Disney Damage and Princess Culture: The Dark Realities of Objectification and Repressive Ideologies

       In her reimagining of the classic children’s fable *Bluebeard*, Angela Carter uses lavish imagery to maintain the child-like, magical view of the world we have always known, containing the same unethical messages we have been spoon fed all our lives, while heightening the sexual explicitness and phallic imagery. She does so in order to reveal to us what our common notions of what we desire or have been told to desire really are, lies, methods of giving up our power willingly without realizing that these ideologies damn us, weaken us, commodify us, and give our sense of selves up to Man, the overbearing Patriarchy. Not everyone is, or will ever become a princess, and this repressive ideology not only negativity effects women, but men as well. Carter is not only critiquing princess culture in *The Bloody Chamber*, but also the idea that female curiosity must be controlled, punished, or shut down by men, for it is only their sexual desirability that matters. Women are objectified, mere objects under the male gaze, and men own them, body and soul. How many people stand up against this objectification? So many young girls could be spared if only we taught children to examine the ethical aspects of what they have learned from the media and fables they grow up listening to. We are not teaching children to develop an ethical compass within themselves, but what they do learn from us is that vanity, wealth, and desirability will get them to higher stations of society, and this message does incredible amounts of damage of their young, moldable minds. The narrator of *The Bloody Chamber* is a good example of the type of person one grows into with the influence of the repressive ideologies of princess culture and objectification.

      The narrator in *The Bloody Chamber* is just a young girl: innocent, naïve and enticed by the prospects of wealth. Her view of the Marquis’s world as “that magic place, the fairy castle whose wall were made of foam” (Carter 112), is one of many hints at her naïveté. She admires her mother, but seems to look down upon her decision to give up money for love. She had “gladly, scandalously, defiantly beggared herself for love” (Carter 111). We can assume like all young girls, the narrator most likely grew up hearing the stories of princesses who lived in grand chateaus after being saved from poverty by rich, handsome princes, and the repressive ideologies they develop from hearing these types of fairy tales serve to blind them. In the third edition of *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson argues that “by posing as natural ways of seeing the world, repressive ideologies prevent us from understanding the material/historical conditions in which we live because they refuse to acknowledge that those conditions have any bearing on the way we see the world” (Tyson 54). She goes on to say that repressive ideologies serve to blind us, we are programmed by them, and we are also the products of material and historical circumstances. This is important to our understanding of why the narrator would choose to marry the Marquis, and why all young girls grow up expecting to marry princes; it just seems natural. It creates a doxa, what Hanna Blank defines as the “stuff everyone knows,” the “common sense” ideas we have about our world and how it works” (Blank 26); a common sense idea that all girls are princesses and will marry princes, or simply men, preferably with money, and that they will be taken care of so long as they perform their heteronormative duties as a wife. As Blank reminds us “absorbing a culture’s doxa, very much including the doxa regarding sexuality, is an inescapable cultural process that starts at birth” (Blank). In conclusion, all girls are told or will be told that they are straight princesses, and this message is damaging in more ways than one.

       “Disney damage,” as Blank terms it, is the “codependent fantasy of romantic love,” the idea that Prince Charming is somewhere out there, and a happily ever after is achievable so long as we seek out this prince, or princess in the case of men because of course a man can’t marry a prince, not legally that is… As of June 26th, 2015, Gay marriage became legal in all fifty states, and couples no longer have to “remain strangers even in death, a (now former) state imposed separation Obergefell deemed ‘hurtful for the rest of time,’” (Supreme Court). Women can marry princesses and men can marry princes now, but that is not the message princess culture is sending children. Princess culture reinforces heterosexual marriage and “in most of the Disney oeuvre, is necessary to the happy ending” (Blank 96). Disney attempts to teach young people moral lessons in many of their films, but instead they teach them something far more damaging. The message being sent to children is “only straight, married princesses will ever be happy,” and the prospect of wealth is another incentive as well, in this case for the narrator of *The Bloody Chamber*. The idea that money can buy happiness is not uncommon, as well as the certainty that nothing in this world is free. The world of the wealthy, the bourgeois class, is what the narrator aspires to reach, and she can only get there by giving up something to her new husband, the Marquis. She has nothing of value to give, but her body and her freedom are arguably more valuable than any material wealth. She becomes materialized, objectified, a prized virgin to be sacrificed in worship of the devil, who is in fact a patriarchal male.

