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Revealing the Wizard Behind the Curtain: Deconstructivist Fairytale Politics in the Works of Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, and Angela Carter

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of Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, and Angela Carter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

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Revealing the Wizard Behind the Curtain: A Brief Introduction to Fairytale Politics

After being conditioned as a child to the lovely never-never land of magic, of fairy queens and virginal maidens, of little princes and their rose bushes… of the magic wand, and the faultless illustrations…all this I knew, and felt, and believed.
Just when we think we’ve closed the cover on our childlike excursions into the fantasy land of fairytales, the echoes clamor: “Once upon a time...happily ever after” ring the familiar voices. These narrative bookends resonate in the cultural/collective (un)consciousness long after we’ve ostensibly abandoned our ‘juvenile’ idealisms. Indeed, though these phrases signify reassuring closure, in the realm of the ‘real’/the realm of the reader, their power inflates exponentially, erecting closed circuits of meaning and ‘innocently’ offering cultural scripts that document and subsequently inform lived experience. As folklorist Jack Zipes observes, fairytales are “the lies that govern our lives” (Fairy Tale 4). These cautionary and moralizing fables are not the innocuous forays into fantasy that we tuck away when we’re through; fairytales, in fact, are so ingrained upon consciousness and awarded so great a power in the ideological imaginary that they become an inescapable lived mythology, a phantasmic narrative presence made manifest in regulatory regimes of culture.ii Stock phrases, characters, and plotlines of the genre—the damsel in distress, the charming prince, the benevolent king, the wicked witch, and the fib that there will invariably be a happy ending despite the horrors that precede it—are so instantly recognizable as to seem instinctual in the playing out of culturally-produced identities and scripts.

Literature as it is commonly understood today cannot be severed from the socio-political and historical contexts from which it erupts; why, then, do contemporary readers continue to place blind faith in the presumed authorless-ness or universality of the fairytale genre? Why do readers still turn a blind eye to the normalizing operations of
tales that rear the children of nearly every culture? For there is an author; yes, there is a
locus of power that determines the ways in which fairytales are written, read, and
marketed—perhaps even more significantly in a post-Disney age, wherein the genre
transcends the confines of text and comes to represent not only a narrative or a series of
images, but an entire field of consumption in the ideological economy.

The ‘ideological economy’ I take to mean the finite possibilities of lived
experience as they are policed in restrictive cultural contexts; that is to say, the front-lines
drawn by those in power necessarily assert a position of dominance, thereby conjuring
rules concerning the production and consumption of ‘proper’ or ‘acceptable’ discourses
and performances. Stanley Fish, as an example, notes that the shifting state of literary
criticism as an institution is determined by an unspoken agreement regarding ‘canons of
acceptability,’ in that certain interpretive strategies can be logically ruled out in the
reading of a text, based upon the fundamental knowledge and trends currently available
for any given piece of work. Likewise, Fish notes that “readings once considered
ridiculous are now respectable or even orthodox” (349), for modes of interpretation and
the data available for criticism remain mutable. Literature engages in a supply and
demand economy, and readings of a text are produced as discursive capital, and
consequently either rejected outright, or consumed and re-produced once more.
Likewise, there are, particularly when one looks at a patriarchally-defined cultural system
(where else can one look?), specific ‘canons of acceptability’ in the economy of political,
intellectual, sexual (and so on) ideologies. All becomes marketed for consumption; and
these markets consume all.
Leading folklorists like Zipes and Maria Tatar attempt to trace the historical evolution of the genre, most notably identifying demarcated repositionings of its discursive production. Take its shift from the oral tradition to the literary: what, looking closer, were the cultural politics lurking beneath such a transition? For one thing, orally performed tales are of course accessible to all classes and characters of people, as education and literacy rates among the lower classes frequently denied them the possibility of entrance into texts. Moreover, the written word is indisputably a more fixed avenue of storytelling; where oral tales thrive on the fluidity of provisional performance, a tale stamped into text faces a far stickier fate in assuming the guise of permanence. While an oral tale’s defining hallmark is its mutability and capacity for an array of transmutations from performance to performance, the text, no matter how often one returns to it, will always hold within it the same series of letters and words, the same characters and plot points, conflict and resolution. Additionally, when a tale is cemented in the mold of text, who decides what or how it is expressed and subsequently interpreted?

The emergence of the fairytale as a literary genre in European courts signaled a development wherein “educated writers purposely appropriated the oral folktale and converted it into a type of literary discourse about mores, values, and manner, so that children and adults would become civilized according to the social code of that time” (*Art of Subversion* 3). In its textual translation through a literary filter of normalization, the fairytale genre inherited the cultural power to indoctrinate and civilize its readers; for, as Angela Carter inquires, “isn’t the function of a good fairytale to instill fear” through regulatory discourse (*Shaking a Leg* 452); are myths and folklore not, in fact,
“extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree” (SaL 38)? The oft-accepted notion of the universality and authorless-ness of fairytales (or alternately, the glorification of figureheads in the genre like the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Walt Disney as benevolent tale-collectors) sweeps the deliberately-produced and problematic narrative politics of fairytales beneath the proverbial (magic) carpet. Of course, the rise of the Disney empire in the 1930s signaled a shift in which fairytale narratives became located not simply in the prison of printed language, but in the more enduring realm of the visual. One need not be literate to partake in the celluloid tales, but the institution’s socializing function can now be inflicted upon a wider audience. The form becomes increasingly constrictive, for now “pictures deprive the audience now of visualizing their own characters, roles, and desires” (Art of Subversion 200).

This is not to say that the genre has become an inevitably slavish creation of closed discourse; despite the hurdles over which one must leap, there remains the potential to rediscover the ‘magic’ of the genre, particularly in deconstructive projects toward revealing the wizard, so to speak, behind the political curtain of narrative production. As Zipes contends, there has always been a radical or three working within the confines of the fairytale institution, and this subversive project continues contemporaneously. Notably, modern feminist theorists and authors have commandeered the dangerously monolithic fairytale institution to challenge essentialized gender politics, rethink the limits and possibilities of narration, and effectively destabilize the universalized and indoctrinatory foundations of fairytale discourse. An evaluation of this sort of feminist labor is, then, my project here, though it is perhaps a more local one. I intend to unveil metatextual and intertextual reverberations among three (feminist or not)
female writers—Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, and Angela Carter—who have seized fairytale narratives by the jugular and reimagined them in ways that deconstruct both narrative and gender politics. More specifically, I hope to resituate a uniquely feminist vantage point in the works of these authors as they envision a breaking free from cultural chains and reconceptualize autonomously-defined female subjectivity and multiply-desirous (dare I say queer?) female sexuality.

I say “feminist or not” in relation to these authors because in at least the cases of Atwood and Sexton, their relationship with the ‘official’ feminist movement has been, at best, an arduous and problematic one to decipher. Sexton, as evidenced in the memoirs of her daughter Linda Gray Sexton and close friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin, was acquainted with the movement, even going so far as to give her daughter a copy of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. We must bear in mind, however, that it is easy to raise female writers—like these three, like Virginia Woolf, like Sylvia Plath—up, flag-like, as feminist martyrs, despite their more apparent position along the fringes of the feminist movement. Woolf, despite her feverish engagement with feminist principles and criticism,\(^iv\) took issue with the explicit label of ‘feminist,’ which, she supposed, implied a political methodology of gender separatism and an enforced ‘mannish’ demeanor in the women involved. Plath and Sexton, contemporaries who studied (and became passing friends) under Robert Lowell, likewise experienced their formative years mere decades before the rise of the ‘Second Wave’ of the feminist movement. Plath, of course, committed suicide in 1963, effectively evading the movement’s ascent to cultural prominence, while Sexton, as far as any direct evidence reveals, never declared a position in one way or the other. She did, however, live on until 1974 (like Plath, she took her
own life) and had, we can presume, at least a passing knowledge of the political rumblings of feminism in the late 60s and early 70s.

Atwood’s engagement with feminism has proven an even trickier point of contention; at varying times, she has alternately lashed out at interviewers assigning the term to her and her work, or conditionally self-identified with limited tenets of the larger feminist project. Atwood’s relation to feminism, however, appears quite pertinent in its parallels to her body of work. Just as she refuses to privilege extremist valuations or absolute moral systems in her texts, Atwood disavows the trappings of identity politics—and, since her mounting celebrity (primarily in Canada) in the 70s and 80s coincided with the boiling over of the ‘Second Wave,’ her fear of being caught up in essentialist claims and hierarchic identity structures (even within the movement) was not entirely unfounded. In this way, and in the deconstructive projects of her texts, Atwood remains relevant to a post-modern framework of literary criticism. As Atwood cautions, she is “always looking behind, over [her] shoulder” (qtd. in Becker 28); she refuses to be caught with her back to the wall. Atwood’s conceptualization and fear of the feminist label in relation to creative celebrity appears most lucid in her semi-autobiographical novel *Cat’s Eye:*

> What I have to say is not altogether what she wants to hear. She’d prefer stories of outrage…people my age are supposed to have stories of outrage; at least insult, at least putdown. Male art teachers pinching your bum, calling you *baby,* asking you why there are no great female painters, that sort of thing. She would like me to be furious, and quaint. (*Cat’s Eye* 96)
Atwood’s abrasiveness towards identity politics seems not so much a disavowal of a feminist project itself, but to the trappings inherent in taking up, as it were, a branded flag for isolated political or identificatory positionings. Nor is it an entirely unwarranted anxiety; even a card-carrying, oft-polarizing feminist author like Angela Carter has been reconfigured, post-mortem, in precisely the restrictive categories Atwood so fears: critics are inclined to label Carter as either an obscene and violently-radical wild woman, or as the benevolent ‘fairy godmother’ of magical realist literature. As Merja Makinen observes, this “mythologizing needs watching; it is always the dangerously problematic that are mythologized in order to make them less dangerous” (Makinen 2). Indeed, Carter’s deliciously difficult body of work—from fairytale detonations in *The Bloody Chamber*, to playfully mythic freak show *Nights at the Circus*, to pornographic polemic *The Sadeian Woman*—actively engages with riotous feminist-political theory and the deconstructive ventures of post-modernist narrative, though I often wonder whether any issue or theoretical framework escaped Carter’s discerning and bawdy pen. It is, however, her peculiarly panoptic and erratic imagination that leaves Carter vulnerable to the stabilizing labors of critics attempting to undermine Carter’s self-identified position in the de-mythologizing business. Despite their efforts, Carter remains in her raucous texts an unclassifiable visionary of deconstruction, who demands from her readers as much intellectual and creative engagement with her texts as she herself puts into them.

And as I said, I hope to resituate the works of each author alongside the continuing endeavors of feminist-literary deconstruction. For, whatever guarded tower (or perhaps, bloody chamber) critics attempt to lock Atwood, Sexton, and Carter into, each—with or without the aid of evidentiary political leanings—participates in the almost
necessarily transgressive act of female writing. Hélène Cixous contends that “writing is necessarily the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought” (“Laugh” 337); in no more than putting words to the page, these female authors commit cultural treason in the asphyxiating bell jar of patriarchal society. More specifically, that these women take the fairytale institution to task implicitly links their revisions to a political move of narrative deconstruction. As Carter proudly declares, “I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (SAL 37). As the genre is inextricable from its cultural production within the skeleton of patriarchy, the very undertaking of re-writing male-defined texts (particularly those with as immense capital in the ideological economy as myths and fairytales) from a vantage point in female consciousness signals a political destabilization of textual foundations.

This is not to reconfigure Atwood’s, Sexton’s, and Carter’s respective treatments of re-visionary or de-mythologizing work within yet another monolithic category—as Judith Butler might say, that kind of critical move merely shifts the opacity of perception (Butler 302)—for it goes without saying that they re-appropriate the genre with vastly different tactics and produce texts with irreducibly distinctive outcomes. Nevertheless, with this disclaimer in hand, each author defangs and deploys fairytale tropes and mythos in a deliberately critical effort to break the vice grip of male-defined narratives and cultural scripts on lived experience. So without further ado, we descend into the fantastical and fearsome forests of feminist fairytale revision—but as Carter cautions in “The Erl-King,” we must remain alert, for the “woods enclose. You step between the fir
trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up” (“The Erl-King” 186). Keep both eyes open.
I’d read too much folklore—gold that turned to coal in the morning, beauty that caused your hands to be cut off—not to know that there would now be trickery and hazards, and some hidden, potentially lethal price to be paid.

—Margaret Atwood

I. “That’s what you get for being food”: Fairytale Consumption and the Female Body Economy in Margaret Atwood’s The Edible Woman

As Marian MacAlpin remarks in The Edible Woman, “we all have to eat” (63), and it goes without saying that consumption is an inescapable fact of human survival. But if eating is survival, then those who control food and consumption wield the power to dominate individuals, communities, and nations. The phrase “kill or be killed” can easily translate in more primal systems as “eat or be eaten”—and so it frequently plays out. Offred’s ‘master’ in Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale shrewdly comments that “better never means better for everyone…it always means worse, for some” (211). No act of consumption is spotless; there is always something—or someone—that must be eaten. While this project focuses on only two of Atwood’s texts, try finding one among her oeuvre that doesn’t contest social and ideological systems of domination. Whether looking at The Handmaid’s Tale, a feminist’s nightmare in which the conservative right gains control of the United States and commandeers lower-class women’s bodies as baby-vessels, or at Cat’s Eye, a semi-autobiographical study of the power politics of female interpersonal relationships, an indictment of power relations is never merely peripheral while Atwood’s at the helm.

Images of food/eating in literature and popular culture often unequivocally associate the body with edible goods—why is it we rarely stop to consider the
implications of so-called terms of endearment like ‘sweetie,’ ‘sugar-pie,’ ‘baby-cake,’ or ‘honey’? More brutally, Tony of Atwood’s *The Robber Bride* compiles “a mental list of…synonyms for death. *You’re toast, you’re fried, you’re wasted, you’re steak, you’re dead meat.* It’s odd how many of these have to do with food, as if being reduced to nutrients is the final indignity” (*RB* 42). Of the sugary-sweet list, take note: many of these technically unisex ‘sweet nothings’ are deployed expressly against the female body. Further, the culturally-produced Western beauty myth enforces palatability upon the female form: the ideal woman is frail as a rail, with inflatable breasts, too-luscious lips, too-narrow hips, and required to acquire an assortment of other equally unattainable traits. These ‘desirable’ displays are functionally united, intended for the arousal and satisfaction of the straight male libido, and though breasts and butts and lips are in many cases rather large in this myth, Woman is always more acceptable when occupying less space. When she is put on display and kept inept, silent—what else were Snow White and Sleeping Beauty but breathtaking blow-up dolls in glass coffins and upon marble slabs? Naturally, women take up less space when they eat less, and less, and less, until they are so emaciated as to nearly be dead.

In fairytales, consumption, both of food and (more disturbingly) of bodies, brandishes formidable authority in the underbellies of many stories. If these tales act as markers of an economy of ideological consumption, wherein cultural scripts are produced, utilized, and reproduced within normalizing systems of power, where does more explicit devouring fall within this framework? And if in fairytales consumption signals a wielding of power, eating in these tales is markedly differentiated along a gender code. For fairytale men, eating signifies self-sustainability, virility, and power;
men eat quickly, voraciously, and confidently. For their female counterparts, eating is either a non-issue (or a non-action) or a wicked deed; women should not, under any circumstances, dine freely.

Think back to such classic fairytales—those that school children in ‘proper’ virtues and illustrate ‘unforgivable’ crimes—as “Hansel and Gretel,” “Snow White,” “Rapunzel,” and “Sleeping Beauty.” Hansel and Gretel are abandoned by parents who cannot even afford to feed themselves; the children are abandoned in the woods, and, believing themselves doomed, happen upon a crone’s edible abode. The siblings devour everything in sight—but as retribution, the crone squeezes the grubby little babes onto the dinner menu. Snow White’s heart is to be served, seasoned and braised, to the wicked queen—all for her being the fairest in the land. And let’s not forget that terribly poisonous apple she chomps through! Rapunzel, likewise, is bartered by her parents to (yes) another crone for no more than a head of rampion. Even Sleeping Beauty, comatose and eternally beautiful, is evidently unable to eat a thing. The pattern emerges: women that eat are unforgivable; they are wicked and cannibalistic crones, or mothers villainized for simply surviving. In Hansel and Gretel, the mother takes the fall for abandoning the children, while the father’s complicity with this act is ignored, or forgotten. The damsels-in-distress of these tales, those that eat, find the action so potent as to be fatal. It is no coincidence that Snow White’s poisonous apple evokes the icon of biblical Eve and her ‘fall’ to temptation.

Two such classic tales, “Bluebeard” and “The Robber Bridegroom,” situate the politics of consumption within a more literally lethal and cannibalistic frame; and in each, these brutal impulses are inextricable from marital relations, marking this flesh-eating as
a sexual cannibalism—erotically-charged violence. To briefly illustrate, “Bluebeard” tells of a nobleman with two strange traits: a ‘frightfully ugly’ beard of the cerulean variety and a penchant for chopping up curious wives. In the most common variant, Bluebeard’s third wife is given a set of keys and allowed access to all but one—that which unlocks her husband’s forbidden chamber. Overpowered by curiosity, just as were her predecessors, the bride enters the room, only to discover the vanished wives bloodied and suspended from hooks like so much butcher’s meat. The bride drops the key in the blood flooding the floor, and subsequently finds that nothing can bleach away the key’s stains. Naturally, Bluebeard discovers her naughty transgression, threatens to dispose of her in the Robespierrian-style; she locks herself away in the highest tower of the castle and awaits salvation at the hands of her conveniently capable brothers. They turn Bluebeard’s threat back upon him, and the bride reaps the rewards of having a very rich, very dead husband.

In “The Robber Bridegroom,” a young girl is engaged to be wed to a rich suitor, who implores her to visit his home in the sinister woods. On arrival, a caged birdie warns her that she’s entering a murderer’s house. If that weren’t foreboding enough, the bridegroom’s elderly maid cautions that she will be killed and eaten unless she allows herself to be hidden. The clever girl follows the obvious advice. A band of robbers, including the girl’s husband-to-be, return to the house, making good on the promises of the bird and the crone by bringing a young girl back for dinner—only this girl won’t be doing any eating. They summarily baste and devour her. However, in the attempt to procure a ring from her finger, they sever the unfortunate phalange from the rest of the hand, and it launches into the frightened fiancée’s bodice. The old woman convinces the
robbers to look for it in the morning, offers them drugged wine, and she and the girl make their grand escape. The wedding day arrives, and the guests of the ceremony exchange stories in a Chaucerian communal tale-telling ritual. When the bride’s turn comes, she recounts a dream, one curiously akin to her visit to the robber’s den. The bridegroom punctuates her tale with the phrase “Darling, it was only a dream,” but at the end of her story, the girl displays the severed finger, and the bridegroom and his cannibal compatriots are put to death.

The examples of ideological and physical consumption are countless, but a clear framework is laid. And such a framework, given enough cultural capital, metamorphoses into a master narrative—the sort of narrative Margaret Atwood attempts to ‘un-master’ or destabilize in her own work. In Atwood’s first published novel, *The Edible Woman*, the central conflict lies between protagonist Marian MacAlpin and, you guessed it, the question of consumption—who does it, who controls it, and how to subvert it without keeling over in the process. From the very start, Marian’s cultural and personal victimization is illustrated in relation to consumer culture; she is a market-surveyor for an advertising firm, itself depicted as food: “The company is layered like an ice-cream sandwich, with three floors: the upper crust, the lower crust, and our department, the gooey layer in the middle” (*EW* 14). Marian, administering and revising questionnaires in this asphyxiating sandwich, is simultaneously allied with a system of ceaseless production and consumption; her position identifies her, not as a desiring individual, but as a mediator/translator between consumer and consumed. Marian is capable of conducting surveys and responding to inquiries and complaints, but she does not or cannot actively participate in the process.
Marian’s position at Seymour Surveys, where she has the sense of “being subject to rules [she has] no interest in and no part making” (EW 17), foregrounds the narrative world beyond the professional sphere as one violently dichotomized between those that consume and those who are themselvesdevoured. This dialectical cultural struggle, as mapped by the ‘cannibal bridegroom’ motif of “Bluebeard” and “The Robber Bridegroom,” is further construed as a specifically gendered warzone. Men devour; women, it would seem, are the featured entrees on the menu. Ever-fearful of ideological or political hard-lines, however, Atwood blurs this boundary in many instances throughout The Edible Woman, as in Marian’s roommate Ainsley and her paramour, Duncan. But Marian’s function as the ambivalent wild-card, whose ‘illness’ is inextricable from her female social and biological body, figures her conflict within the topography of an edible war of the sexes.

