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"Bluebeard" and "The Bloody Chamber": The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion
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Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1988), pp. 7-12
Published by: University of Nebraska Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3345932
Accessed: 08/05/2012 20:24

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Bluebeard and *The Bloody Chamber:* The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion

Kari E. Lokke

Like many fairy tale motifs, the Bluebeard legend is grotesque in essence. This tale of the wealthy, seemingly chivalrous aristocrat who murders seven young brides and inters them in his cellar brings together violence and love, perversion and innocence, death and marriage in an unsettling combination. The intermingling of seemingly incongruous elements and the juxtaposition of opposites challenge audience expectation and habits of thinking in a manner typical of the grotesque as defined by theorists as varied as Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin.[1]

As readers we expect the grotesque in fairy tales, perhaps because these stories are displaced to a never-never land beyond the demands of logic and verisimilitude. And if Bakhtin is correct in asserting that the grotesque aesthetic in literature and art is an outgrowth of medieval carnivals, folk festivals, and popular culture,[2] then the reasons for the predominance of the grotesque in folktales become self-evident. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Bakhtin suggests, the grotesque had an emancipatory function, for the juxtaposition of opposites broke down false societal and ideological barriers to expose the truth of life's unpredictability and spontaneity and to celebrate the unity and power of that life in all its most corporeal manifestations. Bakhtin sees Kayser's "timeless conception of the grotesque"[3] as an attempt to project the modern grotesque backwards into history. In this modern grotesque as defined by both theorists, the juxtaposition of incongruous elements points to a fundamental absurdity, a terrifying emptiness, and even a demonic disorder in the universe.

Perhaps we tend, as moderns, to tell ourselves that the world of the fairy tale is not our own, but a more naive and primitive one of long ago and far away. Witness Charles Perrault, defender of the moderns against the ancients in the seventeenth-century *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, trying to comfort himself and his reader with this ironic moral to his own rendering of the Bluebeard tale: "It is easy to see that the events described in this story took place many years ago. No modern husband would dare be half so terrible, nor to demand of his wife such an impossible thing as to stifle her curiosity. Be he ever so quarrelsome or jealous, he'll toe the line as soon as she tells him to. And whatever colour his beard might be, it's easy to see which of the two is the master."[4]

In fact, two contemporary authors, Angela Carter and Max Frisch, seem to disagree with Perrault's urbane, sensible, and "enlightened" attitude toward the grisly Bluebeard tale. Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* and Frisch in *Bluebeard* have placed this ancient fairy tale motif at the heart of recent novellas with the obvious intent of making strong statements about violence, exploitation, alienation, and loneliness in contemporary male-female relationships. Neither Carter nor Frisch makes Perrault's cavalier assumption that a wife is always her husband's "master." As Carter states in the foreword to her translation of Perrault's tales, "Each century tends to create or re-create fairy tales after its own taste."[5] And in its own image, one might add for emphasis.

These two recreations of the Bluebeard tale certainly reflect strikingly different authorial stances and backgrounds. Max Frisch, along with Friedrich Dürrenmatt, one of the most prominent and best known of contemporary Swiss authors, uses his published diaries and diary-like novels, including *Stiller*, *Homo Faber* and *Montauk*, to undermine the rational, empirical conception of self as a logical, coherent, definable entity. Frisch's work represents the position, both privileged and unenviable, of the male heir to the Western patriarchal tradition

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Kari E. Lokke will join the faculty of the University of California, Davis in September 1988 as assistant professor of English and comparative literature. Her recently published book Gérard de Nerval: The Poet as Social Visionary *(French Forum, 1987) discusses the political implications of Nerval's mysticism. The article published here is related to her current research interests in the aesthetics of the grotesque and the sublime.* *Kari Lokke is grateful to the Editorial Board of* FRONTIERS *for insightful commentary on* The Bloody Chamber *that allowed her to make significant improvements in her analysis of this remarkable novella.*

who examines and describes the dissolution of that intellectual and political tradition.

