestingly enough, the vast majority of instances take place before the discovery of each Bluebeard’s secret.

³ In *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1957), and *Rabelais and His World* (1965) respectively.

In “The Bloody Chamber”, the protagonist—and Carter in turn—, emphasizes a connection between sexuality and violence, suggesting that “[t]here is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer” (Carter 27). The constellation of fairy tale and pornographic imagery is grotesque yet highly successful in the tale, given that both elements belong to the realm of fantasy; they are both designed for intellectual and erotic excitement respectively. Part of their synergy is the result of the protagonist’s avid articulation of the Grotesque in moments where she is least expected to do so, as is the case of the protagonist's attempted loss of virginity:

Enough! No; [...] his movements seemed to me deliberately coarse, vulgar. [...] And yet, you see, I guessed it might be so - that we should have *a formal disrobing of the bride, a ritual from the brothel*. [...] He stripped me, *gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke* - but do not imagine much finesse about it; this artichoke was no particular treat for the diner nor was he yet in any greedy haste. He approached his familiar treat with a weary appetite. And when nothing but my scarlet, palpitating core remained, I saw, in the mirror, *the living image of an etching by Rops* from the collection he had shown me when our engagement permitted us to be alone together ... the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. And so *my purchaser unwrapped his bargain*. (Carter 15; emphasis added)

Here, the Grotesque manifests itself in the images evoked by her unconventional description and comparison of the sexual encounter, openly considering herself to be an item of possession, a bargain, or an artichoke, ready to be helplessly consumed by her possessor.

Rather than meeting the standards of lady-like language decorum, her discourse resembles that of a proper libertine like Sade himself, employing analogies that illustrate Bluebeard's desire as being driven by two of the most primitive passions: sex and food. It is extremely vulgar, and still, it conveys the eroticism of the scene, which is ultimately framed by Félicien Rops' "Les Sonnets du Docteur" (1893).



Figure 1. Félicien Rops' "Les Sonnets du Docteur" (1893)

In her book *Sadeian Woman* (2001), Angela Carter claims that erotic violence is "the area in which censorship operates most defensibly [as] it reveals too clearly that violence has always been the method by which institutions (and men) demonstrate their superiority" (22). Carter's use of grotesque images in relation to sex can thereby be understood as representative of the "psychological mutilations performed in the name of love [that] take place in a privacy beyond reach of official censorship" (Carter 23). That is, the sexually-Grotesque here, non-existent in Perrault's version, is employed to strip the privacy of such public secret by openly displaying the normalized practice of non-consensual sexual relationships and the various forms of violence undergone by women within their marriages. It presents the extreme idea of erotic violence, in which the the bride is reduced to a mere

prey, and the groom to its hunder. This association is already introduced in the first pages of the text, and is recurrent too in later feminists texts, such as Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion*⁴ (1987), and Janice Galloway's "The Meat"⁵ (1992):

His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat. [...] I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in tie market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it... (Carter 11)

The need to portray this and other scenes by means of the Grotesque can be directly linked to the increasing yet unrecognized cases of domestic violence during the years following the war. According to Sarah Leavitt, the widespread opinion about violence against women in Canada and British Columbia at the time was that it was an acceptable way for men to treat women as it was a private matter, and just like in "Bluebeard", that women were to blame for being assaulted, a point of view which was supported both by society and the legal system (245). Despite the seriousness of the matter, Carter makes sure to include humor within this Grotesque in a way that derides the acceptance of male-on-female violence as absurd; notice the way in which the protagonist comments on marital customs: "And yet, you see, I guessed it might be so - that we should have a formal disrobing of the bride, a ritual from the brothel" (Carter 15). Though she is inexperienced in sexual matters, she still conveys the idea that Bluebeard is yet another unbridled man with an unoriginal craving for the female body, as if she were already knowledgeable about the acts of men, almost

⁴ Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* is historical fiction novel that focuses on Villanelle and Henri as they venture through Venice during Napoleonic times. In the first page too, it is established that Napoleon "[...] liked Josephine the way he liked chicken" (1). As it happens in "The Bloody Chamber" this comparison reduces Josephine to a piece of meat, a chicken, ready to be consumed by Napoleon.

⁵ Janice Galloway's "The Meat" is a work of flash fiction focused on a butcher who displays a piece of meat in his shop. The end of the story suggests that the butcher's wife had been the hanging flesh, as he saves its remnants underneath the marital bed. Again, this furthers the conception of the female body associated with an object of consumption.

insinuating that, just like any other man, Bluebeard cannot be expected to act any differently, because acting like animals is perhaps, the best men can do.

In “The Bloody Chamber”, the Grotesque is also articulated in relatively uneventful instances, where the plot is driven by fleeting images that foreshadow the action of the story. An interesting example is found in the association of the protagonist's gifted lilies, which to her, appear to be “arms, dismembered arms, drifting drowned in greenish water”(22) which make her bedroom look like “an embalming parlor. Those somnolent lilies, that wave their heavy heads, distributing their lush, insolent incense reminiscent of pampered flesh” (18). The regular use of Grotesque expressions and imagery on the protagonist’s part signals the normalization of violence, and how sensibility towards brutality or the lack thereof shape her existence and condition her behavior as well as her judgment. As a literary device, the Grotesque makes the reading unpredictable: it conveys a feeling of obliviousness, of constant hesitation, of discomfort, in which lilies easily turn into a funeral, or a choker of rubies into a “slit throat” (11).

