

Of Flesh and Phantoms: The Irigarayan Gothic Maternal in Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber and Beyond

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Abstract

This paper examines the spectral and physical aspects of the mother-daughter relationship in Angela Carter's gothic short fiction, with a primary focus on *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and stories such as "The Lady of the House of Love." It applies Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference, drawn from *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985) and *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993), where the maternal-feminine emerges as a fluid subjectivity that resists phallocentric control and erasure. Carter's narratives present vivid scenes of female becoming, featuring maternal figures as powerful ghosts that challenge Oedipal structures through gothic transformation and embodied feminine language. The study highlights key Irigaray concepts, including placental economy and *parler-femme*—a cyclical, sensory form of feminine speech. Carter's mothers, depicted as wolf-like, vampiric, or tenderly monstrous, establish sites of bodily power; their rhythmic prose disrupts patriarchal meaning systems. In *The Bloody Chamber*, the mother arrives as a "shadow of yourself," restoring mother-daughter reciprocity, while bodily fluids like blood, flesh, and milk signify pre-Oedipal bonds that interrupt linear identity formation. Findings reveal the gothic mother as an active agent of feminist change, not mere lack or rejection: the vampiress embodies plural identity ("virgin, vampire, mother, maiden"). This Irigarayan-Carterian framework advances gothic maternal studies by redefining relationality through desire, difference, and self-other connection.

Keywords: sexual difference, gothic maternity, mother-daughter relationship, *parler-femme*, placental economy, spectral embodiment, feminist gothic

Introduction

Angela Carter (1940–1992) occupies a contentious position in feminist literary history. Celebrated for her transgressive rewritings of fairy tale and gothic convention, she has also attracted sustained feminist critique: contemporaries aligned with Andrea Dworkin's circle accused Carter of aestheticizing violence against women rather than dismantling it, and the question of whether *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) constitutes a feminist intervention or a sophisticated reproduction of patriarchal desire remains actively contested in Carter scholarship. This essay does not resolve that debate but takes it as a necessary point of departure.

Within that contested terrain, Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference offers a generative, if imperfect, interpretive framework for three stories from the collection: the title story, *The Lady of the House of Love*, and *The Company of Wolves*. Irigaray's concepts of *parler-femme*, placental economy, and the two-subject mother-daughter relation illuminate dimensions of Carter's prose that psychoanalytic frameworks grounded in Lacanian lack tend to foreclose. The three stories are selected because they foreground gothic feminine or quasi-gothic feminine figures in structurally distinct ways: the title story stages a living gothic feminine intervention; *The Lady of the House of Love* dramatizes gothic feminine spectral inheritance; "The Company of Wolves" embeds gothic feminine transmission in oral and

corporeal tradition. Stories that do not center gothic feminine dynamics—"Puss-in-Boots," "The Erl-King"—are accordingly excluded.

The essay makes three related claims. First, that Carter's gothic feminine figures resist the psychoanalytic characterization of the mother as absence, lack, or obstacle to subject formation, performing instead forms of relational subjectivity grounded in difference rather than identity. Second, that Irigaray's framework, while illuminating, strains at the points where the gothic genre's constitutive reliance on death, monstrosity, and spectral absence conflicts with Irigaray's ethics of living, embodied, reciprocal relation. Third, that Carter's prose style formally enacts a mode of disrupted, non-linear expression that productively, though not unproblematically, resonates with Irigarayan *parler-femme*. These claims are advanced through close formal reading of the three stories in conjunction with theoretical exegesis of key Irigarayan texts.

Literature Review

Critical literature on Carter has developed along several overlapping trajectories. Scholars working in the feminist fairy-tale tradition—Cristina Bacchilega, Merja Makinen, Susan Sellers—have mapped Carter's subversion of mythic and folkloric structures, though their accounts differ in emphasis and theoretical commitment. Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales* (1997) draws on performance theory and

narrative theory alongside feminist critique, producing a reading of Carter's work as a "tripling" of fairy-tale convention that cannot be reduced to ideological reversal: postmodern fairy tales do not simply retell traditional narratives but expose and revise the ideological assumptions behind them, especially concerning gender and power. Makinen's influential essay "Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality" offers a liberationist reading that centers desire rather than absence, though motherhood remains peripheral to its argument. Sellers's *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* and Dani Cavallaro's *Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation* engage psychoanalytic frameworks more extensively, deploying Freudian and Lacanian categories deliberately rather than unreflectively. It would therefore be inaccurate to characterize this body of criticism as trapped within "lack and absence"; rather, these studies collectively demonstrate how Carter repeatedly stages the instability of gendered identity, the violence of patriarchal romance, and the narratological power of rewriting.

