

Henry Liverseege,
'Little Red Riding
Hood' (1830).



The Rewilding of Fairy: Queer Desires in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*

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When Angela Carter's collection of fairy-tale retellings was published in 1979, the popular view among feminist scholars was that fairy tales should be abandoned as structures so deeply bound up with misogyny and the oppression of women that it was impossible to disentangle them from their patriarchal origins.¹ However, other feminist scholars – Angela Carter among them – argued that, rather than reject the fairy tale completely, there was radical potential to be found in reworking the old, oppressive structures and transforming them from the inside out.² As Carter wrote, 'I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottle explode.'³ And explode them she did. The ten stories which comprise *The Bloody Chamber* reimagine some of the most well-known stories from the European fairy-tale tradition in ways that significantly challenge and subvert the patriarchal narrative structures found in earlier versions of these tales. Like the mirror in the collection's title story that allows the protagonist to witness her own sexual encounter with such stark and visceral scrutiny, Carter's tales share a recognisable identity with their predecessors, but the images they show us are clearer, sharper, and more truthful about their own dark and violent inner workings.

Thanks to the critical and self-referential nature of Carter's fairy tales, many scholars have analysed the ways in which Carter radicalised the fairy-tale tradition by deconstructing the fallacious binaries found in the original tales, especially those relating to gender and sexuality. Much of the existing scholarship has focused on reading Carter's stories through a feminist, postmodern lens to show how Carter's playful engagement with the dominant myths of the patriarchal imagination enable her to subvert these repressive ideas and articulate instead a revolutionary sexual politics that foreground female agency and mutual pleasure between sexual partners.⁴ But while much has been written about the transgressive nature of her sexual politics as it relates to feminist understandings of sexuality, there exists comparatively little scholarship that reads *The Bloody Chamber* beyond a heterosexual paradigm.⁵ This is understandable given the focus

in her stories on heterosexual partnerships, and because of the way Carter is self-consciously refashioning myths about heterosexual patriarchy.

Kimberly J. Lau has analysed Carter's 'Little Red Riding Hood' retellings alongside Carter's concept of a moral pornography from *The Sadeian Woman* to show how these stories present an 'other erotic' that challenges the hegemonic order of heterosexual relations and offers instead 'a space where both women and men can express their animal drives, can live their bestial natures, can embrace their erotic selves in a "world of absolute sexual license for all the genders"'.⁶ In reading the 'erotic infidelities' in Carter's 'Red Riding Hood' tales, Lau identifies the ways in which Carter's tales resist a phallocentric symbolic order; and present 'an alternative to the dominant myth of singularity' through the 'infinite metamorphoses' of the tales' central characters.⁷ However, while Lau emphasises Carter's use of transformation and acknowledges the resulting resistance to definition these transformations create, she does not go so far as to identify this resistance to definition as queer, or as articulating a specifically queer erotic.

In this article, I propose a queer reading of Carter's sexual imaginary in *The Bloody Chamber* by examining the ways in which the sexuality in these stories is intimately connected both with transformation and with the natural world. Three stories in particular illustrate the ways in which Carter's depictions of wild beings and spaces articulate queer desires and relationships: 'The Company of Wolves', 'The Tiger's Bride' and 'The Erl-King'. In these stories, human characters engage in intimate relationships with nonhuman characters whose liminal identities bring together aspects of both the human and the animal. These figures act as embodiments of queerness in the sense that they have a multiplicity of being where they exist as both sides of various dualities simultaneously (animal/human, man/woman, etc.). These liminal beings present infinite possible configurations of identity and sexuality because their forms are not fixed but fluid and therefore entail both risk and potential. Her versions of these characters (the werewolf, the tiger, and the Erl-King) can further be read as embodiments of queerness in that they present embodiments of the natural world (what I will refer to as 'the wild') that are deeply sensory, erotic, and desirable to the human characters. They are desirable in the way that these intimate encounters offer the possibility of liminality for the protagonists themselves, both through physical transformation and the revolutionary sexual politics that they make possible.

The physical transformations that these erotic encounters create collapse distinctions between binary categories of all kinds, between the categories of the human and the non-human, but also between male and female, life and death, and pleasure and pain. This resistance to categorisation is queer because it enables an expansion beyond binary logic that creates opportunities for multiple configurations of desire, sexuality and identity that surpass what is imagined by heterosexist patriarchy. I use the word 'queer' in this context to refer to that which expands beyond binary logic and can be

characterised instead by liminality, multiplicity, hybridity, and resistance to stability, particularly in relation to constructions of identity and in erotic and/or sexual encounters. This expansive capacity allows for the continual renewal of identity as well as sexuality. In the queer imaginary of Carter's fairy tales, identity and sexuality are not rigid and restrictive categories but rather ever-shifting potentialities.

