

**NEW READINGS OF OLD TEXTS: ANGELA CARTER'S FAIRY-TALES****Delia-Maria Radu, Assist. Prof., PhD, University of Oradea**

*Abstract: For the British writer Angela Carter, folklore makes real life more exciting and is much easier to infiltrate with different kinds of consciousness. Like putting new wine in old bottles, as she had somewhere put it, Carter enjoyed playing with texts and re-writing, treating European literature as a kind of folklore. Her stories in the volume "The Bloody Chamber" are the result of her belief that reading is just as creative an activity as writing, so most intellectual development depends upon new reading of old texts.*

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Meant for children, traditional fairy-tales always deal with the problems people could be faced with, and provide ways of overcoming them. At an age when they tried to understand themselves and to give meaning to their surrounding world, children were given moral education by the examples contained in these tales. Along time, the tales became more and more refined, gaining other meanings, addressing both children as well as adults. Initially a part of folklore, they penetrated literature as one of its sources of inspiration, being adapted not only by the Romantics, but also by contemporary writers.

*The Bloody Chamber and Other Adult Fairy-Tales*, a collection of stories published in 1979 by the British writer Angela Carter and rewarded with Cheltenham Festival literary prize, rewrites the tradition, adapting fairy-tales to the 20<sup>th</sup> century atmosphere. Angela Carter was attracted to fairy-tales because they use imagination to reinterpret daily experience. She keeps the essential of the tales she tackles, but changes details, shifts the perspective, or creates a different atmosphere.

"I don't mind being called a spell-binder. Telling stories is a perfectly honourable thing to do. [...] I do find the imagery of fairy tales very seductive and capable of innumerable interpretations", confessed Angela Carter in an interview (see Haffenden, 1985:82-83). Her intention was to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories (Haffenden, 1985:84). She was also inspired by the fact that Italo Calvino had started his career by writing a fairy tale book which had a transformational effect on his subsequent writings. But Carter credits Jose Luis Borges as a more important influence in her stories than the traditional fairy-tales she enjoys retelling in her own fashion.

Carter gives prominence to her version of Bluebeard's tale by making it the title story of her collection. There may have well been a historical Bluebeard (see Duncker, 1986:232). One of the possibilities is Comorre the Cursed, a native of Brittany, who lived in AD 500. He was given to murdering his wives as soon as they were pregnant, and supposedly decapitated the last one.

In Carter's version, the traditional interaction between the powerful, sadistic husband and his innocent, curious bride is retained, although translated into the settings of rich French

twentieth-century life, so that Bluebeard has a deliciously romantic castle in Brittany, provided with a telephone on which he can call his stockbroker.

Carter's story is given a new twist by using the virgin bride's narratorial voice, rather than using the objective third-person narrative. Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and the French writer Colette's biography *Mes apprentissages* have also been seen as influences on this modern version of Bluebeard's story (see Isabel Armstrong's considerations, 1992). It begins with the image of the young bride, sleepless during the long journey by train, a train taking her away from everything known before, from her previous life, and which "*bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from childhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.*" (Carter, 1993:1)

Angela Carter seems to consider trains as fatidic elements breaking-off with a familiar, cosy world of the past and taking the characters into a cold, hostile, and most often dangerous future. We see that, for instance, in the novel *The Magic Toyshop*, where Melanie, the heroine, sees the train as "*a kind of purgatory, a waiting time, between the known and completed past, and the unguessable future which had not yet begun.*" (Carter, 1992:32) The train is the symbol of the destiny that takes away the characters; it is linked to a physical evolution, a progression towards a new life.

