Deconstructing Sleeping Beauty

- Angela Carter and Écriture Feminine

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Abstract
When attempting to convey certain political or ideological agendas in literary texts maintaining specific writing strategies can work as a useful tool. From a feminist perspective the use of *écriture féminine* as a means of undermining patriarchy has been largely neglected as well as misunderstood by many feminists. However, as argued in this essay, *écriture féminine* is not only a useful tool for pursuing a feminist agenda, but is also something that needs to be discussed due to the many misunderstandings of it. Resting on the theoretical perspectives of Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Antonio Gramsci, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Richard Slotkin this essay investigates Angela Carter’s short story “The Lady of the House of Love” in relation to *écriture féminine* by exploring how the text rejects patriarchy and its idea of the gender binary. In this short story Carter re-works the classic Sleeping Beauty fairy tale and provides us with a feminist’s version of it. The main thesis of this essay is therefore that Carter challenges the gender binary by de-victimizing “woman” and by engaging in a style of writing that overturns western culture’s definitions of “woman” Carter provides a version of Sleeping Beauty that radically differs from the hegemonic/patriarchal versions.

Keywords: Angela Carter, Hélène Cixous, *écriture féminine*, feminism, gender, literature, Sleeping Beauty.
She was a perfect woman;  
like the moon,  
she only gave reflected light. (Carter, The Passion of New Eve 40).

“In a faraway land long ago...” Thus begins Disney's film version of the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty,” immediately giving its viewers a sense of a seemingly mythological and historical past. Most, if not all, people raised within Western culture are familiar with the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale and the story about a young girl being cursed to prick her finger on a spindle only to be awakened again by a true love’s kiss. Imagine instead a different version of Sleeping Beauty, an eroticized version with blood and gore and where the protagonist is sexually rapacious; a vampire who feeds off men and who lures men to her castle where she ravages them, sexually, before leaving them to their death. That is the Sleeping Beauty of Angela Carter.

The main topic of this essay is Carter and her feminist rewriting of Sleeping Beauty in her 1979 short story “The Lady of the House of Love” from the short story collection The Bloody Chamber. Much has been said and written about Carter as a postmodernist author; however, she is most prominently known for her feminist oeuvre, breaking gender stereotypes. In large, Carter was an author who constantly aimed at portraying “woman” differently than that of the hegemonic ideal and who addressed “the crisis of gender and sexuality in thinking and being ‘woman’ in the late twentieth century” (Benedikz 19). In order to be able to fully grasp, and indeed also enjoy, Carter’s texts and their ironic and humoristic aspects as well as their elements of parody; some acquaintance with feminist theory is useful. There are, however, a number of different branches of feminism and in this essay I intend to present a criticism of Carter’s novella based on an understanding of feminism in line with Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva who are both known for their criticisms of the patriarchal gender binary and their reluctance towards labeling themselves feminists since that acknowledges the gender binary and patriarchal notions of “woman.”

The re-writing of a patriarchal fairy tale such as Sleeping Beauty must also involve a “re-conquering” of the myth of “woman.” But since western culture is phallogocentric the purpose of feminist writers must be to not only re-conquer or question definitions of “woman” but also to undermine those very definitions. In order to be able to undermine patriarchal definitions, feminists must step beyond the gender binary and not remain inside the patriarchal logos and its definitions of gender. Many poststructuralist feminists argue that by “rethinking ‘woman’ and the feminine” one is able to free “woman” from being defined by the masculine (Benedikz 20). But in doing so we are also engaging in the reinforcement of the patriarchal logos since we then acknowledge the identity of “woman” and therefore remain trapped within patriarchy by using its logos of gender, whether this re-thinking of “woman” is a new “better” version or not. However, since the possibility of
completely stepping outside the patriarchal logos is next to impossible, as Jacques Derrida would argue, feminists are “forced” to work within the patriarchal logos. Because feminists operate within a phallogocentric ideology they are also inevitably affected by its reasoning simply by virtue of operating within it. In order for a text to be “truly” feminist it must step outside the world of phallogocentrism and patriarchy, and not remain dependent on its ways of reasoning. To take this argument even further, is not the concept “feminism” too a patriarchal invention? Feminism, being “founded” inside a patriarchal world/ideology, is so affected by patriarchy that it is inexorably dependent on the patriarchal logos, for instance on the concept of sex/gender, and in that dependency feminism inevitably acknowledges patriarchy. This said, the intention here is not to in any way undermine the feminist movement as such, but merely to expose and create awareness of how deeply patriarchal ideology is rooted within our very thinking. There are ways of using the patriarchal logos while still pursuing a feminist agenda and one way for feminist writers, like Carter, to do this is to use the writing strategy of *écriture feminine*.

The purpose of this essay is to show how Carter can be understood as engaging in this method of writing. Carter does this by re-writing the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale and working against the gender binary of the patriarchal logos. Carter manages to break patriarchal gender stereotypes by giving her female protagonist features that in patriarchy would be labeled “masculine” and by allowing the character to act/behave as males are “expected” to act/behave within patriarchy. Therefore the main thesis of this essay is that Carter exceeds patriarchal definitions of gender in the short story “The Lady of the House of Love” by engaging in what can be perceived as *écriture feminine*.

As previous research has shown, Carter’s literature re-work the patriarchal notions of “woman” and it also shows us “how Western culture has shaped limiting concepts of gender and sexuality” (Bristow & Broughton 14). However, most of the previous research have either largely neglected “The Lady of the House of Love” in benefit of the other stories in *The Bloody Chamber*, or mainly focused on the vampire aspect of it. For instance, Sarah Sceats has investigated the use of vampire tropes in relation to oral sex in her article “Oral Sex: Vampiric Transgressions and the Writing of Angela Carter”. Sceats provides psychoanalytical explanations for the Countess’s behavior in the text, and concludes that Carter’s vampire tropes indicate ambiguities in relation to desire.

Another scholar who has examined Carter’s work is Merja Mäkinen, who discusses female sexuality in *The Bloody Chamber* and “The Lady of the House of Love”. Mäkinen argues that Carter’s texts prey upon the old misogynistic versions of these fairy tales and that they aim towards the construction of “a complex vision of female psychosexuality” (9). What Mäkinen means by this is that Carter explodes the stereotypes of women as “passive, demure cyphers” and therefore questions patriarchal notions of “woman” (9). Furthermore, Mäkinen states that Carter’s texts
provide images of sexual transactions as equal and that they construct femininity as “active, desiring and unruly” (9). Finally, Mäkinen sums up that “The Lady of the House of Love” constructs woman as the sexual aggressor where a man plays the role of the virgin victim.