In the last few years, queer scholars have taken interest in wildness as a concept that can serve as a useful tool for investigating the category of the other under patriarchy. While the term has a history of being used in the service of colonial and racialising discourse, queer scholars Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o believe that wildness also has the potential to challenge the same repressive categories it has been used to uphold. In their introduction to the July 2018 issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* (which has wildness as its central theme), Halberstam and Nyong'o articulate the powerful resonances between queerness and wildness:

Wildness has certainly functioned as a foil to civilization, as the dumping ground for all that white settler colonialism has wanted to declare expired, unmanageable, undomesticated, and politically unruly. For us, that makes wildness all the more appealing. Like another problematic term – queer – wildness names, while rendering partially opaque, what hegemonic systems would interdict or push to the margins.⁸

Associations between queerness and otherness, and thus queerness and animality, or monstrosity, have been made by queer scholars before.⁹ In their use of the term 'wildness', however, Halberstam and Nyong'o name the forces in the natural world – and also in queerness – that give these marginal categories their particular power: 'Wildness is where the environment speaks back, where communication bows to intensity, where worlds collide, cultures clash, and things fall apart.'¹⁰ This is true of Carter's fairy tales, in which those entities that have been silenced, dehumanised and pushed to the margins finally gain the opportunity to speak. Wildness, like queerness, can bring confusion, chaos, disruption and unpredictability, but also potentially pleasure and play. As queer scholars interested in investigating the concept of wildness in relation to queerness, Halberstam and Nyong'o state that one of their intentions is 'the rewinding of theory', which, they explain, 'proceeds from an understanding that first encounters with wildness are intimate and bewilder all sovereign expectations of autonomous selfhood. To be wild in this sense is to be beside oneself, to be internally incoherent, to be driven by forces seen and unseen, to hear in voices, and to speak in tongues.'¹¹ This internal incoherency that they describe, as well as the evaporation of autonomous

selfhood that takes place in intimate encounters with the wild, are both elements we can see in the liminal, supernatural characters in Carter's tales, and in their relationships with one another throughout *The Bloody Chamber*.

Another way in which queerness and wildness map onto one another is that both concepts resist hierarchical thinking and challenge the existence of rigid boundaries. In Jack Halberstam's 2020 book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, he explains how wildness can be helpful for thinking about queerness because, like queerness, 'the wild does not simply name a space of nonhuman activity that must submit to human control; it also questions the hierarchies of being that have been designed to mark and patrol the boundaries between the human and everything else'.¹² This questioning of rigid boundaries and the hierarchies that accompany them is central to how I understand queer identities and relationships as well, as states of being and modes of relating that move between boundaries and resist categorisation. As Halberstam writes, 'wildness often offers a way of being in the world differently, of interacting with rather than separating from vegetal and animal forms of life'.¹³ He goes on to add, 'this queer something that exceeds the ordinary and resides in the irrational can be accessed through alternative relations to vegetation, to animals, to beauty, to politics, to life and to death'.¹⁴

We see these kinds of alternate relationships between humans and animals, and humans and the natural world, in Carter's fairy-tale retellings, where desire and sensuality unite human and animal lovers in encounters that elide difference and subvert the binary associations that usually cluster around the categories of 'animal' and 'human', as well as man and woman. In these stories, we see humans rejecting an anthropocentric view of the world, choosing instead to embrace the savage, uncivilised world of the animal, not only by engaging in erotic unions with animals (and other liminal supernatural beings) but by becoming wild themselves – either transforming into animals or adopting animal habits and ways of being.

One such story where we can see a human character embracing the wild thanks to an erotic encounter with a non-human lover is 'The Company of Wolves'. The story is one of three retellings of 'Little Red Riding Hood' in *The Bloody Chamber*. In it, Carter alludes to the story's origins as a peasant folktale that primarily circulated orally, which was much more vulgar and sexually explicit than the version made famous by Charles Perrault in his 1697 collection *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, and the one first published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812.¹⁵ Like some older versions of the story which feature the protagonist removing her clothes at the wolf's request (before escaping by telling the wolf she needs to go outside to relieve herself), 'The Company of Wolves' is explicit about the sexual nature of the relationship between the young girl and the wolf she finds in her grandmother's bed. When the wolf first casts off his disguise upon entering the grandmother's house, Carter lingers with sensual detail over his naked body:

His skin is the colour and texture of vellum. A crisp stripe of hair runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and dark as poison fruit but he's so thin you could count the ribs under his skin if only he gave you the time. He strips off his trousers and she can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals, huge. Ah! huge.¹⁶

Unlike the anthropomorphised wolf in Perrault's version, Carter's wolf is a hybrid figure, part-man, part-wolf. He may appear in human form, but he is still capable of devouring the grandmother and leaving behind nothing but bones and hair. As much as Carter emphasises the tale's sexual undercurrents, she also clearly establishes the wolf as a dangerous beast, illustrating the wolf's symbolic history as the predator extraordinaire through a series of cautionary tales about bloodthirsty wolves that transform into human men, and men that turn into wolves: 'Before he can become a wolf, the lycanthrope strips stark naked. If you spy a naked man among the pines, you must run as if the Devil were after you.'¹⁷ Like the rest of the story, the voice of this folk-peasant/oral-storytelling narrator acknowledges that the dangers the werewolf represents are not just devouring of a literal kind, but also the sexual appetites of the flesh.

