



Playing the Female Fool: Metamorphoses of the Fool from Fireworks to The Bloody Chamber

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at the representation of the fool in the first two short story collections by Angela Carter, namely *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Its central argument is that the quintessentially subversive presence of the fool is theorized and developed in Carter's earlier short stories, in a way that leads to a radical shift in her poetics and in the reader's perception of her writing. In fact, a path of evolution of this figure is traced in Carter's female characters in her first two short story collections, outlining how the female fool develops from an individualist and vengeful rebel in *Fireworks* to a more socially constructive dissident in *The Bloody Chamber*. The female fool is seen as an experimental symbol of female subversion which is deeply intertwined with Carter's self-awareness as a feminist writer, developing alongside her first conceptualization of this figure. The article starts with an outline of the three fool figures which exemplify the female fool's evolution from the first to the second short story collection; it then proceeds to analyze the short stories that foreground female fool figures. The last section focuses on the figure of the healing female fool, whose transformative potential eventually brings about long-lasting and constructive effects.

KEY WORDS: fool; Angela Carter; grotesque; *The Bloody Chamber*; healing



I am all for putting new wine in old bottles,
especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.
(Carter, "Notes" 69)

The many idioms and phrases featuring the fool in the English language underline how this figure is the epitome of ambiguity, sometimes of duplicity; in fact, several studies have shown how the (traditionally male) figure of the fool has made a long journey from silliness to manipulative sophistication. Despite being an outcast, the fool is not completely outside the social order: his liminal condition allows him the necessary detachment to speak the truth and imagine a new way of shaping the world, generally conveyed through his humorous comments and provocative behavior, directly appealing to the reader/audience. My article looks at the ambivalent representation of the fool in the first two short story collections by Angela Carter, namely *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). I contend that the quintessentially subversive presence of the fool is theorized and developed in Carter's earlier short stories, in a way that will lead to a radical shift in her poetics and in the reader's perception of her writing. In fact, I outline a path of evolution of this figure by tracing its features in Carter's *female* characters in her first two short story collections, illustrating how the female fool develops from an individualist and vengeful rebel in *Fireworks* to a more socially constructive dissident in *The Bloody Chamber*.

Indeed, the fool, characteristically considered as either a marginal character or a 'wild card' (in the Tarot game), often ascends to the rank of protagonist in Carter's work, thus radically innovating the plot development and the narrative outcome of her fiction. In "Notes from the front line" (1983), Carter recognizes folklore, from which the fool emerges, as an ideal tool for demythologization, which is a central 'business' in her poetics, and it may be argued that the fool is indeed an intentionally activated figure in Carter's later novels. For instance, the winged Victory, Fevvers, the clowns of Clown Alley in *Nights at the Circus*—whose grotesque features are investigated by Anna Hunt (147-149)—and the allusions to Shakespearean fools in *Wise Children* may plausibly be interpreted as key fool figures. In this article I intend to trace the origins of this character, which lie in Carter's early short fiction; I posit that her first two collections serve as a laboratory where Carter creates, develops and experiments with the subversive figure of the female fool, while simultaneously embracing a more radical feminist perspective. Her conceptualization of the female fool is later adopted and displayed in novels such as *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991), where it is presented in its more complex and accomplished form. In agreement with Sarah Gamble's definition of Angela Carter as a "cultural saboteur" (4), I interpret the female fool in Carter's short fiction as yet another iteration of Carter's own "cultivation of marginal view" (Gamble 4) in a disruptive, political way. As Gamble posits, Carter's fiction is haunted by the tension between the urge to overturn a dominant narrative from the margin and the fear of such subversion being volatile, in that it eventually reproduces a binary opposition that may recreate the same hegemonic configuration it intends to destroy. The figure of the female fool seems to exemplify this tension, and possibly even suggest a disruption



which may bring about long-lasting effects, creating a community through a comic kind of healing.

In this perspective, the female fool epitomizes a centripetal dynamic that brings a kind of eccentricity—which escapes and exceeds ideological normativity—to the center of the narrative. Specifically, I read the figure of the healing female fool as a diegetic element which radically modifies the result of gender dynamics in Carter's narrative, and I identify the author herself as a liberating fool who plays at once with her readers and her critics. Refusing any identification, she proffers her fluctuating, contradictory reputation of feminist icon and perpetrator of stereotypes, women's rights advocate and pornographer, wise old magician and ironic, dangerous witch. The transformative potential that the healing female fool activates is deeply intertwined with Carter's demythologizing project and the subversive potential of the Carnival spirit staged in in the tales I investigate; the figure of the healing female fool thus seems to push the fool's inherent folkloric essence towards a disruptive function that has the power to dismantle the "lies designed to make people unfree" ("Notes" 71). In my analysis, I will rely on classical texts, such as Mikhail Bakhtin's studies on the carnivalesque and Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque*, which are crucial to interpret the fool's excessive appearance; moreover, I will refer to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of decolonization in my investigation of the racially codified female subalternity in the two stories "The Loves of Lady Purple" and "Master." Lastly, Herbert Marcuse's notion of the underclasses as bearers of a revolutionary potential informs my reading of the female fool as a possible agent of a carnevalization which eventually brings to a new order and drastically questions patriarchal politics.

