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VIOLENCE, MAGIC, AND THE ALICE PLOT  
The Experience of Liminality in 20<sup>th</sup> Century British Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an in-depth study of *The Hearing Trumpet* by Leonora Carrington and “The Bloody Chamber” by Angela Carter. The heroines of both of these stories are marked by a tri-part experience that I call the Alice Plot. This experience is always violent and causes a significant change in each of the characters who fall into the plot’s “rabbit hole,” resulting in rebirth in one form or another. This thesis hopes to portray a new insight into both of these works, along with surrealism, classic folklore, and the themes which concern both genres.

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## Chapter 1

### Violence, Magic, and the Alice Plot:

#### The Experience of Liminality in 20th Century British Fiction

Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* opposes conventional ideas of hell, age, and reality to new-age thoughts about the dissolution of the world as we know it. Just before her rebirth into the newly-transformed world, Marian Leatherby, Carrington's 92-year-old protagonist, finds herself facing her doppelgänger in an underground cavern. When asked where they are, the Other Marian states that, "[We are in] Hell...but Hell is merely a form of terminology. Really this is the Womb of the World whence all things come" (172). The Womb of the World and the afterlife play significant roles both in *The Hearing Trumpet* and in another work that this thesis addresses, "The Bloody Chamber," by the English writer Angela Carter. The Womb of the World is a liminal space between the states of life and death, and one of many in-between spaces explored by both Carrington and Carter. While Carrington was associated with the Surrealist movement in France between the World Wars, Carter was a post-second wave feminist writer whose stories involved scandalous rewritings of fairy tales and other traditional narratives. Although these two writers were members of different generations, they share an approach to plotting the stories of their female protagonists. I call this "The Alice Plot," because the forms are similar to Alice's fall into the rabbit hole and through Wonderland. The Alice Plot contains a three-part ritual consisting of two displacements and one final, violent rebirth. The protagonists must experience and survive these three ordeals before gaining a sense of agency in a new world. All three of the trials take place in liminal spaces characterized by change,

violence, and renewal. In Marian's case these stages are occasioned by the destruction of the current world and the advent of a Second Ice Age.

Both Carrington and Carter's stories are grounded in the fantastic and both share similarities with classic fairy tales. I will therefore incorporate discussions of the traditional tales to which these stories allude, namely "The Snow Queen" in *The Hearing Trumpet* and "Bluebeard," which constitutes the basis for Carter's "The Bloody Chamber." These stories and others like them often serve as cautionary tales that encourage following a path of conservative morality. Ironically, they also lend themselves fittingly to feminist revisions, which challenge conventional wisdom and reveal the patriarchal assumptions that underpin both convention and morality.

While the unnamed Fourth Wife of "The Bloody Chamber" is a childlike figure with a stake in refiguring the Damsel in Distress motif, Marian Leatherby is a "crone...[and] and kind of medium" (*Trumpet* v). Marian, a European transplant to a town in Latin America (most likely Mexico, but we are never told) is stone deaf, mostly toothless, and has a beard. Her son, Galahad, is a tremendous bore, and her daughter-in-law, Muriel, and grandson, Robert, want nothing to do with her. Thinking her to be too old and senile to function in everyday society, Galahad and his family institutionalize Marian in a convent-turned-nursing home called Santa Brigida. Santa Brigida is overseen by a Christian group called the Well of Light Brotherhood, which employs two live-in representatives: Mr. and Mrs. Gambit, a religious couple who run the nursing home and interact with its residents on a daily basis. In a show of his characteristic cowardice—which is quite ironic given his namesake—Galahad tells his mother that he is sending her "on a nice holiday" (23). Although Marian "doubt[s]...very much" (24) that a holiday it will be, the Institution turns out to be a true home for Marian where she discovers her inner self. At Santa Brigida, living quarters are shaped like shoes and igloos, other residents are fascinating and

strange, and there is a mysterious connection between the Institution and the occult, which is discovered upon the occasion of a murder.

The reveal of Santa Brigida's occult connections begins with the poisoning death of Maude Wilkins, a quiet and well liked resident at Santa Brigida. Maude is "timid" and "sensitive;" she is in fact "the only one...that... in any way resembled the Dear Old Lady of Tradition." Maude looks "more like a woman" (137) than the rest of the old ladies. It turns out, however, that she is actually a heterosexual man in disguise.<sup>1</sup> Maude's former partner is also a resident at Santa Brigida: Veronica Adams, the Institution's oldest resident. With this revelation, the idea of feminine perfection is completely deconstructed—if a transvestite is the perfect woman, what does femininity really mean? If the "Dear Old Lady of Tradition" can pass through life with unnoticed male genitalia, what does "womanhood" entail? Maude Wilkins's gender performance points to another of the many blurry spaces explored in the novel: that between female and male, and masculinity and femininity.

As the tale begins to take shape at Santa Brigida, it is discovered that one of the former Abbesses, Doña Rosalinda, was a nun and a supporter of the Goddess, for whom she attempted to find the Holy Grail. The Goddess is a female spirit manifested in a swarm of bumblebees surrounding a giant Queen Bee. The spirit of the Abbess, the Goddess, and the occult activity surrounding Santa Brigida form the basis for Marian's experience in a strange otherworld. Marian's enactment of the Alice Plot comprises three experiences: her sojourn into Santa Brigida; her physical rebirth in the underground chamber via a stabbing and boiling at the hands of her doppelgänger; and finally, the post-apocalyptic ice age that Marian emerges into from the subterranean hall—an ice age complete with female goddesses, swarms of bumblebees, an ark

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<sup>1</sup> Maude's former, male name was Arthur Somers. After years of dealing drugs and living life fast and hard, Arthur thought "a home for senile ladies was a tasteful end to a rather active life" (139). Arthur/Maude's story is told by Marian's friend, Georgina Sykes, who knew Arthur when he owned a curio shop in New York that was actually the front for his *real* business: selling "tiny pink or blue pincushions covered with lace and stuffed with marijuana" (138).

that belongs to Marian's English friend, Marlborough, and an abundance of werewolves. In the face of hostility from the Angry Father God and the Christianity of the Well of Light Brotherhood, Marian and her friends, including Christabel, Veronica Adams, and Carmella, each of whom play a specific part in Marian's renewal, become worshippers of the Goddess. By the end of their adventure, the Angry Father God has been defeated, the newly frozen world has been redeemed by the Goddess, and every line of the world has been redrawn—the earth's poles have shifted, moving the continents around the globe in a completely new shape and form.

After most of the world is destroyed by earthquakes and the Second Ice Age dawns, Marian is inducted into the nursing home's cult-like group of reborn women. Her induction takes place while she is alone in an underground chamber beneath the Institution's tower, which has crumbled from the apocalyptic destruction. After solving three riddles given to her by Christabel, the wise Caribbean woman who resides in the home and is the unofficial leader of the occult group of elderly ladies, Marian descends into the underground chamber. Christabel, contrary to what her name might lead us to expect, leads Marian down to the underworld, rather than up into the heavenly tower. This is the reversed world of *The Hearing Trumpet*: a female Christ figure from Jamaica leads a follower into Hell, under the earth, where she is reborn via female goddesses and a violent, cannibalistic ritual. But the creative violence of this underground world is opposite to the violent "religious" regime under which the ladies found themselves when ruled by the Well of Light Brotherhood. After being stabbed by her counterpart in a cavern and jumping willingly into a vat of broth, Marian emerges feeling "refreshed...and somehow deeply relieved" (176). This relief stems from her new positioning as a powerful female who is beyond fear, social regulations, and the constrictions of the body. Marian completely rejects the corporeal form of the human figure, thereby rejecting its limitations and its unwillingness to adapt. Nothing is permanent, and Marian explores this new impermanence by replacing her body

with one that is more suitable for this new world, in which only the followers of the Goddess have survived.