       Carter privileges the Marquis’s perspective through the innocence and acquired opulence of the narrator. He does not need to speak to be present because his power is felt throughout the story, and in each setting as well. If he has been in a room once then it is now his, and he does not have to be in that room again for it to be his; he owns it, and everything in it, like he owns his wife: “I felt a pang of loss as if, when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some way, ceased to be her daughter in becoming his wife” (Carter 111). His power is emphasized by his appearance: animalistic and dark, his wealth, and everything he owns including the narrator herself. His ancestral relation to “Catherine de Medici,” the queen of France, wife of King Henry II, is evidence of his power, influence, and standing in French society (Carter 113). Status speaks for him. The narrator also compares the Marquis’s affluence to that of “Croesus,” the king of Lydia in the 6th century BCE, who was renowned for his wealth (Carter 114). He is able to speak and be present through his status, and does not have to utter a word, or be in the presence of his wife to be present. The connections to real life figures of royal descent in the story creates an illusion. It uses recognizable names, settings, and details in order to make us believe that this fiction could be true; it creates an illusion of familiarity, but it becomes unfamiliar to us when mixed with dark and gothic elements. Women believe that they can become princesses, and therefore this reimagining has to give off the illusion of reality in order for us to place ourselves in the shoes of the narrator, and in turn realize how dark and damning princess culture really is. The Marquis is a fictional representation of the influence of the patriarchy, and arguably also a representation of the devil with eyes that disturbed the narrator due to “their absolute absence of light” (Carter 112). There is a sense of evil that lingers over the influence of the patriarchy that is seemingly inescapable. Dostoevsky, in *The Problem of Evil*, stated “I think if the devil doesn’t exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness,” (Dostoevsky 5) and so our ability to relate the influence of the patriarchy in our society to a figure such as the devil becomes less shocking.

        Mary Wollstonecraft said it best in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman:*

The education of women has, of late, been more attended to than formerly; yet they are still reckoned a frivolous sex… It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments: meanwhile, strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry, they act as such children may be expected to act: they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for the seraglio! Can they govern a family, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world? (Wollstonecraft 113)

Wollstonecraft was actually refereeing to upper class women in English Society in her critique of education and women’s roles in marriage, but this is relevant to our reading because the narrator becomes an upper class woman through her wedlock to the Marquis. When Wollstonecraft discusses how they spend their first years of their lives acquiring accomplishments, this can remind us of the piano playing skills of the narrator, and her desire to establish herself results in her sacrificing her body and mind to her husband. There are similarities between these types of women and the narrator before and after she is owned by the Marquis, and we can be quite sure that Wollstonecraft would look down on the narrator just as she looks down upon upper class women who would rather concern themselves with silly trifles than actually trying to better the world through their greater accessibility in society.

The narrator acknowledges that she is being commodified by the Marquis in the unwrapping scene, “and so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain” (119). She is a piece of meat to a ravenously hungry wolf. “I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of a connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab.” She is an animal to him, weak, innocent, prey. “I’d never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it…” (Carter 115). Avarice is a synonym of greed. How comical that a wealthy man who has everything still craves more. Just like a capitalist society, once profit is made the acquirer of the wealth craves more and more. The husband is a product of a much higher value, while the narrator is a cheap knock-off, possibly made by an outsourced company for pennies to the dollar, and owned by the Marquis himself. Nothing is ever enough. Now he wants her body, her innocence, and it is all his now, he dilutes her purity and feeds off of her inexperience and anxiety. He is in control. The man asserts his dominance and takes what is his. A symbol of this is his “Ancestral bed” (112) which can be seen as a mark of the narrator’s destiny, a patriarchal symbol of his dominance over her.

     The husband is the master, his wife a mere slave: three/ fifths a person if considered a person at all. In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger stated, "Men act; women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." The essence of Berger’s argument is that men are the ones with all the power in marriage and in society, while women are static objects that are only meant to please men when acted upon. They are in control, and women are around solely for the purpose of male entertainment, and seen as nothing more than animals, objects, with fleshy, warm orifices to insert themselves in whenever they please. Matthew Altman, in *Kant and Applied Ethics*, stated that “the history of marriage in the West is largely characterized by the exploitation of women for economic purposes – while men had economic and political power, women were treated merely as means, subservient to the demands of their husbands and society in general.” I agree with his argument, and also believe that the exploitation of women was and still occurs due to men believing that they must display their power even in relation to their spouses. He goes on to say “For Kant, sexual desire is inherently objectifying; exploitation does not depend on social circumstances but inclinations that are natural to human beings” (Altman 169) and that it was once thought that “women’s responsibilities (were) associated with private life, and they have no independent purposes” (Altman 168), and this is still true for many women including the narrator who only has one purpose in the eyes of her husband. The Marquis takes the narrators virginity gruesomely, and she watches “a dozen husbands approach” her “in a dozen mirrors” (118), and “a dozen husbands impaled a dozen brides while the mewing gulls swung on invisible trapezes in the empty air outside” (Carter 121). The hideousness of the word impaled in describing a first time sexual experience is not pleasant imagery, and is reminiscent of rape culture. Rape culture “is an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture” (Marshall.edu). In chapter four of *Straight*, Blank discusses how rape “was not even recognized within marriage” because “how could it be wrong for him to seize what was already his?” (Blank 77)