WHAT'S IN A 'FOOL'? A TYPOLOGICAL DEFINITION

One of the first problems encountered when dealing with the transcultural figure of the fool is the ambiguity of his characterization. Numerous texts addressing the fool (see Welsford; Willeford; Grottanelli; Billington; Amooore and Hall) report the same overlap between the notion of fool, clown, jester, buffoon, trickster and joker; the list could be even longer. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed historical overview of the fool, whose multifaceted nature is deeply entangled with societal dynamics which lead to his specific cultural development and produce a shift from odd beggar to bizarre, shrewd observer of social dynamics. Hence, in this section I will briefly point out some key features shared by the different types of fools, and then turn to the three operational categories which will guide my analysis of the fool's transformation in Angela Carter's short fiction: the innocent fool/victim, the trickster, and the wise fool. Although other stories in the two collections I investigate foreground male characters who might be defined as fools, for instance "Puss in Boots" in *The Bloody Chamber*, I do not find this 'classic' depiction of the fool instrumental to my formulation: in spite of the fact that the male, exuberantly heterosexual cat in the abovementioned tale assumes a central role in the plot, his playful jokes and the tasks he is assigned place him in a conventional trickster role, whose schemes do not foster a dynamic of substantially transformative transgression. Nonetheless, the centripetal shift that transforms the fool from a marginal character to the protagonist of this story is undoubtedly significant, in



that it sets the ground for the deeper, more persistent transition that the *female* fool will complete.

If the fool's intellectual awareness and brilliance are disputable, the recurrence of some elements that characterize his aesthetics is unquestionable. In her introduction to *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art and History*, Janik writes: "Fools worldwide have a consistency in their faces, figures, and movement. Faces are painted, masked, or decorated; hair is highly stylized or artificial; headpieces derive from animals; clothes are tattered and coarse or brightly colored and absurd; and items carried in the hand are often metonymous of nature or magic" (5); this clownish figure is also extensively described as liminal, in both physical and social terms (see Janik 9), vagrant (see Janik 2-6), rule-breaking (see Grottanelli 120), somehow primordially connected with nature and magic (Willeford 73-98), wise and truth-telling (see Welsford 239; Goldsmith 98-99). Despite the fact that the quintessential ambiguity of the fool may prove troublesome when attempting to categorize a fool character specifically—as Janik warns "some fools elude any category; some fit into more than one category; categories of fools cannot be rigid; and categories are most beneficial if they are used only as guides to increase insight" (4)—some distinctions can be drawn. In their studies of the fool, both Enid Welsford and Sandra Billington illustrate the historically determined dichotomy between the presumedly witless, 'natural' fool and the cunning 'artificial' fool. Innocent fools, simpletons, holy fools and victims, at times conflating, belong to the first group; while tricksters, court jesters, buffoons and wise fools pertain to the second.

I will now examine more closely the distinctive traits of innocent fools/victims, tricksters and wise fools, which will be instrumental to my reading of the stories I consider in this analysis. As 'natural' fools, both innocent fools and victims are perceived as innately extravagant, naïve, unsophisticated and close to nature, whereas tricksters and wise fools use their peculiar status to convey a humorous, though witty and truthful commentary of the social order they inhabit (see Welsford 239-244; Goldsmith 98-99; Billington 16-31). Innocent fools and victims have several aspects in common, in fact their only substantial difference seems to lie in the victim's systematic (and unwitting) being taken advantage of by a more powerful and astute character (Janik 3-10). Moreover, the innocent fools and victims are equally impaired in their use of language, which results in a perception of their characters as childlike, as Ellis points out (253); this shortcoming is related to their condition of 'natural' fool-ishness, which implicates their physical affinity with the animal world and makes them "ingenuously unable to function normally because of physical, mental, or emotional conditions" (Janik 1). A direct connection with animality is also one of the distinctive traits of the trickster, who complicates the innocent/victim fool's configuration with a more convoluted psychological profile. Grottanelli highlights that tricksters are breakers of physical and metaphorical boundaries *par excellence*: they are either depicted as animals with human attributes or vice versa, and generally leverage on their liminal status in order to solve a personal crisis (138). Although they share with the innocent fool/victim their subordinate condition, they are ingenious, and use their shrewdness out of malice and self-interest: "when he is an animal, the trickster is a crafty, rather than a powerful, beast [...]; when a human being, he never ranks high, and his power lies in his witty brain or in some strange gift of nature" (120). In their opposition to a 'central' power whose authority they slyly undermine, they frequently embody tragic and comic elements at