For men, in culture and in fairytales, consumption and eating signal “coded expressions of power” (Parker 349), and the men of Atwood’s text are no exception. Marian perceives her fiancé Peter alternately as a merciless hunter (EW 82), a carnivorous wolf (315), a cannibal (59), and a stalker (318). Peter, the all-consuming mouth, is rising in his law firm like a balloon (65), but just as he seemingly inflates, Marian’s breathing room inversely tightens. The first instance in which Marian perceives Peter as a viable threat to her existence is while on a double date with Ainsley and Marian’s friend Len Slank, a hypermasculine womanizer. Hoping to impress Len with his own feats of aggressive ‘maleness,’ Peter recounts an experience hunting rabbits. As he spins the tale (marking both speech and murder as masculine traits by barring the women from the conversation), Marian imagines the scene: “Peter stood with his back to
me…his rifle slung on his shoulder…the anonymous trees, splashed with blood, the mouths wrenched with laughter. I couldn’t see the rabbit” (EW 82). Marian’s anxiety at the rabbit’s absence is telling, for it is as though Marian is the rabbit; Peter, she believes, will hunt and eviscerate her once she is in his grasp (via thechokehold of marriage). Peter’s violent reminiscence provokes her to excuse herself to the restroom, where she is shocked to discover she is nauseous and has been crying. This dissonance between Marian’s bodily reaction and mental recognition marks the first time in which she experiences a mind/body split, which we’ll discuss at length once the stage has been set.

Atwood’s treatment of the consumer role in Peter and in Len is particularly discernible, as critic Emma Parker points out, through displays of brutal physicality. Men in Atwood’s texts, notably those that threaten through masculine privilege, are repeatedly and deliberately shown baring or exercising predatory teeth (Parker 360). It is, so they say, a ‘dog-eat-dog’ world, and in The Edible Woman, violently masculine characters like Peter and Len exhibit their teeth to signify voraciousness and power. While photographing a panicking Marian, for example, Peter’s “mouth opened in a snarl of teeth” (EW 315); in another, Len, after explosively quarreling with Ainsley, “smiled, showing his teeth”—though Marian’s initial fear is that he will strike her (EW 311). These displays associate men and their all-consuming mouths with perceived and actualized violence—and because these exhibitions are mapped by gender, they implicitly signal violence deployed more specifically against women. Like the bride in “The Robber Bridegroom,” Marian fears the potentiality for her own demise between Peter’s molars and canines.
Marian’s anxieties related to the ‘cannibal bridegroom’ motif of fairytales—the primordial “fear of devourment,” as Angela Carter suggests (BYB 168)—rise to a fever pitch in a scene markedly resembling the bride’s discovery of Bluebeard’s bloody chamber in the classic tale. Marian and Peter host an engagement party in her apartment, and throughout the evening, Peter literally stalks Marian with his camera in the attempt to capture her in an uncharacteristic slinky red dress. Marian flees its monstrous lens, passing through a labyrinthine series of doors in a great get-away. Through these doors, Marian encounters a variety of fearsome visions of Peter, all imparting potential future experiences of married life with him. “Everything seemed to be slowing down” in Marian’s dreamlike journey (EW 314). She first stumbles upon a balding, pot-bellied and suburbanite vision of him; later, still balding, but donning a chef’s hat and wielding a frightening fork (perhaps preparing to serve the missing rabbit). When she seeks herself out in the garden beside this Peter, “she wasn’t there and the discovery chilled her” (EW 314). Passing through further doors, Marian finds through each yet another terrifying Peter, who finally (and in reality) violently flashes his camera at her, with teeth—yet Marian’s instantaneous perception is that this camera is a meat cleaver. Like Bluebeard’s bride, Marian’s voyage through the corridors and strange doors indicates either a search for or an escape from the ‘real’ Peter and the ‘true core’ of her relation to him. Common to all of Marian’s interactions with Peter and, to a lesser extent, with Len and Duncan, is an almost instinctive terror inextricable from gendered dichotomies of eater and food.

But what of the women? Marian is of course not the only female figure of the novel; her friends Clara and Ainsley provide powerful and bizarre alternatives to Marian’s occupation of a liminal feminine space. As we’ve noted, consumer culture and
the fairytale mythography enforce rigid dualities upon their inhabitants; again, we come to the question of ‘eat or be eaten’—or in fairytales, there is either Good or Evil, the Daring Prince or the Damsel in Distress, the Benevolent Godmother or the Wicked Crone. In short, if you’re trapped in a fairytale, you will be tip-toeing the tightrope of one extreme or another. While Marian’s struggle is one of discovering a balance between autonomy under and submission to culture, in her friend Clara and her roommate Ainsley, we see the consumed/consumer binary made violently manifest. Marian and Ainsley visit Clara early on in the novel: she is introduced as “holding her latest baby somewhere in the vicinity of what had once been her lap” (30). Marian and Clara herself conceptualize the mother-role as one of subjugation; Clara’s children, like Hansel and Gretel, are referred to as “little leech[es]” (31) that subsume their mother’s corporeal and psychic autonomy. She warns Marian and Ainsley to “never believe what they tell you about maternal instinct” (33), and her own is conspicuously absent despite the omnipresent pitter-patter of little feet.

Marian is preoccupied with the frantic and the bodily minutiae of the scene. Clara’s small-scale zoo is colored by references to defecation, urination, and violence—the babies are vacuous, miniature geysers, discharging excretions from all orifices upon their mother, and Marian, seemingly fearful of contamination, offers assistance, but only “up to a point” (33). Clara complains of the instability of her “bloody stomach” (33), conjuring a link between childbirth, the female body, and mutilation, all of which ring ambiguously terrifying as Marian’s unease rises. Julia Kristeva contends that “the most powerful location of abjection in the development of any individual is the maternal body,” for the maternal body is the most profound bodily space in which boundaries
between subject and other are corporeally blurred. Marian’s inability to distinguish Clara’s infant from what had ‘once been’ her lap engenders the question of Marian’s own physical subjectivity. In being confronted by Clara’s abject maternal body, Marian likewise confronts the potential for her own body to be subsumed by the parasitic other (the child), to be intricately and biologically tied to a tiny future-subject. Moreover, Marian’s narrative experience thus far construes Peter as the phallic violator of her body; so not only does she begin to fear that he will literally consume her, but that the offspring he can potentially infect her with will do so to a more violently abject extent.

Clara thus presents one logical fate for the other passively (or hyperactively) feminine women in the text. In one example, Marian’s coworkers, the so-termed ‘Office Virgins,’ understand that their boss, Mrs. Bogue, “regards pregnancy as an act of disloyalty to the company” (21). Even this surface transgression of the consumer/consumed dichotomy (for a woman compels other women to avoid consumption at the mercies of the marriage institution and childrearing) fits into the system on closer analysis. Mrs. Bogue, a married woman herself, only compels these women to avoid devourment by men so as to be more efficiently consumed by their careers, in which they provide ornamentation for the same consumer culture around which The Edible Woman is constructed. In any case, while under the domesticated and domesticating influence of Marian and Peter’s engagement party, even the Office Virgins preen and prepare themselves, expecting “a version of Peter to walk miraculously through the door, drop to one knee, and propose” (301). Like a fairytale, it would seem, where dashing princes (or frightening Bluebeards) ask for the virgin damsel’s hand, knowing nothing about her, except that they happen to have stumbled upon her in a glass
cage or concealed behind a wall of thorns. This sort of woman, in turn, cannot act except to allow her own abduction—that is, if she’s capable of conscious consent, a curiously pervasive problem for fairytale ‘heroines.’

Alternately, Marian’s roommate Ainsley—despite her insight into Clara’s paralyzed existence—makes it her mission in the narrative to assume the role of a single mother, at whatever cost. The expense in this case is the bodily integrity of Marian’s friend Len Slank. Ainsley intends, like the erotically carnivorous men of the novel, to appropriate Len as sperm donor, so as to conceive a child and subsequently expel the fertile womanizer from her life. Ainsley’s ploy, moreover, functions performatively in two fashions: first, she dons the costume of the *nymphet*, the infantilized virgin, as a way of luring unsuspecting Len into her web. Marian views this guise with distaste, commenting that this “latest version of [Ainsley]…was like one of the large plump dolls in the stores at Christmastime” (81). And as with these mass-produced dolls, Ainsley cannot deviate from her shiny plastic identity-prison if she hopes to ensnare Len. A deliberate and studied melodrama of chaste femininity, Ainsley’s routine reinscribes dangerous iconographies of passively sexualized child-women, like Nabokov’s Lolita or various fairytale heroines. This performance, too, seems inextricable from the image Ainsley hopes to reproduce through its staging, for the cultural figuring of the Single Mother boasts as reductive a performative framework as that of the nymphet.

In her second enactment of performativity, Ainsley performs ‘under the sign’ of masculine consumer; she disguises her function as the cannibal ‘bridegroom’ behind the theatrical sheen of the ‘pure’ bride, as it were. Her erotic devouring of Len, rather than disrupting the binary order of the system, merely manipulates its veneers (as in the
theatrical role of the nymphet) and reverses the gender dynamics of the power differentials. This reversal in turn inevitably fails to expand or subvert the limits of the consumer/consumed dichotomy, for though Ainsley commandeers the ‘masculine’ act of sexually cannibalizing men, she has merely shifted the site of domination; the system remains intact. Indeed, a figure like Ainsley takes on an even more problematic position in this sort of system, because it is easy to imagine her as one who, by ‘reclaiming’ her body through sacrificing the easily-dismissed womanizer, has fulfilled the stereotypically ‘feminist’ function. She’s brought down the big, bad man and sports newfound ‘Girl Power’! In this way, however, Ainsley’s selfish and unethical actions in the narrative ‘shore up’ the system in a more insidious fashion, for they reify ideological and embodied forms of domination through surface-level ‘progressive’ moves.

Exposed to such models as these, it is little wonder that Marian conceptualizes the gendered body as a site of anxiety. In a seemingly self-reflexive move on Atwood’s part, Duncan’s roommate Fischer later expounds upon this anxiety through a discussion of the latent content of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*: he says that “‘everybody knows *Alice* is a sexual-identity-crisis book…One sexual role after another is presented to her but she seems unable to accept any of them’” (248). Like Alice in Fischer’s analysis, Marian is prey to a chaotic culture in which the only roles available to her prove either dangerously limiting or literally destructive; she has by now encountered a series of ‘master narratives,’ none of which seem to fit. Rather than aligning herself with the voracious consumers of the novel (like Peter, Ainsley, Len, and even Duncan), or with the inert women (like Clara, the Office Virgins, or Ainsley’s nymphet-role), Marian goes
the way of the wild card, rejecting each oppositional mold and searching for an in-between space in which to evade the systems of domination at hand.

Marian’s anxieties concerning the marriage institution and its insistence upon female subordination thus compel her to her first reactionary measure, an either unconscious or involuntary systematic rejection of food items from her diet. This ‘trouble,’ Marian’s ostensible ‘problem that has no name,’ is diagnosed by Peter and Ainsley as a rejection of her femininity (EW 96 and 354, respectively). But this phrase—‘rejecting femininity’—must be unpacked. Where several critics tie Marian’s food-rejection to latent sexual anxieties—T.D. MacLulich, for example, believes that “Marian fears destruction by sex” and remarks on the possibility of “childhood [sexual] traumas” that might generate terror towards femaleness and sexuality (MacLulich 188)—they fail to account for both Marian’s consensual sexual affair with trickster-figure Duncan and Atwood’s subtle push for subversion through Marian’s plight. Many critics are inclined to confine Marian to the victim-role, but this fails on two levels: first, a critical strain that views Atwood’s protagonists as passive victims or fallen women too-superficially condenses her crafty texts into cardboard cutouts of themselves. Secondly, the approach fails to employ a broader analysis of Atwood’s oeuvre, which more visibly illuminates a pattern of first-victimized and subsequently subversive female characters. Marian’s food-rejection in a culture assailed by a consumer-consumed duality is in and of itself a sort of subversion. As Susan Honeyman, in an analysis of fairytale consumption culture, comments, “ideologies of domination, conflict, and absorption invite extremes—both binge habits and food rejection” (Honeyman 202). These extremist moves, rather than
passively accepting the social order, signify internalized rebellions against dominant
cultural scripts and regulations.

While Marian’s extravagant baking/eating of a cake modeled after herself at the
end of the narrative seems a particularly potent subversion, her food-rejection throughout
the text, though to some extent a form of self-mutilation, also serves as resistance against
Marian’s perceived cultural chains. If Marian is the literary inheritor of the brides of
“Bluebeard” and “The Robber Bridegroom,” the wasting away of her body diminishes
her edibility to Peter and to culture (no one likes a lean carcass when planning the feast!).
Additionally, Marian’s apparent ‘panics’ throughout the narrative, linked to her inability
to consume, mark flights not so much from herself but from the all-seeing eyes of Peter
and consumer culture. After the aforementioned rooftop double date, Marian
inexplicably flees the restaurant, before being finally cornered by Peter and Len. They
force her back to Len’s apartment but, when left unattended for a moment, Marian finds
“something very attractive about the dark cool space between the bed and the wall” (90).
Crawling into this crevice, Marian remarks that she feels safer ’underground’: “it was
satisfying to be the only one who knew where I really was” (91). As with her food
rejection, Marian, increasingly powerless in life, takes control in the only way she
knows—through her body.

Even if we accept the diagnosis that Marian rejects femininity in rejecting food,
this “socio-political anorexia” (Davies 58) does not necessarily signify Marian’s
reification of her victimization. Her rejection of discursively-produced femininity refuses
the male-defined female ‘social body’ thrust by phallocentric culture upon her. Because
women are defined in this culture as bodies and as sex em-bodied, Marian undergoes
what Emma Parker terms a psychic split—an internalized severing of mind and body—as a method of self-preservation. Parker elaborates that this split is marked in Atwood’s heroines who “try to distance the experience of victimization and protect some aspect of their selfhood by psychically removing themselves from their bodies” (Parker 366). Like Joan Foster of Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, who fakes her own death and reconfigures her external appearance and identity as an escape from the suffocation of her marriage and the pressures of celebrity, or Elaine Risley of *Cat’s Eye*, who discovers a method of inducing out-of-body experiences and fainting as a method of avoiding the tortures of her female ‘friends,’ Marian mutilates her exterior as a way of severing her selfhood from the site of the dismembered female social body.

As with many Atwoodian heroines, however, this psychic split proves destructive; Marian’s food-rejection will inevitably lead to starvation and death. But it is along this precipice that Marian achieves her subversive overthrow of the system at hand. Reaching an emotional crisis with Peter, Marian acknowledges that she must take action, that “What she needed was something that avoided words” (346). If language is the foundation of culture—generated within phallocentric systems dominated by and advantageous for men—Marian must approach her debasement from a site beyond the grasp of language and its politics. Marian’s baking of a cake modeled after herself functions doubly: she avoids the sticky system of patriarchal language by ‘speaking’ in a manner that ironically plays into ideological constructions of Woman as body/sex, and creates an iconography of herself that tackles her consumption-deficiency head-on. If her text is the cake-woman, Marian successfully escapes the prison of language; if she successfully consumes this ‘text,’ she likewise overcomes her ‘nameless problem.’
Marian signals her re-appropriation of power through physical exhibition: “She grinned into the mirror, showing her teeth,” much like the men of the text (348). And though the display is superficially coded masculine, Marian’s teeth-baring is informed by her nascent critical awareness of the cultural codes through which she stages the action.

That the cake is an approximated icon of Marian makes manifest the ‘othering’ process she has undergone—the cake-woman serves to out the ‘Other in the Self’ inasmuch as it manifestly documents the female social body imposed upon Marian. Earlier, she imagines her dolled-up image as a pastry: after being dressed like a storefront mannequin for Peter’s “Robber Bridegroom”-esque party, Marian remarks that “they treated your head like a cake: something to be carefully iced and ornamented” (268). By literally molding an icon of her hitherto ‘othered’ body, Marian undertakes the task Hélène Cixous sets out for women writers—Marian ‘writes the body’ insomuch as she consciously constructs a physical representation of her culturally-maimed subject position. The cake-woman, frilly and pink and ornately-arranged, embodies the male-defined femininity Marian has been unwillingly obliged to occupy; the cake-woman is literal object, a role Marian fearfully and increasingly watched herself devolve into. To clarify, Hélène Cixous maintains that the woman writer “lays herself bare…she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she’s saying” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 263). Marian’s configuration of the cake-woman in her image, then, propels her into self-authorship; the cake-woman is Marian’s text to the extent that it materially documents her culturally-induced trauma and subsequent psychic splitting.
While it seems that Marian reifies this psychic splitting—she breaks her social body (the cake-woman) from her interiority in order to evade regulatory culture—it is in her ensuing act of ritual ‘self-cannibalism’ that Atwood suggests Marian’s positive integration of the other into the self. Rather than maintaining the internalized mind/body binary, her consumption of the cake-woman cites an awareness of the constraints placed upon women’s bodies in the cultural economy while simultaneously integrating this alterity within a sovereign subjectivity. As Cixous suggests of the woman writer, Marian must celebrate her identificatory hybridity: she must ever remain the “I-woman, escapee” (Cixous 261). Cixous’ woman writer is a hyphenated ‘I,’ for the ontological construction of ‘I’ can never intimate totalization, nor can Marian simply repress the cake-woman in the endeavor to totalize her own identity. In consuming the cake-woman, Marian recognizes the inherently provisional construction of identity and inscribes her feat of escapism upon her revolutionary text. Refusing utopic resolutions, however, Atwood ambiguously concludes *The Edible Woman*; we are not given to know whether Marian overthrows the culture in which she must remain. Marian may be left intact by the end of the narrative, but she is ‘whole’ only insofar as she self-consciously inhabits her ‘fragmentation.’ Marian’s recognition of her position as ‘I-(cake)woman’ imagines the very possibility of change, but there is no reassuring happily-ever-after to be had here—there is only, in the end, a brushing against subversion.

Part II: Barbie Doll Parts: *The Robber Bride*, Female Dismemberment, and Authorial Authority
Atwood’s *The Robber Bride*, like its immediate predecessor *Cat’s Eye*, is a text saturated with women’s power politics. At the narrative’s center quakes Zenia, a woman who superficially fulfills the function of the enigmatic villainess and is bent on obliterating the lives of the three protagonists: Tony, a Thumbelina-sized war historian; Charis, the psychologically-split survivor of sexual abuse; and Roz, a rags-to-riches Cinderella, post-‘happily-ever-after.’ Straddling the front-lines of genre, *The Robber Bride* toys with the supernatural hauntings of the Gothic tradition while weaving the intertextual thread of “The Robber Bridegroom,” the classic fairytale for which Atwood’s novel is distortedly christened. Atwood remarks in an interview with Charlie Rose that the novel was in part inspired by her concern that after World War II, the “great villainesses of literature” in the vein of Lady Macbeth and ‘femme fatales’ had “disappeared” (interview; 21 Feb 1994). She elaborates upon this anxiety in an essay entitled “Spotty-Handed Villainesses,” in which she caustically inquires “is it not…*unfeminist* to depict a woman behaving badly?” (*Writing with Intent* 126). Atwood’s answer, it would seem, is no. Enter Zenia.

Indeed, if Atwood’s revision of “The Robber Bridegroom” conjures a gendered reversal of the locus of power—wherein a *woman*, Zenia, cannibalizes the three ‘brides’ of the novel—does her novel then suggest that women might be complicit with power politics in a patriarchal society? How dare she! Such writings-off of ‘bad’ female characters, as Atwood suggests, fall prey to patriarchally-sanctioned Good Woman/Bad Woman binaries. Atwood insists that in an overtly feminist (some would argue *post-*feminist) age, “a female character could rebel against social strictures without then having to throw herself in front of a train like Anna Karenina; she could think the
unthinkable and say the unsayable; she could flout authority” (WI 133). Likewise, a female character can wage war against her fellow female ‘compatriots’—for if feminism has disrupted the ‘angel in the house’ identificatory cage, it must also allow that women aren’t invariably ‘good’ feminists. As a fictional figure, Zenia substantiates the potentiality of women turning against one another, and suggests that, while this should not be condoned, the possibility must be acknowledged if we don’t wish to reify the same oppositional dichotomies of femininity.

In looking at The Robber Bride’s implicit and explicit re-inscriptions of “The Robber Bridegroom,” a ‘three-pronged’ approach is perhaps useful: first, we will study feminist critiques of female cultural dispersion/dismemberment under patriarchal discourse, by way of the fragmentation of the three female protagonists in the novel and their relation to/with Zenia. Second, this fragmentation and relation will be re-imagined through a psychoanalytic analysis of psychological splits and the ‘double’ or doppelganger figure in the ideological imagination. Finally, we will conclude our journey through the tangled and brutal webs of The Robber Bride with an inquiry into and indictment of narrative authority and the fairytale master narrative.

Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote that a significant barricade against the women’s movement was the lack of “concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own…they live dispersed among the males” (de Beauvoir 15). Women, incapable of severing relations with their oppressors, are powerless to carve a space in the world order, or to produce a cohesive and self-sufficient troop. Women, in de Beauvoir’s model, are unlike other marginalized peoples in that they are necessarily
reliant on relations with their oppressors; “woman cannot even dream of exterminating the males” (de Beauvoir 15). As there has been no historical event or moment in which men won the global game of ‘king of the hill,’ women cannot imagine life before or free of subordination. They are unable to stake a flag at the past-moment in which the ball-and-chain clamped shut.