The English iconoclast and feminist, Angela Carter, on the other nand, consistently represents the outsider in her novels, short stories, and essays. "Black Venus," for example, is an eerie portrait of Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's Creole mistress. "The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe" gives us Elizabeth and Virginia Poe, the mother and wife of the celebrated and haunted writer. *The Sadeian Woman* examines the cultural significance of the life and writings of the Marquis de Sade. A twentieth-century Madame d'Aulnoy, Carter takes myth and folklore, the world of collective subjectivity, as her inspiration. From her fantastic *Fireworks* tales to her carnivalesque novel *Nights at the Circus*, Carter's writings bring the vitality of what Bakhtin calls "popular culture" into contemporary British literature by translating the motifs of myth and folklore into the language of the sophisticated aesthete. Thus the collection *The Bloody Chamber* contains renderings of several well-known fairy tales, including "Puss-in-Boots" and "Little Red Riding Hood," as well as the title story that retells the tale of Bluebeard.

In the folktale, Bluebeard is a wealthy merchant or king who marries and then murders a series of wives, usually three or seven. After marriage, each wife is given the key to a forbidden chamber of horrors where the former wives are interred, and, of course, each wife breaks the taboo and enters the forbidden room when the husband is absent. The "disobedience" of each wife is, in turn, betrayed when the key becomes indelibly bloody. Finally, the cycle is broken when the last wife is saved and Bluebeard himself murdered, by the bride, her brothers, or a page, depending upon the specific version of the tale.

Bluebeard is a widespread European folktale with many variants—German, French, Basque, and Estonian, to name but a few. In Norway the husband is a troll, in Italy, a devil, and in an ancient Greek version, death itself. According to Funk and Wagnall's *Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, the central motif of the story is the broken taboo, the forbidden chamber motif.[6] Charles Perrault seems to agree, for his first moral to the story reads as a warning to young wives: "Curiosity is a charming passion, but may only be satisfied at the price of a thousand regrets; one sees around one a thousand examples of this sad truth every day. Curiosity is the most fleeting of pleasures; the moment it is satisfied, it ceases to exist and it always proves very, very expensive."[7] But Carter and Frisch seem much less willing to place the woman in the wrong,[8] and for them it is the murderous husband or the murderous marriage that is the object of interest and criticism.

These two novellas have other significant similarities besides thematic ones. Each is a structural and stylistic *tour de force*, the Carter text through grotesque overstatement and excess, the Frisch through equally extreme sparseness, reticence, and understatement. Each text has a strong element of grotesque symbolism, with much of the symbolism presented tongue-in-cheek. And finally, powerful irony and parody of traditional plot and narrative expectations are essential to both *Bluebeard* and *The Bloody Chamber*. Yet if the similarities between the two works are important, the tonal differences are even more striking. Frisch's grotesque is closer to the modern conception of the grotesque born of Romantic introspection, individualism, and alienation, whereas Carter's is more akin to the original, emancipatory Renaissance grotesque called "grotesque realism" by Bakhtin.

Both novellas are told in the first person, a point of view foreign to the traditional folktale. But these two first-person narrative perspectives seem to have almost nothing in common. *The Bloody Chamber* is the intense and breathless retelling of a young girl's seduction into and escape from a deadly marriage. The reader is pulled into the flow of the lush, erotic, rhythmic prose from this first remarkable sentence:

> I remember how, that night, I lay awake in the wagon-lit in a tender, delicious ecstasy of excitement, my burning cheek pressed against the impeccable linen of the pillow and the pounding of my heart mimicking that of the great pistons ceaselessly thrusting the train that bore me through the night, away from Paris, away from girlhood, away from the white, enclosed quietude of my mother's apartment, into the unguessable country of marriage.[9]

