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ANGELA CARTER

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THE BLOODY CHAMBER

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From familiar fairy tales and legends – Red Riding Hood, Bluebeard, Puss in Boots, Beauty and the Beast, vampires and werewolves – Angela Carter has created an absorbing collection of dark, sensual, fantastic stories.

'Magnificent set pieces of fastidious sensuality'
Ian McEwan

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ANGELA CARTER

Angela Carter was born in 1940. She made her home in London and spent time in Japan, the United States and Australia. Her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, was published in 1965. Her next book, *The Magic Toyshop*, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and the next, *Several Perceptions*, the Somerset Maugham Award. She died in February 1992.

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The Bloody Chamber

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
Helen Simpson

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Some of the stories in this collection originally appeared in somewhat different form in the following publications: 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon', *British Vogue*; 'The Erl-King' and 'The Company of Wolves', *Bananas*; 'The Lady of the House of Love', *Iowa Review*; 'The Werewolf', *South-West Arts Review*; 'Wolf-Alice', *Stand*; all are reprinted here with the permission of the editors. 'The Snow Child' was broadcast on the BBC Radio 4 programme *Not Now, I'm Listening*. 'Puss-in-Boots' appeared in an anthology, *The Straw and the Gold*, edited by Emma Tennant (Pierrot Books, 1979).

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Introduction

'The tale does not log everyday experience, as the short story does,' wrote Angela Carter in the afterword to *Fireworks*, her first story collection, in 1974; 'It interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience.' She drew a sharp distinction between what she later described as 'those fragments of epiphanic experience which are the type of the twentieth-century story', and the 'ornate, unnatural' style and symbolism of her favoured form, the tale. She knew from the start that she was drawn to 'Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious.' When, in her second collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, she continued in this Gothic mode but with narratives suggested by traditional western European fairy tales, she found that she had conjured up an exotic new hybrid which would carry her voice to a wider audience than it had reached before.

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The Bloody Chamber is often – wrongly – described as a group of traditional fairy tales given a subversive feminist twist. In fact these are new stories, not retellings. As Carter made clear, 'My intention was not to do "versions" or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, "adult" fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories.' Nor are they *that* homogeneous, being strikingly different from each other in length and tone. The title story, for example, is more than twice the length of any of the other stories, and more than thirty times the length of the shortest. Its slow-moving Gothic intensity is quite different from the libidinous top-speed farce of 'Puss-in-Boots', for example, or from the laconic brutality of 'The Werewolf'. And it is this very lack of homogeneity that gives this collection its impressive complexity – it uses the physical form of the story collection to approach its theme obliquely, variously, from ten strikingly different angles.

The Bloody Chamber is like a multi-faceted glittering diamond reflecting and refracting a variety of portraits of desire and sexuality – heterosexual female sexuality – which, unusually for the time, 1979, are told from a heterosexual female viewpoint. This was the year, remember, that Penelope Fitzgerald's *Offshore* won the Booker Prize, and Penelope Lively's *Treasures of Time* won the National Book Award. Anita Brookner's first novel, *A Start in Life*, would not appear for another two years. Margaret Thatcher, at 53 years old,

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had just been elected Britain's first female Prime Minister. Angela Carter, at 39, had seven novels to her name, none of which had so far received more than marginal recognition.

Carter was later to come under attack for not busting more taboos than she did ('She could never imagine Cinderella in bed with the Fairy Godmother,' wrote Patricia Duncker, for example). But such criticisms seem wide of the mark. Her work caused shock waves when it appeared, and it continues to shock. *The Bloody Chamber*, which has been extensively studied in universities over the last decade, apparently elicits furious hostility from a significant number of students, who are outraged when they recognise the bedtime stories of their childhood newly configured as tales of sex and violence. But as Carter said, 'I was taking . . . the latent content of those traditional stories and using that; and the latent content is violently sexual.' It is also true that her imagination had a fierce and appetitive quality, turbo-fuelled by Gothic themes, particularly in her youth. (Later, after she had published *Nights at the Circus*, she was to comment, 'You know, sometimes when I read my back pages, I'm quite appalled at the violence of my imagination. Before I had a family and stuff.')