While Perrault's version of the tale punishes its heroine with death for her naïveté in falling victim to the predatory wolf (this is articulated most explicitly in the moral at the end of his tale),¹⁸ the protagonist in the Grimms' 'Little Red Cap' escapes from the wolf's belly thanks to a passing hunter, and is therefore given another chance to learn the valuable lesson the tale intends to impart to its child readers. Not only is the initial wolf killed by the huntsman and skinned, but the Grimms' tale ends by detailing Little Red Cap's encounter with a second wolf, whom she is now knowledgeable enough to outwit. She and her grandmother trick the wolf and kill it, this time without the huntsman's help. The tale thus demonstrates how thoroughly Little Red Cap learned her lesson as a result of her initial dangerous encounter. In contrast to the didactic and moralising messages that are central in the versions by Perrault and Grimm, Carter's story is not a cautionary tale. Or if it is, then the central message may be understood as the reverse, advising readers to embrace the wolf and all that he represents, rather than to run from him.

Unlike the girls in the Perrault's and the Grimms' versions, Carter's protagonist is already aware of the dangers of the forest at the story's beginning. She is a 'strong-minded child' who heeds the warnings about wild beasts passed down to her by laying a carving knife in her basket, and who recognises immediately the danger she is in when she enters her grandmother's house to find all that remains of the old woman is a tuft of white hair caught in the fireplace.¹⁹ She is clever enough to know the threat this creature poses in spite of his semi-human appearance ('she knew the worst wolves are

hairy on the inside'), but she is also wise enough not to be frightened: 'since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid'.²⁰ Looking out upon the multitude of wolves howling in the snowy winter garden, her response is not fearful, but empathetic: 'It is very cold, poor things, she said; no wonder they howl so'.²¹ This empathetic attitude towards the wolves in the garden, and all the wildness they represent, establishes a kind of kinship between the girl and the animals that sets the tone for the last few scenes of the story, in which she embraces her supernatural lover with eagerness, and very much on her own terms.

The story concludes with the young protagonist removing her clothes and throwing each item into the fire, before crawling into bed with the wolf. Significantly, it is the girl who initiates the removal of her clothing, and she does so with an unmistakable joy and sense of liberation. In this scene the liberation is not just sexual, it also symbolises the protagonist's liberation from the civilised, rational human world:

The thin muslin went flaring up the chimney like a magic bird and now off came her skirt, her woollen stockings, her shoes, and on to the fire they went, too, and were gone for good. The firelight shone through the edges of her skin; now she was clothed only in her untouched integument of flesh. This dazzling, naked she combed out her hair with her fingers; her hair looked white as the snow outside. Then went directly to the man with red eyes in whose unkempt mane the lice moved; she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt.²²

The destruction of her clothing by fire signals her rejection of the human world along with all of the material manifestations of civilisation, and shows her willingness to embrace not only the wolf quite literally, but also her own natural or wild self. Carter's description of the girl stripped bare emphasises the non-human elements of her naked form. The translucence of her naked skin and the use of the word 'integument' to describe it calls to mind the thin membrane of a leaf, and the association between her hair and the snow outside demonstrates that she is as much a part of the wintry landscape outside the cottage as her feral lover and his brothers, the wolves. It is also significant that it is she who approaches him and begins to undress him, and then 'freely' gives 'the kiss she owed him'.²³

After tearing off the wolf's clothing and throwing it into the fire to join her own, the narrator tells us of the next intimate carnal act that will take place between the lovers: 'She will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she

would do in a savage marriage ceremony.²⁴ What could more effectively initiate a human into the wild than this most primal act of devotion? In this moment, we see how completely our human protagonist has shed the trappings of civilisation and entered the realm of the wild. But for all of their wildness, we can also see that there is tenderness and mutuality in their union. His act of laying his head in her lap demonstrates this, as well as the final line of the story: 'See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny's bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.'²⁵ The tenderness of the wolf is significant here because it shows that both girl and wolf are equally capable of domination and submission; both are fierce and vulnerable in equal measure. Thus, Carter reveals through the carnal relationship between girl and wolf that they are not so different after all. This ending presents a reversal of the message found in the versions of the story made popular by Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. Instead of the girl learning her lesson about the dangers of the predatory wolf, she meets the wolf on equal terms, demonstrating both her sexual autonomy, as well as her desire for the wild, animal world that the wolf represents – the world beyond the human.

