Angela Carter in a Subversive Dialogue With the Brothers Grimm: The Powerful and Ambiguous Role of Mother Figures in Fairy Tales

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This paper examines the complex roles of mother figures in Angela Carter's subversive fairy tales. The first part contextualises the genre's evolution, the emergence of subversive voices, and Carter's strategies in rewriting canonical tales. Special focus is given to the traditional portrayal of mother figures, and to their role in promoting the patriarchal ideology. The second part examines how Carter challenges the Grimms' agenda through her rewritten mother figures in the "The Snow Child" and "The Bloody Chamber." This study contributes to the discussion of the shifting role of mother figures in contemporary–postmodern fiction.

Keywords: adaptations, archetypal women, fairy tales, post-structuralism, Gothic

1 Introduction

"Each century tends to create or re-create fairy tales after its own taste," writes Kari Lokke (1988, 7), and Angela Carter's subversive fairy tales are no exception. Her provocative collection of *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* contains reinterpretations of often-told fairy tales such as "Bluebeard," "Snow White," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Little Red Riding Hood," offering a post-structuralist take on these traditional narratives belonging to the Western canon. One aspect which these twentieth-century fairy tales share with their canonical versions written by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm is the role of parents. Mothers in particular are often perceived as *movens*, to use Max Lüthi's term (1987, 35), which refers to the driving force of the narrative, setting the plot of the fairy tale in motion.

Carter relied on the stability of the fairy tale form, and, as Soman Chainani notes, she remained within the boundaries of the genre, reimagining its themes from a new perspective (2003, 215). Her primary tropes deal with taboos, the question of agency, and the Other; she subverted the fairy tale canon using Gothic imagery, inverted endings, the grotesque, and parody. This "juxtaposition of opposites," such

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as the combination of a baroque tone with a vulgar and mocking one, or the use of grotesque in traditional love stories, confronts readers' expectations, and dismantles the binary system of prescribed socio-political values (Lokke 1988, 7). Her rewriting of the archetypal mother continues to challenge the patriarchal ideologies of the Grimms and Perrault. As Lorna Sage observes, this is linked to Carter's notion that good mothers and evil stepmothers are much like a complementing pair of Justines and Juliettes (1998, 61).

This paper explores the ambivalent role of mother figures in fairy tales, considering their function and portrayal in the canonical versions by the Grimms and Perrault, as well as their development and subversion by Carter. The first section will offer an introduction to the fairy tale genre, contextualising the storyteller's voice and Carter's revision of the genre in the framework of post-structuralist adaptations. It will then analyse a selection of tales by the Grimms and Carter, with a focus on how ambiguous mother figures shape the heroine's journey. In the context of the Grimms the focus is on the narrative purposes of mother figures in the Western canon of fairy tales, exploring how these mainstream figures support ideological agendas. This is followed by a comparative review of the mother's evolution in Carter's rewritten tales, offering a new perspective on how her subversive mother figures shape not only the relationship between mother and daughter, but also the outcome of the narrative, in which mothers become underlying protagonists.

2 Carter's Rewritten Fairy Tales: Context and Strategies

The canon of fairy tales is a living, breathing instrument, which came to emphasise different aspects of social hierarchy and values, in close dialogue with changes in society and history. As Maria Tatar notes, the "social structures, institutions, and economic networks of many fairy tales" are rooted in feudalism, established as much in politics as in the family hierarchy, treating women as commodities and marriage as an economic proposition (2003, 49). These structures reflect medieval society's values, which were woven into fairy tales, seeking to legitimise the patriarchal order.

Firstly, there was a marked difference between expectations towards men and women in fairy tales. While men were depicted as adventurous and brave – in line with Arthurian codes of chivalry – women were encouraged to wait passively. These expectations predict outcomes and happily ever afters for both genders, although the endings for men and women look quite different. "Puss in Boots" illustrates how the cat's well-plotted marriage for his master, the Marquis de Carabas earned him a beautiful wife, a kingdom, and social climbing. The same cannot be said for

Snow White, who had to learn early that the world is full of female rivals, and one can only survive by adopting the desired traits of obedience and silence. Secondly, a range of prescribed characteristics in fairy tales set the standard of behavioural norms, showcasing traits to be rewarded and punished. Listed by Tatar as a sin of heroines, an early lesson in the world of fairy tales is repressing one's curiosity (1993, 95). We need not look further than Eve, Pandora or Bluebeard's wife to see the consequences, which followed without failure. Voicelessness and a lack of autonomy on the other hand came highly recommended, as illustrated by Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty. Such desired traits were rewarded with handsome princes and the wedding of the century. Finally, in the Western fairy tale canon power was associated with male figures, reflecting the prescribed hierarchy between genders for centuries to come. Looking back at myths and legends, power was archetypically in the hands of female characters (Bottigheimer 2014, 119). However, the performative power in the hands of women was an uncomfortable notion in the patriarchal order, and silencing women came to be high on the agenda. With the gender line reinforced, women were marginalised, appearing primarily through their link to a more prominent male character, such as Beauty and her father or the Beast. Those characters who still possessed power were turned into stepmothers and ogres, and were forced to meet their unfortunate ends.

Although female characters were thus marginalised in fairy tales, storytelling itself was traditionally considered a feminine activity, and was ascribed to archetypal figures such as spinsters, nurses, and grandmothers. However, just as Perrault had strategically hidden his narrator under the cape of Mother Goose, the embodiment of "aboriginal female wisdom" (Warner 1990, 22), male storytellers appropriated the female voice and gained fame and control through their retellings (Rowe 2014, 61). This pattern is consistently linked to female figures from a lower social rank transmitting narratives to the male storyteller, who typically belongs to a higher class and retells fairy tales through the male gaze (Warner 1990, 8). The Grimms collected their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* from female storytellers and were known for their heavy-handed editing. Their resulting tales cultivated themes of gendered hierarchy, silenced women, and in turn, powerful men. It was in large part owing to the Grimms' work that the male gaze became so prominent in storytelling. These initiatives of appropriating narratives told by women masked the overriding insecurity and anxiety over the weakening of the perceived superiority of patriarchy (Warner 1996, 212). However, female storytellers were not to be silenced. Post-structuralist and feminist waves in the twentieth century reshaped ideologies within the genre, leading to the emergence of subversive, rebellious adaptations of the Western canon. The emerging trend of the criticism of fairy tale opened new dimensions within the discourse, with these debates also contributing to shaking up the traditional foundations of the genre.