After her rebirth, which happens in the blink of an eye and begins with a “moment of intense agony,” Marian sees her face in a makeshift obsidian mirror (176). Instead of functioning as a normal mirror, the piece of obsidian shows her face transformed into a hybrid: she is now Marian Leatherby, vitally entwined with the story’s goddess figures: the Abbess, an occultist and ironic saint, and the Queen Bee, a representation of feminine power.<sup>2</sup> In this rebirth, Marian and her friends—all of whom also meet the Abbess and the Queen Bee upon leaving their individual vats of broth—come into their power and successfully de-throne the Angry Father God. The corporeal and violent nature of these transformations—cannibalism and stabbing, among other actions—is the only way that the group can regain control over their lives, the world, and the Grail. This control, ironically, is marked by total chaos and simultaneously by progression and creation.

The idea that the followers of the Goddess are somehow recreated as higher beings is complementary to the nature of Santa Brigida. Marian’s son Galahad’s blasé initial argument against institutionalizing his mother—“We are not in England. Institutions here are not fit for human beings” (15)—unknowingly foresees the real nature of the home. Santa Brigida is fit for *higher* beings like Marian, who is not quite human. Regular humans face challenges in the home and they are eventually rejected: Mr. and Mrs. Gambit are killed, and residents who are not supporters of the goddess are forced out. Only two residents are specifically named as being anti-

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<sup>2</sup> This figure of the Queen Bee is linked in the text to Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale, “The Snow Queen,” which Marian references early in the novel, and which takes place in Marian’s beloved Lapland, in the far north of Scandinavia. The tale’s title character is Queen of the Snowflakes, or “snow bees,” as they are referred to in the story (Andersen 14). Bees are also the messengers of Marian and her companions’ Goddess, and are featured throughout *The Hearing Trumpet*, most notably at the bee pond, where Marian and her friends have their meetings; where the Queen Bee appears; and where the “Goddess reclaim[s] her Holy Cup with an army of bees, wolves, seven old women, a postman, a Chinaman, a poet, an atom-driven Ark, and a werewoman” at the novel’s end (*Trumpet* 198).

Goddess, and both chose to leave Santa Brigida before the disasters struck. They are Natacha, the indigenous woman who speaks in tongues and claims to have a connection to Christ, and Mrs. Van Tocht, Maude's sinister roommate who helps to accidentally poison her. In the place of these four individuals come a family of werewolves, hordes of bees, and giant, winged beasts. To outsiders, the old ladies are viewed as crippled, crazy, or worthless; but once they are inside the Santa Brigida's walls, they come in contact with each other and find themselves anew. Like every other deconstructed stereotype in *The Hearing Trumpet*, the Institution has been ironically refigured from a rest home for aged, senile women into a wonderland ripe with adventure and stimulating new beliefs.

The strength of the Goddess's power and the presence of an occult world comprise a direct antithesis to the intensely Christian values that the Gambits, Natacha, and Mrs. Van Tocht attempt to instill in the home's residents. Mr. and Mrs. Gambit's religious fervor and devotion to The Movements, a type of Christian gymnastics which they have built into the residents' daily programming, makes Marian very nervous and uncomfortable. Carrington's parody of traditional religious systems and their secret societies is detailed in the Gambits' descriptions of the Movements, as told to Marian:

The Movements were given to us in the past by Somebody in the Tradition. They have many meanings I am not at liberty to disclose to you yet as you have only just arrived, but I can say one of their outer meanings is the harmonious evolution of the Whole organism to different Special rhythms. (43)

The vagueness of these statements is of a piece with Carrington's surrealist portrayal of the nonsensical "traditions" that undergird modern society. Who gave the Gambits the Movements? When were they passed down? If there are "outer meanings," are there inner meanings, too? As dissent builds and time passes, the Goddess's followers gain power and strength in numbers; eventually, the Movements are replaced by the Old Ladies' "weird dance" (148) in celebration of

Hecate and the Queen Bee goddess.<sup>3</sup> When apocalyptic earthquakes crush the Gambits and Natacha and Mrs. Van Tocht are driven from the institution by the Marian and Carmella-led hunger strike, the novel's male-dominated Christianity is rejected and the Goddess renews her seat of power and regains her Holy Grail.

Leonora Carrington's surrealism resists categorization and any sort of sustained interpretive reading. Nevertheless, many of its implicit critiques can be applied more broadly to works by other female writers, regardless of when or where they were writing. *The Hearing Trumpet* and its themes of reimagined life, death, and rebirth, feminist figures, and gender and sexuality figure prominently in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," a revision of a French folktale about Bluebeard and his many wives.

Like *The Hearing Trumpet*, "The Bloody Chamber" critiques and deconstructs patriarchal ideology and forges new ideas about the modern woman. A collector and re-imaginer of fairy tales, Carter rewrote Charles Perrault's 17<sup>th</sup>-century "Bluebeard" and published it along with many other retold tales. "The Bloody Chamber" is sexual, violent, and incendiary, while the original, like many folk tales and proverbs, was largely a moral tale meant to dissuade young women from being curious and disobeying their husbands. The original tale, as reprinted in Maria Tatar's *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*, centers around a rich and mysterious gentleman who owned "grand houses, both in town and in the country...gold and silver [dinner services], fine tapestries...[and] coaches covered with gold...[but he had] the misfortune of having a blue beard" (Tatar 147). Bluebeard, as he is referred to in the story, notices two beautiful sisters who live with their mother in town; he proposes to one of them, leaving it up to their mother to decide which he will marry. Neither girl can "bring herself to marry a man with a blue beard" (148), so

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<sup>3</sup> Hecate is the Greek goddess of the crossroads (three-way crossroads, in particular, which she is said to haunt), and is often depicted as having three heads (a dog, a snake, and a horse). She is thought to be the goddess of witchcraft or evil, but she saved Persephone (Queen of the Underworld and daughter of Demeter) from the Underworld.

they pass the engagement between each other until Bluebeard throws their family a large party. By the end of the festivities, the younger sister “began to think that the beard of the lord of the manor was not so blue after all” (148), so she accepts his hand and they are married. It is widely known that Bluebeard has already married “several women...[and] no one knows what had become of the previous wives” (148). Months pass, until Bluebeard leaves to “take care of some urgent business...for at least six weeks” (149). He gives his young wife the keys to every room in the house and tells her to do whatever she pleases, but forbids her from entering one room in particular, threatening that “if [she] open[s] it even a crack, nothing will protect [her] from [his] wrath” (150).

Upon her husband’s departure, the young wife throws a large party for her friends; until that point, they had “not dared to visit...because they were so frightened of [Bluebeard’s] beard” (150). While entertaining her guests, the young wife becomes so anxious and distracted by the thought of the forbidden room that she leaves her friends and, “tormented by curiosity” (151), goes to find the room. Once inside, she stumbles upon “pools of blood [that] reflected the corpses of...all the women Bluebeard had married” (151). In a state of terror, the young wife drops the room’s key in a pool of blood, which leaves upon the metal an indelible stain. Bluebeard returns home early the day after the party, discovers his wife’s disobedience, and tells her that she must die. She begs Bluebeard to give her a quarter of an hour to say her goodbyes, and when he acquiesces, she calls for her sister, Anne, and asks her to look for her brothers, who “promised that they were coming to visit” (154). After Anne mistakenly identifies dust from a flock of sheep as dust from their brothers’ galloping horses, she sees the two men and sends them a signal to hurry. As Bluebeard is lifting his saber to behead his young wife, her brothers—who are now revealed to be a “dragoon and a musketeer” (156)—enter through the gate and “[run] their swords through [Bluebeard] and leave him for dead” (156). The young wife, who is “almost as lifeless as her husband,” (156) embraces her brothers and soon discovered that she has

inherited Bluebeard's fortunes, since he left no heirs. She uses all of the money to marry Anne to a "young gentleman who was deeply in love with her" and marry herself to "a worthy man who helped her banish the memory of the terrible days she had spent with Bluebeard" (156).