In 'The Company of Wolves', we can see how Carter uses sexuality to destabilise binary thinking in the way that she disrupts our expectations surrounding humans and animals. She is able to demonstrate the similarities between humans and animals, and the mutuality they are capable of, through the erotic relationship between the characters. Carter's story 'The Tiger's Bride' also features a human/animal relationship that disrupts the hierarchical categories of human and animal by blurring the distinctions between the two. Like 'The Company of Wolves', this story (which is one of two retellings of 'Beauty and the Beast' in the collection) also subverts the message found in earlier versions of the tale (including Beaumont's well-known 1756 version) by altering the ending. Instead of the Beast's transformation back into a human at the end of the story, Carter's version ends with the human Beauty's magnificent transformation into a beast. The reasons for this are highly political. She recognises him, and all members of the animal kingdom, as fellow victims in a patriarchal system that denies them humanity.²⁶

The story makes explicit the way women are treated as sexual pawns in the patriarchal economy of desire, emphasising the economic value that is placed on a girl's sexual purity. As Beauty herself tells us, 'my own skin was my sole capital in the world.'²⁷ This is made evident in the story when Beauty's father bets his daughter in a game of cards against the Beast and loses. As she is her father's property, Beauty is compelled to go live with the Beast to pay her father's debt. Deemed incapable of reason, women are valued for their bodies alone, reduced to pure sensuality. The same is true of animals in this system. The beast is seen as a monster because he is not human; thus, he hides his animal features behind a mask painted with a man's face. The protagonist begins to sense her affinity with the beast and his simian valet even before she sees what lies behind the mask:

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 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 the flimsy, insubstantial things when the good Lord opened the gates of Eden and let Eve and her familiars tumble out.²⁸

She feels a sense of connection with the two ostracised figures of the Beast and his valet, because they, like her, have been othered by the realm of men. Thus, in the patriarchal world of masculine ideals, she is denied humanity just as much as they are.

This burgeoning sense of kinship between the protagonist and the Beast is later strengthened by the Beast's decision to reveal his true nature to her, in a gesture of mutuality. After she is taken to the Beast's palazzo, the Beast's valet explains that all his master wants is to see the girl naked one time, then she will be free of her debt. Insulted by the request, she refuses, and is gratified by the single tear the beast sheds in response: 'A tear, I hoped, of shame', she tells us.²⁹ The beast's shameful tear over his desires and the protagonist's refusal to submit to them demonstrate how both characters reject the stereotypes the patriarchal world expects of them. As both man and animal, the patriarchal ideal would expect the Beast to exhibit a monstrous and domineering sexuality, taking what he wants by force if refused; the young, virginal protagonist would be expected to cower before him and submit to his will. Instead, the Beast hides his body and is ashamed of his desires, expressing his vulnerability and sensitivity through the tear that he sheds, while the young, sexually innocent girl is bold enough to refuse what she considers to be a demeaning offer. Beaumont also reverses the gendered stereotype of the emotional woman and the rational man in her version of the tale by giving her Beast stereotypically feminine characteristics while Beauty speaks in terms of sense and reason, but as we will see, Carter's tale is even more radical in its reversal of these categories. As Maria Tatar points out, Beaumont's tale ends with a celebration of 'the civilizing power of feminine virtue and its triumph over crude animal instincts',³⁰ whereas Carter's tale ultimately celebrates the category of the animal and all that it encompasses by ending with the protagonist choosing to become an animal herself. In so doing she rejects the civilising code of human values that would associate her sexual innocence with virtue and goodness.

The patriarchal stereotypes of the dominant man and the submissive woman are further undermined when the Beast unmask himself for the protagonist, demonstrating his desire for reciprocity between them. Although we never learn the motivations for

his actions, his decision seems to communicate that he recognises that if he asks such a thing of her, it is only fair that he do the same himself. Although she is terrified by the prospect, she agrees, and what she sees when the Beast finally reveals himself to her makes the shared sense of kinship between them all the more powerful. The reciprocity inherent in his animal nature is stressed by the narrative which tells us: 'The tiger will never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers.'³¹ Here we are treated to a foreshadowing of the story's conclusion – it is she who will come to him on her terms, not the other way around. The description of the Beast that follows is distinctly sensual, and affects the protagonist so deeply that she feels her breast 'ripped apart, as if I suffered a marvellous wound':

A great, feline, tawny shape whose pelt was barred with a savage geometry of bars the colour of burned wood. His domed, heavy head, so terrible he must hide it. How subtle the muscles, how profound the tread. The annihilating vehemence of his eyes, like twin suns.³²

When the valet moves to cover his master once again, she stops him with an audible 'No', noting the size and heraldic strength of the animal before her, concluding with apparent satisfaction: 'Nothing about him reminded me of humanity.'³³ It is indeed this resolute lack of humanity that renders him appealing to her as a lover, and what leads to her own willingness to bare herself to him as well.

Similar to the striptease scene in 'The Company of Wolves', we see again in 'The Tiger's Bride' an encounter where a human and an animal meet as equals, exposing their vulnerabilities to one another by stripping down to their most essential physical forms. The protagonist's appreciation of the Beast's erotic animal body is evident in her descriptive sensual language, but she also does not shy away from the reality that he is a beast, a wild animal with the capacity to destroy her. All the old warnings about the dangers of male sexuality imagined in fairy tales in the form of the wild beast are drawn out here in Carter's description of this moment:

He will gobble you up.

Nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment. The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw, approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in which his appetite need not be my extinction.³⁴

Even though she still experiences that ancient human fear, she chooses to stay with the

Beast, not in spite of his animal nature, but because of it. Just like the protagonist in 'The Company of Wolves', she sheds the trappings of her humanity by removing her clothing, even if it is difficult, even if she is 'unaccustomed to nakedness', and the process leaves her feeling as if she is stripping away her own skin. And though the process may be painful, it is a pain that she is willing to endure because it means she can leave behind the commodified human world, where, as a woman she is valued only for the 'cold, white meat' of her flesh, 'where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence'.³⁵

Instead, she embraces the wild, in all its savagery, irrationality and potential danger, because she knows that there she will be treated as an equal. Thus abandoning the ornaments of her human femininity (except for a pair of diamond earrings given to her by the Beast), she goes to the Beast's room and finds him in his true form, without his human mask, 'his heavy tail twitching as he paced out the length and breadth of his imprisonment between the gnawed and bloody bones'.³⁶ She is able to see past all the human myths that have informed her perception of him, and beneath the wildness of his exterior she perceives his vulnerability, as she tells us: 'He was far more frightened of me than I was of him'.³⁷ Squatting naked before him, she stretches out her hand to show him she is unafraid, demonstrating to him once again that she is meeting him on equal terms. It is this equality that is the foundation of the wordless pact that they make together. He approaches her and begins to lick her with a 'tongue, abrasive as sandpaper', until, we are told in the final lines of the story, 'each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur'.³⁸ In losing her human skin, she is thus reborn as an animal. Her transformation is so absolute that even the diamond earrings she wears – material markers of the wealth and economic interests of men – are transformed too, signalling her freedom from a system that values her only for the purity of her human flesh. Her liberation from this system is underscored by her final gesture of shrugging the drops away – they are insignificant to her now, just as insignificant as the world of men, to which she no longer belongs. Thus, her transformation initiates her into a world where she can escape the dominant patriarchal ideas encoded in the traditional fairy tale.

And yet, her transformation does not only represent a rejection of patriarchy; it also demonstrates her acceptance of a more expansive form of sexuality, in which desire for the animal, for the non-human, shatters the patriarchal norms that dictate and delimit sexual desire. Like Little Red's decision to climb into bed with the wolf, the protagonist's decision to enter into an erotic union with the Beast is queer in the sense that it embraces pleasure in and solidarity with a being whose worth is not recognised by heterosexist patriarchy. Her sexual desire alone would make the relationship a queer one, but her transformation into a tiger herself illustrates a more profound acceptance of the non-

human and everything it represents. Her transformation also makes literal queer perceptions of identity and desire as entities that are shifting and multiple.

One last example from *The Bloody Chamber* offers a compelling demonstration of the queerness of the wild as it's represented in Carter's retold fairy tales. As we have seen, Carter's depictions of erotic encounters with non-human beings foreground the desire of her female protagonists and convey the non-human bodies of these liminal beings in terms of potent desire and sensual wonder. In no story is the erotic charge of the supernatural lover more evident than in 'The Erl-King', where the seductive appeal of the wild is both intoxicating and also potentially deadly. In this story, a young girl is summoned into the depths of the woods to sleep with the eldritch Erl-King, who is represented as the living embodiment of the forest. Just as Carter's werewolf in 'The Company of Wolves' is represented as the ultimate carnivorous predator, her Erl-King is the archetype of the supernatural seducer from ballads and folk tales.³⁹ Sex and death come together in this figure who is as deadly as he is beautiful, luring the speaker to him with a whistle he fashions out of an elder twig. Although he has a human-like appearance, Carter's Erl-King is a liminal figure who exists in between the human and the animal worlds. In this way he is similar to the werewolf in 'The Company of Wolves', and the beast in 'The Tiger's Bride', who both straddle the divide between human and animal. However, the Erl-King is even more of a liminal being because he exists between *multiple* oppositional categories, not only the human and the animal, but also between man and woman, as well as life and death. In Carter's story, the Erl-King is the living manifestation of the forest in which he lives and, as we will see, both his body and the forest that serves as the representation of his being are liminal spaces that blend oppositional categories of all kinds, establishing him as a queer being whose identity cannot be fixed.

