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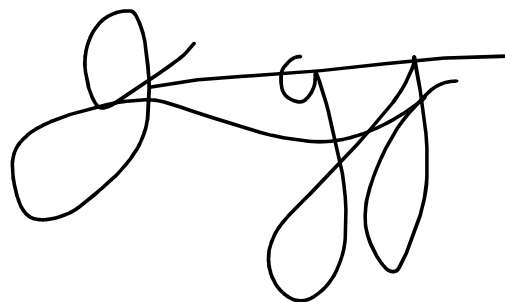
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Angela Carter's (non)fiction and the Feminist Pornography Wars

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Abstract

This paper discusses three works of British author Angela Carter; *The Sadeian Women*, *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* and places them in the context of the feminist pornography debates. In its effort to understand the place of Angela Carter's work in feminist debates about pornography, this Master thesis explains the role that discussion about pornography and sexuality played during the second feminist wave, framing the two main camps of anti-pornography feminists and pro-pornography feminists. By situating Carter's *The Sadeian Women* in the feminist pornography debates, her work is compared to that of radical anti-pornography feminists. However, Carter's work does more than argue in favor of pornography. By looking at *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* in conjunction with *The Sadeian Women*, this paper is able to construe Carter's opinion of pornography and sexuality as nuanced and refined. In this way, it steers away from the characterization of Carter's work as totally in line with libertarian feminism.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Table of Contents	4
Introduction	5
Chapter 1: Characterizing Feminist Debate about Pornography.....	8
Introduction	8
Framing the Sex wars	9
Anti-Pornography Feminism	11
Anti-antipornography Feminism.....	16
Positioning Carter	18
Chapter 2: Exploring Pornography and Feminism in Angela Carter's Fiction	22
Introduction	22
The Bloody Chamber	23
The Passion of New Eve	38
Chapter 3: Carter and The Pornography Wars in the Present	46
Introduction	46
Characterizing Contemporary Feminist Debate	47
Positioning Pornography in Contemporary Feminism	50
Angela Carter in Contemporary Feminism	56
Conclusion.....	62
Literature	65

Introduction

The feminist stance on pornography has been deeply divisive ever since the debate about this topic emerged. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, discussion about sexual liberation began to engage feminists. As such, this era is generally seen as the beginning of the ‘second feminist wave’, a term coined by Martha Weinman Lear, as she sought to describe the contemporary movement of feminist thought and action, especially in relation to the earlier feminist suffragette movement.

Starting in the 1970s, and maintaining relevance into the 1980s, the feminist debate about pornography is often dubbed the feminist pornography wars, pointing towards the degree of friction within this dispute. Most simply put, the debate produced two camps, in which one held anti-pornography views, as pornography would be considered profoundly harmful to women. On the other hand, the pro-pornography feminists would hold that pornography can have a liberating effect on women, and as such it should be celebrated.

These two camps remain largely the same in contemporary feminist circles, even though the state of pornography has changed drastically. The second feminist wave coincided with the Golden Age of Pornography. During this time, sexually explicit films were published for theatrical distribution, and as such they gained fame and in some cases critical acclaim as well. Most notably, this era started out with Andy Warhol’s *Blue Movie*, but the most well-known example of sexually explicit material of this time is the 1972 film *Deepthroat*. This icon of the Golden Age of Pornography was highly successful, even in the mainstream. Though, this example is not unanimously accepted as positive change. In fact, the film is often criticized for being harmful to women overall. For instance, the star of the film herself, Linda Lovelace, spoke out about her objections to it in her 1980 autobiography *Ordeal*. As such, this Golden Age of Pornography already exemplifies the many diverging attitudes

towards pornography and its effect on women and society at large that characterized this era in feminism.

Angela Carter was a deeply prolific writer during the time that the pornography wars were most talked about in feminist circles. In addition to her oeuvre of fiction, Carter has also produced some nonfiction works. In relation to the feminist pornography debate, her most notable work in this category is *The Sadeian Women*. In this project, she delves into the legacy of Marquis de Sade, as she aims to use his works and the lasting impact of these works in order to produce a feminist argument in favor of pornography. As such, Carter can easily be placed in the pro-pornography side of the debate.

However, due to the extensiveness of Carter's body of work, it is also valuable to look at the ways in which this argument travels across her other works. This project will therefore turn to some of Carter's fictional work, namely *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve*, in order to investigate themes pertaining to the feminist pornography wars. These texts are chosen because both engage directly with sexuality and the performance of sexuality by an explicitly gendered character, but at the same time, these texts are very different from one another. *The Bloody Chamber* uses a masculine villain in order to contrast starkly to the feminine main character, and as such it explores the (sexual) domination of the male character over the female character. *The Passion of New Eve* centers a gender transition and it discusses the angles of the protagonist's sexual oppression through various antagonists. Both works cover journeys of self-exploration and -reclamation through the assertion of the protagonist's sexuality and selfhood. As such, *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* both offer unique avenues to determine Carter's engagement with sexuality, while also overlapping in certain areas, making them valuable for a joint analysis. In this analysis, I will look at Carter's descriptions of female sexuality, desire and agency, as well as at the ways in which these themes add to the identity formation of the central characters. This investigation allows

us to see how Carter's ideas on the pornography debate, and on feminism at large, translate in her fiction, as well as how her fiction can work to supplement her theoretical works.

Combining these elements into a central problem, this research will operate according to the following question: 'How does Angela Carter present her views on feminism and pornography in her (non)fiction and what is the relevance of these presentations in historical and contemporary debates about pornography?' I will argue that Carter's views on feminism and pornography can be distinguished across many aspects of her work, most importantly in her depiction of female characters. Furthermore, I will argue that Carter's views on feminism and pornography are highly nuanced, even if she is often placed firmly in the pro-pornography side of the pornography debate. In order to firmly present this argument, I will first delineate the pornography wars in a historical context, and I will place Carter in this context. Subsequently, I will be able to consider the case studies, *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve*, in light of Carter's position within the debate. Finally, this project will consider the lasting impact of the feminist pornography wars, as it will look at the ways in which this debate continues into contemporary feminist circles. Through exploring the sides of the contemporary pornography industry, its critics and its proponents, I will be able to offer an understanding of the transformation of the pornography wars and its lasting impact on contemporary feminism and fiction.

Chapter 1: Characterizing Feminist Debate about Pornography

Introduction

The feminist debate about pornography has been a contentious discussion among feminists and in feminist literature. At its core, this debate highlights the opposing perspectives about the implications of pornography for women's liberation and the cause and effect of sexual violence within (hetero)sexual relations. Ann Ferguson adequately describes the opposing sides that emerged among feminists during the second feminist wave, as she explains that 'there has been an increasing polarization of American feminists into two camps on issues of feminist sexual morality.' (1984, p. 106). Ferguson identifies these two camps as 'radical feminists' and 'libertarian feminists', in which the first group represents the argument that all (hetero)sexual encounters involve a degree of violence and abuse. The second group opposes this idea, and instead the 'libertarian feminists' argue for the importance and value of sexuality as a liberating force.

In this first chapter, I will aim to understand the division between feminists on the topic of pornography further, by outlining some major arguments. Eventually, I will position Carter's *The Sadeian Women* in this context, in order to illuminate how she engages with the debate herself, as well as the impact her work has on the pornography debate. In this chapter, I will thus aim to answer the following question: 'How can the feminist pornography wars be characterized, and how can Angela Carter be positioned in this context?' I will argue that Carter's position is a neutral one, in the sense that she does not glorify pornography nor does she detest it. Her view holds that pornography is simply a fact of life and that it has a right to exist even in feminist circles. She disagrees with fervent anti-pornography feminists, and she goes out of her way to defend pornography from the attacks it receives from many of her contemporaries. As such, Carter produces a counter-voice to a lot of mainstream feminist discussion about pornography, showing the true depth and diversity of the debate.

Framing the Sex wars

Ann Ferguson usefully notes that the division in thinking about sexual morality is a relatively new invention. As she explains, 'the first phase of the women's movement in the late 1960s emphasized both a defense of women's right to pleasure and legal protection from the dangers of heterosexual intercourse.' (1984, p. 106). This gradually changed, and from the late 1970s going on into the 1980s, feminists started to consider more deeply the violent implications of both the sex industry as well as personal sexual encounters (Ferguson, 1984, p. 106). This explanation helps to lineate the feminist sex wars in time, while providing an awareness of the invention of these sex wars. The timeframe of these events furthermore shows that feminist thought about sexuality and pornography went along with a more open interest in these topics in general. The second feminist wave occurred alongside a widespread desire for more open sexual politics. Importantly, this era revolutionized reproductive health and as such a more sexually liberated culture was introduced. Consequently, this meant that sexuality, and by extension pornography, gained a lot of visibility and as such these topics could become highly fertile ground for discussion.

In their introduction to 'The Feminist Sexuality Debates', Estelle B. Freedman and Barrie Thorne also discuss the emergence of the sex wars. As they describe it, the early 1970s marked the beginning of a division of feminists into two groups. One group challenged and opposed the influence of male perspective on female sexuality in both practice and thought (Freedman and Thorne, 1984, p. 102-103). The other group emphasized the ability of women to gain agency over their own sexuality and explore this sexuality in order to liberate themselves (Freedman and Thorne, 1984, p. 103). Later, during the mid-1970s the polarization between the two groups heightened as the issue of pornography became more pronounced. It is interesting that Freedman and Thorne characterize the increased visibility of pornography within feminist debate as a catalyst for polarization within feminist circles, as

opposed to increased intellectual debate. Before the topic of pornography severely dramatized the two described sides of feminist thought and literature, these two sides coexisted much more seamlessly (Freedman and Thorne, 1984, p. 102). As pornography took center stage however, 'the antipornography' and 'anti-antipornography' forces soon engaged not in dialogue but in polarized debate, with attacks and counter attacks more charged...' (Freedman and Thorne, 1984, p. 103). As such, the increased visibility of gendered sexual relations that pornography offered, highlighted the arguments on both sides of the debate, and because these sides now had more concrete evidence to support their claims, the divisions between the two camps started to grow exponentially.

As Ferguson sets out to explain the 'historical and philosophical differences between the two camps', she explains that radical feminists condemn 'deviant' sexual practices because of their (implicit or explicit) appeal to heterosexual power imbalance and male dominance. On the other hand, libertarian feminists work against the moralization of sex and celebrate all sexual acts, because they bring pleasure and because they may serve as emancipatory stepping stones. Ferguson identifies the debate about pornography as a main source of polarization between the two groups (1984). This is the case because radical feminist naturally oppose pornography, while libertarian feminists find such a view regressive and restrictive as it expects a traditionally feminine performance of sexuality that is oppressive towards liberated expression (Ferguson, 1984).

While these two camps represent highly different beliefs, Ferguson notes that neither side offers a complete understanding of the matter which they debate: 'a problem with the current debate between radical and libertarian feminists is that their opposing positions do not exhaust the possible feminist perspectives on sexual pleasure, sexual freedom, and danger.' (1984, p. 107). The implication of this is that both sides of the argument base themselves upon weak foundations. Attacks from neither side hold up all that well, because they operate and

analyze according to different rules and understandings. Moreover, this means that both sides are vulnerable. Not to each other, but to outside perspectives that challenge the underlying structures of both camps. More implicitly, this indicates that both perspectives can and should coexist. After all, neither anti-pornography nor pro-pornography feminists exhaust the full range of meaning when talking about this topic. Both operate from a specific framework that characterizes pornography in a certain way. However, it is arguably impossible to come to such a unilateral conclusion regarding such a multi-faceted field. As such, both camps can offer worthwhile understandings of pornography and sexuality as they pertain to women's liberation.

Anti-Pornography Feminism

Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* is a foundational feminist work within the context of the anti-pornography movement (1981). In this text, Dworkin provides a radical critique of pornography and the impact it has on women's sexuality and their lives in general, arguing that pornography is not a harmless form of entertainment or pleasure but a powerful tool used by men to control and dehumanize women (1981). Obviously then, Dworkin can be placed in the camp of anti-pornography feminism in her endeavor to curb pornography and present it as a form of violence.