Clare Beams notes that the bodily responses of characters to their situations make those situations feel personally real, which causes the reader to feel as if they were living through those experiences themselves. It is precisely because of the unpleasantness of the events recounted that Carter achieves to unsettle the reader. By doing so, she is able to denounce the character’s poor conditions in her state as a young, economically dependent woman, a situation that contributes to the perpetuation of male-on-female violence. It is through the protagonist’s lack of identity and relatability that Carter revisits Perrault’s misunderstood literary icon: a woman with no name, who is the voice of thousands of other women.

The final morals of Perrault’s fairy tale suggest that the unacknowledgement of the bride’s identity might be an act of humiliation, as if her name need not be remembered for her curiosity and disobedience were just one among many other cases of women being flawed:

“Curiosity, in spite of its appeal, often leads to deep regret. To the displeasure of many a maiden, its enjoyment is short lived” (229). Carter revisits the bride’s lack of identity in a way that makes the bride’s individualized experience with Bluebeard a generalized one. In this way, the bride might purposely be left unnamed so that other women are able to relate their experiences with gender violence to that of Bluebeard’s wife, thus giving voice to thousands of women whose “curiosity” has been socially misunderstood as a flaw rather than a survival instinct.

Margaret Atwood achieves a similar reader response in “Bluebeard’s Egg” through Sally’s insight on her marriage to Ed. Contrary to Perrault’s and Carter’s protagonists, the protagonist of “Bluebeard’s Egg” is an adult woman, long established in the business of marketing, and with an apparent steady marriage to her surgeon husband Ed. Initially, Sally is presented as an anti-hero, resembling Bluebeard's character more than that of his wives. Such an impression is the result of Atwood’s narrative choice, which solely comprises Sally’s point of view. On several occasions, Sally refers to her husband as “stupid Ed” (Atwood 100), and multiple remarks are made regarding Ed’s stupidity (100-104). In addition to her meanness, Sally is also characterized by her frivolity, which oftentimes is displayed through the Grotesque:

"I mean," she said to one of the leading surgeons, "basically it's just an exalted form of dress-making, don't you think?"

"Come again?" said the surgeon, smiling. The heart men think Sally is one hell of a tease.

"It's really just cutting and sewing, isn't it?" Sally murmured. (Atwood 108)

The macabre depiction of cardiac surgery as dressmaking is reminiscent of Perrault’s Bluebeard’s degradation of the corpses of his wives into mere ornaments of the chamber. Atwood creates a clear discernable duality in the leading characters of her rewriting: while

Sally is malicious towards Ed and especially to other women, Ed, on the other hand, is introduced as being a complaisant people-pleaser, who puts up with Sally's gossip for the sake of their marriage. Nicholas Ruddick challenges Atwood's driven perception, and argues that Ed is "a serial philanderer who uses his status as "heart-man" to enchant and seduce women by pretending to be stupid and helpless [; he] emotionally dismembers them one by one as a result of his contempt for them as mere bodies to be manipulated and fixed by his surgical gizmos" (352). Indeed, behind Ed's unproblematic passivity is sheer disinterest: Ed has been married three times, the failures of which he resists acknowledging, and within his marriage to Sally, he seeks other women to the point of being unfaithful with Sally's best friend Marylyn.

Ruddick's observation creates a new paradigm, which is supported by the evaluation of Sally's life as Ed's wife: she is constantly made aware of her replaceability, which causes her to internalize fear and violence—whether physical or psychological—as the only constant in her unstable life. This state of permanent anxiety brings about images of the Grotesque, that is, images that depict Sally's innermost horrors regarding her idea of marriage:

What if he wakes up one day and decides that she isn't the true bride after all, but the false one? Then she will be put into a barrel stuck full of nails and rolled downhill, endlessly, while he is sitting in yet another bridal bed, drinking champagne. (Atwood 102)

Though Sally's life is at no point in the short story physically threatened, she finds herself in an analogous situation to Carter and Perrault's Bluebeard's wife. Hence, the protagonist's use of the Grotesque can once more be understood as the result of the normalization of the oppression exerted by Ed as well as other men in Sally's life, a practice that is connived by the institutions they uphold. Beyond the frame of the short story, Carter and Atwood's purpose in the writing of the Grotesque goes to show how rather than

remaining passive victims, women appropriate the violence and monstrosity that is wielded against them by male villains (Scholz).

What is more, the Grotesque as voiced by these women with contrasting backgrounds—in regards to the authors, as well as to their characters—is also employed to portray women as complex beings capable of being morally corrupted. The following scenes explore feminine desire and eroticism, and present women as sexual beings driven by sexual impulses, the shapes of which reveal distinct phantasies on each woman's sexual experience:

"That's it?" said Sally dubiously. Her heart looked so insubstantial, like a bag of gelatin, something that would melt, fade, disintegrate, if you squeezed it even a little.