In what Linda Hutcheon refers to as the "postmodern age of cultural recycling," adaptation becomes central to postmodern literature (2006, 3). It is not so much that authors of modern days reuse a text and give it a surface-level twist, but rather they select a narrative of olden times and adjust the context in which it is read and received by a now changed audience, allowing different aspects of the story to resurface. Interpreting adapted texts is much like opening a Russian doll, in which the reader is ideally familiar not only with their own socio-cultural context, but also that of the original author, as only this can lead to a complete decoding of the new meanings within the story. This multi-layered process, labelled by Hutcheon as "palimpsestuous intertextuality," is perhaps easier to digest in forms which heavily rely on visual representation (2006, 21). Disney's fairy worlds lend themselves to more direct interpretation, because the audience is helped by a series of strong visual clues. Similarly, in the fairy tale picture books of Maurice Sendak and Angela Barrett, one notes the links and differences to the original text based on the illustrations. In her picture book *Snow White in New York*, Fiona French plays around with the traditional Snow White story, gathering the key elements and repopulating them in the New York of the roaring twenties.

The twentieth century saw the emergence of subversive fairy tales by Tony Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter, among others. These stories are in dialogue with their patriarchal intertexts and are marked by the voice of the reappropriated female storyteller. Fairy tales have also retained their resilience throughout the turbulent twentieth century, never failing to perform their primary function: in today's society they still act as powerful codes of social norms and values, and as such they are capable of simultaneously reflecting on their present socio-political context, while shaping the future (Tatar 1993, 229). If the twentieth-century fairy tale's defining feature was subversiveness, its true storyteller was Carter. Her works opened a dialogue with the texts of Perrault and the Grimms, talking back and "destabilising interpretation by presenting versions that are to be read with and against each other" (Bacchilega 2000, 90). As Marina Warner comments, "Carter was drawn to the fairy tale as a form," but her relationship with the genre goes beyond reusing the traditional schemata of the wonder tale, having created her very own formula built on the post-structuralist pillars of intertextuality, parody, irony, and the grotesque (1996, 193). Her Bluebeard narrative reflects not only on the European versions of the tale, but on French *fin-de-siècle* poetry, and her ornate and elaborate language in "Puss-in-Boots" links her to the seventeenth-century French fairy tale tradition. As Helen Simpson notes, Carter fine-tuned her take on the fairy tale until it became a hybrid of genres: her vivid imagery and provocative use of language links these tales from Edward Lear's nonsense literature, to the pornographic Gothic, and the bawdy and carnivalesque *commedia dell'arte* of sixteenth-century Italy (2006, xix).

Her predominant tropes of the taboo, identity, and agency highlight the deeply rooted issues stemming from patriarchal pressure, urging her reader to question the prevailing ideologies of Perrault's time.

Fairy tales have carried both an inherently Gothic sense of the sinister and the grotesque well before Carter's time. Gruesome scenes, such as the mother eating her daughter in the Grimms' "The Juniper Tree," or Cinderella's cruel sisters reaching for the knife to reshape their feet have long been part of children's bedtime stories. Both the Gothic and the grotesque are important pillars of Carter's style and take shape from the self-mocking and grotesque parody of the old husband in "Puss-in-Boots" to the postmodern Gothic of Bluebeard's fading, flower-like persona. The Gothic is evoked by the archetypal imagery of the ancestral home. The decadent castle with labyrinthine passages, where the outer world no longer exists (the telephone rings empty), invokes the crumbling aristocracy of the Ushers. These Gothic figures conceal a deeper layer of the uncanny, masking family illnesses and sins, for which someone will inevitably atone. Carter's use of the trope of a young woman's entrapment, as in the "The Erl-King" and in "The Bloody Chamber," themes of graphic violence and abuse in the family, the incestuous father of "The Snow Child" come together in this collection, playing with the boundaries of the taboo and uncanny. A fundamentally Gothic notion, referred to by David Punter as "the divisions and doublings of the self" take centre stage in the exploration of the Beast as Other in the "The Tiger's Bride" and in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" (Punter 2004, 51). Carter reinterprets the Gothic and challenges the tradition by "destabilizing the subject," and reimagining the previously known boundaries of the Gothic tradition (Hennelly 2001, 70).

Carter's works are also grounded in the post-structuralist feminist tradition. When projected onto the genre of the fairy tale, post-structuralism picked apart the gendered hierarchy, as well as questioned the use of a combined male gaze and the female voice in order to criticise both "patriarchal literary and cultural practices in Western societies" (Jarvis 2000, 158). Carter's fairy tales contain a wide array of post-structuralist devices. The alternative endings in both "The Snow Child" and "The Bloody Chamber" destabilise readers' assumptions as much as the identity of their characters. Like many fairy tales, Carter's "Snow White" adaptation is short and to the point: in two brief pages Carter builds up the rivalry between the female characters and offers us a view of the stepmother's victory, an ending entirely foreign to Western audiences. Similarly, in her version of "Bluebeard," the mother comes to the rescue of the girl on the brink of decapitation, a role change that moves the narrative out of its traditional line of gendered identities. The juxtaposition of these subversive techniques and the well-established fairy tale structure allow Carter to break down the authoritative, male-centred hierarchy and give way instead to a more pluralistic model.