Although the wife is the narrator and moral compass of the tale, it is Bluebeard who is the focus of attention. In critic and writer Lydia Millet's words, Bluebeard (and Carter's Marquis of "The Bloody Chamber") is "an overt articulator of the private fantasy of egomania" (243). Bluebeard's actions are twisted and reprehensible—readers are unlikely to sympathize with him—but his story is fascinating because of its pure hedonism. He "takes [him]self for a god [and] he is omnipotent because he accepts no social compromise; he acts solely in the pursuit of his own satisfaction" (Millet 243). This fearless refusal of superego's constraints certainly offers a site for readerly projections: in Millet's words,

In transgressing convention of law, we instate ourselves in history; we recognize that our power to affect the world is greatest when we take action against the constrictions placed on our personal liberty by the preestablished order, by the old rules—by, in fact, any rules. (244-5)

Millet's insights may be applied as well to *The Hearing Trumpet*. Marian and the Fourth Wife, as we shall see, both reject the status quo and walk their own paths. Regardless of their journeys' dangers and the social constrictions that threaten to bind them, both of these women survive three ordeals and go on to thrive outside of the conventions of "normality" that once bound them.

The original tale of Bluebeard found in Tatar's *Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* ends with two morals:

## MORAL

Curiosity, with its many charms,  
 Can stir up serious regrets;  
 Thousands of examples turn up every day.  
 Women give in but it's a fleeting pleasure;  
 Once satisfied, it ceases to be.  
 And always it proves very costly. (156)

## SECOND MORAL

Take the time to stop and think,  
 And to ponder this grim little story.  
 You surely know that this tale  
 Took place many years ago.  
 No longer are husbands so terrible,  
 Demanding the impossible,  
 Acting unhappy and jealous.  
 They toe the line with their wives.  
 And no matter what color their beards,  
 It's not hard to tell who is in charge. (157)

It is no surprise that Carter found these morals, and the overall tale of Bluebeard, to be at once so fascinating and misogynistic. The story of Bluebeard “conforms to [a] child’s worst fears about sex” (Bettelheim 306), thereby achieving its goals of instilling fear of sex and physical intimacy in younger generations, “purifying” them to remain chaste. In her essay “Rewriting Bluebeard,” Tatar comments on Carter’s decision to rename the story in her retelling, modifying it to focus on the real problem: violence toward women which the original tale—and the two final morals—seem to accept as necessary and unremarkable tactics for controlling women:

With one stroke, Carter demolishes the myth that ‘Bluebeard’ hinges on the wife’s disobedience in staining the key entrusted to her by her husband or that the story turns on the wife’s curiosity about taboo matters. Instead she enunciates in the title exactly what is at stake in this Bluebeard tale: a bloody chamber that houses the corpses of a husband who has murdered one wife after another. (115)

The change in title shifts the story’s focus from a wife’s disobedience to the complicated idea of marriage and the marital violence that “The Bloody Chamber” calls into question. The Bloody Chamber is more than just a bloody room in a hellish house: it represents the bleeding of the virgin in the marriage chamber, and the extension of that chamber into the unquestionable and unyielding authority of a sadistic marriage. Carter elaborates the cold and bloody fact of violence toward women in the tale, a fact that remains disguised or justified in patriarchal culture, precisely by means of such long-standing cultural narratives. Carter aims to “demystify, debunk, and deconstruct...sacred cultural texts...[which] are implicated in perpetuating stereotypes...[and

through doing so] initiat[e] social change [by] means [of] breaking the magic hold of these stories” (*Rewriting* 115), and she succeeds at doing just that.

In his essay “Angela Carter and the Literary Märchen,” critic Stephen Benson comments that Carter critiques the “process of institutionalization” (43). She believes that folk tales and their figuring into past and modern culture have institutionalized patriarchal ideals, normalizing them even if they exist in contradiction with other modern values.. Carter’s retelling of “Bluebeard” in “The Bloody Chamber,”

Acts as a symbolist version of the battle of the sexes, a decadent version... which brings the sadomasochistic subtext of the original to the foreground by giving its murderous episodes the lush refinement of [Audrey] Beardsley’s illustrations of *Salome*. (Benson quoting Kaiser, 44)

The narrator/protagonist of “The Bloody Chamber” is masochistic, sexual, and impetuous—three adjectives never used to describe a classical fairytale heroine. Carter further inverts the idea of the Damsel in Distress by not giving the girl a name—the Fourth Wife, as I shall call her, is a passive victim, like her counterpart from the original tale. Her behavior is confusing—like a child, she does not seem to know what she wants. She speaks of how she hates her husband, but she longs for him when he leaves. When he tries to hurt her, or even kill her, she does not run away or attempt to fight. The Fourth Wife’s namelessness and facelessness makes her an every-woman. Carter reframes the archetype of a Damsel in Distress by maintaining her passive victimhood, but changing her motives: if the original damsel in distress gets married in order to have children and live the kind of moral, classical life which the tales aim to instill, the Fourth Wife from “The Bloody Chamber” gets married to slake the curiosity that the original tale and its morals so harshly dissuade.

As the story opens, the Fourth Wife shares with her readers her decision to leave her mother and her home in Paris to marry a much older Marquis from the French coast. When her mother asks the Fourth Wife if she is “sure [she] love[s] him,” the Fourth Wife responds, “I’m

sure I want to marry him” (“Bloody” 111). Her marriage to the Marquis/Bluebeard is not based on love, but instead on a strangely passive and masochistic fascination with her waxen-faced, vampiric husband. After their marriage ceremony, the Fourth Wife—wearing her wedding present from her husband, a thick choker of blood red rubies—travel to the Marquis’s home on the coast. She quickly comes to feel disgust for the Marquis, but despite these feelings, she never makes a solid decision to leave or to hate her husband. She is the story’s narrator *and* it’s most passive character.

Shortly after they arrive at the castle, the Marquis informs his new wife that he will be traveling to the United States for business for six weeks. Leaving her with the many keys to the doors and passages of the castle, he forbids her from using one of the keys to enter one of his personal chambers. Overtaken with curiosity after a day of wandering about the castle alone, the Fourth Wife disobeys the Marquis and enters the forbidden chamber to find the bodies of his three previous wives, all of whom met a violent and tragic end at the Marquis’s hands. Traumatized and frightened, the Fourth Wife decides to leave the castle—but alas, the Marquis has come home early and dismissed the staff, leaving the Fourth Wife with no support but that of her new friend (and lover, as she eventually refers to him), the castle’s young, blind piano tuner named Jean Yves. Jean Yves represents the second of the two significant decisions that the Fourth Wife makes in her story (both of which concern men): first, she decides to marry the Marquis, and then she insists upon the hiring of a male piano tuner, Jean Yves, so she can play the instrument in the castle.

After discovering that the Fourth wife has disobeyed him, the Marquis announces that he will behead her while she is wearing her ruby choker, which he also made her wear during sex as a physical reminder of his monetary and physical dominance over her life and livelihood. The Marquis cuts off the Fourth Wife’s dress, leaving her naked except for her gems. As the Marquis is about to swing the heavy sword that will sever his wife’s head, the Fourth Wife’s intrepid

mother, who had an adventurous childhood in Indo-China, arrives and shoots the Marquis. Upon his death, the Fourth Wife inherits all the Marquis's riches, and she and her mother, along with Jean Yves, take a home in the country. They open a music school and all is well.

The Fourth Wife and Marian have many differences—age, demeanor, and experience being just a few—but the Fourth Wife, like her elderly counterpart, also experiences three stages of the Alice Plot in order that she might be reborn into a new, more empowered version of herself. Her arrival at the Marquis's home marks her descent into the lonely castle's world of a sexually violent limbo; her discovery of hellish Bloody Chamber and the sheer terror that awakens her from her passive slumber follows her arrival; and lastly, her near-execution, to be performed as a kind of punishment that she thinks she deserves (“I only did what he knew I would,” she says [140]). Her mother/savior represents an archetypal character in Carter's work, and it is she who prevents the final annihilation.