Although Perrault's tale is well-known, so the outcome shouldn't be a surprise for the readers, Angela Carter carefully drops premonitory clues along her story, which help us foresee the the bride's destiny. She suggests that the husband has a darker side, something to hide covered by a mask-like face. Although he is much older than the bride, "*his strange, heavy, almost waxen face was not lined by experience. Rather experience seemed to have washed it perfectly smooth... And sometimes that face, with eyes that always disturbed me by their absolute absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me... lay underneath this mask. Or else, elsewhere... in, perhaps, that castle to which the train now took us.*" (Carter, 1993:3)

The night before they got married he had taken her and her mother to the Opera, to see Tristan, and she was wearing his wedding gift "*clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinary precious slit throat... the flashing crimson jewels... bright as arterial blood.*" (Carter, 1993:6) As the choker of rubies foreshadows, later on, to punish her for her curiosity, he will try to decapitate her. The same idea is suggested by another image, in the way she sees him in the dark, during their night journey by train: "*I could see his white, broad face as if it were hovering, disembodied, above the sheets, illuminated from below like a grotesque carnival head.*" (Carter, 1993:7)

His castle is a strange place, "*at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves*" (Carter, 1993:8), like the castles in the fairy-tales which give the impression of belonging to other, imaginary realms. In its library, the first books she lays her eyes upon are meaningfully entitled *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, *The Secret of Pandora's Box*, and even the title of the paintings hanging on the walls are significant: *Sacrificial Victim*, *The Foolish Virgins*, *Out of the Night We Come, Into the Night We Go*.

Before their wedding night, he asks her to wear her choker and twines her hair into a rope, lifting it off her shoulders. He kisses the rubies before kissing her, like in a kind of strange, mysterious ritual known only by him, and she is to remain that way, not allowed to take off the ruby choker or undo her hair. Then, the story goes on as we know it. The next day, he tells his wife he has to go away, and hands her the bunch of keys which unlocks every door in the castle. A single key remains unaccounted for, and he seems to hesitate whether to give it to her, as well, or not, raising her curiosity. It is not the key to his heart, he answers her

question, “*rather the key to my enfer [...] it is the key to a little room at the foot of the west tower, behind the still-room, at the end of a dark little corridor full of horrid cobwebs... It is only a private study, a hideaway, a ‘den’.*” (Carter, 1993:18) While saying these words he seems to bear the burden of a terrible, haunting secret, being torn between his duty to protect himself and his awful secret, and his inner hope that someone might eventually discover the truth and find a way to release him from the spell.

After receiving such precise and detailed directions, who could resist the temptation of going to the forbidden room? Anyway, with her husband gone away so soon, the young lady has nothing better to do; the house is being taken care of by the housekeeper, and she can’t spend her time unpacking, as a maid has already unpacked her trunks. What else to do, then? Alone in her room, bored, with the bunch of keys in her hand, she hopes to find something interesting to do, as well as something else, more important: “*I was determined, now, to search them all for evidence of my husband’s true nature... Perhaps I might find his real self in his den.*” (Carter, 1993:25)

She begins by searching his office, an extremely impersonal room, which raises her suspicions that there must be a great deal to conceal if he takes such pains to hide it. Then she heads for the forbidden room. Just like he indicated, it is at the end of a long corridor, along the walls of which were hung heavy, Venetian tapestries with mythological subjects, full of swords and immolated horses. To her surprise, she discovers that it is her mother’s brave spirit that she has inherited and that drives her forward in her quest, along this creepy corridor.

The secret den she wasn’t supposed to enter turns out to be a torture chamber, full of funerary urns, bowls of incense, instruments of mutilation, with a catafalque in its centre. She remembers her feelings each time she struck a match to light the candles around the catafalque and see its occupant more closely: “*it seemed a garment of that innocence of mine... fell away from me*” (Carter, 1993:27), a very suggestive image for her progressive initiation in the horrible secret of the house. Just like in Perrault’s tale, all his former wives are hidden there, and the frightful thought that she was meant, in her turn, to join them, added to this horrible scene, makes her drop the key into a pool of blood – blood that she will not be able to scrub away, however hard she tries, just as she will never be able to forget what she has found out.