In the text, Dworkin examines the ways in which pornography uses women as objects for male gratification (1981). What follows is that pornography instills misogynist ideologies and contributes to (the normalization of) violence against women. This is the case because women are portrayed only as bodies for men to desire, without any agency or autonomy of their own. Dworkin furthermore highlights the negative social effects of porn consumption. She argues that pornography fosters a culture of sexual violence, as it shapes men's attitudes

towards women, which again leads to the objectification and subjugation of women and their bodies.

Using these arguments, Dworkin declares the need to regulate pornography and to recognize the importance of women's rights to liberate themselves from (sexual) exploitation and degradation. She argues against the idea of pornography as a form of freedom of speech. Instead, Dworkin paints pornography as a form of hate speech, because it reinforces and perpetuates discrimination and violence. Finally, then, Dworkin's *Pornography* calls for a radical reassessment of attitudes towards sexuality and sexual (power) relations, underlining the necessity of creating a culture that liberates women and protects their autonomy.

Dworkin further elaborates on her ideas about the interrelations of sex, violence and power in her 1987 work *Intercourse*. Here, she provides a radical feminist reading that explores the intricacies of sexual relations in contemporary society. As such, Dworkin uses the argument she established in *Pornography*, namely that women are constantly dehumanized and oppressed through pornography, because it reduces their existence to a purely eroticized body that only exists to be desired and exploited by men. *Intercourse* arguably takes an even more radical approach, in applying this reasoning not only to pornography, but to all heterosexual intercourse. As Dworkin explains, patriarchal society enforces an experience of sexual intercourse that necessitates subordination. That is to say, heterosexual sex, according to Dworkin, is based on a framework of domination and exploitation, in which women always become the victim of sexual violence, because there exists no equality in such relations. In this way, Dworkin challenges the notion of consent, essentially arguing that it is nearly impossible for women to freely consent to heterosexual intercourse, as the patriarchal system does not allow them genuine autonomy and liberty (1987).

Intercourse is also different from *Pornography* in that it more liberally draws on examples from literature and popular culture. Dworkin discusses the societal implications of

her idea of intercourse, but she also elaborates extensively on its presence in literature. Including foundational works of western literature, Dworkin argues that this literature constantly centers a heterosexist performance of sexuality. She describes that heterosexuality is generally written as the only proper way to engage in intercourse. Representations of sexuality that do not fit into this category, are often described in a deeply derogatory manner, which again works to further cement the dominance of heterosexuality (Dworkin, 1987).

Taking Dworkin as the prime example of anti-pornography feminism thus provides a radical look at the ways in which women are subjugated to men, not only in pornography, but in all sexual encounters. In this manner, Dworkin does not allow space for different perspectives or experiences of sexuality, as she offers a united look at women's (sexual) oppression by men.

Throughout her career as a feminist, Dworkin has worked extensively with Catherine MacKinnon. MacKinnon is a legal scholar, and has produced many ideas about the legal implications of patriarchal oppression. Her work centers feminist legal theory and addresses sexual abuse through this framework. In their work together, Dworkin and MacKinnon have primarily emphasized issues surrounding pornography and sexual oppression and exploitation, often through a legal lens.

In her 1983 article *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence*, MacKinnon presents her views on systematic inequality and how this is a product of male dominance. She explains how the male perspective always overpowers the female perspective; she describes the hegemony of the male perspective and the ways in which this defines all aspects of social reality. What follows is that all institutions operate from a male principle and that there is no way for women to step outside of this. For this reason, MacKinnon emphasizes the significance of the feminist method, that is to say, the method through which feminism appeals to its own voice and experience without gratifying

the male perspective. In one of her footnotes, MacKinnon explains that the methodological approach in feminism endeavors to imagine and appreciate the truth of women's experiences by looking deeply into their actual lives and by determining that women live unique, individual, but also intersected lives (1983, p. 639). It creates a sense of commonality via the emphasis on personal freedom and individuality. This form of feminism, then, ought to challenge the hegemony of the male perspective by denying the naturalness of this truth, and by subsequently asserting its own truth (MacKinnon, 1983, p. 640).

MacKinnon further builds upon the idea that the reality that patriarchy produces and enforces is not sufficient for women to make sense of their own experience in her essay *Sexuality, Pornography and Method: 'Pleasure under Patriarchy'*. In this work, MacKinnon also delves more specifically into the matter of pornography and the ways in which this is a product of male heterosexual violence and oppression. She argues that male hegemony is of a sexual nature, and that this implies that the institution of patriarchy necessitates sexual violence against women (MacKinnon, 1983, p. 316). MacKinnon emphasizes the ubiquity of sexual violence and the oppressive and aggressive theory of sexuality and gender that this indicates. It is pertinent to her argument that she characterizes pornography as part of the sexual violence that patriarchy produces.

The outward collaboration between MacKinnon and Dworkin regarding pornography and law was cemented by their involvement with the legal action of Linda Boreman. Boreman gained publicity as Linda Lovelace, star of the famous pornographic film *Deep Throat* (1972). Boreman describes the abuse and exploitation she suffered because of this film in her 1980 memoir *Ordeal*. She subsequently gets involved with the anti-pornography school that Dworkin and MacKinnon pioneered. While Boreman is not able to file a lawsuit against her abuser in the end, the ordeal does prove to be fertile ground for a discussion about the possibilities of legislating pornography.

Eventually, MacKinnon and Dworkin collaborated to write a number of Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinances. In these works, they argued that pornography infringes upon women's civil rights, and therefore that women who are harmed by the porn industry are able to seek damages in civil court. The ordinances were finally dismissed on account of violation of freedom of speech, but they do illuminate the committed efforts of antipornography feminists. Additionally, these ordinances provide a valuable theoretical foundation for discussions about pornography, as they offer legal definitions of the term.

In her 1987 article *Representing Pornography: Feminism, Criticism, and Depictions of Female Violation*, Susan Gubar draws partially on some of Dworkin's arguments and theories. Gubar explains how it is necessary to make the distinction between sexually explicit art and pornography, as this distinction is not present in Dworkin's work, where all sexually explicit material falls under the category of pornography. While the Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinances offer guidelines as to how to interpret pornography in a legal setting, the definition that is offered is extremely broad. However, by referring to different literary examples and their places in the canon, Gubar also shows that the distinction between sexually explicit art and pornography is often subjective and difficult to make. Gubar explains that an increased awareness of the dehumanization and objectification of women means that pornographic materials have started to be characterized along terms of dehumanization, as opposed to obscenity (1987, p. 713). This turn in talking about pornography is naturally paired with the two opposing sides of the feminist debate, in which one group frames all pornography as violence against women that ought to be curbed legally. The other group disagrees with such censorship and instead argues for a more liberating relationship to all sexual expression, including porn (Gubar, 1987, p. 714).

While these two groups disagree on many accounts, Gubar explains that both of them ought to take into consideration the aesthetic question that pornography poses: 'the judgment

we make about pornography as a social phenomenon will be based on aesthetic criteria.' (1987, p. 714). Indeed, in approaching the issue of pornography one must determine how to address it. As such, it is pertinent to investigate the claims pornographic or sexually explicit materials can make to identify as art (Gubar, 1987, p. 714).

Anti-antipornography Feminism

Thus, while Mackinnon and Dworkin have provided the feminist project with a lot of valuable insights and progressions, their work is also heavily criticized, especially by feminists with more libertarian values, even lasting into contemporary feminist debate. Havana Marking writes in the Guardian that Dworkin's branch of feminism was so dramatic and controversial that it had a polarizing effect (2005). The public opinion on feminism did not take well to such explicit arguments and descriptions, and for that reason Dworkin made feminism less credible and useful, according to Marking (2005). Additionally, Marking considers Dworkin's analysis of pornography faulty. This is the case because the definition of pornography that Dworkin provides is not universal, because it is informed by her deeply disdainful attitude towards pornography. Marking argues that it is certainly important to impose legal structures onto the porn industry, so that the abuse and exploitation in this industry may be diminished (2005). However, she also argues that pornography is not much more than 'sex between adults recorded to inspire erotic and sexually arousing feelings' (Marking, 2005). By providing such a broad definition of the term, Marking opposes Dworkin's singularly negative attitude towards pornography, as well as the idea that pornography ought to be a performance of sexual abuse. As she continues: 'the deliberate blurring of these definitions is Dworkin's fundamental error and led ultimately to her malalignment and the ease with which society was able to demonize her.' (Marking, 2005). That is to say, by operating on a wholly different conception of pornography than the rest of the world, Dworkin alienated herself and her ideas

from the demographic it was supposed to convince. Furthermore, Dworkin's incessant demonization of pornography and the sex industry has not significantly helped the women who are in this line of work. In her protest against the social and legal implications of pornography, Dworkin's project has framed sex workers as victims of patriarchy. In doing so, Dworkin's legacy leaves no message of empowerment or improvement for sex workers to seek out. It does not adequately address ways for women to organize themselves and improve their circumstances, and because of that, Dworkin's work has obstructed emancipatory movements for the sex industry and the women who are part of it.

Marking's critique of Dworkin and the anti-pornography movement at large indicates an issue taken with the accessibility of feminism and the ability for women to determine their own experience. Because Dworkin offers a view of pornography and heterosexual intercourse that is by definition oppressive, this perspective does not allow women to decide for themselves how they wish to approach their own sexuality. Arguably, Marking's issue with Dworkin is that she proposes a new set of deeply restrictive rules when it comes to female sexuality. That is to say, Dworkin comes across as slightly hypocritical in her conviction that pornography is wholly evil, as such a view also works to instill a very specific, potentially oppressive, view of sexuality.

Nadine Strossen wrote 'A Feminist Critique of 'the' Feminist Critique of Pornography' in 1993, essentially as a reaction towards the school of anti-pornography feminism that Dworkin pioneered, but also to challenge judicial expressions on the matter of pornography. In her article, Strossen offers an analysis of the term pornography and 'attempts to correct the imbalance existing in both the popular perception and the legal discussion of the 'pornography' issue.' (1993, p. 1107). She describes that pornography is a very ambiguous and imprecise word, and therefore it is difficult and possibly misguided to draw conclusions on a general opinion of it (1993, p. 1103). As she explains, the contemporary feminists viewed

pornography as fundamentally misogynistic and harmful to women. Describing the dominance of the Dworkin-MacKinnon school of analyzing pornography, Strossen explains that most law scholarship on the matter of pornography has followed this school, and thus has endorsed censorship (1993, p. 1107). Very few law publications oppose the Dworkin-MacKinnon school, and when they do, it's on first amendment grounds, not on feminist principles (Strossen, 1993, p. 1107). As such, Strossen explains, judicial literature only meaningfully engages with pornography as a feminist issue, and in doing so, it has mischaracterized the feminist opinion on pornography as fully unilateral and thus exclusively anti-pornography and pro-censorship (1993, p. 1108). Through Strossen's article, and her critique on the mischaracterization of the issue of pornography in law publications, the relevance of a nuanced understanding of pornography and feminism is highlighted. Evidently, it is harmful when law scholars make ungrounded and uninformed assumptions about a supposedly universal feminist opinion. Especially when this opinion in fact knows many sides and subtlety. Strossen's argument is thus somewhat similar to that of Marking, because Strossen also criticizes the universality with which the Dworkin-MacKinnon school approaches pornography. As a consequence, this means that almost all legal opinions about pornography follow such restrictive paths, which is ultimately harmful to women, because it minimizes the importance of the diversity of the female experience of sexuality and pornography, and instead paints the feminist stance on pornography as fully one-sided as opposed to highly diverse and challenged.