In the original Perrault story, the Fourth Wife's brothers save their sister's life. Beyond that change and Carter's addition of the blind piano tuner, the basic storylines of the original “Bluebeard” and “The Bloody Chamber” are the same. Carter's version, though, is much longer and includes more details that counteract the original purpose of “Bluebeard” as a short, moral tale. In Tatar's words, Carter “unsettles a narrative tradition, showing its tragic consequences as well as its perverse attractiveness” (119). But Tatar adds that the story's conclusion, which reinstalls an image of placid matrimonial happiness, has the effect of a “flat” anticlimax, in comparison with the Bloody Chamber's “gothic horrors,” which “stubbornly remain the real source of narrative pleasure” (118). Life after the Marquis's death is more peaceful, but life with the Marquis—and all its horrors—is far more interesting. The reader, like the Fourth Wife, occupies an ambiguous space between feeling good about the Fourth Wife's happy ending, but being intrigued by the violent world of the Marquis's castle and bloody chamber.

In the same year she published “The Bloody Chamber,” Angela Carter also published *The Sadeian Woman*, a slim work dissecting the connections between pornographic culture and the Marquis de Sade, an 18<sup>th</sup> century French aristocrat known for his erotic, often violent sexual stories, pornographic tales, and problematic championing of “rights of free sexuality for women” (*Sadeian* 36). The Marquis de Sade is an important figure in the study of violence and fantasy, as he “invented women who suffered...[and] also...women who caused suffering” (*Sadeian* 36). In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter insists upon a connection between pornography, pornographers, and violence, arguing that

Pornography, like satire, has an inbuilt reactionary mechanism. Its effect depends on the notion that the nature of man is invariable and cannot be modified by changes in his social institutions...The disruptiveness of sexuality, its inability to be contained, the overflowing of the cauldron of id—these are basic invariables of sexuality, opines the pornographer, and in itself pornography is a satire on human pretensions. (16)

This satire is apparent in “The Bloody Chamber” through the treatment of Bluebeard and the Fourth Wife. He is a rich Marquis in a beautiful castle, but the nice objects with which he surrounds himself bear little relation to evil in his soul. Similarly, the Fourth Wife is a virginal child, but she still craves sex—even sex that she does not enjoy with a man she claims to loathe. In Carter’s revision, the Marquis’s behavior toward the Fourth Wife is inherently pornographic in nature, and their relationship is a “satire on human pretensions” (16). The Marquis and his new wife, according to convention, should be flawless; but the Marquis’s evil ways are unforgivable and the Fourth Wife’s sexual tendencies confront the idea of what is “normal” for a young girl to feel.

Critic and writer Margaret Atwood has said that the entirety of the collection *The Bloody Chamber* can be understood “as an exploration of the narrative possibilities of de Sade’s lamb-and-tiger dichotomy” (Benson 37). Atwood’s views on the story and themes of Bluebeard are interesting in light of the fact that she also re-imagined the story of Bluebeard in the title story of

her 1998 collection *Bluebeard's Egg*. Atwood's version of the tale is not as true to the original as "The Bloody Chamber," but it features similar themes, imagining Bluebeard/the Marquis and the young wife/Fourth Wife as they might appear in the modern day. Atwood's Bluebeard, personified as a middle-aged doctor named Ed, is thought to be slow and stupid by his wife, but is actually a sexual predator who uses his wife's low opinions of his intelligence and fidelity to terrify her and have affairs with other women. Similarly, Lydia Millet imagines a modern-day Bluebeard as a brutal suburbanite,

[Lying] glumly in his recliner, remote control drooping from his right hand, swilling beers, drowning in lassitude, advancing into sure senility...all the while dreaming of a secret locked closet where the decapitated beauties of a golden moment of conquest and barbarity lie sleeping as a testament to his virility. (231)

Atwood and Millet's Bluebeards are contextually different from Perrault and Carter's Bluebeards, but their modern rewriting speaks to a changing time; with the dawn of women's rights and a shift in social consciousness, violent displays of masculine virility and power are rejected as archaic.

In her narration of her first sexual encounter with the Marquis, the Fourth Wife compares herself to "a child with...sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots [and] her gloves" and the Marquis to an "old, manacled lecher who examine[s] her, limb by limb" (119). The Fourth Wife tells the reader that the encounter was the "most pornographic of all confrontations," comparing the Marquis to a "purchaser unwrap[ing] his bargain" (119), as if marrying her and seeing her naked body was some kind of twisted, sexual game in which the prize was a treat covered in wrapping paper. Carter writes that the type of pornography in which the newlyweds are taking part,

Reinforced the false universals of sexual archetypes because it denies, or doesn't have time for, or can't find room for, or, because of its underlying ideology, ignores, the social context in which sexual activity takes place...Therefore, pornography must always have the false simplicity of fable; the abstraction of the flesh involves the mystification of the flesh. (*Sadeian* 16)

The Marquis is acting as Carter says—in reimagining his world within his castle, he is able to commit dastardly sexual acts against women because the context is removed to a private world. When the watchful eye of society is no longer present, the Marquis can rewrite morality to suit his own desires. Within the castle, the wives find themselves in a secluded game of cat and mouse that they have no chance of winning.

Allusions to opera and theater run through the entirety of “The Bloody Chamber.” The Fourth Wife speaks frequently of going to the theater with the Marquis during their courtship. In particular, she reminisces on a performance of *Tristan and Isolde* that they attended on the eve of their wedding. *Tristan and Isolde* is the archetypal love story, but this understanding is ironized by the Marquis and the Fourth Wife’s viewing, to which she wears her death choker of blood red rubies. No love is shared between the couple; in fact, their very presence at the opera challenges the universalism of its theme. This ironized spectacle of love moves from the theater to the Marquis’s matrimonial room full of mirrors. During their first physical encounter, the Fourth Wife is overwhelmed by the gilded reflections that seem to surround her on all sides. Their recreation of sex as a spectacle, not as an intimate act between two people, refigures sex just as their viewing of *Tristan and Isolde* refigures love.

Indeed, in their inversion of the traditional love story, the Marquis and the Fourth Wife resemble the sado-masochistic couple described by theorist and philosopher Slavoj Žižek in “Courtly Love, Or Woman As Thing.”<sup>4</sup> Žižek describes masochism as a relationship characterized as “essentially theatrical, the violence endlessly repeated in an uninterrupted gesture...[in the] high theatre of masochistic performance” (148). Although the violence is real and not feigned as it would be in a theatrical performance, it “functions as a component of a scene, as part of a theatrical performance” (Žižek 153). The sado-masochistic couple’s behavior,

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<sup>4</sup> The Lady as an impassive, untouchable ideal; the Knight as a hero

as shown through the Fourth Wife (who seems to crave the discomfort of being with the Marquis) and the Marquis (who finds violence to be sexually satisfying) takes on a heightened quality in light of a story to which Žižek refers later in the essay, in which,

[A murderer] approached his victim... he wanted to kill him, yet he was simultaneously waiting for a sign of fear, of resistance, from the victim, a sign which would prevent the murderer from accomplishing the act. The victim, however, did not give any such sign, which would have subjectized the murderer, acknowledging him as a (divided) subject... [This] attitude of non-resistance, of indifferent provocation, objectivized the murderer, reducing him to an instrument of the Other's will, and so left him with no choice. In short, what compelled the murderer to act was the experience of having his desire to kill the victim coincide with the victim's death drive. (154)

The death drives of the Marquis's wives are illuminated by this theoretical observation. The women's prospects at survival are bleak, and Carter's reimagining of their characters raises some pointed questions: do the three former wives of the Marquis really want to be saved, or is their "death drive" part of the reason that the Marquis killed them? Further, is masochism a shared trait in all of the Marquis's wives? There is evidence for this supposition in three of the four wives throughout the work: the Fourth Wife's longing for her husband (125), a man whom she hates and feels a need to "cl[ing] to...as though only the one who had inflicted the pain could [give] comfort" (121); Romanian Countess Carmilla's "joke in the worst possible taste" (129) about her own death; and the Opera Singer whose "dead lips smil[ed]" (131) on her embalming table within the Bloody Chamber. With the exception of the Fourth Wife, who escapes her fate through the intervention of her mother, the three other wives end up trapped in the hell of the Bloody Chamber.

