

No Magic Mirror Required: Folklore and Patriarchy in Angela Carter's "The Snow Child"

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*It is easy to overlook Angela Carter's retelling of Snow White, tucked away on two pages of *The Bloody Chamber*. Should one's eyes fall upon "The Snow Child", however, it becomes impossible to look away as the reader is drawn into a world of inescapable power struggles and victimisation. Exploring Carter's uses and subversions of this traditional narrative, the present article reveals how she gives voice to issues of gender and abuse within patriarchal structures that are still relevant in the twenty-first century.*

There is no magic mirror in Angela Carter's "The Snow Child", nor are there any dwarfs, poisoned apples, or princes. There is, however, a girl born from the red of blood, the white of snow, and the black of a raven's feather, and a mother who wishes the child gone. *The Bloody Chamber*, a collection of short stories of which it is a part, is inspired by fairy tales, especially the versions Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm introduced to the world, and this retelling of "Snow White" continues the tradition of using magic tales as a way of communicating through symbol and fiction what cannot be otherwise spoken. The confines and dangers of patriarchal society, most notably the fickle nature of power allotted to women and the resulting threats and acts of rape that cannot be countered, are brought forward through Carter's carefully crafted language, and her effective inversion of a familiar narrative challenges the readers' expectations as they are forced to confront the damage being done to women within this culture.

The framework of what Kay Stone describes as "a girl's blossoming, apparent death, and miraculous rebirth" (54) is so expansive that in the system first developed by Antti Aarne for classifying the various patterns, or motifs, found within folktales (further expanded upon by Stith Thompson and, later, Hans-Jörg Uther) it is accorded its own tale type, number 709 (Uther 383-4). It is clearly not limited to the brothers Grimm; nevertheless, the influences of their versions in Carter's retelling remain dominant (Stone 57). Instead of the beautiful innkeeper and her daughter or step-daughter

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found in many Romance language variations (Oriol 244), there are the more noble characters of the Count and Countess, much like the king and queen of the Grimm stories. In the first recorded variation of the Grimm's "Snow White", found in an 1810 letter from Jacob Grimm to his friend Friedrich Carl von Savigny (Joosen 885), it is a mother who seeks the death of the girl; her character is not transformed into a step-mother until 1819 (Lee 19). She takes the child into the woods to abandon her, and it is her father who finds her and has her revived (Stone 57). These roles are at first familiar as the Countess devises ways to get rid of the girl, only to be thwarted by her husband, but very quickly all that is recognisable is subverted or stripped away.

The first challenge to audience expectations is that it is the Count, not his wife, who wishes for a girl "as white as snow...red as blood...black as that bird's [raven] feather" (Carter 115). The Countess is witness to this act of creation thereby embodying both the 1810 role of mother--being the one present at her birth--and the step-mother of later versions--this child is not from her desire or her body. Thus the first villain is introduced: a woman without maternal predilections. Whether barren by choice or by circumstance, she does not want this child and, therefore, her identity seems set. Carter, however, refuses to permit her audience to blindly accept such positioning decontextualized and explores whether a woman can be both villain and victim. She presents a figure who is very aware of the instability of her status; Christina Bacchilega notes that "[a]ny shift in the Count's affection is immediately reflected in the relationship of the two women, whose socio-economic fortunes mirror each other in reverse--as the one gains, the other loses--and depend entirely on the Count's words" (37). This quickly shifting position that women must negotiate within a male-dominated society is a predominant focus of "The Snow Child", expressed symbolically throughout the text.

Edith Rogers' "Clothing as a Multifarious Ballad Symbol" is focused on a different folk genre; however, her exploration into clothing is equally applicable to Carter who uses the ballad symbolism of dress to explore the interrelationship between women's sexuality and power. It is clothing that is a symbol of this sexuality (Rogers 294) and not nakedness, as one would first expect. In an attempt to rid herself of the child, the Countess sets forth challenges that would free her of the girl. Countered twice by her husband, each failure results in her losing her garments to the child. As the latter becomes more covered her power grows, she moves closer to sexual maturity, and the Countess is further pushed aside; she is being literally and symbolically stripped. Clothing establishes power and identity and with its loss comes the loss of dignity, status, and self (Rogers 271). On a more concrete level, Margaret Atwood translates this loss of status to the very real threat of poverty (128). Without the security of her marriage, accomplished through the power she gains from sexuality which, like the clothing, is given to her by her husband, she is vulnerable. The Countess may be a villain, but she is also trapped within a social structure that affords her little autonomy, and as long as they are contained by this system she and the snow child are both fated victims.