Each detail—from the pallid, fleshy whiteness of her husband's face, to his leather-bound pornographic library, to the "cruel necklace," the priceless "bloody bandage of rubies" that he forces her to wear around her frail neck—increases the reader's horror at the seeming inevitability of the victim's death by decapitation. The tension—almost, but not quite unbearable—common to both the best erotic fiction and the best horror stories is the trademark of this tale. At the same time, the narrative has an ironic quality of genre parody because the reader knows from the very first word that the heroine survives to tell her tale. Thus Carter's prose has the power to do the impossible, to create overwhelming suspense even when the conditions for that suspense are in fact nonexistent. The reader simultaneously experiences intense emotional involvement in the story and a more detached and intellectual admiration for Carter's storytelling skills. The height of both reader involvement and irony in the tale comes at the moment when the young bride is rescued by her strong, courageous mother and Carter explicitly turns the tables on an age-old literary and mythic tradition, the tradition of *Love in the Western World*:

> The Marquis stood transfixed, utterly dazed, at a loss. It must have been as if he had been watching his beloved *Tristan* for the twelfth, the thirteenth time and Tristan stirred, then leapt from his bier in the last act, announced in a jaunty aria interposed from Verdi that bygones were bygones, crying over spilled milk did nobody any good, and as for himself, he proposed to live happily ever after. The puppetmaster, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their strings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king, aghast, witnesses the revolt of his pawns. (44-45)

Frisch's text plays a similarly sophisticated but opposite game. Frisch creates the interior monologue of a character, Felix Schaad, who has recently been acquitted of murdering his sixth wife and who obsessively relives the trial in his mind. Schaad's consciousness has, in fact, been so invaded and overwhelmed by his own memories, his sense of guilt, the persistent questions of the prosecutor, and the testimonies of the many witnesses that he has become a totally fragmented and self-alienated human being. The fragmentation reaches the grotesque as personal memories and ridiculous testimonies full of irrelevancies and non sequiturs mingle with accounts of his current attempts to appease his sense of guilt with billiard games:

—And when he was drunk, Frau Schaad—and this is my final question—what did he do when he had too much to drink?
—He talked. . . .
—What about?
—Always the same thing. . . .
—And that was?
—I can't remember.
—You can't remember. . . .

Sometimes the presiding judge has also had enough:

—Can the witness now be allowed to stand down?

The witness takes up her handbag.

—The trial is adjourned to Monday morning at eight.

I place my billiard cue back in the rack. I put on my jacket. I had not removed my tie for the game; I pull it tight. . . . I look for my car. No ticket, though my parking meter has run out. I get in behind the steering wheel. It is raining. I insert the ignition key and ask myself where I am living at the moment.[10]

Eventually all his meditations and recollections seem to take the form of question and answer, offense-defense between different parts of himself:

—You were deeply upset when you saw the police photograph, the body on the carpet, the five lilies on the body. . . .
—It was horrible.
—It was not you who gave her those lilies?
—There were often lilies there.
—You never mentioned that. . . .
—Always five.
—Why didn't you mention that?
—I don't know. . . .
—Your detention lasted almost ten months, Herr Schaad, the trial itself three weeks; you had plenty of time, Herr Schaad, to mention everything.
—It escaped my memory.
—And today, here in the woods, with no judge to question you, it suddenly comes to your mind: there were often lilies there. (127-8)

The abrupt, disjointed quality of Frisch's prose discourages reader involvement just as surely as the fluidity of Carter's style draws one into her fictional world. The leaps in time, space, and context in Frisch's text slow one down and force one to approach it as an intellectual game or puzzle. Thus we remain as alienated from Felix Schaad as he is from himself in his obsessive attempts to objectify, numb, and reify the pain of his past without expressing any feeling. He is like a walking dead man, an automaton, a machine, images common to the contemporary grotesque from Kafka to Beckett.[11]