It is evident that although there does exist poststructuralist and deconstructive readings of Carter’s texts, readings that also address the problems of the patriarchal gender binary, they fail to ask questions about transcending the gender binary through *écriture féminine*. Much of the previous research on “The Lady of the House of Love” has, as mentioned above, mainly focused on the vampire aspect of the short story and has therefore, in some instances, neglected Carter’s references to Sleeping Beauty. By looking at this story from the perspective of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale as well as exploring its use of the gender binary in relation to *écriture féminine*, I believe we will be able to not only re-work the text, but also be able to provide new angles to previous analyses. For the Countess in this story is not only a vampire but there are several motifs that point to similarities with Sleeping Beauty: the Countess is a somnambulist, the castle where she lives has a rose bush in the garden, and the Countess also pricks her finger in the end of the story, however, not on a spindle but on broken glass.

Margret Benedikz writes about Carter as someone who raids the literary canon and views Carter’s texts as a “postmodern attempt” of questioning patriarchal laws (2). This is indeed a suitable description of Carter’s literary works: she manages to raid and transgress patriarchal gender boundaries and my essay focuses on that aspect of “The Lady of the House of Love”: with use of the below presented theoretical approach I argue that Carter overturns the patriarchal stereotypes of “woman” and “man” and “The Lady of the House of Love” therefore steps outside the patriarchal modes of thinking and also provides an alternative to the hegemonic versions of the fairy tale.

Carter was very interested in the fairy tale genre which explains why she chose to re-work a number of traditional fairy tales. Sarah Gamble mentions that Carter believed that “appropriation and adaptation is really what the fairy tale is all about” (67). Indeed, as Roemer and Bacchilega explain in *Angela Carter and the Fairy Tale*, it was very common to modify fairy tales before the brothers Grimm collected their stories and research shows that storytellers would often try to “improve” fairy tales in order to make them more pleasant or suiting for specific ideological perspectives, which is also what the brothers Grimm did themselves (11, 16). Furthermore, Lorna Sage argues that Carter criticized the traditional hegemonic fairy tales for being “sugar-coated lie[s]” or “a ‘myth’, a cultural construct naturalized as a timeless truth” (Roemer & Bacchilega 68). This definition of fairy tales as “sugar-coated lies” can also be said to reflect Carter’s view of how gender is naturalized in patriarchy. By keeping these matters in mind it becomes ever more so clear why Carter would choose to rewrite classic fairy tales with the purpose of breaking with the hegemonic tradition of the genre and, by doing so, historicize the patriarchal myth of “woman.”
Fairy tales must be seen as part of the process of naturalization of gender stereotypes because they reproduce and reify myths about gender. The fairy tale genre as such is not usually considered as belonging to “high” culture or literature, which can be explained by its association with women and children. Sarah Gamble explains the fairy tale genre’s low status in western culture as directly related to its association with women and is therefore often written off as “nonsense” (68). However, since Carter is a highly esteemed author who uses the fairy tale genre, her work in The Bloody Chamber and “The Lady of the House of Love” must be seen as an attempt to destroy the myth of fairy tales as “nonsense.” It is important to investigate what fairy tales tell us and how we treat them especially when discussing gender due to fairy tales’ association with women and femininity. Furthermore, since representations of gender are central to fairy tales it is crucial to discuss these in order to understand them. Yet another reason for the importance of exploring fairy tales is the fact that they are very popular and widely read and told in both literature and film.

When exploring the classic or, rather, hegemonic versions of Sleeping Beauty and how “woman” is portrayed in them, it is almost as though the protagonist has no will and she is portrayed as blatantly passive and as someone who is just waiting for fate and life to happen to her – or, to put it bluntly, in the words of Joyce Carol Oates, merely to be “female [in fairy tales] is to be without volition, identity” (99). Stephen Benson views Carter’s fairy tales in The Bloody Chamber as historicizing and “denaturalizing of the mythic pretensions of its source texts” (Roemer & Bacchilega 43). It is evident that while investigating fairy tales, contemporary or classic, it is important to have some background knowledge about how myth functions in culture.

In order for us to be able to grasp the complex nature of fairy tales it is important to understand how myth, gender and patriarchal ideology are connected. If we are able to understand how these ideas and concepts are related, then we are able to understand the importance of fairy tale mythmaking in the managing of patriarchal power structures. Also, by understanding how gender works in fairy tales we are able to see exactly how deeply rooted patriarchal ideology is in every single fraction of our (western) culture and society, even in the seemingly most feminist texts such as those of Carter. It is therefore necessary to explain myth, ideology, and gender, and also how these notions are related to fairy tales.

In the article “Myth and the Production of History” Richard Slotkin explains that myth and ideology play essential roles in every human culture. Slotkin defines ideology simply as an abstraction of the belief system that characterizes every society, and myths themselves are the narratives that are used to naturalize ideology. Since we often understand our own belief systems to be the result of logic and objective reasoning, we do not usually use the term ideology when referring to our own politics. The notion that our own belief systems are the result of logic and reasoning is merely a result of the naturalization of ideology, a process made possible through the
use of myth and metaphors. Slotkin stresses the importance of myth in the shaping of ideology, and what is central to my essay is that fairy tales contain myths of gender which makes it important to understand how myths function.

“Myths are stories,” Slotkin writes, “drawn from history,” that have become central to the culture of the society that uses them (70). Through the use of certain metaphors, members of society are able to refer to historical events and feel a sense of belonging to a historical past, and also to each other. These myths and metaphors not only provide a sense of tradition and belonging within a cultural group, but they also invoke an association of a struggle against an “ideological opposite” (72). In the case of patriarchal ideology, which pertains to this research, we may use this theory to explain how patriarchal power operates: men have historically used women as an ideological opposite and “woman” has been, and is, a metaphor against which men can measure themselves and are able to feel a sense of belonging as a collective. Furthermore, uses of “woman” as metaphor, and whatever qualities are associated with being “woman,” help men not only to identify and relate to each other (as do women, in their subordination), but also manage to maintain patriarchal power.

