

# Ekphrasis in Angle Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

Liu Sailian

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China  
azhi\_weiye@163.com

**Abstract:** In Angela Carter's collection of re-written fairy tales, *The Bloody Chamber* stands as the opening narrative, offering rich ground for exploration through the lens of ekphrasis. This paper delineates three types of women images: the being gazed woman, the imprisoned woman, and the new women through the analysis of three categories of ekphrasis: pornographic art collections, spatial scenes, and the characters' images. Through extensive employment of ekphrasis, Carter vividly reproduces what the heroin sees through what she says, sharply satirizing the stereotypical images of traditional women in classic fairy tales, subverting the binary opposition where men are the subject and women the object, and deconstructing the moral constraints imposed on women in fairy tales.

**Keywords:** *The Bloody Chamber*; Ekphrasis; Images of Women

## 1. Introduction

Angela Carter is a renowned British writer of the 20th century literary scene, known for her distinctive style characterized by magic realism, surrealism, and feminism. As Joannou commented that "*Carter is usually associated with fantasy, the Gothic, the bizarre, the fairy tale, the burlesque, the mythical, magical and metaphorical, all of which transport us away from historical actuality into a primarily symbolic literary space.*"<sup>[1]</sup> In 1979, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, a collection of re-written fairy-tales of Perrault and Madame Leprince de Beaumont was published. Makinen believes that "*Carter saw fairy-tales as the oral literature of the poor, a literature that spanned Europe and one that encoded the dark and mysterious elements of the psyche. She argued that even though the seventeenth and eighteenth-century aristocratic writers 'fixed' these tales by writing them down and added moral tags to adapt them into parables of instruction for children, they could not erase the darkness and the magic of the content.*"<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, through re-writing these traditional fairy-tales, Carter added her unique insights on women, love and desire, power and other feminist spirits of her age. Carter states, "*I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode.*"<sup>[3]</sup> Obviously, Carter's new wine, with its strong pressure, destroys the superficial purity and beauty of fairy tales, exposing the patriarchal oppression of women behind.

*The Bloody Chamber* is the first chapter of this collection, a parody of fairy tale *Bluebeard*. The *Bluebeard* tells the story of a young woman who discovers that her newly-wed husband is a violent who keeps the dead bodies of his previous wives in a secret room. With the help of her two brothers, she escapes the peril and finally marries a "worthy man".<sup>[4]</sup> As Sivyer notes that "*the two central themes of the tale are thus caution in marriage and the dangerous consequences of a too strong desire for knowledge.*"<sup>[5]</sup> It is undoubtedly that the latter theme functions as a discipline which educates women that ignorance is a virtue as quest for knowledge and curiosity about it only leads to disaster. However, Carter's version is quite a different one. Instead of a zero focalization, the story uses internal focalization, allowing the heroine to tell her own story, giving her a voice and ironically revealing the ending at the beginning. Secondly, the heroine is saved not by her two brothers but by her knightly brave mother; lastly, the heroine does not find a worthy man but marries a blind piano tuner. In Carter's writing, the traditional female role of chastity, fragility, and being the male-dominated object is subverted into a role of desire, bravery, challenging and overthrowing male dominance.

From the perspective of feminist criticism, scholars hold opposite opinions towards Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. Arikan states that by waging the weapon of languages, Carter "*not only deconstructs the sexist meanings in the earlier fairy tales but presents alternative stories to undermine the oppression of females.*"<sup>[6]</sup> Özüm further argues that Carter reveals "*the limitation of confining the motif of malevolent masculinity to a singular reference point by navigating the ambiguous territory where the content and structure of fairy tales intersect.*"<sup>[7]</sup> However, some scholars criticize her for getting locked into the conservative sexism. Patricia Duncker argues that Carter's re-writings "*merely explains, amplifies and*

*re-produces rather than alters the original, deeply, rigidly sexist psychology of the erotic.*"<sup>[8]</sup> Lewallen thinks that Carter "significantly overlooks the use of irony".<sup>[9]</sup> They argue that what Carter really constructs may become a reproduction of male pornography. Despite the existence of divergent viewpoints, Carter's fundamental intention as a feminist remains unchanged. The so-called "erotic" description is one aspect of the employment of ekphrasis by Carter, aiming not to reproduce gender discrimination but to reproduce what the heroine sees through her own words, so as to make the reader an audience witnessing a thrilling drama of murder and counter-murder, thereby more realistically and clearly exposing the bloody reality.