once, and manage to achieve their goals thanks to their grotesque impurity. Finally, cleverness is the substantial element that connotes wise fools as well, in the terms offered by Amoores and Hall: "The figure of the 'sage fool' is [...] not simply a figure of fun, but a lowly subject able to use his wits to outdo his 'superiors' and speak truth with impunity, exposing the ridiculousness of those around him"(100). Nonetheless, the wise fool's key characteristics, largely influenced by Erasmus' portrayal in *The Praise of Folly* (1511), have less to do with physicality and mostly rest on irony, social satire, verbal wits and bawdy license (see Goldsmith; Billington).

Interestingly, most of the fool's iterations are deeply entangled with the male gender of the character. An unusual version of masculinity, undeniably; yet, except for a small number of mentions in Billington (who reports on women acting as dancing fools in fairgrounds), there is hardly any notable record of famous female fools in courts or in English literature. It seems, thus, worth investigating how the binary representation of the fool as innocent/artificial is affected when the fool is instead a woman, and whether the narrative function of a female fool may generate unusual endings. In the paragraphs that follow I will trace the evolution of the female fool from innocent to trickster, to what I identify as the wise, healing female fool. I contend that in *Fireworks* the first two iterations of the female fool embody the fool's most innocent and unaware aspects, since, although the female fool becomes the master of her own destiny thanks to trickery, she is not yet capable of escaping patriarchal codifications; the two later representations in *The Bloody Chamber*, instead, illustrate a self-development of the female fool that entails the notion of caretaking and is aimed at creating collective, as well as individual, emancipation and well-being.

More specifically, I read the figure of the mother in "The Bloody Chamber" as the epitome of the female fool as a figure which imposes an essential rethinking of the carnivalesque reversal at work in Angela Carter's short fiction: she simultaneously embodies a trickster and a wise fool, insofar as she uses her cunning at once to quickly reverse a situation to her advantage and to help her powerful companion/daughter in distress, possibly achieving common good through her grotesque instinctuality. Differently from her male counterpart, the image of this bawdy old female fool broadens the horizons traced by the fool's traditional carnivalesque nature and allows the plot to break free from prescribed roles and endings. The mother-fool can also be seen to mirror the image of the author, herself a renowned ironic quasi-pornographer, whose writing has certainly shocked her readers in unparalleled ways, while at once drawing from them the liberating belly laughter that Mikhail Bakhtin saw as a source of healing and renewal in the community. In this sense, the evolution and complication of the female fool in Carter's stories from innocent/trickster to trickster/wise fool reflects the evolution of her own poetics—from depicting female protagonists who, despite their 'fool-ish' potential, have no opportunity to disrupt the patriarchal system, to female fools having a quasi-archetypal healing power.

THE QUIET OF THE SUBALTERN TRICKSTERS

The two fools I analyze in this section are two metamorphic women, Lady Purple in "The Loves of Lady Purple" and the indigenous girl rebaptized as "Friday" in "Master"—both

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published in Angela Carter's first collection *Fireworks*. At the beginning of these stories, the two women are in completely subaltern positions; they subsequently acquire an awareness of their condition and finally, through a kind of magical connection with art and with nature respectively, they achieve a kind of freedom that is still, to some extent, problematic. In "The Loves of Lady Purple," Lady Purple is a puppet whose terrible story of orphanage, murders and prostitution is performed by her master and creator, the Asiatic Professor; at the end of the story, Lady Purple absorbs his life force, turning into a living woman, and goes in search of a brothel, the only place where she can perform herself in the way she has been created. "Master" is instead a modern version of *Robinson Crusoe* foregrounding the theme of the silent, exotic girl and has, strangely, received little critical attention (see Artt 178). In the tale, a white hunter travels in the Amazon rainforest hunting wild animals; he purchases a slave girl, whom he renames "Friday," repeatedly rapes, and uses as a guide through the forest to help him kill jaguars. The girl, in the end, magically connects with the jaguars she considers sacred and kills her master, becoming a jaguar herself. Looking at their common traits, I see these characters as two provocative depictions of female fools in Carter's short fiction, evolving from victims/innocent fools to avenging tricksters. Remarkably, neither makes use of words during her process of progression: the women's magical powers and their exuberant physicality seem to obviate the lack of dialogue. This shared feature corroborates their identification with innocent fools and victims: "some fools, particularly innocent fools and victims, are mimes and do not speak at all. Very often there is great power in such figures as they function without the albatross of language" (Janik 15).