Intertextuality, irony and parody are at the core of Carter's language, present in a layered web of references, humour, and criticism. Both her collection of fairy tales and her later collection of short stories, *Saints and Strangers*, are filled with mythological, literary, and musical references. Her retelling of "Bluebeard" pays tribute to both Baudelaire through paraphrasing him, and to his symbolist circle with their specific imagery, which is reflected in the Marquis's character (Kaiser 1994, 32). Carter also draws on the myth of Eve and Lewis Carroll's *Alice*, while "The Snow Child" is heavily connected to its Pygmalion intertext. Similarly, irony and parody provide tools to invert meanings and plots to re-examine the narrative through a novel lens. "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," Carter's Rococo fairy tale written in d'Aulnoy's style, stands as a tale of parodic domesticity, in which the two male protagonists are both tamed into domestic happiness. Beauty's father cuts an amenable and benevolent figure, in opposition to the autocratic head of the idealised patriarchal family. As Cristina Bacchilega points out, another source of parody originates in Beauty's conscious acceptance of her reversed position: she has no difficulty taming the Lion into an obedient husband (2020, 101). As Patricia Brooke argues, this behaviour contrasts what the title promises and alludes to the irony of arranged marriages, another tool Carter employs to ridicule and challenge the patriarchal agenda (2006, 70).

One of the most potent ways in which Carter challenges patriarchal notions and patterns is through her approach to the mother's archetypal figure. The mother as a character is rich in symbolism and has gained many layers of meaning over the centuries. Embodying the polarities of both good and dark, her figure has been used to support various ideologies, and as a result fits particularly well into Carter's frequent juxtaposition of the holy and the uncanny, the protector and the morally rotten. Themes typically associated with motherhood, such as nurturing and care on one end of the scale and exerting control and authority on the other, provide the underlying framework in many of Carter's narratives. Nicole Ward Jouve claims that it is her objective approach to the mother that allows Carter to remove the archetype from its pre-existing frames and to criticise what she has been used to portray (2007, 165). She achieves this by inverting the power balance between mother and father figure, "the patriarch is […] shown to be shallow, his power mechanical […]. But the fiercest rebellion is against the mother, what she stands for" (2007, 166). Once traditional framings are broken down, Carter releases the character from her symbolic and historical confines, juxtaposing the various polarised iterations of the archetype. Anna Kérchy notes that Carter's subversion is in line with Teresa De Lauretis's vision of a doubled woman contained in one, as "her heroines become *Woman*, doomed to identify with stereotypes of ideologically-prescribed Femininity," only to then "challenge these compulsory clichés of Womanhood" through the grotesque (2008,

60). Such is the mother in Carter's "Bluebeard" revision, a masculine power with more of a maternal instinct than most other fairy tale mothers possess, and even the parody of the father-turned-doting-mother in "The Courtship of Mr Lyon." The underlying intention of Carter's subversive approach is to demythologise the mother's ambiguous role, as "it is always the dangerously problematic that are mythologized in order to make them less dangerous" (Mackinen 1992, 2–3). As a consequence of challenging the well-established stereotypes, Carter's mothers are allowed to take shape in their unrestricted form and power, neither muted nor dismissed, opening the door to "a new, cheerful, active, duty-free form of mothering" (Ward Jouve 2007, 172).

3 Angels and Monsters: Mother Figures in the Grimms' Fairy Tales

Mother figures are some of the most powerful and ambiguous characters encountered in fairy tales, though their role in the heroine's life is often so obscured that a single reading of the text will not reveal the full picture. Their motives and development must be closely followed in order to understand the complex interplay between mothers and daughters. In Gilbert and Gubar's reading, traditional representations of mother figures can be broadly categorised as "the angel-woman and the monster-woman" (1979, 36). These categories correspond to mother figures' archetypal counterparts: on the one hand, the healing and nurturing good mother who offers moral guidance and provides protection, and on the other hand, the symbol of the dark mother, characterised by her ambition and self-preservation, who means to undermine, control, and eliminate her daughter. However, maternal presence in fairy tales comes in a variety of shapes between these two ends of the scale, from Beauty's absent mother, and the cannibalistic stepmother in the "The Juniper Tree," to the doubled mirror image of Snow White's and Cinderella's absent/stepmother. This analysis will focus primarily on the two polarised categories of the absent and angelic mother as opposed to the plotting and wicked stepmother, while also bringing examples of tales where the lines of a character become blurred to illustrate the duality often underlying these characters. Although similarly to the archetypal mother figure, father figures also often play a significant part in fairy tales, narratives with the father as the central parent figure raise a different set of equally complex issues, and thus take another direction to the one examined here.

Before turning to the analysis of the specific mother figures, however, it is essential to establish the cultural dynamism within which they were constructed – particularly because this context is often overlooked. Fairy tale mothers fell just as much prey to the

patriarchal influence as their young and innocent counterparts, if not more so. Their very existence in the tales is "author(iz)ed by a male voice," legitimising the dominant hierarchy (Bacchilega 1988, 3). Often appearing as transgressive, representing sins of the fairy tale world (Tatar, 1993, 96), and more sinister in their projections of happily ever afters, mothers frequently become portrayed by Perrault and the Grimms as witches, stepmothers, and ogres, in short, the arch villain, as the example of all that goes against the virtues and social codes prescribed by fairy tales. Often it was preferable to erase and silence the mother altogether and replace her with a faded, although beautiful image of the absent mother, sending her daughter supernatural help whenever she was in need of assistance. Both angelic and monstrous prototypes served to promote gendered messages of social conduct, feminine beauty, and the prescribed order of social hierarchy (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 714).

Absent mothers are characterised by frequently leaving their dutiful daughters behind, often doing so without further justification, notes Warner (1996, 210). This narrative element has become so widespread that it often occurs to readers only halfway through the tale that the mother of the heroine has been conspicuously absent all along. In her rendition of "Beauty and the Beast" Villeneuve cuts to the chaise and begins her story with the father's misfortunes of losing his riches, making no mention of the mother's early death. Meanwhile the Grimms deal with the matter right at the beginning of the heroine's journey: "And when the child was born, the Queen died" (1993, 249). In the nineteenth century death in childbirth was not a rare occurrence, which grounded this episode of tales in reality. However, there were other, more pressing reasons for making the biological mother's death a cornerstone of fairy tales. Their disappearance is no coincidence, for it has much to do with the patriarchal order, from which the only respectable way to escape is through an early death in childbirth (Fisher and Silber 2000, 126). The daughter left to her own devices must make the best of the situation without her mother's guidance, and navigate the years leading to adolescence, often hindered by stepsisters, the stepmother, and at times even by her incestuous father. While she possesses charm, a kind heart, and an obedient nature, this typically does not suffice, and so the angel mother intervenes in a divine form, in line with her symbolic counterpart, the protective and nurturing good mother.