Positioning Carter

Angela Carter, in both her fiction and her nonfiction, worked to offer contrary opinions to the more well-known ideas of anti-pornography activists. Her 1979 work *The Sadeian Women* is a critical examination of the works of Marquis de Sade and the ways in which these

works have impacted (the perception of) female sexuality. More Broadly, it is a text that explores the implications of pornography for the feminist project. In doing this, Carter breaks with the anti-pornography movement that was highly represented in feminist circles. Instead, she offers a nuanced understanding of the function of pornography and the impact it historically has had on women and their expressions of sexuality. In this way, Carter may be characterized as part of a more libertarian side to the feminist sex wars, as she opposed the censorship of the antipornography feminists and instead offers an observation of the ostensible need for pornography.

What follows is an exploration of Sade's work that challenges traditional interpretations, and an argument that his writings offer more than merely pornographic depictions. Rather, Sade provides complex narratives that subvert and critique socio-political dynamics, especially pertaining to gendered power relations (Carter, 1979).

Carter additionally delves into Sade's depiction of women. Here, she elaborates on the many stereotypical representations through which women are described by Sade. She discusses Justine and Juliette, two female characters produced by Sade. Justine and Juliette are opposites in the sense that Justine is wholly virtuous and Juliette is completely amoral, though their respective stories show that their character's do not reflect their circumstance. Justine is abused in every way, even though she remains good at heart. Juliette ends up satisfied in her depravity, as she has succeeded to enjoy her life at any expense.

Carter argues that it is important to see these characters as a disruption of stereotypes. She explains that Sade's women may be read in different lights, as they occasionally occupy positions of agency and dominance as opposed to being fully inactive objects of male debauchery. Carter critically argues that many of Sade's female characters are often portrayed as active participants in their own sexual encounters, which challenges conventional contemporary views of women as wholly submissive and docile. In the case of Justine and

Juliette, especially their endings mark a shift away from stereotype, as the virtuous Justine meets no reward for her continued goodness, and as the debauched Juliette can live without a care in the world, being rewarded for her hedonistic life-style. As such, Sade's lack of concern for rewarding female virtue in his fiction is what charges his fiction with emancipatory force, according to Carter (1979).

In order to add further nuance to her argument, Carter explores the historical and cultural context in which Sade's work emerged. Thereby, *The Sadeian Women* also sheds light onto the oppressive social structures that governed (and govern) women's lives and thus their expressions of sexuality. Carter suggests that Sade's explicit depictions of sexuality served as a form of resistance against these norms, which thus offered a representation of women and their ability to assert dominance and autonomy. Finally, then, Carter's *The Sadeian Women* employs a feminist perspective in order to interrogate the ways in which Sade's literature both enforces and subverts patriarchal ideologies. Carter concludes that Sade's work may often feel regressive and disturbing to the reader, but it ultimately does provide valuable insights into the complex issues of (female) sexuality and the struggle for autonomy and liberation.

Finally, then, Carter presents her own argument in *The Sadeian Women* as a neutral and nuanced view on the issue of pornographic material, and the ways in which such material can be consumed even from a feminist perspective. She entertains the existence of pornography from an objective point of view. In this way, Carter publicly engaged in debate with the likes of Dworkin and MacKinnon, as she challenged their ideas about the inherently oppressive nature of pornography. While Carter is often framed as postfeminist for this argument, I argue that she merely points out the diversity of the debate. That is to say, Carter does not move beyond feminism in her reasoning. As a matter of fact, her argument exists within a feminist context and is firmly positioned in the feminist debate about pornography. As such, *The Sadeian Women* is not an exercise away from feminism, but rather an attempt to

envision feminist merit in an unorthodox example; it offers a broadening of feminism. For this reason, Carter's *The Sadeian Women* is an arguably revolutionary piece of writing, because it firmly breaks with conventional thought regarding pornography and women's sexuality. This means that, while Carter can be placed more on the side of the pro-pornography camp, her work ultimately offers a mode of looking at pornography that neither side of the debate had meaningfully entertained before.

Chapter 2: Exploring Pornography and Feminism in Angela Carter's Fiction

Introduction

As the first chapter of this project has underlined, during the second feminist wave Carter's work and opinions stood out as unconventional and possibly radical. This is the case because she provides arguments in favor of a nuanced perspective towards pornography and an improved understanding of female sexuality. In this way, Carter projects a move away from the anti-pornography branch of feminism that gained traction] during this time.

Simultaneously, Carter does not offer a unilateral acceptance of pornography as fundamentally good. Her stance is not totally pro-pornography, but instead warrants an understanding of pornography that accepts the liberating potential of such material. Carter does not argue that pornography ought to be celebrated without interrogation, but she does explain the natural fact of its existence, and she uses this might have for the feminist project (1979).

In this chapter, I move away from the historical approach, and instead focus on two of Carter's fictional pieces, *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* (1979) (1977). *The Bloody Chamber* is Carter's second short story collection but arguably her most well-known work (1979). The collection contains ten stories of various lengths. In this chapter I will focus on the titular story, *The Bloody Chamber*, which is also the longest in the collection. This tale is explicitly inspired by the story of Bluebeard, and it reimagines this well-known character through the Marquis, who marries a young girl to take her to his castle and eventually attempts to murder her as she comes to discover the 'bloody chamber', in which she is confronted with the violence and abuse that her new husband has inflicted upon his former wives (Carter, 1979).

Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* was first published in 1977, two years before *The Bloody Chamber*. While this novel is not based on folklore like *The Bloody Chamber*, it

does draw inspiration from the Greek myth of Tiresias. Its allusions to this myth are obvious in the novel's preoccupation with gender beyond its traditional binary. One of the most gruesome but memorable scenes in *The Passion of New Eve*, describes a detailed (forced) sex-change and the ways in which the newly transgendered main character deals with this experience (Carter, 1977). In addition to that, the novel satirizes rigid gender binaries and the power imbalance between genders by amplifying these aspects. For example, the main character is unconvinced of his castration, but from that point onward the character is referred to with feminine pronouns (Carter, 1977).

This chapter thus investigates the ways in which Carter's opinions about feminism and pornography are visible throughout *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve*. As such, this chapter will consider the question 'How are Carter's views on feminism and pornography present in her fiction?'. In order to answer this question, I will discuss the feminist merit in these stories and the implication they pose for the feminist pornography debate. Furthermore, I will look at both stories not only with Carter's opinion on pornography in mind. In order to truly investigate the stories and their contents, this chapter will consider both radical and libertarian feminist views, and it will establish entry points into the stories for both perspectives. By close-reading passages from the two texts, I aim to establish a nuanced reading of Carter's work, in which both sides of the debate may find value. This chapter will be able to illuminate the feminist content of these works of fiction, as well as add them to the context of the pornography debate.

The Bloody Chamber

In order to determine how Carter's feminist inclination is displayed in *The Bloody Chamber*, I will start out by analyzing certain key scenes in the story. In this analysis, I will look at the presentation of the main character, as well as how this character relates to the other characters

in the story, most importantly the Marquis and her mother. Though, in addition to this close-reading, I will also investigate certain formal aspects of *The Bloody Chamber*. The short story necessarily exists within the legacy of the story of Bluebeard, and its status as such will be investigated in order to determine the feminist value of creating such a reworking.

The Bloody Chamber follows the narrator, a young girl, who marries a wealthy but much older Marquis (Carter, 1979). The story opens with the narrator in a train towards her new life with the Marquis (Carter, 1979, p. 1). She is moving from her family home in Paris to the Marquis's sea-side castle. In these first few sentences she frames her marriage and the new life that comes with it as an escape to her life with her mother. The train is taking her 'away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.' (Carter, 1979, p. 1). In this sense, the narrator frames her marriage as a liberating exercise. Her mother, while never framed as the villain, and indeed sooner viewed as an accomplished and courageous figure, even in these first paragraphs, is seen as slightly overbearing, and therefore, the narrator ought to 'escape' from the life under her mother. As such, the initial setup of the story frames the narrator's marriage with the Marquis as a step into freedom, away from the closed off life she led before. In order to further emphasize the supposed liberating effect of the union, the narrator's mother asks her: 'Are you sure you love him?' (Carter, 1979, p. 2). The narrator replies: 'I'm sure I want to marry him,' (Carter, 1979, p. 2). In this way, the narrator makes an active decision for herself, in order to secure the future that she wishes to obtain, that is to say, a future of freedom and an emancipation out of the shadows of her mother.

It is interesting that this act of agency is undercut in the following paragraph, as the narrator describes her marriage, and more specifically her reproductive duty within that marriage as her 'destiny' (Carter, 1979, p. 2). However, this is not merely an assertion of a woman's calling. Instead, the rest of the paragraph works more to illuminate the castle as a

site, and in doing so it elucidates the traditions of such a place as well. The narrator specifies that she may bear an heir to the place, rather than to the bloodline (Carter, 1979, p. 2). For this reason, we start to see that the castle as a place is deeply entwined with the personal histories that emerge from it.

Arguably, this seeming contradiction between her making a free choice and subscribing to the idea of a destiny that is quintessentially female, is in line with the characterization that Kathleen Manley proposes, in which she describes the narrator as 'a woman in process' (1998). As Manley explains, the narrator is 'not always passive, however, but oscillates between being insecure and feeling sure of herself. She is [...] exploring her subject position and beginning to tell her own story.' (Manley, 1998, p. 71). The main character will proceed to engage in a process of self-discovery that is often informed by her relation to her own developing sexuality.

The major introduction of sexuality in *The Bloody Chamber* comes in the form of pornography. Pornography is first mentioned in the story as the narrator explores the Marquis's library. Once the narrator arrives at the castle and enters her suite, the Marquis begins almost immediately to undress her. In this confrontation, the narrator is deeply embarrassed as she is confronted with the immaturity of her body, especially as it is contrasted against her perfectly tailored husband. In the end, though, they do not consummate the marriage right away, as the Marquis has business to attend to. As a result, the narrator waits in anticipation. In her boredom she starts to investigate the bookcase. In doing so, she stumbles across a collection of pornographic literature. This scene explicitly describes the pornographic images that the narrator encounters. Rather than an immediate shocked reaction, the narrator initially wonders at the origins of the book. She wonders how it was collected and how it found its way to the bookcase. This implies that her encounter with the pornographic texts makes her wonder at her husband's relation to it. She knows her own reaction to the

works: 'I knew enough of what I saw in that book to make me gasp.' (Carter, 1979, p. 13).

Though she is unsure of the Marquis's relation to it, and indeed his appreciation of such works would have implications for their relationship, which can only be heightened in anticipation of the wedding night.

When the Marquis finds her in the library he remarks that his 'nun has found the prayerbooks' and that 'Baby mustn't play with grownups' toys' (Carter, 1979, p.13). In these reactions, the Marquis mocks the narrator and her childlike innocence, and he continues to do so as he initiates sexual relations that she appears to resist: 'We've not taken luncheon yet; and, besides, it is broad daylight.' (Carter, 1979, p. 13). He replies in a dismissive manner to her struggling. In the end, 'A dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside.' (Carter, 1979, p. 14). This image is created by the many mirrors in the room, and it arguably underlines a sense of distance. Thus, the final act causes a sense of detachment from the narrator. This detachment makes sense for the rest of the scene. While the scene does establish the bodily reaction of the narrator; she trembles as she fastens her necklace and she grows cold because of it, it centers more clearly the actions of the Marquis (Carter, 1979, p. 14). Her presence in the scene is fully passive, he is active as he guides her, touches and kisses her. It is by his doing that she stumbles upon the bed, puts on her choker, and presents herself to be touched by him. None of the actions or experiences she endures are directly her choice.

The lack of agency from the narrator in this scene is noticeable through the mirror as a symbol. As Kathleen Manley argues, the mirror indicates 'not only the protagonist's dependence on her sense of innocence but also her lack of a sense of herself as a subject.' (1998, p. 75). This function of the mirror effectively illustrates the narrator's lack of agency as well, because she fails to conceive of herself as an actor within the entire ordeal and instead relies only on the ways in which she is seen by others.