These women's resounding silence is closely related not only to their function as fools, but also to their subalternity. If, as previously mentioned, fools generally serve an employer, the protagonists of these two stories are actually enslaved by men who can be literally referred to as their masters: Lady Purple is a marionette, whose strings are pulled by the Asiatic Professor, who is in turn enchanted by Lady Purple's magnetic beauty; the indigenous girl is bought (or rather, bartered for a tyre) by the unnamed hunter, whose status as a 'master' gives the short story its title. The two women's subaltern condition, together with their mutism, directly evoke Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". A cornerstone of postcolonial theory, the essay was first published in 1985 in the journal *Wedge*, and, by speculating on the practice of Indian widows' self-sacrifice, it famously deals with the issue of the subaltern voice and her actual capability to convey her own concerns, demands and desires without reinstating her masters' assumptions. Spivak does not limit the notion of subalternity to women, but clearly states that "the question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways" (90). The two women in these two short stories possess nothing but their bare skin, are exotic each in her own way, and are voiceless: Carter seems to anticipate Spivak's concern about the danger of attributing a voice to subaltern identities while writing from a hegemonic and privileged position. She chooses a merciless representation that is unaffected by romantic ideas of self-assertion and, writing from the perspective of a British white woman who had only recently started to think in feminist terms—in fact, Carter wrote the stories published in *Fireworks* after a two-year period in Japan, after which she asserted "In Japan I learnt what it is to be a woman and



became radicalised" (*Nothing Sacred* 28)—she conceives the stories in a crude, true-to-life way. The two protagonists in these short stories, similarly to the *sati* in Spivak's essay, have neither the time nor the means to conquer appropriate means of political dialectic expression: the only means they possess is the limited agency of a gesture that is rooted in a silencing pattern. The depiction that Carter is offering here is that of a subalternity that has no possibility to escape the systemic recursiveness imposed by patriarchal codifications. This pattern, nonetheless, will be broken in the stories from *The Bloody Chamber* I examine, as anticipated by Salman Rushdie's introduction to *Burning Your Boats*:

[Lady Purple] is a female, sexy and lethal rewrite of *Pinocchio*, and, along with the metamorphic cat-woman in 'Master', one of the many dark (and fair) ladies with 'unappeasable appetites' to whom Angela Carter is so partial. In her second collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, these riot ladies inherit her fictional earth. (7)

Lady Purple and Friday present numerous traits that can be ascribed to innocent fools/victims. For instance, everything about Lady Purple is exaggerated: her unsettling and hellish beauty, her immense wig, her excessively white complexion, her agelessness. Moreover, her portrayal is similar to that of a wild beast: long nails, ferocious teeth. Her "monstrous goddess's" smile, which her master has carved in her wooden face and whose fixity she cannot escape, recalls the feline, involuntary smile that Friday has in "Master": "she had the immovable smile of a cat, which is forced by physiology to smile whether it wants to or not" ("Master" 69). Lady Purple shares with the fool also her clothes, which are strikingly flamboyant during most of her performance, and become nothing but rags at the end; Carter explicitly states that in the fairground that is Lady Purple's reign "the grotesque is the order of the day" ("The Loves" 43). Yet the text itself shows how Lady Purple is inherently guiltless for the evil she commits, as she has been conceived as a wicked Oriental Venus by the Asiatic Professor, without whose depraved imagination she is "nothing but wood and hair" (46); despite being "defencelessly bald" (48), she is shoved into confirming her status as a trickster and an evildoer by the "tautological paradox in which she was trapped" (49).

Lady Purple's somewhat blameless maleficence is not matched by Friday's nature at the beginning of her story. She is not used to killing: she initially only eats roots and lives in harmony with all the beings in the forest; at first, she reluctantly but meekly obeys her master's orders; she is a virgin, pubescent girl and, in short, has several aspects of an innocent fool/victim, who does not conceive wickedness and is unable to decode her master's evil behavior. She shows some physical features of a fool, too: she is partially naked, her tribal hairdo is described as extravagant and grotesque, and she is frequently associated with animality, until, at the end of the story, she transforms into a jaguar, the emblem of her clan and her master's most wanted prey. Her transition to trickery is the result of a coercion, a shift in her nature and in her relationship with the forest that Master imposes on her: he starts by forcing her to eat meat, and continues by violating her body, compelling her to witness his hunts and indirectly pushing her to learn how to shoot. Indeed, the girl's first shooting is a turning point in the short story: not only does it foster the girl's desire to revolt against the master, in that "as she grew more like him, so she began to resent him" ("Master" 71); it also provokes the only occurrence of laughter in this story, as the girl laughs with delight at the sight of preys

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falling to the ground. This wild laughter marks the girl's transition from innocent to vicious, which is exemplified in her metamorphosis into a jaguar – one of the signs of the tricksters being their zoomorphism, as Jurich broadly discusses in *Scheherazade's Sisters. Trickster Heroines and Their Stories in World Literature* (1-27). However, achieving the power to kill her master does not solace the girl, just as killing the Asiatic Professor does not relieve Lady Purple: having become a wild beast, the jaguar/girl is incapable of adopting any moral standpoint, and does not show any sign of interest in returning to her family, whose father had after all traded her for trivial commodities.

