Fairy tales present Angela Carter with a range of subject matter for drawing out the beauty and violence in gender and sexual formations.1 In deconstructing the tales, Carter reveals the false universalizing inherent in many so-called master narratives of the Western literary tradition. Lorna Sage further highlights this strain in Carter’s work, arguing that by ‘going back to these preliterary forms of storytelling … she could experiment with her own writer’s role, ally herself in an imagination with the countless, anonymous narrators who stood behind literary redactors like Perrault or Grimm.’2 Thus, not only do fairy tales provide Carter with a radical content – fundamental and revolutionary – in their sexual and violent manifestations, but they also contest the authorial position, rejecting the romantic and modern authoritative voice in favour of the multiplicity of voices, often female, that have been repressed by the ‘official’ tellings of Perrault, Grimm, or Disney. Once the venue of women – mothers or governesses – passing tales from one generation to the next over the hearth, fairy tales were taken over by male chroniclers of culture in attempts to unify and totalize their belief systems. As Carter notes in her introduction to a collection of international fairy tales, ‘Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think of it in terms of the domestic arts.’3 The culinary arts serve her purposes as exemplifying women’s creativity and practicality; recipes seldom have a single known originator and are prepared again and again, varying with the ingredients at hand. Interested in female roles ranging from maternity to prostitution, Carter’s metaphor of material domesticity explicitly involves female subcultures that have shared their experiences and
knowledge while adapting them to suit personal tastes or social, historical, or practical needs. The highly theoretical influences on her work – which during the period of writing *The Bloody Chamber*, for example, included Foucault and Laing – both inform and are informed by Carter’s concerns over the material existence of women’s lived experience.

Involved not only in exposing the repressive representations – of class, gender, or sexuality – implicit within many tales, Carter’s revisions also work to reassess the narratives’ composite parts, variously reconstructing them in order to posit multiple re-writings. Issues central to Carter include the construction of a feminist subjectivity defined as active rather than passive. Merja Makinen argues that while Carter’s early work presents women trapped by the male gaze, physically abused by the patriarchal culture, in her later career, Carter depicts ‘women who grab their sexuality and fight back … women troubled by and even powered by their own violence’. Above all else, Carter’s fairy tale heroines survive both within their narratives and our collective cultural experience, enduring mental abuse, physical violence, and humiliation by refusing to be intimidated by, and even at times prevailing over social stereotypes and sexist ideologies that limit their subjectivity. Of equal importance within these revisions is the restoration of an active and positive heterosexuality that does not limit women to their procreative function. Many of Carter’s revisionary fairy tales demand that women’s ostensible social, sexual, and physical displacement from action in the world is not an unavoidable position but a potent myth, enforced by women’s prohibition form the public sphere, to be deconstructed. Carter’s fairy tales emphasize the potential for (but certainly not the inevitability of) mutually satisfying, unconfining sexual relations. While her work does not always successfully disrupt the stereotypes of sexual predator (active, male culprit) or prey (passive, female victim), it plays with presumptions about, assumptions of, and identifications with either side.

The fairy tales revised by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* – specifically ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ and ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ – revise and supplement the story of Beauty and the Beast through parodic reversals and amplifications, and then further repeat the appropriation, re-telling the tale from an alternate perspective. For example, when Carter takes on ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, she tells the story at least three times, each shifting its perspective, sympathies, and moral. As Cristina Bacchilega explains, ‘Masks peeled off in one scenario
are refracted differently in another, suspicion lingers but dynamics shift. In the mirror of such contained intertextuality, stories reflect on each other through the work of repetition against itself. It is as if Carter asks ‘What if we looked at the story this way?’ and then ‘What if we changed this, or added this, then what might its results or implications be?’ Each retold story is supplemental, both following and followed by another repetition that does not contradict its predecessor, but rather substitutes for and appends it. While it has been argued that all of the tales in *The Bloody Chamber* involve a sort of retelling of Beauty and the Beast, the two stories that explicitly confront the eighteenth-century French twosome illustrate possible backgrounds and motivations behind this romantic opposition. Both stories, in turn, destabilize the artificially restrictive categories of ‘Beauty’ and ‘the Beast’, disrupting the binary ‘Beauty/Beast’ to undermine the lingering presence in contemporary cultural presumptions.