Eventually, the narrator is 'brought to [her] senses by the insistent shrilling of the telephone.' (Carter, 1979, p. 14). In this moment, she regards the Marquis as he is sleeping and she recollects 'that one-sided struggle' (Carter, 1979, p. 14). Though, it is not totally clear which side is implied here. Read in either direction, it indicates a lack of mutual understanding of the situation. However, the struggle arguably does point towards an articulation of the narrator's own wishes. In her struggle against the Marquis' actions, she does take action herself; her potential resistance implies a specific desire and a measure taken to achieve that goal, even if it is unsuccessful and possibly worsens her situation.

The interactions between the Marquis and the narrator that I have thus far described reveal a profound dedication to the feminist project through the investigation of power relations between men and women, especially as they pertain to sexuality. Carter's preoccupation with this topic is apparent throughout the short story as she describes the Marquis as an active force in the story, while the narrator is only used by him to set his plans in motion. As Manley explains: 'the protagonist's husband clearly considers her an object of exchange and plans to inscribe upon her his continuing tale of punishment for wives' disobedience.' (Manley, 1998, p. 73). That is to say, the Marquis has set up a framework within which he shall place the narrator. In doing so, he denies her any sort of agency or free will, and instead he guides her towards the final punishment; her decapitation. This is evident in the necklace he makes her wear; 'A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat.' (Carter, 1979, p. 6). In this accessory, the story alludes to the unfortunate end that the Marquis has already predicted for his wife, as he believes he will need to murder her for her impending discoveries.

The Marquis also confirms the narrator's fate in different ways, as he is luring her towards it, effectively stripping her of her own agency and using her in accordance with the

plans he has already made. He must go away promptly to take care of business overseas. As he leaves, he provides the narrator with all the keys of the house, telling her she may use all of them save for one. The forbidden key leads to the Marquis's secret room, as he explains that 'every man must have one secret, even if only one, from his wife,' (Carter, 1979, p. 18). Though, by asserting his necessity for this private room, he also lures in the narrator. He tells her to explore every room, apart from the forbidden room, but he also emphasizes what she may find in this room, thereby arousing her interest in potentially ignoring his warnings. He tells her that it is 'the key to a little room at the foot of the west tower, behind the still-room, at the end of a dark little corridor full of horrid cobwebs that would get into your hair and frighten you if you ventured there.' (Carter, 1979, p. 18). In this explanation of what she might find there, and especially in sketching out its precise location within the castle, the Marquis draws the narrator's attention to the room. Furthermore, by describing it as a forbidden location, the room (and the key) become much more interesting, as they now have a special value that makes them stand out from all the other rooms and keys. Of course, by emphasizing that the narrator may explore the rest of the castle all she likes, except for one room, all her attention is drawn towards that forbidden room. In addition to the whereabouts of the room, the Marquis also goes on to describe the contents of it. He says that the room functions as a 'private study', where he may go when married life is too demanding for him; 'There I can go, you understand, to savour the rare pleasure of imagining myself wifeless.' (Carter, 1979, p. 18-19).

As the Marquis leaves on his business trip, the narrator feels lost and insecure. She does not know what to do with herself and she calls her mother for support and comfort (Carter, 1979, p. 21). This interaction seems to instill in her a new sense of self and she becomes interested in exploring 'the keys to the interior doors of this lovely prison of which [she] was both the inmate and the mistress. [...] When I remembered that, I felt the

exhilaration of the explorer.’ (Carter, 1979, p. 22). As such, the short conversation with her mother reminded the narrator of what she is capable of. Because the mother is such an accomplished and respectable figure, who explored distant parts of the world in her youth, the narrator's sense of adventure is awakened, and she feels the courage to set out on her own expedition within the castle.

She begins by turning on all the lights, so that the castle and its keys may not intimidate her anymore (Carter, 1979, p. 22). Naturally, the transition from darkness to light is paired with the transition from ignorance to knowledge, as this turning on of the lights marks the beginning of the narrator exploring the truth of the castle. She says herself that she endeavors to ‘search through [the keys] for evidence of my husband’s true nature.’ (Carter, 1979, p. 22). Because the narrator starts to act according to her own instincts, this part of the story also indicates the beginning of a certain character transformation. Whereas the Marquis has thus far dictated almost every move within the narrator's life, she now starts to explore on her own account. However, the superficial agency that is presented here, must also be understood in relation to the Marquis. As has been established, the Marquis has actively tried to lure the narrator towards the most secretive place in the castle in his mysterious descriptions of that room. This attraction is arguably heightened when the narrator finds out that this description was not totally correct. As she draws closer to the forbidden room, she notices that it is not at all stowed away in an unswept corner of the castle: ‘Not a narrow, dusty little passage at all; why had he lied to me?’ (Carter, 1979, p. 25). The mystery of this obvious lie works to add to the attraction the Marquis built up earlier. The narrator wonders why he lied about this particular aspect of the room, and as such she wants to continue her journey, not least to figure out what else he may have lied about.

Additionally, in her earlier investigation of his office, she has determined that nothing seems to be out of order. She is concerned by this lack of ‘evidence of his real life’ (Carter,

1979, p. 23). After all, she wishes to explore the castle partially because she wishes to know and understand her husband. Because he appears to her so inscrutable, she wants to discover little clues across the castle that might reveal his inner workings. Though his office appears proper to the extent that it worries the narrator: 'there must [...] be a great deal to conceal if he takes such pains to hide it.' (Carter, 1979, p. 23). The narrator's worry and suspicion in this scene, while justified, also point towards a lasting sense of naiveté, as the efforts of the Marquis to 'hide' anything are of course fully disingenuous. She is concerned with finding out his true self, though this aspect is hardly hidden as he has made such an effort to coax her right towards the hiding place of his truest form.

Eventually, the narrator ventures deeper into the forbidden room, and in this action her character truly begins to take on a more deliberate and agential attitude, because she refuses to follow the ideal that the Marquis has created of her any longer. Instead, she decides to act upon her own instincts, rather than accept his influence without interrogation. Initially, she describes not feeling any fear or hesitation in entering the room. While this position is partially informed by her ignorance and naivety regarding the full scope of the situation, it also derives from a sense of courage she finds in herself by recalling the bravery of her mother before her. As the narrator beholds the torture devices in the 'bloody chamber', she finds that she has inherited more of her mother's nerves than she thought. She says that her 'mother's spirit drove [her] on, into that dreadful place, in a cold ecstasy to know the very worst.' (Carter, 1979, p. 26). As such, the narrator explicitly steps away from the Marquis' conception of her, as she begins to craft her own self-image informed and inspired by her mother.

The scene in the 'bloody chamber' highlights the story's general preoccupation with women and their lives. In her entry to the chamber, the narrator is primarily concerned with women.

She invokes her mother's spirit in order to brave the horrors of the room. She attempts to envision her mother's courage and wisdom in herself and in doing so, the narrator is framed as part of a larger collective of women that came before her. In doing so, this scene cements the further character arc of the protagonist, as it elaborates on her characterization through a comparison with her mother, whom the audience now understands as a valiant superhero-esque figure.

Furthermore, it is in the 'bloody chamber' that the narrator begins to feel a strong sense of connection and solidarity with the women that preceded her as the Marquis' wife. In the first part of the story, the narrator feels intimidated by the former wives of the Marquis: 'I did not want to remember how he had loved other women before me.' (Carter, 1979, p. 4). She feels uncomfortable in being grouped together with the first three wives. Additionally, she feels confused as to why he chose to marry her so soon after his former wife passed. At the same time, she feels special in that he chose her. She attempts to read the 'imponderable weight of his desire' in his absence of noticeable emotion (Carter, 1979, p. 4). It is this feeling of individuality that also pushes her to explore the room in the first place. Right before she enters the chamber, she hardly feels any apprehension to enter it, because she determines that the Marquis's affections for her would not allow him to punish her for her overstepping. These imaginations not only illuminate the narrator's childlike naivety, but also the superiority complex she maintains over his former wives, as she sees his love and lust for her as totally unique to her and as forces that may absolve her mistakes. Both of these attitudes are framed as ignorant and slightly ridiculous, as the narrator says 'I thought: Oh! How he must want me!' (Carter, 1979, p. 4). The enthusiasm in this description comes across as immature. The narrator is anticipating being swept off her feet, but as she says herself in the following paragraph: 'I was seventeen and knew nothing of the world.' (Carter, 1979, p. 4). As such, the retrospective voice of the narrator is prominent in this scene, and it works to

illuminate the changes of character that are still to come. The narrator at this point in the story is still far removed from the narrator as she narrates. Therefore, this gap between two versions of the character allows for the story to be embedded with value judgements from the character to her former self. This aspect of the story additionally allows for the reader to understand where the story goes; it adds a layer of interpretation that the audience ought to reconcile with their expectations as it alludes to the final outcome of the tale.

In the 'bloody chamber' scene, we see the beginning of an overlap between the two versions of the character, which indicates that a transformation indeed takes place. As she observes the 'instruments of mutilation' around her, she begins to envision herself as part of a tragic group alongside the first three wives, as she describes 'the fated sisterhood of his wives.' (Carter, 1979, p. 26-27). She feels a sense of solidarity and a shared fate with the other women. She no longer holds any delusions regarding being special as compared to her predecessors; she accepts her own fate as mirroring the other wives'. Moreover, she understands that they could not have acted in any way to escape from their violent ends. The Marquis is framed as the sole actor; his victims did nothing to deserve his torture, but this tragically indicates that they could also not have done anything to escape it. The narrator almost immediately acknowledges that she is the same.

Once she returns from the 'bloody chamber' she is afraid to call for help or to alert anyone of the things she has seen in the room. Her fear in this regard is connected to the Marquis' power and the institutions that are implied in that. His family has ruled the land for generations, and as such the Marquis has an undeniable grip on the estate and the people that work for him. As the narrator says, she might run away from the castle, towards a nearby town. Though, 'Might not the police, the advocates, even the judge, all be in his service, turning a common blind eye to his vices since he was milord who must be obeyed?' (Carter, 1979, p. 29). She envisions everyone in the vicinity to be in cahoots with the Marquis; they

are aware of his crimes but would never disobey or inconvenience him. As such, in the fear that the narrator feels she acknowledges the powerlessness of her position, which is necessarily related to the powerful position of the Marquis. In this awareness she is also forced to recognize the lack of credibility her words and actions will have against those of the Marquis. She is not able to trust anyone, because all people and the systems of which they are a part work in his favor. The power imbalance between the Marquis and the narrator can arguably be used to exemplify Carter's feminist intentions in *The Bloody Chamber*, as well as her concern for sexual liberation. This element of the story portrays the potential for inequality in the relationship between men and women.

I argue that further feminist merit in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* derives, at least partially, from its status as a version of the tale of Bluebeard. As explained by Kari Lokke, the tale of Bluebeard has many iterations across Europe. Though the basic structure is generally the same, in that a rich man marries women in order to murder them as they are punished for entering into a forbidden room where all the already murdered wives are stockpiled. The cycle of abuse is broken when the final wife of the story is saved and Bluebeard is killed in her name. Lokke draws on Charles Perrault to explain a reading of this folktale that is supposed to warn brides against curiosity. However, Carter's story steers away from such an interpretation, as it portrays the narrator's curiosity as a positive trait. While it has a disastrous outcome, the narrator's exploration of the castle is what marks her transformation as a character. In this way, curiosity is framed as a necessary impulse, and a way for women to take action in their own lives instead of being constantly dictated by their husbands. Carter additionally alludes to the punishment of curiosity in women directly, as the pianotuner, Jean-Yves compares the narrator to Eve (Carter, 1979, p. 38). In this way, Carter places her story within this historical practice of blaming women for their desire for knowledge, and in doing so she arguably

frames the legacy of Bluebeard as a whole within this context. As such, she is able to inscribe the many iterations and interpretations of this story with the implications of blaming women. *The Bloody Chamber* arguably functions to dilute the misogynistic undertones of the story of Bluebeard, by turning it into a story of women's victory over their oppressor and by denying the culpability of the women in the story.