These kindly mothers are not forgotten by the heroine: throughout the narrative they remain framed as models of obedience and passivity, characteristics highlighted with barely concealed motives by the Grimms, Perrault, and their contemporaries. Such virtues are underlined by the Grimms through the parting words of Cinderella's mother: "'Dear child, be good and pious, and then the good God will always protect you, and I will look down on you from heaven and be near you' […] and [Cinderella] remained pious and good" (1993, 121). Since fairy tales are "gendered

scripts and serve to legitimize and support the dominant gender system" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 711), it is unsurprising that the backbone of the fairy tale canon is concerned with female beauty, obedience and passivity. Incidentally, it is these very traits which absent mothers hand down to their daughters, and so their relationship plays out in light of these values. If their daughters follow in their footsteps and heed their advice, or rather take note of what made their mothers angels rather than monsters, they are likely to end up in a similar position by the end of the story. Considering this, it makes one question whether these good mothers are characters in their own right, or rather just shadows of a character, strategically employed tools to underline an ideological message.

In both the Grimms' "Cinderella" and "Snow White," the mother figure gains an ambivalent layer of meanings by its doubled counterpart, the cruel stepmother. While not much is known about Cinderella's mother, we know that Cinderella continues to grieve, visiting her mother's grave and sharing her sorrows and difficulties encountered with the now reigning stepmother and her two vicious stepsisters. Her mother then sends help in the form of an animal helper, which is transformed into the figure of the fairy godmother in later versions (Warner 1996, 204). This divine interference grants Cinderella the requisite beauty and grace, and a coach signifying social status, leading to her marriage to the prince (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 123). In a similar fashion, it is the performative words of Snow White's good mother that gifted her with enviable beauty before she was even born (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 249). It is this quality of Snow White that later prevents the hunter from killing her, and makes the prince get off his high horse upon seeing her in the glass coffin. In short, the good mother has once again paved the way for a safe passage to adulthood in the patriarchal world. Perrault's "Bluebeard," although only fleetingly, mentions the mother figure as a compliant, docile woman, one who is not opposed to marrying any of her daughters off to a strange man whose very presence they all find deeply repulsive (Perrault 2009, 35). This characterisation, too, is in line with Perrault's agenda of keeping women away from decisions concerning the economy of marriage.

As Tatar notes, biological mothers are rarely established as key characters, even though their intangible influence can be felt throughout the story (2003, 142). However, the same cannot be said of their counterpart, the long-established rival of young daughters, the stepmother. In sharp contrast with the angelic mother, who appears as a protecting shadow character of the heroine's journey, the scheming stepmother takes centre stage, controlling both princess and plot (Fisher and Silber 2000, 123). To unveil the attributes of this controversial character and shed light on her complex relationship to the heroine, we must first examine her origins and how she came to occupy such a major part of the scene.

The stepmother originated in the figure of the wicked mother-in-law, later edited out by the Grimms. In the Grimms' "Mother-in-Law," the King's mother developed a carnivorous appetite for the new wife and her offspring. This ogre-like mother-in-law bears a striking similarity to the prince's mother in "Sleeping Beauty" in Perrault's version (Tatar 2003, 138). These instances stand as examples of a time when the stepmother had not yet become the standard portrayal of the archaic female villain. Warner offers an alternative view on the conflicts the heroine faces in the story: perhaps Sleeping Beauty's enchanted sleep and the entrapment of Rapunzel represent not the trials leading up to marriage, but those inevitable conflicts with the mother-in-law which follow the marriage to the handsome prince (1996, 220). These dangerous creatures on the borderlands of woman-turned-ogre fear loss of control, once the young bride enters the scene. By the time the figure of the wicked stepmother replaces the mother-in-law, the character is clearly formed, showcasing characteristics which cut a sinister figure when compared to the heroine's young and innocent nature. These traits are consistent with the archetypal dark mother, who makes up for her lack of maternal instincts and unconditional love for her daughter with equal amounts of ambition and oppressive power. The Grimms' portrayals of Cinderella's neglectful stepmother, the controlling crone in "Rapunzel," and the downright cruel mother of "The Juniper Tree" are iterations of this dark, uncanny character through and through.

The startling difference between heroine and evil stepmother has been in the focus of Disney's adaptation of "Snow White" from the first scene: the titular character, dressed in traditional peasant clothes, broom and bucket in tow, is heavily contrasted with the Queen's rich cloaks, angular face and majestic posture (Sharpsteen et al. 1937, 3:33–4:50). Cinderella's stepmother is portrayed in a similar angle in Disney's version: her sharp expression, towering hairdo and the narrow staircase she is climbing towards Cinderella aligns the reader with the perspective of the heroine, creating terror (Geronimi et al. 1949, 22:00–24:10; Warner 1996, 225). Such visual representations heavily draw on the Grimms' versions and give an accurate portrayal of how this sinister character is shown in the original texts (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 121).

What Disney achieved with visual aids, the Grimms accomplished by bringing the stepmother in contrast with the values embodied by the heroine, thus strategically underlining the stepmother's deeply flawed character traits. These traits were some of the worst imaginable feminine qualities in the patriarchal socio-historical context. Vain and jealous of Snow White's youth and beauty, the Queen cannot bear the idea that there might be someone fairer than her. In the Grimms' "Hansel and Gretel," the doubled character of witch/stepmother is shaped by her gluttony both for money and the children's meat, while possessiveness and wishing to retain control are the

defining features of the old hag keeping Rapunzel captive (Chainani 2003, 213). Curiously, in fairy tales only pre-adolescent girls are dominated by the stepmother; she has no power over males or mature women, which shows a pattern of singling out her targets not only along a gender, but also on a generational divide. An overarching feature, encompassing all these traits, is her deviance from the silenced woman. Often shaped as witches, fairy tale stepmothers are endowed with the ability to perform spells – in short, their words have power. The Grimms, unwelcoming towards female characters whose voice could override the prominent ideological messages, decided to eliminate the stepmother on a structural level.