Scholarship focused more directly on the gothic dimensions of Carter's work includes Sarah Gamble's *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line* and Rebecca Munford's *Re-visiting Angela Carter*. Munford's feminist psychoanalytic critique attends carefully to loss and trauma but does not engage the relational and embodied frameworks that post-Irigarayan feminist theory

has developed. Lucie Armitt's work on Carter and the gothic offers a body-centered approach that anticipates aspects of the Irigarayan reading proposed here: her argument that Carter's fiction challenges masculine objectification by situating the gothic body as a site of ambivalent resistance is especially useful for this essay. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik's contributions to feminist gothic studies theorize the female body as a site of resistant inscription without reducing it to either Lacanian lack or Irigarayan multiplicity; they are less concerned with what the female body essentially is than with what it does within specific cultural and textual contexts. Their work is important because it situates Carter within a broader genealogy of women's gothic writing rather than treating her as an isolated case.

The Irigarayan framework itself requires careful handling. In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi identifies Irigaray's celebration of feminine morphology as potentially reinscribing the biological essentialism it claims to dissolve: if feminine language is anchored in "two lips," breath, and bodily contiguity, it risks naturalizing the very gender difference that patriarchal discourse has constructed. This essay does not treat Irigaray's bodily metaphors as biologically essentialist claims; instead, it reads them as strategically embodied and historically situated figures that remain useful insofar as their essentialist pressure is kept visible and critically limited—insofar, that is, as they are not permitted

to solidify into transhistorical claims about feminine embodiment and sexual difference. Judith Butler's critique in *Gender Trouble* sharpens this concern: Butler argues that Irigaray's mimetic strategy depends on a stable feminine that it cannot ground without appealing to a pre-discursive body, thereby smuggling in the essentialism it purports to critique. Naomi Schor's defense of Irigaray is also relevant here. Schor argues that critics have often mistaken Irigaray's rhetorical deployment of the female body for a philosophical claim about female nature, urging instead that we "begin by de-essentializing essentialism" (60). Schor's distinction between essentialism and the strategic deployment of bodily imagery matters for this essay because it permits the application of Irigarayan categories without reducing them to crude biologism—while nonetheless insisting that the tension between metaphor, ontology, and politics in Irigaray's writing remains unresolved, and must remain visible in any application of her categories.

The particular Irigaray applied in this essay is primarily the relational and ethical Irigaray of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and the linguistic Irigaray of *This Sex Which Is Not One*, with selective recourse to *Speculum of the Other Woman*. These texts represent distinct and not entirely consistent phases of Irigaray's thought: the structural-psychoanalytic Irigaray of *Speculum* and the ontological-ethical Irigaray of *An Ethics* do not speak with a single voice. Where the essay

moves between them, it flags the transition rather than treating Irigaray as a unified theoretical resource.

Carter's own contested feminist politics also warrant acknowledgement. Carter described herself as a "shocking pink propagandist" for the sexual revolution but simultaneously embraced sadomasochistic aesthetics that some feminist readers found irreconcilable with feminist politics. Lorna Sage's work remains one of the most useful critical entry points into this ambivalence, arguing that Carter sought to "demythologize femininity" (57). Helen Simpson's introduction to the 2006 Vintage edition of *The Bloody Chamber* reads the collection's violence as carnivalesque liberation; Patricia Duncker, by contrast, argues that Carter reinscribes the structures she appears to subvert, since the heroine's awakening in the title story is mediated through her relationship to the Marquis and through a highly eroticized representation of female vulnerability. This essay aligns with neither position wholesale but takes the critical controversy as a reason to read Carter's gothic feminine figures with sustained attention to what the gothic frame does as well as what it enables—treating excess and contradiction as constitutive rather than exceptional, since both Carter's prose and Irigaray's bodily imagery produce meaning through instability.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Irigaray and the Gothic Feminine