At the beginning of the work, Schaad's acquittal does not seem to provide convincing proof of his innocence, yet his confession near the end of the novella seems equally false. When we finally learn the identity of the real murderer, the revelation is totally anticlimactic. The work has proceeded by simultaneously building up and undercutting the suspense surrounding the question of Schaad's guilt until finally the answer seems totally irrelevant. Schaad has shown such emotional emptiness and such an overwhelming sense of guilt that the reader tends to condemn him, as he condemns himself in his final false confession, even if he did not commit the actual murder. As Sven Birkerts, *The New Republic*'s reviewer, emphasizes, "What does emerge from the various accounts is that he has lived his life as a supremely egotistical creature. . . . He did not murder Rosalinde, but he could have. The murder was a specific event, but his guilt is a condition of the soul."[12] The technical exoneration of Schaad and the confession of the real murderer seem as insignificant as the murder of Carter's Bluebeard and the rescue of her heroine are exhilarating and liberating.

In Felix Schaad, Frisch has created a pathetic and ridiculous figure who is forced to confront the ludicrous loneliness of his existence as reflected in the testimonies of the witnesses. None of his friends or his former wives has anything either truly positive or negative to say about him. A cold and empty propriety seems to reign in all his relationships. When asked if she has feared strangulation by her former husband when he was angry, one wife replies, "I don't think he had it in him to do that" (45). His current wife calls him Chevalier Bluebeard as a "term of endearment" not only because he "already had six wives in the cellar," but also because he is so "chivalrous" (91). Similarly the murdered woman's apartment manager states that "Herr Doktor Schaad is a gentleman" (7). Ultimately Schaad seems reduced to playing the absurd role of tax advisor to all his wives, women whose lives he supposedly once shared intimately. Like his name, which is related to both *schaden*, to harm or hurt, and *schade*!, what a pity!, too bad!, Felix Schaad is both frightening and pathetic. Indeed, he exemplifies the grotesque character as defined by Gilbert Muller:

The grotesque character is a comic figure. It is impossible to sympathize with him, despite his agonies, because we view him from a detached perspective, and when we are not emotionally involved in his suffering, we are amused. . . .

As with the grotesque character, the entire technique of the grotesque is also essentially comic, for we always view the grotesque from a vantage point. To be certain, the subject matter of the grotesque—the raw material which creates the vision—is always potentially horrible, but the treatment of this material is comic: this explains the peculiar complexity of tone, combining both horror and the ludicrous, which characterizes the grotesque as an art form.[13]

In *The Bloody Chamber* it is not the heroine-narrator who is the grotesque figure, but rather her monstrous husband. He is an inhuman embodiment of sexual perversion and destructive power, ultimately a symbol of death itself. His face is more masklike than human, never revealing any emotion:

But his strange, heavy, almost waxen face was not lined by experience. Rather, experience seemed to have washed it perfectly smooth, like a stone on a beach whose fissures have been eroded by successive tides. And sometimes that face, in stillness when he listened to me playing, with the heavy eyelids folded over eyes that always disturbed me by their absence of light, seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask. Or else, elsewhere. (3-4)

The Bloody Chamber is a contemporary transformation of that quintessentially grotesque motif, the dance of death and the maiden, a modern, feminist transformation in which for once the maiden is victorious over death itself. In fact, it is

the interpenetration of death with such richly positive facets of life—wealth, beauty, youth, and sexuality—that gives the symbolism of this novella its grotesque and uncanny power. The Marquis, with his "deathly composure" (15) and his "waxworks stillness" (16), is most suggestively identified with death in his association with lilies. As doting husband, he fills his bride's bedroom with lilies so that it looks like an "embalming parlor" (16). In the Marquis's lily-like presence, death and phallic sexuality are one:

> I know it must seem a curious analogy, a man with a flower, but sometimes he seemed to me like a lily. Yes. A lily. Possessed of that strange ominous calm of a sentient vegetable, like one of those cobra-headed, funereal lilies whose white sheaths are curled out of a flesh as thick and tensely yielding to the touch as vellum. (4)