Carter’s style of narrative is sometimes troubling in its double function, working against masculinist representations of women while potentially reinforcing them through its parody. This movement also serves to complicate their telling in ways that can be liberating for postmodern feminism, unsettling definitions that all too often restrict potential. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler discusses the importance of repetition as a subversive feminist strategy that can, significantly, reveal an ‘original’ to be nothing other than a parody of itself. Through excessive repetition, acts and representations become naturalized, construed and masked as essential or natural although they are constructed through the very repetition that enables their seeming originality. Carter’s repetition of this story emphasizes the mutability of the former characterizations of Beauty and the Beast, pointing to slips and disjunctions that reveal the parodic performances of female/male or good/evil. Butler identifies gender as ‘not just the cultural inscription of meaning onto a pregiven sex’, but also ‘the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.’ Carter’s repetitive fairy tale revisions highlight both the inscription of gender onto the two central figures and the material apparatus enforcing such engendering. These revisionary fairy tales move incrementally away from their source materials, grounding the heroine’s knowledge and expression within her own sexuality in order to critique the inscribed restrictive ideology that denies that such impulses – perverse, violent, liberatory – exist in women. But the path to this revelation is not clear, and Carter revises the tale to question Beauty’s motives as well as the Beast’s.
‘Beauty and the Beast’ represents a slightly different tradition of the fairy tale than do ‘Snow White’ or ‘Cinderella.’ Though elements of the story draw on predecessors from ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty’ to ‘The Frog Prince’, and even ‘Cupid and Psyche’ from classical Greek mythology – Bacchilega notes approximately fifteen hundred versions – the most popular version was penned by Madame Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont in the mid-eighteenth century. The traditional plot of the story includes a recently bankrupt father who stops at a seemingly abandoned castle on his way home from a failed trip to the city to regain his fortune. Departing after having been treated courteously though anonymously, the father picks a single rose for his youngest daughter, Beauty – at which time he meets the host, an alarming beast/man creature. The Beast demands the father or his daughter in exchange for the theft. Beauty, the youngest, purest, and (for me, ludicrously) perfect sister of two selfish and envious older sisters, sacrifices herself willingly in her beloved father’s stead. The Beast falls in love with her; she, while repelled, treats him with respect and, eventually, some fondness. Granted a trip home to see her ailing father, Beauty is distracted by her sisters who conspire to detain her; thus, she breaks her promise to return to the Beast within a week. When she does guiltily return, the Beast verges on death. Begging him not to die, Beauty agrees to marry him, at which moment he transforms into a handsome prince who transports Beauty and her father into ‘happily ever after’ and punishes the evil sisters for their spite by turning them into statues.

‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ begins much as the traditional tale does, albeit Carter’s modernized version is complete with broken-down automobiles, telephones, and florists. Differences from more traditional tellings lie in Carter’s characterizations of Beauty and the Beast and in the irony that underlies her telling. From its title, this Carter revision discloses its ironic affiliations with the marriage or domestic plot. However here it is not the innocent daughter who is being wooed, but rather, it is she who implicitly seduces the Beast, who ‘courts’ (and indeed actually creates) ‘Mr. Lyon.’ The irony of the title, in its parody of the marriage plots of novels that prioritize successful wedlock above all else, is subtly maintained throughout, breaking through the surface occasionally in narrative asides and uncertainties. Sentimental language suffuses the overall tone. The daughter is described as ‘the lovely girl, whose skin possesses that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made of all
snow’ and the landscape ‘is white and unmarked as a spilled bolt of bridal satin’. The excessive quality of Carter’s language suggests an ironic parody at work that extends the drama of gender performances. Here Beauty does not simply have ‘skin as white as snow’ from another familiar tale, but she is so pure that she is made ‘of all snow’, without flaws and ready for the bridal altar (or perhaps, the sacrificial one, although here she is not being sacrificed, but is performing the ritual herself). Such language relies on Carter’s own ability to introduce a note of parodic excess and incongruity into Beauty’s gender performance, making it difficult to read the above description straightforwardly or sincerely. Carter has amplified the lavish language of the eighteenth-century fairy tale, and incorporated it in her late-twentieth-century text. Carter describes the Beast’s house as a miniature, perfect Palladian house that seemed to hide itself shyly behind snow-laden skirts of antique cypress. It was almost night; that house, with its sweet, retiring melancholy grace, would have seemed deserted but for a light that flickered in an upstairs window, so vague it might have been the reflection of a star, if any stars could have penetrated the snow that whirléd yet more thickly.

The elaborate description continues to the ‘withered ghost of a tangle of thorns, there clung, still, the faded rag of a white rose’ (144). Such exaggerated sentimentality could be read straight, putting the reader in the proper mood for a fairy tale/marriage plot. But it is too much, and Carter’s narrator undercuts its impact quickly, emphasizing that any strange occurrences can be explained because this was ‘a place of privilege where all the laws of the world … need not necessarily apply, for very rich are often very eccentric’ and parenthetically editorializing when the spaniel appears ‘(how amusing)’ (145). It is this element of excess, argues Paulina Palmer, that prevents Carter’s ‘mimetic and parodic performance of gender from being misinterpreted’ and seen as essentialist.

The father, setting the action in motion, has an inconsequential role after Beauty meets the Beast, and is not reunited with the couple at the end; hence the story is divested of much of its oedipal overtones of excessive paternal attachment and necessary transference of affection. The sisters, depicting avarice and jealously in contrast to Beauty’s virtuous perfection in earlier tellings, are absent altogether, thus removing the female scheming and backbiting that have heretofore reinforced representations of patriarchal dominance and of
women’s rivalry under its control. Both of these omissions serve to ensure Beauty’s centrality in the story. Although she meets and remains with the Beast because of her obligation to her father, her subsequent actions stem from her own predilections. ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ is, on its surface, very similar to earlier versions of the tale, but its language and focus complicate issues, Bacchilega explains, ‘shifting the tale, exposing machinations of magic without explicitly renouncing it, leaving the reader to reflect on the power of words and looks. It is a parodic performance that thrives on the playfully ironic tradition of Beauty and the Beast literary texts.’13 Similar to the evolution of the cyborg as envisioned by Haraway, identities here are ‘contradictory, partial, and strategic’ within the greater tradition of the tale.14 As a result, any attempt to posit an essential identity is shown to be false. While traditional tellings of Beauty and the Beast characterize each as purely good or beastly, Carter’s revision reveals the impossibility of such constructions, presenting an ironic performance of gender and its stereotypes.