Luce Irigaray's major works of the 1970s—most notably *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974) and *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977)—interrogate the phallogentric structures that have historically defined woman as secondary, derivative, or absent within Western thought. Drawing on and revising Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, she argues that Western discourse produces femininity as a structural other within a masculine symbolic order. Irigaray is most useful to this essay not because she offers a ready-made feminist key to Angela Carter, but because she exposes the extent to which femininity is constructed as secondary to masculinity—understood in terms of derivation, absence, and substitutability within a broader symbolic system. In Irigaray's analysis, the female subject is not simply excluded from philosophical discourse; she is structurally produced as the other of a system that can recognise woman only as lack, mirror, womb, or commodity (*This Sex* 68–85). This matters for reading Carter because the gothic feminine figures in *The Bloody Chamber* are repeatedly positioned at the point where patriarchal narratives attempt to convert women into functions—yet Carter's maternal, spectral, and quasi-gothic feminine figures do not remain stable symbols of origin or nurture. They appear as agents, ghosts, protectors, predators, and transmitters of knowledge. Irigaray helps to name

this resistance; she also demonstrates why it remains unstable, since any attempt to articulate femininity risks being reabsorbed into the symbolic structures that position it as secondary and derivative.

At the center of Irigaray's intervention is her insistence that sexual difference has never been properly thought within Western philosophy. Rather than accepting the masculine subject as universal and the feminine as derivative, Irigaray argues for a culture in which two subjects can exist in relation without one being absorbed into the terms of the other. This claim is crucial for any reading of Carter's gothic feminine figures because they do not function primarily as origin points for male identity or as passive containers for female suffering. Instead, they mark relations between women: mother and daughter, grandmother and granddaughter, gothic surrogate mother and vulnerable inheritor. In this sense, Carter's fiction can be read as imagining precisely the kind of relational subjectivity Irigaray seeks, though in gothic and unstable form.

Irigaray's work on the mother-daughter relation is especially valuable here. In patriarchal culture, she argues, the daughter is compelled to identify with the father's symbolic order and to lose access to the mother as a speaking and desiring subject, producing a symbolic rupture in which women are prevented from inheriting a female genealogy. Carter's fiction repeatedly stages this rupture. The mothers in *The Bloody*

Chamber are absent, delayed, or overdetermined by violence and narrative constraint—yet these absences do not merely reproduce patriarchal loss. They also dramatise the need for a female line of transmission not reducible to biological motherhood alone. Carter turns the gothic feminine into a site of struggle over memory, language, and survival, making it a productive point of contact with Irigaray's concerns about sexual difference, representation, and the limits of patriarchal discourse.

Irigaray's notion of *parler-femme* is not a simple claim that women speak in a biologically determined way. Rather, it names a mode of discourse that resists linear, hierarchical, and masterful forms of expression—a mode that is multiple, discontinuous, rhythmic, and excessive, that does not aim to imitate masculine logic but exposes the limits of that logic by unsettling its syntax and assumptions. Carter's prose is not feminine in any essentialist sense, and it would be a mistake to reduce her style to Irigarayan embodiment. But her writing frequently proceeds through accretion, repetition, sensuous detail, and abrupt tonal shifts in ways that make it possible to read her sentences as formally resistant to the governing conventions of patriarchal narrative. Carter's gothic feminine figures are never simply natural or originary; they are culturally mediated, theatrical, and gothic. A reading that treats Irigaray as offering a fixed model of female being would flatten Carter's complexity. The more

productive approach treats Irigaray as offering a vocabulary for thinking relation, embodiment, and symbolic exclusion, while keeping her essentialist pressures visible throughout.

That tension is especially productive within the gothic. Irigaray's thought repeatedly returns to the cost of a symbolic order that has severed daughters from mothers and women from one another. Carter's gothic fiction turns that severance into a visible narrative fact: mothers are murdered, absent, or too late; daughters are trapped in enclosed houses; female inheritance appears only in fragments, warnings, scars, and stories. The gothic thus becomes a formal language for what Irigaray calls the cultural erasure of the feminine. At the same time, the gothic never allows the feminine to become wholly reparative: it insists on death, haunting, repetition, and instability, which means that the gothic feminine in Carter is not a recovered origin but a contested scene in which presence and absence continually displace one another.