Ekphrasis is defined as a "*descriptive speech which brings the subject shown before the eyes with visual vividness*"<sup>[10]</sup> in the Oxford Classical Dictionary. In Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it says that "*one of the earliest and most commonly cited forms of ekphrasis occurs in The Iliad, when Homer provides a long and discursive account of the elaborate scenes embossed on the shield of Achilles.*"<sup>[11]</sup> James A. W. Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as "*the verbal representation of visual representation*"<sup>[12]</sup> has a wide-ranging influence and almost become a consensus in academia. Based on this definition, ekphrasis can mean the verbal representation of art works in a narrow sense, or it also includes "*a vivid presentation of any scene, whether natural or invented*"<sup>[13]</sup> in a broad sense. From these definitions, the core of ekphrasis lies to the representation (through words) of the representation (through eyes).

In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter deftly employs ekphrasis, mainly including three aspects: visual art works, i.e. pornographic art collections, castle spatial scenes, and character images. Through analyzing these three types of ekphrasis, this article compares the stereotypical female images in traditional fairy tales with the newly shaped female images in Carter's writing, revealing the path Carter takes to deconstruct the patriarchal codes that morally discipline women in fairy tales.

## 2. The Pornographic Artworks and Enslaved Women

In *The Bloody Chamber*, the heroine's husband once showed her his collection of erotic paintings, all of which without exception depict the same theme: women subjected to sexual abuse. The women in these paintings are naked, shy, pitiful, and at the mercy of men, reflecting the distorted imagination of women from a male sadistic perspective. Through ekphrasis, Carter reproduces the content of these paintings through the heroine's words, not only reflecting the heroine's current predicament but also foreshadowing the direction of the subsequent plot. This narrative technique allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between the scenes in the paintings and the story's development, further revealing the dark theme of the story and the threats faced by the heroine.

### 2.1. Rops' Etching

During their first night, their images in the mirror remind her of the etching by Rops: "*The child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her gloves, sheidling her face with her hand as though her face were the last repository of her modesty; and the old, monocle lecher who examined her, limb by limb.*"<sup>[14]</sup> This artwork is very much the representation of what is happening between the heroin and her husband. She is merely a naive 17-year-old girl, born into poverty and of low status, while he is a wealthy, powerful Marquis, who has been married three times. This vast disparity in class and status renders the young girl a vulnerable, objectified entity. As Carter vividly depicts: "*He stripped me, gourmand that he was, as if he were stripping the leaves off an artichoke*"<sup>[14]</sup> and "*at once he closed my legs like a book*",<sup>[14]</sup> the heroin is objectified to a meal to be eaten or a book to be read.

### 2.2. "Reproof of Curiosity"

When she opens the doors of the bookcase, she sees another pornographic artwork: *the girl with tears hanging on her cheeks like stuck pearls, her cunt a split fig below the great globes of her buttocks on which the knotted tails of the cat were about to descend, while a man in a black mask fingered with his free hand his prick, that curved upwards like the scimitar he held.*"<sup>[14]</sup> Like Rops' etching, woman is also naked, enduring the sexual abuse of man in this painting. It is interesting that this painting is entitled "Reproof of Curiosity". Prior to encountering this painting, the heroine engages in an exploration of her husband's library, where she discovers three books titled *The Initiation*, *The Key of Mysteries*, and *The Secret of Pandora's Box*. The convergence of these three books, coupled with the caption of the painting and the latter steel engraving named *Immolation of wives of the Sultan*, foreshadows ensuing events within the narrative. *The Initiation*, ironically symbolizing the heroine's sexual education. *The Key of*

*Mysteries* alludes to the instrument unlocking the torture chamber where the Marquis executed his previous wives. The heroine's curiosity regarding the forbidden chamber prompts her to the key of mysteries, thereby unveiling the secrets within, akin to the Pandora's Box. The picture aptly titled "Reproof of Curiosity", serves as a cautionary tale, signifying the consequences of the protagonist's curiosity in breaching the forbidden chamber. And lastly, she suffers the "punishment of curiosity" with her fate mirroring that of the sacrificed Sultan's wives.