Turning to the Beast, we see a character who seems already divested of many characteristics that may have made him threatening and in need of Beauty’s domesticating influence. The narrative focus never allows reader awareness of the Beast’s own motivations or potential for change. When first introduced, he momentarily fulfills fairy tale stereotypes, releasing a ‘mighty, furious roaring’ filled with ‘dignity’ yet ‘assertiveness’ (146), and demanding reparation for the father’s theft of his rose. But after seeing a photo of Beauty, the Beast amends his tone, asking – not demanding as in the preceding tellings – that the father bring her to dinner. Carter emphasizes moments of individual volition that motivate the tale’s actions, rejecting magical spells and premonitions in favor of material descriptions and the characters’ socially and economically determined perspectives and actions. So the Beast seems not only leonine complete with ‘claws’, but also has a ‘head of hair’ and wears a smoking jacket. His beastly nature is in question, and perhaps exists more in the eye of his beholders as a result of his physical presence and material wealth, than in a magical, inexplicable realm. His behavior is far from wild, and he never commands his guests but volunteers assistance through his reputation, legal service, and hospitality. Only hints of an alternate disposition are provided, including a ‘rumbling roar’ that may or may not mean that he has been hunting game. Insights into his character filter primarily through Beauty’s consciousness so the reader cannot
discern his nature unmediated by her view. When she leaves him to meet her father, the Beast simply asks: ‘You will come back to me? It will be lonely here, without you’ (150). His reaction belongs more to a smitten suitor than a threatening Beast: he is weak, shy, and easily manipulated by his beloved’s whims. The dominant conventions of the Beast’s character-type are reversed and amplified – Beauty ‘frightens’ him and the Beast is ‘helpless’ in her presence (148, 150) – challenging a reader’s conditioned assumptions about his dominant and malevolent role and relationship with Beauty. This Beast seems to fall into the tradition of one who will be tamed by the woman’s domesticating influence (and may already have been, simply by seeing Beauty’s image), yet Carter reminds us that he potentially exceeds this characterization through his persistent animal nature that ‘belong[s] to a different order of beauty … and has no respect for us’ as interpreted by Beauty herself (147). Carter’s language here further reinforces the difficulty of assigning a fixed or uniform standard to beauty and, by extension, goodness.

Initially, Beauty, too, fulfills readerly expectations for a fairy tale: she is pretty and obedient with a look ‘of absolute sweetness and absolute gravity’ although with a Carterian quality, ‘as if her eyes might pierce appearances and see your soul’ (147). But the effect becomes derisive when the description emanates from Beauty’s own perspective: ‘And such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial’ (148). Her gaze falls uncritically upon herself, resolutely leaving her own surface unpierced, intact, virginal. Though to some degree Beauty’s self-characterization is accurate – she does feel compelled to remain with the Beast in exchange for his legal assistance and so sacrifices herself – it is difficult not to read ‘spotless, sacrificial’ ironically in a Carter story where no one fits this stereotypical and pernicious description. Carter thus inscribes an additional surface onto our Beauty. A lamb led to slaughter who may possess a sense of irony about her position, Beauty is situated in the postmodern age, performing her shifting role within this script. As in Teresa de Lauretis’s theory of the postmodern text, Carter’s revision opens up ironic space that draws the reader’s attention to the self-conscious articulation of femininity. Beauty’s father describes his daughter as ‘his girl-child, his pet’ (144); she occupies the position of revered property – ‘pet’ connoting both beloved and domesticated animal. Her position is reflected by the presence of the Beast’s ‘liver and white King Charles spaniel’, who performs the duties of courteous attendant
when the father arrives, ironically reflecting the link between the dog, a ‘gracious hostess’, and Beauty, her father’s ‘pet’ (145). Beauty is herself embracing this traditionally subservient role; the narrative takes pains to ensure that we know that. She puts herself, whether by desire, habit, or necessity, into the role of virtuous, dutiful daughter, and through these qualities, wins herself marriage and wealth.

Several literary conventions exist simultaneously for the reader of this story. The various traditional, socially regulated renditions of the tale oscillate within Carter’s sardonic feminist writing. Beauty exists in each tradition; she is at once a fairy tale heroine who ‘possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree … would gladly have gone to the ends of the earth for her father, whom she loved dearly’, and a self-aware (although not self-critical), metafictional protagonist who reads ‘a collection of courtly and elegant French fairy tales’ (148). Beauty initially experiences the power she wields over the Beast as ‘poignant’ because ‘she frightened him’ (148), but as she grows accustomed to the Beast’s foreignness, she becomes ‘transfixed’ by it (not him), and narcissistically inhabits his world. Looking directly at ‘his green, inscrutable eyes’, she only sees ‘her face repeated twice, as small as if she were a bud’ (149). The narrative ‘as if’ undercuts a straightforward reading, questioning Beauty’s purity, delicacy, come-liness, and, again by extension, virtue. Shifting away from her role of ‘dutiful daughter’, Beauty repeatedly and self-consciously places herself in the position of ‘well-disguised’ virginal victim (148). She performs the part skillfully, though the narrative reveals flaws in her performance. Butler describes such a performance as a masquerade that posits ‘appearing’ as ‘being’, the ‘performative production of a gendered ontology’.15 While Beauty may or may not be self-consciously masquerading as feminine virtue in its various incarnations, many readers of the text will recognize Carter’s parodic exaggeration of gender stereotypes, drawing attention to the precarious distinction between appearing and being.