We are made aware that the Erl-King is inseparable from the woods in the way the protagonist describes him. She compares him with mushrooms that 'spring up overnight like bubbles of earth, unsustained by nature, existing in a void'.⁴⁰ His supernatural characteristics are underscored by the fact that he has no earthly mother and father: 'I could believe that it has been the same with him; he came alive from the desire of the woods.'⁴¹ His eyes are green, 'as if from too much looking at the wood,'⁴² and they are clearly not human: 'Eyes of an incomparable luminosity, the numinous phosphorescence of the eyes of lycanthropes.'⁴³ He possesses the uncanny ability to tame all living creatures; when the protagonist first encounters him, she finds him 'in a garden where all the flowers were birds and beasts.'⁴⁴ Later in the story, when she sees him calling birds to him with his elder twig whistle, she tells us: 'He seemed so much the spirit of the place I saw without surprise how the fox laid its muzzle fearlessly upon his knee.'⁴⁵ But for all of his wildness, he has a domestic side. He lives alone in a one-room house in the heart of the woods, living off the bounty of the woodland. He makes soft cheese from the milk provided by his goat, he weaves reeds into baskets, and keeps his rustic home 'spick and span', because, as the protagonist tells us: 'He is an excellent housewife.'⁴⁶

Like the Erl-King, the autumnal woods in which the story is set are a liminal space, on the verge of transition between seasons, full of decay, and the approaching death that winter brings: 'there is a haunting sense of the imminent cessation of being; the year, in turning, turns in on itself. Introspective weather; a sickroom hush.'⁴⁷ These images of coming death act as warnings for the destruction the Erl-King promises to bring the narrator; a destruction she is all too aware of, made apparent in her refrain throughout the story: 'Erl-King will do you grievous harm.'⁴⁸ Like Carter's other female protagonists, the narrator of 'The Erl-King' is no fool; she may be a young girl, but she is fully aware of the dangers her supernatural union will bring. As the story goes on, she learns that he plans to transform her into a bird and keep her in a cage in his forest home. Thus, the narrator's language is full of images of enclosure, of consumption; the forest, which is inseparable from the Erl-King, seeks to entrap her, to swallow her up, just as he will in their sexual encounters: 'The woods enclose. You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up.'⁴⁹ The protagonist's desire for the Erl-King and her impending doom are bound up together, impossible to separate, just as the woods themselves are full of oppositions that exist side by side, reminiscent of the collapsing of distinctions that the Erl-King himself represents.

Like the autumnal wood, the Erl-King's body is a contradictory mixture of decay and abundance, and for as much as he represents life and material richness, death is never far behind: 'When he combs his hair that is the colour of dead leaves, dead leaves fall out of it; they rustle and drift to the ground as though he were a tree'; and where he walks, the narrator tells us, 'a little of the cold air that blows over graveyards always goes with him.'⁵⁰ When she compares him to a mushroom, the kind that 'spring[s] up overnight in lightless places and thrive on dead things',⁵¹ and describes his flesh as being made 'of the same substance as those leaves that are slowly turning into earth',⁵² we can see that the Erl-King's otherworldly presence embodies the contradiction at the heart of the natural world, which wildness itself encapsulates – that life is born from death and decay; we cannot have one without the other. This engendering of contradictions is evocative of Halberstam and Nyong'o's articulation of wildness as a form of internal incoherency. This is what makes it possible for the Erl-King to be represented by Carter as both a lover and a killer, possessing both the ability to create life, as well as to destroy it, and how the protagonist can claim that 'in his innocence he never knew he might be the death of me.'⁵³ Just as the decomposition of leaves eventually yields new growth, so the powers of creation and destruction exist side by side in her supernatural lover.

We can see his indistinguishability from the wood as well in their scenes of sexual union, where the narrator describes his body using images from the natural world. As much as he is a figure of death, like his forest, he is also a figure of vitality, fertility, and abundance. In her descriptions of his plant-like body, we can see how Carter's conflation of the Erl-King with his wood enables her to eroticise the natural world: 'His skin is the tint and texture of sour

cream, he has stiff, russet nipples as ripe as berries. Like a tree that bears bloom and fruit on the same bough together.⁵⁴ In its associations with the natural world, his erotic appeal is deeply androgynous, as represented in this moment of comparison between his skin and a flowering tree. The image of a male lover being likened to a tree that bears not only blossom but fruit queers our perception of the cis-gendered male body recognised by heterosexist patriarchy. The queer feminine imagery of the Erl-King's fruitful body is clearly pleasing to the female protagonist, whose perspective we are most closely aligned with in the story ('how pleasing, how lovely' she tells us in her aside).⁵⁵ Carter's ability to evoke the erotic and sensual components of the natural world through this liminal figure queers the gendered dynamics of sex, while also challenging the divide that separates humans from nature.