Carter makes many allusions to the idea of the afterlife throughout the story, hinging largely on the idea that the Marquis's Bloody Chamber is both limbo and hell, where victims wait to be saved or killed. The castle is a place of enchantment, where half-hidden worldly ideologies of sex and gender eventually become explicit in the Bloody Chamber. Carter's Bloody Chamber

can be seen as a space opposite to Carrington's Womb of the World. Where the Bloody Chamber is a site of death and violence, the Womb of the World is a foundation of creation and life.

However, both of these spaces exist in the bounds between life and death. The Marquis's home itself seems to straddle two worlds; the Fourth Wife describes it as

[A] castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea...evanescent departures of the ocean, cut off by the tide from the land for half a day...that castle, at home neither on the land nor on the water, a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid who perches on her rock and waits...that lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place! (117).

When the Fourth Wife enters the castle, she falls into the rabbit hole where she will either die at the hands of her husband in the Bloody Chamber, or from which she will return alive and stronger from her bloody ordeal. This reawakening begins with a distinctly pornographic, violent episode of sexual relations. Bluebeard does not have sex with the Fourth Wife during their initial sexual encounter—instead, he undresses her, touches her, and treats her like a piece of meat that he may or may not buy from the butcher's shop. Afterward, the Fourth Wife claims that she felt a “strange, impersonal arousal...[and] a repugnance...for his white, heavy flesh” (119). According to patriarchal norms, this arousal is not what the Fourth Wife *should* feel; in fact, her apparent enjoyment of the ordeal further suggests her masochistic tendencies. Patricia Duncker claims that, “Carter envisages women's sensuality simply as a response to male arousal. She has no conception of women's sexuality as autonomous desire” (Benson 38), but I disagree with Duncker—the Fourth Wife and other Carterian women are not void of sexual desire; instead, they are fully in power of their sexuality. Carter places their sexuality and desire in controversial situations to show that a woman's sexuality can be as blind or as powerful as a man's sexuality.

The Fourth Wife walks a line between passivity and activity. She allows herself to be controlled by her husband when in his presence (acquiescing to his wishes in bed, not fighting his attempt to murder her, etc.); but furthermore, she embodies passivity—a passivity that stems from

her masochistic tendencies. When Bluebeard tells her that, “it would have been the first time in all [his] married lives [he] could have shown [bloody sheets after a wedding night],” the Fourth Wife is shocked. Only then does she realize that it was her youth, innocence, and childlike manner that captivated his attention. In this innocence, she is passive—no man has touched her, she has not tried to be touched, and she has remained “pure” until her wedding night. But with this realization, the Fourth Wife becomes active. When outside of the Marquis’s sight, she is independent, allowing herself to do, say, and behave as she pleases. During the Marquis’s short sojourn away from the castle, the Fourth Wife disobeys his one command: “Promise me you’ll use all the keys on the ring expect [the] last little one...[to] a dull little room...[where I can go to] imagin[e] [myself] wifeless” (124-5). Despite his self-portrayal as an experienced and happy husband, Bluebeard is so often wifeless because he brutally murders his wives then preserves their bodies in a bloody, sexually deviant fantasy room.

In her denial of the classical, abused virgin of Sade’s stories, Carter rewrites not only the fairy tale, but also the fairy tale heroine.<sup>5</sup> This new heroine does not need to completely reject sex in order to avoid a fate of death and disfavor. Instead, she can have both sexual freedom and a love life, given that she is willing to take on a strong, active role. The Fourth Wife’s mother, who rides to the Marquis’s castle on a horse and rescues her daughter, is part of a plot device for what Carter calls “moral pornography.” She defines this at some length in *The Sadeian Woman*:

A moral pornographer would be an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual license for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. [His or her] business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a person would not be the enemy of women...because [he or she] might begin to penetrate to the heart of the

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<sup>5</sup> Justine, one of Sade’s most famous protagonists, is raped, beaten, and mistreated by almost everyone she meets, but she maintains her piety and goodness throughout her lifetime of abuse. Thus, Sade parodies the (from his perspective) foolishness of those traits.

contempt for women that distorts our culture even as [he or she] entered the realms of true obscenity. (19-20)

This “contempt for women” was a central concern of Carter’s work until her premature death, and the form of her critique deployed moral pornography.

The pornographic themes of “The Bloody Chamber” go hand in hand with the sexuality that is forced upon the Fourth Wife via the male gaze. The power of the male gaze is illustrated by Bluebeard’s relationship with his young wife, and his prowling, sexually powerful stare is pointedly compared to the Fourth Wife’s lover, the piano tuner who is blind and, therefore, gaze-less. If sight bestows power on the viewer, the piano tuner’s inability to see means he is safe for the Fourth Wife and will (hopefully) allow her to live her own life, independent of his influence. In “The Bloody Chamber,” with the power of sight comes the power to manipulate, assess, and abuse. Fittingly, sight is also a key component to pornography, further drawing the parallel between Bluebeard’s marriages and his literal objectification of his wives. Even the title of the tale—“The Bloody Chamber”—brings forth a twisted image of female genitalia during times of menstruation. Fitting to their roles in the relationship, the Marquis would have controlled not only the Fourth Wife’s sexual practices, but also her ability to become or to not become pregnant. But it is important to note that it is precisely his complete power over her that gives her the ability to hand herself over to death and then rise up, fulfilled by the feminist empowerment of her mother, whose independent, swashbuckling rescue stands as an allegory to Carter’s role as author.

The Fourth Wife’s mother is Carter’s representation of the Mother Hero figure. In a characterization that further challenges typical gender roles, the Mother is a classical hero: prone to violence, wielding a weapon, and fighting for her love, her daughter. In the original tale, the three people involved in saving the young wife from execution are two brothers and her sister, Anne. Anne’s role as the female is much more traditional and passive. She does not actively fight to save her sister; instead, she calls for her brothers, and although she is distressed by her

sister's peril, she shows no sign that she is thinking of attempting to save her. As one would expect from a traditional fairy tale, it is the men, both of whom are soldiers, who save their sister and slay Bluebeard.

In Carter's version, there are no brothers and no sisters: the Fourth Wife's family consists of herself and her mother, who had an "adventurous girlhood in Indo-China [as] the daughter of a rich tea planter" (111). How the Mother met the Fourth Wife's father, a "gallant soldier" (111) for whose love she "gladly, scandalously, defiantly beggared herself" (111) and ended up an impoverished widow in Paris is never told, but it would surely be a good story. The Mother may have lost the money from her childhood, but she has not lost her spark of defiance and bravery. As the Mother rides up the pathway, gun drawn and hair flying in the wind, the Fourth Wife notes that

On her eighteenth birthday, my mother disposed of a man-eating tiger that had ravaged the villages on the hills north of Hanoi. Now, without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head. (142)

The man-eating tiger of Hanoi draws a direct correlation to the woman-killing Marquis, whose rapacious nature is reminiscent of a predatory animal. The Mother is a natural warrior who was born to slay beasts, human or otherwise.