Despite Beauty’s compassion for the Beast, when the opportunity arises, she immediately rejoins her now wealthy father, insincerely agreeing to return to the Beast ‘before the winter is over’ (150). Now playing the part of debutante for her father (she ‘step[s] out on his arm to parties’ like an expensive accessory [150]), her growth begun at the Beast’s house, where she read, discussed nature, and gardened, halts. In London she learns ‘how to be a spoiled child … a mite petulant when things went not quite as she had wanted them’ (151). Her flawed
memory of the Beast suppresses his previous effect on her: ‘she expe-
rienced a sudden sense of perfect freedom, as if she had just escaped
from an unknown danger, had been grazed by the possibility of some
change but, finally, left intact. Yet with this exhilaration, a desolating
emptiness’ (150–51). In fact, she is experiencing an economic freedom
previously unknown that allows her some degree of control over her
actions (though not full independence, for though she wants for no
consumer possessions or entertainments, she remains still dependent
on her wealthy father). But with this privilege come social constraints
(e.g. restrictions on proper attire and attitude) that disallow the poten-
tial for change and forbid the implied sexual freedom available at the
Beast’s estate. Her intactness – virginity – had seemed to be under
threat by her perception of his strange wildness despite his self-
possessed behavior and genteel etiquette. Ironically, she distracts
herself from such thoughts with ‘a delicious expedition to buy her
furs’ (151), purchasing the skin of the Beast rather than inhabiting it on
her own. Perhaps she sensed within herself the potential for corruption
that Carter’s protagonist of ‘The Bloody Chamber’ recognizes, a
potential that will not be tested by the tame Beast who has shown no
evidence of sexuality at all, perverse or otherwise.

The arrival in London of the Beast’s now-disheveled canine
companion reminds Beauty of her erstwhile promise to return. She
leaves only a ‘scribbled note for her father’ before boarding a train
transporting her to the Beast’s estate. Under other authorship, the
ending to this tale might seem somewhat traditional, but Carter’s
ironic tone, resurfacing sporadically, prevents such an assumption.
Arriving to find a dead garden and deserted house, Beauty goes to the
Beast’s chamber to find him dying from starvation. He explains that,
unable ‘to kill the gentle beasts, I could not eat’ (153). But upon her
declaration, ‘If you’ll have me, I’ll never leave you’, he is trans-
formed: ‘[He] at last began to stretch his fingers … the bones showed
through the pelt, the flesh through the wide, tawny brow. And then it
was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt
mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose … that gave him a
distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of all the beasts’
(153). Beauty seems hardly surprised at the transformation,
suggesting that it may exist more in her perception than in external
circumstances. And so, the great Beast who had protected his estate
and his privacy from intrusions has become ‘Mr. Lyon’ prepared to
‘manage a little breakfast’ with his Beauty. Tamed and remade (if
only in her eye) from fierce predator who threatened her purity and convention to her betrothed eating porridge and walking in the garden, the Beast has lost the mating game, and has instead been successfully courted, captured, and domesticated.

The threat existed solely in Beauty’s perception, as a setting for her performance as virginal ingenue in need of protection from the predatory (sexual) Beast. Their relationship, despite its contradictory casting, is sanctioned from beginning to end with little indication of transgressive narrative norms. The Beast, courted by the daughter who controls their relationship, is tamed immediately; the angry passion he demonstrates with Beauty’s father has been completely erased, replaced by the tame behavior of an English country gentleman. The ending is somewhat unsatisfactory, and while Beauty does not seem disappointed (as in the traditional tellings) by the Beast’s transformation to a porridge-eating gentleman, the reader may very well be. As Linda Hutcheon reminds us, there is no resolution of the contradictory forms in postmodern parody precisely because ‘it is a foregrounding of contradictions’.17 Carter’s revision challenges the concealed politics of gendered representation through its ironic, parodic characterizations of both Beauty and the Beast. Carter does not reject the folk tale narrative, but through an ironic rewriting that draws parallels to the domestic marriage plot, she lays the groundwork for the desirability for beastly passion over domestication fulfilled by ‘The Tiger’s Bride’.

‘The Tiger’s Bride’ follows ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ in The Bloody Chamber, and completes Carter’s amelioration of the fairy tale conventions of Madame de Beaumont. Unpublished before its collection, the story fits firmly into Carter’s revisionary project of the time. She published The Sadeian Woman and The Bloody Chamber both in 1979, and the texts correspond, one theorizing the other’s fictional representations. Carter writes in The Sadeian Woman, ‘Sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations … ’.18 Like Sade, Carter treats sexuality as a political reality, but unlike Sade, she reexamines levels of constraints and meaning, finding that sexual restriction in part lies in social and cultural repressions as well as economic inequities. Her postmodern feminist revisions begins to re-construct a space for free, rather than forced, engagement between participants. Margaret Atwood concurs: ‘The Bloody Chamber may
be read as a “writing against” de Sade, a talking-back to him; and above all, as an exploration of the possibilities for the kind of synthesis de Sade himself could never find.19 ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ involves a Beauty who, fully aware of the exchange value of her body, rejects her father and his patriarchal society altogether to join the carnality of the Beast. The narrative lays bare the implications of a marriage ceremony that does not result from courting and affection, but from a pure exchange of capital between men. Here, Beauty’s father reveals the nature of his relationship with his daughter – ownership prevails over affection. All their family ties are nonexistent, erased, and together they flee the bankruptcy and shame brought about by his gambling and excessive lifestyle in Russia. The ‘magic’ of the Beast exists here only in his person – ambi-pedal, cogitative, wealthy, and, most importantly, feared. His castle and grounds, however, exist in a state of disrepair and asperity. Transformation belongs to the daughter who, despite her status as a virgin bride traded by one master to another, transfigures her role from passive object into active subject, altering her signification and determining her own meanings and subjectivity.