The push-pull dynamic between the stepmother and the heroine is put into motion by the stepmother's deviance, which in postmodern versions translates into offering an alternative path for the heroine. In the original texts their rivalry served an ideological purpose: females were discouraged, if not barred from being on good terms with each other. In the Grimms' "Mother Holle" the "pretty and industrious" daughter is described from the beginning as "the Cinderella of the house," who was ordered to go down the well by her mother (1993, 133). The same treatment does not apply to the mother's preferred daughter, consequently there is no chance for an alliance between the sisters. There also exists a purposefully placed barrier of values and behavioural norms between the two sisters and Cinderella, one which is artificial and unbreakable. Although "beautiful and fair of face, [the stepsisters were] vile and black of heart," and such differences in values prevent the three sisters from forming a bond (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 121). This unstable and downright threatening dynamic between women confirms to misogynistic norms, an agenda handed down by men.

Hostility between female characters is further amplified by the central tropes of female beauty and the mirror, both of which play a key role in "Snow White" in its various interpretations. As Gilbert and Gubar note, "female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice of the looking glass sets them against each other" (1979, 39). While the conflict is between the two female protagonists, their relationship is constructed on a three-pillar model, as it is the voice of the mirror, masking the male gaze, which sets the tone of their relationship and drives the plot forward. The mirror serves two key functions: firstly, it underscores the importance of feminine beauty, something which "objectifies, devalues, and subordinates women" (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz 2003, 711). The Queen, as the older woman of the two, already dreading her beauty fading at the first signs of aging, is desperately trying to gain the attention of the King over his young and beautiful daughter. She soon falls victim to the nagging voice of the mirror. Secondly, fuelling the Queen's hatred and jealousy towards Snow White, the mirror symbolism paves the way for their

ill-fated relationship. It is the mirror's voice raising Snow White to the status of an equal competitor, urging the Queen to single her out as a worthy adversary. The Queen's downfall is ultimately caused by her scheming, similar to the old crone's designs in "Rapunzel." If only the Queen had never listened to her magic mirror, comments Zipes, she might never have been driven to such lengths in her desperate wish to be accepted by the King and eliminate Snow White as competition, and she might even have survived the encounter (2010, 116–17). Interestingly, Snow White remains untouched by the mirror. She knows her path and there is no danger of her straying from it; therefore, she needs no mirror reminding her of the patriarchal agenda in which she is already entrapped.

Villainous mother figures therefore fulfil a particularly important role in Perrault's and the Grimms' fairy tales: their characterisation forces the heroine to distance herself from their influence, and everything they stand for, mirroring instead "the passive, feminine identity of the first queen" (Fisher and Silber 2000, 124). The portrayal of the evil stepmother thus ensures that the heroine remains on the path which she was never meant to stray from and arrives safely in the harbour of a well-planned marriage with the prince. The stepmother, whose presence has a much stronger impact on the outcome of the story than the absent mother, makes sure that "traditional gender roles in the patriarchal state" are respected by offering an anti-patriarchal example (Zipes 1993, 36).

4 The Changing Role of Mothers in Carter's Subversive Tales

While the postmodern fairy tale of the twentieth century did not annihilate the mother figures we have previously encountered, these characters, just like the plots which they shape, have gone through transformations. Absent and monstrous mothers exist all the same in post-structuralist adaptations by Carter and her contemporaries, as the real change in these stories lies elsewhere. The change of perspective, the autonomy of female characters, and alternative endings render the narratives radically different from our expectations, breaking up the patriarchal hierarchy and preconceived notions of what certain characters are capable of achieving.

The briefest tale of the collection, Carter's "The Snow Child" reinvents the mother's relationship with the heroine by making crucial changes in terms of the family structure, the autonomy of female characters, and consequently the ending of the tale. These new perspectives are different from our expectations, since they break up the patriarchal hierarchy and preconceived notions of what certain characters are capable of achieving. "Midwinter – invincible, immaculate" – Carter's flawless,

clear white opening is in sharp contrast with the violent, incestuous plot (2006, 152). The characters are always the same, a trio of mother, father, and daughter; however, the original versions rendered the father into oblivion, a silent observer of the stepmother's cruelty. Carter's Countess, the Snow Child's quasi-stepmother, is not far from the Grimms' portrayal of the evil Queen: "how shall I be rid of her?" was her first thought on the young girl's entering the scene (Carter 2006, 152). The mirror's voice and female rivalry still provide the Countess's inner motivation and dictate her every move. However, the involvement of the father figure in the plot renders the narrative radically different from the Grimms' tale, thus bringing about a number of key changes to the archetypal role of the wicked stepmother.

Firstly, the performative voice is attributed not to Snow White's late mother, but to the father. In the Grimms' version, the patriarch is conspicuously absent, yet autocratic all the same (Marshall 2004, 406). What we know about him factually is relatively little: his angelic wife, who fulfils her own wish of having a beautiful child, departs from his side. Not long after, he decides to bring a new Queen to the palace; however, there is no room for two women by the King's side. Subverting this framework, and in contrast with "The Courtship of Mr Lyon" and "The Tiger's Bride," which feature between them a pair of polarised depictions of the father archetype and a set of notably absent mothers, Carter makes space for both the female characters and the father, who is no longer a passive participant of the story. Carter's Snow Child is born "on the father's desire," he moulded her in a Pygmalionesque fashion out of the elements of the forest, mirroring the original tale (Chainani 2003, 217). "I wish I had a girl as white as snow" – the Count utters the first part of the ritualistic three-tiered wish, and once the wish was complete, so was the child: "there she stood, beside the road, white skin, red mouth, black hair and stark naked; she was the child of his desire" (Carter 2006, 152). The inversion of roles in the context of performative power is meant to achieve a double effect. It renders the stepmother voiceless, while in canonical tales it was the female voice which dictated the pace of the tale. As a result, Carter switches readers' perspective and criticises the patriarchal model by placing the Count in a position of power, thus holding him responsible for the events which follow. This is a diversion from the Grimms' narrative, which held the stepmother accountable for all evils befalling the daughter. Consequently, the stepmother's voicelessness also hints at the daughter's inability to speak up for herself in the future. For how is she to learn to stand her ground if her mother has not set her a better precedent?

