

I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in. Discuss the use of images of entrapment in the work of two female novelists of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

Reader, she married him; reader, they lived happily ever after; but, reader, considerable is the suffering they went through first. In this way, *Jane Eyre* is not so far removed from the fairy tale; and entrapment is key in the mythos of both, for entrapment is a female plight, and fairy tales a female form: Virginia Woolf asserts that it was a woman ‘who made the ballads and the folk-songs, crooning them to her children’¹. Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, drawing from ‘Bluebeard’s Castle’ and ‘Beauty and the Beast’, can be read throughout as a novel of escape; the various stops on Jane’s quasi-pilgrimage ‘constitute a kind of Bastille, from which she must run, ride or (from Thornfield) crawl away on hands and knees.’² The heroines of Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber*, a visceral feminist reworking of these and other age-old folk legends, are incarcerated in all manner of ‘unpleasant’ ways, subverting and questioning fairy-tale tradition. These two texts meet and challenge each other in a variety of ways, explored here through the lens of the images they use; since both are so self-consciously Gothic, they engage a series of potent leitmotifs in ways both alike and divergent.

A room is a woman’s domain, as Woolf describes, ‘for women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.’¹ It is fitting, then, that Jane Eyre becomes a woman in her entrapment in the ‘red room’ of Gateshead. She crosses its threshold spilling blood, echoing menstruation in crossing into womanhood, and the room itself, as Showalter writes, ‘with its deadly and bloody connotations, its Freudian wealth of secret compartments, wardrobes, drawers, and jewel chest...has strong associations with the adult female body.’³ This is the physical coming of age paralleled in her newfound rebellion against the Reeds. That the room simultaneously ‘suggests imprisonment,’ as Locy argues, with its ‘windows “with their blinds always drawn down” and “half shrouded in festoons and falls of...drapery”’, aligns womanhood with entrapment from the outset.⁴ The destiny of woman – to be subjugated by man – is foreshadowed here; whatever it may become for Jane, it is the death-place of her uncle and thus, as Fraiman posits, ‘the vacated seat of [his] power.’ In this space so representative of the female body, Jane is ‘imprisoned by the patriarchal spirit’ and ‘the authority of the elite adult male’.⁵ By becoming a woman through her experience in the red room, Jane assumes these constraints.

Brontë’s explicit connection of femininity and incarceration is reflected at its height in the ‘bloody chamber’ of Carter’s titular story. The echo unmistakable in name alone (‘red room’ and ‘bloody chamber’), this is the culmination of that subjugation, the gory burial-place of three women murdered by the same husband, ‘whose embraces were annihilation’. The Marquis tells the heroine that none of his previous wives were virgins; this, especially in light of the heroine’s own escape, seems to be part of their condemnation. In the more comic ‘Puss-in-Boots’, the ultimately cuckolded husband keeps his wife ‘behind so many bolts and bars you wouldn’t believe’ for fear of infidelity. In *Jane Eyre*, meanwhile, the fate of women with threatening sexuality (Bertha Mason is notably ‘unchaste’) is to be locked in the attic, ‘in a room without a window...and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain.’ This room, like many in *The Bloody Chamber*, is windowless; women are denied not only physical movement (even the lamp is on a ‘chain’), but the power to see or be seen. The very actions of Bertha’s entrapment are again the fulfilment of those in the red room: Jane narrates that the

'preparation for bonds...took a little of the excitement out of me. 'Don't take them off,' I cried; 'I will not stir.' In guarantee whereof, I attached myself to my seat by my hands'; she, a largely unthreatening, and certainly virginal, child, remains physically unfettered. The unvirginal Bertha gains no such reprieve: when Rochester masters her in their struggle, 'he pinioned [her arms] behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair.' Brontë and Carter might well condemn this patriarchal prejudice; the age-old connection of female education to promiscuity would sentence them (especially Brontë, writing earlier) to a similar judgement.