The Bloody Chamber, as well as the other stories in the collection cannot be considered an adaptation. Carter herself was very direct in dismissing their characterization as such, when she explained 'My intention was not to do "versions" or. [...] "adult" fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional and to use it as the beginnings of new stories.' (Carter, 1985). That is to say, she used well-known tales in order to catalyze her own original works. In doing so, she was able to reconfigure these tales into stories that explore themes like sexuality and power, as she explains that 'the latent content is violently sexual' (Carter, 1985). Carter's business is thus not direct adaptation, but subtle allusion.

Carter's exercise of allusion is illustrated by Danielle Roemer as she explains that 'reader-activated allusion operated within the context of an appreciation of curiosity. A sensed uncomfortableness with the status quo mixed with a desire for associations that extend beyond the given, curiosity motivates the allusive enterprise' (1998, p. 95-96). Allusion thus works by activating a sense of curiosity in the reader, which is established through a combined sense of affliction and interest. Carter employs this principle by altering a story, which provides a 'sensed uncomfortableness' (Roemer, 1998, p. 95). This is the case, because by casting a well-known story in a new frame, Carter is able to throw off her audience; their expectations are constantly contested by the course of story and the way in which this diverges from the tale with which they are familiar. Therefore, she also presents a possibility 'for associations that extend beyond the given.' (Roemer, 1998, p. 95). This is the case, because Carter offers the option of interpreting a story differently than what one might be used to, as she embeds it

specifically with feminist themes that often contradict the original purpose of the story. As such, Carter suggests to the reader that an understanding of a tale must not necessarily follow a set of previously established rules. Instead, she opens up the historical reality of the folktale to new (feminist) understandings as she performs allusions to her own understandings of such tales. Roemer continues to argue that 'Carter has linked associativeness with the exploration of possibility which, in turn, can constitute a move toward freedom.' (1998, p. 96). Thus, Carter's allusions work to motivate a more liberal and liberated interaction with well-known stories, as they hint at the value of individual analysis.

According to Roemer, this is a crucial aspect of Carter's writing, as she displays a profound concern for 'demythologizing' (1998, p. 96). Carter's writing often aims to interfere with authoritative interpretations, in favor of more peripheral expressions. Naturally, this aspect of Carter's work reveals her interest in the socio-political implications of literature: 'the act of intervening in the authoritatively sanctioned with the intent of reframing it within an emotionally and politically responsible iconoclasm is a crucial dynamic of Carter's project.' (Roemer, 1998, p. 96). The feminist suggestions present in her work, therefore, are part of a larger tendency to reconfigure established works and imbue them with new meanings and trends.

Looking at *The Bloody Chamber*, these tendencies can be explored in many elements of the story. One way in which Carter reassembles the familiar narrative is with the character of the mother. As has been established, the narrator's mother is a deeply respectable figure, who has had a grand and heroic personal history. Her time in Indo-China is often underlined, and her noble character follows from these descriptions. The first page of the story sets up this character as being 'eagle-featured' and 'indomitable' (Carter, 1979, p. 1). Though at the same time she is presented as a sensitive and sensible person, who mourns the loss of her daughter to a husband, but who is simultaneously proud and satisfied because of the milestone (Carter,

1979, p. 1). The presentation of the mother in such a way, already seems unorthodox within the tradition of folktale in which mothers are not generally portrayed as heroic figures. The mother as such a strong woman also hints towards her final heroic act, in which she saves the narrator from her immediate death at the hands of the Marquis. As Lokke establishes, the last wife in the tale of Bluebeard is usually saved by a different figure. The character of Bluebeard is frequently 'murdered, by the bride, her brothers, or a page' (Lokke, 1988, p. 8). Carter's decision to have the mother kill the Marquis thus breaks with the established framework of the tale, and in doing so it provides added value in its understanding that women, and especially mothers, are capable of saving others and themselves.

The characterization of the mother in this fashion may also hint towards the character development of the narrator. While she is presented as an innocent and naive person in the beginning of the story, she eventually finds courage and overcomes her ignorance. In this metamorphosis, the narrator also appeals to her mother in her reactions to her surroundings. Importantly, she compares her own strength of mind to that of her mother when she is about to enter the 'bloody chamber' (Carter, 1979, p. 26). As Manley explains, it is precisely this connection to her mother that allows the narrator to realize a sense of self: 'It is partly this model that enables the protagonist to look into the story her husband wishes to inscribe upon her. [...] The knowledge the protagonist gains in following her mother's spirit helps her to try to tell her own story rather than her husband's story of her' (1998, p. 75).

What is interesting, is that the narrator ought to be saved by her mother in order to complete her transformation. As it turns out, she is incapable of saving herself, although she does envision the opportunities to do so when they are presented to her. Even though she understands the finality of her situation when the Marquis confronts her after her expedition into the 'bloody chamber', she still considers her chances of escape: 'I saw how he almost failed to resist me. If he had come to me in bed, I would have strangled him, then.' (Carter,

1979, p. 35). Manley also underlines how the narrator's first step in executing her own story, is in her 'attempt to seduce her husband.' (1998, p. 75). The complicated reality of the narrator's sense of self thus becomes more firm as she asserts her sexuality and as she fully grasps the power this sexuality allows her.

Finally, then, *The Bloody Chamber* performs a concern for feminist politics in the sense that it is both thematically and formally occupied with presenting female sexuality as paired together with female agency. This becomes obvious as the narrator is sexually dominated by the Marquis, having no agency or power over her own sexual expression. The narrator's journey of character development works to instill her with more security and sense of self, and as we approach the end of the story she has taken control over what she still can; she attempts to use her body to seduce the Marquis. This dramatic change is catalyzed by the main character's increased feeling of familiarity with the other female characters. Her relation to her mother and the former wives starts to shape the main character and how she perceives the Marquis. As such, *The Bloody Chamber* posits a necessity for framing oneself within a larger context, while at the same time emphasizing the individuality of this position. This character work can arguably be understood in relation to Carter's endeavor of 'demythologizing', because it presents a constant desire to embed new meaning into already established frameworks.

The Passion of New Eve

Arguably even more so than *The Bloody Chamber*, *The Passion of New Eve* positions the self-discovery of the main character (Carter, 1977). This journey forces many forms of violence upon the main character, especially forms of sexual abuse. In this way, the novel paints a picture of female sexuality that appears to be deeply connected to abuse (by men). However, the complicated gender identity of the main character also points towards a more subtle understanding of sexuality and power within this novel. As such, I will examine some key scenes of *The Passion of New Eve*, in order to grasp the range of Carter's multi-faceted story, and in order to see how her views on feminism and pornography emerge in it. I argue that Carter is profoundly engaged with representing nuance and dichotomy in this novel, as she describes the many complicated aspects of a transitioning gender identity in a culture that values strict binaries. She uses both women-dominated and men-dominated systems in which she is able to critique not the gender in power, but the issues that are inherent to such a one-sided culture.

The Passion of New Eve follows Evelyn, who later becomes Eve (Carter, 1979). In the beginning of the story, Evelyn spends his last night in London before leaving for a dystopian version of New York. In order to honor the occasion, he offers a tribute to Tristessa de St. Ange, an old movie star that he is obsessed with. In these first paragraphs, Evelyn provides a largely superficial description of Tristessa, and it becomes clear that he worships her mostly because of her beauty. Tristessa's beauty conveys a profound pain that no one else could ever convey, and it is in this appearance that Evelyn constructs 'the very essence of [her] magic' (Carter, 1977, p. 5). After this assertion of her beauty, though, Evelyn also ponders the implications of her aging and the potential loss of such beauty. While he says that Tristessa is 'just as beautiful as twenty years before, would always be so beautiful as long as celluloid

remained in complicity with the phenomenon of persistence of vision.’ (Carter, 1977, p. 5).

Tristessa is thus framed as an eternal beauty who shall never fade.

However, Evelyn then begins to ponder the incongruence between symbols and their physical manifestations. Here, we start to see the first signs that Evelyn’s obsession is not merely skin-deep.. As he claims: ‘Our external symbols must always express the life within us with absolute precision; how could they do otherwise, since that life has generated them?’ (Carter, 1977, p. 6). He believes that all physical manifestations of life are produced from a direct connection to the inner reality. That is to say, all signs are direct extrapolations of the things they signify. It is interesting that this sentiment is brought up so soon by Evelyn in relation to Tristessa, as the rest of the narrative will reveal a profound distinction between the symbol and the thing symbolized. Ironically, the paragraph ends with the declaration that ‘a critique of these symbols is a critique of our lives.’ (Carter, 1977, p. 6). In this way, Carter sets up Evelyn as deeply convinced of his own ideas, and this allows the story to function at least in part as a disassembly of such ideas. That is to say, the novel will engage with Evelyn’s thesis that symbol and symbolized are in direct contact. The novel’s exploration of gender, especially in relation to Evelyn and Tristessa, allows for Evelyn's first argument to be fully refuted by the end of it. In fact, the novel’s crossing of boundaries between genders and the subsequent confusion that this causes prove that our ‘external symbols’ come nowhere near an absolutely precise expression of ‘the life within us’ (Carter, 1977, p. 6). This is further cemented by the fact that both Evelyn and Tristessa find joy in the inaccurate connection between physical manifestation and internal essence, as they come to understand themselves through the other. In their moment of shared connection, Eve comes to realize that ‘Masculine and feminine are correlatives which involve one another.’ (Carter, 1977, p. 149). As such, the relationship between symbol and symbolized is not self-evident, as Evelyn initially believes. Instead, our external symbols and our internal life are not precisely aligned. Often their

relationship is prone to change through circumstantial factors, such as the body we inhabit or the societal roles we are expected to fulfill.

Evelyn moves to the United States after his last night in England, but the job he had set up there does not materialize (Carter, 1977). He finds himself in a dystopian version of New York, where he eventually meets a young woman named Leilah. He regularly abuses her in various ways and at the end of their relationship he impregnates her and forces her to get an abortion from a voodoo practitioner, which he refuses to pay for even though he has enough money. After leaving Leilah, Evelyn flees to the desert with no real plan other than to escape the mess of the life he left behind. He quickly runs out of supplies and tries to find a way to come in contact with other travelers. However, in this pursuit he is almost immediately robbed of everything he owns. Then, he is captured by women from the city of Beulah. Beulah is an underground establishment in which only women live, and where they worship a figure called 'Mother', who is seen as the founder of the place; 'Mother built this underground town, she burrowed it out below the sand [...] unless, that is, she herself has always been there.' (Carter, 1977, p. 47). In the figure of 'Mother' we can see how Evelyn's initial argument starts to crumble. She is explained as 'an incarnated deity', who has 'transformed her flesh', and 'undergone a painful metamorphosis of the entire body and become the abstraction of a natural principle.' (Carter, 1977, p. 47). That is to say, 'Mother' changed her entire physical manifestation, but it is unclear how her new form correlates to her inner mind. Therefore, the claim that the physical realm must directly symbolize inner life is highly contested by this figure, as she elucidates the unnatural aspect of physical reality. In fact, one's physical form can be molded into any shape, and thus the connection to any inner truth it may symbolize ranges from fluid at the least to possibly non-existent. Evelyn's initial formula posits a given relationship between symbol and symbolized, and 'Mother' deconstructs the self-evident

aspect of this relationship. 'Mother' provides a more challenging synthesis of inner life and physical manifestation as it is unclear which presupposes which.

As Nicoletta Vallorani notes in her essay about cityscapes in *The Passion of New Eve*, it is not just the body that is examined as a contested site of symbolism. In fact, the different urban areas that Carter sketches throughout the novel also present this puzzle. Indeed, Vallorani argues that 'different urban spaces are described as complex metaphors of the interior space.' (1994). This means that Evelyn's initial formula in which symbolic representation equals immaterial reality is presented through the various backdrops of the story. Vallorani furthermore explains that 'we may posit an analogy and a sort of contiguity between the physical body of a person and the urban body of a city.' (1994). Therefore, the architecture of the city can be understood to symbolize the population that it houses. As a consequence, the implications of the individual body are altered and deepened through its connection to the city (Vallorani, 1994). When the environment is explicitly gendered, as it is in *The Passion of New Eve*, the 'signifying system', or the city in this case, gains a 'further and deeper articulation' (Vallorani, 1994). As such, by adding the aspect of gender to her urban territory, Carter amplifies the symbolic relationship between city and body.