Secondly, while the Grimms' villain was the stepmother, in Carter's revision evil is shared between the Count and the Countess. Once brought into existence following a number of wishes, the Snow Child's short life is a series of trials by the Countess, which culminates in rape by the Count. The themes of rape and incestuous

fathers were consistently edited out of the original tales, mirroring the prominent ideological trends of the nineteenth century (Marshall 2004, 408). Relying on Gothic elements, Carter adds a new, previously censored layer to the Snow White narrative, which focuses on the "dynamics and displacements of the bourgeois family romance" (Hennelly 2001, 73). As a result, in Carter's revision of sharing the blame, the heroine's flight from her home can be just as much a consequence of her father's inappropriate desire as her stepmother's jealousy (Marshall 2004, 407). While this transfer of the evil act from the stepmother (in the Grimms' version ordering Snow White's murder) to the Father does not render her less evil, it certainly underlines the impossibility of her position. Although the Grimms portrayed the Queen as a deviant woman whose suffering is merited and whose power should be eliminated, Carter makes a point of inverting the plot. Here not even the traditionally vile character is able to exert her will and triumph over the daughter, which underlines her lack of power in the greater patriarchal scheme.

Thirdly, "The Snow Child" brings into centre a second relationship, other than the mother–daughter dynamic. The dialogue between the Countess and the mirror takes place behind the scenes, although its presence is just as relevant as in the original tale. Carter puts the plan into motion by contrasting the archetypal, evil stepmother's active, scheming character with one devoid of agency and a voice. While the mirror symbolism representing the male gaze is only indirectly present, it is brought into focus by the triangle of the three characters in which the two female figures are entrapped with the Count being the only one in a position of power. As observed by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, it is often women wishing to get their way through their beauty who rely most on men's approval (2003, 712). There is no mother wishing for a child in Carter's story, only one whose sole desire is to win the approval of the male gaze, "wrapped in the glittering pelts of black foxes [wearing] high, black, shining boots with scarlet heels" (Carter 2006, 152). The Countess's lack of power in her dynamic with the Count challenges the typical stepmother figure, which carries over to her problematic relationship with the Snow Child.

The final way in which Carter alters the connection between mother and daughter is the lack of direct contact between the two characters. However, this does not mean that the core relationship of the Snow White tale loses depth or significance. Rather, it is hidden behind the more visible ties both characters have to the Count. While in the Grimms' narrative the father is noticeably absent, his patriarchal voice only partially present through the magic mirror, Carter renders his threatening presence an essential pillar of the plot. As a result of the father's active presence, interaction is more distanced between the two women, manifesting primarily through the Count. The character of the Countess is grounded in themes traditionally associated with the evil stepmother, such as oppressive power and the desire to control. Thus, female

rivalry remains a central division of the family structure, and the elimination of the younger female remains the primary aim of the Countess. As noted earlier, this trend is rooted in patriarchal culture, which objectifies women in the reflection of the mirror. The Countess's scheming, fuelled by her murderous jealousy, remains strong as ever, although there is little purpose to it: as soon as the Count had raped the girl, she "began to melt" and order was restored (Carter 2006, 153). Yet, this turn of events brings no happiness to the Countess, for no sooner does the Count hand her the rose – the one bringing about the girl's death – the Countess "touched it, she dropped it. 'It bites' she said" (Carter 2006, 153). While it is not clear whether the Countess will meet the same end as the Snow Child, the rose remains, implying the enduring nature of their rivalry.

This subversive interpretation of the mother figure opens the door to a series of previously unexplored ways in which she impacts the heroine's journey. In the context of the original tale, Shuli Barzilai refers to Snow White's traditional "nothing can happen to me" attitude as a guarantee that she will survive every attempt made by her stepmother to eliminate her (1990, 524). Carter challenges this schema by letting the Countess temporarily win and the Snow Child fall victim to her scheming request of picking her a rose. Although in this inverted plot the stepmother seems to emerge victoriously, her position remains ambiguous, as she gains no power over the Count through her survival. The inversion therefore renders Carter's plot more powerful, by showing that nobody, other than the Count, is capable of winning his own game. Carter's sinister, ironic ending "empowers neither the heroine nor the villainess," portraying instead the polarity of the patriarchal agenda (Chainani 2003, 219).

"The Snow Child" shows the staple figure of the wicked stepmother from a new angle: previously of a rebellious and deviant nature, now just as jealous but paralysed by her dependence on the Count's attentions, the Countess suffers an end that is a cautionary tale in its own right. The Grimms' original ending sees the Queen "put on the red-hot shoes, and dance until she dropped down dead" (1993, 258). The Grimms' agenda is clear: female characters who take matters into their own hands and threaten to push the heroine off the beaten path shall be eliminated. Carter negates the Grimms' intentions of framing the stepmother as a warning example by emphasising the choiceless nature of her position. In a quick turn of events, suddenly it is the Countess who "was bare as a bone and the girl furred and booted" – that is, at a moment's notice the Count robs her of items as intimately tied to her as the very layers of clothes on her body (Carter 2006, 153). Through this asymmetric balance of power Carter challenges the Grimms' notion of inherent evil and redirects it towards the institute of patriarchy. While in the original tale the stepmother's death ensures a better, safer future for the daughter, in Carter's plot there is no future for either female character. By allowing herself to be controlled by

the male gaze, the Countess makes no attempt to bring the system to an end or to show signs of rebellion. The ending thus underscores the fundamental role of the mother figure: a submissive character in the face of an oppressive system – whether angelic and absent, or engaged in petty rivalries – will not empower her daughter to break out from the ties of passivity and obedience.