From the outset of *The Robber Bride*, the interrogation of history’s clutch on consciousness and its operation as a discursively-produced and oft-fictionalized narrative permeates the text. Tony notes as early as the first page that “Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unraveled” (*RB* 3). Tony’s role as war historian further marks both her and the text as documenters of battle narratives—here, the protagonists’ battle for survival with one another and, ultimately, against the baffling wraith of Zenia. We must keep in mind, however, that patriarchy—or more broadly, those at the top of the totem pole in hierarchic systems—cannot be located in a singular embodiment. Just as the category Woman is an ideological construct, and therefore, a sticky signifier that evades ‘essential’ definitions, one cannot naively hope to unearth some mad, misogynistic scientist winding the gears of capital-‘P’ Patriarchy. In Zenia’s case, we cannot expect to discover an objective truth concerning her motivations in masquerading as the ‘robber bride,’ nor are we granted comforting closure in knowing by the end of the text that the women will fulfill the desired ‘happily-ever-after’ following Zenia’s literal extermination. That Zenia is the vehicle of conflation for two of these totalizing functions—Woman and Oppressor—alerts us to the fact that the villains who culturally dismember women are not always so easily identifiable. Atwood herself contends that Zenia cannot function within the conventional architecture of patriarchal power plays;
she is in this sense beyond the boundaries of knowable systems of domination and must, then, be dealt with through new methodologies.

Following up on de Beauvoir’s contention, a system as insidiously enveloping as patriarchy leaves women, both in themselves and as a cultural group, discursively and literally amputated. For if women are constructed in such a system as the ‘Other,’ insomuch as men ideologically construe women’s positioning in the social order as “the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential” (de Beauvoir 13), there is, it would seem, a necessary fragmentation of women’s formulation of subjectivity. To be ‘The One’ in de Beauvoir’s terms implies independently-conceived identity; women as Other are always hindered, somewhat mutilated, in the production of a sovereign female self. This is nothing to speak of the cultural honor conferred upon severed individuation as opposed to so-termed relational identification. This developmental dismemberment of female subjectivity effectively diffuses women as a cultural group, for patriarchy, in an effort to maintain its position of unwarranted privilege, persists in the effort to defang female communities. The possibility of women gaining strength in numbers—despite their dispersion among ‘the enemy’—and building communities as women (again, we must be careful not to essentialize these culturally-produced identity categories) is the most frightening of spectacles to those dealing the cards of discursive power.

Of course, Zenia’s relation to Tony, Charis, and Roz cannot be defined through typical terms; they do not reside on one side of a binary against Zenia, nor does she assume the uncontested role of The One in the novel; but de Beauvoir’s framework is perhaps useful in analyzing the social foundations that compromise these women, and in Atwood’s later suggestion of female community-building. Atwood remarks in the
Charlie Rose interview that the men of the text, those that Zenia ‘robs’ the women of at various times and with varying outcomes, are no more than “loot.” Deprived of subjectivity and male-privilege in the novel’s female-centered war zone, male players are no longer the powerhouses holding the cards; it is Zenia, the morally and corporeally ambiguous harpy who poses as the “third godmother…a dark godmother, the one who brings the negative gifts” (RB 320).

Yet what are the gifts that Zenia—as dark witch/godmother (which itself blurs the good witch/evil crone dichotomy)—delivers to the narrative? Though Zenia is figured as a foreign invader—issues of imperialism and colonized identities are imbedded in the countless narratives assigned to and by Zenia—I am particularly fascinated by the possibility that Zenia signals a return of the repressed for the fragmented heroines of The Robber Bride. This approach locates the protagonists’ conflict with Zenia in the more frightening dominion of the interior; dismantling Atwood’s ironic depictions of supernatural and Gothic tropes, Zenia’s inexplicable presence now functions as the physical manifestation of the ‘other in the self’ of each woman. Atwood never totalizes Zenia’s irreducible narratives, nor does she implore her readers to seek out or settle on a definitive ‘story’ for Zenia. Rather, in positioning Zenia as the specter of the repressed, the novel’s power is found in the interlocking power of Tony’s, Charis’s, and Roz’s stories which are, in turn, linked and determined by the common thread of Zenia’s phantasmic and actual presence.

In terms of female psychic dismemberment, Zenia focalizes these intertwined experiences, because she is the figure around whom they assemble, but more significantly, she destabilizes their interpersonal connections, robbing them of both their
‘loot’ (their men) and their superficially totalized selfhood. Zenia, if we allow that she embodies the ‘other in the self,’ generates the terrifying emergence of the repressed/amputated shards of each woman’s selfhood. Moreover, “Tony and the others are unable to act effectively in Zenia’s presence because…she is ‘out of place’ in the symbolic order they inhabit. She is the real, that which exceeds the symbolic order, that which no signifier can represent” (Wyatt 42). Tony, Charis, and Roz, then, are paralyzed by Zenia’s return, because she is the ghostly and ghastly force that reminds them of their intrinsically maimed subject position; she exemplifies that which the women might have been or might yet become. The illusory conception of the inviolate self gains authority only through violent acts of disavowal, and Zenia’s surfacing—notably after she has been presumed dead—engenders a rippling/shattering effect upon their psyches.

It is worth detouring at this point to consider the ‘psychic splits’ each protagonist has already undergone, the past disavowals that grant them these outwardly ‘whole’ selves—those which crack beneath the pressure of Zenia’s arrival. For in the Atwoodian (destabilizing) mythography, the psychic split—recall Marian MacAlpin and her cake-woman replica—frequently spawns an embodied, and oft-horrifying, double. Whether friend (again, Marian’s cake-woman) or foe (Zenia), these doubles first serve the knee-jerk coping mechanism of organizing reassuring totalization; later, however, the double must be integrated, must, it would seem, be taken into the self. And for each of the three protagonists of *The Robber Bride*, their lives are awash with doubles, twins, duplicates, and shadows.

Tony’s first and most potent double lies in her imagined twin, Tnomerf Ynot (Tony Fremont backwards), a warrior figure Tony simultaneously relies on and fears.
Ynot, though her ‘twin,’ is “a good deal taller than Tony herself. Taller, stronger, more
daring” (155)—and more bloodthirsty. Ynot is the dark inner voice that cries ‘On! On!’
as Tony’s mother Anthea plummets toward a tree while tobogganing, even as Tony
herself shouts ‘No! No!’ (154). Tony imaginatively ties Ynot to barbarism, domination,
and emptiness, foregrounding Tony’s eventual obsession with warfare and bloody
histories. Tony muses at one point that “if you said a word backwards, the meaning
emptied out” (173); likewise, Ynot inhabits the hollow fissures left first by Tony’s
parents’ marital woes, and later by her mother’s abandonment and her father’s suicide.
Tony’s dark twin embodies the violent internalized impulses denied Tony’s reassuringly
infantilized, Thumbelina-body. Tony’s disavowal/repression of these brutal desires
literally calls Tnomerf Ynot into being. From the vacancies left by Tony’s psychic
mutilation—recall Woman’s maimed subject position in phallocentric discourse—erupts,
unwieldy and unexpected, Tony’s merciless ‘other half.’

Atwood arguably provides the most powerful example of doubling in Charis,
whose shadowy duplicate emerges from the jarring split induced by sexual abuse at the
groping hands of her uncle. Charis, born Karen, is a Little Red Riding Hood figure: sent
along a dangerous path from mother to grandmother’s house, she encounters a theatrical
cast of ambiguous fairytale villains. There is the morally-ambiguous mother figure who
fails to successfully embody her role as ‘nurturing’ Woman; then the grandmother, who
toes the boundary between benevolent godmother and wicked crone; and finally, forced
into domestic ‘security’ with her Uncle Vern, Karen encounters the sexually cannibalistic
wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing. Though the initial fear rests behind the grandmother, Karen’s
experience there educates her to the ways of a primal order, for the grandmother is a
harbinger of both life and death. Blurring godmother and crone iconographies, Atwood revises the fairytale inclination to remove women from spheres of influence—evoking pre-patriarchal systems and goddess-worship, Karen’s grandmother refuses to be shuffled into the Good/Bad Woman dichotomy.

Yet as with Marian MacAlpin, Karen finds herself prey to the same consumer/consumed binary system so pervasive in fairytale terrains. Uniting allusions to “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Fitcher’s Bird,” Atwood fashions a backdrop of horror and erotic consumption through Karen’s haunted past. Uncle Vern, Karen soon discovers, lurks like the Big Bad Wolf behind old grandmother’s cap. Where Karen’s grandmother wields a healing blue energy, Uncle Vern’s hands “have a heavy luminescence around them, thick like jelly, sticky, brown-green” (289). Alert to repetitive fairytale motifs of cannibalistic sexual violence, Karen perceives the hidden danger therein, but she is by this point trapped in a cycle of fairytale brutality. And so Uncle Vern “falls on top of Karen and puts his slabby hand over her mouth and splits her in two” (294). Atwood highlights (as Carter does to more explicit effect in her wolf trilogy) the cruelly sexual underpinnings of ‘classic’ children’s tales, confronting the reader with the (expected) wolf’s consumption of a young girl. But in Karen’s case, this consumption is (as in “The Robber Bridegroom”) a sexual cannibalism. Again locating fairytale mythos through the venue of the ‘everyday,’ Atwood makes visible the logical consequences of a reliance on tales that sanction, and indeed institutionalize, sexual violence against women. Karen’s most intimate interiors are forcibly invaded and, as with many Atwoodian heroines, her only tactic of survival is in,
yes, the psychic split. Karen recognizes that when “[Uncle Vern] split her in two” her “skin comes open like the dry skin of a cocoon, and Charis flies out” (RB 294).

As with Marian, Karen/Charis’ split is visibly spawned through violence written on her body; as with Ynot, the severed identity known as Karen is now constituted by all that Charis—a consciously constructed double—must disavow in order to survive. It is Karen who “would like to take an axe and chop Uncle Vern’s head off” (RB 295), and it is Karen, the dark Other, who ominously surfaces when Zenia does. Charis, too, is cognizant that dark-Karen “is no longer a nine-year-old girl…she no longer looks like Karen. She looks like Zenia” (RB 299). Karen is not only duplicated Charis (and vice versa), but further mirrored in, perhaps in fact fused with, the specter of Zenia.

Finally, in Roz, there is not so much an embodied double as a life-narrative imagined in split parts. In her child, Roz toys with the rags-to-riches Cinderella motif: “Roz the toilet cleaner, Roz the down-market Cinderella, sullenly scrubbing. You eat here, said her mother, so you help out. That was before her father…turned rags into riches” (RB 82). As with Tony/Ynot and Karen/Charis, Rosalind Greenwood—displaced child—becomes Roz Grunwald, the Jewish-American princess, heir to her father’s furtively-collected fortune. But Roz remains displaced, she “finds herself in a foreign country. She’s an immigrant” even in her nascent Cinderella-costume (RB 388). Roz’s critical comprehension of fairytale politics signals her transition to the other side of the mirror; questioning the ‘fairness’ of indoctrinating fairytale narratives upon children, Roz remarks that “What would help would be a wise woman…who would step out from behind a tree, who would give advice” (RB 439). Roz herself is initially rewarded for her skepticism; despite being a ‘chubby’ girl, she is swept off her feet by Prince Charming,
alias Mitch, and in turn carries out the conventional Cinderella cycle. Roz perceives Mitch as a ‘golden boy’ who is oddly enough described as rising “in his law firm like a soap bubble” (RB 352). And as with rising-balloon Peter of *The Edible Woman*, the iconography of the Dashing Prince supersedes Mitch’s reality, distorting Roz’s perception both of him and of herself.

Roz’s subsequent inhabitation of the ‘other side of the mirror’—the dark side of the looking glass that is veiled by tidy fairytale resolutions—makes visible the fallaciousness of fairytale utopias. For after riding off into the sunset with her Prince, Roz grows accustomed to the commonplaces of marital experience—childrearing, housecleaning, late nights spent either working herself or awaiting Mitch’s return, and of course Prince Charming’s wandering eye (among other appendages). The lucky gal who hooked the handsomest fish now remarks that an affair doesn’t trouble her “as long as it didn’t disrupt, as long as it didn’t interfere, as long as she could come out of it with not very many ribs broken” (RB 333). Both Mitch and Roz, passing through the mirror, undergo a fairytale transformation to become the dark doubles of their younger selves. Roz finds herself consulting mirrors like the wicked queen of “Snow White” (RB 326, 442), but is caught in the role of tale collector/interpreter. She is a woman “familiar with the pleasures of narration” (RB 418), who with her therapist “labour[s] over [her] life as if it’s a jigsaw puzzle, a mystery story with a solution at the end…if [she] can figure out what story she’s in…they can change the ending” (RB 431). Roz, intimate with narrative tactics and, in particular, fairy stories, most frequently alludes to them and is most mindful of the ways in which their tropes inform experience.
Her children, twins (doubles/duplicates themselves) on several occasions beseech Roz and Tony to read them fairytales; yet even their ‘innocent’ longing reflects the effects of the institution on the uninitiated. When Roz suggests revising brutal fairytale conclusions, the twins refuse: “Somebody had to be boiled” (*RB* 330). Indoctrinated already to the violent foundations of fairytales, Roz’s children perpetuate the ‘boiling’ operations of moralizing fables. In recognizing these damaging potentialities, Roz (the former and forlorn Cinderella) transforms, assuming the wise woman/crone role. As in her own life, Roz may be able to ‘change the ending’ of their collective experience/narrative by unveiling the sutures that uphold the brutal/political parameters of fairytales. Roz wields a critical double-consciousness—her doubling does not signal the same violently demarcated psychic fragmentation through which Tony and Charis pass, but rather an increased alertness to the systemic boundaries by way of her own ‘border crossing.’ Roz, however, faces the same dubious duplication in Zenia; like Tony and Charis, that which has been repressed does not simply surface but *erupts* from Zenia’s volcanic, enigmatic force.

While each woman has her own unique and recognizable double, as generated through the ‘psychic split’ motif so pervasive throughout Atwood’s work, for each, too, Zenia signifies the dismembered and disavowed fragments of their submerged selves. Atwood elaborates upon her understanding of doubling by commenting that “the double is more than a twin or a sibling. He or she is *you*” (*Negotiating* 40). Zenia is, in psychoanalytic terms, the terrifying and spectacular ‘return of the uncanny.’ And if this is the case, the supernatural ‘haunting’ of the text, then, is not one of ghastly or Gothic origin, but a confrontation with the psychically mutilated fragments of selfhood as they
violently burst upward. Like the severed and bloody (lady)finger presented to the
cannibal husband in “The Robber Bridegroom,” Zenia surfaces—‘just like a dream’—to
threaten the protagonists with their own abjected desires and identities. She is the awful
fragment of their subjectivities which they refuse to face but likewise cannot fully push
from themselves—for she is them.

In situating Zenia as both the ‘villainess’ of the narrative and as the ghostly
uncanny of the protagonists, Atwood makes a peculiarly deconstructive narrative move.
Fairytales, as we know, are systemically constituted by dualities, and the construction of
the moral in fairytales takes the binary of Good/Evil as its primary conflict, and the
foundation for its inevitably tidy moralizing/normalizing resolution. Roxanne Fand
contends that Atwood “constructs a moral…except not a solid white moral with one set
of values winning against a vilified other but a moral that affirms the Yin-Yang interplay
between the depths and surfaces of dark and light, good and evil” (Fand 2). I’d modify
this to say that the so-termed ‘Yin-Yang interplay’ remains too dialectically-constructed;
indeed, if Zenia is the othered-self of the protagonists, there can be no battle between
good and evil, for Atwood conflates these binary oppositions through Zenia. A
reassuringly totalized subject cannot wage war on his or herself; internal conflict
inevitably arises, but Zenia cannot be evil through the outlet of fairytale moral codes.
Her relation to the three women, allowing that she is the uncanny, cannot be
authoritatively repressed if any of them hopes to formulate autonomous subjectivity.

And as with any Atwood text, the question of who holds the power to narrate and
interpret tales—the ‘authorial authority’—consumes The Robber Bride. As an author
herself, with the presumed authority to steer her own texts and their subsequent reception,
Atwood positively refuses to admit objective truths, to allow that a story has but one telling or interpretation. She observes in *Negotiating with the Dead* that, as an ‘author’ in the public eye, she understands herself in divided terms: “The author is the name on the books. I’m the other one” (*Negotiating* 37). In a chapter on doubling, she goes on to say that the act of authorship fragments the self; narrative, in turn, interprets these shards and presents them to the reading public. Thus, the ‘author’ is merely one version of this figurehead we call ‘Margaret Atwood.’ Additionally, her discussion of folklore and the oral tradition in this chapter provides a useful resource to those interested in her intertextual deployment of fairytale motifs. Opposed to oral telling, “writing had a hardness, a permanence, that speech did not…as soon as tale-tellers took to writing…the writers-down became inscribers, and what they wrote took on a fixed and unchanging quality” (*Negotiating* 47). With this post-modern take on narrative construction, Atwood indicts the written word in its erection of closed circuits of reading and interpretation/meaning.

In effect, the act of revising or re-inscribing fairytale narratives comes to us like a palimpsest, a scraping-away at the ‘original’ story while simultaneously re-appropriating the shadows and echoes left behind. In so doing, the monolithic power of the written text is called into question; text itself as permanent/whole is effectively denied, and any story has an irreducible number of tellings, infinite interpretations. In *The Robber Bride*, Zenia is such a tale-teller, threading her life-narrative through varied lenses for the distinct interpretive capacities of each protagonist. With Tony, for example, Zenia bitterly recounts Eastern European destitution, enslavement in child-prostitution with a prostitute mother who herself spun tales for Zenia: of her father, Zenia remarks “I had three! My
mother had several versions…The story about him changed, depending on how she felt” (RB 187). Likewise, the story Zenia offers concerning her own past, like folklore itself, acquires variants in the re-telling for each of the women. Conflating the robber bridegroom and his bride, Atwood invokes Zenia as a teller of tales, weaving stories as a method of survival, and as a robber of lives, the double figure that threatens violent duplication of the Self.

Zenia’s tactic of tale-spinning takes on greater power insofar as it signals her struggle to appropriate narrative control. For, though Atwood toys with conventional story-moral structure in “purposely leaving out that [narrative] of the antagonist, to slant the reader’s sympathies, as would a proper fairy tale” (Fand 2), Zenia functions as either a multiply-identified/unstable individual or a pathological liar (shall we say ‘author’?). Like Caddy Compson of William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury, The Robber Bride is positively obsessed with Zenia—and yet, Zenia’s is the singularly most significant narrative voice that is visibly silenced. Though Caddy and Zenia are at the epicenter of each text, neither has the opportunity to focalize the narrative from their vantage point; each is at the mercy of those who gaze or tell upon them. And as with imprisoned and dispossessed Grace Marks in Atwood’s Alias Grace, Zenia recognizes that the only outlet through which she can gain autonomy, enact self-authorship, is narrative. Zenia does not take her battle lying down; she convinces each protagonist of her constructed life-narrative and subsequently manipulates them through their distorted trust. Like the voice of the wicked queen’s looking glass in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” Zenia acts as the gaping specter-mouth, revealing unsolicited truths and unsavory perspectives on each woman’s victimization.
Zenia’s puppeteering of the protagonists indicts them as uninformed ‘readers’ inasmuch as they “passively accept the ‘text’ that Zenia hands them” (Fand 8). But while Zenia superficially employs a post-modern approach to narrative, for she grants the potentiality for multiple voices/narratives, her use of ‘Story’ to ‘master’ the women refigures her as a promulgator of totalizing ideologies. The women, like Marian, cannot simply reify their disavowal of Zenia (and their fragmented subjectivities) in order to expel her from their lives; they must collaborate to construct a female community. Collectively warring against Zenia’s specter, “each of the three women takes on attributes associated with” the others (Potts 296), assembling the ‘self-sufficient’ troop we mentioned in relation to de Beauvoir. Building on each other’s strengths, rather than attempting to re-signify isolationist identity, Tony, Roz, and Charis communally toss out the master narrative Zenia imparts. Just as Zenia is physically thrown over a hotel balcony (513), the women overthrow the uncanny without endeavoring to essentialize their own identities.

This takes on particular import in their posthumous ‘memorialization’ of Zenia. Tony muses that “now Zenia is History” (RB 517), with Atwood calling attention (by capitalizing the ‘H’ of history) to the fictionalization and ideological totalization of historical narratives. Tony corrects herself: “No: now Zenia is gone,” she remarks (RB 517), undercutting her initial attempt to license Zenia’s mythologizing. As a war historian, Tony recognizes that Zenia only becomes icon through cultural signification; that “she will only become history if Tony chooses to shape her into history…The story of Zenia is insubstantial, ownerless…you saw what she wanted you to see; or else you saw what you yourself wanted to see” (RB 517). The women recognize that Zenia’s
master narrative functions as a mythology only insofar as the teller of it (Zenia) and the readers of it (the protagonists) allow it to appropriate cultural meaning. Like Marian MacAlpin, the women eschew their distorted perceptions and fragmented social positions in a communal struggle to destabilize the authoritative operations of narrative. By the end of their own narratives, they self-consciously concede that “The end of any history is a lie in which we all agree to conspire” (RB 522). Likewise, the only conclusion I can offer here must be a theoretical lie to which we collectively consent—Atwood and I aspire to no abstract truths, and leaving her behind, we now move into the paralyzed realm of the abject with Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*.