Furthermore, Slotkin identifies the problem of “reification” as the central difficulty of studies of myth, that is, the way in which we tend to treat ideas and metaphors as though they are in fact “real” aspects of material reality. What Slotkin means by this is that by treating myths as though they are in fact “real” and not as ideas that were invented by humans and then also, over time, explained as “natural.” For instance, the patriarchal notion of “woman” is a myth and the use of that myth in literary texts reifies how we, society, treat the idea of “woman” as something natural and not as something constructed in society and culture. By using the gender binary and assigning different qualities to gender, literary texts not only promote biological essentialist views of gender but also reinforce patriarchy, since the notion of gender was formed within patriarchal discourse to begin with.

In relation to this it becomes interesting to discuss the feminist re-writings of fairy tales because they not only use patriarchal fairy tale myths but also the myth of what it means to be “woman,” even though these myths are used to promote change in the way we understand “woman.” By using “woman,” in literary texts for instance, without pointing out that this is something constructed authors run the risk of reifying “woman” as something “natural” and then also inevitably acknowledge patriarchy. Therefore, if the reification is the problem, as Slotkin argues, feminist re-writings of patriarchal stories must attempt to undermine patriarchal ideas of “woman” by denaturalizing the very myth of “woman.” The problem lies within patriarchal understanding of gender itself: “woman” is trapped within the binary hierarchy, and therefore the only way to reach liberation is in the breaking of that hierarchy and stepping beyond it. If one is able to break this binary pattern then this will also undermine the entire logos of patriarchy. Another
problem is that we, humans, in a sense depend on myths in order to “deal with” and comprehend the world we live in. We divide the world into categories such as woman/man and will inevitably continue to do so for quite some time and therefore the solution, as Slotkin argues, is to denaturalize and historicize these myths. The importance lies in our ability to realize and recognize that these myths are indeed *myths*, false truths that should be examined critically and treated with utmost care.

Myths are not only used as a way of creating and maintaining historical memory but they can also be used as a means of controlling people or keeping them in check. One important point Antonio Gramsci makes about social power is that it can be maintained without force, if spontaneous consent is secured through, for instance, education (Rivkin and Ryan 673). What Gramsci suggests, furthermore, is that this consent is mainly achieved through the maintaining of historical prestige of the dominant group: as a result of education civil society automatically consents and upholds the ideology of the hegemonic power without questioning it. In other words, through the naturalization of ideology, power is maintained and reinforced by, and without critique from the subjugated group. In light of this, fairy tales must be understood as being used in patriarchal ideology as a form of education. Fairy tales, and here Sleeping Beauty, help impose patriarchal perceptions of the world (in terms of the gender binary and the definitions of gender archetypes) upon those who are exposed to them. Through the repeated use of fairy tales, gender is reiterated and thus also maintains patriarchy.

Since this essay relies heavily on the understanding of how gender is portrayed in patriarchy, it is important to understand how gender is created and naturalized within the patriarchal logos. According to Judith Butler, gender should not be understood as something stable or essential, but rather as a matter of performativity. Gender is not “a locus of agency from which certain acts follow,” as Butler puts it, but is an identity that is tenuously established over time, reified through the reenactment and repetition of cultural norms (191). Another important aspect of the performativity of gender is anticipation. Butler derives this idea from Derrida, who suggests that expectation in itself ends up producing the event it anticipates (xv). This idea is not very unlike those of Gramsci and it clearly shows how power functions in patriarchy: when we are expected to perform certain acts in relation to our gender we also seem to follow these expectations. If it is the binary gender structure that upholds patriarchy, and thus subjugates women, through the repetition of these anticipated acts, then it must be important to break these patterns and for feminist writers, like Carter, it is crucial to present alternative versions of gender. Alternative versions meaning such that do not simply reify patriarchal versions of “woman” but rather such that question and undermine essentialist views of males and females, or as I argue: to step beyond the gender binary by not using patriarchal notions of gender will undermine the patriarchal logos.

The importance of maintaining certain strategies for writing as a feminist is something which
has concerned poststructuralist French writer Hélène Cixous. It is my belief that Cixous’s deconstructive feminism of difference can provide viable solutions to the problems posed in this essay about gender and the use of and rethinking of “woman.” Cixous calls for an écriture féminine, a writing that flees “hierarchal bonds” and which is also something that both women and men can engage in. Cixous suggests a feminine style of writing in écriture féminine since she believes feminine desire to be plural, spontaneous, chaotic and “other” – or in Cixous own words: “she (...) destroys laws, ‘the natural order’” (96). In the essay “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays,” Cixous argues that gender works in a binary hierarchal system that consists of oppositions. In this system, one is always subordinate the other and indeed this hierarchal binary structure pertains not only to gender but is also inherent within language itself, where words are paired up in couplets, defining each other, such as man/woman, light/darkness, activity/passivity etcetera. Not only do these pairs rely on being defined by each other but there is also a hierarchy between them where one is always rated more valuable than, or superior to the other (168). Also, Cixous’s definition of patriarchal language also concerns language on a larger scale, for instance, the structuring of language and writing. Because our way of writing, be it in terms of academic or literary texts, operates within patriarchy and therefore inevitably uses a patriarchal language; the purpose of feminist writers should be to find other ways of writing than such that have been shaped by patriarchy: for instance in the shape of écriture féminine. Indeed, writing as we know it is itself part of a patriarchal language since it uses patriarchal discourse and has traditionally been shaped by patriarchy.

According to Cixous, and other feminist critics, western culture and its logos revolve around the phallus; in effect, everything, the very notions of truth, reason and rationality, are phallogocentric. Cixous uses a “deconstructive critique of western metaphysics as a system of oppositions”; a system where the oppositions are gendered (Bray 24). Gender is not neatly divided into two separate categories of “A” and “B,” where “A” is “man” and “B” “woman,” but instead Cixous suggests that the gender binary must be understood as “A” and “not A.” “Woman” is not defined as what she has that differs from “man,” but in terms of what she lacks: she is defined as “not a man” and not as “woman” she is “the Other” which further denotes the phallogocentrism of patriarchy (Cixous 64-65).