Irigaray's accounts of exchange and female value illuminate a further dimension of Carter's gothic feminine economy. Patriarchal systems, in her analysis, organize women as objects of circulation between men rather than as subjects of relation in their own right. Carter's stories are deeply concerned with this structure of circulation: the wives in "The Bloody Chamber" are stored like commodities; the vampiress in "The Lady of the House of Love" is trapped in a

repetitive economy of death and seduction; the granddaughter in "The Company of Wolves" falls, consciously, into the loop of predator and prey. These are structurally distinct forms of gothic feminine or quasi-gothic feminine relation, but all expose the inadequacy of patriarchal exchange as the only model for understanding women's social being.

For these reasons, Irigaray should not be presented as a transparent interpretive tool. Her value lies partly in the fact that she is genuinely difficult: simultaneously anti-phallogentric and vulnerable to essentialist criticism, radical in her insistence on sexual difference and limited by her own reliance on bodily metaphor. That doubleness makes her especially appropriate for Carter, whose fiction is similarly double-coded—at once feminist and ambivalent, liberatory and complicit, reparative and violent. Reading the gothic feminine through Irigaray does not resolve Carter's contradictions; it makes them more legible. In the title story, the mother appears as an intervention that interrupts patriarchal murder, but her action is not simple nurture—it is force, mobility, and armed agency. In "The Lady of the House of Love," the gothic feminine is present only as erasure, trace, and inheritance in ruins. In *The Company of Wolves*, the granddaughter possesses practical knowledge of survival, yet her engagement with the werewolf remains ethically indeterminate. In each case, the gothic feminine is not a stable essence but a relation under pressure—

and it is at the points of pressure that the most significant critical work occurs.

Argument and Analytical Procedure

This essay argues that, with important qualifications, Carter's gothic feminine figures in the three stories examined enact a cluster of operations that Irigaray's philosophy helps to render legible: they resist the gothic feminine-as-lack central to dominant psychoanalytic accounts, perform relational subjectivity grounded in recognition across difference rather than assimilation, and employ a prose that formally enacts the non-linear, embodied modes of meaning Irigaray theories as *parler-femme*.

Building on close readings of the three stories, the essay reads Carter's gothic feminine figures through an Irigarayan lens while remaining attentive to the limits of that framework—especially where Carter's gothic imagery, spectral mothers, or violent ruptures complicate Irigaray's emphasis on dialogic mutual recognition. Methodologically, the study combines theoretical exegesis of key Irigarayan texts with formalist attention to narrative voice, temporality, and embodied metaphor, showing how Carter's style both manifests and strains the operations Irigaray describes.

In each story, the gothic genre simultaneously enables and constrains feminist reclamation. Death, monstrosity, and spectral absence—the constitutive elements of the gothic feminine—are not obviously consonant with

Irigaray's ethics of living, embodied, reciprocal relation. This tension is not resolved in the readings that follow; it is treated as genuinely productive critical material.

Analysis and Discussion

The Bloody Chamber: Sovereignty, Reciprocity, and the Limits of Rescue

The Bloody Chamber tells the story of a young pianist who marries a wealthy Marquis and moves to his isolated castle, gradually discovering that he has murdered his previous wives. When he returns and prepares to kill her, her mother arrives and shoots him. The story's closing sequence is one of the most analysed moments in the collection, and rightly so: it ruptures the gothic logic of female passivity at precisely the moment when that logic seems most complete. The mother appears not as an allegorical figure but as a physical agent whose intervention is simultaneously gothic feminine and martial:

you never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father's service revolver and, behind her, the breakers of the savage, indifferent sea, like the witnesses of a furious justice. (46)

The mother's armed arrival can be read as Irigarayan relational intervention insofar as it interrupts the Marquis's murderous control and restores the daughter as a subject in relation—encountering her as a distinct subject across a relation of difference rather than absorbing her. The narrator recalls: "I can only bless the—what shall I call it?—the maternal telepathy that sent my mother running headlong from the telephone to the station after I had called her, that night" (48). The scene constitutes the daughter not by merger but by recognition across generational difference, which is precisely the structure of relation Irigaray valorises.

Yet the framework strains at several points. The mother arrives with a pistol, performing a sovereign agency coded in the story's imagery as masculine—a cavalry charge, a weapon, an act of violent interruption. If Irigaray's ethics insists on a specifically feminine mode of relation grounded in proximity, touch, and non-hierarchical reciprocity, the mother's rescue enacts something closer to the patriarchal model of heroic intervention it is supposed to displace. This is not a disqualifying observation: Carter's deliberate adoption of masculine generic conventions for feminist purposes is itself a form of strategic mimesis. But it does mean the passage cannot be read as an unambiguous instantiation of Irigarayan ethics. The mother rescues; she does not enter into the reciprocal recognition that Irigaray imagines.