The heroine of ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, Beauty if she had a name, opens the tale abruptly: ‘My father lost me to The Beast at cards.’20 She is a highly self-aware narrator, cynical and philosophical, observing the surroundings and events affecting her with a detached, acrimonious perspective. Unnamed because disallowed self-identification or signification by her father and his society, the narrator makes explicit the predicament of women’s existence by highlighting her condition: ‘I watched with the furious cynicism peculiar to women whom circumstances force mutely to witness folly’ (154). Her position follows the example set by her mother, ‘bartered for her dowry to such a feckless sprig of the Russian nobility that she soon died of his gaming, his whoring, his agonising repentances’ (155). While the narrator, like her mother, is also susceptible to the weaknesses and whims of father/husband, rather than silently succumbing to them, her voice controls the narrative and tells her story. Assuredly, albeit ironically, she notes, ‘It was not my flesh but, truly, my father’s soul that was in peril’ (156). Her language shifts tenses, creating a sense of veracity and immediacy in its manipulation of present and past form: descriptions are in simple present, the tense used for statements of fact, heightening her credibility and the impact of the past tense used to describe the events taking place in the story. While, during the
evening’s gambling, the mirror ‘gave me back his frenzy, my impassivity … [and] the still mask that concealed all the features of the Beast’, the country in which the game is played ‘is a melancholy, introspective region; a sunless, featureless landscape’ (154–55). Phrases often substitute for sentences to create an impressionistic, lyrical rendering of the transformative events. The daughter’s central weapon against her father is linguistic, manifesting the self-awareness, -containment, and -respect that is reflected through her narrative.

Through Beauty’s narration, elements of the more familiar story are integrated but remain resolutely foreign in this setting. A sense of the uncanny permeates the narrative, heightening the tone of dis-ease and alienation, pervading both character and reader. Beauty – ‘Che bella!’ greets her arrival at the inn – contrasts less sharply with the Beast – ‘La Bestia’ – than she does with her fatuous father. Similarities between the two characters increase as the story progresses. Both have retreated far from proper civilization, and their crossed paths take them even further from the safety and superficial civility of society and its customs. Beauty is fascinated by the Beast and the feeling is returned as his ‘yellow eyes … strayed, now and then, from his unfurled hand towards myself’ during his victorious card game (155). This revision of the Beast does not hide his nature except behind a flimsy curtain of outdated garments and a painted mask. Each expressionless, they watch one another over the father’s frenzy, neither surprised by the game’s outcome. Both have forsaken fashion, alienated from its whimsical rules. The daughter suggests ‘this remote, provincial place, out of fashion two hundred years’ for their stay and the Beast, too, ‘does not feel the need to keep up with the times’ (154,157). The white rose so central to other versions is given to Beauty upon the Beast’s arrival for the evening game, but she disdains the blossom, finding it ‘unnatural, out of season’ (155), and shredding it as the evening progresses. Her contempt increases with the arrival of another bouquet the morning of her exchange, ‘as if a gift of flowers would reconcile a woman to any humiliation’ (157). Although earlier versions of the tale affirm, indeed insist upon, such patriarchal expectations of exchange and sacrifice of Beauty’s freedom for her father’s theft, here the gesture is thick with irony enhanced twofold by her offer of a blood-stained rose to her father as she departs and her later disposal of the bouquet and confrontation of her ‘humiliation’ on her own terms. Conventional elements of the tale are parodied throughout by Beauty’s sardonic tone and perspective.
While little humor breaks through the text’s frozen surface— an element of parody that some theorists still maintain is crucial to its composition21—nevertheless, in the textual discrepancy created through a reversal of the inscribed symbols and gestures of the preceding tales, ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ confronts its tradition, dismantling its restrictive implications.

Being delivered to the Beast’s palazzo, Beauty ponders his nature, remembering stories that scared her as a child, one of a ‘tiger-man’ and another of a bear-man in her Russian village who could control the wind’s direction. She rejects them as ‘old wives’ tales, nursery fears!’ here consciously utilized to distract herself. The stories arise as if repressed and uncannily returned; in Freudian psychoanalytic terms, the uncanny is that which has undergone repression and then returned, primitive beliefs that have been surmounted become once more confirmed.22 Beauty’s experience of pleasure at these memories is inseparable from the uneasiness of her encounters with these uncanny figures. Both uncanny moments and experiences permeate the narrator’s experience at the Beast’s decrepit estate. The figures of the Beast and his valet are the most obvious embodiments of the uncanny, familiar yet not. The frozen mask of the Beast and the unnatural nimbleness of his valet mark them as neither wholly beasts nor men. The Beast is ‘a carnival figure made of paper-mâché and crêpe hair’ who ‘has such a growling impediment in his speech that only his valet, who understands him, can interpret for him, as if his master were the clumsy doll and he the ventriloquist’ (156). The valet moves with ‘preternatural agility’ and has a face ‘seamed with the innocent cunning of an ancient baby’ (157–58). Further, when Beauty arrives at her room in the palazzo, she confronts the uncanny in her own reflection, greeted by a mechanical puppet reproduction of herself, one that is ‘secretly familiar’ in Freudian terms, yet inexorably foreign: life contained within the mechanical. It is ironic but apt, as the reader will see, that Beauty is first reflected not as animal but machine. The uncanny is that which invites transgression, unveiling what has been concealed, but it nevertheless deflects precise definition or direct confrontation through its chiaroscuro effect. Carter does not make it altogether clear what has been repressed, perhaps the animal nature present in all, reinforcing Julia Kristeva, who argues that ‘the indefiniteness is part and parcel of the “concept”’, in refutation of Freud’s attempt to ‘retain the sense, the real, the reality of the sense of things’.23 The intrusion of these uncanny forms and experiences are in
some way more familiar to Beauty. Having thus far lived only a simu-
lation of reality or existence in her passive role of martyred daughter
who suffers silently, Beauty’s discordant experience is somehow natu-
ralized through the Beast’s mimicry of humanity.