The Marquis's nightmarish yet magical castle by the sea is a "Universe of Death," both captivating and repellent. Embodying the essence of the grotesque aesthetic, it defies definition and categorization; "at home neither on the land nor on the water," it is "a mysterious, amphibious place, contravening the materiality of both earth and the waves" (9). References to Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Debussy, and Huysmans create an appropriately decadent atmosphere. This exotic, fairy tale castle is a world of hothouse flowers, marrons glacés, Asti Spumante, and watered black silk. Perhaps most intriguing is the manner in which this aesthete's paradise, this world of overexquisite taste, through its amorality, intensity, and excess, borders on the hellish and the hideous. The grotesque often reveals that the seemingly ugly can be aesthetically fascinating, but Carter's perverse craft shows that the beautiful can in fact be extraordinarily ugly. Like the "lush, insolent incense" of the heavy-headed lilies, and the "desirous dread" the lecherous voluptuary inspires in his young virgin bride, the atmosphere of this castle is both seductive and suffocating. Seen through the glass of their vase, the stems of the lilies resemble "dismembered arms, drifting drowned in greenish water" (22). There is an edge of violence, sadism, and corruption to all this luxury and taste, for the Marquis's wealth is based upon centuries of exploitation and enslavement and his pleasure upon the torture and slaughter of the three women now entombed in his cellar.

Against this background of perverse humor and overabundant sensuous symbolism, the symbol of the heart stands out in forceful simplicity. The young bride interprets the key to the forbidden chamber as the key to her husband's heart. As she illuminates every room of the once dark castle, she sees herself as searching for her husband's "true nature" (24), for his soul. Her exploration of the torture chamber under his castle becomes an archetypal descent into hell, and the indelibly bloody heart that marks the key when she leaves this chamber is ultimately transferred to her forehead as the eternal mark of Cain. This "telltale heart" is the one unequivocally supernatural detail in the story and as such is strongly highlighted. Finally the young heroine must admit to herself that she has sold herself to the devil for "a handful of colored stones and the pelts of dead beasts" (16), that she has been seduced by her own potential for corruption.

The Bloody Chamber ends as a feminist fairy tale should, with the rescue of the daughter by her strong and heroic mother, an "eagle-featured, indomitable" woman (2). After this rescue, the young widow donates her fortune to charity and sets up house with her mother and the young blind piano tuner with whom she has fallen in love in the midst of her nightmarish adventures. In a structural reversal typical of this ironic fairy tale, the punishment due the villainous husband has been meted out prematurely to the innocent young lover. This archetypal tale of the loss of innocence, which begins with the pounding of a young girl's heart, ends in mixed tones appropriate to the grotesque, with the heroine's recognition of the evil within her and her acknowledgment of the beauty of her blind lover's heart:

> No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead; I am glad he cannot see it—not for fear of his revulsion, since I know he sees me clearly with his heart—but because it spares my shame. (46)

In contrast to Carter's opulent, exotic fairy tale, the symbolism of Frisch's exaggeratedly mundane world is much more subtle and difficult to interpret. This symbolism is nevertheless responsible for much of the dry and understated humor in the text. We cannot suppress a smile when, for example, we learn that Rosalinde, who was a high-priced call girl before she was murdered, lived on a street called Hornstrasse or that she had a cleaning lady named Isolde. (The Tristan and Isolde myth finds its way into Frisch's text through ironic detail; it permeates *The Bloody Chamber* like a heavy, recurrent melody.) Similarly, Schaad's obsessive but distracted rubbing and chalking of his phallic billiard cues provoke a chuckle. But, like so much modern grotesque humor—that of Franz Kafka, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Nathanael West, and Günter Grass, for example—*Bluebeard* provokes a laughter that is never wholehearted or full. It occurs against the backdrop of a murdered woman's brutalized body. The image of Rosalinde's corpse suffocated with a dirty sanitary napkin, strangled with Schaad's tie, and strewn with five white lilies haunts the reader and poisons the atmosphere of the story just as the bloody chamber of horrors taints the beauty of Bluebeard's castle in the Carter tale.