[...] "That's wonderful," she said. [...] this transaction, this whole room, was sexual in a way she didn't quite understand; it was clearly a dangerous place. (Atwood 110)

In this fragment, Sally's inexplicable attraction is presented to the reader through the narrator's focalization on her. While "Bluebeard's Egg" illustrates the peculiarity and miscellany of women's sexual desires in the depiction of Sally's arousal at the literal sight of her own heart, "The Bloody Chamber" does so in the use of sexual language and innuendos throughout the text, as voiced by the young bride:

"[My satin nightdress] had slipped over my young girl's pointed breasts and shoulders,[...] and now teasingly caressed me, egregious, insinuating, nudging between my thighs as I shifted restlessly in my narrow berth. His kiss, his kiss with tongue and teeth in it and a rasp of beard, had hinted to me [...] of the wedding night..." (Carter 8)

Merja Makinen suggests that the purpose of including sexually grotesque imagery is to "argue for a wider incorporation of female sexuality, to argue that it contains [a] whole gamut of 'perversions' alongside 'normal' sex" (12). This might have certainly been the purpose of Carter and Atwood's writing about female fantasies in grotesque terms, as well as the explicit

disclosure of “unconventional” sexual tastes, as it corresponds with the discourse of women’s sexual liberation that was popular at the time of the publishing of the short stories.

The sexual revolution was a movement born in the United States that quickly spread overseas from the 1950s to the late 1970s. It revindicated women’s sexuality outside the status of child-bearers and housewives, in addition to advocating for genuine sexual liberty where women could explore polygamy, group sex, sexualized sadomasochism, and other sorts of sexual encounters as forms of pleasure and excitement. Just like these rewritings do, it also exposed male objectification and dehumanization of women, and denounce rape, pornography, and sexualized violence amongst others (Hooks 148-150).

In addition to resonating with contemporary feminist discourse about sexuality, the adoption of particular grotesque imagery and lexicon disrupted the traditional values of gender and domesticity—both as literary characters and female writers—long established by Victorian literature. One of the most remarkable literary tropes of the Victorian era was the portrayal of women as either idyllic angels or vicious demons. The Victorian ideal of womanhood came to be through Coventry Patmore’s poem “Angel in the House” (1854), which provided a description of the qualities of a perfect wife (his wife) for all women to look up to. The expression “Angel in the House” was later reintroduced into literature by Virginia Woolf, who provided a rightful definition of the term. According to Woolf’s *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays* (1974), the “Angel in the House”

was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] She was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all —I need not say it— she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty; her blushes, her

great grace. In those days —the last of Queen Victoria— every house had its Angel.
(156)

As previously seen, middle-class women were expected to embody the “eternal feminine virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, [and] politeness” (Gilbert and Gubar 23). While men were held to little standards in regards to their partners, women needed to show submission and devotion to their husbands so as to be considered respectable. It need not be elaborated in great detail for plenty has been written about the nineteenth-century English novel (Gilbert and Gubar 1979; Watt 1984; Gorsky 1992; Langland 1995; Harrison and Fantina 2006). However, Sarah Kühl does an outstanding work of synthesis in her article “*The Angel in the House and Fallen Women: Assigning Women their Places in Victorian Society*” (2016). As Kühl notes, sex was not a topic that was openly discussed, as it was not regarded as something that ladies should enjoy. Many girls did indeed live in total ignorance until the day of their wedding and disrobing. Marital sex was a duty, which at least in theory served the sole purpose of procreation, not something to be indulged in for pleasure (173-174). Characters such as Jane Eyre in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Adèle Ratignolle from Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) are modeled after the 19th-century Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House.

The standards presented by Patmore and later by Victorian decorum fetishize an ideal of womanhood that is virtually infeasible in real-life circumstances. Following Kühl, there was almost no way for middle class women to escape these labels, since they either complied with social expectations and became some sort of chaste, obedient domestic angel or they almost certainly fell within the category of a fallen woman (176). Fallen women were oftentimes referred to as prostitutes, an umbrella term which included not only sex workers but any woman who failed to comply with the set guidelines, including mistresses, unmarried women, and autonomous women. Recovering the status of a respectable woman having been

deemed a prostitute was practically impossible and had a direct impact on the economy and quality of a woman's life. Furthermore, women who dared to rebel against this status quo even risked being put into asylums for being 'mentally unstable' (176). Some semi-autobiographical novels such as Jennifer Dawson's *The Ha-Ha* (1961), Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* (1961), and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) demonstrate that the wrongful clinical association between non-standard female identity and mental illness was a practice still used during the 20th century.⁶

Perhaps, one of the greatest problems of the Angel in the House vs. Fallen Woman dichotomy is that they are intrinsically co-dependent: one needs the other in order to be. If the wife "adheres to the ideal, as a status symbol, the mistress [provides] the things that a marriage with such a saintly figure is probably lacking, each in a way creating a greater demand for the other" (Kühl 177). These ideals persisted throughout the 19th century until the early 20th century, when new feminist models of womanhood emerged. These advocated for a "a gradual shift in roles, concerns, and tastes of women" (West 55). It is during this time that the ideal of the "New Woman" became particularly relevant, especially through its popularization by authors such as Henry James. The New Woman departed from the Angel in the House by seeking female economic independence, self-realization through creative endeavors, education, and freedom of choice in a myriad of areas ranging from sexuality to fashion (West 1955; Freedman 1974; Ledger 1997). The socio-political crises after WWII, however, elicited a renewed interest in the concept of domesticity and the role of women as housewives that resulted in a regression of ideals similar to the ones of the Victorian era. This might explain why still in *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*⁷, which was published little over a century after Coventry Patmore's poem, Virginia Woolf wrote: "Killing the Angel

⁶ For further reference, see Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985).

⁷ In "Bluebeard's Egg", Atwood alludes to Sally's heart as being like "uncertain moth" (110). This could have been a direct reference to Woolf's essay, given that the short story openly employs intertextuality.

in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (238). This is precisely what Carter and Atwood do in their respective rewritings.