"The Bloody Chamber" is in many ways the inverse of "The Snow Child." Stretching to the length of a novelette, and told in the first person, it does not play into the natural characteristics of the fairy tale genre. The Bluebeard tale's familiar fairy tale setting of a schematic village in its feudal context is brought into *fin de siècle* France in Carter's decadent, overly detailed rendition. In this post-structuralist inversion, the focus is on extracting the latent grotesque already present in Perrault's "Bluebeard" narrative and on bringing it into a dialogue with the genres of Gothic romance and pornography (Lokke 1988, 7). It is all the more shocking to come across a mother figure so rebellious against the backdrop of a decaying world, fascinated by the aristocracy and playing on the myths of fallen women such as Eve and Pandora. Carter lays out the patriarchal scenery from the very beginning of the narrative, as the Bride is travelling to "that marvellous castle in which [Bluebeard] had been born" (Carter 2006, 5) only to be then taken to the "gilded bed on which he had been conceived" (19). The Marquis is deeply grounded in his ancestral heritage, centuries of unbreakable patriarchal traditions, which set the scene for the arrival of a mother figure never before encountered in fairy tales. Even within her collection of fairy tales, Carter's mother of the Bride cuts a one-of-a-kind character, establishing a new model of mother–daughter dynamic, in contrast with her other subversive tales such as "The Courtship of Mr Lyon," and "The Tiger's Bride," in which mother figures, while substantially reinvented, follow more noticeably the classic models of guiding, nurturing mothers and evil, dangerous stepmothers. Described by her daughter as her scandalous and defiant, "eagle-featured, indomitable mother," who has "grown magnificently eccentric in hardship" (Carter 2006, 2), the Bride's mother could hardly be further away from the Grimms' beautiful and haughty Queen (Grimm and Grimm 1993, 249), who becomes the point of reference by virtue of being present throughout almost the entire story, similarly to the Bride's mother. Traditionally, mother figures in Perrault's and the Grimms' stories are introduced either by reference to their beauty and meek nature, or in the case of wicked stepmothers, their striking presence and arrogance. When it comes to the Bride's mother, Carter chooses to emphasise a different range of qualities: courage, defiance, and a spirit of adventure form the core of her character, with no scheming designs underlying her intentions. While the wicked Queen might carry a poisoned apple in her basket, the Bride's mother "kept [a revolver] in her reticule, in case […] she was surprised by footpads on her way home from the grocer's shop" (Carter 2006, 2–3). Although both mother figures have a deep instinct of self-preservation, their

motivations are vastly different: the archetypal wicked stepmother is the embodiment of danger and rivalry, determined to eliminate her (step)-daughter; while the Bride's mother stands as a symbol of protection and guidance, taking charge only when her daughter truly needs her.

Intention and motivation lie at the heart of Carter's rewritten mother figure, distinguishing her from both the evil stepmother trope, and the absent and demure Angel of the House. What Carter has developed is an altogether different kind of mother, subversive in the way that it subscribes to no ideological aim previously set out in the fairy tale discourse by Perrault and the Grimms. Her role in the heroine's life is set on a new trajectory, as she is not supportive of her daughter in the traditional modes readers expect to encounter. Since the Bride's birth mother is present throughout the entire story, we expect rivalry to enter into their dynamic as in traditional coming-of-age stories, as rivalry is triggered by the heroine's entering into adulthood rather than by her lack of blood relationship to the mother. Carter does not allude to rivalry between the mother and the Bride, instead, the Bride's mother takes on a powerful and dynamic role both in the heroine's life and in amplifying Carter's narrative intention that there is a fine line between good and deviant mothers, and women should no longer be treated as existing only in terms of polarities. If the Grimms' mothers were victims of the system in one way or another, the mother in Carter's rendition of "Bluebeard" is the courageous, strong-minded warrior, labelled by Mary Kaiser as the "woman-as-avenger" (1994, 33), disrupting a long line of mothers written by men with a view to fitting their patriarchal agenda.

In addition to providing the mother figure with different intentions and motivation, Carter made a number of other changes within the plot and the dynamic between the two female characters. Firstly, the fact that the mother has survived long enough – as opposed to traditional biological mothers who depart once the story begins – for readers to meet her as "a woman on her daughter's wedding day" (Carter 2006, 1) implies that she poses no threat to her grown-up daughter's life. Unlike Beauty's absent mother or the old crone from "Rapunzel," the Bride's mother, in an unprecedented turn, is a solid presence throughout her childhood, who knows when to nurture and when to let go. Consequently, the Bride's mother takes on a dual aspect of being present throughout the Bride's adulthood, similarly to evil stepmothers, while providing guidance and support, just like absent, angelic mothers do.

Another aspect of Carter's reimagined mother figure is that she does not suffer the consequences of her agency and courage; on the contrary, these are the very characteristics which make her a hero, someone who can hold her own in a world of dominating and perverse men. The patriarchal codes restricting women into their classic roles of too soon departed or wicked and jealous mothers seem to have no effect on the Bride's mother, making her all the more resilient. This newfound

power of the rewritten mother figure allows her to break through the long-standing tradition of the Marquis decapitating his brides, and on a more symbolic level create a precedent for courageous mother figures coming to the rescue of their daughters.

Since she is not a victim of the patriarchal system, the Bride's mother feels no need to strengthen its agenda by submitting to the Marquis and allowing him to do as he pleases with her daughter. This is visible very early on in the text, when the mother asks the Bride, "Are you sure you love him?" (Carter 2006, 2) – as in no traditional fairy tale is the daughter asked if she would like to marry the old, repulsive monster. The message is that much clearer: Carter's subversive mother will not force her daughter into a marriage that is so plainly perverse and grotesque. Despite seeing the twisted nature of the match and hearing the chilling tales of the Marquis's previous marriages, she does not force her own view on her daughter, but simply asks her once more "Are you sure you love him?" and only sighs following her daughter's evasive answer (Carter 2006, 2). This is a turning point in the development of the subversive mother figure, for instead of the traditional gifts of beauty, good advice and a fairy godmother, she offers something much more valuable to her daughter: she allows her agency in the decision of marriage, while reminding her of the alternatives available. Such a balanced mother never ever existed before in a fairy tale. Although at first glance this might seem as if the Bride is left to her own devices, heading into the lion's den, it is only through her marriage to the Marquis that she faces situations through which she grows curious, explores what is behind locks and gains courage and agency. A mother who can endow her daughter with such traits and give her a choice in the face of the system is a powerful mother indeed.