These pornographic artworks depict women being fully deprived from agency and turned into a passive victim of the man's aggressions. In these paintings, the women are typically depicted as naked, fragile, powerless, and submissive, while the men are clothed, assuming a dominant role. They gaze upon and inflict harm upon the female body with impunity, treating women as mere objects for their gratification, fulfilling their desires for conquest and sexual sadism. These artworks serve as reflections of the heroine and her husband, also serving to foreshadow the narrative and hint at the fate of the heroine. In these pornographic paintings, women lose control over their bodies, becoming objects of man's sexual desire, subjected to exploitation.

### 3. Spatial Scenes and the Imprisoned Woman

The second category of ekphrasis are the spatial scenes of Castle and of its rooms. During high tide, the castle is isolated from the outside world, like an island floating on the sea, trapping the heroine inside and implying her helpless isolation. The internal spaces of the castle, represented by the bridal chamber and the terrifying secret room, all exude an atmosphere of death. The heroine reduces into a caged bird once she enters into the castle where she is under her husband's constant surveillance. Through ekphrasis, Carter recreates the layout and furnishings of the spatial scenes, revealing that the seemingly fairy-tale-like castle is actually fraught with danger. This is one of the ways Carter decodes the hidden darkness in fairy tales.

#### 3.1. The Castel

Despite its fairy-tale-like appearance, the castle harbors deadly danger. Immersed in the joy of her new marriage, the heroine, excitedly heading to the castle, fantasizes about her imminent class ascension and becoming a high-society lady. She can't help but exclaim when she first sees the castle: "*Ah! his castle. The faery solitude of the place; with its turrets of misty blue, its courtyard, its spiked gate, his castle that lay on the very bosom of the sea with seabirds mewing about its attics... a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves, with the melancholy of a mermaid. ... That lovely, sad, sea-siren of a place!*"<sup>[14]</sup> In the eyes of the heroine, the castle is filled with fairy-tale charm, but her description reveals a gothic and eerie atmosphere. First, the castle belongs to her husband, symbolizing his power and status, and it is his domain. Once the heroine enters, she is under the control of the him. Secondly, the castle is isolated from the outside world half of the time, standing alone in the sea. This unique geographic location makes the castle an island, difficult for outsiders to reach and for those inside to escape, implying the heroine's helpless isolation. Lastly, the castle, like a melancholy mermaid waiting for her lover or as beautiful as a siren, indicates that the castle is an embodiment of her husband who lures naive young girls and kills them. The castle becomes the site where the hero exercises his power of control and kill, disguising itself as a fairy tale to attract women, ultimately imprisoning them and turning them into corpses.

#### 3.2. The Bedroom

If the castle is still shrouded in a layer of fairy-tale allure, the bedroom has already clearly revealed the implications of surveillance and imprisonment. In their bedroom "*there lay the grand, hereditary matrimonial bed, itself the size, almost, of my little room at home, with the gargoyles carved on its surfaces of ebony, vermilion lacquer, gold leaf; and its white gauze curtains, billowing in the sea breeze. Our bed. And surrounded by many mirrors! Mirrors on all the walls, in stately frames of contorted gold, that reflected more white lilies than I'd ever seen in my life before.*"<sup>[14]</sup> The wedding bed in the bedroom is extremely luxurious, highlighting the marquis's noble status and immense wealth. Additionally, the most striking furnishings in the bedroom are the numerous mirrors and white lilies. The mirrors in the bedroom have a dual significance: first, the twelve mirrors allow the hero to observe the heroine from different angles, making it impossible for her to escape the male gaze; second, the mirrors symbolize the hero's surveillance of the heroine. Marquis here is depicted as an omniscient God who sees and knows each activity of his wife. Just as the heroine declares: "*the eye of God-his eye-was upon me.*"<sup>[14]</sup> These

mirrors turn the bedroom even the whole castle into a transparent prison where the heroine is permanently under the monitor of her husband.