For Cixous, the means to break the gender binary and produce non-patriarchal texts is feminine writing, that is, écriture féminine. Although we cannot be completely sure of how or what exactly écriture féminine looks like, one of the most important points about Cixous’s feminine writing made by Morag Schiach is that it cannot quite be defined and perhaps the power of écriture féminine lies therein and should therefore not be given a fixed definition (22). Since I am working within a limited space in this essay there is not enough room to fully submerge into a thorough
discussion of écriture feminine; therefore the following attempt to define this complex idea should not be seen as exhaustive. However, écriture feminine, or feminine writing, can be explained as a way of expressing the female experience, or the “feminine body,” which is the term Cixous uses, inside patriarchy; according to Cixous women have a perception and experience of the world that differs from the male since women operate within a society that privileges men – again, in patriarchy women are “the Other” (Cixous 71). Therefore, feminine writing expresses différence a different style of writing that breaks with the patriarchal style (and patriarchal definitions of “woman”) and conveys feminine identity – or rather, identities, since not all women share the same experience of being “woman.” Furthermore, women have, historically, been invisible in patriarchy which makes it even more so important for “woman” to write herself into history and express the feminine body and make “woman” visible (68, 75). Schiach also describes Cixous’s definition of feminine writing as something that is “happening in the ‘between’, in that space which is uncertain” – in other words, a style of writing that focuses on “otherness” and pluralism and being “different” instead of being preoccupied with using secure fixed categories of stable identity (22). Feminine writing is therefore not afraid to go “outside narrative structures,” as Schiach says, or to explore the unconscious, which stands outside the patriarchal logic and patriarchal discourse (22). The purpose of écriture feminine is to destabilize phallogocentric discourses and the “feminine” should be understood as that which “exceeds being totally captured by logic” (Bray 24). It is evident that écriture feminine is very much a complex phenomenon that cannot quite be clearly defined or fixed and that is not only one of its characteristics/qualities but also its main point.

In light of this, it is possible to argue that fairy tales are a form of écriture feminine since fairy tales have that quality of “in the between:ness” and “undecidability”; they contain elements of magic and are not necessarily under the spell of patriarchal rationalism. Fairy tales are “different” since they take place in a make believe world where anything is possible such as magical spells, talking animals, and supernatural creatures et cetera, in other words: fairy tales should not be seen as completely captured by patriarchal logic, especially not those with feminist agendas. Therefore, feminist re-workings of fairy tales which are not trapped within the patriarchal gender binary, such as that of Carter’s “The Lady of the House of Love,” should be seen as engaging in écriture feminine.

One of the main points Cixous makes about feminine writing is that it is a political act: that through expressing a specifically feminine voice “woman” will be able to free herself from patriarchy; through a writing that specifically expresses female desire from the feminine body, or perspective, “woman” can become free (94). Furthermore, the patriarchal myth of “woman” and female desire, or perhaps her lack thereof, as will be explained further on in this essay, is used against “woman” to keep her within the binary hierarchy where she is surpassed and subjugated by
Therefore, exploring depictions of desire must be crucial for feminists; and since desire is also an important aspect of fairy tales, the question of whether Carter engages in feminine writing and expresses female desire or not is relevant to this essay.

Many of Cixous’s critics have pointed to the essentialist problem of feminine writing, where one risks re-establishing old patriarchal myths of gender that certain qualities are inherent in the female body, qualities that are biologically essential, for instance; that women are “by nature” passive and submissive or “the weaker sex”; in other words, that gender is not performative as Butler argues (Bray 28). Abigail Bray quotes Marxist feminist Teresa Ebert who points out that Cixous’s feminine writing “risks re-essentialising the feminine and constructing a new identity anchored in a reified notion of the body and language” (30). But Cixous does not maintain an essentialist view of femininity, and claims that being a woman in a society that privileges men will undeniably provide for a comprehension of the world that radically differs from the male perspective:

If woman has always functioned ‘within’ man’s discourse (…) now it is time for her to displace this ‘within,’ explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her women’s mouth, bite its tongue with her women’s teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it.

(Cixous 95-96)

What Cixous means here is that “woman” and femininity has always been defined by and existed within the patriarchal discourse as “the Other” which is why “woman” then also must have a different experience of existing in patriarchy than that of men. This is not an essentialist standpoint since it is not related to physically inherent qualities that can be explained by biology, but is one that explains differences between males and females as having been acquired in culture through socialization and education.

Therefore, the Cixousian notion of écriture feminine does indeed provide an alternative for feminist writers and should be kept in mind by those aiming at writing feminist texts. Furthermore, Cixous argues that poets have a certain strength in their specific genre of writing since they, according to Cixous, work in that space in “the between” that Cixous calls for women to write in; she says that poets “take strength from the unconscious, and the unconscious, the other country without boundaries, is where the repressed survive – women (…)” (98). Since Cixous argues that poets take their inspiration or strength from the unconscious, the analysis of Carter’s text will be contrasted with another re-writing of Sleeping Beauty in the shape of a poem. The poem chosen for this task is by an author that is quite different from Carter: Anne Sexton. Her poem “Briar Rose” describes male desire and uses the motif of incest to express a critique of patriarchal society.
Desire is not only a subject of great importance for feminism; it also plays a significant role in fairy tales and most certainly in Carter’s fairy tales. In patriarchal ideology, desire is either categorized as right or wrong and is also closely related to heterosexuality. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle discuss the depictions of desire in literature in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, where they present two main ideas about desire and literature: all literary texts are in some way about desire and they also “produce or solicit desire” (208-209). This being said, it does not mean that all literary texts present unanimous images of desire, and by studying literary texts it is easily noted that the notion of desire is both mobile and open to change and, furthermore, readers may not always interpret literary texts as hegemonic ideology “wants” them to. Drawing on ideas of Michel Foucault, Bennett and Royle maintain that desire is controlled by social and institutional practices and discourses such as questions of law, medicine, gender and sexuality. In other words: desire is heavily influenced and policed by what is considered socially accepted in relation to gender, age, ethnicity (for instance) in specific historical contexts.