She took traditional fairy tales and used them to write new ones. Fairy tales have been usefully described as the science fiction of the past; certainly Carter regarded them in this light, using them as a way of exploring ideas of how things might be different. She admired much science fiction

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with its utopian perspectives and speculative thinking – 'It seemed to me, after reading these writers a lot, that they were writing about ideas, and that was basically what I was trying to do.' Also, as dissident writers have so often found, the indirection and metaphor of fantasy can be helpful when airing controversial subject matter; not that Carter would have minded about causing offence, but, whether she minded or not, by using the time-sanctioned form of fairy tales she acquired readers who would not otherwise have read her. And she was using the forms of fantasy and fairy tales with conscious radical intent; in a letter to her friend Robert Coover, she wrote, 'I really do believe that a fiction absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is, not a logbook of events) can help to transform reality itself.'

All this makes her writing sound over-schematic; but while she used fantasy to discuss ideas, it is also obvious that it was the landscapes and imagery of fairy tales and legends that fired her imagination – bloodstains and ravens' feathers on snow, moonlight on a dust-grimed mirror, graveyards on Walpurgisnacht. The stories in *The Bloody Chamber* reverberate with deep and unmistakable imaginative pleasure. There is an astonishing extra-vivid materiality to this alternative world she invented, down to the last sensuous detail, like the candle which drops hot wax onto the girl's bare shoulders in 'The Tiger's Bride'. She loved to describe the trappings of luxury, to display rich scenery in rich language. Dialogue

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came less naturally to her and she avoided it for years, joking that the advantage of including animal protagonists in her work was that she did not have to make them talk. Naturalism or realism, the 'low mimetic' as she called it, was not her mode. Not that she wasn't observant – nothing could have been sharper than her journalism with its gimlet anthropological eye – but in the end her genius did not actually lend itself to the 'low mimetic' (see 'The Quilt Maker', an uncollected story in this mode, which is interesting but possibly her least successful).

Carter was an abstract thinker with an intensely visual imagination. What she liked about the short story form was (as she wrote in the afterword to *Fireworks*) that 'Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative.' She found that 'though the play of surfaces never ceased to fascinate me, I was not so much exploring them as making abstractions from them.' It comes as no surprise to find that she particularly admired Baudelaire and the nineteenth-century symbolist poets, and also much twentieth-century French surrealist and structuralist writing. *The Bloody Chamber* is packed with signs, symbols and signifiers. Ironically enough, though, the two Frenchmen who stand as true fairy godfathers to this collection lived in earlier centuries.

First there is Charles Perrault, (1628–1703), a translation of whose collection of traditional fairy stories, *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé*, Carter had published in 1977. She

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praised his 'consummate craftsmanship and his good-natured cynicism' in her preface, adding that 'From the work of this humane, tolerant and kind-hearted Frenchman, children can learn enlightened self-interest . . . and gain much pleasure, besides.'

And then there is the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814). Carter's reading of Sade, and her decade-long argument with him, colour two earlier novels, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), while her white-hot aphoristic account of his pornographic writings, *The Sadeian Woman,* appeared alongside *The Bloody Chamber* in 1979. 'I really can't see what's wrong with finding out about what the great male fantasies about women are,' she declared, reasonably enough, when *The Sadeian Woman* came under attack. It is a difficult, provocative book whose polemical preface is subtitled 'pornography in the service of women' – and a continuing bone of contention for many contemporary readers.

One shining aperçu which emerges from its pages to spread light through the stories of *The Bloody Chamber* is that passivity is not an intrinsically virtuous state, even – in fact, especially not – in women. 'Justine marks the start of a kind of self-regarding female masochism, a woman with no place in the world, no status, the core of whose resistance has been eaten away by self-pity,' wrote Carter, tracing the descendants of Sade's heroine Justine down to Marilyn Monroe.