We see this creative potential in their scenes of sexual union as well through the repeated analogy of their sex with images of transformation. Significantly, it is not the usual kind of creative potential we associate with reproductive heterosexual sex – in which a body designated female gives birth to a child after penetrative sex with a body that's designated male. Here, instead, in describing their sex, the narrator presents us with an ever-shifting multitude of images of transformation connected with the natural world. Like the Erl-King himself, the images she uses to describe their sexual encounters shift continually as if to demonstrate her need for a multiplicity of images to represent the multiplicity that he embodies. The narrator compares herself to a seed, and imagines herself being planted in the decomposing leaves that she likens to the Erl-King's flesh, reimagining the creative potential in their sex in non-human terms: 'He could thrust me into the seed-bed of next year's generation and I would have to wait until he whistled me up from my darkness before I could come back again.'⁵⁶ She refers to his embrace as clothing her, giving her a new skin made from the components of the natural world, but instead of a fur coat like the girl in 'The Tiger's Bride', her new skin is made of water: 'He strips me to my last nakedness, that underskin of mauve, pearlised satin, like a skinned rabbit; then dresses me again in an embrace so lucid and encompassing it might be made of water. And shakes over me dead leaves as if into the stream I have become.'⁵⁷ Like a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the girl herself is transformed in the midst of the sexual act. However, unlike many of the transformations in Ovid, she does not transform to escape her lover's unwanted embraces, or to be punished for them; rather her transformation is the *result* of her lover's embrace, an embrace that she craves, as she tells us in a flurry of allusions to the sexual appetite he has awakened in her that cannot be sated: 'Eat me, drink me; thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden, I go back and back to him to have his fingers strip the tattered skin away and clothe me in his dress of water, this garment that drenches me, its slithering odour, its capacity for drowning.'⁵⁸

The narrator's ambivalent feelings towards her lover are evident in this passage, underscored by the reference to drowning, as well as by the many allusions to Christina Rossetti's poem 'Goblin Market', which evokes the theme of the sinful pleasures of the flesh

brought about by a supernatural creature, a pleasure so intense that on the other side of it is death. Rosetti's poem exists in intertextual relation with Carter's story, made clear by the repeated references to goblin fruit and by the narrator's plea to the Erl-King to 'eat me, drink me' in the midst of their lovemaking.⁵⁹ The allusion to Rosetti's poem captures the ambivalence of the narrator's feelings towards the Erl-King, which are characterised by pain and pleasure both. She tells how '[h]is touch both consoles and devastates me',⁶⁰ and when she says: 'I feel your sharp teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses', we find once again an image of water, replete with all the contradictions water itself can contain – fluid, translucent, and life-giving, but also opaque, powerful, and potentially deadly; and when she says, 'you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream', we do not know whether her screams are of pleasure or of pain.⁶¹

One final transformative image of their love-making conveys in vivid detail the myriad of shifting contradictions the Erl-King embodies: 'His skin covers me entirely; we are like two halves of a seed, enclosed in the same integument. I should like to grow enormously small, so that you could swallow me, like those queens in fairy tales who conceive when they swallow a grain of corn or a sesame seed. Then I could lodge inside your body and you would bear me.'⁶² Here, the Erl-King's already androgynous gender is further queered by his lover's erotic desire to be swallowed by him and born from his body like a child. This association of the Erl-King with the life-giving powers of the womb echo his powers as the living embodiment of the natural world, in which birth and death converge in him, just as they materially haunt his forest bower: In the figure of the Erl-King, Mother Earth is thus reimagined as a mushroom-picking, pleasure-giving, feral goblin king.

We can also see in this image the transformative capacity the Erl-King has over the narrator in his ability to make her grow enormously small and then give birth to her; as if his own shifting liminal presence is so powerful as to produce the same effect in his lovers. Further, it is significant that she describes the two of them as being like 'two halves of a seed, enclosed in the same integument'. Not only does this image render their sex in terms that feel wholly detached from human sexuality and therefore purely androgynous, as it strips them of their human-created gender categories, it also establishes them as equals, as somehow two parts of the same whole, like Plato's myth about the origins of love. There is a kind of endless creative capacity couched in the transformational images of their lovemaking, as if sex with the Erl-King has the power not just to create new life, but to create entirely new systems for imagining erotic desire, sexuality, the bodies of all living beings, and how they relate to one another.

These images of transformation in their lovemaking foreshadow the final transformation that their union leads to at the story's conclusion, when the narrator will free the caged birds the Erl-King has held prisoner; and they will turn back into the girls they once were. Significantly, the story does not end with the Erl-King capturing the heroine and transforming her into a bird, but rather with her breaking the spell of his enchantment by strangling him

with his own hair, and then using his hair to string the old fiddle that hangs on his wall so it may play itself: 'The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out: "Mother, mother, you have murdered me!"'⁶³ This final image of the story contains allusions to two different stories of transformation: 'The Juniper Tree', the Grimms' grisly tale about a boy who is murdered by his stepmother and transforms into a bird to tell the truth about his murder; and a Child ballad called 'The Twa Sisters' that tells of a girl who is murdered by her jealous sister and whose hair and bones are transformed into a musical instrument that plays itself to reveal the identity of the girl's murderer. While both of these texts are often read as cautionary tales about retributive justice, the transformative logic inherent in the images of the bird and the singing bones contain a deeper message about rebirth and the transformative possibility of the creative act. In both of these stories, it is the act of transformation that gives the wronged protagonists the opportunity to speak their truth through song.