In the French oral version of Bluebeard’s tale, entitled *Le Père Jacques*, there is an old man locked in the castle tower who reveals her things about her husband. In Carter’s version, the place of this old man is taken by a blind piano tuner, Jean-Yves, her single ally and comfort during the short period before her husband’s ‘return’, although what he reveals her is not very encouraging. Her husband’s lust for blood appears to be hereditary, as one of his ancestors used to hunt young girls on the mainland with dogs, as though they were foxes.

Bluebeard soon returns, and she has to face him. When he asks for his keys, she goes to fetch them, praying “*to God his eyes would fail him, that he might be struck blind.*” (Carter, 1993:36) The same image appears again the moment he has the proof of her disobedience: “*he raised his head and stared at me with his blind, shuttered eyes...*” (Carter, 1993:36). Had he been blind, he could not see the proof of her disobey, and this recurrent image of blindness may be the clue for the reader that, eventually, after she escapes Bluebeard’s terrible ‘punishment’, it will be Jean-Yves whom she chooses as partner, Jean-Yves, the blind piano-tuner who is not able to see the mark of her sin, magically transferred from the stained key to her forehead: “*No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it – not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart – but because it spares my shame.*” (Carter, 1993:44)

When Perrault wrote down the orally transmitted fairy-tale, he changed some elements to make it more suitable for bourgeois children. He wanted to convey patriarchal values through 'his' fairy-tales. However, Carter focuses on two periods of time simultaneously: the time of patriarchy, and the time in which patriarchy is disappearing. She does this by placing women in the center of her stories.

Countess Nosferatu, the main character of the short story *The Lady of the House of Love*, is both the Sleeping Beauty and the Vampire Queen, plus the voracious witch of *Hansel and Gretel*. Carter gives us a typical description of what a genuine last descendant of Vlad the Impaler is thought to be: naturally, she inhabits a dilapidated, gloomy castle, with endless corridors, up-winding staircases, and galleries where the painted eyes of family portraits briefly flicker as one passes, a castle haunted by an army of shadows, in which she spends her days lying in an open coffin.

Like Bluebeard's castle, she is somewhere in-between, not belonging to a definite realm: "*She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man's land between life and death, sleeping and waking, behind the hedge of spiked flowers, Nosferatu's sanguinary rosebud.*" (Carter, 1993:124)

Yet, surprisingly, this vampire does not like the kind of life she leads: "in her dreams she would like to be human; but she does not know if that is possible" as she bears the burden of a hereditary vampirism it would be useless to fight. The young British officer who arrives one day, after visiting friends in Vienna and deciding to explore 'the little-known uplands of Romania' is described as having a fundamental disbelief in what he sees before him (somehow reminding us of Walser, the journalist who falls under Fevvers' spell in *Night at the Circus*, one of Carter's later novels), a rational being who travels by bicycle "in the land of vampires" and sees the funny side of it. He breaks the spell by kissing the countess' wounded hand and, thus, having a taste of her blood.

The symbol of the rose appears twice in the story: the roses which surround the castle (like in the fairy-tale of the *Sleeping Beauty*), "thickets bristling with thorns", with a heavy scent inducing a sensuous vertigo, an abundance of roses reminding us of the funereal lilies present in the Bluebeard's story, *The Bloody Chamber*. When Countess Nosferatu dies, the only thing the young officer takes away with him is her rose. If we consider the rose as a symbol of regeneration (from ancient times, people used to put roses on tombs by virtue of this very symbol), then we may see this withered rose – which regains all its former bloom and elasticity (when he puts it in water in his quarters, in Britain) – as a reemodiment of the Countess' spirit, who avenges herself, even after her death. This might be one way of explaining the abrupt ending of the story: next day his regiments embarks for France, meaning he is sent to fight and die in the war, as a punishment of the rose.