Beauty attempts to separate her sense of the ‘supernatural’ uncanny
from the material, physical exchange she will soon undertake, and is
unwilling to acknowledge that these two aspects are inextricably
intertwined in her relations with the Beast. Expecting to forfeit her
virginity to satisfy her father’s debt, Beauty recognizes that this is all
a young woman of uncertain means has to barter: ‘I knew well enough
the reason for the trepidation I cosily titillated with superstitious
marvels of my childhood on the day my childhood ended. For now my
own skin was my sole capital in the world and today I’d make my first
investment’ (159). Such a loss also divests her of any capital worth for
future paternal exchange; a violated daughter is valued little on the
marriage block. Beauty works to confront the Beast’s unknown desire
on her terms, controlling the situation using every recourse within her
means, resolved to ‘hold my head high’ to cover the apprehension and
to keep ‘eyes level with those inside the mask that now evaded mine
as if, to his credit, he was ashamed of his own request’ (160–61).
Despite her determined approach, Beauty is shocked by the Beast’s
desire, which does not involve her virginity, but simply a desire ‘to
see the pretty young lady unclothed nude without her dress and that
only for one time after which she will be returned to her father
undamaged’ (160).24 Offended by the perceived paucity of the
exchange – reflecting later ‘That he should want so little was the
reason why I could not give it’ (163) – she refuses, instead offering to:

pull my skirt up to my waist, ready for you. But there must be a sheet over
my face, to hide it; though the sheet must be laid on me so lightly that it
will not choke me. So I shall be covered completely from the waist
upwards, and no lights. There you can visit me once, sir, and only once.
After that I must be driven directly to the city and deposited in the public
square, in front of the church. (161)

Her compulsion to keep her face covered repeats a scene in ‘The
Bloody Chamber’, that describes ‘an etching by Rops’ of

the child with her sticklike limbs, naked but for her button boots, her
gloves, shielding her face with her hand as though her face were the last
repository of her modesty; and the old, monocled lecher who examined
her, limb by limb. He in his London tailoring; she, bare of a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations.  

While the protagonist of this earlier story is aroused by the image and her enactment of it, this narrator cannot yet presume to see sex outside of its moral connotations, and places herself artificially in the victim’s position rather than allowing the Beast to strip her of her aegis. In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter criticizes ‘the frigidity that aristocratic girls have been taught to equate with virtue [which] prevents them from achieving sexual autonomy that would transform their passive humiliations into a form of action’. Sadeian texts exemplify such passivity through their presumption of Justine’s submissiveness throughout her sexual torture, passively assuming her goodness and virtue will eventually be rewarded. Juliette is a better model for Carter, because of her engagement in and control over her sexual education. While Beauty seems unlikely to turn to orgasm as a means of escape from circumstance, she struggles to find the means of controlling the terms of her body’s exchange. Her pride precludes the humiliation of the passive, victimized sacrifice, but she misunderstands the Beast’s request as a cowardly degradation rather than a complete exposure of the self beneath the fashion both disdain. In the closing section of *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter speaks of the stripping of ‘socialized virtues’ as a restoration ‘to the primal and vicious states of nature. Her education has regression rather than maturation as its goal.’ However, Beauty is yet unprepared for such a disrobing, particularly given the uneven terms of exchange between the Beast and herself.

Invited to ride with master and valet, Beauty cannot refuse; she has earlier professed: ‘horses are better than we are, and [I] … would have been glad to depart … to the kingdom of horses, if I’d been given the chance’ (157). Now transported to the country of beasts, she sadly finds the horses as ‘beasts in bondage’, and ironically remains yet unable to see how much the castle’s occupants share (164). As they ride away from the castle, Beauty’s assessment of her situation deepens, along with her affinity with the Beast:

A profound sense of strangeness slowly began to possess me. I knew my two companions were not, in any way, as other men … This knowledge gave me a certain fearfulness still; but, I would say, not much … I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason. If I could see not one single soul in that wilderness of desolation all around me,
then the six of us – mounts and riders, both – could boast amongst us not one soul, either, since all the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with [souls]. (165)

The similarities between these figures move from material, external conditions to internal definitions of selfhood. The uncanniness of the situation is compelling to her as Beauty begins to sense the strangeness in herself and her social codes of civility rather than in the Beast, who paradoxically chooses ‘to live in an uninhabited place’ (160). Again, Kristeva elucidates: ‘The Heimliche passes imperceptibly to the Unheimliche, which is the intimate of intimacy, the “true” intimacy.’28 Such intimacy is proffered and accepted when the Beast prepares to disrobe. The narrator reacts strongly: ‘My composure deserted me; all at once I was on the brink of panic. I did not think I could bear the sight of him, whatever he was’ (165–66). Despite her affiliation with the Beast, when faced explicitly with his uncanniness, she retreats in fear. Gazing at the tiger unveiled, Beauty can now see in his earlier request an invitation to bare her protection, but not until he is willing to forge a pact and reject the material of his patriarchal control can she commit to such a transformation. Upon his revelation, Beauty ‘felt my breast ripped apart as if I suffered a marvellous wound’ (166). The deflowering that she feared but to which she had become resigned is of another kind. Moved by his exposure, Beauty falters only momentarily, ‘lest this frail little article of human upholstery before him might not be, in itself, grand enough’, and reciprocates: ‘I showed his grave silence my white skin, my red nipples, and the horses turned their heads to watch me, also, as if they, too, were courteously curious as to the fleshly nature of women’ (166). Because communal, the disrobing shifts their relation from the domain of the patriarchal contract; de Lauretis argues that a transition from patriarchy is necessary ‘to envision gender and to (re)construct it in terms other than those dictated’ by the contract. Because both have been excluded from androcentric society, their relationship can reject the ‘male-centered frame of reference in which gender and sexuality are (re)produced by discourses of male sexuality’.29 But, the mutual display is temporary; the transformation indefinite.