Despite the unfading mark on her forehead, which "no paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask" (Carter 2006, 61), the Bride now armed with her power and self-preservation inherited from her mother is unafraid of restarting her life as a piano teacher, even as a target of gossip and tales. Lokke refers to both mother and daughter as "powerful, strong-willed, steel-nerved women warriors" (1988, 11), implying that the mother had a strong and lasting impact on her daughter's narrative, turning the Bride into someone who is capable of agency, asking for help and taking control of her story. There are no expectations posed by the mother towards her daughter, no attempts to create a mirror image of herself; instead, she guides the Bride to her own path, one which by the end brings her a happy, fulfilling life.

There is one, more tangible gift of the Mother, which emphasises her lasting, nurturing influence on the heroine's journey. She gives her practical lessons, insisting on musical education being an integral part of the heroine's life, something which later becomes an asset in more than one way. It is her love for music and her piano playing skills that lead the Bride to the blind piano tuner. who becomes her ally.

It is also her musical skills that later give her a career as a piano teacher and the chance for a comfortable life while being married to the man she has finally chosen. Through this series of changes, Carter re-worked Perrault's and the Grimms' traditional mother figure until an Amazon stood in her place, deeply upsetting the prescribed order of mother–daughter dynamic. The alterations to the focal relationship are visible on a number of levels, all of which carry over to the impact the mother figure has on the heroine's journey. Primarily, it is illustrated by the elimination of rivalry, which is replaced by an alliance between mother and daughter. As noted earlier, daughters rarely gain the affection of another female character in traditional fairy tales. The mother as a powerful ally is one of the unknowns of fairy tales, viewed by the Grimms as a dangerous tool, as it can lessen the importance of the male gaze and reduce the power of patriarchal values, such as female beauty and obedience. Not only is the mother an ally, but also she acts as the saviour of the Bride, someone who "without a moment's hesitation […] took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through" the Marquis's head (Carter 2006, 60). Thus, the mother becomes a role model of female agency, contrary to the cautionary model of the stepmother or the passive, objectified mother.

In Carter's narrative the tie between mother and daughter goes deeper than saving one's kin. Fairy tales do not usually rely on bonds manifesting in the shape of the "maternal telepathy that sent [her] mother running headlong from the telephone to the station" (Carter 2006, 60). From the Grimms' perspective, a connection of this nature would no doubt be deemed just as dangerous as the alliance described earlier. Armed with the emotional strength she derives from such a relationship with her mother, the Bride is ready to face what awaits her, which could otherwise easily have been a stigmatised, burdened future. Their deep and long-lasting connection is further reinforced by the narrator's epilogue: "We lead a quiet life, the three of us" and she continues to describe their new life just outside Paris, consistently referring to the newly formed family unit as "the three of us" (Carter 2006, 60). This phrasing suggests that Carter's reinvented mother figure keeps to her position as a pillar of support in her daughter's life, a source of strength she can call on in times of need. Such an ending would be unimaginable in the world of Perrault and the Grimms, where no mother sees her daughter live happily ever after, much less finds joy in the notion. "The Bloody Chamber" is a tale of survival, a "feminist transformation in which for once the maiden is victorious over death itself," and it is owing to the mother's subversive, transformed role that the heroine is liberated, and becomes an active participant in her own story (Lokke 1988, 9).

5 Conclusion

As the fairy tale evolved over the centuries, so did its characters: they too are reflections of socio-political ideology, gendered hierarchy, or, as visible in the twentieth-century narratives, they portray the subversion of such binary lines. While this paper is concerned primarily with mother figures in the Grimms' and Carter's tales and their shift both in function and in the impact they have on the heroine, it is undeniable that father figures and daughters were also subject to a near-complete transformation in post-structuralist intertexts of Western fairy tales. Depictions of motherhood served strict ideological purposes in the Grimms' agenda, which resulted in a series of stereotypical mother images both in their angelic and monstrous forms. Absent mothers, old hags, and jealous stepmothers shaped not only the path which forms the heroine's pre-adolescent years, but also the ending of her story. Good mothers did so by suggesting silence and obedience as desirable traits through their symbolic absence, while deviant stepmothers cut cruel examples with such unfortunate ends that no young heroine in their right mind would consider following them. The endings offered by these tales were unchangeable for a long time, as the pressure of socio-cultural norms anchored dutiful daughters to a stationary position (Chainani 2003, 213).

In comparison, Carter offers a pluralistic approach by retelling narratives through subversive writing, parody, and unveiling tropes previously treated as taboos. Challenging and inverting the Grimms' patterns, Carter's rewritten tales feature a range of subversive and powerful mother figures, some of whom become an empowering presence in their daughter's story and shape her future in a positive way. The mother in "The Bloody Chamber" is rendered more forceful and adventurous than the archetypal good mother of fairy tales, riding in on horseback to save her daughter in the very last minute – a role traditionally filled by a set of brothers. At the same time Carter's narrative intention of shaping the mother–daughter bond as enduring and nurturing presents a quasi-one-of-a-kind occurrence in the world of fairy tales. Even in narratives such as "The Snow Child," where the mother is portrayed in her ambitious, jealous and violent nature, Carter's message is a clear response to the Grimms' agenda: neither mother nor daughter can win in a situation where the male gaze takes control. Although the Countess outlives the Snow Child, Carter's narrative can be interpreted in an open-ended fashion, where it is only a matter of time until all female characters are silenced. By expanding the family structure to include the father in a powerful and controlling position and placing female rivalry within a deeper layer of the narrative structure, Carter brings the oppressive patriarchal system in focus, highlighting the father's actions and role in the outcome of the tale. In both "The Bloody Chamber" and "The Snow Child" there is a direct link between the type of mother portrayed and the ending of the tale.

Neither story ends in "a proper patriarchal conclusion" (Fisher and Silber 2000, 130), which Carter achieved through subverting traditional mother figures, endowing them with the power to change the course of the plot and often determining the outcome of the story. Considering their powerful role in shaping both the plot and the heroine's character, Carter's reimagined mother figures become underlying protagonists of her fairy tales.

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