According to Patricia Duncker, "in fact, what the Countess longs for is the grand finale of all 'snuff' movies, in which the woman is sexually used and ritually killed, the oldest cliché of them all, sex and death. Only in death does she pass into womanhood, and the handsome British cyclist passes out of the innocent security of fairy-tale into the terror of history and the trenches of the First World War." (Duncker, 1986:232)

The sad, gloomy atmosphere of the story is, at times, enlivened by ironic, mocking passages, as, for instance, Carter's digressions about the officer's means of transport on his trip round the Carpathians: "*To ride a bicycle*", writes Carter, "*is in itself some protection against superstitious fears, since the bicycle is the product of pure reason applied to motion. Geometry at the service of man! Give me two spheres and a straight line and I will show you how far I can take them. Voltaire himself might have invented the bicycle, since it contributes so much to man's welfare and nothing at all to his bane. Beneficial to the health, it emits no*

*harmful fumes and permits only the most decorous speeds*” (Carter, 1993:117), or the officer’s plans concerning the Countess: “*We shall take her to Zürich, to a clinic: she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist to put her teeth into a better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares.*” (Carter, 1993:129)

This is how a rational, twentieth-century young person might deal with such a weird thing as a vampire. Even the title of the story could be explained from a twentieth century mind’s perspective. Seeing her macabre bedroom, the British soldier remembers his colonel, who had once advised him to go to a brothel in Paris where, apparently, the biggest attraction was a lugubrious bedroom full of the perfumes of an embalming parlour, where a naked girl would lay on a coffin, and give pleasure to her customers. Seen through the eyes of the character belonging to a different century, the grotesque background, the cobwebs, the worm-eaten beams, the ill-lit rooms, and even the girl’s ceremonial, seem all cheap, vulgar, suited only for a brothel.

“*Yet I do believe she scarcely know what she is doing*” (Carter, 1993:127). Every one of her gestures is seen and commented in a mocking-pitiful tone by the officer’s inner voice, which sometimes mingle with hers. In fact, the entire narrative is a mixture of expressed and hidden thoughts. A perfect host at the beginning, Countess Nosferatu gradually loses her self-composure, hurrying to get what used to be the final stage of the passers-by’s visit: the bedroom.

She continually studies the officer, torn between her lust for blood and her need to feed and her unexpected attraction to him, her hope of finding a little love and compassion. Thus, incantations like “*Suivez-moi. Je vous attendais. Vous serez ma proie.*” (Carter, 1993:125) alternate with thoughts such as: “*I don’t mean to hurt you [...] I’ve always been ready for you; I’ve been waiting for you in my wedding dress, why have you delayed for so long?... It will all be over very quickly.*” Carter, 1993:124) Still, heredity, her ancestors’ voices, are stronger than her, and it is only by chance that the young British officer doesn’t share the others’ fate. Only by chance does he exorcise the vampire and break the evil spell forever.

*The Werewolf* is Angela Carter’s re-imagining of Perrault’s *Little Red Riding Hood*. From the late Middle Age onwards, oral versions of the story circulated in France. Charles Perrault based his *Petit Chaperon Rouge* on this oral tradition, adapting the folktale to convey social manners to children of the bourgeois class. This changes of purpose and public belongs to the general tendency in Europe from the end of the seventeenth century onwards, which Jack Zipes calls “the literary ‘bourgeoisification’ of the oral folk tale”. According to Zipes, Charles Perrault turns the brave girl, who is perfectly capable of defending her life and chastity, into a helpless and even stupid bourgeois type. (Zipes, 1983:26)

In 1812, the bourgeoisification of the precious little girl reaches its apex in the brothers Grimm’s version. Little Red Cap brings her grandmother neither bread and milk, like her orally transmitted ancestor, nor biscuits and butter, but a piece of cake and a bottle of wine. Importantly, the girl and her grandmother are freed from the belly of the big, bad wolf by the big, brave hunter.