The lilies are powerful symbols of death in both texts, in *The Bloody Chamber* through their oppressive presence, in *Bluebeard* through the relative absence of other images with equal symbolic weight and portent. It turns out, of course, that the five lilies that were so often present in Rosalinde's apartment, like the lilies mysteriously placed on her grave, were gifts from the murderer, the young Greek student. Equally significant is Schaad's admission, near the end of the novella, that he had sent lilies as a joke on the day of her murder. Is it possible that Schaad's superficial, sarcastic gesture, his lack of attunement to the emotional significance of these flowers, provoked a murderous fit of jealousy on the part of Rosalinde's lover when he realized that someone else had sent her *his* flowers? This embarrassingly melodramatic question, straight out of a bad detective novel, leaves the reader wondering whether Frisch is suggesting that Schaad may have "unconsciously" known what he was doing, or whether Frisch is instead commenting upon Schaad's lack of awareness of the world of symbols and revealing the cruel and horrifying results of Schaad's emotional blindness and repression.

Here again, Frisch seems, consciously or unconsciously, to be engaging in metafiction, to be parodying not only Schaad's emotional insensitivity, but also the style of self-expression, the language, that reflects it. Frisch's style—the language of

his protagonist—is sparse, skeletal, stripped of metaphor, symbol, and myth. Nevertheless, the lilies have precisely the primal power that Schaad wishes to deny them. They rise from the surface of the text as a fateful symbol of perversion and death in spite of—in fact, precisely by virtue of—Schaad's attempt to relegate them to the level of a silly, slightly cruel joke. And Schaad, the proper and well-respected Swiss doctor, is forced to admit that his persona has been invaded by the monstrous and mythical character of Bluebeard.

Similarly, Carter attacks myths as "consolatory nonsense" in the "Polemical Preface" to her book *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*:

> If women allow themselves to be consoled for their culturally determined lack of access to the modes of intellectual debate by the invocation of hypothetical great goddesses, they are simply flattering themselves into submission (a technique often used on them by men). All the mythic versions of women . . . are consolatory nonsenses; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods.[14]

Yet Carter does not escape the world of archetypes, no matter how "archaic" and "atavistic" she may consider them. Her own sadistic Marquis is the quintessence of the negative animus archetype described by Marie-Louise von Franz in *An Introduction to the Psychology of Fairy Tales*—the ruler of a land of death who tortures woman and cuts her off from life. Bluebeard, Franz writes, "embodies the death-like, ferocious aspects of the animus in his most diabolical form. . . . Woman, on the other hand, serves life, and the anima entangles a man in life. . . . The animus in his negative form seems to be the opposite. He draws woman away from life and murders life for her."[15]

Furthermore, Carter's attack on the myths of male supremacy in *The Bloody Chamber* employs a modern, feminist version of the Demeter-Persephone myth: the archetypal descent into the hell of the self and the slaying of the monster keeper of this realm of riches. And her courageous mother-daughter heroines are variations on the Amazon archetype: powerful, strong-willed, steel-nerved women warriors. In fact, Carter's fairy tales are exemplary instances of the current feminist revisions of mythic archetypes described by Estella Lauter in *Women as Mythmakers* (1984) and *Feminist Archetypal Theory: Interdisciplinary Re-Visions of Jungian Thought* (1985).

Despite her theoretical assertions in *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter's own art proves that myth is not inherently regressive or atavistic. What is important is how it is used. Thus *The Bloody Chamber* creates, from an ancient fairy tale and ancient mythic motifs, a vital original expression of a forceful feminist vision. With the rescue of the heroine by the powerful mother figure, Carter rewrites the traditional folktale plot in which the heroine is rescued by herself, a brother, or a future lover. In *The Bloody Chamber* the courageous mother comes galloping wildly down the causeway and shoots the Marquis just as the rising tide and the murderer are about to separate the heroine from life forever. Here Carter is also challenging the tradition of sado-masochism, which, as she brilliantly suggests in *The Sadeian Woman*, is founded upon a lover's pact with death and a hatred of the mother as giver-of-life. For the sado-masochist the womb becomes a tomb, a "bloody chamber."

