

REVISITING AND RESOLVING THE BORDEN'S MYSTERY OF LIZZIE'S
'FORTY WHACKS' IN ANGELA CARTER'S "THE FALL RIVER AXE MURDERS"

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The green leaf of loyalty's beginning to fall.
The bonnie White Rose it is withering an' all.
But I'll water it with blood of usurping tyranny.
And green it will grow in my ain countrie.

(qtd. in Waite 36)

The above is Lizzie's favorite hymn, "590 Hame, Hame, Hame" written by Allam Cunningham, this lyrical message carved in a fireplace mantle at Maplecroft. Perhaps, an encoded message that contains the repressed feelings of a thirty two year old heroine, Lizzie Borden, a New England spinster, who on a sultry August afternoon hacked her father and her stepmother to death with an axe in "Fall River, Massachusetts," in the year 1892. This hate-crime since time immemorial has attracted sufficient critical interest and so has been re-told a number of times so much so that there are "two operas, a ballet, numerous novels, eight plays, a film, a television show, two short stories, four poems, various popular songs, and, of course, the children's [nursery] rhyme" (Langlois 193, Schofield 91).

"The Fall River Axe Murders" (hereafter referred to as "The Fall") is Carter's delicate rendition of a "skillfully-constructed narrative" whose story everyone knows. "The Fall" is Carter's twentieth century interpretation of a nineteenth century murder convict's past; a story in which her task as a self conscious writer is concerned with revealing the unfamiliar portion of it that is, "what the commonly accepted version of history keeps hidden" (Gamble 159).

*Lizzie Borden with an axe
Gave her father forty whacks
When she saw what she had done
She gave her mother forty one.*

Children's rhyme

("The Fall" 101)

It is with this nursery-rhyme like epigraph that Carter opens her short story "The Fall" thus, drawing attention to Borden's "quasi-folkloric status" (Gamble 159). Perhaps, via this

“popular skipping-rope rhyme” Carter puts forth her unique version of a sensational murder case which was a “*cause célèbre*” throughout the United States, for in it instead of focusing on the guilt-innocence debate that centers on Lizzie Borden, she puts forth alternate versions of this bitter reality and makes space for readers to dwell on the circumstances that led to this double murder so as to recreate their own versions of it (Wikipedia).

However, what Carter has re-constructed in Lizzie’s tale is not a “nursery story,” but a study in suppression related under the gloom of the imminent “foreknowledge both reader and author share which attempts to restore historical specificity to the familiar narrative.” In this manner, Carter rescues and liberates Lizzie’s act from the realm of “salaciously horrific” and recreates it more sensitively, “as the release of a repression too great to be contained” (Gamble 159).

Incidentally, with “The Fall” Carter announced her noticeable decision to “*move away*” from her classic fairy tales of 1979 “The Bloody Chamber” into the realm of historical consciousness as Susannah Clapp states: “These stories, written late in Angela’s life, are about legends and myths and marvels, about Wild Western girls and pagan practices.” In context of this self admitted “most definite shift” in her works, Rushdie in his introduction to the short stories, *Burning Your Boats* writes: “Carter’s revisionist imagination has turned towards the real, her interest towards portraiture rather than narrative” (qtd. in Langlois 192-93). Perhaps, via the tool of re-writing, Carter’s goal is to fill reader’s imagination with the unsaid in the history of the time. By re-visioning Lizzie’s story she intends to represent Lizzie more than an axe and the murder, and thereby reframes the story irrespective of its historical accuracy into a cautionary tale to hint at the ominous presence of Bluebeard like patriarchs spread everywhere in the real world since “repression [of self] leads to madness, and madness leads to murder.” For the cause of the Borden murder is debatable but the Victorian society in which Lizzie lives in title of the story attracts sufficient interest to the Fall River’s involvement in the in the parricide and matricide (Waite 37).

Coincidentally, in Carter’s tale the residents of Fall River are in for burning summer heat; the high temperature that adds to the anxiety and lethargy of the residents who do nothing to comfort their present hapless state, as Carter writes: “Early in the morning of the fourth of August, 1892 in Fall River, Massachusetts. Hot, hot, hot . . . very early in the morning, before the factory whistle, but, even at this hour, everything shimmers and quivers under the attack of white, furious sun already high in the still air” (“The Fall” 103). The fact that historically, fourth of August was a scorching day in this area of the New England town accounts for an impressive “realistic” portrayal of Carter’s “metafictive” short story that might prompt some readers to accuse her of “paraphrasing somewhat too closely the casebook studies that document the famous event. Historical accuracy per se appears uppermost” (Langlois 194, McClenagan, 46).