Desire is also, in addition to being a result of historical context, a matter of socialization. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has developed the ideas of French structuralist René Girard, who, like him, argues that “we learn to desire (...) by copying others’ desires” and our desires are fundamentally produced “in response to the desire of another” (Bennett & Royle 213). Furthermore, Sedgwick notes that in Western society, male homosocial desire is directly related to the maintaining and transmission of patriarchal power, and a large proportion of literary texts and narratives in Western culture can be read as narratives of male homosocial desire. For instance, the really important relationship in many literary texts is the relationship of the struggle between two men for a female object, and not the relationship between one male’s desires for a female. What this means then, according to Sedgwick, is that patriarchal society excludes women from relations of desire (214). This argument becomes particularly interesting when reading Carter since her texts are feminist re-writings of patriarchal texts.

Before the full analysis of “The Lady of the House of Love” can ensue, perhaps a brief recap of the story itself is in order. The re-working of the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty in the short story “The Lady of the House of Love” is set in early twentieth century Europe during the First World War. The protagonist, called “the Countess,” is a vampire who also happens to be a somnambulist. The Countess resides in a castle in a deserted town in Romania where she is taken care of by a mute referred to as “the crone,” an old lady who discards of the corpses of the men the Countess devours. At nighttime, the Countess sits in her room dressed in an antique bridal gown turning over Tarot cards to tell her own future, and during the day she sleeps wearing a blood-stained lace negligee inside a coffin. One night the Tarot cards show the Countess that she is about to fall in love and that it will be the death of her. A young officer comes along, the man she is to fall in love with, and by
the end of the day of his arrival the Countess has cut her finger on a piece of glass; consequently leading to her death after the officer kisses her wound.

It is evident that Carter’s female protagonist’s fate differs from the classic story. Although she also cuts her finger like Sleeping Beauty does, the Countess does this on broken glass instead of on a spindle and when blood gushes out her finger the officer, who is her “saviour,” kisses her wound – a true love’s kiss – in an attempt to stop the bleeding and thus seals her destiny of death. Clearly, there are some obvious differences between Carter’s re-writing of the classic Sleeping Beauty; however, there are also some similarities between them, such that enhance Carter’s feminist agenda in her almost parodic version of Sleeping Beauty.

In the short story, Carter uses the same motifs that are common in the hegemonic versions of Sleeping Beauty: the Countess is described as “the beautiful queen of the vampires” and we are also told that she is “so beautiful she is unnatural” (93, 94). Furthermore, the narrator goes on describing the Countess’s beauty as “symptomatic” of her “soullessness” (being a vampire), and her beauty is clearly an important aspect of the text (94). However, readers of “The Lady of the House of Love” are not told much more about her personality and it seems that her beauty is what is central to her character. Beside the fact that the Countess is described as having fangs and long claw-like fingernails, of course a typical trait of vampires, Carter uses the hegemonic and patriarchal versions’ fixation with physical beauty. This can of course be understood as Carter’s way of making fun of the hegemonic versions of Sleeping Beauty and Carter is using the patriarchal gender stereotypes throughout the text in order to not only highlight the absurdity of the patriarchal logos, but also to criticize the hegemonic versions of Sleeping Beauty where the protagonist has practically no personality at all.

Furthermore, the Countess is described as animalistic, catlike even, and is on several instances in the text referred to as not human. Also, she is described as not leading a real life but an “imitation of life” (95). The way in which the Countess, as mentioned earlier, is denied further characteristics than being beautiful, adds to the impression that she is not quite human. This is of course an aspect of feminist ideology that criticizes how women in patriarchy are not considered to be humans as much as they are women or female. The fact that the protagonist should happen to be female and also dreams about being human is not coincidental. It is evident that for Carter, which feminist theories also argue, in patriarchy “woman” is not seen as first and foremost a human but instead “woman” is first and foremost “woman.” Therefore the Countess’s dreams of becoming human must be understood as not so much related to her being a vampire, but more along the lines of being seen as a real person and not as “woman.”

One of the major differences between Carter’s Sleeping Beauty and the hegemonic versions is that in Carter’s version it is the male who is oblivious and, in fact, a little dumb. When he enters the
Countess’s domain, the officer shuffles the Countess’s Tarot cards carelessly and sees them as nonsense or “strange playthings for a young girl” simply because he is too dumb to understand what they mean (101). The officer’s ignorance is further implied in the descriptions of him: he is a young officer in the British army, is heavy-muscled, with blue eyes and blond hair and (97). He is also said to have that “special quality of virginity” to him and is both unknowing and somewhat ignorant, indeed upon first meeting the Countess, he does not see her at all but initially only notices the bridal gown (97). The narrator also states that “He is more than he knows,” which is interesting in relation to patriarchal structures: this is partly to be understood as that the officer, although still a young boy, possesses more power solely in being a man than he has yet realized; but also that the is both naïve and ignorant (97).

Furthermore, when the officer touches the Countess he interprets her reaction as though she becomes more alive, she smiles and raises herself upright: “At his touch, she seemed to revive a little” (101). When the officer enters the castle he is unaccustomed to the darkness the Countess lives in which is why he needs light in order to be able to fully see her, which then forces the Countess to put on dark sunglasses to protect her from the light. The officer’s reaction to the Countess putting on sunglasses is: “Her blind spectacles gave him his handsome face back to himself twice over; if he presented himself to her naked face, he would dazzle her like the sun she is forbidden to look at” (102). In other words, he only sees himself when he is in fact staring directly at the Countess which also denotes his oblivious ignorance.

Carter also mocks the patriarchal gender binary: the Countess leads a domestic life in a castle dressed in a bridal gown waiting for her bridegroom to come into her bedroom which “has been prepared for him” while the officer is a British soldier who is travelling through Europe (103). Furthermore, the officer represents light and the Countess darkness. The Countess, being a vampire, not only lives in darkness but both her hair and eyes are described as dark. When the officer comes to the castle he brings light with him both symbolically and literally, but this light is not brought about in the positive sense since the officer in fact causes the death of the Countess. When the officer needs light in order to be able to see the Countess, she must put on sunglasses for protection, the Countess then fumbles with her sunglasses and accidentally shatters them and cuts her finger on the glass which leads to the officer’s kissing the wound (the act that curses her) and the Countess then dies. All these events occur without the officer paying too much attention to them, instead he merely feels sorry for the Countess and goes to sleep oblivious to the fact that the Countess is dying. Not only is this a mocking of the gender binary, but also an ironic critique of the patriarchal logos: light symbolizes enlightenment and knowledge in western culture, but light is not positive in this story and instead light is dangerous to the Countess since that is what ultimately leads to her death. Therefore, Carter’s text should be understood as a critique of the patriarchal obsession with
science, logic and rationalism.