The genius of this novella lies in its narrative structure, which first seduces us into identification with the masochistic heroine through the richness and sensuality of its language and then compels us to experience the horrific consequences of the heroine's surrender to the Marquis. By acknowledging the glamour of sado-masochistic self-annihilation as well as its ultimate brutality, ugliness, and misogyny, Carter reveals both the difficulty and the absolute necessity of a feminist redefinition of sexual pleasure and desire. Thus the heart on the heroine's forehead is not only a mark of shame, a sign of complicity; it is also a badge of courage. She is rewarded for breaking the patriarchal taboo with a knowledge of the human heart. The power of the heart is the unconditional power of love, both the indomitable love of the mother and the total acceptance of the gentle male partner. As Carter suggests in the provocative conclusion to *The Sadeian Woman*, fear of love is perhaps the ultimate obstacle in the way of women's freedom: "It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women" (150).

The dynamic in both texts—the return of repressed myth and metaphor, the dialectic of enlightenment—is a kind of microcosm of the development of contemporary European literature as a whole, which has found that attempts to denude itself of myth and metaphor have succeeded only in creating newer and ever more complex mythic structures. Hence Alain Robbe-Grillet's simplistic attack on myth and metaphor in *Nature, humanisme, tragédie* (1958) developed into an obsession with recreating contemporary cultural mythology in *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970), and Roland Barthes came to see his attempt at demystification of myth in *Mythologies* as itself a mythic act.[16] And in her lectures on *Kassandra*, Christa Wolf, despite all her skepticism and rationalism, finds herself on a visit to Greece obsessed with the figure of the legendary prophetess and hypnotically drawn to terra cotta fertility goddesses and snake priestesses on the island of Crete. As Wolf reflects, all poets want to believe in the power of prophecy, the power of the word.[17] These developments seem to bear out the assertions of such theorists as Ernst Cassirer in *Language and Myth* that metaphor, myth, and language are inextricable entities, that myth and metaphor are central conditions of speech and human self-expression.

With no positive vision of the future, Frisch, however, can see only silence and death as Schaad's avenues of escape from the terrifying realm of Bluebeard's castle. Frisch's novella ends in disintegration and despair, with Schaad trying to alleviate his guilt through a false confession and a futile suicide attempt. Frisch's thematic preoccupations in *Bluebeard* are identical to those of *Stiller*, his first major novel. In fact, images of loneliness, unhappy love, disintegrating marriages, sexual fear, and cruelty haunt all of Frisch's novels, *Gantenbein* (1964) and *Montauk* (1975) in particular. Stiller, for example, like Schaad, becomes convinced that he has murdered his wife, though she has in fact died of tuberculosis. Stiller confesses to her murder, realizing that "there are all sorts of ways of murdering a person or at least his soul, and that's something no police in the world can spot."[18] "Guilt is ourselves,"[19] he announces. This guilt is the ubiquitous guilt of the Germanic race after the genocide of World War II, guilt projected onto the faceless foreigner, the scapegoat, the anonymous Greek student who is the "real murderer."[20] It is also the collective guilt of man against woman, which some critics have suggested is the dominant theme in Frisch's entire oeuvre.[21] The differences between *Bluebeard* and *Stiller* are stylistic and structural; *Bluebeard*

is a grotesquely sparse and skeletal version of the earlier diary-confessional novel. In the end Schaad maintains absolute silence as he hears a doctor's voice, the voice of his own alienated emotional self, inform him that he is in pain. Ultimately Schaad's self seems to disappear into nothingness.