The Mother's willingness to commit acts of murder and violence is contradictory to classic ideas of femininity and motherhood, but Carter consistently maintains the Mother's maternal voice. After slaying the Marquis, the Fourth Wife asks her mother how she knew to save her, since the Fourth Wife never told her Mother of any danger. She praises her mother's "maternal telepathy" (143) as the Mother informs the Fourth Wife that she came to the castle immediately after speaking to her daughter on the phone. During that conversation, the Fourth Wife bursts into tears upon hearing her mother's voice, and instead of confessing her fears, she claims that "No, nothing is the matter...I have gold bath taps" (127). The Fourth Wife often

defers her genuine fear of the Marquis by speaking of his extraordinary wealth, but the Mother is not fooled by her daughter's poor smoke screen: "Who ever cried because of gold bath taps?" is the Mother's explanation for the suspicions that sent her straight from the telephone to the train station. Forever practical and smart, the Fourth Wife's "eagle-featured, indomitable mother...[who] outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates...[and] nursed a village through a visitation of the plague...all before she was [eighteen]" (111) is the most important character of "The Bloody Chamber" because her actions represent a kind of independence that Carter's folktales seek to relay to their readers. The Mother's fearless alacrity stands in opposition to her childish and passive daughter. Their personalities complement each other, filling in the new versions of female character that the story offers.

The Mother's shift from daring adventurer to impoverished widow seems to have placed her in a liminal social space, and while her past and her present are completely opposite, she is able to regain her power through her daughter's third fall. The Mother's Paris apartment is described as a "white, enclosed quietude" and their table is "meager" (111), but she is a survivor, and in her role as savior she proves that there can be no gentle power; control must be taken forcefully and violently. She make her exciting past a part of her present when she uses her stereotypically female powers (in this case, a woman's intuition) to realize that her daughter is in need of assistance.

The period of the Fourth Wife's journey to empowerment and freedom that takes place in Bluebeard's bedchambers is the sexual antithesis of any experience that Marian has at Santa Brigida. Overt sexuality is not commonly addressed in *The Hearing Trumpet*—in fact, Carrington seems to go out of her way to remove sexuality completely from Marian's character. Carrington does not de-sex all her characters, though: Maude is a man dressing as a woman; the Abbess, Doña Rosalinda, has a sexual encounter via an aphrodisiac found in the tomb of Mary Magdalen with a homosexual priest, the Bishop of Treves les Freles; and Anubeth,

Marlborough's sister, has werewolf children with her wolf husband, King Pontefact.<sup>6</sup> None of these sexual relationships could be classified as "normal"; rather, like most things in *The Hearing Trumpet*, they exist in the neutral, free space where Marian falls in order to come again to consciousness. Although she is classified as an old woman, Marian has "a short grey beard which conventional people would find repulsive...[but she] find[s] it rather gallant" (*Trumpet* 5). Marian is not the only bearded woman of *The Hearing Trumpet*: in Doña Rosalinda's tale, the bishop-scribe writes that Doña Rosalinda wore a beard and masculine clothes in order to disguise herself as man in order to enter the tomb containing the Holy Grail. The scribe also tells that, "For some thousands of years the [Holy Grail] was safely in the keeping of the subterranean Goddess, who was known to be bearded and a hermaphrodite. Her name was Barbarus...[and she was] worshipped as the life giver or womb" (115).

The doppelgänger that Marian meets in the "Womb of the World" (172) is presumably bearded, since she looks just like Marian. When Marian is reborn through her violent stabbing and boiling, she finds herself suddenly "standing outside the pot stirring the soup in which [she] could see [her] own meat, feet up, boiling away merrily" (176). Marian then consumes the soup—complete with her "own meat"—and moves on, wondering "which of us I was" (176). When she emerges from the cavern, she notes that "ages seemed to have passed since *somebody* first hobbled down the steps, and now [she] was climbing to the upperworld as spry as a mountain goat...[and] could see through the dark like a cat" (177). Marian's rebirth leaves her physically changed, but her personality and memories seem to be intact. Like Marian, the Fourth Wife is also changed by her final ordeal, but in a much less positive way. Instead of being reborn and refreshed into a new world, the Fourth Wife is left with a "heart-shaped stain...transferred [from the bloody chamber's key] to the space between the eyebrows" ("Bloody" 139). These physical

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<sup>6</sup> Marlborough is an old friend of Marian's who appears at the end of the novel. He brings his ark, which is propelled by atoms, and his sister, Anubeth, who is half-wolf, half-woman.

changes are marks of the transformational spaces into which the two women—and many of the companions—fall when they experience a life-changing event. From the stabbing and boiling, Marian enables her companions to find the Holy Grail; from the heart-shaped scar, the Fourth Wife is able to conquer the Marquis (via her mother) and find happiness.

Marian may be reborn an unearthly goddess in the Womb of the World, but before her rebirth she was already considered to be inhuman by many of her peers. As Susan Rubin

Suleiman remarks:

The people Marian lives with do not consider her quite human: ‘The Maid, Rosina, is an Indian woman with a morose character and seems generally opposed to the rest of humanity. I do not believe that she puts me in a human category so our relationship is not disagreeable’ (4). Her grandson calls her ‘the monster of Glamis,’ ‘a drooling sack of decomposing flesh’ (15); to her daughter-in-law, she is a senile old woman; to her son, she appears merely as an ‘inanimate creature.’<sup>7</sup> (169)

Marian is full of contradictions. She is deaf, but her eyesight is perfect; she is 92-years old, but her mind is sharp as a tack and her wit is quick. She hates living with her family, including her aptly named son, Galahad. In light of Marian’s search for the Holy Grail, her son’s name is particularly striking, since “Galahad, in the Arthurian legends, is the knight pure in heart destined to succeed in the quest for the Holy Grail. In Carrington’s rewriting, it is not Galahad but his mother who delivers the grail” (Suleiman 172). In reversing the gender of the Grail Finder and putting more stock in the maternal figure, Carrington inverts the idea of classical heroism, an idea that is already challenged by the “Lewiscarrollesque” (Suleiman 171) novel and its geriatric heroines.

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<sup>7</sup> The Monster of Glamis was said to have lived in Glamis Castle in Scotland. Never confirmed nor denied to have existed, it is said that the Monster was a horribly deformed male heir of the Bowes-Lyon family who was locked away for his entire life in one of the castle’s many rooms. It is “commonly suggested that he was the first-born of the 11th Earl, or the heir of that Earl’s son, Lord Glamis” (Dash, par. 8). When compared to Marian, it is obvious that Robert either had no idea what the Monster of Glamis actually was, or he so feared his unearthly grandmother that he chose to think of her as another kind of “human” altogether.

Thus far, I have attempted to unravel the complicated, neutral Alice Plot through which the Fourth Wife and Marian Leatherby pass in their respective novels. As a final passage out of the misogynistic worlds in which they live, both Marian and the Fourth Wife have to endure three trials, the last of which is brutally violent. For the Fourth Wife, the final trial is a branding, near-execution, and the revelation of the Mother Hero figure, her mother. Marian leaves the outside world afflicted by ageism and escapes into Santa Brigida, where she encounters the rigors of male-dominated Catholicism. Marian is more active in her role of renewal than the Fourth Wife, but she is also helped greatly by another Mother Hero, the Abbess.

*The Hearing Trumpet's* Abbess, Doña Rosalinda, is a student of the occult, follower of the Goddess, and a powerful Catholic nun, which is to say that she embodies a sacrilegious contradiction. The Abbess' story takes up roughly 40 pages of *The Hearing Trumpet*, a hefty amount given that the entire novel is only 200 pages long. The Catholic/Christian commentary, of which her story is a part, could easily fill an entire book—Carrington, who was educated at and expelled from many convent schools, certainly had a complicated relationship with her family's faith system. Her heroine, Marian, also finds faults with the Catholic Church, and she draws a specific, interesting connection between herself and the Church's only female warrior saint, Saint Joan of Arc:

I can't help feeling some deep affinity with Joan of Arc and I often feel I am being burned at the stake just because I am different from everybody else because I have always refused to give up that wonderful strange power I have inside me and it becomes manifested when I am in harmonious communication with some other inspired being like myself. (33)

Marian says this while in conversation with her fellow Santa Brigida denizen, Anna Wertz. Anna has already been reborn via the Goddess in the underground cave, and Marian recognizes this occult ability that they share.