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Another passage might have been written specifically as an epigraph for *The Bloody Chamber*:

> To be the *object* of desire is to be defined in the passive case.
> To exist in the passive case is to die in the passive case – that is, to be killed.
> This is the moral of the fairy tale about the perfect woman.

The stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are fired by the conviction that human nature is not immutable, that human beings are capable of change. Some of their most brilliant passages are accounts of metamorphoses. Think of 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' which ends with Beast transformed by Beauty – 'When her lips touched the meat-hook claws, they drew back into their pads and she saw how he had always kept his fists clenched but now, painfully, tentatively, at last began to stretch his fingers'; or of the story with which it is twinned, 'The Tiger's Bride', where this time Beauty is transformed by Beast – 'And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.' The heroines of these stories are struggling out of the straitjackets of history and ideology and biological essentialism. 'There's a story in *The Bloody Chamber* called "The Lady

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and the House of Love",' said Carter, 'part of which derives from a movie version that I saw of a story by Dostoyevsky. And in the movie . . . the woman, who is a very passive person and is very much in distress, asks herself the question, "Can a bird sing only the song it knows, or can it learn a new song?" Have we got the capacity at all of singing new songs? It's very important that if we haven't, we might as well stop now.'

The unnamed first-person heroine of *The Bloody Chamber*'s title story appears at first to be a Justine-like sacrificial virgin in a white dress, routinely destined for immolation; however, she changes during the narrative, and finishes by escaping her inheritance – female masochism as a modus vivendi (and morendi) – after a full-scale survey of its temptations. The story is set in a castle on sea-girt Mont St Michel in *fin-de-siècle* France, with more than a nod to Sade's cannibal Minski and his lake-surrounded castle with its torture chamber and captive virgins.

This story is also a version of the Bluebeard fairy tale which appeared in Perrault's collection, where a new bride unlocks the forbidden room in her husband's castle to find the murdered corpses of his former wives. Perrault drew the moral that female curiosity leads to retribution, though in the France of his time, where death in childbirth was commonplace and four-fifths of the resultant widowers remarried, the bloody chamber might surely have been seen as the womb. In Carter's twentieth-century version, the

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menace is located not in the perils of childbirth, but in the darker side of heterosexuality, in sadomasochism and the idea of fatal passion.

As well as all this, *The Bloody Chamber* is a tour de force in its recreation of late nineteenth-century France. Carter claimed the stories in this collection could not have existed the way they did without the example of Isak Dinesen – 'because in a way they are imitation nineteenth-century stories, like hers'; such stories are (she described elsewhere) 'highly structured artefacts with beginnings, middles, and ends and a schematic coherence of imagery'. Certainly this is an accurate description of *The Bloody Chamber*'s title story, which, like each of the highly wrought stories in Isak Dinesen's *Seven Gothic Tales*, reads almost like a novella.

'I wanted a lush *fin-de-siècle* décor for the story,' wrote Carter in a letter to a friend, 'and a style that . . . utilises the heightened diction of the novelette, to half-seduce the reader into this wicked, glamorous, fatal world.' It was, she added, 'a deliberate *homage* to Colette.' Its unnamed seventeen-year-old heroine wears a schoolgirl's serge skirt and flannel blouse, just like the eponymous heroine of Colette's Claudine novels, and there is more than a little of Colette's first husband, that cliché of a roué, Monsieur Willy, in the unnamed husband character.