Returned to the castle, Beauty is disgusted to see (in the requisite magic mirror) her father luxuriating in new clothes and feasting on the fruits of her display. Recognizing that her epiphanic action has been reduced to the level of economic exchange and hence recuper-
ated by patriarchy, Beauty gains the strength to sever her final connection to her father’s constrictive expectations. Resolving to send the mechanical maid ‘back to play the part of my father’s daughter’, Beauty prepares to confront the Beast again, this time freely and invited. She finally understands the depth of her nakedness:

to take off all my clothes involved a kind of flaying … it was not natural for humankind to go naked, not since first we hid our loins with fig leaves. He had demanded the abominable. I felt as much atrocious pain as if I was stripping off my own underpelt … peel[ing] down to the cold white meat of contract. (168)

She controls the terms of the transformation, stripping when she decides rather than returning to the civilization that would simply constrain and barter her again and again. At the tale’s opening, the narrator foolishly believes this to be the land ‘where the lion lies down with the lamb’ (154); upon viewing the Beast she realizes ‘the tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal’ (166). Reciprocating to a degree not heretofore expected, the naked Beauty approaches the tiger in his lair ‘As if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction’ (168). Her offering is not that of the lamb on the altar, but rather one without fear, between equals. She does not tame the Beast as Beauty does Mr. Lyon, nor is she consumed by him. Instead, bathed by his ‘tongue, abrasive as sandpaper’, this Beauty joins a new order of existence, discarding ‘skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shiny hairs … my beautiful fur’ (169). The stripping of ‘socialized virtues’, heralded by *The Sadeian Woman* as a way of returning ‘to the primal and vicious states of nature’, is complete as the walls of the castle crumble around them. In embracing the Beast, Beauty gains power, strength, and a new awareness of her self – its construction and position. In turn, she loses the egocentric sense of herself as a morally superior being that almost prevented her union with the Beast.

Taken as a dyad, these two revisions of the popular Beauty and the Beast tale destabilize each other from within the tradition, ‘simultaneously exposing the structures of power manifest in our most conventional narratives of gender relations’, through a transformation of the standard tales into constructions of hetero-sexualized feminist experience, ‘reimagining the heroines as active agents in their own
sexual development’. Though their conclusions share an ultimate union between Beauty and the Beast, neither proffers an unproblematically happy ending. ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ results in a sterilized union sanctioned by social regulations while ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ refuses to represent nature as an affirmative purification opposing cultural corruption, but depicts the danger inherent in both. The former story moves within a comfortable, but passionless, domestic order while the latter visualizes and verbalizes the forbidden with an uncertain result. But, as Bacchilega argues, ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ parodies normalization in a few moments that point to Beauty’s self-conscious role-playing while ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ makes its transformation suspect through its overt construction. Strengthening the ending’s impact in ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, Carter refuses to designate nature or ‘beastliness’ as sanctified or secure, or as unproblematically liberating. The couple retreat from society, to an alternative, yet unstable realm that proffers freedom but not protection or refuge. While both heroines resist appropriating the Other – Beauty or Beast – in neither tale is Beauty a completely free agent. The initial constraint upon desire by the masculinist framework in which she operates affects her ability and autonomy to determine her future, and so the frustration or realization of Beauty’s desire is determined by and within the master patriarchal narrative. Carter self-consciously adapts and expands the fairy tale form, one that encompasses both conforming and confrontational traditions.

Fairy tales exist across generational and geographical lines, explaining, instructing, and prohibiting social customs and natural phenomena. Often such tales work to constrain women in particular from breaking cultural barriers. The power structure involved is often all too evident. Carter’s postmodern feminism confronts the violence inherent in these narratives that construct and regulate gender and sexuality, exposing misleading totalities inherent in fairy tales, myths, and other such dominant narratives. In her deconstructive re-reading and re-writing of fairy tales, Carter highlights the violence that accompanies (perhaps is required by) the beauty in gender and sexual constructions, radicalizing the tradition. These revisions illustrate many issues repressed in their mainstream renditions. Her retellings of Beauty and the Beast, ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ and ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, both rework expectations of the tale’s typecasting of gender and material wealth, recasting them not to teach Beauty a lesson about appearances or sexuality, nor to allow her a chance to
tame the Beast, but rather, first, to illustrate that both interpretations are fraudulent pretenses for cultural and interpretive stability that artificially stereotype the characters, and second, once the master frame has been deconstructed, to expose further the fallacious binary separating the characters. The gendered distinction separating Beauty/Beast has been elided; the binary divide collapsed. In doing so, the revisions reject the marriage-contract-as-the-means-of-unification ending earlier versions. Carter favors instead a repudiation of social constraints altogether. Marriage here serves as a focal point for restrictive gender controls governing both public and private representations. As de Lauretis persuasively argues, ‘the social representation of gender affects its subjective construction and the subjective representation of gender – or self-representation – affects its social construction’, thus tautologically limiting possibilities for agency and self-determination. Constructions of gender are enacted through both daily life and resistances to it that enable agency and empowerment and through cultural productions of ‘woman’ that inscribe gendered representations and constructions. Marriage represents a space where private and public these come together. While Carter’s first revision of Beauty and the Beast ends in a publicly endorsed union – Beauty even changes her name to Mrs. Lyon – within the second tale, the union between Beauty and Beast exceeds the projected desire prohibited by cultural forces that restrict women to the status of property without their own libido.