Besides the humid weather outside which adds up to the woes of the residents, the most important question in Lizzie’s account is what is so fascinating about Lizzie’s tale that it till date is the subject of discussion? As critic Schofield suggests, irrespective of Lizzie’s guilt or innocence, the intriguing question is in the ambivalence inherent in the question “[d]id you do it?” for there have to be some solid reasons for her to perform the unnatural

act (92). Similarly, the red hot background of this story in sharp contrast to the dark, cold, particularly sinister setting in Carter's other tales is mysterious. It appears to inform the rest of the story writes Rikki Ducornet, at "the story's center, the sun's vortex gyres" that steers the plot forward in a "continually circular manner" (qtd. in McClenagan 55). This sizzling heat outside coupled with the fuming emotions of the people in the town who are victims of these repressive conditions anchors the story in social realism along with the mundane reality "of workers' bodies sweltering in the heat of New England mills, of mill owners' bodies (and those of their wives, daughters and servants) sweltering in Victorian cultural codes at the nexus of social, political and historical forces but in league with the devil" (Langlois 194). This intolerable hot environment that forces the residents to hibernate behind the blinds and closed metal bars of their respective homes intensifies the boredom and agony of Lizzie, the heroine, in the Borden house even more.

To such suffocating and dehumanized conditions Carter brings back Bluebeard and his Gothic castle from her short story "The Bloody Chamber" rightly from the annals of history and the real world through her short story "The Fall." The Borden castle is controlled by Lizzie's oppressive father Mr. Borden, who is a "[m]orose and gaunt, self-made man . . . His vocation is capital accumulation," and his hobby is "grinding the faces of the poor." He is a man for whom "[f]oreclosures and evictions are meat and drink. He loves nothing [but] usury" ("The Fall" 110-11). In the story, he is described as a melancholic "self-sufficient Sadeian spirit" whose "iron-willed repression extends [not only] to himself [but] to others" as well and "to every area of his domestic and professional life" (Gamble 160). Along with exercising his control on the material objects around, Carter asserts that this disinterested, old miser who "save[s] kerosene" and sits in "lampless dark" and even waters the pear trees with his urine, is a true patriarch as he proclaims to even own "all the women [around] by either marriage, birth or contract" ("The Fall" 111,104). Waite states that in matter of asserting the ownership Borden resembles the "Marquis in 'Chamber' except [he] does not lavish his prisoners with dizzying luxury" (39). In view of the Fathers' rule, Mr. Borden owns Lizzie, her sister Emma, her stepmother by birth and marriage and therefore has natural right to access their personal, psychological and financial space respectively. So, as long as Mr. Borden is alive, Lizzie (in her thirties) and her sister Emma (in her forties) "remain in a fictive, protracted childhood" and shall never have access to "anything to look forward to, nothing" ("The Fall" 108,118).

The Borden mansion in which the five member family of the Borden's live (Andrew Jackson Borden, Lizzie's father; Abby Durfee Borden, her stepmother; Emma Borden, her sister; John Vinnicum Morse, her deceased mother's brother on a visit; and Bridget Sullivan, their Irish housekeeper and cook) is a "narrow . . . coffin" like structure that resembles a Gothic castle with "cramped, comfortless, small and mean" confining interiors ("The Fall" 104-05, Langlois 195). It is a peculiar house: "A house full of locked doors that opens only into other rooms with other locked doors, for upstairs and downstairs, all the rooms lead in and out of the another like a maze in a bad dream. It is a house without passages . . . it is a house of privacies sealed as close as if they had been sealed with wax on a legal document" ("The Fall" 107). Indeed, Mr. Borden's Bluebeard's castle of which he is the "architect" with

its labyrinthine structure is Carter's Gothic puzzle for her readers to decipher all that she "is not disclosing" (Zappel 11-12, Waite 39). Like Atwood in *Bodily Harm*, Carter too in this short story leaves clues for her reader to re-create the life-story of Lizzie Borden, and with this strategy "[r]eflective of its historiographic metafictional genre, Carter acknowledges that she cannot know the *entire* story and, thus, recognizes herself as a creative author, not an objective biographer" adds Zappel (12).