Paying attention to clothing as a symbol reveals the constant threat of suffering and death in the Countess' life. One of the main characteristics of this tale type is that the step-mother is punished by being forced to wear red hot shoes and dance herself to death at the end of the story (Jones 58). In Carter's version, the Countess wears this promise of her final demise--her scarlet heeled boots. They serve as a reminder that, whether it be this girl or another, someday she will be undone by a shift in the Count's whim that she has no ability to control. The transference of these boots from the Countess to the girl bestows upon the latter the reality of her own impending death. Only once the

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child has been reduced to her base parts do the boots, and their threat of punishment, return to the Countess. In this world, the only freedom available comes from death, from no longer being a woman.

Women are to be possessed and used; consent is not of concern to those who wield power. In one Grimm's narrative, the king's son pleads with the dwarfs to allow him to have Snow White: "Let me have it as a gift, for I cannot live without seeing Snow White. I will honour and prize her as my dearest possession" (221). This dehumanisation of women is exaggerated in Carter's "The Snow Child" by denying the title character permanent resuscitations or resurrections. Her escape from the challenges given to her by the Countess is only temporary and, while her end is delayed, it is always present and coming, not from another woman trapped within the same patriarchal system, but from the man who was to be her protector. This version takes the assault narrative layered into these tales to its ultimate end. When the girl pricks her finger, "bleeds; screams; falls" (116), the Count dismounts from his horse and thrusts "his virile member into the dead girl" (116). While the iconic prince's kiss is cast as a romantic action in the Disney version and brings Snow White back to life, the Count's act is revealed as harsh and deadly.

Driven by desire, the Count rapes the girl as soon as she is deemed sexually mature, once she bleeds. This action represents the general, destructive nature of sexuality within this society and the specific act of incest, a social issue that is often woven into folk narratives (see Perry, Porter, Brewster). The Count, no longer a helper to the girl but a villain, behaves in such a horrific manner that it subverts any potential for her to have a future. His singular focus on having not a child to protect but a trophy to possess denies her resurrection. She melts away beneath him, never having a chance for the expected resuscitation of other Snow Whites; she simply becomes a bit of blood and water, never viewed as human in this patriarchal realm. And while the Countess still survives she, too, has been marked by the bite of the rose and her end, whenever it comes, is set.

Women's entrapment in this male world is, finally, explored through the absence of life-cycle rituals for women in "The Snow Child". The beginning of menses is indicated when the girl pricks her finger and bleeds; she has become a sexual being, but she is denied agency. Without access to any rites of passage at this liminal point, she has no defence against the sexual force of the Count. The entire narrative follows her life from birth to death but is devoid of any supporting rituals to communicate meaning or knowledge. Without them, the girl is never truly human, never named; devoid of them, she cannot hold her form. The Countess, herself, is not free from these patterns. She is bound within a cycle of reproduction that demands the death of her child or herself to begin again. The story ends with the rose biting her; the moment she pricks her finger Carter's audience is brought to the threshold of a new version of the tale. Perhaps, this time, it will be a child of her desire that will emerge and, maybe this time, the Countess will be destroyed and it will be the girl who will live on, who will someday be faced with the very same threat from her own flesh and blood. Regardless, like the snow child, she is trapped in a cycle of meaningless birth and death.

Existing on two pages alone, this story of Carter's is a condensed, tightened version of the tale that, in its brevity, denies the reader any space to look away from the horrors that unfold. Following in the magic tale tradition, "The Snow Child" contains only what is relevant to the narrative and drives the plot forward. Her symbols are presented in the same sophisticated layers expected in these tales; however, she continually subverts assumptions and destabilises the story. Such narrative decisions

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invite the audience to be co-creators in the experience and read their own meaning into the events they encounter while never allowing them to take their eyes off those trapped within these lines of text. In doing so, Carter demonstrates that there is still a need for folktales because women continue to suffer within patriarchal power systems as they face, on a daily basis, issues of rape, incest, and abuse that, even when overlooked and marginalised, continue to demand a voice.

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