Nearly all Carter's writing is strikingly full of cultural and intertextual references – you could spend five years on an annotation of *The Bloody Chamber* – but this story is

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extremely so. It is an artfully constructed edifice of signs and allusions and clues. The Marquis, as he is called (suggesting, of course, the Marquis de Sade), is a parodic evil aesthete and voluptuary with his monocle and beard, his gifts of *marrons glacés* and hothouse flowers, and his penchant for quoting the juicier bits of Baudelaire and Sade. On the walls of his castle hang paintings of dead women by Moreau, Ensor and Gauguin; he listens to Wagner (specifically the *Liebestod* – 'love-death' – in *Tristan und Isolde*); he smokes Romeo y Julieta cigars 'fat as a baby's arm'; his library is stocked with graphically described sadistic pornography and his dungeon chamber with mutilated corpses and itemised instruments of torture.

In this heavily perfumed story, the Marquis' smell of spiced leather, *Cuir de Russie*, is referred to more than half a dozen times, reverting at the end 'to the elements of flayed hide and excrement of which it was composed'. Descriptions of scented lilies, 'cobra-headed, funereal', smelling of 'pampered flesh', appear nine times, their fat stems like 'dismembered arms'. The words 'immolation', 'impalement', 'martyr' and 'sacrifice' occur, motif-like, at regular intervals but, abruptly – rather too abruptly for some critics – on the last two pages of this novella-length story the heroine-victim is rescued from decapitation by the sudden arrival of her pistol-toting *maman*, who puts a bullet through the Marquis' head. Her fate is not immutable after all; she discovers that her future looks quite different now that she has

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escaped from the old story and is learning to sing a new song.

There follow three cat tales. The first two are Beauty and the Beast transformations, as described earlier. Carter writes with tremendous relish when describing skin, fur, fabric and snow-covered landscapes. To say she is wonderful at surfaces sounds a little disparaging, as if to say she is superficial. No; she is good at surfaces as the Gawain poet is good at surfaces. 'I do put everything in to be read – read the way allegory was intended to be read,' she declared; but also 'I've tried to keep an entertaining surface . . . so that you don't have to read them as a system of signification if you don't want to.' And it is true that you could ignore the ideas in these stories if you wanted to, and still enjoy the colour, beauty and vivid sensuousness of the language, the densely allusive prose alight with sly verbal jokes, cross-cultural references and dandified wit.

The third cat story, 'Puss-in-Boots', is utterly different from its predecessors. It is 'the first story that I wrote that was supposed to be really funny, out-and-out funny,' said Carter. It is precursor in its ribald cynical tone to her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, and in its turning away from the Gothic mode towards the determinedly benign. In this story, set in the northern Italian town of Bergamo, all the stock types and jokes of the *commedia dell'arte* are used to pantomimic effect, and sex is bawdy and farcical, the young lovers 'at it, hammer and tongs, down on the carpet

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since the bed is occupé' with the corpse of Signor Panteleone the dotard-husband, who has broken his neck falling downstairs after tripping over the cat. The first-person narrator, the cat himself, is a witty raconteur and master of innuendo, proceeding mainly by rhetorical questions and exclamations. His language is a vivid mixture of Latinate elaboration and Anglo-Saxon bluntness: 'I went about my ablutions, tonguing my arsehole with the impeccable hygienic integrity of cats, one leg stuck in the air like a ham bone.'

The next three stories, at the centre of the book, fit less easily into this collection. In each one of them, lovers are lethal, traditional romantic patterns kill, and sex leads to death. 'The Erl-King' is based not on a fairy tale but on a German legend where a malignant goblin haunts the Black Forest and lures wanderers to their doom. Its forest setting is described with extraordinary painterly precision, studded with plant names and descriptions of perspective and light. The accumulation of small, sharply observed details gives it a closely stitched, embroidered quality – quite different from the stark black, white and red of the story which follows it. 'The Snow Child' is only a page long, just a few hundred words, and yet in some ways it is the most shocking piece of all, with its incestuous rape and murderous sexual rivalry. It is based on a variant of the fairy tale Snow White which the Brothers Grimm collected but chose not to publish, in which Snow White's birth is a result of her father's desire (rather than her mother's, as in the more familiar

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version of the story). 'We are dealing with . . . creations of fantasy and wish-fulfilment,' wrote Carter in her 1990 introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, 'which is why the loose symbolic structure of fairy tales leaves them so open to psychoanalytic interpretation, as if they were not formal inventions but informal dreams dreamed in public.' 'The Snow Child' has just such a dream-like atmosphere and symbolism, with its snow hole filled with blood and the weeping count sorrowfully raping his dead daughter before giving his wife a toothed rose that bites.