From this perspective, the innocent fool/victim's isolation appears as a crucial component of her personality. Several details define Lady Purple as estranged from human society: for instance, after vampirizing her creator, she is depicted as completely alone, as a "baroque figurehead, lone survivor of a shipwreck, thrown up on a shore by the tide" ("The Loves" 49), and her solitude returns in the last image of the story, where she walks alone towards the nearest brothel. Friday is similarly cast out of the social order, in that she is deracinated from her community: the two women's only companions are their masters, with whom they reconstitute the typical master/fool literary pair. These "ambiguous couples," as Carter defines them in "Master," share a certain eerie intimacy, albeit unwilling on the slave's part, which is fostered by silence. In fact, despite her creator chattering to her, and thus seemingly attributing to her the faculty to understand his incomprehensible language, Lady Purple never shows any capability (or intention) to talk back; the girl in "Master" is never directly addressed as an interlocutor by her persecutor, who has only taught her to call him *Master*. The two women's silence is only eventually filled with the clamor of their mutiny.

Carter seems to anticipate, at the end of these stories, what she will more clearly re-state at the end of her short story "Pantoland," appearing in Angela Carter's last collection of short fiction, *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, posthumously published in 1993:

As Umberto Eco once said, 'an everlasting carnival does not work.' You can't keep it up, you know; nobody ever could. The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment...after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened. [...] Masters were masters again the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind... (315-316)

Carter, through Eco, is here quite explicitly referencing the Bakhtinian notion of carnivalesque, a lens through which her work has frequently been read (among the most prominent scholars adopting this angle are Paulina Palmer, Betty Moss, Lorna Sage, Mary Russo, Heather Johnson and, most recently, Anna Hunt); in *Rabelais and His World*, a study in which Bakhtin famously reviewed Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel* inscribing it in a cultural production of folk humor, the carnival is viewed as a symbolic model of transgression which facilitates the rebirth and the renewal of the entire social system, by unmasking and mocking authority and opposing rationalized wisdom. The carnival is generally personified by the excessive and irreverent grotesque body, which is essentially divergent from the Classical body and has, in fact, all the features of



the fool's body. Bakhtin broadly discusses fools, clowns and jesters in his theorization, identifying them as indisputable sovereigns of the Carnival celebrations, and the leaders of the comic insurrection that revitalizes society within them. Throughout his work, Bakhtin remarks how the overturning of hierarchical social structures that takes place in Carnival celebrations is merely temporary, and tends to strengthen, rather than permanently destabilize, the existing social structure (see Bakhtin 1-58). In these two short stories, Carter seems to stage a Bakhtinian, carnivalesque subversion which indeed brings the fool to the center of the narrative, but lacks permanent transformative power: although chaotic and grotesque, this shift happens in absolute quietness, and only leads to renewed isolation and stereotyping. Nonetheless, I argue that these two stories, with their limited potential for (r)evolution, pave the way for the substantial change happening in "The Tiger's Bride" and in "The Bloody Chamber," inasmuch as in Carter's work, what ultimately stays with the reader is the carnival spirit, its principle: even in the stories in which the carnival does last or create alternative realities, its presence interrogates the reader and plants the seed for a reading against the grain which discloses its utopian potential. As Kathleen Ashley contends, "Tricksters make available for thought the way things are not but might be; their stories can function as critiques of the status quo as well as models for other possible arrangements. Whether and how such stories activate those functions depends upon the interpretive community in which they are told" (113). The catalyst of the carnival functions activated in the stories is grotesquely embodied, in this perspective, by the female fool: far from reproducing the canonical mockery that characterizes her male counterpart, "The figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle is still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted" (Russo 60).