The occult abilities that the older ladies discover upon being institutionalized all connect to the history of the Abbess. The Abbess' story, like the entirety of *The Hearing Trumpet*, defies convention. Described as a "wonderful and terrible woman" (93), Doña Rosalinda is devoted to the Goddess throughout the entirety of her time as a nun. While tending to the former Abbess on her deathbed, Doña Rosalinda "obtained the title of Abbess even before the [former Abbess] has expired" (97). The narrator of the Abbess's manuscript, a priest and the convent's confessor before he is burned at the stake on the order of the Pope, is named Dominico Eucaristo Deseos. His narration is not kind to the Abbess—he obviously dislikes her, describing her lavish tastes, questionable behavior, and occasional evil actions, like blinding other nuns with needles when they peek through her chamber's keyhole (99). The Abbess's friend, the homosexual Bishop of Treve les Freles, brings her a powerful aphrodisiac, an ointment "from the East" (99) that is said to have been "excavated in Nineveh and found beside the mummy of Mary Magdalen herself" (99). The Abbess becomes quite attached to the magical ointment, so when she received a note from His Royal Highness Prince Theutus Zosimos saying that he is coming to the convent to get the ointment, which he claims was stolen from him by "bandits...[lead by] the Bishop" (102-3), she takes matters into her own hands. The Abbess intercepts the Prince, kidnaps him, and fails at healing him when he falls ill. The prince dies, and many months pass before she receives word from the Bishop that he has discovered the location of the Holy Grail.

The Abbess disappears for two years to Western Ireland, and eventually infiltrates the Knights Templar (keepers of the Grail) dressed as a bearded, Spanish nobleman named Don Rosalendo de Tartaro. She retrieves the Grail—much to the distress of the Knights Templar—and returns to Santa Brigida "swathed in a long, dark cloak...[and] carr[ying] an enormous belly, at least twice the size of an ordinary pregnancy" (125). While in labor, the Abbess swells to the size of a "small whale...and turn[s] coal black" (126). She explodes, leaving only a "morsel of black skin" behind on the bed, and having given birth to a luminous, winged boy "no bigger than

a barn owl” (126). The story ends with the Abbess’ explosion and the birth of the winged boy, who bears an uncanny resemblance to Sephira, the winged creature trapped in the Institution’s tower whom Marian frees upon solving Christabel’s riddles (to which I will return shortly).

In Helen Byatt’s introduction to *The Hearing Trumpet*, she writes that

*The Hearing Trumpet* contains two religious words. Externally we see the supposedly religious community at Lighthouse Hall in Santa Brigida. It is a community over-interested in manipulating its inmates. Inlaid inside this—stories within a story—are the ancient texts Marian is given to read, with their commentary on Doña Rosalinda, the Abbess of the Convent of Santa Barbara de Tartarus....[T]he Abbess, Doña Rosalinda, is pre-Christian—she plays with unbaptized children...she makes herbal remedies...[and] she gallops fearlessly through the night on a quest for ultimate knowledge. Like many Carrington heroines she has the hybrid energy of a woman who is nearly animal. (xiii)

The idea of the Abbess as a pre-Christian figure is an example of the delicious irony of which Carrington is a master; in fact, *The Hearing Trumpet* is, arguably, a novel about the intersection of Christianity and paganism, and about what would happen if the two were forced to coexist on a grand scale. Carrington implies that the Catholic Church is so committed to never “losing” its struggle for religious dominion that the world would end if it ever did, in fact, lose. The power of a new system of beliefs would be so startling, so completely foreign and new, that the world would need to wipe its slate clean and start afresh.

The merits of the Goddess and paganism are fleshed out quite fully in *The Hearing Trumpet*. Women are free to live, work, and exist as they please; the world returns to a more organic, freer place; and desires—like Marian’s dream to visit Lapland, which is mentioned throughout the book—is realized in the story’s closing page. Marian finds that, “According to Carmella’s planisphere we are now somewhere in the region where Lapland used to be” (199), since the earth’s axis has shifted during the apocalypse. Under paganism and the female power, the continents literally move, so as to realize the dreams of one of the Goddess’s children. *The Hearing Trumpet* is not a book about pagan beliefs—it is a story of the collapse of regulated

systems of power and the challenges that they face. *The Hearing Trumpet* shows the breaking down of the known world, Carrington's views on the contradictions entailed in living life under "normal" codes of conduct or moral hierarchies, and the potential for magic and greatness that comes when what is right, wrong, or normal is examined and reevaluated.

The Goddess and the paganism of the ladies of Santa Brigida are shown to be the natural allies of females, but *The Hearing Trumpet's* relationship between Christianity and femininity is a more complicated one. When studied through the Abbess' story, it is clear that the Church has given Doña Rosalinda a chance for education and power, both of which lead to a life of adventure. Ironically, though, all of this adventure and excitement was a byproduct of the Abbess's complete disregard for the Church and its rules, and her devotion to the Goddess and certain female aspects of Christianity—namely the story of Mary Magdalen.<sup>8</sup> Carrington took many liberties in using Mary Magdalen, who is remembered in traditional Catholicism as being a sinner-turned-apostle and one of the only well-known, female companions of Jesus Christ. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, Mary Magdalen's mummy—which is never mentioned in scripture—is accompanied in its tomb by all of her "personal riches" (Magdalen is said to have died a hermit in a cave, not a wealthy woman) and many flasks of a powerful aphrodisiac referred to as "Musc de Madelaine" (100). In the letter from the Bishop in which this information is exposed, he also describes his "transports of delight...when [he] learnt that Magdalen had been a high initiate of the mysteries of the Goddess but had been executed for the sacrilege of selling certain secrets of her cult to Jesus of Nazareth" (95). In this new refiguring of Jesus as a backdoor buyer of secrets, the roots of Christianity are questioned alongside the modern manifestations of it.

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<sup>8</sup> A devoted group of French Catholics called the Cult of Mary Magdalen persisted throughout 13<sup>th</sup> century France, perpetuated by the claim that Magdalen's tomb resided within a church located in a small, southern French town called Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. When Magdalen died after years of preaching and traveling in France, her followers hid her relics. Even today, Magdalen is considered to be an ideal representation of repentance and holiness (Basilica, par. 1).

Another hero figure of *The Hearing Trumpet* can be found in Marian's good friend and neighbor, Carmella. One of the most humorous characters in the story, Carmella visits Marian many times and upon each visit, has concocted a new plan by which to break Marian out of the Institution, communicate with her secretly, or help her overtake her "captors." Carmella's main saving action takes place near the novel's end, when she arrives shortly after the dawn of the Second Ice Age "swathed in a sheepskin coat," escorted in a lilac-colored limousine, and the new owner of a "mine of uranium" which she dug up in her backyard while attempting to dig a tunnel to the Institution through which Marian could escape (154-6). As the end of the tale draws nearer, Carmella continues to leave and return to Santa Brigida with information, news, and provisions for the apocalypse.<sup>9</sup> In addition to providing physical nourishment for Marian and her other new friends, Carmella also unknowingly helps Marian to solve two of Christabel's three riddles, which Marian must answer before she can enter the tower and be reborn. The answer to the first is "the Earth" (156) and the second is "the Pole Star" (166). "Sephira" is the answer to the third riddle, which Marian realizes independently after the creature, named Sephira, bursts forth from the tower during the earthquake that immediately precedes the Second Ice Age.<sup>10</sup> Even though she has no direct hand in solving that riddle, Carmella is present when Marian sees

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<sup>9</sup> These include mushroom spore, beans, lentils, dried peas and rice, grass seed, biscuits, tinned fish, miscellaneous sweet wines, sugar, chocolates, marshmallows, tinned cat food, face cream, tea, coffee, medicine chest, flour, violet capsules, tinned soup, sack of wheat, work basket, pickaxe, tobacco, cocoa, and nail polish (165)

<sup>10</sup> First riddle: "*I wear a white cap on my head and my tail/All seasons my caps I wear without fail/Around my fat belly my girdle is hot/I move round and round tho' legs I have not*" (151)  
 Second riddle: "*I never move as you whirl round and round/I sit and I watch you with never a sound/If you tilt far enough caps become belt/New caps are made and old caps will melt/Though legless your whirling will then appear lame/I seem to move but I don't, what's my name?*" (151)  
 Third riddle: "*One of you turns while the other will sit/And though the caps change they always will fit/Once in the life of a mountain or rock/I fly like a bird though bird I am not/When you get new caps my prison will break/The watchers who slept will now be awake/And over their land I will fly once again/Who is my mother? What is my name?*" (151-2)

Sephira and completes the task. Overall, Carmella is something of a surrealist angel: arriving when needed with a quick wit and everything one might need to be saved.