'The Lady of the House of Love' is different again, being a Transylvanian vampire tale rather than a fairy story. It started life as a radio play, *Vampirella* (first broadcast in 1976, so probably written well before the rest of this collection, which Carter said she wrote mostly during her time in Sheffield, where she was Arts Council Fellow from 1976–8). Carter, an avid reader of Anne Rice's vampire novels, said the idea for the radio play came to her when she was sitting idly trying to work and ran a pencil along the top of a radiator – 'It was just the noise that a long, pointed fingernail might make if it were run along the bars of a birdcage.' She found she had to cut a great deal of discursive matter rewriting the play into a story, so that it 'became leaner, more *about* itself, less about its own resonances, and more consistent in tone.'

Finally, three disparate werewolf tales work and rework the story of Red Riding Hood, borrowing variants from

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different centuries, compulsively circling the figures of the werewolf, the old woman and the young girl. 'The Werewolf' is brutal and short, its tone chillingly laconic. The girl cuts off the wolf's paw, but finds that it is really her grandmother's hand. The old woman is stoned to death as a witch. 'Now the child lived in her grandmother's house; she prospered' reads the last sentence of this story, which is less concerned with sexuality than with survival. 'The Company of Wolves' is longer, less bleak, and far more luxuriant in style. Its first pages are given to a zestful atmospheric essay on the wolf, 'carnivore incarnate', with vivid werewolf anecdotes. Not until over a third of the way into the story does the Red Riding Hood narrative begin.

'The Company of Wolves' eventually grew into a film, after much rewriting and inclusion of additional material. The film-maker Neil Jordan remembered, 'What she had written – the adaptation of the story basically – was too short for a feature film. I suggested to her that we develop it into a Chinese box structure . . . thereby enabling us to integrate other stories and themes of Angela's own.' Carter loved narrative proliferation, forks in the road and red herrings. In her novels, too, she was attracted to the picaresque. The narratives in *The Bloody Chamber*, by way of contrast, have relatively linear plot-lines, thanks to their fairy tale sources.

So, a third of the way in, Red Riding Hood is introduced to 'The Company of Wolves'. At the end of Perrault's familiar version of the story, she gets into bed with the wolf

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and is gobbled up. 'What else can you expect if you talk to strange men, comments Perrault briskly,' wrote Carter in the preface to her translation of his stories, 'Let's not bother our heads with the mysteries of sado-masochistic attraction. We must learn to cope with the world before we can interpret it.' But, of course, interpreting these mysteries is just what Carter does attempt in 'The Company of Wolves', at the end of which Red Riding Hood refuses to feel fear (she 'burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody's meat') or disgust (she will delouse the wolf and eat the lice 'in a savage marriage ceremony'), and ends sleeping 'sweet and sound' in bed with the now 'tender wolf'.

Last of all, 'Wolf-Alice' returns to Gothic territory and the gloomy mansion of a werewolf-duke. The story also borrows from an early medieval Red Riding Hood analogue, *De puella a lupellis seruata*, which tells the story of a feral child suckled by wolves. Again, there is a lice-borne rejection of disgust at animal nature in an evocation of 'the Eden of our first beginnings where Eve and grunting Adam squat on a daisy bank, picking the lice from one another's pelts.' When the werewolf-duke is shot and wounded, Wolf-Alice saves him by tenderly licking the blood and dirt from his face.

This image of blood being licked away returns the reader to the moment in 'The Lady of the House of Love' where the young man kisses better the vampire's wound and so, inadvertently, kills her; it also recalls the ending of 'The Tiger's Bride', where the licking leads to new life and animal

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