This reduction to despair and silence places Frisch squarely in the modernist tradition of Beckett and the absurdists. Carter, on the other hand, as a woman and a feminist, is refreshingly free from this unremittingly bleak male perspective. *The Bloody Chamber* is a lush celebration of the heroine's vitality, sensuality, eagerness for adventure, and love of experience. Even her acknowledgment of shame and guilt seems a healthy coming to terms with herself, an acceptance of responsibility rather than destructive self-deprecation. It is worth asking whether there is not, in contrast to the nihilistic grotesque of masculine writers, a twentieth-century feminine grotesque with exemplars as varied as Djuna Barnes, Flannery O'Connor, Isak Dinesen, and Angela Carter. In its joyful acceptance of both body and soul, its irreverent humor, and its vision of the regenerative power of love and hope, this grotesque fulfills the emancipatory function that Bakhtin attributes to the original Renaissance grotesque—the destruction of rigidified hierarchy and the celebration of the unending cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

Finally, then, the grotesque in both *Bluebeard* and *The Bloody Chamber* functions as an unsettling vehicle for exposing, through exaggeration, dark humor, and irony, the brutality of traditional patriarchal attitudes towards women. Inevitably, because Frisch's work is told from a male perspective, it becomes self-parody just as Carter's voice is a voice of self-assertion. Carter offers a wry expression of faith in the human heart, whereas Frisch gives us nothingness and despair. In the European modernist tradition men seem to be moving into silence. Women, on the other hand, are speaking out. It is as if Frisch, standing within a Western patriarchal tradition that he knows is moribund, feels an ethical obligation to help destroy the tradition that fathered him. Carter has the more joyous and thankful task of transforming the ancient and the mythic into the radically new.

NOTES

1. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968), and Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (1963; reprint New York: McGraw Hill, 1966). Both Bakhtin and Kayser emphasize the juxtaposition of opposites (life-death, fact-fiction, matter-spirit, comic-tragic, organic-mechanical); the intermingling of incongruous elements; and the assault upon aesthetic expectations, rational thought, and societal norms. But whereas Kayser sees the grotesque as a timeless, ahistorical aesthetic phenomenon, Bakhtin points to the historical development of the grotesque from the Middle Ages to the present.

2. Bakhtin describes carnivals as celebrating "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; they marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (10). "Contrary to the modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. . . . The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body" (26).

3. Kayser, 179.

4. Charles Perrault, *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*, trans. with foreword by Angela Carter (New York: Avon Books, 1979), 41.

5. Perrault, 17.

6. Maria Leach and Jerome Fried, eds., *Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*, vol. I (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1949), 150.

7. Perrault, 41.

8. A comparison of the Bluebeard motif and the myth of Amor and Psyche would be rewarding. Curiosity also leads Psyche to "disobey" her husband. For a discussion of the Amor and Psyche myth that interprets Psyche's curiosity in a positive light, see Erich Neumann, *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1956).

9. Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 1. All parenthetical references in the text are to this edition.

10. Max Frisch, *Bluebeard: A Tale*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 46-147. All parenthetical references in the text are to this edition.

11. See Kayser's discussion of the mechanical or technical grotesque, 182-83.

12. Sven Birkerts, review of *Bluebeard: A Tale*, by Max Frisch, *The New Republic*, 11 July 1983, 32-35.

13. Gilbert Muller, *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), 7.

14. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 5.

15. Marie-Louise von Franz, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Fairy Tales (New York: Spring, 1970), chapter 8, 43.*

16. Michael Spencer, "Avatars du mythe chez Robbe-Grillet et Butor," in Robbe-Grillet: Analyse, Théorie, ed. Jean Ricardou, vol. 1, *Roman-Cinéma* (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1976), 64-84.

17. Christa Wolf, *Voraussetzungen einer Erzählung: Kassandra* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1983), 25.

18. Max Frisch, *I'm Not Stiller*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 111.

19. Frisch, *I'm Not Stiller*, 390.

20. Robert M. Adams also discusses Bluebeard as an embodiment of the collective guilt of Germany in his review of *Bluebeard: A Tale*, by Max Frisch, *The New York Review of Books*, 29 September 1983, 14-16.

21. See Gerhard F. Probst and Jay F. Bodine, eds., *Perspectives on Max Frisch* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 3.