    The two inch ruby necklace gifted to the narrator marks her new status and belonging in the bourgeois, but also the narrator’s acceptance of being a commodified body, a slave to her husband, an animal, even a virgin sacrifice, or delectable object to be consumed. She is the princess in the tower, supposedly saved by the prince, saved from poverty in this case, and with nothing to give in exchange except for her body. “His wedding gift, clasped round my throat. A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinarily precious slit throat” (Carter 114). She is owned by him, a dog, his little ‘chien’ with an expensive collar. The necklace can also be seen as a symbol representing the female vagina. A lot of Carter’s symbols in the story denote sexual imagery, such as the bloody chamber itself, as well as all doorways or entrances, the necklace, and lilies: the flowers that remind the narrator of her husband. Lilies are common funerary flowers, they represent death, and their smell is overwhelming. This is possibly a symbol of the death of her innocence, and the smell could also be effluvium from when she bled the first time in the deflowering scene. The Marquis is symbolized by lilies and therefore is the bringer of death, or even death himself, and this is more evidence of his character representing the devil.

      The curiosity of the narrator threatens her life. “She could not escape being on the losing side of a gender hierarchy where men held all the power” (Blank 77). Her growing interest in sex, and self-discovery, as well as increasing sense of vanity had to be punished, controlled. Her body is no longer hers, in fact it never was. It belongs to her husband, and before that it belonged to society, like government property, but now the Marquis owns her. She is commodified, and used, but eventually becomes infatuated, and longs to be touched even though he disgusts her. “’There is a striking resemblance between the act of love and the ministrations of a torturer,’ opined my husband’s favorite poet; I had learned something of the nature of that similarity on my marriage bed” (Carter 130). Charles Baudelaire, the Marquis’ favorite poet, is famous for breathing new life and darkness into Romanticism: “he argued that art must create beauty from even the most depraved or “non-poetic” situations” ([poets.org](http://poets.org/)), and we can see how men have made women believe that there is beauty or rightfulness in being animalized, sodomized, and exploited for sexual gratification through their pain and humiliation. Sometimes we mistake pain and guilty appeasement for love, and this is what happened to the young narrator. We all look to those who hurt us for comfort, for understanding. Princes are supposed to be good, honorable, chivalrous men, and so we give them many chance even after they’ve hurt us because we are stuck with this repressive ideology of princess culture. Once the narrator starts to like sex, and explores her sexuality, that is when she must be reprimanded. Sexual desire is supposedly only for men, and so she has to be shut down before she gains any power. Men don’t like sharing power, especially husbands with their wives. The narrator’s discover of the bloody chamber containing the bodies of the Marquis’s dead wives can only be read as a warning against female curiosity, sexual or otherwise. The idea is that if you are female and decided to explore your sexuality, you will die, so to speak. Carter’s reimagining exposes this unethical message that was and is still being spoon fed to our youth through children’s fables and Disney movies, especially to young girls.

*The Bloody Chamber* is a critique of the Bluebeard fairytale, and the lavish imagery Carter uses aid in bringing us into a world of royalty and fantasy, an idealized reality that blinds us to the fact that it is meant to reflect our society. This is the world we are told to want, are convinced we want for ourselves, and this life, this comfort, the comfort of a princess’s life, is not realistic, and yet we all want it. We dress up as princesses on Halloween and desire crowns from high school dances and we crave this magical existence which is only a reality for a few dozen women, those of whom either married princes or inherited titles from their parents. We must escape princess culture, and stop feeding these damaging images to our youth or nothing will change. It is unethical for us to allow this to continue. Women are warned against curiosity and wearing plastic tiaras, pasting rhinestones on it, or showering it in glitter cannot hide this truth. Disney damage and princess culture continue today, if not in fables and movies, then in teen fiction and adult novels. This is ridiculous! Where does it end? We must put a stop to these blinding repressive ideologies because continuing to give them power takes power away from women. We commodify ourselves and breathe life into the eternal flames of the patriarchy by doing so. Carter’s critique of the Bluebeard tale is astounding, and having learned a great deal from the example it sets, hopefully we will not continue to allow unethical endings such as “and that young lady completely lost all her sense of curiosity” (Bluebeard) to ever be read to another child again.

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