In the descriptions of the officer, Carter uses her witticisms and rather cleverly makes fun of patriarchy and its male-oriented science and concept of logic and reason. The young boy is said to be rational and that he has chosen “the most rational mode of transport in the world for his trip” (97). Furthermore, not only does Carter make fun of Voltaire in the same passage but also writes: “Geometry at the service of man! Give me two spheres and a straight line and I will show you how far I can take them” (97). There is undoubtedly a sense of sarcasm to this part of the short story and clearly a critique, even a mockery, of how men and patriarchy see themselves as fundamentally rational beings. It is also important to note that while the officer is described as rational he is also oblivious and ignorant which also reflects patriarchal society: patriarchy is so preoccupied with its own logos, and is so phallogocentric, that it fails to realize what this does to women.

Interestingly, for a text by a feminist author, the main character is only described in relation to her male ancestors. Her mother is but barely mentioned in the text and the more important ancestors of the Countess are both male: her father and her older ancestor Vlad the Impaler (it is unclear how he is related to the Countess). The Countess’s father is referred to as Nosferatu, from whom she has inherited not only her powers but also the castle and “his vast domain” (95). It may seem curious that a feminist author should be so occupied with what is clearly a patriarchal notion that males are the only important ancestors, but this is only Carter’s way of exposing patriarchal reasoning which explains why only male ancestors are mentioned in the text. That the main character is “the last bud of the poison tree that sprang from the loins of Vlad the Impaler,” denotes that Vlad the Impaler, a male, in a sense “gave birth” to the Countess’s relatives which enhances the absurdity of phallogocentric discourse and how males are seen as the only important ancestors (94).

Having inherited her powers and her domains from her dead father, the Countess is undoubtedly described in stereotypically phallogocentric terms. She has been given all the powers that used to belong to her father, Nosferatu, and she is the “commandant of the army of shadows who (...) penetrate the woods” and who “torment pubescent girls” with “disorders of the blood” (95). This is Carter’s witticism at work and is also something which ought to be kept in mind when discussing Carter’s feminism: she clearly uses phallogocentric symbols and patriarchal language in her text, but she does this in order to critique and mock them. Also, note that the Countess has been given these traditionally “male” traits and her powers by her male ancestors; she has not actively herself pursued this which denotes a passiveness on the Countess’s behalf implying the absurdity of patriarchal discourse.

There are several aspects of the short story that point to the Countess as passive: the Countess is for instance described as a hollow object when she is portrayed as a “cave full of echoes” and “soulless” and she is also presented as almost a vessel through which her ancestors act: “the
beautiful queen of the vampires sits all alone in her dark, high house under the eyes of the portraits of her demented and atrocious ancestors, each one of whom, through her, projects a baleful posthumous existence” (93). When this is put into context with how her ancestors overall are portrayed as male it is easily concluded that Carter engages in a phallogocentric discourse, but this is done in the name of parody. By using phallogocentric discourse Carter is able to show how patriarchy functions and how “woman” is neglected importance in terms of ancestry despite the fact that, clearly, women have not been the passive bystanders in history which is of course what patriarchy wants us to believe. Furthermore, the fact that the Countess’s ancestors act through her, and also how she “does not possess herself,” denotes how these traditionally “masculine” traits of hers are not really hers at all which further points to how phallogocentric discourse functions: “woman” is viewed as a passive, an empty canvas, or a playground where patriarchal ideas roam freely (103).

The fact that the Countess is hollow and that her male ancestors act through her; as well as the fact that the officer is described as having “power in potentia” while having “the special quality of virginity” all bring the mind to sexuality (97). Carter’s use of symbols of penetration in relation to the emptiness and cave-like descriptions of the Countess denotes a phallogocentric and patriarchal discourse where the male enters the female and “man” completes “woman” both symbolically and literally in the physical act of coitus. Furthermore, the Countess is hollow and cave-like while the officer has “power in potentia” which also denotes how he completes her. However, as mentioned earlier in the essay, instead of falling in line with hegemonic versions of fairy tales where the male rescues the female and they fall in love and live happily ever after; Carter’s male “saviour” accidentally kills the female instead of saving her. This is Carter’s way of overturning the hegemonic version of Sleeping Beauty and making the fairy tale her own.

The references to the Countess as a “cave full of echoes” can also be understood as a way of Carter bringing her own constructionist view of gender into the story, that gender itself is only a system of repetitions and there are no naturally inherent qualities to being “woman” but that one must continually repeat and perform gender in order for it to exist. In the same spirit, “The Lady of the House of Love” has a quotation that is repeated several times in the text: “Can a bird sing only the song it knows or can it learn a new song?” (93). This is a way of Carter to question naturalized ideas of gender and to imply that gender is not an essence but something that is highly subject to change if practised. It might also be Carter’s call for a change and also denotes a kind of ambivalence as to whether or not a change from patriarchy is possible or not.

An interesting aspect of how the narration shift to the officer’s perspective, is how he does not see the Countess as a woman but refers to her simply as “a girl.” This is not merely patronizing for the Countess, but it also shows the reader how this man and also many men in patriarchy view
“woman.” In the use of “girl” instead of “woman,” the Countess is demeaned and the power relations between man and woman become even more visible: “man” is superior to “woman.” This is also expressed in how the officer, when looking at the Countess’s mouth, immediately associates it with “a whore’s mouth” which denotes that he feels superior to the Countess (101). The officer is not intimidated by the Countess and despite his young age and ignorance he still feels superior to her. This is due to the power structures of patriarchy where men are not only superior to women but are also more valuable than them. Since, in patriarchy, women are seen as more of a commodity to men than as their equals, the only real fear a man can feel is when being threatened by another male. This is described in how he does not fear the Countess but will instead, ironically, “learn to shudder in the trenches” in the First World War (104).

The officer is described as wanting to help the Countess and to cure her from her illness. He wants to take her to a clinic in Zurich where she will be treated for “nervous hysteria” and turned into “the lovely girl she is.” (107). The idea that the Countess is a female but still needs help being turned into the girl she actually is, comes off as bizarre and ironic, humorous to say the least. It can also be understood as another sign of the officer’s ignorance for he fails to realize that she is a vampire and that she could in fact kill him. Moreover, the young boy’s urge to want help the Countess while he pities her, also signifies the patriarchal view of “woman” as constantly being in need of help and not being able to manage on their own – in other words: “woman” must be completed by “man.”