TWO: “This life after death”: Anne Sexton, Abjection, and the Survivor’s Narrative

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind…
Poor Anne Sexton. Poor, pitiable, pusillanimous Annie. She’s just one among many wretched women who met their match trapped as a ‘madwoman in the attic’ of her own chaotic mind. Her upper-class New England repression forced her behind the inescapable prison bars of social terror, sexual promiscuity, incestuous desire, madness, and, of course (otherwise, this fascinating story would be incomplete!), suicide. But she simply couldn’t help herself; after all, she was just little ol’ Oedipal Anne. We’re supposed to sympathize with her, so long as she doesn’t come too close; and after, we must belittle her and her poetry, as infantile, narcissistic, unrelentingly bleak. Or so critics often implore us to believe. So where does Dame Sexton fit into a theory of so-called ‘feminist’ fairytales? Certainly, no woman as tragic in the cultural imagination as Anne Sexton can prove herself or her work as subversive or otherwise useful to an analysis of transformative female self-authorship. Right?

But this, if not already clear, is precisely what I aim to posit. This is not to say I disregard the critical limitations ensnaring Sexton’s station in the literary canon; however, her poetry and, in particular, her 1971 collection of reimagined fairytales, *Transformations*, seem to me instead powerful documents of what I term here the ‘survivor’s narrative.’ Though Sexton did indeed travel rocky paths en route to a rather dreadful end—and it is impossible to sever her work from her life, nor do I believe such an undertaking useful—her poetry imparts a site through which contemporary readers might discover, as Sexton herself remarks, “something worth learning” (“For John,” l. 4). Sexton’s poetry is never preoccupied with fumbling towards conventional beauty, or with achieving ‘happily ever afters’; her poetry stakes its claim in the literary canon, whether...
critics like it or not, for Sexton’s brazen depictions of the female, the bodily, of those desires and performances submerged, made ideologically unspeakable, beneath male narratives.

Confessionalism is marked, particularly in Sexton’s gritty body of work, by a disruption of the privilege of high over low art; by a compulsive looking inwards; by, as Sandra Gilbert asserts, a conflation of the private and public performances of self. For women, confessionalism is particularly consumed by the desire to “formulate an ontology of selfhood” (Gilbert 448). Like her female confessional compatriots Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, and Denise Levertov (among many), Sexton struggles to assemble an identity/identities, most powerfully through an “emphasis on a central mythology of the self” (Gilbert 444). Breaking the binary oppositions foundational to the tensions between high and low art, public and private, universal and personal narratives, confessional form generates fissures in the rubble of these hierarchic systems, leaving gaping spaces for unspeakable narratives and voices to seep through. It comes as no surprise that many of these women have tackled mythology and folklore head-on, and it is perhaps Sexton’s speaking of the unspeakable that proves her so adept in re-conceptualizing classic fairytales through a darker lens.

Sexton, like Atwood and Carter, pays skeptical homage to the violent and erotic undercurrents of those ‘children’s stories’ and offers a ‘situated knowledge’ from the compromised location of the culturally dispossessed. While Carol Leventen contends that Transformations is a “bleak, devastating vision” featuring women that are “silenced, acted upon, and…acquiesce almost helplessly in continuing silence themselves” (Leventen 136), her appraisal (and she’s certainly not alone in this vein) in fact functions
within the same systems of subordination Sexton resists. Because retellings necessarily invoke their ‘originals,’ Sexton’s resistance is through a methodology of violent re-inscription. Sexton is not interested in blindly imagining utopias; her value to a project theorizing feminist critiques of the fairytale institution rests in her recognition that there is no place to start but from where you already are. In an almost Derridian sense, Sexton is strikingly cognizant of the necessity of dragging that which she resists along with her.

Sexton seemingly encapsulates Transformations’ project in the prefatory poem of the collection, in which she reveals her narrator, emphasizes her intent, and invites the possibility of a transformative, magical subversion. “The Gold Key” first introduces Sexton’s interest in and link to the originally oral tradition of folklore: she remarks that “The speaker in this case/is a middle-aged witch, me—/ tangled on my two great arms,/ my face in a book/ and my mouth wide,/ ready to tell you a story or two” (“The Gold Key” ll. 1-6). Not only does Sexton, the confessionalist, conflate herself with the crone figure—therein giving voice to the silenced by re-configuring the wicked witch/crone icon as a potential purveyor of narrative—but opens the collection with the startling image of a mouth hanging agape. As if from within a womb or an abyss, the witch-narrator spins tales from the space of the repressed. The witch’s voice, previously inextricable from the unspoken position of Evil in the fairytale mythography, suggests an alternative not merely to the cultural master narratives we know as ‘fairytales’ but to the invisible and powerful presence of the male tale-teller in these overarching narratives.

Hers is the unspeakable narrative, for the witch in these stories is, as Andrea Dworkin contends in her discussion of fairytales, “the source of terror” (Dworkin 41)—the witch-figure of fairytales is denied voice; “she is evil because she acts” (48). Again,
we hear the echo of Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa,” in which female-authorship is transgressive simply because it is done. Like the phallic mother in psychoanalytic terms, the witch and her narrative are disavowed in the effort to endorse totalized masculinity, to deify the male tale-collector, to ensure the privilege of male-defined standards of ‘civilité.’

Sexton’s witch, however, refuses to be cowed to these pressures. She does not merely assume the guise of the benevolent tale-collector, or of the old-wife reciting tales by the hearth, much to the same de-author-izing effect. For as Angela Carter notes in her introduction to *Angela Carter’s Book of Fairy Tales*, “Old wives’ tales [are] worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it” (xiii). Because the conventionally universalized narrator is either coded-male or understood as the uncontested god-head of the narrative, the witch—making visible even her own unreliability—disrupts the omnipotent and omniscient (male) narrative voice. The witch, mouthing wicked incantations and concocting bubbling brews, is a manifested site of forbidden and potentially lethal knowledge.

And this witch, indeed, is ready to “tell you a story or two” (“GK” l. 6), but is here to remind readers—those passively or unwittingly ‘written on’ by fairy stories—that “we must have the answers” (l. 32), we must be enlightened to what infects us through the filmy instructions of fairytales. The children gathering about Sexton’s witch and her gaping mouth are not intrusively fed those indoctrinatory scripts of fairytales; the witch, as we’ll soon see, knows the debasing effects of being subjected to such narratives. She provokes her readers/listeners to engage critically with her texts, dares them to turn the forbidden key and access the dark secrets and agendas of “this book of odd tales” (l. 46).
Provocatively, the witch-narrator remarks of this key that “Its secrets whimper / like a dog in heat” (ll. 42-43), associating the hidden or locked-away components of our beloved ‘children’s fables’ with primal sexuality. Like the dog in heat, helpless before nature, fairytale narratives attempt both to essentialize sex/gender roles and to construct eroticized moral systems under seamlessly innocent guises. But the boy the witch-narrator exhibits before her audience is of the sort that “Upon finding a string / …would look for a harp”; the boy, who is “…each of us. / I mean you. / I mean me” (ll. 39-40, ll. 27-29), does not allow himself to be caught within the microcosm (the string) presented by individual tales. The witch-narrator asks ‘each of us’ to make this same leap, to wrestle with the master narratives and scripts (the harp) fairytales enforce upon passive readers.

Finally, whatever apocalyptic visions Sexton and her witch narrate, there remains—as at the end of “The Gold Key”—the potential for magical subversion. On unlocking the whimpering secrets of this odd book, its pages gorged on violence, commodification, sex, and death, Sexton’s boy inquires: “Transform? / As if an enlarged paper clip / could be a piece of sculpture. / (And it could.)” (ll. 48-51). Despite the insistent indictment of the fairytale institution, this business of having the answers, Sexton and her witch-narrator recognize that there may yet be fringe-spaces in which the magic of fairytales can be subversively deployed. Even this potentiality, the transformative ‘it could’ of the final line, is marked parenthetically, as though the witch-narrator’s transformations must be found/enacted within a liminal/marginal space of the fairytale master narrative.
But how do Sexton’s transformations subvert their problematic predecessors? Of the collection, Sexton wrote (to Kurt Vonnegut):

I feel my *Transformations* needs an introduction telling of the value of my (one could say) rape of them…I do something very modern to them…They are small, funny and horrifying…I don’t know if you know my other work, but humor was never a very prominent feature…terror, deformity, madness and torture were my bag. But this little universe of Grimm is not that far away. I think they end up being as wholly personal as my most intimate poems, in a different language, a different rhythm, but coming strangely, for all their story sound, from as deep a place.

(*Self-Portrait* xxx)

Like Atwood, Sexton acknowledges the phantasmic supremacy of fairytales upon lived experience, the ways in which the ‘universe of Grimm’—with subtextual motifs rooted in power politics, raunchy sex, and brutality—is ‘not that far away’ from our own. And like Atwood, Sexton deploys fairytale tropes in an effort to undermine the conventions of contemporary existence by commenting on these same conventions in the ‘once upon a time’ of fairytales. Where Atwood roots her narratives in contemporary and quotidian experience, Sexton’s transformations originate in the fantastical landscape of the ‘classics’ while alluding to anachronistically-placed events, figures, and creations of modern culture.

It is a pop-chic methodology; the reader is jolted when, for example, Snow White’s bodice is wrapped about her “as tight as an Ace bandage” (“SW” l. 95) or we are told that she is “as full of life as soda pop” (l. 100). Just as Atwood reminds us that we
cannot leave fairytales behind in never-never land, Sexton’s anachronisms, as we’ll see too with Carter, induce a sense of temporal dislocation. Additionally, these cultural references comment upon the capitalist/consumerist systems that enforce mutually exclusive inhabitations of oppressor/victim roles in the same society that Atwood similarly and fiercely indicts. Sexton’s satirically vicious reconfigurings of happily-ever-after resolutions through an attention to the commodification of bodies and the courtship plot frequently play into contemporary conceptualizations of the so-termed ‘American Dream.’ Alicia Ostriker notes that “Half of Sexton’s tales end in marriage, and most of these marriages are seen as some form of either selfishness or captivity” (Ostriker 257). When the witch-narrator refers to Cinderella and her prince as “Regular Bobbsey Twins” completing the Sisyphean cycle of “That story” (“Cinderella” ll. 5) or remarks that the princess and the transformed amphibian of “The Frog Prince” “were married. / After all he had compromised her” (“FP” ll. 149-150), the American Dream no longer seems as utopian as normative culture would insist.

Sexton’s transformations not only reject idealistically imagined happy endings, but erect a theatrical stage upon which beloved fairytale figures are maneuvered and tugged about like puppets. The witch-narrator does not only document these performances, but acts as their accompanying Greek chorus—a cultural critic, as Dawn Skorczewski contends— for the witch-narrator is the survivor of ‘that story.’ Skorczewski charts Transformations’s retellings along three threads: each poem is ‘prefaced’ by a modernized adaptation of the classic tale, as recounted through the witch-narrator’s perspective. The poems then transition into a ‘traditional’ (or recognizable) telling of the classic plot wherein the witch narrates through an omniscient (detached)
filter. Finally, these tellings fuse to bridge the gap between the witch-speaker’s preface and ‘conventional’ depictions of the fairytale ‘puppets.’ Uniting these voices in the conclusion to each, Sexton conflates personal and situational identities with the overtly universal/public—and frequently distant—realm of the fairytale institution. This follows in Sexton’s claim to Vonnegut that, despite their foundations in the universalizing realm of folklore, the poems of *Transformations* are as interlocked with the private site of the interior as her previous ‘confessional’ volumes had been.

Insofar as the figure of the witch is “suspended at the point of crossing into the unspoken and forbidden” (Sempruch 2), Sexton’s inclusion of both the situational vantage point of the witch-narrator and the seemingly indifferent observations of fairytale brutalities and carnalities designate the poems’ overarching effect as one of radical ambiguity. The reader is uncertain whether to identify with the narrator, with the ‘puppets’ of the tales, or perhaps with both (and/or neither) simultaneously. Fairytale figures imbedded and beloved in the cultural imagination are, unlike the author-ized witch-narrator, mapped as the culturally dispossessed, indeed, the abject. Those fairytale darlings, like Snow White, like Cinderella, like Briar Rose, are here reimagined as doll-like ‘its,’ violated and vacated of subjectivity. Once, either prior to the narrative the witch-speaker tells or in the pre-existing cultural understanding of these fairytale figures, they were subjects of the Symbolic Order. Sexton, however, strips her puppets of subjectivity, demonstrating the logical outcomes of systems that deprive women—and men—of deviations from the fairytale ideological system.

Julia Kristeva’s work on abjection is of course useful here. The abject is a figure, not entirely unlike the figure of the witch, paralyzed along a precipice of (non)being.
Liminally positioned between Subject and Object, the abject is “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (Kristeva 229). It is not object, except in the sense that it is “opposed to I” (230), yet the abject is a “‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing” (230). The abject repulses the subject, who attempts to disavow it, crying that the abject is “radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that” (230)—but as it is ‘not nothing,’ it cannot be wholly forsworn. Because of its position between Subject and Object—and past-Subject-ness—the abject confronts us with our own future defilement and abjection, most lucidly elaborated upon in Kristeva’s example of the corpse. The corpse presents to us our repressed perception of mortality, because it places the ‘I’—me—“at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border… ‘I’ is expelled” (231). The abject is “death infecting life… something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (232). Additionally, abjection is a peculiarly forceful example in theorizing Transformations’ project, for just as the subject is confronted with its future abjection, Sexton’s poems confront the reader of fairy stories with their own abject indoctrination by master narratives, their own potential for entrapment within that which they hope to disavow.

The witch-narrator, indeed, depicts familiar fairytale characters as marionettes, as abject—they are as though hollowed out, like ghosts in the machine; agents and non-agents at once; comprised, like the nouveau-Snow White we’ve mentioned, of consumable/material goods; pawned about at the hands of an unknowable force. While critics like Leventen attest that the witch-narrator is the puppet-master in this fantastical theatre, the locus of power intrinsic to these tales permeates further than her narration is
able. For, as we’ve seen in Atwood and will continue to look to with Carter, political subversion cannot overthrow discursive systems in an identifiable instance; what we do see, however, is the witch-narrator (as cultural critic) grappling with these systems, which in turn makes them visible to their otherwise unwittingly manipulated subjects. Thus the delineation between the witch’s preface to each tale, a modernized and critical glance, and the ‘classic’ tale itself—still re-imagined, but following the general narrative of its predecessors. To illustrate, we’ll look to the variations on a number of these figures as they are imagined first in the preface and then in the ‘classic’ tale, finally moving into the ‘synthesis’ of the voices that frequently appears in the ends of the poems.

“Snow White,” provides our first explicit example of this interrogation of abjection. The witch-narrator observes that “No matter what life you lead / the virgin is a lovely number: / cheeks as fragile as cigarette paper, / arms and legs made of Limoges, / lips like Vin Du Rhône, / rolling her china-blue doll eyes / open and shut” (“SW” ll. 1-7). Our ‘modern’ Snow White is conceived of as a “hodge-podge of marketable parts” (Leventen 140), denied interiority—composed of paper, porcelain, and wine, she amalgamates into the ‘totalized’ figure of the vacuous doll. She is not literally corpse, but this doll-girl functions along the Kristevan borders of existence, for she is neither the uninhabited, object-doll, nor is she a Subject capable of constructing or managing her subjectivity. This girl, the icon of the virgin, is “unsoiled. / She is white as a bonefish” (ll. 12-13), and like Marian of The Edible Woman, her commodified female body is a palatable item in gendered discourses created by and for men—for “the thrust / of the unicorn,” the phallic violation, as the witch illustrates (ll. 10-11). Luce Irigaray maintains that “The virginal woman…is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the
possession, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange” (Irigaray 186). As the witch-narrator alerts us, this virgin is the blank slate upon which men project their sexual fantasies, desires, and actions—Snow White is the screen on which male-defined beauty mythographies (fair/fragile skin, brittle limbs, literally intoxicating lips) are exhibited, and she, no more than bonefish, is intended for consumption.

The second part of the poem, the ‘conventional’ retelling, in turn ties an inescapable bind between female purity and female-female envy. As in the classic tale and in predominant cultural conceptualizations of the Wicked Stepmother/Chaste Princess binary, the story’s conflict at this juncture resides not in the question of a patriarchal pitting of women against one another, but in the aging matriarch’s petty jealousy toward the virginal (re: valuable) girl. Snow White’s stepmother “would hear of no beauty surpassing her own,” and “Pride pumped in her like poison” when her looking glass affirms her vanity (l. 20, 33). This looking glass, however, aesthetically displaces the stepmother on Snow White’s entrance into the beauty contest: “now the queen saw brown spots on her hand / and four whiskers over her lip / so she condemned Snow White / to be hacked to death” (ll. 40-44). The mirror is god; its words authorize flesh, corporeally constituting the wicked queen through disapprobation. A manifest ‘writing on the body,’ as it were. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar persuasively contend in their landmark polemic The Madwoman in the Attic that “women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other”
(Gilbert and Gubar 203), but as Sexton ironically implies, this mirror, as propagator of the patriarchal voice, displaces the blame and reflects it upon Woman’s ‘distorted’ desire.

The mirror then re-signifies Snow White’s (virgin) body, for as the queen shrivels from—is in fact eaten by (l. 19)—age, the fair maiden is not only ideologically commodified, but literal food. The queen of Sexton’s tale turns cannibal, vampiric, in desiring to devour Snow White’s heart like a cube steak (l. 48) and be deemed fairest once more—as though by ingesting the body of the virgin, she might be again unsoiled, white as bonefish. The question of abjection surfaces once more: cannibal and victim reside liminally between Subject and Object, for in culturally prescribed terms of acceptability, Subject cannot eat Subject, and likewise, Subject is not intended for consumption. The cannibal and its food, then, are abject border-dwellers, between consumer and consumed. As Sexton writes to Philip Legler, “My transformations of the Brothers Grimm are full of food images but what could be more directly food than cooking the kids and finally the wicked lady” (Self Portrait 352-353)?

Sexton’s only substantial deviations from the classic “Snow White” come at the conclusion, where the queen (as in the classic) is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes; now, though, it is her turn to be ‘directly food.’ The fused narratives of this section inform her that “First your toes will smoke / and then your heels will turn black / and you will fry upward like a frog” (ll. 153-155). But cooking the wicked lady does not signal happily-ever-after in Sexton’s revision, for the witch-narrator offers a glimpse beyond the original utopic ending, unstitching the tale’s tightly-woven narrative seams. Snow White in Sexton’s world, should she live long enough, will look on in horror when the looking glass reflects her own brown-spotted hands back on her. The witch, voicing the
unspeakable, tells us that “Meanwhile Snow White held court, / rolling her china-blue
doll eyes open and shut / and sometimes referring to her mirror / as women do” (ll. 161-
164). The resolution’s ambiguity lingers, for as Angela Carter insists, “For women, the
ritual marriage at the story’s ending may be no more than a prelude to the haunting
dilemma in which the mother of the Grimms’ Snow White found herself” (AC’s Book
xxi)—childbirth terminating in death or, on the other hand, the re-positioning of the fair
virgin as haggard crone.

Of the collection’s other marriages, we are told of Cinderella and her prince that
the two presumably live ‘happily ever after.’ If, however, happiness is lived “like two
dolls in a museum case / never bothered by diapers or dust, / never arguing over the
timing of an egg” (“CI” ll. 92-94), one questions the authenticity of utopia. Happily-
ever-after is performed upon a stage paralyzed, as with Clara of The Edible Woman, by
heteronormative anxieties. The nod to theatricality here alerts the reader to the
suspension of disbelief implicit to utopic resolutions. Cinderella and her prince can live
happily, without the bother of life’s material conditions and minutiae (diapers, dust, egg),
so long as they remain frozen as dolls, so long as they themselves gather dust in the
stagnant museum-tomb. Their performances are marked by “darling smiles [that are]
pasted on for eternity. / Regular Bobbsey Twins. / That story” (ll. 97-99). The refrain of
That story that pervades the poem pays mind to the indoctrinatory operations of fairy
stories intended to culturally signify ‘real’ meaning through socially prescribed identities
and scripts. ‘That story’ is simultaneously re-inscribed and unveiled, for we are led to
accept that Cinderella and her prince (and the readers of ‘That story’) inhabit these
prescribed roles/bodies while being alerted to the fact that ‘That story’ has become so
imbedded in the ideological imaginary as to be inescapable.

In “The Maiden Without Hands,” the witch-narrator imagines patriarchal
authority through the regulatory and institutionalized filter of marriages between
symbolic un-equals—the ‘whole’ man and the ‘maimed’ woman. The nameless man of
the preface weds a cripple in the “desire to own the maiming” (“Maiden Without Hands”
1. 4), commanding “Lady, bring me your wooden leg / so I may stand on my own / two
pink pig feet. / If someone burns out your eye / I will take your socket / and use it for an
ashtray” (ll. 8-13). The man united with the cripple declares that “My apple has no worm
in it! / My apple is whole!” (ll. 20-21), for with a wife defined only through lack, he
presents to the public eye a totalized and thereby culturally sanctioned self. Once more,
de Beauvoir echoes: Woman in the patriarchal order is constituted only through her
deficiencies; she is the shadow of what Man leaves unclaimed.