In *The Werewolf*, Angela Carter unites the bad wolf and the good grandmother in the character of the werewolf, making us question grandmother’s goodness. Why does the grandmother have to die? The answer is obvious: to enable the girl to take her place, i.e. to sleep “in granny’s bed” and prosper. The Werewolf is, then, a story about elderly people who refuse to follow the natural cycle of life, and who deny their offspring to succeed them (Zipes,

1983:27). Jack Zipes goes on saying that this aspect of the story becomes more clear if we look at the oral version, in which the werewolf asks the girl whether she is taking the path of needles or the path of pins, which refer to the needlework apprenticeship young peasants girls underwent in certain regions of France, and which designated their arrival at puberty, when “the girl proves that she is mature and strong enough to replace the grandmother” (Zipes, 1983:28).

Angela Carter reintroduced this aspect of the story as consciously as Perrault omitted it. The later aimed at postponing the girls’ adulthood, describing the misadventure of a girl who wants to enter adulthood too easily: she is eaten by a wolf and causes her grandmother to go through the same fate. Carter revives the original version in a celebration of a girl passing into adulthood, taking her fate into her own hands and replacing her grandmother. Carter even takes the title of her story from the original folk-tale, as it is not about a wolf, but about a werewolf.

The twentieth-century Little Red Riding Hood is only referred to as a ‘child’, who lives in a northern country with cold weather and wild beasts in the forests. The people there lead a hard life, and still believe in old superstitions. In such rough conditions, children grow accustomed, from an early age, to dealing with hardships and managing by themselves in various situations. That is why Carter’s heroine leaves for her grandmother’s house not only with some oat cakes and a little pot of butter, but also with her father’s hunting knife to defend herself against bears or starving wolves, a knife she will not hesitate to use when attacked by a wolf, whose right forepaw she slashes off.

Carter’s tales rarely rewrite one story only. *The Werewolf*, for instance, also contains elements alluding to cruelty and mutilation, usually present in the Bluebeard-type stories. The girl takes away the wolf’s paw, which in her granny’s house proves to be, in fact, a human hand: “*chopped off at the wrist, a hand toughened with work and freckled with old age. There was a wedding ring on the third finger and a wart on the index finger. By the wart she knew it for her grandmother’s hand*” (Carter, 1993:132), which explains why her grandmother had a fever and had fallen into a fretful sleep, moaning and shaking. Pulling the sheet, the girl sees that her granny was, indeed, missing a hand.

The following scene, in which the bad, split-personality grandmother is punished, is linked, in a circular motion, to the beginning of the story, which presented the punishment of the witches: “*The child crossed herself and cried out so loud that the neighbours heard her and came rushing in. They knew the wart on the hand at once for a witch’s nipple; they drove the old woman, in her shift as she was, out into the snow with sticks, beating her old carcass as far as the edge of the forest, and pelted her with stones until she fell down dead.*” (Carter, 1993:133)

The end of the tale leaves us convinced that the brave, innocent girl will live happily ever after, as we are told that “Now the child lived in her grandmother’s house; she prospered” (Carter, 1993:133). Yet, we can not help wondering whether, after taking her grandmother’s place, she will not become, in her turn, another werewolf.

The story of *The Little Red Riding Hood* was also the starting point for Carter’s *The Company of Wolves*, which was later transformed into a film. John Haffenden begins by saying that “Bruno Bettelheim disliked Charles Perrault’s version of the story, in which the wolf gobbles the girl, because it points to a specific moral lesson – you get what you deserve if you stray from the path and give in to seduction. He prefers the later Grimm version, in which a hunter finally rescues the girl and her grandmother from the belly of the wolf”, only to conclude that Carter’s version in *The Bloody Chamber* respected the oral version in which the girl is not scared and lies down with the wolf. (Haffenden, 1985:83)

“I enjoy writing fiction”, Carter confessed in interviews, “and I set myself a number of tasks each time I write a story. [...] I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (Carter, 1983:69) to break fiction’s conventional borders, and to point towards new possibilities.

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