The prose surrounding the rescue performs a different kind of work. Carter's sentences at this climactic moment are short, percussive, and rhythmically irregular in ways that disrupt the lush, accumulated syntax of the Marquis's sections, enacting at the level of style the rupture that the plot stages at the level of event: "Assistance. My mother. I ran to the telephone; and the line, of course, was dead" (18). "Courage. When I thought of courage, I thought of my mother" (24). Whether this constitutes *parler-femme* in Irigaray's sense depends on which Irigaray one invokes. The morphological Irigaray, for whom feminine language is anchored in bodily specificity, would require a more explicit connection between prose rhythm and embodied feminine experience than Carter's text straightforwardly provides. The rhetorical Irigaray, for whom mimesis is the operative mode, finds in the shift of register a parodic exposure of phallogocentric narrative control. Both readings are tenable; neither is definitive.

The gothic maternal rescue also matters structurally because it refuses one of the central gothic scripts: the helpless daughter saved only by a man. In Carter's version, the daughter is vulnerable, but the rescuing force comes from a female figure whose age, mobility, and independence are emphasized rather than diminished. "I never heard you cry before," the mother says, "by way of explanation. Not when you were happy. And who ever cried because of

gold bath taps?" (48). For an Irigarayan reading, this exchange is significant because it preserves difference between mother and daughter rather than collapsing them into identity. The mother is older, outward-facing, and socially mobile; the daughter remains inside the chamber, caught in a narrative of erotic entrapment. The scene therefore offers an ethics of relation without identity—closer to Irigaray's two-subject model than to the fusion of simple sisterhood.

At the same time, the title story complicates any effort to convert the mother into a symbol of feminist empowerment. Carter's mother is associated with hunting, travel, and violence rather than with peaceful nurture. The story thus suggests that gothic feminine power under patriarchy may take the form of protective force rather than benign care—broadening the concept of the gothic feminine beyond domestic constraint and into the realm of action, movement, and judgment. In this sense, Carter's mother resists the reduction of the gothic feminine to symbolic dependence or reproductive function, a reduction that Irigaray also criticizes, even as she does so through means that Irigaray's own ethics cannot fully accommodate.

The Lady of the House of Love: Mimesis, Spectral Desire, and the Problem of Absence

The Lady of the House of Love is a gothic story about a lonely vampire countess in a decaying Transylvanian castle, trapped by her own

curse, compelled to lure men to their deaths. Carter describes the vampiress as "both virgin and vampire," "death and the maiden," bound to a castle that is "like a mausoleum" (117):

Wearing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence; she counts out the Tarot cards, ceaselessly construing a constellation of possibilities as if the random fall of the cards on the red plush tablecloth before her could precipitate her from her chill, shuttered room into a country of perpetual summer and obliterate the perennial sadness of a girl who is both death and the maiden. (117)

When a rational, unafraid British soldier arrives on the eve of the First World War, his gentle kiss breaks the spell but simultaneously causes her death, since becoming human means becoming mortal.

Carter gives the vampiress a strikingly unstable ontology. She refuses the singular identity that patriarchal classification imposes on women, inhabiting what Irigaray calls the "not-one" of feminine subjectivity—a plurality of folds and contradictions that defies phallic unity. Yet this plurality is inseparable from patriarchal inheritance: "Just as they staked him out, the fatal

Count cried: 'Nosferatu is dead; long live Nosferatu!' Now she possesses all the haunted forests and mysterious habitations of his vast domain" (117). The vampiress's plural, spectral subjectivity is thus an effect of gothic feminine erasure, not of gothic feminine presence: she has inherited her father's name and domain, not a living female genealogy.