The motifs of death and desire are highly related in “The Lady of the House of Love.” When the Countess pricks her finger on her broken glasses, the officer puts his mouth to her wound in an attempt to kiss it better for her like her “mother would have” if she had lived (106). The kiss curses her to death and when the young boy finds her the following morning he first believes her to only be asleep before he realizes that she is actually dead. This signifies how most men are oblivious to the workings of patriarchy and one way of understanding the officer’s ignorance is that most men in the real world are in fact oblivious to the fact that they have a privileged position to women. It then becomes more so tragic that the oblivion here is also related to the Countess’s death. Apart from the short story being Carter’s way of mocking the patriarchal logos and alleged rationalism of patriarchy, it may also be understood Carter’s way of saying that ignorance and unawareness inevitably leads to the death, symbolic or real, of “woman.” It is here worth noting how desire is related to death and that when the Countess falls in love she must die. This relation between death and desire denotes the dangers of desire and how it can lead ultimately to death. And of course this death must not be physical but could occur on a spiritual level in patriarchy: how “woman” must ultimately give up part of herself in order to be in a relationship with a man.

In “The Lady of the House of Love,” it is the female that desires and not the male which is the
case in the hegemonic versions where the patriarchal stereotype of “woman” as victim and the male as the sexual aggressor is used. In Carter’s short story it is the Countess who is the one who desires the officer and not the other way around. The Countess is described as someone who desires men and has also been with a number of men; for not only does she feed off men but she brings them to her bedroom before killing them. The Countess comes off as sexually rapacious which is also what makes her interesting for readers of “The Lady of the House of Love;” this is where Carter breaks with the hegemonic versions of Sleeping Beauty and also where she most fervently challenges the patriarchal idea of “woman” as a passive victim who is unable to desire. It is the female that is the sexual aggressor in Carter’s Sleeping Beauty whereas the male is passive and oblivious to the events that occur.

It is evident that sexuality is an important aspect of “The Lady of the House of Love.” A classic symbol for female genitalia in western culture is of course the rose and the Countess’s castle is surrounded by rose bushes. When the officer comes to the castle his reaction to these roses and their scent is one of repulsion almost:

A great, intoxicated surge of the heavy scent of red roses blew into his face as soon as they left the village, inducing a sensuous vertigo; a blast of rich, faintly corrupt sweetness strong enough almost, to fell him. Too many roses. Too many roses bloomed on enormous thickets that lined the path, thickets bristling with thorns, and the flowers themselves were almost too luxuriant, their huge congregations of plush petals somehow obscene in their excess, their whorled, tightly budded cores outrageous in their implications. The mansion emerged grudgingly out of this jungle. (98)

Furthermore, at the end of the story the officer leaves the castle with a rose in his hand one that has been plucked “from between [the dead Countess’s] thighs” (107). These symbols for female genitalia may be interpreted as a kind of “gynocentrism” but since these descriptions are made from a male perspective the roses are described as fascinating, yet repulsive they should be understood as a sign of the phallogocentric discourse where the female body is objectifies. In phallogocentric society the female body is viewed in ambiguous terms: it is both highly sexualized and objectified while at the same time considered somewhat repulsive in terms of menstruation and its other reproductive anatomic “features.” This ambiguity is reflected in the quotation above where the officer is both in awe of the beauty of the roses but still repulsed by them in their “obscene excess.”

Blood, another important aspect of “The Lady of the House of Love”, is mentioned several times in the text. Not only does the Countess feed off blood, but she dies when she pricks her finger on her broken sunglasses which causes her blood to gush out of the wound. At the end of the story
when the Countess has died, the officer finds her negligee blood-stained “as it might be from a woman’s menses”; this use of a blood-stained fabric is a classic symbol for sexual consummation (196). Blood is also found in the title of the collection to which “The Lady of the House of Love” belongs: The Bloody Chamber. Blood can signify a number of different things, but the most interesting and relevant interpretation of Carter’s use of blood in “The Lady of the House of Love” is the one Lucie Armitt provides: blood “can equally signify their menstrual flow, which continues to threaten to breach the limits of restrictively enclosing patriarchal representations (including its taboos, its silences and its secrets)” (Bristow & Broughton 93). What Armitt means by this is that menses is threatening to phallogocentric discourse since menstruation itself is a taboo subject and not under the control of patriarchy: since patriarchy cannot control “woman’s” menses it is therefore also a threat to it. By exposing a subject as taboo as the menstrual flow Carter challenges the phallogocentric discourse where the female body is sexualized and objectified by men. Menstruation, in a sense, also denies the sexualisation of the female body (from a patriarchal perspective) and when the female body is no longer sexualized it is no longer desired nor “useful” to the patriarchal logos. The sexualisation of the female body is not only something that concerns Carter, but is also a central motif in Sexton’s poem “Briar Rose.”

By looking at another re-working of Sleeping Beauty, Sexton’s “Briar Rose,” and contrasting “The Lady of the House of Love” to it, we will be able to give additional perspective to Carter’s re-writing of the fairy tale: by comparing two writers as different as Carter and Sexton the argument presented in this essay will become more enhanced. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this essay, Cixous argues that poetry is closer to the écriture feminine in its style which is why a poem was chosen to contrast “The Lady of the House of Love.” At the end of the analysis we will be able to see how Sexton also uses écriture feminine and that both Carter and Sexton provide excellent examples of feminine writing that exceed the patriarchal logos.

In “Briar Rose,” Sexton critiques the patriarchal sexualisation and possession of the female body. The narrative of the poem shifts between a girl remembering her childhood and that of the story of Briar Rose in the more traditional sense. The phallus symbol is important in Sexton’s poem as she compares the relationship between “man” and “woman” in patriarchy to incest.