The space in which all of these women exist is directly contingent upon the society in which they live. Liminality and femininity for both Carter and Carrington are byproducts of the male-dominated, violent world. When a female rejects the idea of living within these bounds, she is forced into a neutral space, from which she must escape. In *The Hearing Trumpet*, this escape is impossible without the complete rejection of the human body in place of a better, less volatile form. Carrington continues this theme of questioning the human body and experience in her short story “As They Rode Along the Edge.” The protagonist of this story is named Virginia Fur, and she is a far more dramatic version of Doña Rosalinda of *The Hearing Trumpet*. She is nearly animal, inhabiting a space that is completely wild and breaks down the idea of what it means to be human, animal, or vegetable.

“As They Rode Along the Edge” portrays a segment of the life of Virginia Fur, a creature who may not be altogether human with “a mane of hair yards long and enormous hands with dirty nails” (3). Along with her many cats, she rides a wheel along the treetops of the mountain she calls home until one day she is approached by Saint Alexander.<sup>11</sup> He wears a monk’s habit and wishes her to join the Church, because he “hope[s] to win [her] soul...[which she] sold a long time ago for a kilo of truffles...to Ignose the Boar” (4). After visiting the church and promptly leaving—but not until she has managed to steal many “holy plates” (6)—Virginia takes Ignose the Boar as her lover.<sup>12</sup> At Saint Alexander’s command, Ignose is hunted and killed. Virginia gives birth to “seven little boars; [she] keep[s] the one most like Ignose, and boil[s] the others for herself and the cats, as a funeral feast” (10). The animals and plants of the forest vow to kill not

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<sup>11</sup> The Catholic Church recognizes many different saints called Saint Alexander, including multiple Popes.

<sup>12</sup> When Virginia Fur comes to his church, she makes note of the many statues of Saint Alexander, the few, small statues of Jesus, and the various instruments of self-mutilation which are strewn about the church’s lawn (5).

only Saint Alexander, but Saint Francis as well.<sup>13</sup> Two women who are on their way to dine at the Saint Alexander's church—which houses a convent, as well—buy the corpse of Ignose on the road and bring it to the church to offer as a gift to Saint Alexander and the nuns who live there. Just as the group of humans is ready to feast, “the door crashed open and all the beasts of the forest [and a fast-moving Virginia atop her wheel] entered crying, ‘Kill him, kill him’” (15). One would assume that they managed to do just that.

Virginia Fur occupies a natural limbo of the forest. It would be easy to define her as “liminal,” but that would be erroneous and unfair to her character; unlike her counterparts in *The Hearing Trumpet* and in “The Bloody Chamber,” Virginia does not exist in ambiguity because she is a totally separate being who is marked completely by progression and creation. She exists independent of society, but to her, society means nothing—so, by default, existing outside of it means nothing, either. Virginia, her cats, her boar, and her wheel represent the intensely productive, fantastic surrealism that Carrington created and called her own. Virginia Fur's singularity stands in contrast to the neutral space and three-part experiences of Marian Leatherby and the Fourth Wife, suggesting what it means to reject society and what it means to exist within it.

As they emerge from their spaces of transformation, the female characters of Carrington and Carter embody the Woman in Process. These processes, as I have attempted to demonstrate, are always violent and initially coded by male expectations. The forces that abruptly produce self-evaluation jolts them out of a static existence in the world. The Fourth Wife makes a conscious choice to marry the Marquis. Marian does not enter Santa Brigida out of her own free will, but her arrival there starts the cycle of rebirth that becomes such an important theme. In a broader sense, Marian, the Fourth Wife, Marian's companions, and the Fourth Wife's Mother are

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<sup>13</sup> In the Catholic Church, Saint Francis of Assisi is recognized as the patron saint of animals and the environment.

all searching for the freedom that both comes from and enables them to break the chains of patriarchal law by which they are ruled.

In *The Hearing Trumpet*, this freedom expedition is exemplified in Marian's lifelong dream of visiting Lapland. In Marian's mind, her sojourn to the Latin American country where *The Hearing Trumpet* is set is nothing more than a short vacation that turned into something more:

I never could understand this country and now I am beginning to be afraid that I never will get back to the north, never get away from here...People think fifty years is a long time to visit any country...[but] to me fifty years is no more than a space of time stuck somewhere I don't really want to be at all. For the last forty-five years I have been trying to get away. Somehow I never could, there must be a binding spell which keeps me in this country. Sometime I shall find out why I stayed so long here, while I am happily contemplating reindeer and snow, cherry trees, meadows, and the song of the thrush. (4-5)

The "binding spell" that kept her locked in Latin America was a society that forced to her stay put and then forced her to be institutionalized. Marian cannot go to Lapland until the earth has been destroyed by the Second Ice Age. Her search for Lapland and the freedom that it promises cannot be completed until all the rules have been rewritten; the world had to end and the power had to be shifted to a different group of people who were, in this case, a group of old ladies, a goddess, and some werewolves.

In order for happiness to come to the women of *The Hearing Trumpet* and "The Bloody Chamber," total chaos and destruction must first take place. The only totally free creatures are those who function under no societal strictures, like Virginia Fur. Mother Heroes from *The Hearing Trumpet* and "The Bloody Chamber" signify the use of feminine power to invoke change for the better, but this change is always a result of a power shift that is violent and often coupled with pain, sacrifice, and death. Through their engagement with the Alice Plot via the guidance of their Mother Hero figure, Marian and the Fourth Wife exemplify a new kind of heroine: an old lady who sacrifices her body to become part of a world-historical transformation, and a young

woman who challenges the system of classical moral tales to rewrite the conditions of love and marriage.

## Appendix A

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## VITA

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Penn State Schreyer Honors College Academic Excellence Scholarship, 2008-2012

Modular Building Institute Foundation Scholarship, 2011

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#### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES**

McNeil Nutritionals, a Johnson & Johnson Company, National Sales Intern, June-August 2011

- Sales, Marketing, and Sales Strategy experience on McNeil brands, specifically Benecol and Splenda products
- Designed and presented re-launch plan to sales leadership among McNeil Nutritionals
- Extensive experience in teamwork and organization

United States House of Representatives, Office of Congressman Robert Brady (PA-01), Intern, May-August 2010

- Extensive research experience on global issues, namely environmental, immigration, and terrorism problems
- Official Capitol Hill Tour Guide
- Authorized to write official letters for the Congressman, which were mailed to constituents

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Studied at la Universidad de Sevilla, Seville, Spain, January-May 2011

- Spring semester study abroad experience with the Center for International Educational Experiences (CIEE)
- Exclusively Spanish coursework in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish Art, Spanish Gastronomy, Language & Grammar, Flamenco Music & Dance, and Spanish Cinema
- Lived with a non-English speaking host family
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Honors London Theater Study, London, England, December-January 2009-2010

- Study abroad program through the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State
- Intensive writing and discussion-based coursework
- Cultural and theatrical exposure to British and international styles of theater
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Schreyer Honors College New Student Orientation (SHO TIME), 2009-2011

- Student Coordinator & Make-Up Orientation Coordinator (2011)
- Special Events & Parent Programming Coordinator (2010)
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Penn State Competitive Ballroom Dance, 2011-2012