OF BEAUTIFUL PELTS AND BAWDY CRONES: FEMALE FOOLS TO THE RESCUE

The two short stories based on folktales that I consider in this section foreground female fools that turn the tables in more radical ways, exceeding binary oppositions and ideological codifications, and creating an eye-opening aside, addressed to the reader. Both stories are collected in *The Bloody Chamber*, published in 1979 and a watershed in Angela Carter's career, especially considering the publication, in the previous year, of her provocative and almost heretical non-fiction work *The Sadeian Woman*. These two books sparked a heated debate on pornography among feminist scholars, and much has been written for and against Carter's representation of women's agency and her revision/reinvention of the fairy tale genre after these two books. Among the most well-known interpretations of Carter as perpetuating patriarchal stereotypes are those of Andrea Dworkin, Susanne Kappeler, Patricia Duncker, and Avis Lewallen; instead, among the critics interpreting Carter as a deconstructor of myths and an inventor of a



new erotic identity, most notable are Margaret Atwood and Cronan Rose, whereas Cristina Bacchilega develops an analysis of *The Bloody Chamber* as a postmodern narrative. In her recent study on *The Bloody Chamber*, Anna Pasolini identifies metamorphosis as “a guiding principle for the analysis of the collection as a whole because it pervades the content and meanings of the tales, is a metaphor for alternative developments of female identity, and informs their structure and representation” (14); in fact, after *The Bloody Chamber*'s incredible visibility in 1979, the shift in Carter's poetics is substantial and results in the creation of more and more complicated and controversial female characters. Carter starts to play with her much wider readership, foregrounding increasingly controversial issues in her narratives, as she explicitly states in “Notes from the Front Line”:

Do I 'situate myself politically as a writer'? Well, yes; of course. [...] I try, when I write fiction, to think on my feet—to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. (69)

Unsurprisingly, these themes and characters frequently interweave with what Mary Russo termed as the grotesque female body, which

as a space of feminist possibility, [...] can 'unmask' much that is oppressive and objectifying for women. In combination with the monstrous and macabre, [the grotesque female body] can 'unmake' any identity politics, including the very feminist work that insisted on bringing it forward for scrutiny. (Mc William 220)

The characters I discuss in this section follow this pattern, and by presenting 'foolish features,' they contribute to mess up the rumpus room of both traditional storytelling and feminist discourse: in my view, these female fools respond in fact to a radically new narrative strategy that Carter explores and develops in her short fiction, which therefore acts as a laboratory of what may be identified as one of the many items of her signature style.

In “The Tiger's Bride,” which is, like “The Courtship of Mr Lyon,” a retelling of “The Beauty and the Beast,” another nameless protagonist is bartered by her Russian father to a wealthy “Beast,” whose ardent desire is to see the girl naked; while initially refusing, the girl eventually decides to undress after the Beast has disrobed himself first; on that occasion, she is licked by him, thus revealing the beautiful pelt hidden under her human skin, and exposing her newly found animal nature. The story is set in Mantua, Italy—the Italian setting being a quintessential enchanted setting, the land of frenzy and passion. Here the girl and her father quickly become beggars, due to the father's drinking and gambling; the girl's poverty is confirmed by her father trading her to the Beast as his only possession, and by the insistence on her naked body as a commodity subjected to the male gaze. These details suggest a possibility of reading the tiger's bride as a fool figure: the girl seems to be traveling Europe with no apparent destination (similarly to Lady Purple's circus nomadism and Friday's aimless wandering while game-hunting), moreover growing poorer and poorer. However, the female fool in “The Tiger's Bride” escapes any rigid categorization, and, judging from the critical success of this tale, her revolutionary potential seems to lie also in her unclassifiability. She defines herself as a baby as “a wild wee thing” (132) and afterwards points out that “I was a young girl, a



virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason" (137). While she reflects on the metaphysical impairment of women and beasts in the eyes of God—thus revealing an active discourse in the text challenging the idea of rationality as a male prerogative—the turning point in the tale comes: the Beast shows his body in all its vulnerable, wild majesty—an act of voluntary exposure that transforms him in the girl's eyes from an aspiring master to a truth-telling companion, and prompts her to mirror his gesture with her transformative, voluntary undressing. His nudity also triggers the unveiling of the lie that underlies the tiger's bride's performance, namely her pretense of (patriarchally codified) humanity, and discloses the reality of her newly conquered animal identity. This relieves her of the isolation that society had forced on her: like Lady Purple and the girl in "Master," she has no social ties, no allegiances.