This principle is highly evident once Evelyn enters the city of Beulah. One aspect of the city that reveals its gendered character, is its location in the desert, deep underneath the earth. The placement of Beulah in such a deep and closed-off area evokes a womb-like space. Because the city only allows women, who connect to their leader in a mother-daughter dynamic, the inherent femininity of the city of Beulah is heightened. That is to say, the architecture and location of the city mirror its population.

The feminist merit in envisioning such a single-gendered space in the place of a city, lies in its ability to imagine an urban environment that inverts the reality of danger that women experience in such environments. As such, this aspect of the novel offers a counter-

narrative to the popular interpretation of the post-apocalyptic city-scape and in doing so it points out Carter's dedication to imagining and subsequently refuting the need for single-gendered spaces. Even though the city of Beulah presents a purely female environment in both its population and its architecture, Carter's consistently ironic approach [MB9] toward the place indicates her distaste for such segregated attitudes. While Beulah may initially look like a safe city-scape for women, Carter puts her protagonist in a lot of danger while in Beulah. Arguably, by bringing Evelyn into Beulah, Carter allows for the city and its strict rules to deconstruct themselves. In her narration of the story, Eve retorts her supposed knowledge of physical manifestation, and indeed describes that if she knows anything at all, it was clarified to her through her operation: 'if I've suffered since then a clarification of the world, if now I comprehend even a little the nature of the flesh, I owe this knowledge to the illumination afforded me by the sullen flash of Holy Mother's obsidian scalpel.' (Carter, 1977, p. 50). Therefore, it is apparent that Eve's transformation has deeply influenced her views of the world, and this transformation emerges from the castration in Beulah at the hands of the 'Mother'. Before this operation takes place, Evelyn is locked up in a room and cries as he feels 'utterly helpless' (Carter, 1977, p. 51). While Evelyn is alone in this moment, he constantly feels the presence of others, as his pathetic reaction makes them respond in order to further amplify his humiliation (Carter, 1977, p. 51). He then fears he is about to be executed as a voice declares that 'except a man dies and be born again he may not enter the kingdom of heaven.' (Carter, 1977, p. 51). However, it soon becomes clear that the people of Beulah do not wish to kill Evelyn directly. As a matter of fact, the voice goes on to say that Evelyn is 'at the place of birth' and Evelyn finally realizes he is inside of a 'simulacrum of the womb' (Carter, 1977, p. 52).

It is interesting that Evelyn should describe it as a simulacrum, rather than a simulation. Following Jean Baudrillard's theory in *Simulacra and Simulation* the concept of a

simulacrum entails that the simulated environment or object does not have a true starting point (1981). Instead, the original of the copied object does not exist. Following this framework of simulacra, the womb is presented as a space with no original; it is an object that only knows copies of copies. This title makes sense as the womb room then proceeds to present a lecture about the timelessness of a world without men. In the equation that the women introduce, men symbolize time and women symbolize space. As such: 'kill time and live forever' (Carter, 1977, p. 53). The women of Beulah envision a world without men, in which they may live forever. They partition an eternal existence, and therefore the womb as an infinite spiral with no real beginning fits into their perspective. At the same time, they want to 'journey backwards to the source' (Carter, 1977, p. 53). It is partially through this sentiment that we can distinguish the ungrounded desires of the all-female community. They wish to go back to a place whose origins are totally uncertain. Furthermore, the figure of the Mother arguably represents not a return to but a movement away from any sort of primitive womanly being, as her entire construction has been artificial; she has constructed herself and her city. Neither of 'Mother' nor Beulah are timeless facts of nature. They are woman-made at a certain moment in time.

The ironic undertones of Carter's representation of Beulah continue as the lecture is concluded and Evelyn realizes he is hungry. As he says: 'my hunger was the only way I learned how time had passed and, somewhere outside my sealed globe, presumably, time was continuing to pass.' (Carter, 1977, p. 53). Because the natural impulse of hunger is described as a way of telling time, Carter underlines the unnaturalness of the women's wishes to live without it. Furthermore, Evelyn points out that time does continue to pass outside of the synthetic environment of Beulah, which has been set up so as to be able to ignore all the implications of time passing. Beulah is represented as an unattainable goal, as its most basic tenets are wholly unnatural, even though it pretends to seek out a foundational source to all

life. Their leader and goddess represents this ultimate hubristic attitude, as Evelyn describes: 'Mother has made symbolism a concrete fact. She is the hand-carved figurehead of her own, self-constructed theology.' (Carter, 1977, p. 58).

As the actual act of castration draws closer, Evelyn begins to feel strangely more at ease in the womb of Beulah. Before entering the room in which Mother awaits his presence, Evelyn feels 'a sense of sacrilege, as if my presence here were forbidden.' (Carter, 1977, p. 57). It is evident that Evelyn knows not yet of what is to come at this moment; he still feels like an outsider and is afraid of the implications of being an outsider in such a hostile place. However, his attitude soon changes as he sees Mother: 'when I saw her, I knew I had come home' (Carter, 1977, p. 58). The confrontation with Mother produces almost instantly a sense of feminine self-awareness in Evelyn. He knows her power and what it means for him, and he appears to accept the transformation that she will set in motion, as she 'will free me from being, transform my I into the other and, in doing so, annihilate it.' (Carter, 1977, p. 59). As such, the Mother is about to execute a total metamorphosis, in which Evelyn will detach himself from physical being and his current self will be destroyed in attaining 'the other' (Carter, 1977, p. 59). The mission of the Mother, to expand the women-exclusive society of Beulah, is thus transferred onto Evelyn, and he accepts his fate immediately when it is presented to him. He feels immediately at ease in becoming the next official member of the community. Yet, while he feels an awe-inspiring sense of belonging, the view of the Mother repulses him: 'I was appalled by the spectacle of the goddess. She was a sacred monster' (Carter, 1977, p. 59). Again, the artificiality of the goddess is underlined. She is described in extremes and opposites; she is 'self-fulfilling fertility' and 'fully clothed in obscene nakedness' (Carter, 1977, p. 59). The feeling of security that Evelyn feels is thus undercut by the discomfort of the sight of the Mother.

These scenes show that *The Passion of New Eve* is a novel that is heavily engaged in dichotomies. Carter consistently builds up certain elements of the story, only to break them down almost simultaneously. This is the case in the descriptions of the city of Beulah, as well as the descriptions of the Mother, as both of these are presented with reverence while they are also deeply unsettling. In both cases, the combination of the uncanny and the homely aspects of these entities occurs alongside Eve's inner journey of self-discovery. In this way, the story poses the sexual extremes that Beulah and the Mother signify as crucial aspects to Eve's self-actualization. Her decision to eventually escape the city is contingent upon these elements. Eve is noticeably upset by her surroundings, and she refuses to take part in the strict sexual politics that Beulah celebrates. As such Eve's time in Beulah portrays the connection between autonomy and sexuality.

Finally, then, Carter's argument in favor of pornography and against the censorship that anti-pornography feminists pose, is also prevalent in her fictional works. This is the case because *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* both offer readings of female sexuality that center the characters' agency in the sexual encounter. By denying the protagonists agency at first, their subsequent search for it becomes all the more important to their characterization. Carter's writing in these cases thus suggests a perspective of pornography that is in line with her argument in *The Sadeian Women*, because of this emphasis on autonomy as it is channeled in sexual relations. In turn, this observation reveals that Carter's feminist inclinations translate into her fiction.

Chapter 3: Carter and The Pornography Wars in the Present

Introduction

Having analyzed the historical feminist movement in which Angela Carter can be placed, and the feminist contents of *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* in the first two chapters of this work, I will proceed to position Carter and her fiction within the contemporary landscape of feminist discourse. In doing so, this chapter will focus on the continued relevance of Carter's work and the themes she addresses in it. This chapter will thus explore the contemporary relevance of pornography within feminism, in order to see how the debates of the second feminist wave have changed to take their place within the current zeitgeist. Looking at current engagements with Carter's fiction will also illustrate how contemporary feminists look at Carter's work. By extension, such an analysis will provide an insight into the many ways Carter's relevance remains and inspires feminist research and discussion.

In order to structure this chapter, it will follow the question 'How do Carter's writings still exert impact on feminist debate today?'. I argue that Carter's emphasis on nuanced understandings of sexuality and pornography make her work evergreen. However, Carter's thesis on pornography does not seriously engage with the themes that contemporary anti-pornography feminism prioritizes. That is to say, she does not discuss the active harm that the present-day pornography industry causes women, in the form of human trafficking, rape and abuse, because her focus is on the consumption of pornography rather than the production of it. I furthermore argue that this absence in her logic can be substituted by looking at her fiction.

Characterizing Contemporary Feminist Debate

Characterizing the contemporary feminist movement fully is a highly complicated task, and as such this chapter will focus on contemporary feminism purely as it relates to sexuality and pornography. Lynn Comella writes about the necessity for nuanced feminist debate about pornography in a more contemporary setting. In her 2015 review, she discussed different works that revisit the feminist 'sex wars'. Comella frames this necessity in light of the *Fifty Shades* novels, explaining that 'Feminist writers and media critics were quick to jump into the cultural fray to offer their opinions on, and analyses of, the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon, often presenting an either/or scenario where the scales tilted toward one of two possible scenarios: sexual peril or sexual pleasure.' (Comella, 2015, p. 438). She says that this book series marked a huge academic interest in female sexuality, in which authors theorized about both the potential harmful and the potential empowering effects of the novels. On the one hand, some critics argued that the *Fifty Shades* books were an example of the incessant presence of pornography in (popular) culture (Comella, 2015, p. 438). In contrast, others proposed that the series offered an opportunity for women to explore their sexuality in a liberating manner (Comella, 2015, p. 439). As Comella adequately explains, the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon reveals the difficulty of discussing the implications of erotica and pornography for women's sexuality, and the everlasting presence of the 'legacy of the feminist sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s', that indicated 'battles over pornography and sexual expression that caused deep and enduring rifts within the broader feminist movement that are still felt today (2015, p. 439). It becomes evident that the different arguments in favor of, and against the merit of *Fifty Shades* reveal just how relevant a contemporary example can be, in explaining and utilizing the vocabulary and frameworks of past discussions. Differing ideas and debates regarding female sexuality and the (political) power relations that are indicated in this still frame our debates

about literature and other media, and are still the main structure through which we can make sense of depictions of female sexuality (Comella, 2015, p. 439).

As Comella writes, pornography receives an ever-increasing amount of interest, as people begin to take it more seriously as a field of academic interest and study, and as people are increasingly interested in the different effects that pornography has on a society and its different demographics (Comella, 2015, p. 440). Due to this increased interest, it is highly valuable to reexamine 'the history of feminist battles over pornography, and sex work more broadly, not only because these ideological devices endure [...] but also because feminist history is so easily rewritten or simply erased from public memory.' (Comella, 2015, p. 440). And even though the culture surrounding sexuality and pornography has changed since feminists first started to discuss these issues in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the same rhetoric and vocabulary is used both in current anti-porn circles, as well as within sex-positive perspectives (Comella, 2015, p. 440).

Via the perspective of sex -positivity the trend of choice -feminism can be explained, as this branch of contemporary feminism approaches the topic of feminist sexuality through the lens of sex- positivity. That is to say, the branch of choice-feminism posits an approach to sexuality (and pornography) that is unilaterally positive. It regards sexuality as a positive force in women's lives and seeks to celebrate women's diverging experiences of their individual sexuality. This is relevant to the debate at hand, because it exemplifies one of the ways in which pro-pornography feminism continues to influence popular opinion. As Rachel Thwaites explains in her discussion of choice feminism, this form of thought sees 'the choices [women] make as justified and always politically acceptable.' (2017, p. 55). All choices made by women can therefore be framed as feminist within this perspective, because the feminist value of the choice lies within the choice itself and this choice is made by a woman on account of her own free will. By nature, then, choice feminism is also necessarily diverse and

inclusive of all the ways in which an individual may choose to live out their womanhood. This inclusive shift in feminism started in the 1990s, during the third feminist wave, mostly as a reaction towards the more rigid definitions and expectations of the second feminist wave.