On the one hand, Carter and Atwood challenge the idea of domesticity as a safe place. They do so by rewriting a classic fairy tale such as "Bluebeard" in which the chamber is a form of representation of violence at home and the perils that exist in blind trust and/or devotion. On the other hand, by denouncing the acts of men like Bluebeard and Ed, while drawing attention to female horror as well as desire, Carter and Atwood illustrate this new model of womanhood that did not necessarily fall into the "Angel in the House vs. Fallen Women" configuration. It presents realistic 20th-century female characters that are morally flawed and yet deserving of love, that have agency in their lives, and that have a say within their marriages. More so realistic, outside the literary world, the stories signal how male-dominated history fails to keep up with women; how, even after life-changing historical events, women are still subjected to the same societal standards of the 19th century, and how in the failure to fulfill these, women face the same oppression as in Perrault's 17th century. Carter and Atwood's modern Bluebeard's wives break with literary conventions and depart from the prevailing Victorian ideology. They are no longer "desirable because [they] are beautiful, passive and victimized" (48) as Dworkin suggests; it is not their beauty, their youth, or their sexual purity that Bluebeards are keen on, but their "potentiality for corruption", and their "face, with its promise of debauchery only a connoisseur could detect" (Carter *TBC* 11, 20).

As has been previously discussed, World War II posed a point of inflection for the collective thought of nations such as Canada and the United Kingdom; so much horror had been lived and left in such a short time, that people developed a high tolerance to brutality and were less sensitive to violence. This resulted in feminist writers such as Carter and Atwood having to increase the elements of shock value in their works in order to unsettle

their readers enough to get their messages across. The Grotesque was the ideal literary device, as it provided the necessary elements to discuss ordinary circumstances in extraordinary terminology. In this sense, the Grotesque “heighten[s] the reader’s awareness of the threat posed by the sadomasochistic underpinnings of much of decadent culture, which created a dangerously passive and readily victimized feminine ideal” (Kaiser 32). The versatility of the Grotesque also allowed Carter and Atwood to create characters that were representative of contemporary women and their values, aspirations, desires, and thoughts.

Thus, the factors that could have contributed to the authorial choices of reproducing and enhancing the array of grotesque images in “The Bloody Chamber” and “Bluebeard’s Egg” essentially correspond to the social changes at the time of the works: World War II and its socio-political aftermath on women, the general normalization of violence in and out of the domestic sphere, the oppression of women under patriarchal institutions, as well as the feminist discourse, and the sexual liberation movement of the late 70s.

By drawing attention to well-known contemporary issues, these rewritings need not end with morals since the morals are already embedded in the grotesque narrative. Their extraction demands an exercise of rationality on the reader's part to understand both the humanity of women and the inhuman acts that had been (and still are) performed upon them.

2. Change in Genre

As seen, in analyzing the usage and purpose of the Grotesque in Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” and Margaret Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg”, both short stories require a reading that takes into consideration not only elements found in the texts—such as the narratology and the Grotesque—, but also elements that surround the texts, as is with their authorship, the time of inception, and the politics of the era. These considerations render a better understanding of each text as a unit. With this lateral thinking in mind, in looking *at* the text, there is also a distinct contrast concerning narrative length between the rewritings and

the original tale resulting from the change of genre. Given that fairy tales such as Perrault's "Bluebeard" are essentially perceived as children's literature (Fadiman 1976; Johnson & Louis 1987; Wood 1999; Zipes 1988, 2013), the change of genre might indicate a shift of the target audience. In this way, genre becomes, too, a literary device that conveys another meaning to the texts. This next section discusses a further understanding of "The Bloody Chamber" and "Bluebeard's Egg" by presenting a historical insight into the genres of the rewritings, as well as the original tale.

Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" was published in 1697 as a fairy tale, although similar versions of the tale had been circulating orally for years (Tatar 220). Given the lack of factual records, it is virtually impossible to ascertain the exact origin of fairy tales. However, the acclaimed scholar in 20th-century literary studies on historical fairy tales Jack Zipes identifies the birth of fairy tales as a sort of "literary appropriation" of the tradition of oral storytelling, namely the *Zaubermärchen* or wonder folk tale ("The Changing Function of the Fairy Tale" 7). Fairy tales need not necessarily feature fairies, yet they began to be regarded as such with their written transcriptions by the 17th century, the first being credited to Marie Catherine d'Aulnoy in 1690 for "L'Île de la félicité".

Fairy tales take after wonder tales in an attempt to fulfill the demands of an increasingly literate audience formed by aristocracy and the middle classes. In the process of descriptive writing of a corpus of oral stories, motifs, conventions, and plots eventually prescribed what would be the principles of composition of the modern fairy tale. The perennial study *The morphology of the Folk Tale* (1968) by Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp provides a structural analysis of the genre precisely by laying out thirty one basic themes that comprise the model narrative. The scope of his study covers the archetypical *dramatis personae* of the tales (villain, helper, princess, hero), as well as the typology of plot devices undergone by such characters (absentation, interdiction, departure, resolution). Still, the definition of the

genre is problematic given that French medieval secular literature such as Marie de France's *Lais* and Chrétien de Troyes' chivalric romances (late 12th century) feature most of the themes listed by Propp without being considered fairy tales themselves.