The girl protagonist of this tale displays one of the distinctive traits of the trickster, namely shapeshifting: here, however, animal transmorphosis is not associated with the death of the male figure in the story, as it was in "Master". In this version of "The Beauty and the Beast," the beauty's transformation into a tiger denotes her resurrection into a liberating new shape, as well as her rejection of a prescribed role: as a female trickster, the tiger's bride uses shapeshifting to elude patriarchal interpellation and what her father unilaterally considers her duties as a daughter, woman, and prospective wife. Finally, a third kind of 'fool-ishness' complicates this character: as Patricia Brooke notes, "conventional elements of the tale are parodied throughout by Beauty's sardonic tone and perspective" (78). The bride's parodic tone and comments are those of a wise fool who is ridiculing and defying a genre, such as the fairy tale, which is conventionally constricting for women. From the ironic, scornful remarks about her father's conduct, to the observations about her own limited agency—the protagonist states: "I certainly meditated on the nature of my own state, how I had been bought and sold, passed from hand to hand. That clockwork girl who powdered my cheeks for me; had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?" ("The Tiger's Bride" 137)—the story is told by a first-person narrator whose account constantly solicits the reader's critical awareness, and the tiger's bride's comments prepare the reader for the final, somewhat cathartic metamorphosis, which is completely focused on the protagonist/narrator's desire. Desire is indeed one of the crucial elements in this tale, and not merely because of the insistence on nakedness and undressing: Carter wants to, in Cristina Bacchilega's words, "reactivate desire", by providing "devastating critiques of the 'innocent persecuted heroine's plot'" ("Fairy Tales" 512). This desire resonates with a specific part of the reader's inner self, as Bacchilega illustrates elsewhere in her body of work: "This somewhat Marcusean liberation of the pleasure principle does homage to the higher nature of the beast within us, the beast that will save us from the age of mechanical reproduction—and Carter's own participation in the Sixties' sexual and political revolution lends this reading some support" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 100).

The recurrence of the disrobing evokes an iconic detail which seems to be one of the distinctive traits of female fools, and it occurs as well in the title tale "The Bloody Chamber," a retelling of "Bluebeard." As is well-known, in this tale a poor young bride marries a rich, older man who forbids her to enter a mysterious room in his castle; after discovering his wife's transgression, he is about to kill her as he did with his three



previous wives, but in Carter's version the young girl is saved by her mother's brave and timely intervention. The evil, depraved husband is shot, the two women rejoin, and are able to afford a now financially secured household together with the piano tuner, with whom the young widow has meanwhile fallen in love. The narrator's mother can legitimately be defined as a legendary character: she embodies a mythical Oriental warrior and, during the rescue that takes place at the end of the story, she is attributed Medusa's appearance and powers. She also presents 'fool-ish' features: although she was the daughter of a rich tea planter in Indo-China, therefore living side by side with Imperialist colonizers and having what Phillips terms as a "problematic colonial background" (159), as a young woman she chooses to beggar herself for love (in fact, her daughter chooses to marry a rich man she does not love to improve her mother's financial situation, as well as hers). She has animal attributes, as Cristina Bacchilega remarks in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*: she is "eagle-featured" ("The Bloody Chamber" 95), she eventually descends on her daughter's leonine husband like an "avenging angel," as a bird of prey would do, and "when confronting each other, they look like two lions, one white-maned and the other black-bearded" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 120). She is notably eccentric, and just like a wise fool, she immediately senses her daughter's suitor's nature, and tries to advise her against marrying him.

But the specific aspect that makes the mother's character stand out among her other fellow female fools is her inclination to look after people in need. At the beginning of the story, the narrator reports that, as a teenager, her mother had "nursed a village through a visitation of the plague" ("The Bloody Chamber" 95); moreover, throughout the tale she constantly aims to protect and defend her daughter. When the young bride is in her new mansion, overwhelmed with unhappiness and boredom, she calls her mother, who immediately senses what is really happening to her daughter and comforts her. The older woman's power to mend seems to work also from afar, and within her daughter. In fact, whenever the girl is afraid or insecure, it is to her maternal heritage she resorts: her "nerves and will" (110), her spirit; as she phrases it, "when I thought of courage, I thought of my mother" (118). When she realizes her life is in danger, the young bride seeks for her mother's assistance, unsuspecting that she is already on her way to save her, sent by "maternal telepathy" (120); when she finally sees her, she spots "a rider, her black skirts tucked up around her waist so she could ride hard and fast, a crazy, magnificent horsewoman in widow's weeds" (118). The warrior/mother is a wild older fool, who rushes to an unhappy daughter's aid in eccentric clothes; the definitive healing in this tale takes the form of a remorseless execution that follows the traditional patterns of the fairy tale genre, where the villain is disposed of and the good triumphs. Nonetheless, this violent ending leads to an emotional, social, artistic regeneration, and to the creation of a new community leading "a quiet life" (120).