This is where the Irigarayan framework encounters its most significant internal tension in relation to Carter's text. Irigaray's mother-daughter ethics is premised on the possibility of mutual recognition between living subjects who can speak and respond. Carter's vampiress, however, inherits not a living female interlocutor but a surrogate figure—a governess or female helper—who functions as a mediating agent within a system of enclosure, inheritance, and repetition rather than as a stabilizing source of care. The story therefore refuses the consolatory narrative repair that Irigaray's ethics implies, producing instead a spectral plurality in which gothic feminine presence persists only as a mediated function of patriarchal inheritance. Whether this refusal represents a limitation of Carter's feminism—an abdication of redemptive feminist narration that forecloses mutual recognition—or a deliberate ethical choice that preserves the ambivalences and violences feminist theory must reckon with rather than neatly resolve, is a question the text opens without closing.

The vampiress's spectral plurality is produced by gothic feminine erasure rather than by gothic feminine presence. If Irigaray diagnoses the cultural murder of the female ancestor as a founding act of phallocentrism, Carter's story stages the aftermath of that murder without offering a clear alternative. The vampiress does not reconstruct a gothic feminine genealogy; she inhabits its ruins. The scene in which she lingers over relics of feminine life—wedding dress, portrait, faded letters—shows relationality as spectral and asymmetrical rather than dialogic: these objects evoke recognition only as ghostly echo, undercutting Irigaray's model of mutual responsiveness and thereby making the theoretical stakes of her ethics more visible. This marked mismatch does not undermine the comparison so much as deepen it: Carter's gothic becomes a powerful test case that exposes both the generative force and the limits of Irigarayan claims about mutual recognition.

The story's narrative temporality is, however, suggestively Irigarayan in form. Its oscillation between present-tense immediacy—"wearing an antique bridal gown, the beautiful queen of the vampires *sits* all alone" (117, emphasis mine)—and folklore-inflected repetition, with its cyclical rituals and its sense that the vampiress is trapped in a repeated script ("La Papesse, La Mort, La Tour Abolie, wisdom, death, dissolution" [119]), produces what Irigaray identifies as the cyclical and repetitive structure of

feminine language against the linear teleology of dominant narrative. Whether this cyclicity constitutes resistance or entrapment is a question the story raises without resolving: the vampiress is imprisoned in repetition as much as she inhabits it, and this ambiguity is central to the story's power.

The figure of the soldier is equally important. He does not "save" the vampiress in any conventional sense; rather, his unguarded humanity destabilizes her curse. His passivity—rare among Carter's male figures—alters the gendered structure of desire: rather than predatory masculine mastery, Carter stages a tenderness that is almost unbearable to the vampiress precisely because it cannot be assimilated into her vampiric economy. Her death follows from the impossibility of reconciling love with immortality, eros with endless repetition. The story's refusal to resolve its carefully constructed tensions leaves the vampiress in a state of productive indeterminacy: her brief encounter with affect, embodiment, and vulnerability does not inaugurate a new symbolic order but terminates her existence. Carter thus refuses both the restorative fantasy of gothic feminine recovery and the teleological promise of feminist emancipation through recognition, offering instead a gothic meditation on what it means to inhabit a subjectivity constituted by loss, repetition, and spectral desire.

The Company of Wolves: Gothic Feminine Transmission and the Limits of Protection

The Company of Wolves is a dark parodic retelling of Little Red Riding Hood in which a girl on the threshold between childhood and adulthood travels through a dangerous forest to her grandmother's house and encounters a werewolf. Carter establishes her agency from the outset:

She stands and moves within the invisible pentacle of her own virginity. She is an unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has inside her a magic space the entrance to which is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a closed system; she does not know how to shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of nothing. (143)

The story focuses on the girl's sexual and psychological initiation into maturity. At the grandmother's cottage, the wolf kills and eats the grandmother, then waits for the girl. Instead of being eaten, the girl confronts the wolf with confidence and allure; the ending deliberately refuses resolution.

The grandmother in "The Company of Wolves" differs from the gothic feminine figures in the other two stories in one important structural respect: she does not rescue—she transmits. Her body, aged and physically formidable, carries and passes on a form of embodied knowledge about survival in a world populated by predators. The grandmother does not survive to guide the girl's

final confrontation, and she should therefore not be read as a direct source of knowledge at the climax. Even so, her earlier warnings, the domestic setting she has established, and the story's inherited folkloric frame shape the girl's response, making her operative as a figure of transmitted memory and caution rather than as a present teacher. Her death can be read as the symbolic removal of an older generation and the protective domestic world associated with childhood, leaving the girl to negotiate the world without a gothic feminine or familial mediator.