Dworkin’s contention that in fairytales, the only good woman is a dead one is
exemplified in the narrator’s ironically scopophilic perception of the maiden as a “perfect
still life” (l. 45); the witch-speaker/indifferent narrator here direct the reader, indeed, to
“picture her there for a moment” (l. 44) as the immobile doll, the vacant corpse incapable
of counter-gaze. The king in Sexton’s revision of the classic yearns to keep his maiden’s
silver hands “polished daily, / a kind of purple heart, / a talisman, / a yellow star” (ll. 126-
129) as physical manifestation of his former bodily superiority to her. Depicting the
king’s talisman as a purple heart, Sexton additionally associates the war of the sexes with
a global experience marred by war. The personal, she suggests, cannot be severed from
the political, and in drawing this connection, ‘trivialized’ gender oppression is implicated in the formation of entire webs of political ideologies of domination.

In “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” even Carol Leventen concedes that Sexton presents her heroines sympathetically; the poem intends reader-identification with the abject protagonists, and the revision reads not as a tale of sexual maturation but as one of foreclosed female erotic possibility. The courtship plot is once again undermined to reveal heteronormative denials of autonomous female sexuality, and the regulatory institution of marriage is, as Adrienne Rich might insist, primarily deployed as a tool for the preservation of patriarchal/male privilege. As Leventen grudgingly acknowledges, the witch-narrator’s preface beseeches the reader to commiserate with the girls: “If you danced from midnight / to six A.M. who would understand?” (“Twelve Dancing Princesses” ll. 1-2). She identifies the sorts of people who might empathize with the girls’ desire for sexual liberation, those marginalized by normative society—the runaway, the paralytic’s wife, the amnesiac and the drunken poet (l. 3, 12, 26, 32). If the lattermost of these figures could arguably be Sexton herself, our identificatory impulse implicates us with the selfsame deviance and implores us, like the figures of the preface, to ‘understand’ the girls’ desires.

Like these fringe-dwellers, the twelve dancing princesses transgress physical and discursive boundaries in their night-dances. Though “at night the king locked and bolted the door” (l. 60), the girls inexplicably dance their shoes to tatters each night: indeed, “each was as worn as an old jockstrap” (l. 64). Their transgressions are framed through masculine physicality—with their shoes as jockstraps, their wayward feet are metaphorically interlocked with male sport and, tellingly, with male genitalia. They
have, it would seem, superseded their father’s phallic authority, and this subversive power takes a more explicit turn when we are told that the girls eliminate the threat of their door-guard by slipping “the snoopy man a Mickey Finn” (l. 77). The girls’ border-crossing is literally aligned with the aid of a rape drug primarily deployed by men—and so with methodologies both aggressive and erotically-charged, the girls’ re-appropriations of power cannot be split from a politics of masculine privilege and sexuality.

But as in the classic Grimms’ tale, a soldier outwits them, penetrating the liminal space in which they privately dance; his ‘victory’ is rewarded by access to “his pick of the litter” (l. 68). No more than infantilized animals, the girls are exchanged between men (the king, the guard, and finally the soldier) as vacuous trinkets of male sexual authority, for “woman has value on the market by virtue of one single quality: that of being a product of man’s ‘labor’” (Irigaray 175). In infiltrating the girls’ private/transgressive space, the symbolic son aligns his desire with the father’s insofar as both require erotic subservience from the dancing girls—if the patriarch cannot confine the girls behind literal barricades, his symbolic substitute will amputate their sovereign desires, which lie beyond the bounds of the men’s reach.

Besides Sexton’s “Briar Rose,” “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” offers the most unsettling comment upon the conventional marriage resolution that slams shut the pages of many fairytales. Of this ‘happy ending,’ the witch-narrator observes that:

He had won. The dancing shoes would dance / no more. The princesses were torn from / their night life like a baby from its pacifier. / … / At the wedding the princesses averted their eyes / and sagged like old sweatshirts. / … / never
again their shoes worn down to a laugh, / never the bed falling down into
purgatory / to let them climb in after / with their Lucifer kicking. (ll. 142-153)

This is no mutually-desired outcome; rather, the marriage is a battle-loss in the sex war,
for there are demarcated victors (the soldier; the king) and losers (the girls). Though the
nod to the baby/pacifier ambiguously implies that this change is necessary to proper
emotional development, *Transformations’s* ‘black humor’ leads us to believe this a
satirical comment upon psychoanalytic inquiries into ‘mature’ female sexuality. For if
Freud insists that the female clitoral orgasm must be overcome as infantile, in favor of the
‘mature’ (and seemingly nonexistent) ‘vaginal’ orgasm, Sexton’s link between the
foreclosure of female erotic possibility with the child’s loss of its pacifier boldly refuses
to be subject to Freud’s (and other psychoanalytic) paradigms.

The girls are denied theatrical/aggressive appropriation of male sexuality (the
jockstrap) and are coerced to vacate their bodies and beloved shoes to become little more
than tattered, bodiless sweatshirts—perhaps also suggestive of future domestic servitude.
Like the maiden without hands (as a ‘still life’), the girls are disallowed a potential
counter-gaze, forced to avert their eyes (l. 146) in the idolization of heterosexuality at the
marriage ceremony. Their shoes can no longer be employed in a dance of (perhaps
Cixousian) laughter, and the liminal subversive space (embodied in ‘purgatory’) is
disavowed by male authority as a locus of ‘Evil’ (tied to Lucifer).

Uniting depictions of abjection and the disconcerting reliance on the marriage
plot-resolution in fairytales, the final poem of *Transformations*, “Briar Rose (Sleeping
Beauty),” violently indicts the ideological systems of domination that breed victor/victim
roles in lived experience. Bringing the collection back full circle to “The Gold Key,”
“Briar Rose” solidifies *Transformations* as a documentation of mourning and memory, trauma and survival. By the time “Briar Rose” closes the cover on Sexton’s dark adaptations, the reader is well-acquainted with both the witch-narrator’s cultural critiques and the biting re-inscriptions of the ‘conventional’ tales at hand. We are invited in the prologue to “consider / a girl who keeps slipping off” (“Briar Rose” ll. 1-2) as if in trance, who is “speaking with the gift of tongues” (l. 6). Unlike the witch-speaker’s terrifying and knowledgeably-agape mouth, the Briar Rose in question articulates, but only through the loss of bodily and psychic control. Her speaking in tongues evokes the icon of the poetic muse, who accesses her voice only through a mediating force.

Infantilized and abject, this little doll child (l. 15) is victimized by a patriarchal system that seizes the female body as an exchangeable good, that deploys it as the vessel through which men conduct power-plays between each other, that gives the ‘Papa’ of Sexton’s tale unlimited access to his own daughter’s body and psyche.

Indeed, the witch-narrator invokes a girl who is invited to “Sit on [Papa’s] knee” and “be [his] snooky” (l. 17; 21); in return, Papa “will give [her] a root” as we are led on “That kind of voyage / rank as honeysuckle” (ll. 22-24). Not only does this ‘root’ denote the phallic invasion the father commits against his daughter (an effective and disturbing method of espousing male sexual authority), but cites her inextricable bond with the king-father, for the girl is quite literally root-ed to him by blood. Sexton, like Atwood and Carter, is haunted by the sinister traces at the ‘root’ of fairytales’ pedagogical methodologies, and is shrewdly alert to the fact that “Fairy tales…stage scenes in which the family appears as a site of violence” (Marshall 405). As with Cinderella’s habitation within ‘that story,’ Briar Rose navigates *that voyage* through patriarchally-sanctioned
sexual exploitation, though Sexton soon reminds her reader of the stain of the patriarchal
voice in the conventional segment of the poem.

Here, as in “Snow White,” the pitting of women against women under patriarchy
is blamed upon the very women manipulated by the system: the wicked fairy, for
example, has “fingers as long and thin as straws, / her eyes burnt by cigarettes, / her
uterus an empty teacup” (ll. 32-34). The ‘conventional’ (detached) voice insists that the
tale’s conflict is one fashioned from female-envy, marking this crone’s fury against the
princess within a male-defined map of feminine beauty. The empty uterus is a
particularly telling sign, as women’s value to patriarchal consumerist models lies within
her ability to produce offspring; as the fairy fails to fulfill this function, she must be cast
out from the court’s symbolic order. Thus this ‘bad’/active fairy, ideologically opposed
to the voiceless (re: ‘good) trance-girl, wields the power to prophesize the girl’s demise;
as the narrator remarks, “Fairies’ prophecies, / in times like those, / held water” (ll. 43-
45). We recall Carter’s contention that old wives’ tales (fairies’ prophecies likewise fit)
are devalued in the institutionalization of the written fairytale as lies or as gossip—the
types of narratives that do not ‘hold water’ in the cultural politics of narrative. And
returning to the trance-girl as a sort of muse, the recognition of the wicked fairy’s speech
as a ‘prophecy’ implies a higher (likely male) power that bestows it upon her. In any
case, the wicked fairy’s voice is here causally tied to her vengeful reactionary desire
against the king’s disavowal of her.

Yet Sexton radically shifts her framing of the prophecy’s outcome, for suddenly
the witch-narrator disrupts the conventional voice of the second segment; the father is re-
imagined as the architect of the tale’s crimes, and the thirteenth fairy’s death-offer
appears, in fact, to be the most alluring alternative for Briar Rose. For “what does a
daughter’s life become when she identifies her father as a perpetrator of her ‘death’ by
incest” (Skorczewski 310)? In Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères*, she poses this query to
women: “What belongs to you on this earth? Only death. No power on earth can take
that away from you” (*LG* 116). Death may not be a particularly tantalizing alternative,
but in situations of culturally-sanctioned sexual/political slavery, it may the only one a
dispossessed individual can claim as entirely her own. In turn, the wicked fairy (arguably
an embodiment of the witch-narrator), who has undergone—and survived—the violent
imposition of male sexual authority, offers Briar Rose an unorthodox escape through
death. In this model, it seems corporeal annihilation figures as more favorable than
psychic dismemberment, as illustrated in the witch’s subaltern positioning in the
kingdom’s social order.

“Briar Rose” exemplifies Sexton’s project of invoking the survivor’s narrative in
the sense that it becomes a radical voicing of silenced memory, a forbidden tale of sexual
abuse by one’s own (patriarchal) protector. If “The passage into the social order, into the
symbolic order…is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women
among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo” (Irigaray 170),
Sexton’s depiction of incestuous violations makes visible the dangerous consequences of
patriarchal systems of erotic domination and female trafficking. Through this exchange
of female bodies, men identify as Self against an abstracted female-Other, performing
power upon Woman’s body through communal penetration. While feminist-
anthropological theorists have cited the incest taboo as intrinsic to this sexual/ideological
trafficking, Sexton’s violent revision reveals the inevitable exploitations that occur when
daughters are passed, no more than detachable wombs, between symbolic fathers and sons.

As the witch-narrator and her marionettes cross ‘that voyage,’ the king endeavors to deflect the fairy’s death-prophecy via sexualized infiltration: each night he “bit the hem of [Briar Rose’s] gown / to keep her safe. / He fastened the moon up / with a safety pin” (“BR” ll. 55-58). Cultural associations of the moon with feminine energy (most powerfully through the menstrual cycle) seem significant here; notably in the works of Sexton and Plath, the moon signifies a subversive and hidden source of female power. In Plath’s “Purdah,” the moon is the “indefatigable cousin” (“Purdah” l. 12) that enables the narrator to hide her ‘visibilities,’ and, in so doing, evade the penetrative public (male) gaze. Sexton’s “The Frog Prince” depicts the moon as the princess’ invaluable ball, which is spatially contained by her unsolicited suitor in the poem’s disquieting conclusion. In “Rapunzel,” Mother Gothel accesses transcendent (potentially ‘queer’) desire only in dreams, when “moonlight sift[s] into her mouth” (“Rapunzel” l. 158). The moon grants a space in which women can choose to inhabit marginality/liminality, to subvert their own cultural dispossession in the ideological and experiential gaps of the system. In each of these examples, the containment of the moon signals, like the sealing of purgatory in “The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” a foreclosure of female erotic possibility. As in “The Frog Prince,” the king in “Briar Rose” seals away the transgressive symbol of the moon under the guise of acting ‘for her own good,’ policing rather than encouraging his daughter’s sovereign development of subjectivity and sexuality.
Here, the king forces the men in court to “scour [their] tongue[s] with Bab-o / lest they poison the air she dwelt in. / Thus she dwelt in his odor. / Rank as honeysuckle” (“BR” ll. 61-64). The king effectively dismembers his daughter’s sexuality by fastening the moon, while concomitantly constructing the erotic boundaries of his sexual inheritors—as patriarch, he erects a closed system in which all are denied autonomy, left paralyzed and incapable of mutually relating to one another. The king of “Briar Rose” functions as the aforementioned ‘hand of power’ the witch-narrator grapples with throughout *Transformations*, for he is the cultural source of these structures of author-ity. Yet Sexton remains ever-aware that in identifiable discursive systems, even the architect of discourse is subject to his/her own constructs, for after Briar Rose expectedly pricks her finger on the phallic spindle, she is not the only one prey to the consequences—“They all lay in a trance, / each a catatonic / stuck in the time machine” (ll. 76-78).

The princess is inevitably ‘saved,’ though her salvation signals only a passage from her father’s rule to the prince’s. As in “Snow White” and “The Maiden Without Hands,” the sleeping princess is perceived in the male-defined sexual-visual landscape as gaping-void, abject: “the prince found the tableau intact” (l. 93). The psychic substitution of son for father is plain, for the prince “kissed Briar Rose / and she woke up crying:  Daddy!  Daddy!” (ll. 94-96)—marriage signals only a shift from one prison to the next, and in the narrative’s conclusion, “all went well / except for the fear— / the fear of sleep” (ll. 99-101). From here we voyage to the final section of the poem, in which Sexton fuses the voice of the prologue’s cultural critic with the victim’s (silenced) voice in the conventional retelling; in this fusion, “Sexton creates a new voice, with which she challenges her audience to consider personal, cultural, and even critical power
relationships as inseparable” (Skorczewski 320). In this ‘new’ voice, the witch-narrator and Briar Rose speak as one, invoking a hybrid voice that inhabits both Self and Other, narrating victimization from the conscious reframing of personal memory through cultural trauma.

If “The Gold Key” encapsulates Sexton’s aim in Transformations, “Briar Rose” exemplifies its execution. The passive victim (Briar Rose) and triumphant victor (speaking witch) are not, as Leventen stubbornly maintains, positioned by Sexton as two ends of a mutually-exclusive dichotomy; they do not compete for narrative authority here, but speak in collective terms, vacillating between narrative presence and absence, detached observation and personal/political critique, emotional paralysis and bitter perceptiveness. Briar Rose, conflated with the nameless trance-girl of the prologue, “was an insomniac” (l. 103), a sort of maudlin pill-popper who pleads that “sleep must take me unawares / … / so that I do not know that brutal place / where I lie down with cattle prods, / the hole in my cheek open” (ll. 110-114). The ‘hybrid’ voice of the witch/maiden makes clear their interlocked identificatory boundaries, for as with Snow White and her mirror-consultations, Briar Rose fears that her dreams may show a “faltering crone at [her] place, / her eyes burnt by cigarettes / as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat” (ll. 117-119). Like Snow White’s looking-glass, Briar Rose’s dream image reflects her own inescapable future-hagdom—once again, should the fair princess manage to survive her own entrapment within the patriarchal binds of the fairytale system, she will live to see her descent into the role of the wicked queen.

But to what can we pinpoint Briar Rose’s perceived betrayal? Triggered by memories of penetration and abuse in sleep/dreams (which is of course where the initial
attacks by king/prince occurred), does Briar Rose lay the blame at the feet of the crone who inflicted the ‘sleeping curse?’ Or is it that the fairy’s curse failed to extricate her from the clutch of a power system that debases daughters, impels abjection, and exploits women as tools through which patriarchal order is maintained? Sexton is not clear on this point, but the abrupt shift to first person after Briar Rose’s dream leads the reader to believe that at this point the witch-narrator joins her narrative of debasement with the princess’. The collective voice protests that “I must not sleep / for while asleep I’m ninety / and think I’m dying. / Death rattles in my throat” (ll. 120-123). The temporal disorientation of ‘being ninety’ in dreams conflates the wicked fairy (aged crone) and Briar Rose (aged only in sleep), while the death rattle invokes the witch-narrator’s gaping mouth and its unspeakable, rattling narrative. But this time, the story the witch-speaker/Briar Rose is ‘ready to tell’ disturbingly depicts one of eroticized violence and the ‘life after death’ of fairytale exploitation.

The tale these women collectively spin makes unambiguous the abjection of female bodies in male-defined sexual power systems, as they pronounce:

This trance girl / is yours to do with. / You could lay her in a grave, / an awful package, / and shovel dirt on her face / and she’d never call back: Hello there! / But if you kissed her on the mouth / her eyes would spring open / and she’d call out: Daddy! Daddy! / Presto! / She’s out of prison. (ll. 130-140)

The female body, infiltrated, is blank slate, an ‘intact tableau,’ emptied of interiority. As with Atwood’s temporarily-fragmented heroines, Sexton implies that the ‘psychic split’ may be Woman’s only avenue of escape in a system that makes of her all body, all sex. To survive, Sexton’s puppets evacuate their abject bodies, leaving them behind to be
“passed hand to hand / like a bowl of fruit” (l. 148) among men. This hybrid voice in turn represses the memory of being ‘nailed into place’ each night by the phallic penetrator; though this voice invokes the sexual abuse narrative, it is as seen through a filter, for the voice prefaces this by observing that “There was a theft. / That much I am told” (ll. 141-142). Later, the voice acknowledges that in coping with abuse through a severing of mind from body, she/they “forget who I am” (l. 150). The narrator posits the question of ‘knowing’ the facts of the abuse, but an inquiry into narrative reliability is null, for the witch/Briar Rose—despite requiring to ‘be told’ of their abuse—make visible the larger cultural incest narrative while simultaneously critiquing the seams that silence them.

As the poem draws to a close, the hybrid voice inquires “Daddy? / That’s another kind of prison. / It’s not the prince at all, / but my father/drunkenly bent over my bed” (ll. 151-155), again spawning factual disorientation—whether the king or the prince is the girl’s attacker remains hazy. But Sexton suggests that whomever commits the exploitation, the system is cyclical; women will be bartered like ‘bowls of fruit’ between kings and princes, fathers and sons (all surrogates for one another, in any case), time and again. By culture, and by the cultural parameters assembled through fairytales’ pedagogical politics, both women and men are incarcerated within the marriage ‘cesspool,’ as Mother Gothel terms it in “Rapunzel” (“Rapunzel” l. 44)—the cesspool of compulsory heterosexuality, as it is found in systems of domination, manages and mutilates independently-formulated identities and sexualities.

And if the trafficking of women between men requires that Woman must be an abstraction, Woman in turn becomes neither entirely-disavowed object, nor does she
access agency in the way a subject might—she is abject, inhabiting the borders of being and is, in effect, easily manipulated by those who have a firm footing in the center of cultural discourse. Patriarchal and heteronormative systems that construct patrilineal arrangements of inheritance (and, that notion we’re beating to death, the bartering of female bodies) and fictive and unequal identity categories inevitably place all participants of culture (so, everyone) in “another kind of prison” (“BR” l. 152). Fairytales, in ‘innocently’ illustrating these systems as morally right, likewise create narrative and ideological prisons in which we, their readers, guide our experiential performances.

Hence, when Briar Rose/the crone imagines her father “circling the abyss like a shark, / …thick upon me / like some sleeping jellyfish” (ll. 156-158), we are not only warned of the potentially incestuous and violent functions of fairytale family structures, but reminded, strangely, of the witch-speaker’s question in “The Gold Key.” There, she asks “Are you comatose? / Are you undersea?” (“GK” ll. 21-22)—as with Briar Rose/the witch-speaker, the readers addressed in the prefatory poem have been immobilized by the inescapable master narratives of the fairytale institution. Bringing the theme of paralysis within/drowning beneath veils of ignorance full circle, the witch-narrator entreats her audience to make the move she herself has made in surviving the patriarchal prison erected in “Briar Rose.” The witch-speaker and Briar Rose, speaking from shared experience, have each been threatened with submersion in the fairytale sea of eroticized and abjectifying brutalities, but insofar as the witch discloses her own victimization throughout the collection, Briar Rose’s struggle for survival in these shark-infested waters is one and the same with the witch’s. I-woman, escapee. xv
This is the survivor’s narrative. As Sexton distorts the oppositional definitions of Good Woman/Bad Woman, of victor/victim roles, and of personal/public narratives (the sexual abuse narrative being a particularly cogent one) in the most graphic poem of the collection, the reader is confronted with the gruesome unspeakable, with their own potential abjection. Luisa Valenzuela declares that the “mouth [is] the most threatening opening of the feminine body: it can eventually express what shouldn’t be expressed, reveal the hidden desire, unleash the menacing differences which upset the core of the phallogocentric, paternalistic discourse” (Valenzuela 177). In ‘confessing’ her commonality with the fairytale incest-survivor of “Briar Rose,” the witch-narrator’s cavernous mouth illustrated in “The Gold Key” assumes new import, for she refuses to reify the binary between speaking-witch and abject-princess; her gaping mouth widens to release the voice of the survivor, for she herself is one. As we’ve seen in “Snow White” and “Briar Rose,” the princess does not statically occupy her passive role for eternity, for as Sexton insinuates by embellishing upon and leaving ambiguous formerly ‘tidy’ endings, the vacant maidens puppeteered in the ‘conventional’ retellings may, in fact, ‘transform’ into the wicked crone once ‘happily ever after’ is (un)happily in the past.