Interestingly, this unusual community composed of a bizarre fool-mother, her seventeen-year old widowed daughter and the latter's blind lover decide to donate most of their newly acquired money to open a school for the blind and a music school, thus operating a redistribution of the villain's wealth—a particularly relevant element in a story in which class and economic imbalance are prominent. This unconventional ending seems to conceptualize a kind of comic subversion which collides with the notion of a Bakhtinian carnival lacking permanent transformative power, as analyzed in "The Loves of Lady Purple" and "Master," and instead seems to be in line with Mary



Russo's view of the carnival: "The extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression, and the histories of subaltern and counterproductive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as structural models might suggest" (58). In fact, not only is the carnival spirit present in "The Bloody Chamber," but at the end of this tale there is no isolation—on the contrary, there is a community of 'fool-ish' characters who, reversing their unprivileged conditions, unite and change their luck. These dynamics resemble the ones that Herbert Marcuse had envisaged in the last two pages of his famous 1964 *One Dimensional Man*; to some extent, Carter herself suggests a possible reading of her work through a Marcusean lens, by highlighting the influence that Marcuse's theorization has had on her intellectual and political maturity, in "Notes from the Front Line." In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse discusses the nature of consumerist and technological capitalism, and the apparatuses it employs to oppress the masses, by distracting them through commodified forms of entertainment that promote conformity and annihilate any possible form of resistance; his perspective on the capitalist state of society and the possibility for opposition would be entirely negative, but for the end of the book. In the last two pages, Marcuse puts forward the idea that the only hope for revolutionary opposition lies in those who "exist outside of the democratic process" (*One Dimensional Man* 260), and are therefore denied its benefits but are also free from its repressive techniques. Five years later, in *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse described new potential ways to achieve liberation, arguing that

[...] the radical protest tends to become antinomian, anarchistic, and even nonpolitical. Here is another reason why the rebellion often takes on the weird and clownish forms which get on the nerves of the Establishment. In the face of the gruesomely serious totality of institutionalized politics, satire, irony, and laughing provocation become a necessary dimension of the new politics. [...] The rebels revive the desperate laughter and the cynical defiance of the fool as means for demasking the deeds of the serious ones who govern the whole. (63-64)

In Marcusean terms, therefore, female fools seem to be legitimately interpretable as figures who, by exposing their grotesque bodies and relying on their carnivalesque insights, are able to bring about a transformative impulse which, far from being only a merry and chaotic diversion, opens a potential space for a kind of revolutionary subversion not encoded in the patriarchal system.

The only element which is notably absent from "The Bloody Chamber" is laughter: the bride's grotesque mother brings about healing, but no laughing is triggered by her actions within the tale. In my view, laughing is indeed incited by the mother—only, not *within* the narrative. It is the reader who laughs at the thought of this indomitable, "magnifically eccentric" ("The Bloody Chamber" 96) elderly woman who keeps an antique service revolver in her reticule and, to justify her rushing to her daughter's castle, ironically comments "and who ever cried because of gold bath taps?" (120). The reader's laughter is a carnival laughter, in Bakhtinian terms: a laughter that heals (Bakhtin 59-144), a belly laughter involving the reader's body, which is essential to embrace the possibility of the existence of another (utopian) world: "Let us stress once more that the utopian element [...] is lived by the whole man, in thought and body. This bodily participation in the potentiality of another world, the bodily awareness of



another world has an immense importance for the grotesque" (Bakhtin 48). Laughing *with* the body *at* the body, a body conceived in new forms and bestowed a new significance, is the key that Carter offers her readers to unlock a door opening to the message that women's eccentricity and 'fool-ishness' have unpredictable, revolutionary outcomes. In fact, in *The Bloody Chamber* Angela Carter creates two female fools who, thanks to their status as such and their gender, manage to exceed the ideological normativity of traditional storytelling, and bond respectively with an inner wild essence (in "The Tiger's Bride"), and a community of people who *embrace* eccentricity as a method for potential evolution (in "The Bloody Chamber"). Angela Carter herself, with her own white mane, her playful and amused relationship with her readers and critics, her bawdy language and her bewildering depiction of female sexuality, can be read as an embodiment of a female fool: as such, she is not completely integrated in her community—namely, her feminist contemporaries, with whom she had an ambivalent relationship; but she creates a body of work that, by shocking and provoking laughter, aims to heal and create original bonds in her community of women and readers. She certainly acts as a female fool in the literary canon, and from *Fireworks* to *The Bloody Chamber* she transmorphs from a writer of striking, though more binarily codified female characters, to the creator of multilayered, intense portraits of empowered and empowering female fools, who can finally find their collocation in her more mature novels. In her preface to the special edition of *Marvels & Tales* on erotic tales, Cristina Bacchilega writes: "In *The Bloody Chamber* Carter turned to the fairy tale, because of its latent sexuality, in order to lure—rather than force—women into reassessing our relationship to sexuality" (17); the role of sexuality that Carter as a female fool reclaims is a joyful and proactive one, which may astonish and destabilize the reader, all the while transforming ancient rituals into mindful, empowering ones.

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