Similarly, in 'The Erl-King', the protagonist is able to seek her own retributive justice against her potential captor through the transformative power of their erotic encounters. The transformative power of her relationship with the Erl-King is such that it enables her to break the terms of the predator/prey dynamic, which would confine her to the role of passive victim, and allow her to be caged by the Erl-King like all the girls who came before her. Even though the Erl-King plans to seduce and capture the protagonist, because he exists as an embodiment of the wild, and all of the multiplicity of being and liminality that that entails, her erotic encounters with him also unlock this possibility, upending the terms of the heterosexual contract, and establishing her belonging in this world of multiplicity and liminality that he represents. This final reversal reveals the ways in which the nature of his status as a wild transformative being is ultimately disruptive to the patriarchal power dynamics that he attempts to uphold as her seducer. The queer possibility that their relationship entails overpowers the old patriarchal script.

In 'The Erl-King', like in 'The Company of Wolves' and 'The Tiger's Bride', we can see how the queer possibility of the wild is made material in Carter's depictions of the erotic relationships her female protagonists experience with these liminal supernatural beings. In the transformative ontology of these erotic encounters, the wild takes the place of the expected heterosexual exchange, destabilising normative categories and opening up the possibility for a multiplicity of self, and a desire that foregrounds sensuality, reciprocity, and mutual pleasure. But even beyond the recognition of equality and mutuality that these relationships make possible, the desire for the wild that Carter's female protagonists experience is more profoundly a desire for queering itself, for that seemingly endless potential promised by the act of transformation.

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Notes

1. See for example: Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: Plume, 1974): 31-49.
2. See for example: Karen E. Rowe, 'Feminism and Fairy Tales', *Women's Studies* 6 (1979): 237-57.
3. Angela Carter, 'Notes from the Front Line', *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983), 69.
4. Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', *Feminist Review* 42 (Autumn 1992): 2-15; Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); and Patricia Brooke, 'Lyons and Tigers and Wolves – Oh My! Revisionary Fairy Tales in the Work of Angela Carter', *Critical Survey* 16.1 (2004): 67-88.
5. Some notable exceptions include Patricia Duncker, 'Queer Gothic: Angela Carter and the lost narratives of sexual subversion', *Critical Survey* 8, no. 1 (1996): 56-68, and Kimberly J. Lau, 'A Desire for Death: The Grimms' Sleeping Beauty in *The Bloody Chamber*', *Transgressive Tales: Queering the Grimms*, ed. Kay Turner and Pauline Greenhill (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).
6. Kimberly J. Lau, 'Erotic Infidelities: Angela Carter's Wolf Trilogy', *Marvels & Tales* 106, no.1 (2008): 77-94, 92.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, 'Theory in the Wild', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 117 no. 3 (2018): 453-64, 453.
9. See for example Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Queer Inhumanisms), Vol. 21, Nos 2-3, June 2015; *Animalities: Literary and Cultural Studies Beyond the Human*, ed. Michael Lundblad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
10. Halberstam and Nyong'o, 'Theory in the Wild', 454.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
13. Halberstam, *Wild Things*, 11.
14. *Ibid.*
15. French folklorist Paul Delarue has written a composite version of these older, more vulgar tales called 'The Grandmother'. For an English translation of Delarue's tale, see Maria Tatar (ed.), *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Norton, 2017), 14-16.
16. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 116.
17. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 113.
18. Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 17-18.
19. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 114.
20. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 117.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 118.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. For an in-depth analysis of the way Carter re-maps human and animal dynamics as they relate to dualistic binaries from Western culture in 'The Tiger's Bride', see Caroline Webb and Helen Hopcroft's excellent essay: "'A Different Logic': Animals, Transformation, and Rationality in Angela Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride'", *Marvels & Tales* 31, no. 2 (2017): 313-37.
27. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 56.
28. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 63.
29. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 59.
30. Tatar, *Classic Fairy Tales*, 37.
31. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 64.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*

34. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 67.
35. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 66.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 67.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Examples of the supernatural/fairy lover in folktales and ballads are numerous, but there is an especially high number in the Scottish ballad tradition. See especially Frances James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1884-98). Carter's deployment of the Erl-King figure is also, of course, a direct reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1782 ballad 'Erlkönig', which was inspired by the Danish ballad tradition, specifically two Danish ballads translated by Johann Gottfried von Herder in his collection *Volkslieder* (1778-9). For an excellent analysis of the relationship between Goethe's ballad and the Danish ballad tradition, see Robert W. Rix's essay 'The Elf-King: Translation, Transmission, and Transfiguration' in *Nordic Romanticism: Translation, Transmission, Transformation*, ed. Cian Duffy and Robert W. Rix (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1-29.
40. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 86.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*
43. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 90.
44. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 85.
45. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 88.
46. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 87.
47. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 84.
48. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 85.
49. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 84.
50. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 87.
51. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 86.
52. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 87.
53. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 90.
54. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 88.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*
57. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 89.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Christina Rossetti, 'Goblin Market', in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2005), 854.
60. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 89.
61. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 88.
62. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 89.
63. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*, 91.