In any case, the literary regularization of fairy tales caused the genre to diverge from its original aim as a domestic art. According to Zipes, most modern fairy tales find their inspiration in the stories told by nurses, governesses, and other uneducated women in care for children (15), making the fairy tale an inherently feminine and lower class genre in its conception. Already in Perrault's preface to *Contes de Ma Mère l'Oye* (1697) can an admittance to the stories belonging to feminine voices be found: "[Peau d'Âne] est conté tous les jours à des enfants par leurs gouvernantes, et par leurs grand-mères"⁸ (10). What is more, there is a long tradition in European literature to adopt symbolic female narrators in popular collections; this can be traced in Perrault's *Mother Goose*, Grimms' *Gammer Grethel*, or d'Aulnoy's *Mother Bunch*.

The symbolic adoption of a female narrator is also recovered in Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" through the character of Bertha. In the short story, Atwood creates a metafiction where Sally is introduced to "Bluebeard" by attending a literature workshop:

"[...] now they are on Folk Tales and the Oral Tradition, and Sally is having trouble. This time, Bertha wouldn't let them read anything. Instead she read to them [...]. Since it was the Oral Tradition, they weren't even allowed to take notes; Bertha said the original hearers of these stories couldn't read, so the stories were memorized. To re-create the atmosphere," said Bertha, "I should turn out the lights. These stories were always told at night." (Atwood 116)

The depiction of a scene that recreates that of the original tradition indicates that Atwood was familiar with the origins of the genre. As Lewis Seifert points out, "women writers

⁸ "[Donkey Skin] was told to children everyday by their governesses and their grandmothers" (10).

dominated the vogue, with two-thirds of the tales published between 1690 and 1715 to their credit, which suggests that the genre offered them a means of expression and experimentation not available through other established literary forms” (460). In fact, it was Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy herself who coined the expression of present-day English “fairy tales”⁹. Despite women having laid the foundations of the genre, they were ultimately obliterated from both the literary canon, as well as the collective memory of the forthcoming centuries. In this sense, the incorporation of a character such as Bertha might be an attempt on Atwood’s part to display a faithful representation of the origins of the genre, one that restores the centrality of the female narrator to the production and circulation of short stories.

The relevance of fairy tales died out soon after its mainstream popularization due to the abundant and continuous coverage of fairy tale content, as well as the appearance of other forms of narration which shifted the interest of readers into more mature themes following the deeming of fairy tales for children exclusively (Fadiman 1976; Johnson & Louis 1987; Wood 1999; Zipes 1988, 2013). Still, the 20th century was witness to the revival of fairy tales by the hands of Walt Disney Studios and their film adaptations, which released a total of twenty one films in the period between the ending of WWI and the beginning of WWII (1918-1939). Tatar explains that “[f]airy tales transmit higher truths that help us navigate reality. More important, they hold forth the promise of escape to a better and more colorful Elsewhere” (*TCF* 9). To a great extent then, the appearance of these films in that particular moment can be explained by society’s need of reassurance of a potential future untorn by war after 1918. Movies like *Little Red Riding Hood* (1922), *Cinderella* (1922), or *The Ugly Duckling* (1931) all show characters capable of overcoming their fatal misadventures, hence infusing the viewer with a glimpse of hope in their own hardships. Through the gendering of the characters however, these films furthered a very specific image of what femininity and

⁹ In French “Contes de fées”, presumably from Old French *faerie* (12th C.) which takes after *fae* “fay”, from Latin *fata* “the Fates”, plural of *fatum* “that which is ordained; destiny, fate”.

masculinity ought to look like. As a result, many second-wave feminist authors were triggered by the sexist discourse favoured by Disney and normative fairy tales in turn, which motivated the discussion of the genre in academia—such as the infamous Lieberman vs Lurie discussion¹⁰—as well as the production of alternative reinterpretations, amidst which Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood’s short stories can be found.

It is interesting to consider Carter and Atwood’s choice to rewrite “Bluebeard” not as a fairy tale, but as short stories. Tess Cosslet signals that traditionally, feminist fairy tale rewriting has aimed to preserve the format of fairy tales while modifying their implied values by adopting a set of moves; while some apply role reversal of the characters in the fairy tale, others opt for total estrangement from the original tale, which allows for a freer interpretation but begets problems of recognizability (84-85). In a way, Carter and Atwood opt for a completely different strategy by combining these strategies, and producing a rewriting that exceeds both the content and the length of the original tale.

These rewritings take the form of short stories, and just like fairy tales, short fiction takes its origin in oral folk tales, presenting itself as one of the oldest forms of literature to exist since the register of writing. Many scholars have attempted to provide a rightful definition of the genre, but have proved unsuccessful thus far. As Viorica Patea points out, “[a]ttempts at definition have been highly diverse: short stories have been approached in terms of unity (Poe, Brander Matthews), brevity, intensity and tension (Oates, Bader, Friedman, Cortázar), lyricism (Lukács, Moravia), theme (O’Connor’s “human loneliness”), insight, vision and mystery (Éjxenbaum, May, Rohrberger), hybridity (May, Pratt), fractals (Leslie Marmon Silko), and closure (Lohafer, Gerlach)” (8). Perhaps Sukumar Azhikode’s interpretation of short fiction captures best the commonality of prior definitions; according to Azhikode, short

¹⁰ In short, the discussion arose after Alison Lurie published “Fairy Tale Liberation” (1970), an article that declared fairy tales and folk tales beneficial to young girls given their depiction of women in unpopular tales. This sparked a rebuttal from Marcia R. Lieberman, who fundamentally disagreed with Lurie, claiming that regardless of the existence of counter fairy tales, popular fairy tales still acculturate women into traditional social roles.

stories are “a brief prose narrative with an intense episodic or anecdotal effect” (5). Before the modern conception of short stories, short fiction developed in a myriad of directions, all of them being characterized by the brevity of their stories and the simplicity of plot, as it is in legends, myths, fables, and anecdotes (Zipes *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales* 167) . This indicates that there is an intrinsic connection between fairy tales and short stories in their origins, which will be of relevance in the discussion of Atwood and Carter’s change of genre.