The Irigarayan reading of these dynamics focuses on what Irigaray describes as feminine transmission: the possibility of a relation between mother and daughter that is neither fusion nor rivalry but the passing of something—language, knowledge, desire, embodied competence—across a generational difference that remains intact. The granddaughter's erotic agency at the story's close—her seduction of the wolf and her claimed sovereignty over the encounter—has been read by critics such as Patricia Duncker as an inscription of the very predator-prey dynamic it appears to reverse (9). Duncker's warning merits partial assent: Carter's ending does risk replaying predator-prey logic. But it does not simply reinstate patriarchal domination, and the difference lies in what Carter constructs as gothic feminine transmission—a form of knowledge that does not shelter the girl from darkness but sends her into it equipped.

The opening passage establishes this with precision. The girl is "well-warned": she knows the wolves are dangerous, carries a carving knife, and goes anyway. This is not the protective gothic feminine of bourgeois domesticity, which hedges and prohibits; it is a gothic feminine knowledge that acknowledges the world's predatory structure and arms the girl to move through it without paralysis. Alongside the warning, Carter places love: the girl has been "too much loved ever to feel"—the sentence suspends itself there, leaving its object unspoken. What she cannot feel is structurally unnamable because gothic feminine love has foreclosed it entirely, hollowing out the psychic space where fear, and therefore vulnerability, would otherwise live. This is not sentimental love but love operating as a gothic counter-force, transmitted before the narrative's action, enabling the girl's laughter in the wolf's face and her refusal to be "nobody's meat" (149).

The grandmother herself never appears alive in the story, yet she organizes the entire encounter: the girl walks toward her, the wolf has already consumed her, the cottage remains her space. She is operative precisely through absence—a classically gothic structure in which the dead continue to act. Carter therefore gives the gothic feminine an epistemic role that functions beyond the grave: the girl arrives at the cottage not in ignorance but prepared, shaped by a transmission of knowledge and security that precedes and survives the grandmother's death.

Whether the granddaughter's liberation consists in becoming the active agent of a sexual encounter with a male predator represents a transformation of the gothic structure or its inversion within the same terms remains the story's central unresolved question. The Irigarayan framework does not straightforwardly resolve it: *jouissance* in Irigaray is not simply desire directed at a male object, but a relation to the body and to another that exceeds the logic of possession and exchange. Whether Carter's granddaughter achieves this or merely reenacts possession from a different subject-position is a question the story invites but refuses to answer. That refusal is itself part of the story's critical force: Carter denies the reader a secure interpretive position, and that denial enacts the same formal resistance to closure that characterizes the other two stories examined here.

Feminine Language and Gothic Feminine Ethics

Across all three stories, Carter's prose performs a set of formal operations that the Irigarayan framework helps to name, even as the framework's grounding in bodily morphology limits the claim's scope. Carter's sentences are characteristically non-linear: they accumulate subordinate clauses, loop back on their own imagery, and produce meaning through accretion and recurrence rather than through argumentative progression. This formal property—what Irigaray

identifies as the cyclical and contiguous quality of *parler-femme*—is present whether or not one accepts Irigaray's claim that such language is specifically feminine in origin or morphological in basis. Carter's prose approximates *parler-femme* through rhythmic disruption, sensuous excess, and syntactic irregularity, especially in moments where female intervention breaks the smooth authority of masculine narration.

What the formal analysis can claim with less theoretical risk is that Carter's prose style disrupts the dominant syntactic conventions of the gothic narrative it inhabits. The Marquis's voice in the title story—possessive, declarative, linearly organized around the movement of ownership—is syntactically opposed to the mother's arrival, which Carter renders in fragmented, rhythmically irregular sentences. Whether this opposition is best described as *parler-femme* versus phallogentric discourse, or simply as deliberate generic subversion, may be less important than the observation that the formal opposition exists and does ideological work within the story. The gothic feminine figures in all three stories function as bearers of knowledge transmitted through bodily and linguistic proximity rather than through authoritative statement.

This is Irigaray's placental economy at its most suggestive: the idea that the gothic feminine relation is one of sustenance through proximity, of a giving that does not exhaust itself in the gift, of a knowledge that is carried in the

body as much as in language. Carter stages this mode of transmission in each story, though in each case the gothic genre introduces a complication—the mother's militarism, the vampiress's entrapment, the granddaughter's ambiguous survival—that prevents the Irigarayan model from settling into a simply affirmative account.