In 'The Bloody Chamber', entrapment imagery circles its heroine's loss of virginity, a second step into womanhood; the two are universally combined. The Marquis twists her hair into a 'rope', another unsettling image of binding, and 'made me put on my choker, the family heirloom of one woman who had escaped the blade.' This ruby choker is purposely imitative of a slit throat as well as a choked one, binding her inexorably to its giver. It is a reminder not only of physical but economic entrapment; the man, as in *Jane Eyre*, as in real life, has all the financial power. It is in the jewel-laden build-up to their first wedding that Rochester begins to show signs of the entrapper. 'As the master of the house - and of his bride', Locy describes, 'he would load her with jewels, "put a diamond chain round [her] neck" and "clasp the bracelets" on her wrists like manacles.'⁵ Their love may be a true one, but, while Rochester inhabits his old role, it cannot succeed. There is a fundamental inequality between them, which is not remedied until Jane inherits a fortune and gains economic liberty. Inheritance is the surest path to female freedom; Woolf too makes much of how her aunt's legacy 'substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman...a view of the open sky.'¹

'I am no bird, and no net ensnares me,' Jane tells Rochester, yet the image of the caged bird pervades both texts. To Rochester, Jane's soul is a 'a curious sort of bird' seen 'through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there.' Perhaps the cage is her body, perhaps society's constraint. But Jane denies this attempt of his at imagery when he later calls her 'a wild frantic bird', in the assertion above. 'I am a free human being with an independent will,' she continues, 'which I now exert to leave you.' Comparing of women to birds at all, Brontë implies, is demeaning and even self-perpetuating: it denies them the essential humanity which justifies their need for liberty. In Carter's 'The Erl-King', the eponymous villain turns his lovers into 'cage upon cage of singing birds,' but, like Jane, the heroine rebels against her fate. 'I had no wish to join the whistling congregation he kept in his cages although he looked after them very affectionately.' This affection is key, testament to the realisation that male love itself is the cage. 'His embraces were his enticements,' the heroine sees, 'and yet, oh yet! they were the branches of which the trap itself was woven.' Rochester echoes this in his ominous promise to Jane: 'if you raved, my arms should confine you, and not a strait waistcoat... I should receive you in an embrace, at least as fond as it would be restrictive.' An entrapper can be loving and yet an entrapper, the authors remind us.

If men paint women as birds, pretty and confined, there is darker and more complex animalistic imagery intertwined with the texts' depiction of entrapment. In Carter's two Beauty-and-the-Beast narratives, though the heroines are entrapped by the beasts, it is the fathers who are blamed ('My father lost me to the Beast at cards,' the heroine of 'The Tiger's Bride' bitterly begins her tale) and the animals who are redeemed. 'Wild things,' Carter tells us, 'have a far more rational fear of us than is ours of them'; men are still the villains of the

story. In fact, 'The Tiger's Bride' sees girl made animal by the tiger: 'each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world...I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.' The real entrapment here is in society's restrictions. Makinen has read 'the beasts as the projections of a feminine libido... beneath the cultural construction of the demure'.⁶ Like the entrapment of sexual women at the hands of jealous partners described above, 'a life in the world' suppresses their sexuality. There are echoes of this in Rochester's perceptions of Jane: 'the Lowood constraint', he tells her, makes her 'fear in the presence of a man ...to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly.' Lowood's patriarchal teachings, symbolised in Mr Brocklehurst, have indeed constrained her, though the comment is ironic from a man who has himself wreaked such punishment on a woman unafraid to break society's boundaries, while implicitly idealising Jane's innocent chastity. In fact, Jane and Bertha are united in the animalistic imagery used to describe them both. 'She's like a mad cat,' Bessie says of Jane as she imprisons her in the red room; Bertha is 'like some strange wild animal'. This, then, is a woman free of society's mental limitation but physically entrapped, Jane in her fit of passion and Bertha in her real madness.

Sympathy between them pervades the text; Jane's inexplicable attraction to the third floor has her walking 'along the corridor of the third storey, backwards and forwards,' while Bertha 'ran backwards and forwards' only feet away. Such restlessness is characteristic of entrapment imagery in both texts (the tiger in 'The Tiger's Bride' is described identically, 'pacing backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards,...the length and breadth of his imprisonment'), but the similarity between the women is inescapable. Jane's pacing comes during her powerful polemic against the oppression of women: 'they suffer from too rigid a restraint...precisely as men would suffer,' she cries. Woolf makes much of Brontë's shift from this speech to 'when thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh.' She calls it 'an awkward break...it is upsetting to come upon Grace Poole all of a sudden.'¹ Yet she may have underestimated Brontë. It is not a break at all, but a chilling parallel; Jane's description of the entrapment all women face is brutally reflected in the real and cruel entrapment of Bertha Mason, whose laugh she has really heard.

