

New wine in old bottles: Angela Carter's translation of Charles Perrault's La Barbe bleue.

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“New Wine in Old Bottles”: Angela Carter’s Translation of Charles Perrault’s “La Barbe bleue”

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Abstract

This article demonstrates that Angela Carter’s English translation of Charles Perrault’s “La Barbe bleue” does not merely adapt the story for a modern audience, but constitutes a form of rewriting that is best understood in counterpoint with “The Bloody Chamber.” Carter’s “Bluebeard” involves a generic shift that reflects current notions about Perrault as an author for children; and its formal, stylistic, thematic, and semantic configurations match the translator’s idea of the nature and purpose of Perrault’s tales, as well as the editorial constraints of the illustrated book. But the work of translation and background reading about the fairy-tale tradition enabled Carter to discover the “adult” content and textual complexities of Perrault’s tales. Carter’s dialogue with Perrault is thus not unlike her approach to the Marquis de Sade, insofar as she

reclaimed both writers against critics who condemned fairy tales and pornography. Like Perrault, Carter believed fairy tales could carry useful knowledge distinct from conventional morality and that as a modern genre par excellence they could be (re)made to reflect ever-changing realities.

MARTINE HENNARD DUTHEIL DE LA ROCHERE
UTE HEIDMANN

“New Wine in Old Bottles”: Angela Carter’s Translation of Charles Perrault’s “La Barbe bleue”

Each reading is a translation.
—Octavio Paz, “Translation: Literature and Letters”

As a staunch materialist, Angela Carter was acutely aware of the impact of larger historical forces on the act of creation. Thus, at the request of Michéle Wandor, she agreed to situate herself politically as a writer for a collection of essays, *On Gender and Writing* (1983). In her oft-quoted contribution to the volume, titled “Notes from the Front Line,” Carter stresses the influence of the feminist movement on her life and work: “The women’s movement has been of immense importance to me personally and I would regard myself as a feminist writer, because I’m a feminist in everything else and one can’t compartmentalize these things in one’s life” (*Shaking a Leg* 37). Far from reducing the meaning of a literary text to the personal convictions of its author, however, Carter puts the stress on the activity of reception, as she insists on the need “to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions” (37).¹ The importance that Carter gives to the role of the reader shapes her understanding of how writing itself works. She famously adds: “Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (37). We wish to argue that Carter’s view of creation as stemming from the dynamic interplay of reading and writing was intimately connected to (and perhaps even originated in) her experience as a translator.

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