However, as Thwaites also explains, this branch of feminism that prioritizes choice and inclusivity is not unanimously accepted among feminists. In fact, many critiques of choice- feminism question its true dedication to inclusivity and freedom of choice (Thwaites, 2017, p. 56). The arguments against choice-feminism hold that not all choices hold equal political meaning, therefore it is important to distinguish the political implications of a decision and to understand it within its context. Without such an assessment, the decision loses its political potential, rendering it effectively meaningless or potentially harmful to the feminist endeavor. This critique more broadly addresses the scope of feminism. As Thwaites says: 'choice feminism certainly opens up a number of questions around whether feminism's main focus should be on the individual and their decisions or on the collective and the best decisions for all.' (2017, p. 57). Choice feminism presents a worldview that is deeply individualistic, as it emphasizes the importance of individual freedoms. This is the case because women ought to be in charge of their own lives, and as such they must be able to act in the ways that are most pleasing to them: 'there can be no 'standard feminist' actions, but only individual choices based on what is best for that person and her life.' (Thwaites, 2017, p. 58). This priority arguably works as a disservice to shared feminist goals, because a sole emphasis on individual pleasure negates the political impact of collective initiatives. In this way Choice feminism effectively neutralizes the political influence of the feminist project, as it moves feminism from a collective system of thought to a private choice that bears no weight on the system in which it is made. Because any decision is embedded with potential feminist value, this feminist value loses its political power and its potential for societal change.

Positioning Pornography in Contemporary Feminism

The trend of choice-feminism has major implications in the discussion about pornography and sexuality within feminist circles. After all, if women are free to choose to do whatever they desire, then it becomes impossible to meaningfully criticize the pornography industry and its potentially negative impact on women. This is the case, because the choice-argument does not entertain the outcome of a decision. Rather, it zooms in on the decision-making, and frames that as a feminist end in itself. As such, the consequences of a decision and the effects this has on women's lives and wellbeing is largely ignored. In the context of the pornography debate, this means that (feminist) women ought to be free to participate in any aspect of the pornography industry, and that there should be no limits to the ways in which women choose to take part in it.

Ana Valero Heredia describes the ongoing reality of the feminist debate about pornography as she describes the main tenets of each side of the debate. She affirms that the feminist pornography debate emerged in the mid-1980s, as pornography became more widely distributed. As a consequence, this popular pornography consumption 'created a schism which has not yet been resolved and, if anything, has worsened in recent decades.' (Valero Heredia, 2022, p. 222). It is remarkable that Heredia should characterize the current debate about pornography as more polarized than it was during the 1980s. This is the case, because feminist thought has diversified and pornography is no longer a main spearpoint within feminist thought and feminist self-identification. The reason Heredia provides for the increasing divides across the pornography debate is that 'mainstream pornographic dialogue has evolved to encompass increasingly degrading and violent narratives about women.' (2022, p. 222). That is to say, the debate is necessarily more aggressive because the content which it debates has become more violent. As such, opposition to pornography in a contemporary setting finds itself trying to combat increasingly aggressive and violent depictions of women's

sexuality. Where the debate during the second feminist wave found issue with the inherent misogynistic ideas and practices that porn presents and with the implications of an upcoming and booming porn industry, contemporary anti-pornography activism engages more directly with the harm that women experience because of violent (online) pornography.

At the same time, the other side of the debate provides a sex-positive approach, in which pornography is regarded as 'a potential vehicle for channeling the erotic expression of women and sexual minorities, and thus a mechanism for their sexual liberation'. (Valero Heredia, 2022, p. 222). This sex-positive opinion can easily be likened to the pro-pornography feminist sentiment, as it emphasizes the importance of female sexuality and desire, and the positive role pornography can play in the exploration of such themes.

The popular movement of choice feminism can be characterized as sex-positive, because it asserts the crucial role of individual autonomy. As such, women ought to be able to choose whether or not to produce and consume pornography out of their own free will, just as much as they may choose not to engage with pornography at all. Every choice women make can be viewed with a feminist lens, and must be embedded in the framework of freedom of choice for all women. Arguably, though, this understanding of feminism is not sufficient to seriously engage with the discussion surrounding pornography.

Thus, while pornography seems initially to have lost something of its polarizing effect within the feminist debate, its increasingly violent presence in (popular) culture indicates the persevering relevance of this topic. Furthermore, as is shown by Heredia, the spear points of both anti-pornography and pro-pornography feminists of the second wave continue to show signs in contemporary discourse. On the one hand, contemporary feminists draw upon the anti-pornography argument that pornography is inherently degrading to women and that it inhibits their liberty. Other contemporary feminist draw upon the pro-pornography argument

that sexually explicit material offers avenues for women to explore their own sexuality which is important to their self-actualization and liberation.

However, as has been established, the contemporary feminist project is one that is profoundly concerned with diversity. This means that, since the second feminist wave, a diversification has occurred in feminism, broadening the range of feminist talking points. What follows, is that pornography has become part of a larger discussion about power relations, sexuality and abuse. Anti-pornography feminists during the second feminist wave already sought to understand pornography as indicative of larger issues related to misogyny and power-abuse. Through the centralized priority of pornography as an example for violence against women, this group of feminists aimed to discuss and dismantle the systems that oppress women and their sexuality.

Julie Dahlstrom also explores contemporary attitudes and debates regarding pornography through the ways in which pornography is regarded legally in her article 'The New Pornography Wars' (2023). Dahlstrom explains: 'as in the "pornography wars" of the 1970s and 1980s, lawyers and activists have turned to civil remedies and filed creative anti-trafficking lawsuits' (2023, p. 117). Here, she draws a connection between the efforts of anti-pornography advocates in the 1970s and 1980s and the current perspectives in favor of more rigorous legal interventions within the porn industry. In her article, Dahlstrom extensively discusses the legal implications of new trafficking lawsuits that are initiated by this last group. As she describes, such lawsuits question the extent of free speech and other legal expressions as they 'open up new avenues for civil damages against online pornography websites and entities that profit from online harms'. (Dahlstrom, 2023, p. 117). Dahlstrom thus elucidates the complicated legal character of penalizing or even banning pornography; while such action may allow for victims to seek justice, it might also infringe upon rights such as freedom of speech.

In her investigation of this topic, Dahlstrom uses the lawsuits against MindGeek, one of the biggest online pornography conglomerates in the world, which is being accused of hosting and benefiting from 'online harms' (Dahlstrom, 2023, p. 121). Specifically, crimes such as (child) rape, revenge pornography and spy cam footage are allegedly available on MindGeek's website, Pornhub (Dahlstrom, 2023, p. 121).

Taylor Comerford also discusses the legal action taken against Pornhub and MindGeek, however her feminist approach to the situation argues against penalizing pornography websites for hosting harmful content, but not only because it may infringe upon the right of free speech (2022). Instead, Comerford is against penalizing pornography websites because such legislation works to 'subject transactional sex workers and pornography performers to economic and physical harm, making it an ineffective and misguided method to address the core harms of digital sexual exploitation.' (Comerford, 2022, p. 1177). Comerford thus feels that in penalizing the websites that host harmful material, these websites and their contents are not adequately addressed, and in their place sex workers are demonized. Here, Comerford elucidates that the outcry against Pornhub is part of another issue, namely that of sex worker's rights and protection. While it is important to protect people from the sexual abuse that Pornhub hosts, and to hold the executives that allowed such content accountable, Comerford's argument shows that legal action towards Pornhub is translated into a persecution of sex workers who may rely on such platforms to gain attention and thus income.

This analysis can work to explain the failures of choice-feminism or sex-positive feminism in addressing problems within the pornography industry. Choice-feminism affirms that the pornography industry cannot be properly held accountable for the harm it causes, because many sex workers are reliant on this industry and legal implications for the entire industry necessarily impact the individuals who are a part of it. Choice-feminism cannot

adequately approach this dynamic, because it emerges from a genuine belief in free choice, whereas sex work is not always voluntary.

In addition to her argument against the MindGeek lawsuits, Comerford also paints a clear picture of the outcry against pornography websites such as Pornhub. She explains the importance of Laila Mickelwait's initiative, 'Traffickinghub' (Comerford, 2022, p. 1178).

Mickelwait began this campaign in the wake of public outcry against Pornhub, as a petition to shut down the website. The initiative quickly garnered a lot of attention 'and prompted global conversation about Pornhub's inability to screen criminal content on the website.' (Comerford, 2022, p. 1179). As Traffickinghub states on their website, their main goal is 'shutting down Pornhub and holding its executives accountable for enabling, distributing and profiting from rape, child abuse, sex trafficking and criminal image based sexual abuse.' (Traffickinghub). In order to illustrate its purpose, Traffickinghub displays the many lawsuits against Pornhub and it describes the ways in which Pornhub has already been held accountable. Traffickinghub continues to collect signatures and stories in order to fully shut down Pornhub. In their words, it is not sufficient to 'clean up' the site, 'because we must end impunity for corporations and executives who have knowingly enabled, profited from, and globally distributed rape for profit.' (Traffickinghub). On its website, Traffickinghub performs serious concern for justice for victims of sex trafficking, sexual abuse and rape. It stresses how lives have been destroyed, and that Pornhub must be stopped from creating more victims in the future (Traffickinghub). This concern for the victims of sexual abuse, does not translate to concern for sex workers at large. Mickelwait's campaign is unilateral in its condemnation of Pornhub, and in this certainty it ignores the struggles of sex workers who are in their position. Therefore, while Traffickinghub provides a useful resource for people who have been victimized by the pornography industry, it does not offer a nuanced perspective of pornography that treats sex workers with grace.

I argue that the focus on Pornhub's crimes against humanity within the current debate about pornography reveals a two-sided aspect to the contemporary feminist approach. On the one hand, the focus on Pornhub implies not a broadening of subject matter, but rather a specification of it. While the lawsuits and outrage towards MindGeek and its websites are part of a larger discussion surrounding misogyny, abuse and the legal status of sex work, MindGeek and Pornhub are catapulted to the frontlines of the discourse. The legal action taken towards these entities are used specifically to condemn them, and while these critiques may apply to other institutions as well, this is not the goal of campaigns such as Traffickinghub. In its particular focus on Mindgeek as a perpetrator of (online) sexual violence, Traffickinghub is able to present one single villain, in order to turn a highly multi-faceted issue into something more tangible that can be accounted for in a legal setting.

On the other hand, this generalization shows a broader commitment with feminist themes such as sexuality, desire and autonomy. The current feminist debate about pornography has to contend with a much broader spectrum of voices and opinions, simply because of the growth of the feminist body of literature, and the feminist movement at large. Many new feminist theories have emerged over the last 50 years, and these all work to broaden the understanding of women's liberation. Kimberlé Crenshaw's introduction of intersectionality, for instance, showed how different women are oppressed in different ways, due to their diverse identities (1991). By illuminating especially the struggles of women of color, Crenshaw diversified feminist debates. In addition to that, understandings of queer theory also call for a broader perspective on feminist issues. For instance, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity problematizes the ways in which sex and gender are discussed (1990). In doing so it opened up new avenues for queer people to partake in the feminist endeavor and for feminists to challenge their own gender identity.

Moreover, the field of porn studies has developed a lot since pornography was first discussed by feminists. Laura Helen Marks discusses the many contributions to this field in her genealogy of feminist porn studies (2018). In this work, Marks discusses the many dimensions of porn studies, especially as it pertains to media studies. She argues that the field has produced extremely valuable insights for the feminist project, for instance in its appreciation of sex workers, and its ability to offer more nuance to the traditional two sided pornography debate (Marks, 2018).