Furthermore, the multitude of lilies also carry a dual symbolism, representing both death and the Marquis. In Western tradition, lilies are a symbol of death, often placed in funeral or in front of graves. In the story, a large number of lilies are placed in the newlywed couple's bedroom, turning the bedroom into "*an embalming parlour*",<sup>[14]</sup> suggesting that the so-called wedding is actually a funeral prepared for the young girl, and the castle is her tomb. Moreover, to the heroine, the white lilies resemble her husband's "*white, heavy flesh*".<sup>[14]</sup> Through the imagery of lilies, the heroine equates the Marquis with death. The depiction of the bedroom scene indicates that this is the place where the Marquis surveils and imprisons his wife, further exposing the perilous atmosphere of death.

### 3.3. "The Bloody Chamber"

Within the castle, the most mysterious, dangerous, and terrifying place is undoubtedly the bloody chamber where Marquis' previous three wives meet their death. Driven by curiosity, the heroine defies her husband's will and enters into the secret room where she witnesses the brutal instruments of torture and the horrifying remains of the Marquis's previous wives. Here "*the walls of this stark torture chamber consist of naked rock, which gleams as if sweating with fright. At the four corners of the room stand funerary urns, possibly of great antiquity, perhaps Etruscan, atop three-legged ebony stands, emitting a sacerdotal reek from the bowls of incense left burning by the Marquis. Implements of torture such as the wheel, rack, and Iron Maiden are present....*"<sup>[14]</sup> This room is ancient and filled with a mysterious aura, resembling the scene of a religious sacrificial ceremony. However, it is merely a "*dull little room*", "*a private study, a hideaway, a 'den'*"<sup>[14]</sup> for the Marquis. As for the wives, the opera singer is strangled to death, whose throat still leaves the "*blue imprint of his strangler's fingers*".<sup>[14]</sup> The "*evening star*" leaves with only a skull suspended there, "*so utterly denuded, now of flesh*".<sup>[14]</sup> The latest dead is "*pierced, not by one but by a hundred spikes*"<sup>[14]</sup>, full of blood. Here, the wives are cruelly slain as sacrifices, with Marquis playing the dual role of the officiant performing the sacrificial rites and the deity enjoying the offerings. The bloody chamber becomes the embodiment of terrifying danger, where women utterly lose control over their lives.

Through ekphrasis, Carter vividly reproduces the appearance of the castle and its interior spaces, representing a mysterious, horrifying and death-laden place of confinement. Within the domain where Marquis holds absolute power, the heroin is akin to a lamb awaiting slaughter. Therefore, Carter unveil the true nature of so-called fairy-tale castle—a "*Castle of Murder*".<sup>[14]</sup>

## 4. The Images of Characters and the New Women

If the first two types of ekphrasis conform to the patriarchal imagination of women, then Carter's portrayal of the female protagonist, her mother, and the eventual breakdown of the male protagonist's masculinity undoubtedly constitutes a resistance to traditional stereotypical female representations. Whether in the content and implications of erotic paintings or in the setting and portrayal of castle spaces, Carter creates an atmosphere where the heroin seems doomed to a tragic fate, as if she must pay the price of her new knowledge. However, from the outset of the narrative, readers understand that the storyteller is the female protagonist herself, and the revelation that she has not been killed is made clear from the beginning, rendering Carter's parody highly ironic. The heroin does not suffer punishment for her curiosity about knowledge; instead, she meets a favorable outcome. This is Carter's most potent retaliation against the patriarchal society's constraints on women.

### 4.1. The Desired and Rebel Heroine

Traditionally, heroines in fairy tales are often depicted as pure and graceful, with the term "desire" frequently associated with seductive and bewitching femme fatales. In *The Bloody Chamber*, however, the female protagonist, though a naive 17-year-old girl, differs from traditional fairy-tale heroines. She is no longer a passive object of desire but exhibits subjective longing for sexuality. Interrupted on her wedding night by her husband's work, she shows herself to be "*disgruntled*". In her boredom, she resorts to playing the piano. However, she can't bear the piano going slightly out of tune. She feels disappointed and complains "*what should I do now, how shall I pass the long, sea-lit hours until my husband beds me.*"<sup>[14]</sup> Unlike other traditional heroines in the fair-tale, the female protagonist craves for sex. Here, Carter justifies women's desire for sex just as normal as men. Besides, the heroine is no longer submissive to

men. To satisfy her curiosity, she denies the dressing code of upper-class lady and refuses to eat dinner out of her own willing. The boldest rebellion is her entering into the bloody chamber where she obtains new knowledge, thus, prematurely thwarting his plans and gaining a slight advantage for her mother's rescue.