This mirroring of Jane and Bertha reaches its climax in a real mirror. When Bertha visits Jane in the night, Jane 'saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass.' It is in the one place where one can expect to see oneself that Jane first sees Bertha (and, furthermore, Bertha wearing Jane's veil). A mirror itself is 'a sort of chamber, a mysterious enclosure in which images of the self are trapped', as Gilbert and Gubar write – and so Bertha is a kind of dark shadow of Jane, a realisation of her earlier experience in the red room, where in the mirror, 'that visionary hollow', she sees a 'strange little figure there gazing at me... like one of the tiny phantoms.'⁷ The mirror reveals the id to Jane's outer ego, ultimately personified in Bertha Mason. Bertha is the image of Jane's trapped darker, inner self, making the women twisted allies in society's patriarchal framework. Carter's mirrors are telling in different ways. In 'The Tiger's Bride', the heroine sees 'not my own face but that of my father, as if I had put on his face when I arrived at The Beast's palace as the discharge of his debt.' The truth this mirror tells is that the heroine is owned by her father, subsumed into him. Rather than showing her an entrapped inner self, her reflection becomes testament to her own entrapment.

The tale, Carter writes, 'interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience.'⁸ These 'subterranean areas' are the

entrapped ones; a representation of the subconscious, like Bertha's id to Jane's ego, or a purposeful suppression of one's digressions, like Rochester's entrapment of Bertha. In 'The Bloody Chamber', the chamber which houses the Marquis' shadowy and sadistic past is literally 'subterranean', hidden 'in the viscera of the castle' with walls of 'naked rock'. The 'viscera', with the word's connotations of the dark recesses of the body, is an apt location for physical wrongdoing. Brontë, meanwhile, writing before Freud and the concept of the 'subconscious', puts Bertha in the attic, the archetypal Victorian storage space of old relics and paraphernalia. Bertha is the vital relic from Rochester's past, buried away with other discarded objects. But even as he entraps her, she entraps him; her existence bars him from union with Jane, and his denial of that existence seems almost a curse on him. One cannot entrap the truth forever, Brontë warns us. It is only when, in the fire, Rochester tries repeatedly to save Bertha's life, that 'she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement.' By acknowledging and even fighting for her existence, he redeems himself; and so Bertha frees him by destroying herself.

Central to images of entrapment in both texts are images of liberation from that entrapment. If men are the entrappers, Carter and Brontë elect to make women almost universally the liberators, as with Bertha above. In 'The Bloody Chamber', the heroine is about to be decapitated when her mother gallops in, 'her skirts tucked round her waist...she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head.' Carter has changed this from the original legend, where the heroine is saved by her brothers: the maternal liberation is triumphant. When Jane breaks away from Rochester in what is her own moment of redemption, the mastery of her troublesome passions – for her id is something to be overcome, echoed in the death of Bertha, not realised as in 'The Tiger's Bride' above – she is vitally encouraged by her mother's spirit: 'it whispered in my heart — "My daughter, flee temptation." "Mother, I will."' Likewise, in 'The Erl-King', the heroine describes how 'she will open all the cages and let the birds free; they will change back into young girls, every one...The bow will dance over the new strings of its own accord and they will cry out: 'Mother, mother, you have murdered me!'" Here, it is in the act of liberation that she assumes maternal power, not to the girls but, chillingly, to the hairs of her lover. Women liberate themselves or other women throughout both works – works written, let us not forget, by and about women. There is, perhaps, a liberation here too, from years of entrapment in male authorship.

A 'system of imagery' indeed, each more richly evocative than the last, and, united, producing works which are themselves transgressive, railing in a heightened Gothic framework against the entrapment of women by men and by society (and especially that of nineteenth-century England, in Brontë's case; Carter's narratives are more dislocated). They themselves defy literary constraint, even as this essay would defy its word count – if only it could.

Word count: 2500

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