And so, as Briar Rose/the witch-speaker inquires, “What voyage this, little girl? / This coming out of prison? / God help— / this life after death?” (ll. 160-163)—what voyage does Transformations navigate, and what might the survivor do should they escape that prison, that story, that voyage? Where Leventen posits that Sexton cannot even begin to imagine alternatives to victimization, I argue, rather, that on escaping these master narratives, the alternative is no more than what the witch-speaker initially purports to do—narrate. Sexton seems strikingly alert to the silencing of survivor narratives,
particularly those of incest as they function in a “cultural framework that marginalizes voices that challenge patriarchal power” (Skorczewski 334). And because of her seeming double-consciousness (that of victim; that of survivor), Sexton offers to her literary inheritors ‘the very possibility of change’ by way of narrating the unspeakable. She, like Valenzuela, recognizes the dire need for women to “allow the mouths to bleed till we gain access to the territory in which everything can and should be said” (Valenzuela 177), to tear open the seams obscuring marginal spaces of experience. Sexton and her witch-narrator snip the threads that have sewn-shut their mouths, they widen the womb-like abyss, and exhibit (from liminal spaces of critical ‘knowing’) their ghastly faces, which “are raw…the tears could well dissolve the salt and uncover our sores” (Valenzuela 178).

Sexton’s misguided critics, in insisting upon her reification of self-victimization, are in fact the ones trapped by the binary identificatory categories and discursive constructs they project and impose upon Sexton. What they fail to recognize in Transformations, and in her work more generally, is her grappling with the excavation of a hitherto silenced voice, her struggle to carve a space in discourse for the narratives of those who have broken from a culture that seals their gaping mouths, makes of them the abject. Transformations’ closing comment on ‘that voyage’—“God help— / this life after death?” (“BR” ll. 162-163)—endeavors to imagine the narrative that must be constructed in the wake of trauma, from the recesses of repressed memory. Sexton’s knowledge of both victim and survivor positionings impels her to drag the things she resists along with her. She refuses to don the rose-tinged spectacles society provides to maintain the illusion of happily-ever-after; she refuses to deny the psychic death with which culture infects her, but remains ever-conscious of the ‘life after’ that remains
possible. Lingering long after the witch-speaker (temporarily) closes her gaping mouth is the potentiality for fairytale audiences to remember their individual and collective traumas—the possibility that we might all demand answers of the master narratives that debase us, and come to realize the endless opportunities for subversion in speaking the unspeakable.

THREE: “Putting new wine in old bottles”: Angela Carter and the ‘Demythologizing’ Business

Weren’t these dreadful stories Children’s Classics? Weren’t they only doing their cultural duty by forcing them on me? Isn’t the function of a good fairytale to instill fear, trembling and the sickness unto death into the existential virgin, anyway?…The
sooner you learn your own impotence in the face of universal despair, the better.

—Angela Carter

Dominance and subordination, bawdy/body humor, brutality, carnality, self-reflexivity and parody, and delectable excess—all this and more to be found in the wondrous, wacky, and ‘wayward’ works of Angela Carter. There is no warning sufficient to prime a reader for their first advance into Carter’s textual minefields, nor should we desire such cautionary measures. The pleasure in reading Carter is in learning to navigate the frontlines and emerging from the fantastical trenches of her narrative wars—for there is a battle to be had, as Carter herself notes, and we must remain attentive to her operations “in the demythologizing business” (SaL 38). Yet as with Atwood and Sexton, Carter’s work has been received through inadequate critical channels and frequently commandeered by the feminist wars—in Carter’s lifetime, notably through the pro-sex/anti-porn feminist skirmishes of the 1970s, with theorists like Gayle Rubin, Andrea Dworkin, and Catherine MacKinnon at opposing helms. Post-mortem, Carter has been conceptually resituated (now that she can’t answer back) as either the ‘benevolent’ fairy godmother of magical realism or, again, as a cleverly-disguised tool for patriarchal constructions of victimized and pornographic female sexuality and selfhood.

It is vital to consider, however, that these more explicitly political critical battles over canonizing Carter erupt from the interrelated fact that Carter’s texts plainly engage with politics and theory—and a bevy of discursive modes, at that, as Carter brings in gender/sexual politics, powerplay, narrative politics, and philosophical questions on ontology, art, and ethics. No intellectual inquiry, indeed, seems to have escaped her
discerning glance. Likewise, Carter expects of her audience as much mental exertion in the reading of her works as she exercised in the writing of them. When Carter recounts necrophilic rape in “The Snow Child,” there lies the temptation to an effortless fall into the Dworkinian contention that the narrative reinscribes sexist and/or essentializing discourses. But if we permit Robin Ann Sheets’ assertion that Carter’s texts insist “that fiction constitutes an important part of the contemporary discourse on sexuality” and that “an interdisciplinary approach is necessary for reading imaginative literature about sexuality” (633), then perhaps our perceptions of Carter might better bend the boundaries of informed interpretation.

If Atwood and Sexton understand that we can start from no place other than where we already stand, Carter seize this perception and yanks it along to an entirely different plane. Carter’s project of putting new wine in old bottles and, with any luck, exploding these antique urns, is an enterprise she realizes can be executed in none other than the most radical of fashions. This is not to say she doesn’t maintain the same pragmatic stance as Atwood and Sexton; indeed, Carter never turns a blind eye to the material binds of discourse, but remains “always mindful…that a recognition of boundaries must precede their modification and dissolution” (Bacchilega, Roemer 12). Carter provisionally engages with these discursive frameworks while simultaneously interrogating their limits and the ways in which she might advantageously deploy them without becoming herself enclosed.

Fairytales, of course, are never far beyond the fringes of Carter’s work. As Margaret Atwood remarks, Carter “blends myth-making into her theory and theorizing into her myth” (“Running” 118), and in so doing, theoretical indictments are ever-central
to her fairytale revisions. The German fairytale “Sleeping Beauty” frequently emerges, either in the literal presence of its narcoleptic heroine (as in *Nights at the Circus*) or in a trope-ic architecture, as with the dreamlike eroticism and ideologically paralyzed landscape of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman.* Elsewhere, we find a reworking of “Hansel and Gretel” in “Penetrating to the Heart of the Forest,” a derisive vision of Disneyland in “In Pantoland,” and a haunting study of “Cinderella’s” mother/daughter dynamic in “Ashputtle; or, The Mother’s Ghost.” However, my focus in this project rests within her most overt collection of fairytale re-imaginings, *The Bloody Chamber,* originally published in 1979, the same year as her hard-core polemic, *The Sadeian Woman.* I raise this history in an effort to illustrate both the impact of Carter’s fascination with the Marquis de Sade’s ‘moral pornography’ on *The Bloody Chamber,* and as a way of contextualizing Carter’s critical topography.

Carter’s fairytale revisions have frequently been assaulted as tales that reinscribe sexual binaries of dominance/submission, raise the whip of male-eroticized violence, and depict the female body through a male-defined pornographic lens. But as we said of Sexton’s critics, Carter’s seem in fact to be the ones trapped within oppositionally-defined modes of perception. Like Carter’s heroine in “The Erl-King,” Carter’s critics are so immersed in preconceived interpretations—they walk into the forest to find themselves “trapped in [their] own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems” (“The Erl-King” 186)—as to entirely miss her radical destabilizations. In attempting to academically situate Carter’s impossibly-imagined dreamscapes with any sort of linearity or precision, we of course must face the threat of those same reductive critical snares. Thus, in attempting to posit a theory of Carter’s fairytale feminist politics,
we must be ever-alert to the provisionality of any such statements—for often when we aren’t looking, Carter’s texts appear, as in Dr. Hoffman’s dream-war, to metamorphose beneath their own radical weight.

I break *The Bloody Chamber* into three primary conceptual sections. The first of these focuses on the opening triad of the collection, consisting of “The Bloody Chamber,” “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” and “Tiger’s Bride,” in which I propose that the tales collaborate to acknowledge the limitations of the fairytale institution, noticeably by undermining the marriage plot, and approaching an ideological space in which the possibility of destabilizing transformation is imagined. Many critics view the ensuing tale, “Puss in Boots,” as a sort of ‘comic coda’ breaking the first triad from the two following; and as “Puss” does not directly pertain to my interests in this chapter, I direct my readers to further criticism upon that story. In the second triad, featuring “The Erl-King,” “The Snow Child,” and “Lady of the House of Love,” the tales retreat from the first triad’s contact with radical change; indeed, this section speaks from (seems almost to predict) the constrictive attitude many critics assume in conceptualizing Carter. Insofar as each features protagonists trapped within culturally pre-constructed illusions of reality, these three tales illustrate the problematic and often fatal outcomes of allowing master narratives to control lived experience. Finally, in the last triad—“The Werewolf,” “The Company of Wolves, and “Wolf-Alice”—Carter suggests narratives beyond the bounds of culture, and thereby already at the point of radical transformation, either through developmental isolation or from a self-reflexive comprehension of the tales and master narratives at hand.
The title story of the collection invokes as its ‘original’ the classic “Bluebeard” tale—and as with that tale and its referents in the mythical and biblical tales of Pandora and Eve, we are treated to Carter’s shrewd interrogations of curiosity, disobedience, initiation, and a rather vicious spousal reaction to the use of a little key. Perhaps the most telling reversal of the classic tale comes in Carter’s decision to locate the narrative vantage point in first person, behind the bride’s eyes. Our bride-narrator, the ‘existential virgin,’ has an informed grasp on the material conditions trapping her. In the transfer from mother to husband, she remarks that “when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife” (“The Bloody Chamber” 111): this transplant from one source of power to another is physically marked by the ring, a cultural symbol of the goods-trade. Moreover, she corrects her mother’s inquiry as to whether or not she loves the Marquis by responding “I’m sure I want to marry him” (111), undermining romanticized notions of love in conventional fairytale tropes. She, like Carter, understands that passive heroines in fairytales are not licensed to ‘love’ their husbands—as we see in tales like “Bluebeard,” “Snow White,” and “Sleeping Beauty,” marriage is little more than the economic contract drawn up between two individuals of unequal standing, and is often decided when the bride is physically or financially incapacitated, unable to offer consent or sentimentalize ‘love.’ What sort of love is conceived when a girl is bartered to the prince merely by way of his discovering her ‘living tableau’ upon a marble slab? As Lizzie of Carter’s Nights at the Circus suggests, “What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?” (Nights 21).

Yet Carter stretches the bounds of this ideologically-erected power hierarchy further, via a graphic and violent account of eroticized domination and submission.
Carter’s concomitant work on *The Sadeian Woman* seems significant here, for the Marquis is a refined, aesthetically sensitive executioner; his violently erotic project is, like the Marquis de Sade’s, a “business [of] the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation…of the real relations of man and his kind” (*SW* 19). Engaging with the most abject-ifying iconographies of sexuality, both the Marquis of “TBC” and de Sade root sexual oppression in tangibly terrifying narratives, exposing these relations to the world in a sort of ‘return of the repressed.’ The Marquis is, after all, “a patron of the arts and collector of pornography, thereby demonstrating a cultural foundation for his sadism and suggesting a relationship between art and aggression” (Sheets 644). Yet this relationship can only ever be correlative, as Carter cautions in her depiction (at moments) of the Marquis as a sympathetic figure. Though he is the sort of man that waxes poetic on the “striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer” (“TBC” 130), the bride (and Carter) does not condemn the Marquis as an entirely sovereign purveyor of these eroticized and violently determined social bodies/roles. Like Marian MacAlpin’s ‘rational’ perception of Peter by the end of *The Edible Woman* or Sexton’s attention to the puppeteering of princes as well as princesses in her horrific tales, Carter’s bride recognizes that the Marquis is as much a victim of sadomasochistic sexual culture as she. She remarks even after receiving her death sentence that “I felt a terrified pity for him, for this man who lived in such strange, secret places that, if I loved him enough to follow him, I should have to die. The atrocious loneliness of that monster!” (138). Both bridegroom and bride are caught within the confines of a culture that conceptualizes heterosexual relations, like a sort of prostitution, through eroticized power positionings.
This question of pornography figures spectrally throughout the collection, but in the title story, its presence seems most hauntingly manifest. Through references to both blood-drenched fairytales and historical nods to serial-murderer Gilles de Rais, the French Terror, nineteenth-century pornographer Félicien Rops, and Charles Baudelaire, Carter weaves an intertextual web of pornographic desire, pleasure, and horror. In the Marquis’ fascination with sadomasochistic art and sex, and in the bride’s morbid curiosity towards the Marquis, we find ourselves lost in a self-reflexive mockery of the relation between the performance and reality of desire. Where Robin Ann Sheets draws a connective thread between the Marquis’ interest in pornography and his debasement and exploitation of women, and anti-porn feminists like Patricia Duncker and Andrea Dworkin see this connection as an odious reinscription of eroticized domination, I argue instead that Carter outlines the limitations of aesthetic influence and invites her readers to draw their own conclusions. Many critics’ greatest failure in reading Carter is to be found in their strain of dour humorlessness; with such pointed attention to pornography in the tale, and such excessive atmospheric cues, can we read Carter (here and elsewhere) with anything but an acknowledgment of her rather pronounced metaphoric winking at the audience?

By graphically narrating the pornographic gaze, Carter exposes its limitations to elicit an undermining of its authority. The bride does not merely fall prey to her male-defined ‘talent’ for corruption; instead, through a self-conscious analysis of her yearnings, she reconstructs herself as a desiring subject in acknowledging both her fascination with and disgust for the Marquis: “I lay in bed alone. And I longed for him. And he disgusted me” (125). Likewise, the Marquis is not so much a propagator of
culture as he is a product of it—through the bride’s eyes, the reader views him not only as monstrous or grotesque, but as pathetic, a victim of the cultural prescriptions inflicted upon him. Carter doesn’t condone his action, but nor does she condemn him as the spring of these ideologically fatal constructions. Moreover, sadomasochistic sexual performance, in conflating pleasure and pain, establishes an inextricable connection between sex and death, which later is made manifest through the interwoven question of the chamber/womb as death. Sadomasochism, to some extent, removes sexuality from the purely procreative; additionally, in marking sex out as an act that may indeed be brutal or even fatal, Carter’s narrative questions conventional conceptualizations of heterosexuality and marriage as benign institutions.

The bride-narrator is no fool; though she is in danger of entrapment within the pornographic lens, she remains ever-alert to the impending snare. On entrance into the marriage, she reflects upon her position in the Marquis’ tableau of enigmatic and mysteriously-vanished former wives: “as if to demonstrate the eclecticism of his taste, he had invited me to join this gallery of beautiful women” (114). On numerous occasions, the bride observes her mirror-image, her perception of this reflection, and the ways in which the Marquis constructs the looking-glass focalizer. In each case, the bride-narrator offers self-conscious signals to her own capacity for internal reflection and a rational awareness of the scopophilic pleasures seized from the female social body. Like the Marquis and his collections, both of pornographic art and of mutilated women, the bride actively engages with a self-reflexive comprehension of feminist inquiries into the male gaze and the construction of the iconography of Woman.
In two moments, first after the Marquis’ bequeathing of a brutally-imagined choker and then after the bride’s ‘deflowering,’ she reflects upon her ‘talent’ or potentiality for corruption (115; 124). Like Irigaray’s contention that the figure of the virgin acts as the blank slate upon which the male-desired female body is projected, the bride is attentive to her own position as sexual signifier. She knows, in looking to the looking glass and perceiving its ideological construction(s), the danger of becoming trapped behind the mirror of his idea of her. These literally and figuratively reflective moments provide “opportunities [for her] to see herself as others see her [and] allow [her] to begin to have a more complete sense of herself as subject” (Manley 85). By calling attention to both the mirror as a vehicle for the male gaze and the bride-narrator’s interior sensitivity to these limits, Carter suggests the potentiality for a self-determined occupation of the female body beyond the boundaries of male-constructed female sexuality. However, as Carter likewise implies, this can only transpire when both women and men are aware of their discursive/cultural production and actively and critically engage with its political repercussions.

Additionally, that we are invited into the bride’s interiority allows Carter and her narrator to explore paths of agency by way of, as Virginia Woolf terms it, placing “the emphasis…upon something hitherto ignored” and seeing the ways in which the “accent falls a little differently” (Woolf 152). In entering into the silenced/unspeakable narrative of Bluebeard’s bride, Carter implores her audience to imagine what might provoke curiosity to open a box, eat of naughty fruit, or turn a seemingly innocuous key—to imagine what ideological systems erect moralizing categories of female curiosity and disobedience, and speculate upon spaces for subversion in structures where the rules of
the game pre-exist their players. As Cheryl Renfro provocatively proposes, one
emphasis shifted in Carter’s imagining of the Bluebeard tale is from the significance
placed upon the forbidden key to the terrifying journey into the similarly forbidden
chamber (101). Even the title of Carter’s tale stresses the journey into the chamber over
the turning of the key; as Renfroe further intimates, this politically-motivated shift
transfers the central motif of the tale from one of disobedience (the act of using the key)
to one of initiation (the discoveries made in the bloody chamber). In conjunction with
Carter’s increased underscoring of the bride’s mother’s presence in the tale and an
acknowledgment of female inheritance, the narrator’s experience within the bloody
chamber signifies a violent entrance into a womb-like void, and an inherited ritual of
female initiation into Womanhood, wherein culture (re)figures ‘Woman’ as the carrier of
life and of death.

But if this initiation is an inevitable voyage, how does Carter subvert the
conventional cultural parameters? Following in the wake of increased attention to the
mother and her romantic past, the specters of the former brides, as well as the bevy of
women presented in this bride’s mirror image—for example, the mirror figures her as an
entire ‘harem’ for the Marquis (“TBC” 118)—Carter invites the possibility of a female
collective, a multiplicity of voices and experiences intersecting in the junctures of
virginity, marriage, and spousal violence. Remarking that her “mother’s spirit drove
[her] on” to enter the forbidden chamber (131), the bride-narrator highlights the
significance of female rites of passage, namely those framed by the desire for knowledge.
Here, the rite is one of discovering the hidden and frequently aggressive undercurrents of
sexual relations and marriage—but as the bride’s “true initiation is not first intercourse,
but [in] the ordeal of the bloody chamber” (Renfroe 97), how might we understand the question of female collectivity/community building in “The Bloody Chamber”?

As we’ve mentioned, Carter’s decision to shift narrative significance from the key to the chamber, as well as to mark the bride’s initiation through the chamber rather than sexual discovery, focalizes the bride’s blossoming subjectivity through a female-centered filter rather than a male-defined pornographic lens. In the classic tale, the bride’s passage is centrally one into marriage; the entrance into the chamber is a side-step, a moralizing narrative cautioning women against marital disobedience. Here, Carter’s narrator does not naively and purposelessly enter the chamber, but suspects the Marquis’ dark secret to be contained within; thus, her act becomes one of survival, for she is well-aware of his murky past, and yearns to penetrate his secretive interiors. This urge stems from a desire to approach the Marquis from a position of mutuality; her potential death, and those deaths actualized in the wives before her, cite the Marquis’ opposing (and culturally constructed) desire to maintain absolute control over female desire and performance.

The bride-narrator succeeds where the former wives did not, however, by entering into marriage with knowledge of its material conditions, a familiarity with the politics of pornographic and literary master narratives of Woman, and an engagement with threads of female inheritance. After the bride tells the piano tuner, Jean-Yves, of her discovery of the Marquis’ grotesque chamber, he muses that “I thought all of these were old wives’ tales…spooks to scare bad children into good behavior” (135). But the bride-narrator’s advanced comprehension of the master narratives she functions under enables her both to undergo the initiation of female discovery in the womb of the bloody chamber and to survive the ordeal of her husband’s death warrant. Because of their engagement with
female collectivity, the bride and her mother manage to evade the ‘submission or death’ fate doled out to many women, and are effectively capable of destabilizing the foundations of the Marquis’ system. After the bride’s mother rides in to the rescue and prepares to discharge the fatal bullet, they look on as “The puppet master…saw his dolls break free of their strings…and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns” (142). Though the Marquis would conventionally have written, directed, and starred in his own cautionary narrative, Carter’s subversion lies in her invitation to the audience to hear the silenced voice of the bride, to illustrate her morally-complex sense of agency, and to imagine a female-centered consciousness in a tale originally designed for and consumed by men. And while nothing can “mask that red mark” left by the key on the bride’s forehead (143), Carter suggests that this ‘mark of Cain’ does not condemn the bride. Rather, it signifies her successful and autonomous initiation into female subjectivity. The mark physically reminds her that she is (again) I-woman, escapee.