The early 18th century was witness to a temporary dying out of short fiction due to a number of reasons, including the emergence of the novel, and the appearance of movements like the *renaissance humanism* devoted to the revival of forms of classical antiquity. There was too, a great shift of perspective regarding the function of literature, which ceased to be considered as a recreational activity, and became instead a tool of self-expression following the awakening concern about secular issues during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. It was not until the 19th century that short stories saw their revival through *the modern short story*. The newly revised model departed from the realm of the fabular and fantastic, and offered a minimalist form of realism in accordance with the historical context of the century (Warde 156). G. K. Chesterton suggests that the modern comeback of short stories

“[...] is not an accident of form: it is the sign of a real sense of fleetingness and fragility; it means that existence is only an impression, and, perhaps, only an illusion. A short story of to-day has the air of a dream: it has the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood [...]. But when the story is ended, the people are ended. We have no instinct of anything ultimate and enduring behind the episodes. The moderns, in a word, describe life in short stories because they are possessed with the sentiment that life itself is an uncommonly short story, and perhaps not a true one” (69).

This shortness of the narrative that mirrors the brevity of life, the falsehood of a life altogether, is precisely what occupies Atwood and Carter in their respective “Bluebeard”

rewritings. These themes permeate their narratives through the Bluebeard motif itself, presenting brides whose lives are threatened by the revelation of a falsehood in their marriages. It is possible that Carter and Atwood's adoption of a genre that departed from the fabular and fantastic such as the modern short story had been an attempt at stressing the importance of the gender violence present in Bluebeard stories outside the realm of fantasy, that is, it could have been a way to take a fantastic tale and express a real concern for women.

In any case, the European revival of the short story in the 19th century was intimately tied to class and gender. There appears to be a strong masculine tradition in the genre¹¹, with the 19th century western literary canon¹² being composed essentially by either white men in possession of the economical means to take on writing as an activity of leisure, or by men haunted by financial difficulties whose income depended on their writing. Moreover, such re-emergence of the genre can be directly attributed to the surge of print magazines and journals, which popularized the genre amongst common people, therefore expanding their audience. Taking into consideration that “19th-century printing trades were overwhelmingly male-dominated” (Burr 48), and that the stories published in such periodicals were accordingly curated by men, the genre was monopolized by male voices, oftentimes depicting themes traditionally associated with masculine interests and/or concerns such as science and technology (Philip K. Dick and Nathaniel Hawthorne), economy (Mark Twain and Herman Melville) or violence (Edgar Allan Poe).

This apparent masculinity of the short story as a genre in opposition to the feminine tradition of the fairy tale is crucial for a further understanding of the rewritings outside their contents. Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood's change in genre can thereby be interpreted in

¹¹ Notice Guy de Maupassant, Gérard de Nerval, Alphonse Daudet in France; Heinrich von Kleist, Thomas Mann, E.T.A. Hoffman in Germany; Aleksandr Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, Nikolai Gogol in Russia. To the English-speaking world, short stories appeared almost simultaneously as in the rest of Europe, with narratives including those of George W. Cable, Bret Harte, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, or Mark Twain.

¹² As seen in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994).

three ways. On the one hand, it denounces the censorship of female voices in the fairy tale genre. It is an exercise of denunciation on the part of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood insofar as it draws attention to the lack of space for feminine voices in said genre. As suggested by their texts, Carter and Atwood achieve so by implicitly making the reader compare their rewritings with other versions of the fairy tale, the most populars of which have been written in fairy tale format by men. While Carter does so by using a setting that is reminiscent of that of Perrault's, Atwood does so by referencing Grimm Brothers' "Fitcher's Bird" (Atwood 117-118). This implied comparison allows Carter and Atwood to highlight the centrality of fairy tales such as Perrault's "Bluebeard" or Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird" to the detriment of other versions produced by female writers and/or storytellers. Consequently, it makes the reader aware of the virtual censorship of feminine voices in the genre, which ultimately resulted in the neglect of a feminine tradition both in the 16th century and the centuries to come.

What is more, this censorship makes visible male appropriation of fairy tales in what the literary genre concerns, as well as in the characters they depict in their tales, which oftentimes feature stories narrated by women, about women, and for women, despite being written by men (notice Alice, Cinderella, or Donkeyskin amongst others). In shedding light to male appropriation, Carter and Atwood in turn manage to highlight the hypocrisy of the patriarchy, which took all the value away from fairy tales by disregarding the feminine tradition as "worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip" (Carter *Book of Fairy Tales* 16) while appropriating it altogether.

On the other hand, the change in genre can be interpreted as a reclamation of space for feminine voices in and out of the genre of fairy tales. Although women writers have undeniably been part of the literary tradition between the 16th and the 20th century, this reclamation is a callout for female representation in contemporary fiction outside the

literature produced by Victorian authors such as the Brönte sisters, and Jane Austen, who, though subversive at the time in their representations of women, still put forward a specific image of both, female characters as well as female authors. It is through taking up a different genre for the development of their rewritings then, that the authors manage to reclaim a space for feminine voices in a patriarchal society.

