



A review of
**Erotic Infidelities:
Love and
Enchantment
in Angela Carter's
*The Bloody Chamber***

Michelle Ryan-Sautour

Kimberly Lau's book-length study of Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* seeks to explore not only the individual stories of Carter's famous collection, but also the poetics of the volume as an aesthetic whole. This is one of the most innovative aspects of the book, as this dimension of Carter's work has often been neglected. Lau's study looks at the many threads that connect Carter's stories in their different attempts to break down, or 'demythologise', what Lau qualifies as 'hegemonic cultural narratives'. She incorporates 'queer' theory into close analyses of Carter's tales, referring, for example, to the work of Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill in *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms* (2012), and demonstrates a preoccupation with the themes of love and eroticism. Indeed, Lau sees the idea of 'love', as it is intertwined with culture, as a dominant theme in both Carter's published writings and her personal journals: 'I draw from Carter's journals to highlight her deep, lifelong investment in retrieving love, desire, and sex from their cultural constraints, their deceptions and veiled appearances' (10). Lau perceives this engagement in *The Bloody Chamber* as being intertwined with enchantment, thus the title *Erotic Infidelities: Love and Enchantment in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber'*.

Lau's critical vocabulary seems primarily inspired by second-wave feminism, and there is a recurrent use of terms such as 'patriarchy', 'phallogocentric', and 'phallogocentric', which are used loosely to describe the forces Carter seeks to overturn in her collection. This vocabulary is sometimes misleading as it fosters the impression that Lau seeks to show precisely *how* Carter undermines patriarchal values. She admits, however, to adhering more closely to Lorna Sage's observation that Carter's fiction does not abide 'interpretation with docility', and she highlights labyrinthine structures as a means by which Carter proposes critical engagement, without proposing any firm answers. For Lau, this complexity contributes to the pleasure of reading *The Bloody Chamber*. There is a clear celebration of the intricacy and elusiveness of Carter's multiple speculative strands. For Lau, it is such structures that ultimately allow Carter to challenge 'the phallogocentrism of singularity'. She criticises the 'reductive readings' of Duncker

(1984) and Lewallen (1988), and sees in Carter's labyrinths not a trap, but rather a means by which the reader can be drawn towards 'the light of a possible exit urging us on' (41).

Lau's analyses therefore navigate the fine line between openness in Carter's narratives, and the deciphering of intertextual references. There is an overall appreciation of the paradoxes at work in *The Bloody Chamber*, and a perception of the way Carter's rewriting practices set up both metafictional reflections and quests to discover the many layers of palimpsests that can be found in fairy tales. The voices of Perrault, Grimm, and other figures from the fairy-tale tradition are invoked by Lau in her investigation of stratified intertexts, as well as those of neighbouring genres such as gothic. Lau's textual studies are sensitively structured, and her interaction with the texts themselves is fluid, weaving a back-and-forth movement between textual study and an exploration of how intertexts interact in Carter's fiction. Her use of psychoanalysis in this process is particularly probing, as in her study of Carter's 'Feline Stories', 'The Erl-King' and 'The Snow Child'.

One reservation about Lau's work concerns the underlying tension between the acknowledgement of the complexity of Carter's fiction, and her treatment of the concept of patriarchy. As Donald Haase observes in his introduction to *Fairy Tales and Feminism*, it is a difficult task to pin down patriarchy in the complex genealogy of the fairy tale. Lau's work does not sufficiently discuss how Carter's fiction navigates this difficulty. Although the intricacy of Carter's engagement with the fairy tale is recognised, the corresponding complexity of the intertextual tradition of the fairy tale warrants, at times, a deeper exploration. Perhaps a stronger dialogue with the work of more recent Angela Carter criticism might have helped address this tension, as the many paradoxes of Carter's engagement with questions of sexuality and identity in the fairy-tale tradition continue to challenge critics.

In the end, Lau's invoking of second-wave feminist terms clouds, perhaps, her real intention: the celebration of the labyrinthine structures in *The Bloody Chamber*. This appreciative tone is very timely, as we are nearing the 25th anniversary of Angela Carter's death, an event that will be honored by a forthcoming exhibition: 'Strange Worlds: The Vision of Angela Carter' to be held 10 December 2016 – 19 March 2017 at the Royal West of England Academy in Bristol. The exhibition will seek to not only recognise the work of Angela Carter, but will also engage with her perception of the arts and the world. It will also present a number of works of art that have been inspired by Carter's artistic production. Lau's work appears as a similar homage to a powerfully singular writer whose recipes of fairy-tale love and eroticism continue to baffle and surprise.

Author: Kimberly J. Lau.

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