With the next two tales of the triad, it would seem impractical to scrutinize them in isolation; each is a retelling of “Beauty and the Beast,” but each revises the ‘classic’ from a vastly different narrative approach and each to singular effect. “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” seems at first a conventional retelling; through a detached narrative perspective, we find the passive beauty, the strange beast, and an expected and sentimentalized union between them at the story’s end. “Tiger’s Bride,” however, offers an assertive and shrewd first-person narration from newly-cynical Beauty, an almost inhumanly ‘othered’ beast, an undeniable attention to self-reflexive narrative politics, a castle plucked out of Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” and an ending only Carter
could conceive. Indeed, these two tales are nearly so oppositional as to be irreconcilable, but Carter’s inclusion and spatial alignment of both instead functions to contest both the authority of the classic (in parodying its construction with “Courtship”) and Carter’s own narrative clout. As Patricia Brooke reminds us, “Taken as a dyad, these two revisions of the popular Beauty and the Beast tale destabilize each other from within the tradition” (Brooke 83). Because we cannot construct a binary divide between Carter’s revisions, each account—the satirically traditional and the violently radical—undermines the other’s totalizing potential, proffering conditional authority to multiple voices, multiple narratives.

Despite the critical inclination to categorize “Courtship” as a ‘conservative’ imagining of the tale, again I suggest a more investigative glance to Carter’s delight in parodic excess. With maudlin depictions of snow that paves “the road…white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin” (“Courtship” 144) and tongue-in-cheek musings that Beauty’s “visit to the Beast must be, on some magically reciprocal scale, the price of her father’s good fortune” (148), again I plead: pay mind to her theatrical winking in the periphery. To read her work with a straight face is to miss the mark entirely, and in the case of “Courtship,” this concern seems particularly pertinent. What we are to take ‘seriously’ from it, chiefly in its relation to “Tiger’s Bride,” are powerful articulations of difference—of the ‘Othering’ operations of normative culture—satirical and inward-looking reflections upon fairytale narrative structure, and a resolution somehow so predictable as to be bizarrely ambiguous.

Upon entrance into the Beast’s castle, Beauty’s father perceives the space as “a place of privilege where all the laws of the world he knew need not necessarily apply”
(145); this sentiment echoes in Beauty’s realization that “All the natural laws of the world were held in suspension here” (150). This castle requires a disavowal of rationality for recognition of its magical hospitality; and like the castle, this self-reflexively reminds the reader that fairytales themselves require the same suspension of disbelief in order for their ‘magical’ mores to effectively indoctrinate their audience. The Beast’s wondrous castle, in fact, harbors no hired help, as the reader is dutifully informed; the Beast “disliked the presence of servants because…a constant human presence would remind him too bitterly of his otherness” (147). But just as parody simultaneously challenges and reinscribes that which it resists, Carter’s conspicuous nod to hired help prompts a realization of the limits of the ‘magical’ castle—it emphasizes the material conditions of maintaining never-never land, consequently figuring this world of illusion as illogical; the limits become visible. “Courtship’s” momentary recognition of those material conditions is in turn made vehemently manifest in “Tiger’s Bride,” where the ‘help’ is not merely present, but comprised of inhuman creatures and duplicative automatons.

Each story’s Beast prohibits the normalizing (and othering) embrace of humanity and its culture (despite their being, like the Marquis, sophisticated connoisseurs of aestheticism), but this disavowal in “Tiger’s Bride” more prominently haunts the tale, and explicitly plays with theoretical inquiries into performative identity and the ‘totalized’ self. Though here Beauty is presented with actualized servants, they do not occupy the sphere of humanity; the valet tells Beauty that “We surround ourselves instead, for utility and pleasure, with simulacra” (“Tiger’s Bride” 162). A simulacrum, it is worth noting, performs as a copy of an original, but further, the simulacrum serves to ontologically dispute the originality of the ‘original.’ For what sort of aggregate original holds within
it the potentiality for imitation? As Judith Butler contends in relation to identity politics, gender and sexuality are ontological jokes, as their ‘being-ness’ necessarily depends upon a construction against their opposites or ‘others.’ Thus, there is no intact core to these identity categories; they themselves are copies of copies that have been ideologically fabricated through filters of culturally acceptable molds. Not only do “Courtship” and “Tiger’s Bride” coalesce to tear the sutures from this dialogic construction of authenticity (each presents the other with its “Other” to some extent), but both Beauty and the Beast of “Tiger’s Bride” presage this now-classic Butlerian principle.

Beauty, in fact, finds herself literally duplicated in the figure of a cyborg double; made to look and perform like her, this double disrupts the conception of her singular ‘self.’ The Beauty of this tale, unlike the frequently self-interested one of “Courtship,” is unperturbed by the replica; indeed, the automaton proves itself as ‘convenient’ to her as it does to the Beast and his cohort. Weary of her relationship to the father that “lost [her] to the Beast at cards” (154), Beauty allows her simulacrum to take the burden of her culturally-regulated existence: she remarks that “I will dress [my maid] in my own clothes, wind her up, send her back to perform the part of my father’s daughter” (167). Carter’s overt nod to the performative operation of being a ‘father’s daughter’ reflects back upon Beauty’s cynicism; at the beginning of the tale, we are invited to sympathize with her disposition, which she claims is “peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly” (154). This bitter Beauty is alert to the historicity of female oppression—for example, cultural prescriptions that compel women to hijack their own bodies as capital in systems of male exchange—and recognizes that her circumstances are
modifiable, so long as she actively resists their constraints and, perhaps unsettlingly, passes to a sphere beyond the bounds of patriarchal power.

Likewise, the Beast endeavors to sublimate his otherness through an exterior production of ‘real’ humanity. He dons a mask that imitates normative constructions of human presentation, yet as Beauty suggests, his mask imparts “a beautiful face; but one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human: one profile of his mask is the mirror image of the other, too perfect, uncanny” (156). In attempting to recognizably replicate the ‘original,’ he diminishes its appearance of reality—the mask inadvertently calls attention to the failure of these ‘original’ categories to fully contain lived experience and identity. Neither the mask nor Beauty’s ‘exhaustible’ double can properly intimate the living, breathing creatures they purport to represent. In both “Courtship” and “Tiger’s Bride” this intersection of subjective perception with ‘reality’ (perhaps wiser to say ‘lived experience’) is disclosed, as with “The Bloody Chamber,” in images cast upon reflective surfaces, as with the mirrors and eyes that saturate each tale.

The Beauty of “Courtship,” for example, fails to fully inhabit her selfhood in any productive sense because she refuses to critically engage with the discourses reflected upon her. Though the reader is cued to the possibility of a discerning and autonomous gaze—in her father’s photograph, the camera “had captured a certain look…as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul” (“Courtship” 147)—the project of the tale for Beauty is maneuvering into such a subject position. For the better part of the story, Beauty is ensnared within her own limited channels of perception; she sees in the Beast only an ‘intolerable difference’ from herself (147). Like the bride of “The Bloody
Chamber” and even that of “Tiger’s Bride,” her narrative yields the rumblings of radical transformation, but she does not inhabit her subversive potential for the duration.

The very title of the story signals that there is a trajectory to be followed—a courtship plot to be resolved, indeed, the very creation of the identity ‘Mr. Lyon’ from the Beast. But this can only come to pass through Beauty’s interior maturation, namely, the courtship of her critical perception. Beauty ‘learns’ not to tolerate or accept the monstrous otherness, but assimilates it through her own conservative lens. Where the ‘magical’ transmutation typically occurs, there is no evidence of a supernatural curse upon the Beast, nor does Carter outline a corporeal shift; rather, Beauty wonders “How was it she had never noticed before that his agate eyes were equipped with lids, like those of a man? Was it because she had only looked at her own face, reflected there?” (152). Patricia Brooke asserts that the transformation “may exist more in her perception than in external circumstances” (75), and indeed, with the ensuing and explicit transformation depicted in “Tiger’s Bride,” the revelation at the end of “Courtship” seems not one of exhibiting the human behind the beast, but of lifting the veil that distorts Beauty’s vision.

Beauty in “Tiger’s Bride” brandishes a hypersensitivity to the plight of fairytale heroines; the romanticized, iconographic rose that visually resolves “Courtship” is in “Tiger’s Bride” no more than a ragged remnant of antiquarian illusion. When this Beauty’s father begs of her a rose in remembrance, she “prick[s her] finger so he gets his rose all smeared with blood” (“TB” 158). Acquainted with the sorts of men that delight in trafficking their mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, Beauty’s gesture is not merely one of bitter symbolic magnitude. She bears witness to the culturally-regulated and not-so-magical tradition of initiating girls into ‘adult’ sexuality by way of their patriarchal
possessors. Carter’s intertextual threading of the finger-prick from “Sleeping Beauty” signals this Beauty’s seizure of the male-defined tradition; rather than allowing her patriarch (the father, and later the Beast) to manipulate and defang her sex (the sentimental icon of the rose), Beauty grabs hold of this mythographic femininity and tarnishes it with her own freely-flowing (perhaps symbolically menstrual) blood.

And while Beauty of “Tiger’s Bride” frequently relies on her reflected image, in mirrors and in the Beast’s eyes, hers is not a reliance upon vanity—she watches in the mirror the card game by which her fate is sealed. She is called the “‘living image of her mother’” (155), but knows well the dangers mothers face in fairytales, for frequently they are kicking only long enough to pop the protagonist out, and then poof! off into never never more, from their never never land of fantasy. This Beauty’s mirrors, unlike those in “Courtship,” do not offer the shallowly-delineated idols of convention; like Perseus, she appropriates mirrors as a way of employing her subversive gaze.

Similarly, Beauty understands that, as with mirrors and their architectures of female beauty and subjectivity, her survival is dependent on a subversive deployment of her body as literal capital. Like Atwood’s heroines, she proposes a psychic split in her first offering to the Beast:

…I promise you I will pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over my face…So I shall be covered completely from the waist upwards…If you wish to give me money, then I should be pleased to receive it. But I must stress that you should give me only the same amount of money that you would give to any other woman in such circumstances. (161)
Beauty of “Tiger’s Bride” insists upon the Beast’s strict ideological adherence to his carnal absorption in her body; she requires that she be *absolute sex* for his ‘taking’ of her. With her face covered, Beauty can in turn avoid a subjection of her interiority by way of severing it from the submission elicited from her sex. Recognizing that “my own skin was my capital in the world and today I’d make my first investment” (159), Beauty occupies a self-consciously subaltern position; she has a familiarity with her own oppression and accordingly endeavors to undermine it by appropriating the ‘master’s tools’ on her own terms. But despite Beauty’s ‘knowledge’ of the system, she misinterprets the Beast’s desire. He approaches Beauty in a yearning for mutuality, and it is in the fantastical conclusion that we see Carter’s re-telling once more approaching the very *possibility* of change through destabilization. When Beauty and Beast each strip themselves of their clothing, she remarks that it “involved a kind of flaying” (168)—and in the isolated realm of the uncivilized, this flaying strips the two of their ties to culture, and consequently, of their submission to its prescribed and limiting ‘costumes.’ Beauty recognizes in the Beast that “The empty house of his appearance was ready for him but he had abandoned it” (168)—and this in turn foregrounds the radical shattering of the house in which they stand.

Though Beauty’s critical comprehension of fairytale master narratives reminds her to remain alert to the “earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment” (168), Beauty makes the transgressive leap. She invites this delectable feasting, under the condition that she and Beast participate as mutually-desiring subjects. As they descend into the carnal delights of their flaying, “The reverberations of his purring rocked the foundations of the house, the walls began to dance. [Beauty] thought: ‘It will all fall,
everything will disintegrate’” (169). Like the empty house of the Beast’s appearance, this literal house and its disintegration cue the reader to acknowledge the home as a physical expression of cultural and narrative limits. The home is the bedrock, for one thing, of the nuclear family—an institution inextricable from marriage, and, in fairytales, a site of gendered anxiety—and additionally signals the pleasures and power of ‘civilized’ culture. The home is society’s most powerful domesticating force. In upsetting the foundations of the Beast’s home, Beast and Beauty are granted license to imagine existence beyond its restraints, and moreover, to imagine uncaged narratives that play with content and form in a way that incites fluidity, that shatters, as it were, old wine bottles. Beauty senses that “each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world” (169)—they bare not their ‘real’ selves to one another in this polymorphous sexual performance, but reach a point of provisionality; they discover disruptive selves, identities that refuse stagnancy, that may be stripped infinitely away.

Taken in relation to the Beauty of “Tiger’s Bride,” who wields a fearsome counter-gaze, the Beauty of “Courtship” acts as a metatextual mockery of female subjectivity in the traditional marriage plot. The parodic excess of “Courtship” and the aggressively subversive subjectivity of “Tiger’s Bride” collaboratively work to tear away the seams covering over the traditional plot. Additionally, in revealing the incompatibility of identity categories with subjectivity, “Tiger’s Bride” satirically cites “Courtship’s” conventional protagonists and romanticized resolution as farce. Likewise, these shallow niceties on display in “Courtship” call the radical quality of “Tiger’s Bride” into question; each activates with its narrative ‘other’ a mutual textuality that insists upon
the endless possibilities of tale-telling. No tale can have just one telling; there will always be a voice or vantage point acting beyond the narrative frame.

In situating the second triad along the collection’s conceptual trajectory, the tales therein offer narratives in which illusion, prefigured by cultural regimes and master narratives, entirely paralyzes the players and distorts experience so far as to prohibit the possibility of change. As with Sexton’s *Transformations*, Carter’s second triad illuminates the logical (and, here, fatal) consequences of enslavement under discursively-produced and inescapable channels of desire. Unfortunately, as this project is similarly enslaved to limitations in length and scope, I must bite the bullet and center my argument upon one of these tales while drawing moments from the other two into the discussion.

“The Snow Child,” performing as the exemplary tale of the three, is an uncompromising and unsettling retelling of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” in which fantasy/illusion and the performance of desire intersect to spawn violence, rape, and death. “The Snow Child” is the shortest story of the collection—clocking in at just over a page, there is no room for romance; the prose is spare, blunt, haunting. Carter pares the tale down to its most basic, and most brutal, elements.

Reflecting the startlingly brief construction of the tale, Carter’s ‘existential virgin’ in the figure of Snow White is ephemeral, a mere shadow of corporeal desire. Indeed, she lacks solidity entirely—she is not the Count’s literal offspring, after all, but “the child of his desire” (193), his illusory production of the feminine ideal. No more than the manifestation of a cultural idol, the Virgin/nymphet, this ‘snow child’ is wholly at the mercy of ideological forces beyond her comprehension. As Carter alerts us, desire through the filter of sexist discourse depends upon the confidence trick of enigmatically-
imagined female sexuality; if pornographic depictions are the diversion at hand, then “pornography must always have the simplicity of fable; the abstraction of the flesh involves the mystification of the flesh” (SW 16). Carter’s snow child is pornographic abstraction in the extreme, for as we see in the Count’s attempt to literally thrust himself upon/into her, she is only abstraction. The triad suggests that in granting master narratives absolute license over the construction of desire, that desire in turn constructs subjectivity and experience through its own dangerously limited parameters. The powerful pull of pornographic master narratives on this tale recalls “The Bloody Chamber” and its implication that porn, if left unchecked in the way that the Marquis allows, can lead to dangerously distorted, potentially lethal performances of desire.

The Count, as with the Marquis’ ‘god-eye’ in “The Bloody Chamber,” functions as the godhead of the snow child’s narrative, for his words are literally made flesh in her figure: “As soon as he completed her description, there she stood” (“The Snow Child” 193). However, this realized desire signals not pleasure through, but deflation of fantasy. As with culturally-produced identity categories, the consummation of discursively-constructed desire inevitably falls flat against the backdrop of its own illusion. Desire’s project under these constraints, it would seem, is ceaseless deferral—once fully realized, the experience can never fulfill the improbable constructions of fantasy. Thus, it must remain cyclical; we must forever want what we cannot have, so as to avoid said deflation. In yet another rose-prick, however, the snow child herself begins to deflate and, indeed, to die: on picking the rose, the snow child “pricks her finger on the thorn; bleeds; screams; falls” (193). A phallic signifier, the rose thorn once again concentrates the systematic sanctioning of sexual violence into a conveniently and brutally brief image.
As in “Tiger’s Bride,” this intertextual weaving of Sleeping Beauty’s finger-prick through this tale’s fabric makes visible the sexually violent superstructure of patriarchal kinship systems, particularly in father/daughter relations. The rose-prick not only causes injury, as in “Tiger’s Bride,” but brings about the girl’s instantaneous death, to which the Count responds by forcing his own prick upon her: “Weeping, the Count got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl,” but to no avail—she melts, returning to nothingness (193). The Count’s inability to think beyond the prefigured limits of desire in turn begets the snow child’s ostensible ‘death.’

Likewise, these ideologically impenetrable divides of aggressor/victim—those so condemned by theorists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon—are those that produce the sort of ‘physical graffiti’ Carter comments upon in *The Sadeian Woman*. Carter defines rape as “a sort of physical graffiti, the most extreme reduction of love, in which all humanity departs from the sexed beings” (*SW* 6)—the snow child, in a similar fashion, is vacated of her humanity, because to fulfill the pornographic ideal of femininity is to be, it would seem, inhuman. Like the vampiric mistress in “The Lady of the House of Love,” the snow child is little more than a “self articulated garment in which she lived like a ghost in the machine” and she “does not possess herself…she hovers in a no-man’s land between life and death, sleeping and waking,” (“Lady” 202, 205). And because the pornographic iconography of virginity is mere male-defined illusion, the snow child cannot survive her own transmutation into the physical realm.

Though Samon Chainani contends that Carter’s tale confines female sexuality to a “heterosexual, sadomasochistic framework,” she fails, as many Carter critics have, to read “The Snow Child” through its intertextual relation to the rest of the collection.
While there is little evidence for autonomously-defined, positive female sexuality in “The Snow Child,” this tale seems deliberately fatalistic in an effort to highlight the dangerous shortcomings of master narratives and hegemonic mythographies. Carter writes sex in the way she writes Sade. Sade is in Carter-ian terms a ‘moral pornographer’ inasmuch as he “consciously utilizes the propaganda, the ‘grabbing’ effect of pornography to express…the real conditions of the world in terms of sexual encounters” (SW 21). By thrusting sex to its most vile and violent limits, Sade outlines the possibilities of sexuality as it operates in the material world; when the reader experiences that jolt of shock, (s)he recognizes the sutures seamlessly concealing politics already at work. Like Kristeva’s theory of the abject, Sadeian moral pornography forces the ‘normalized’ (or willfully blind) subject to face the desires and sexual performances disavowed, repressed, or kept otherwise silent. Carter takes Sade’s project further by breaking the boundaries of conventional depictions of sexuality and deploying theoretical foundations to engage the reader in her self-reflexive revisions of fairytale sexual politics.

Rather than moralizing to or cautioning her readers against the horrors of the second triad, Carter mercilessly follows the ‘logical’ and discomforting paths of an entrapment in master narratives to completion. Like the girl of “The Erl-King,” we will trek into the troublesome forests of fairytale politics and “be trapped in [our] own illusion because everything in the wood is exactly as it seems” (“EK” 186). Authoritarian narratives oblige us to believe in their universality and ‘truth’; just as the Count is able to act as godhead of his narrative in “The Snow Child,” the conventional narrative desires our suspension of disbelief, our slavish devotion to their hidden ideologies. Thus, the girl in “The Erl-King” is incapable of imagining possibilities beyond the bounds of what she
has been trained to believe; the refrain of the tale reminds her (and us) that “Erl-King will
do you grievous harm” (187), and so she enters the wood ‘knowing’ her own fate as it has
been filtered through the fairytale institution.

Though this understanding allows the girl to escape her own death, or an
entrapment in the god-eye of the Erl-King, it prohibits her from achieving anything but a
reversal of that which she already ‘knows.’ As a result, the girl—in the survivalist
endeavor to avoid the Erl-King’s scopophilic ‘reducing chamber’ (191)—takes “two huge
handfuls of his rustling hair as he lies half dreaming, half waking, and wind[s] them into
ropes, very softly, so he will not wake up, and softly, with hands as gentle as rain, [she
strangles] him with them” (192). Ensnared in pre-conceived notions of what the woods
are, and who the Erl-King might be, the narrator of “The Erl-King” cannot formulate her
own desire, but remains bound to the dichotomous power dynamic of aggressor and
supplicant in patriarchal dialogues. Because the tale’s conceptualizations of forest and
Erl-King are posited through first-person narration, we are not given to know the ‘reality’
of the Erl-King’s objective in caging the girl; we recognize his and her actions only
through the limiting prejudicial lens of a consciousness saturated by Romantic and
fairytale master narratives. This ideological imaginary disallows liminality—the grey
areas of desire cannot be voiced, and so cannot be prevaricated in material performance.