This increase in feminist input works to further contextualize contemporary anti-pornography feminism. As the feminist movement becomes increasingly diverse, anti-pornography platforms such as Traffickinghub can be understood within this increasingly diverse environment. As such, broad themes like female sexuality and agency can be used to underline very specific initiatives. In this way, anti-pornography feminism is able to use feminist language that appeals to many people, while also aiming for very specific goals through actionable plans.

Angela Carter in Contemporary Feminism

These relevant themes in contemporary feminist theory and debate are also present in contemporary engagements with feminist literature. In the first chapter of this MA dissertation, I established the relevance of Carter's work within the feminist landscape of its time. Continuing on into the present day, Carter's work is still often analyzed from a feminist lens, and therefore popular trends in feminism are used in order to frame her fiction. As such, looking at contemporary feminist research into Carter's fiction, the continued feminist merit of these works comes to the fore, as well as the different themes that can be explored in these works. In these academic endeavors we can also distinguish the diversification that feminism has experienced in the last two decades, as certain forms of thought receive more attention.

For instance, recent scholarship regarding Carter's work shows that her fiction lends itself quite well to analysis in the framework of queer theory, not least because of her description of (trans)gendered bodies in *The Passion of New Eve*. Rachel Carroll explains that the status of the transgendered body as a key symbol in queer theory: 'the transgendered figure [...] has come to stand for queer theory and, hence, the presence of transgender themes within a literary text has sometimes been read as a kind of embodied shorthand for queer intent.' (Carroll, 2011, p. 241). That is to say, any literary text that includes transgender themes or characters is often regarded within the context of queer theory. *The Passion of New Eve* can be placed in this context and in doing so, its engagements with 'feminist politics and transgendered identity' can be investigated (Carroll, 2011, p. 241).

In a contemporary setting, the discussion of themes pertaining to feminism is often executed in conjunction with queer studies. As Carroll explains: 'the emergence of queer theory in the 1990s saw the questioning of concepts fundamental to second-wave feminism, including the very concept of women.' (Carroll, 2011, p. 242). The reevaluation of basic terms within the feminist movement has impacted the way in which feminist debate is structured and the topics that it is able to discuss meaningfully. Through the increased inclusion of queer perspectives in feminism, the movement has been able to provide more nuanced understandings of the issues that it seeks to understand and ultimately change.

In the case of *The Passion of New Eve*, an explicitly queer perspective can offer a consideration of the novel that was previously highly difficult to articulate. Furthermore, such a point of view can work to elucidate the ways in which opinions and attitudes towards queerness have evolved overtime. In this respect, *The Passion of New Eve* can be a fascinating case-study, because its presentation of gender and sexuality appears distinctly dated from a more contemporary perspective. For a present-day audience, the novel may initially appear slightly binary in its presentation of the main character. For instance through its use of

pronouns. When the main character is Evelyn, masculine pronouns are used. When Evelyn is transformed into Eve, Carter makes the switch to feminine pronouns. This change occurs because of a sex-change, offering an understanding of gender and sex as synonyms. However, a more critical appreciation of the novel can also distinguish the nuance that is embedded in the story. The switch in gender provides the story with a clear cut-off point, in which the main character transforms from male to female, and the story treats the character accordingly. However, this distinction is not set in stone, and Eve's understanding of her own identity is almost always highly convoluted. She feels at home as well as villainized in the city of Beulah. Later on, she struggles with her lasting affection for movie-star Tristessa, which shows that her identity before the castration and after it remain in contact. Therefore, while the language Carter employs in *The Passion of New Eve* may come across as slightly antiquated, the narrative itself offers exceptionally nuanced presentations of (gender)identity, not only through Eve, but also through many of the other characters, such as Tristessa and Leilah. The queer contents of *The Passion of New Eve* are precisely what allow its continued relevance in queer literature research. That is to say, these themes provide points of entry for a queer theory perspective and allows for an understanding within this framework.

Positioning Angela Carter's own views on the feminist pornography wars in a present-day context is highly complicated, as the situation regarding this topic has evolved dramatically. As has been established, the debate continues to engage feminists because pornography is only becoming more prevalent in society, and this pornography becomes increasingly aggressive and hostile to the women it portrays according to many anti-pornography feminists. This escalation of violence towards women in pornography can thus compromise Carter's initial argument, which she outlined in *The Sadeian Women*. That is to say, women ought to be able to consume pornography freely. I argue that the representation of violence in

contemporary pornography would not be the primary issue for Carter. In *The Sadeian Women* Carter explicitly defends the works of Marquis de Sade (1979). In her argument, Carter includes the extreme sexual violence that is depicted in Sade's writing. This violence is not her main point of interest, but rather the way in which the depictions of sexuality are paired with a sense of agency for (certain) female characters.

Moreover, Sade's work arguably shows that violent pornography is not a new phenomenon at all. In *The 120 Days of Sodom*, Sade details explicitly the extreme sexual gratification of his main characters as he describes scenes of rape, incest, necrophelianeophilia and bestiality, among other things. Regardless of these extremities, Carter argues in favor of Sade and his work, because it takes women outside of the framework of reproductive motherhood and because it describes sexuality and desire as things that can be pursued for their own sake. As has been established, Carter uses this reasoning to argue for the feminist merit in Sade's work, and for the neutral approach that should be maintained in relation to pornography. Essentially, Carter views pornography as a natural part of the human experience that should be stripped of its oppressive and antiquated negative connotations. The fact is, however, that Carter only discusses the consumption of pornography. She leaves the production of it out of her argument. Arguably, her fiction can be used to supplement this lack in her reasoning. For example, *The Bloody Chamber* portrays the Marquis and his disturbing sexual inclinations as creating something of his own pornography in his 'bloody chamber'. The victims of these acts are portrayed in a sympathetic light, and the main character desperately wants to escape from a similar fate. The women that the Marquis uses to satisfy his desires clearly do not choose to be in that position. The story thus undermines the idea that women have absolute freedom of choice when it comes to their sexual experiences. In this way, *The Bloody Chamber* performs an understanding of sexuality that is not totally in line with contemporary choice-feminism, though it does not completely condemn

pornography either. While the main character seemingly decides to marry the Marquis of her own volition, she is also manipulated by him in many ways. Furthermore, her lack of knowledge about the totality of the situation impairs her ability to make an informed decision. This reading of *The Bloody Chamber* thus does not look favorably upon the production of pornography, and the ways in which women can be manipulated into an industry that ultimately aims to harm them, just as the narrator was manipulated into the torture chamber and the abuse that followed.

At the same time, it is her venturing into the ‘bloody chamber’ that catalyzes her transformation as an active agent in the story. Her witnessing of the sexual gratification of the Marquis, even in an indirect manner, is what causes her to take agency in her own story. In this way, Carter upholds the connection between representations of (violent) sexual gratification and women’s autonomy, even as she critiques the mechanisms of satisfying extremely violent inclinations.

Similarly, in *The Passion of New Eve*, it is the occurrence of the main character’s sexual violation that catapults her into an increased sense of self-awareness and a deeper desire for self-actualization. Only after having an involuntary sexual encounter with ‘Mother’ and especially after being forcefully castrated does Eve start to ponder her own existence and does she begin to showcase actual desires.

This reading of *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* thus adds to Carter’s argument in favor of pornography as she outlines it in *The Sadeian Women*. Her logic that pornographic materials can have feminist merit, because they envision a woman that can experience sexual pleasure and desire, is underlined by the fact that the sexually graphic scenes in her fiction are paired with an introduction of female agency and development. I argue that the presence of feminist themes such as female agency in Carter’s fiction allows for contemporary engagements with her work to find entry points on the basis of feminism or

queer theory. The perspectives on pornography that Carter presents furthermore remain relevant, as the pornography debate continues on in contemporary feminist circles, and the nuance and refinement of Carter's argument in this respect can still offer meaningful insights, as the pornography industry becomes increasingly violent towards women.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have aimed to understand the feminist pornography debates and the place of Angela Carter's fiction and non-fiction within its discourse. In the first chapter, I outlined the major sides to the pornography debate as it originated during the second feminist wave, with scholars and activists such as Katherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin. By looking at Carter's *The Sadeian Women*, I contextualized her views on pornography within the debate. As such, I was able to establish Carter's views on pornography as in line with that of the libertarian side of the debate, which argues that pornography is not an ultimately negative influence in women's lives, because it offers avenues to explore their own sexuality and desire. Carter adds to this reasoning that the consumption of pornography should be regarded neutrally, and that value claims in this territory work to negate the natural impulses and inclinations that women should explore. In this way, Carter positions herself as opposite of the group of anti-pornography feminists. Anti-pornography feminists claim that pornography has an ultimately negative effect on women, because the pornography industry exploits and abuses women, and the production and consumption of pornography reinforce violent misogyny and unequal power relations between genders.

In the second chapter of this project, I performed a close-reading analysis of two of Carter's fictional works, *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve*. Both of these novels were read in light of the pornography debate and the relevant themes that present themselves in it. As such, I discussed the representation of power relations, sexuality and gender. I argue that Carter's fictional works can be used to add to her theoretical understandings, and that her fiction can often be seen to illustrate the themes that were prevalent in feminist discourse at the time.

In the final chapter of this project, I aimed to configure an understanding of the feminist debate about pornography as it exists today. I looked at the ways in which the

skeleton of this discussion that emerged during the 1970s still remains, and that it arguably has become increasingly polarized. In a contemporary setting, the legal actions taken against the pornography industry stand out as prime examples of anti-pornography rhetoric. In this way, we can distinguish a linear pattern between the legal repercussions that MacKinnon and Dworkin proposed in their civil rights ordinances. The main difference between these two types of legal action is that MacKinnon and Dworkin aimed to critique the state and function of pornography as a whole. MacKinnon and Dworkin argued that pornography infringes upon women's human rights. On the other hand, current lawsuits against establishments such as MindGeek prove that the legal attacks on pornography have become more refined, targeting specific practices within the industry.

The central question this MA thesis aimed to answer was: 'How can the feminist pornography wars be characterized, and how can Angela Carter be positioned in this context?'. Throughout the three chapters of this project, I have characterized the pornography wars in both their historical and present day forms by looking at the main arguments on both sides of the debate. I found that many talking points within these debates have remained the same. However, change has occurred as well. Looking at the legal actions anti-pornography feminists take across two periods, it becomes clear that present-day anti-pornography feminism is concerned with actionable plans to inhibit the harm that the pornography industry causes women, whereas second wave feminists were concerned with human rights claims. Carter's position in these debates also changed across time. This is the case because she was positioned as a figurehead of libertarian feminism during the second feminist wave. This placement was mostly due to her opposition to radical anti-pornography feminists, even when her own argument lacked a radical approach and instead favored nuance.

In a present-day setting, Carter's arguments can still be used in favor of pornography, especially when linked to choice-feminism and sex-positivity. However, I argue that this

move leaves out crucial details about Carter's argument. Carter did not argue in favor of the pornography industry at large. Her argument is about porn consumption, which means that Carter's views on pornography and sexuality should not be used to substantiate an entire industry, but rather as starting points to discuss the issue of pornography with nuance and without judgment. Furthermore, by looking at *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter's views on pornography become even more refined, as these novels tease out women's agency in sexual relations while also discussing their oppression in systems of sexual abuse. Carter covers both pleasure and pain in relation to sexuality and pornography and as such her efforts to discuss these themes remains important today.

Carter's lasting literary relevance can also be seen in recent adaptations of her works. Bryony Lavery transformed *The Bloody Chamber* into a theater play in 2008, in which the protagonist's curiosity and her defiance of the Marquis are central. Additionally, Jonas S. Bohlin created an opera based on *The Passion of New Eve* in 2018, in which the crucial themes of gender and sexuality remained, as well as a dedication to shocking the audience. These works show that Carter's fiction remains an inspiration and that her stories can even work across different media. Because *The Bloody Chamber* and *The Passion of New Eve* take inspiration from other stories before them, future research may find value in analyzing adaptations of these works, also taking into account medium-specific changes and challenges.

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