With the use of the Grotesque in imagery and language, Carter and Atwood advocate for an equal status between genders as they display literary abilities and themes that surpass those expected for women at the time. As discussed in section one, they outdo the Victorian conventions about womanhood and femininity that had been reinstated in the 20th century after WWII¹³ by writing about women who have agency, who can be driven by obscure passions and desires. In writing such stories as women themselves, they manage to restore the humanity of womanhood: Women cease to be passive subjects, and objects of admiration to the male gaze. Instead, women become the agent in their own narrative (as characters and as authors), one which can not be reduced to the brevity of a fairy tale.

This idea is linked to the final understanding of the change in genre on the part of Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood. To reclaim the space for feminine voices inside fairy tales, Carter and Atwood's "Bluebeard" rewritings provide a multi-dimensional approach to characters and spaces that convey a feeling of reliability and truth to the facts explained. It is because both Carter and Atwood share the same gender, and consequently, the same oppression as their (main) characters that they are able to appropriate the "Bluebeard" motif as *their* story to tell, in a way that Perrault and other male authors could never be able to do in the same way. This exploration into the psyche of the characters had to be done through short stories, as the genre presents itself as similar enough to fairy tales, while offering the

¹³ See page 16 on the rise and decline of the "New Woman". For further reference, see Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (2008).

necessary space for development. In a way then, the change in genre is not only a literary device on the authors' part, but also a means to an end.

These three explorations might explain the intentionality behind Carter and Atwood's inception of their "Bluebeard" rewritings as short stories. Their rewritings of "Bluebeard" as short stories makes the censorship of prior women writers of fairy tales more pronounced, and manages to denounce the failure of society to recognise the significance of female contribution to fairy tales and literature as a whole. In a similar way, it reclaims a much-needed space for female writers in the masculinized genre of short stories, as well as the original status of female authors of fairy tales. Ultimately, their choice to rewrite "Bluebeard" as a short story is a means to an end; just like the use of the Grotesque as an intratextual literary device, employing a similar but longer genre as the short story allows the writers to reclaim the neglected feminine tradition of fairy tales in a wider space by providing insight on the characters depicted, while at the same time subverting gender roles in literature. The reality of women writers like Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter in the context of 20th-century short fiction calls our attention to the necessity of a feminism in fairy tales and other literary genres hitherto unrecognised.

3. Conclusion and Further Research

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" (1983) and Margaret Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" (1979) are two excellent feminist reinterpretations of Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard". As is with re-writings, these short stories modify the original plot by introducing and/or discarding elements such as characters or settings while preserving other elements, as it is with the Grotesque. Although present in all three texts, the Grotesque especially permeates the rewritings. This dissertation has attempted to explore the purpose of including and enhancing grotesque images and language in two feminist rewriting by two female writers.

Having analyzed the foremost instances of grotesque employment, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood use the Grotesque to resonate with coetaneous affairs of the 20th century. Through exaggeration and distortion of reality, the Grotesque manages to dethrone the sacrosanct status of several themes in order to shed light on social conflicts and maladjustments of the time. The articulation of grotesque utterances on the part of the leading female characters therefore serves the purpose of reflecting the normalization of violence in and out of the domestic sphere. The allusion to violence is also representative of the violence undergone throughout the first half of the 20th century on a world-wide scale. At the same time, the Grotesque resonates with the feminist discourse of the time of the publishing of the short stories. Finally, there is also an intimate connection between third-wave feminism and the sexual liberation movement of the 70s, which empowered women to freely unhinge their innermost desires regardless of the taboos attached to the practices. In the short stories, this is shown through the display of the Grotesque along sexual scenes and innuendos.

The act of writing “Bluebeard” variations with forefront female figures who are both verbally outspoken and yet deeply insecure challenges the Angel in the House versus the Fallen Woman configuration established throughout the 18th century, and reincorporated in the 20th-century by virtue of a regression to Victorian values after WWII. Carter and Atwood’s rewritings elucidate this reductionist and patriarchal view of womanhood while offering characters whose self-expression is beyond the decorum established by a sexist society; they are both and neither at the same time. Similarly, by writing feminine stories as women themselves, they are also creating a space for feminine voices in and out of the fairy tale genre. Following this train of thought, the change in genre of the rewritings can be understood as an attempt at denouncing the lack of female representation as writers in fairy tales as a result of male appropriation of the genre. At the same time, Carter and Atwood reclaim fairy tales as a feminine tradition by elaborating on the experiences, feelings and

emotions of their protagonists. This could only have been done through the short story, which provided the necessary room for development while preserving the essential characteristics of the fairy tale given the origins of each genre. Finally, this appropriation of short stories, a “masculine” genre, on Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood’s part exemplifies too the appropriation of fairy tales by the hands of male collectors like Charles Perrault.

As suggested in the introduction of this dissertation, feminist reinterpretations of “Bluebeard” in literature and cinema are varied. Although this dissertation has focused primarily on the use of the Grotesque and the change of genre in two particular 20th rewritings of the tale, there is still much room for discussion regarding “Bluebeard” and fairy tales. A possible line for further research in academia would be to explore the idea of gender mimicry and gender performativity on the part of Bluebeard’s wives in different Bluebeard retellings. Carter and Atwood engage with this idea by writing about wives’ forced behaviors in the presence of their respective partners (Carter *TBC* 8, 35; Atwood 110, 113). Alternatively, as a popular text, it would also be interesting to encourage further reinterpretations of the tale through creative writing workshops to keep the ongoing debate on gender, violence, domesticity, disobedience and sexuality. Find attached in the section entitled Appendix of this dissertation my very own take on the matter.