#### 4.2. *Knightly Brave Mother*

Mothers in fairy tales are typically portrayed as loving, centering their lives around the family, led by their husbands, and dedicated to their children. However, in *The Bloody Chamber*, the heroin's mother, a widow who raised her daughter independently from an early age, is depicted as a legendary figure of bravery akin to a knight. In the final scenes, Carter shapes the image of the mother as a valiant knight, with a wild appearance: "her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver...."<sup>[14]</sup> This portrayal starkly contrasts with the previous depiction of the mother as gentle and tender, presenting her as formidable as a "furious justice". By deliberately replacing the brothers who rescue the heroin with her mother, Carter satirizes the role of women as only capable of being wives and mothers, thereby crafting a towering figure described as "eagle-featured, indomitable mother"<sup>[14]</sup> who "had outfaced a junkful of Chinses pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand"<sup>[14]</sup> when she was as old as the heroin.

#### 4.3. *The Marquis Reduced to An Object*

Through ekphrasis, Carter creates two female characters diverging from traditional fairy tales, but merely undermining stereotypical female representations isn't enough. By depicting the transformation of the Marquis's image before and after in the eyes of the heroin, Carter completely subverts the clear-cut distinction between male and female roles, demonstrating the total breakdown of what is considered masculine. Initially, in the eyes of the heroin, her husband is described as "a big man"<sup>[14]</sup> with "the dark, leonine shape of his head"<sup>[14]</sup> and "opulent male scent of leather and spices"<sup>[14]</sup>. He is wealthy, powerful, and experienced, like a god watching over his prey, controlling their lives and deaths. However, when confronted with the heroine's mother in their final standoff, "the Marquis stood transfixed, utterly dazed, at a loss."<sup>[14]</sup> appearing like Bluebeard in glass cases at fairs. At this moment, the roles between the Marquis and the female protagonist are reversed. The man who once controlled puppets like a king is "open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, powerlessly watching "his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them",<sup>[14]</sup> turning into the blue-beard in the glass box, observed and manipulated by others. Here, Carter completes her subversion of the traditional binary opposition between women as objects and men as subjects, dismantling the myth of masculine qualities.

The portrayal of the heroine and Marquis also constitutes a verbal representation of visual presentation. Initially, the heroine can only serve as an object of the Marquis's gaze and observation; her image is constructed by him. However, the transformation in the description of Marquis's character before and after reveals how he evolves from a lion in control to a toy manipulated by others. With the courageous intervention of another woman, her mother, the heroine also undergoes a transition from object to subject. The construction of the female protagonist's image extends beyond the naked, fragile, and submissive girl depicted in pornographic paintings, as well as beyond the canary watched through the mirror. It also encompasses the image seen through the eyes of the Marquis.

### 5. Conclusion

When discussing the creation of the 1979 fairy tale collection *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, Angela Carter wrote "I'm in the demythologizing business. I'm interested in myths—though I'm much more interested in folklore—just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree".<sup>[3]</sup> As a feminist writer, Angela Carter used her fantastical imagination, sharp prose, and biting satire to engage in "deconstructing myth".<sup>[3]</sup> In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter employs three types of ekphrasis—erotic paintings, castle space settings, and character portrayals—through the female protagonist's narration to vividly recreate her experiences and lead the reader through a dramatic reversal. By contrasting the women in erotic paintings who are objects of the gaze, the women imprisoned in castle spaces, and the ultimately new women, Carter sharply critiques the stereotypes of women in traditional fairy tales as pure, submissive, fragile, and ignorant. She overturns the erroneous notion that women's desire for knowledge and curiosity inevitably lead to disaster and breaks the binary opposition of men as

subjects and women as objects. In doing so, Carter deconstructs the moral constraints imposed on women by traditional fairy tales and reshapes the image of new women.

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