In the first part of “Briar Rose,” Sexton sets the scene by describing a psychiatrist’s office and a patient that is hypnotized into a trance in order to remember, or perhaps relive, childhood events. In the final stages of the first stanza, Sexton writes “come here to Papa. Sit on my knee. … and I will give you a root.” – here “Papa” must be understood as symbolizing patriarchy itself and the root he is offering the girl is the root to a “secure” place within patriarchy – “secure” from the male perspective but of course destructive for “woman.” This offering has a sense of threat within it as well since the father is portrayed as luring and there is a sense of danger to the situation and also,
the father comes across almost as a child molester offering kisses:

Little doll child, come here to Papa.
Sit on my knee.
I have kisses for the back of your neck.
A penny for your thoughts, Princess.
I will hunt them like an emerald.
Come be my snoooky
And I will give you a root. (Sexton 169)

Briar Rose calls out “Daddy!” when being awakened by a lover’s kiss and it seems that she is reliving her childhood every time she sleeps. What the Sleeping Beauty of this poem is experiencing is the aftermath of incest and that is why she fears sleep: she fears her father and the phallus. But, more importantly, Sexton’s Sleeping Beauty also fears the incest of patriarchal ideology. The theme of incest and the father committing incestuous acts on a daughter is not only disturbing, but it also inevitably leads the mind towards an understanding of the poem as describing patriarchy which then denotes how destructive patriarchy is for “woman.” A radical view of patriarchy and how “man” and “woman” operate within it is that “man” takes advantage of and [ab]uses “woman,” if not in terms of an actual physical rape then there is certainly an emotional one: “woman” cannot exist within patriarchy but must succumb to patriarchal laws of submission, but if she fails to do so “woman” is, for instance, labelled a “femme fatale” and must be destroyed.

As opposed to how the protagonist in “The Lady of the House of Love” is described as beautiful, there is no mentioning of beauty or appearance in Sexton’s poem. Instead the poem presents and deals with the different feelings and emotions the “I” in the poem has, and how this “I” deals with sleep and the memory of incest. The narration shifts between “I” and “she,” however, the poem must be understood as dealing with interiority and subjectivity and therefore the “I” and the “she” in the poem are ultimately different versions of the same person or mind. For instance, the poem first says “I’m all shot up with Novocain” and then shifts to the third person perspective in “This trance girl is yours to do with. You could lay her in a grave” (172). This blurring of pronouns and pluralism or “undecidability”” in terms of who exactly the main character in “Briar Rose” is; undeniably denotes a sense of that “in the between:ness” that écriture féminine prescribes.

Furthermore, Sexton critiques how the patriarchal logos confines “woman” to her body. The narrator of the poem describes the thirteenth fairy, who was not invited to the christening of Briar Rose and who therefore curses Briar Rose to die on her fifteenth birthday, as someone with “eyes burnt by cigarettes” and “her uterus an empty teacup” (169). By referring to the uterus as “an empty
teacup” Sexton de-sexualizes the female body and implies that not all female bodies are there for male sexual desire to be taken advantage of in the name of reproduction. This critique of how patriarchy sexualizes the female body is also evident in the use of the incest motif in the poem.

The most important aspect to derive from Sexton’s poem is indeed its use of incest as symbol for patriarchy. What Sexton does in “Briar Rose” is that she implies how, in a sense, all men become “Daddy” when in a relationship with a female. Since “woman” does not possess herself in patriarchy she needs someone to take care of her: as a child “woman” belongs to her father and when she grows up she is handed over to her lover who then in a sense takes over the role of the father. Sexton writes:

It’s not the prince at all,
but my father
drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish.
What voyage this, little girl?
This coming out of prison? (Sexton 173)

The use of the incest motif in the poem indicates that the prince is actually a new “Daddy” and that there is no escape for “woman” in patriarchy; therefore there cannot be a “coming out of prison” as Sexton writes. Although not explicitly expressed, the poem does blur the references between the prince and the father which denotes how Briar Rose herself cannot tell the difference between the two which also implies how patriarchy is incestuous and how men are expected to assume the role of the father when in a relationship with a “woman.”

By stepping outside the phallogocentric discourse of patriarchy, Sexton overturns the sexualization of the female body and compares it to incest. Sexton also expresses the female experience inside patriarchy; an experience which differs from the phallogocentric perspective. Furthermore, Sexton also exposes patriarchy and, in comparing patriarchy to incest, ultimately rejects it; therefore Sexton’s poem “Briar Rose” can also be understood as engaging in écriture feminine.

To sum up, both these different re-workings of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale provide critique of patriarchy and its phallogocentric discourse. Although they use different styles of writing, Carter in the short story and Sexton in the poem, they both manage to convey similar criticisms of patriarchy. Carter creates a new “woman” and de-victimizes “woman” while Sexton critiques the incestuous aspects of patriarchy and how it sexualizes the female body.
Joyce Carol Oates describes Carter’s female characters as “hardly ‘good’ girls but complex, morally ambiguous individuals, not to be defined or predicted by gender (...) And females can be as cruelly rapacious as males” (107). This is indeed a suitable description of “The Lady of the House of Love”, Carter steps outside the patriarchal logos and its myths of “woman” with use of a feminine textuality in écriture féminine and therefore forcefully objects to, opposes and exceeds patriarchy.

“The Lady of the House of Love” should be understood as critiquing patriarchy and is, as well as Sexton’s “Briar Rose,” an excellent example of what écriture féminine could and should look like. The text is performative in the sense that the descriptions of the male antagonist are, for a feminist, ironic and absurd to the extent that one almost snickers at them. Carter forces readers of “The Lady of the House of Love” to reflect upon the patriarchal logos since the text exposes patriarchy and points to significant problems of being “woman” in a phallogocentric society. Carter writes from a feminine perspective and expresses a différence which is outside that of the hegemonic male perspective that écriture féminine calls for.

As shown above, “The Lady of the House of Love” exposes the female experience inside patriarchy and in doing so also rejects it. Not only does Carter’s text have a quality of “undecidability” and différence to it, but it is also different and it rejects phallogocentric rationalism. With use of wit, irony and humour, Carter manages to expose the absurdity of patriarchy and shows the reader how dangerous it is for “woman” to remain trapped within the phallogocentric discourse. Carter also challenges the gender binary and shows an alternative to the patriarchal understanding of desire. “The Lady of the House of Love” provides a de-victimized representation of “woman” as the sexual aggressor where Carter overturns western culture’s limited understanding of “woman” as victim. Instead of falling in line with hegemonic versions of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale, Carter provides us with a version of the fairy tale that radically differs from her predecessors, or, in Cixousian terms: Carter grabs hold of the fairy tale, explodes it, makes it her own, and gives us her version of it.
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