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Appendix

“The Caretaker” (2022), Lara Talavera

Long, long ago there was once a lovely young girl of no particular beauty, but charming yet the same. Her hair was untamed and her features harsh, and she had a coarse skin too familiar with the sun. Though young of age, she possessed nothing but a small hut where she lived all alone. No parents, siblings, or relatives, for she had been visited by Death herself many a time. Her only luck was to have been blessed with the talent of caretaking: she surely knew how to keep the lilies and bluebells blooming in the garden of the church. It was there where she had seen him for the sixth time, dressed in black, wandering lonely as a cloud. Though she knew little of him, she did know him to be one of the wealthiest men on the land. But apparently love seemed not to stick to wealth as easily as she had expected.

Now this gentleman was a busy one. He had been married not one or two, but six times, all of them unsuccessfully. His wives had all left him little after their engagements, some, it is said, to elope with other gentlemen, others to be guarded by His hand. This time, he found himself in the cemetery to mourn the loss of his sixth wife, victim to a tragic accident of food poisoning. As she approached him now, she could not help but be entranced by his voice, as the words left his mouth in solitude. “Were you but lying cold and dead, and lights were paling out of the West, you would come hither, and bend your head, and I would lay my head on your breast; and you would murmur tender words, forgiving me, because you were dead”. Oh, *He wishes his beloved were dead!* She loved this poem, it brought her comfort to think about love even in death. After all, she was an orphan, so death was no stranger to her. To see that man there, to hear those words in his voice, it brought her so much empathy. She felt an instant bond that united them, both by sorrow and by love. Who else could understand her if not someone already familiar with loss?

Little after a month of the encounter, they found themselves at the church again, wedding bells proclaiming the love of the new couple. She no longer lived in the hut, since his husband had arranged a special nest for the lovebirds where he assured her she would be provided for. This new place was furnished to her desire, with rose gold bathroom tiles and a mattress frame as tall as the room allowed, and in the kitchen she found exotic spices from all over the world. Everything was to her liking but for a little room his husband had insisted on not refurbishing. Still, all she had ever dreamed of was becoming a reality. All those books and old stories proved not to have been an invention after all. Ah! To be his wife was nothing but a reassurance, a validation of one’s own worth. She finally felt as alive as ever, and she would not allow anything to disrupt her happiness.

Meanwhile, his work kept him busy in his office, forcing him to leave her unattended, sometimes for days at a time. The latest of his duties involved a trip, which was expected to last two weeks, for he had been called abroad. “My darling”, he said, “find yourself at comfort in my absence. Bake some pastries for the neighbors, make yourself busy in the garden if you desire, but do not enter that one room, my room. You will find nothing of interest in there.” She bowed down in agreement as he kissed her cheek. She was conflicted by the petition. Why should he keep secrets to her? She had confided in him, she did not understand what was there to hide. Love must have no secrets.

Soon after he was gone, she did everything she could to distract herself, yet she could not shake off the thought of seeing that one room, at least just once. At last was she at its door, an enticing silence summoning her to enter at once. “Whatever lays behind this door can only make our bond stronger. Love must have no secrets”. The room was bright, rays of light shining down on a marble desk. Eight golden chairs were displayed along the table, four on one side, three on the other, and a crowning one in the middle.

Six of the chairs were occupied by six women, all sitting perfectly still, lifeless. The corpses were all in different degrees of decomposition, the oldest one barely a couple of bones. Instantly, she knew these corpses to be of all her predecessors, the women her husband had once married. At first she was horrified, her knees shaken and a progressive tremble taking over her. She could not understand how this room had been here all along, six corpses left unnoticed. No smell, no blood, no nothing. They were all dressed in beautiful night gowns, their hair braided at the back of their skulls, their hands folded on their thighs. It was indeed a pleasant sight to see, she thought, were it not for the fact that these women were obviously dead. The initial fright progressively turned into confusion, and at last, she found clarity. As if respecting their peace, she slowly left the room and resumed her housewife chores.

Early the next morning, the gentleman was back. Due to unforeseen circumstances, his presence was no longer required abroad, or so he said. “Now tell me darling”, he said with a knowing smile on his face, “what have you been up to?” “Oh dear! I must confess, I have seen what is in that room, our room” responded she. To this, he was thoroughly surprised. Not by the act, but by the admittance of it. Tenderly, she continued, “I know what you have done to these women, and I know that all of them belong where they are now.” He could not hide his confusion. He stepped back, opening his mouth as if to say something. “You needn’t say a word. I do really understand. I know these women were not able to love you as I do. They were not able to give you the love you required. You have done so much for us, and still I know they disobeyed you. And though I have failed you in the same way, I admit my disobedience before you as a proof of true love. I understand that it had to be done. Love cannot blossom without trust, and now that we no longer have secrets, nothing will ever separate us”.

His heart started to race, blood clotting his eyesight. He was terrified by her lucidity, but most of all, he was terrified to be her husband. Now, he realized that it would just take a small mistake on his part to be seated along his exwives. How was he supposed to act from then on? And most importantly, how would he be able to love, he who had not felt love for a single moment in his life?