Carter’s parodic revisions imply a continuity with and disruption of earlier models. In Hutcheon’s terms, her ‘double-voiced parodic forms play on the tensions created by this historical awareness.’ They signal less an acknowledgment of the ‘inadequacy of the definable forms of their predecessors than their own desire to “refunction” those forms to their own needs.’ The heroine’s role shifts in Carter’s renditions. Central to these is the construction of a feminist subjectivity defined by activity rather than passivity; neither Beauty has any problem rejecting her father and determining her own future. Both perform their roles, first appearing as dutiful daughters, but then their paths split. Beauty in ‘The Courtship of Mr. Lyon’ chooses mechanically to continue the highly regulated and stylized acts of her role, reducing ‘all gender ontology to the play of appearances’. The narrator in ‘The Tiger’s Bride’, faced with a mechanical reproduction that belies her masquerade, discards her parodic performance and reveals ‘feminine desire … capable of a disclosure that might lead to
disruption and displacement of phallogocentric signifying economy’.36 These heroines repudiate the status of victim, stopping short of sacrificing themselves completely for the good of their father’s future. The women in these tales exist beyond their fathers, and while they may not avoid patriarchy altogether, they prevail over the cultural stereotypes and sexist ideologies that have limited their subjectivity by making the choice their own. Carter’s revisionary fairy tales move progressively away from their antecedents, radically repositioning the heroine’s knowledge and desire as a means of criticizing the restrictive ideologies that refuse their social and sexual existence – perverse, violent, and/or liberatory. Lucie Armit, discussing relationships among stories in The Bloody Chamber, finds that these ‘portraits share intertextual concerns, depending themselves upon a textual repetition that is also a compulsive reminiscence . . . . [Carter’s portraits of the heroines] utilize those repetitive drives in order to sever [the] frame and in the process, the far more restrictive frame of formulaic fictional enclosure’.37 Her fairy tales and their heroines refuse externally imposed categorization by foregrounding the multiple and contradictory sexualized imagery and symbolism generated by the traditional tales through their performance in different social contexts.

Notes

1. Several authors have taken up fairy tales for feminist revision, although not all are postmodern. Even an incomplete list would include: Margaret Atwood, Donald Barthelme, A.S. Byatt, Emma Donoghue, Tanith Lee, Lynne Tillman, Jeanette Winterson, and Barry Yourgrau. Many of these authors can be found in Jack Zipes, Don’t Bet on the Prince (New York: Metheuen, 1986).
5. Arguing from personal experience that the contraceptive pill allowed the social existence of single, professional, and sexually active women, Carter writes, ‘I could have been a professional writer at any period since the seventeenth century in Britain or in France. But I could not have combined this latter with the life of a sexually active woman until the introduction of contraception, unless I had been lucky enough to have been born sterile’ (‘Notes from the Front Line’. Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings. Ed. Jenny Uglow.
[London: Chatto & Windus, 1997], 40). The Pill’s impact on Carter personally and professionally, as well as its greater political ramifications, seems to have affected her representation of ‘fairy tale’ heroines. A recent cultural history of the Pill explores its political and social implications. See, for example Elizabeth Siegel Watkins’s study, *On the Pill: A Social History of Oral Contraceptives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).


7. See, for example, Lorna Sage’s full-length study of Carter and Cristina Bacchilega’s study of postmodern fairy tales cited above.


9. Butler additionally argues, ‘parody is itself not subversive; parodic laughter depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered’ (139). Changing a story’s context from Virago to *Granta* to *Vogue* creates an altered affect due to a general shift in readership, academic background, and feminist predilection. The effect of the parody may increase or decrease depending on its shifting context for reception.


15. Butler, 47.

16. This scene in the earlier stories has been interpreted crucially; the Beast’s transformation into a handsome prince is immediately followed by Beauty’s question: ‘But where has my Beast gone?’ She is upset by the disappearance of the Beast—the one with whom she has fallen in love. This moment opens up a gap in the early version for contemporary interpretations; interestingly, Carter has left no gap in this telling. Beauty reacts to the Beast’s transformation with recognition, not surprise or dismay.


21. In particular, Margaret Rose argues with Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody, claiming, ‘It is the structural use of comic incongruity which distinguishes parody from other forms of quotation and literary imitation and shows its function to be more than imitation alone’. See Margaret Rose. *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern* (Oxford: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31.


24. The uncanny resurfaces, for as Kristeva interprets Freud, “‘Unheimliche is the name for everything that ought to have remained … hidden and secret and has become visible” … a lack of modesty. It is only at the end that the sexual threat emerges. But it had always been there’ (530).


27. Ibid.

28. Kristeva 542; emphasis in the original.


33. de Lauretis 9.


35. Butler 47.

36. Ibid.