The tales of the second triad congeal to highlight both the latent sexual violence
of these ‘children’s stories’ and to make visible the limits and damaging potentialities of
passively bowing to the confines of the fairytale institution. Like Sexton’s critics,
however, Carter’s frequently focus on the ‘failings’ depicted in her bleak imaginings of
fairytale trauma. Contextualizing the second triad, however, within its intertextual
relation to the first and third provides a queerer reading of Carter’s destabilizing project. Turning to the third triad, we begin to imagine not merely Carter’s brushing against the possibility of change present in the first, nor the fall to the cage of culture in the second, but to the polymorphous promise of radical existence beyond the frontlines of cultural warfare. The pressure in those old bottles builds and builds until, indeed, they begin to burst. By committing what Kimberly Lau terms ‘erotic infidelities,’ Carter revises the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” in three tales—“The Werewolf,” “The Company of Wolves,” and “Wolf-Alice”—that hollow the ‘original’ narrative out from within. The three wolf tales closing out *The Bloody Chamber* do not merely disrupt the boundaries of fairytale erotics, but begin to shake the foundations of the system itself.

In “The Company of Wolves,” Carter’s protagonist, like those of the eponymous tale and “Tiger’s Bride,” has a self-conscious familiarity with fairytale politics. We are not introduced to this ‘Red,’ however, before being first subjected to the ‘company’ of wolf-myths framing and destabilizing Carter’s narrative. First, the mythography of the wolf surrounds the reader: “those eyes are all you will be able to glimpse of the forest assassins” (“Company” 212), because the fairytale master narrative of the Wolf permeates all. Yet Carter’s insistence on irreducible vision does not function in the way that the ‘god-eyes’ of “TBC” or “The Snow Child” do; there seem, in fact, an infinite number of perceptions—consequently, infinite narrative vantage points. Following this moment, there are three anecdotal tales of lived-experience as filtered through the folkloric positioning of the transformative werewolf, and a return to wolf-theory, in which Carter reminds us that “old wives hereabouts think it some protection to throw a hat or an apron at the werewolf, as if clothes made the man” (214). And in fact,
hearkening back to the ritual flaying of “Tiger’s Bride,” Carter’s lycanthropy is defined at least in part by a violently eroticized stripping away of cultural accoutrements.

As with Marian MacAlpin’s exposure to the various iconographies of masculinity and femininity, the protagonist of “The Company of Wolves” has been inundated by a number of wolf-myths and fairytale narratives; with these in the backdrop, she is a “closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing” (215). Carter’s nod to a closed system seems peculiar; after all, isn’t Carter about breaching the limits of closed systems? Here, however, the protagonist-as-closed-system insists upon her critical engagement with the narratives that attempt to (re)figure her cultural position. Guarding her virginity and her interior, “a magic space…shut tight with a plug of membrane” (215), the protagonist of “Company” is a Scheherazade figure; she has been inundated with the mythographies of wolf-lore, but rather than allowing them to consume her, ‘Red’ seals herself off and deploys her knowledge of the tales as a tactic of survival. Later Carter remarks that “since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid” (*BYB* 219). Thus, the nod to a closed system signals an internal indictment of narrative; the protagonist acts as cultural/literary critic, for her street savvy equips her with a fearlessness that likewise allows her to inhabit her desiring body in the stripping scene of the tale’s conclusion. This final scene transcends the pornographic bonds exhibited in the second triad, for as in the flaying of “Tiger’s Bride,” Wolf and Red together approach subject positions of mutuality.

When the wolf attempts to pilot her sexual performance through the now-clichéd dialogue of the classic tale (‘All the better to eat you with, my dear’), the “girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat” (219). And if in the Carter-ian model, “flesh
plus skin equals sensuality [and] flesh minus skin equals meat” (SW 138), the girl’s refusal to be ‘meat’ suggests a similar refusal to occupy the pornographic icon of Woman. Like Cixous’ Medusa-cackle, the protagonist’s laughter signals a release of that which has been disavowed; here, the potentiality for self-governed female sexuality erupts from her to hollow out the classic tale’s ‘closed system’ of dialogue. No more do the words become flesh when the wolf outlines his anatomy for victimized-Red Riding Hood. Her laughter interrupts the conventional trajectory, but does not merely reverse the dynamic. The protagonist laughs and impels the wolf to remain forever-lycanthrope; she “ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire” (219), which, as we know from the anecdotes that introduce the tale, will condemn him to eternal wolfdom. If ‘clothes make the man’ functions as an identificatory closed system, the protagonist’s dismissal of the wolf’s (and her own) enculturation through garments suggests an additional dismissal of cultural parameters of experiential performance.

Yet Red intends to follow him from a reciprocal space, will learn to ‘run with the tigers’ as it were, for even though his pelt will no longer be shed, the protagonist intends to “pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony” (219). That they can evade the inequality of the marriage system and of (hetero)sexist culture seems plain in Carter’s depiction of sensual ‘come-hither’s’ (“‘What big teeth you have!’…‘All the better to eat you with,’” BYB 219) only operational insofar as they are communally-desired and a ‘union’ that has no power beyond its most basic impulses. The shackles of culture are cast off, for cultural ideology cannot speak this relationship of mutuality; the
wolf and the protagonist must seek a different language with which to articulate their newly-born subjectivities.

Carter expounds upon these nascent subject positions in a more radical way in the final tale of the collection, “Wolf-Alice.” A more discernible departure from the classic “Little Red Riding Hood” tale that interweaves intertexts of *Alice in Wonderland*, the biblical tale of Genesis, and Lacanian theory, “Wolf-Alice” alludes to the wounds inflicted or unsutured in the other nine stories of *The Bloody Chamber* and clots to reveal a narrative of experience absolutely beyond the grasp of normalizing culture. At the heart of this story are the protagonist Alice and her compatriot the Duke, each of them denied subjectivity in the conventional framework of civilized culture. They transgress (*decenter*, if you will) the parameters of this framework through three central paradigms: identity, language, and sexual expression. These three paradigms of culture are of course intertwined by the thread of their gender politics, but moreover, Carter’s subversion of them by way of Alice and the Duke finally achieves that very bottle-bashing, demythologizing project that foregrounds the collection.

Of Alice, abandoned by her parents to the primal ‘company’ of wolves, we are told that “Nothing about her is human except that she is not a wolf…She inhabits only the present tense, a fugue of the continuous” (“Wolf-Alice” 221). The nuns that discover Alice in her wolf-den struggle to normalize her, conducting symbolic-baptism by washing the dirt from her body, and unsuccessfully trying “to cover up her bold nakedness” (222). However, failing to initiate her into the language of polite society (Alice refuses to ‘give thanks’), they surrender to the fact that she has, in her time among the wild things, “reverted entirely, it would seem, to her natural state” (222). Carter’s use
of the term ‘natural’ warrants unpacking here, for ‘natural’ perhaps implies a stable identity—one prone to discursive mythologizing, and intended for cultural consumption. However, Carter’s Alice is natural only inasmuch as she dwells within a subject position pre-existing its cultural significations; ‘natural’ here connotes not inborn identity but subjectivity that has evaded the reductive functions of society.

Neither human nor wolf, Alice cannot adequately inhabit traditionally singular identity categories; like Donna Haraway’s vision of the cyborg, she is a figure of ambiguity and tension, residing likewise in the liminal space of the Duke’s crumbling castle. Within this castle, moreover, Alice sleeps in the ashes of the hearth, a threshold space neither within nor beyond the confines of the home, so as to avoid the ‘bed-traps’ (223). Like Butler’s deconstructive vision of the provisional subject, who refuses the fixity of identity categories, Alice is an embodiment of the present tense. Her identity, like the cyborg’s, is defined by its mutability, its refusal to be confined to anything more solid than the ever-fluctuating moment. The Duke, as werewolf, similarly toes the boundary between human and wolf, and his moonlit romps disturb normative temporality in the liminal time of the ‘witching hour.’ Though the Duke has been “cast in the role of the corpse-eater” (223), he does not don the costume with agency, for he is vacated of identity. His wolf-like appetite may position him as a body-snatcher, but the Duke’s hungers are vampiric in expression, as if he must procure his own identificatory livelihood from the corpses he ingests.

Hybrid and amputated at once, the Duke may be beyond culture, but Carter does not suggest that his passive existence consequentially spawns ‘realized’ subjectivity. He and Alice must come to subjectivity on their own terms and through a relationship of
mutuality, but to so do, they cannot approach identity from within the system. Unlike the protagonists of “The Bloody Chamber” and “Tiger’s Bride,” who destabilize culture from behind its bars, Alice and the Duke are wholly outside its borders—they are pioneers of uncharted territory. As Haraway remarks, her “cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (Haraway 478). Insofar as both Alice and the Duke are hybrid/unstable subjects—the former because of her indefinable inhumanity, the latter as an amalgamation of humanity and animality—they occupy this cyborg myth to the extent that they pose a challenge to master narratives that require reassuringly stable identities and seamless closures.

One such master narrative challenged in “Wolf-Alice” is the very foundation of narrative itself—language. Language does not merely mediate the transfer of knowledge, but shapes ideology and identity through its construction. Monique Wittig persuasively demonstrates in “The Mark of Gender” that words do not have abstract, singular meanings; the signifier does not represent so much as transform its referent, and “language has a plastic action upon the real” (*The Straight Mind* 78). Particularly in the case of gender (wherein language prescribes a subject position upon a locutor), language literally constructs the identity of its user: deploying Wittig again, “Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it” (78). Just as Alice initially revolts against the nuns’ attempts to cleanse and clothe her corporeal body, she refuses to be inculcated by their language and its indoctrination through civilité.

Recalling another pre-cultural narrative, Carter posits an alternative to Genesis, remarking that Alice might “prove to be the wise child who leads them all and her silence and her howling a language as authentic as any language of nature” (“WA” 223). If
Lacan maintains that woman cannot speak, but can only be spoken, Alice (and Carter) rejects each avenue, violently repudiating the active position of speaker and the ravaged role of speech’s conduit. If we remember Carol Leventen’s contention that Sexton’s witch-narrator merely reifies the binary construction of evil/active-speaker and good/silent-object, Carter’s Alice disrupts this troubling binary by presuming experience outside its constrictions. Alice’s howl, recalling Cixous’ Medusa-laughter, imagines a both/and neither position in language. Alice, reared by wolves, is capable of appropriating their language—but she is not-wolf, and thus cannot inhabit their speech; likewise, she rejects the ‘civilized’ speech of the nuns, but nonetheless refuses silence. Diverting the potential for language to indoctrinate her, Alice defines her own mode of communication and ultimately her own subjectivity, for there is no cultural signifier able to effectively enclose her identity.

Revising an interrelated Lacanian paradigm, Alice’s encounters with mirrors in the narrative deflect the mirror’s authority to clarify subjectivity, for she does not approach her reflection in the way that the enculturated potential-subject might. Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage catapults the newly-born subject into both language and culture, and further signifies a ‘false recognition’ of the totalized Ego (or self). Upon recognizing that the reflection in the looking glass signifies oneself, the subject enters into Lacan’s Symbolic Order and begins to differentiate between Self and Other. This order presupposes the preeminence of isolated and coherent subjectivity and in turn produces interpersonal relations defined by difference and identity inextricable from lack. But because “It is only Wolf-Alice’s coming-of-age, her first menses, that shifts her world, that brings her in contact with a mirror, though—importantly—not one that
heralds an identity in the symbolic” (Lau 90), Alice is capable of independently brushing against subjectivity.

Alice recognizes the mirror as reflection by way of understanding its ‘habitual fidelity’ to repetitive movement (“WA” 226); likewise, she comes to understand the passage of time only through menstruation, “by means of this returning cycle” (225)—but even her ‘natural’ cycle comes to her from beyond cultural recognition. Though cultural constructions of menses figure the cycle as terrifying—for Woman is a vessel of life and death, and capable of cyclically bleeding without dying, in the ideological imagination—Alice receives hers only as a way of assembling her own anti-normative architecture of temporal experience. The repetition of the present generates recognition of past-ness, but her evasion of conventional initiation into temporality allows her to act as architect of her own experience, her own occupation of present-ness and acknowledgment of time’s passing. Moreover, Alice’s transgressions of cultural parameters propel her into an identity of collectivity and mutuality, for rather than coming at her reflection with individuation in mind, she approaches her image as a companion, a literal ‘littermate’ (226) with whom she shares her experiences.

Alice most notably identifies that this mirror image of herself can never offer more than shadow, and thus is not a ‘perfected’ reflection, but rather one component of a multitude of selves. Awakening into consciousness, Alice comprehends that “her companion was, in fact, no more than a particularly ingenious variety of the shadow she cast on sunlit grass” and though she cries for her lost ‘littermate,’ “her relation with the mirror was now far more intimate since she knew she saw herself within it” (226).

Rather than feeling impelled to imagine the mirror image as her ideal self, Alice likens
the reflection to her insubstantial shade thrown upon the grass; and so she cries, for her
littermate, now understood as a picture of herself, is diminished, rather than heightened in
her perception. And it is Alice’s rejection or revision of the Lacanian symbolic that in
turn bridges her relation to the Duke, who, because of his hybrid inhumanity, has “ceased
to cast an image in the mirror” (222).

Alice, now effectively inhabiting an autonomously-defined consciousness,
presents herself as a ‘civilized’ woman by clothing herself in a bridal gown, for “now she
knew how to wear clothes and had put on the visible sign of her difference from [the
wolves]” (226). Again, we come to the tricky question of whether or not Carter falls to
essentializing, whether she proposes a ‘natural’ adherence to this sort of costuming. Yet
Alice’s revision of the conventional model of identity-formation prior to this moment
figures her donning of the bridal gown as masquerade; Alice, whose identity is marked
by anti-normative temporality, can only ever perform from moment to moment. She is
always-provisional, and her wearing of the bridal gown does not suggest that she
imagines herself as a coherently-defined ‘Woman,’ for her appropriation of the costume
of ideal femininity (insofar as the ‘perfect’ woman fulfills herself through marriage and
motherhood) merely makes spectacle of the gown’s ‘meaning.’ She necessarily
reinscribes its imaginative value for the ‘sophisticated’ reader, but only in the sense that
she must call to mind its cultural role by parodying it.

And as the revised figure of the Bride (or of Eve), Alice brings with her the
unformed-Adam in her radical reimagining of Genesis: she tends to the Duke, who has
invited her into his ‘primal’ Eden, because of his pitifully “aborted transformation” (227)
as werewolf—because she yearns to offer the same inclusive communality she
experienced with the wolves as an infant. In this scene, Alice and the Duke touch the possibility of relationships defined through mutuality:

As she continued her ministrations, this glass, with infinite slowness, yielded to the reflexive strength of its own material construction. Little by little, there appeared within it...first, a formless web of tracery...then a firmer yet still shadowed outline until at last as vivid as real life itself, as if brought into being by her soft, moist, gentle tongue, finally, the face of the Duke. (228)

As Kimberly Lau remarks, “Wolf-Alice has ushered him into existence, escorted him into the symbolic, but it is her symbolic, a world outside of language though still shaped by the tongue” (Lau 91). I’d revise this to say that while Alice’s eroticized ‘ministrations’ bring about the Duke’s mirror image, Carter does not suggest that Alice wields power over the Duke’s identity. Because of Alice’s perception of the mirror image as only ever a spectral representation of the self, the Duke’s mirror image is likewise only one facet of his subjectivity. Alice and the Duke do not relate to one another along a power differential, but come together as ‘littermates’ in a mutually-erotic relationship.

Foreigners to normalized culture, Wolf-Alice and the Duke propose the potentiality of hybrid/provisional identity to evade the constrictive operations of discourse. Though inducted into a re-imagined symbolic, each approaches subjectivity from an ambiguous vantage point of collectivity; as re-figurings of Eve and Adam, they do not merely stretch the frontlines of culture, but batter their way into a new Eden that shrugs off the tatters of material existence and envisions experience through a new erotic, a new order, and a culture that will only ever, like the latticework tracing of the Duke’s mirror image, indistinctly organize reality. However, the ambiguity of this trace-work, both in the
Duke’s subjectivity and in the ‘new order’ suggested by the end of “Wolf-Alice,” refuses to reify utopic resolutions—Eden is left infinitely provisional.

“Wolf-Alice,” then, reveals the fruition of Carter’s project in The Bloody Chamber, for the bottles have shattered; the new wine overfloweth. With the first triad imagining the realistic measures of a breaking-free from culture, the second coping with the trauma of discursive enslavement, and the third stripping experience down to its barest potentialities, the collection, considered in its entirety, does not merely destabilize the fairytale tradition, but speculates upon a ‘time after’ the war against hegemonic discourse and culture. Though far from a utopian re-imagining of fairytale narrative, Carter’s collection considers each imaginable outcome in the tradition and shirks it all for a radical looking-forward to the political reality of the future fairytale.

Carter leaves no corner unswept, grants no passive reception of her texts, and compels her readers to critically engage with her untamed literary imagination—and then to run farther. Building upon Atwood’s pragmatism and Sexton’s fatalism, Carter suggests that if the fairytale is to have a future at all, we must recognize its limitations, uncover the deliberately political suturing over of these restrictions, and radically destabilize the conventions of fairytale narrative from within, hollowing it out and escalating the pressure until (yes, we’re back to this) the narratives detonate. As Carter observes in “The Lady of the House of Love,” “The end of exile is the end of being” (“Lady” 207), and even in our deconstruction of the institution, we must never fall into the trap of re-totalizing the ‘new’ narrative (be it feminist or not). Like Cixous, we must accept our fragmented habitation within the position of I-reader, escapee. Only in the rubble of these aged narrative superstructures might we reconceptualize a politically-
cognizant, ever-provisional, and transformative site in the canon for the fairytale institution.
Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals*, p. 35.

ii See Butler on identity categories as “instruments of regulatory regimes” in *The Second Wave*, p. 301.

iii See Fish in “What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?” p. 349.

iv For further reading pleasure regarding Woolf’s ‘latent feminism,’ see her polemic on women’s writing, *A Room of One’s Own*, and her gender-bending biomythographical novel *Orlando*.

v Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 22.


vii Likewise, see Zipes’ edition of *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, pp. 141-144 for “The Robber Bridegroom” in its ‘original’ conception.

viii Friedan, p 19.

ix See Cixous, p. 267: “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse.” I should acknowledge here the critical contentions to Cixous’ understanding of ‘woman’s writing’ as reifying essentialist gender discourse; however, my employment of Cixous relates more to the idea of ‘writing the body’ as it pertains to a post-modern self-reflexive comment on the sexed/gendered body.

x See Carol Gilligan’s essay “Woman’s Place in Man’s Life Cycle” for further discussion of gendered individuation processes in childhood.


xii Jack Zipes comments upon civilité as it was enforced through the French courts’ introduction of the literary fairytale. He (seems to) take this to mean a coded moral standard, primarily aimed at the aristocracy, and goes on to note that the introduction of these standards of civilité in the literary fairytale frequently worked to the detriment of women. See *Fairy Tale as Myth*, pgs. 14, 24, and 28 for further discussion.

xiii The witch’s unreliability is most manifest in the poem “Red Riding Hood,” in which the witch-narrator’s preface outlines a series of characters involved in deception: “Many are the deceivers,” she remarks, later confessing, “And I. I too” (l. 1, 48), aligning herself with the purveyors of falsehood.

xiv Cixous: “there have been failures—and if it weren’t for them, I wouldn’t be writing (I-woman, escapee)—in that enormous machine that has been operating and turning out its ‘truth’ for centuries” (261). Drawing from Cixous, I find this fragmented ‘survivor/escapee peculiarly pertinent to Sexton’s witch-narrator, notably in terms of her constructing the survivor’s narrative by speaking the unspeakable abjection she has ‘escaped’ from.

xv Carter, *Shaking a Leg*, p. 452

xvi See Kai Mikkonen’s analysis of *Infernal Desire Machines* in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*.

xvii These three stories and all cited tales from *The Bloody Chamber* are sourced from Carter’s collected short stories in * Burning Your Boats*.

xviii See, for example, Bacchilega and Roemer’s introduction to *AC & the FT*, p. 14-15; Makinen, p. 11.

xx Again, I direct the reader to Tatar’s annotation of the “Bluebeard” tale in her *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*.

xxi See “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” p. 308.

xxii Brooke suggests as much in her essay on the Beauty and the Beast dyad, p. 70.

xxiii Harriet Kramer Linkin does a wonderful reading of Carter’s Romantic-revisions in “The Erl-King.” If the narrator of that tale revises Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” she does so only to reverse the power differential, acting as the victorious murderer rather than the silenced victim. But as theorists like Monique Wittig and Carter herself acknowledge, “Matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy: it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes” (TSM 266). The narrator of “The Erl-King” might shift the power hierarchy, but the discursive center remains.

xxiv As with “Puss in Boots,” “The Werewolf” (*BYB* 210-211) functions a sort of trope-ic coda for Carter’s wolf trilogy. To save time and space, I will simply say that the tale acts as a sort of guide into the less-linear, more self-reflexive, and more explicitly socialist/materialist approach Carter deploys in “The Company of Wolves” and “Wolf-Alise.” See Lau’s article for further discussion of this tale.
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