Carter's prose also repeatedly places the body at the center of meaning-making. Blood, teeth, skin, lips, wounds, and touch recur not as decorative details but as epistemic surfaces. This matters because Irigaray's challenge to Western philosophy is partly a challenge to abstraction: she insists that embodied sexual difference cannot be reduced to symbolic exchange alone. Carter's gothic materiality therefore resonates with Irigaray's insistence that subjectivity is not disembodied—while simultaneously making the body dangerous, pleasurable, and unstable. The body is where power is exercised and where it is undone.

Findings and Discussion

Across the three stories examined, Carter's gothic feminine and quasi-gothic feminine figures resist the dominant psychoanalytic characterization of the mother as absence, lack, or obstacle to subject formation. In each case, the gothic feminine figure exercises a form of agency that is legible, through the Irigarayan framework, as an enactment of relational subjectivity grounded in difference rather than identity: the

mother-sovereign of the title story, the spectral plurality of the vampiress, and the diffuse, unnamed gothic feminine transmission of *The Company of Wolves*, whose warning and love arm the girl against fear without ever cohering into a single present figure.

The Irigarayan framework has, however, revealed three distinct pressure points in the course of this analysis. First, the gothic genre's constitutive reliance on death, monstrosity, and spectral absence sits in tension with Irigaray's ethics of living, embodied reciprocal relation. The gothic feminine figures in these stories are powerful precisely because they are monstrous, dead, or haunting—conditions that Irigaray's framework can diagnose as symptoms of a culture that has murdered the female ancestor, but cannot easily convert into positive ethical models. Second, Irigaray's morphological claims—especially the claim that feminine language is anchored in bodily specificity—cannot be straightforwardly applied to Carter's prose without either accepting the essentialist premises critiqued by Moi and Butler or retreating to a merely formal claim about syntactic disruption that does not require Irigaray at all. Third, Carter's own ambiguous feminist politics mean that the Irigarayan reading is always at risk of overdetermining what the texts actually perform.

These limits are not reasons to abandon the framework but reasons to use it with reflexive attention. The Irigarayan-Carterian pairing

remains productive precisely because it generates friction as well as illumination, and it is in the friction—at the points where the vampiress's imprisonment resists the ethics of becoming, or where the grandmother's transmitted knowledge cannot be cleanly separated from the patriarchal folklore it inhabits—that the most significant critical work occurs. Moreover, reading three stories from a single collection cannot support claims about Carter's gothic feminine figures in any comprehensive sense. Carter's later novels, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and *Wise Children* (1991), engage gothic feminine and matrilineal themes in ways both continuous with and divergent from *The Bloody Chamber*. A full account of the gothic feminine in Carter's work would need to reckon with that expanded corpus.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference offers a generative but bounded interpretive lens for three gothic feminine and quasi-gothic feminine figures in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. The mother-sovereign, the vampiress, and the parodic Red Riding Hood each resist psychoanalytic characterization as lacks or absence, performing forms of relational subjectivity—sovereign reciprocity, spectral multiplicity, and embodied transmission—that the Irigarayan framework helps to name.

The formal analysis of Carter's prose style has supported a weaker but more defensible version of the *parler-femme* claim: that Carter's sentences enact a syntactic disruption of dominant narrative convention, a disruption that does ideological work regardless of whether one accepts Irigaray's morphological grounding for it. The essay has also documented three specific points at which the framework strains: the gothic's reliance on monstrous or spectral feminine figures that cannot straightforwardly inhabit Irigaray's ethics of living reciprocity; the essentialist residue in Irigaray's morphological claims; and the ambiguity in Carter's own feminist politics, which means that the gothic feminine figures are sites of contestation rather than uncomplicated reclamation.

Registering these limits does not diminish the pairing's critical value; it locates the analysis within ongoing scholarly debates rather than above them. The most significant contribution this essay makes to feminist gothic criticism is methodological rather than purely interpretive: it proposes that the application of Irigarayan categories to gothic feminine figures requires sustained attention to the genre's own constraints on what the gothic feminine can be and do. The gothic female is always also a ghost, a monster, a figure of cultural anxiety about female power and reproduction. Reading her through an ethics of living, relational, embodied difference requires holding that generic constraint in view

throughout—not as an obstacle to feminist reading, but as its most revealing and productive condition.

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