But old Borden, the conservative society and the old house are not the only reasons that instigate Lizzie, for behind these reasons lies a "whole culture" which condemns her as a middle-class "New England spinster at the end of the nineteenth century, to a pitifully circumscribed form of existence" (Gamble 160). Lizzie, at thirty is still referred to as a girl, who lives under her father's tutelage and in this light "she is [an] innocent Gothic maiden, with a sick twist" (Waite 39). Not only Lizzie is imprisoned in her father's cage, but in her "oppressive garments" of the Victorian past portrays her in Carter's formulation as a "prisoner of Victorian values, of Victorian material culture and of a particular Victorian patriarch, her father" ("The Fall" 104, 108, Schofield 95).

Unable to grow economically, emotionally, socially and sexually, Lizzie has no freedom at all. She cannot even choose the clothes with which she may clothe her body. Bereft of choices she constantly suffers under her layered oppressive feminine garments of frocks, petticoats, drawers, stocking, and a chemise of course, a corset since the Fall River society in which she lives believes it is "'virtuous to be uncomfortable'" (Zappel 11). In these garments of the past almost daily she performs her unending domestic chores with the donning of "a whalebone corset that took her viscera in a stern hand and squeezed them very tightly," and the very day she decides to act out her hidden forbidden desire, her body is oozing out menstrual blood. The uncontrollable outflow of unwanted blood that her body is expelling is hard time for Lizzie, and Carter highlights this natural process as an important evidence which was deliberately not discussed during the trial of Lizzie Borden but "[u]nlike the jury in the trial, [the author's] repetition demands the readers' engagement with the [female] body and all of its messiness" ("The Fall" 103, Zappel 10).

The fact that Lizzie lives in the Borden's Bluebeard Castle with Andrew and Abby Borden (stepmother) in the "privacy of her [mean house] bedroom," in which for her own delight [she] puts on a rich girl's pretty nightdress . . . because she is a rich girl too" is an evidence that she harbors a desire within her private self to live a sufficient life, but "dislike" she had for her father with regard to the financial friction and an unwanted stepmother was an open secret for the society around ("The Fall" 115). A day after Lizzie's death, on June 2, 1927, the newspapers, McClenagan writes, claimed: "[Lizzie's] life had not been so serene under the surface as it had seemed in the public view-- for her wealthy father had kept his home in the old business section of the city, in a house without conveniences, not even a bathtub." Ironically, Kent says "Lizzie 'had ambitions for more attractive living conditions'" and hence, was extremely unhappy in her present circumstances (qtd. in McClenagan 47).

Another predominant reason that drives the devil out of Lizzie is her stepmother, the essential monstrous mother in this Gothic script, Mrs. Borden whom nobody loves and her presence oppresses her younger step daughter like a "spell" ("The Fall" 118). All these

details of Lizzie's life just before the murder that Carter piles up for the readers are as suppressive and as fuming as the autumnal day, also the house that houses these characters is also a "mute testimony to the family's dysfunction." In this context, Langlois observes that "[t]he story is plotless because it stops *before* it can build to narrative." Literally, it is a "[m]ise-en-scene for a Parricide," the title under which the story was first published in 1981 (195). In lieu of these details it appears that Lizzie's (supposed) murderous act is "no act of meaningless insanity, but a striking out at a system which cancels out her own will and desires and forces [her] to conform to the pattern of another's" (Gamble 161).

Also when Carter's version of Lizzie's story is near conclusion, an incident takes place, an acid test that becomes an "immediate cause for Lizzie's flailing out against her parents" (Langlois 201). Lizzie, Carter writes is particularly attached to her winged companions, her pigeons:

She used to keep her pigeons in the loft above the disused stable and feed them grain out of the palms of her cupped hands . . . She changed their water every day and cleaned up their leprous messes but Old Borden took a dislike to their cooing, it got on his nerves, who'd have thought he *had* any nerves . . . one afternoon he took out the hatchet from the woodpile in the cellar and chopped those pigeons' heads right off, he did. ("The Fall" 120)

Sadly, the bad Gothic stepmother, serves Lizzie's pigeons on the table, thus pushing her (Gothic) daughter further into delirium for these innocent creatures were her only comfort amongst the cruel strangers around. The shadow-male of Carter's story, the Gothic villain, Mr. Borden just to whet the appetite of his wife killed Lizzie's pigeons; this incident is a fit testimony to his younger daughter to remain and behave within the limits of locked doors of his castle, and apprise her of her Victorian responsibilities. Mr. Borden and Mrs. Borden, the burning sun, claustrophobic interiors of the castle like home, the dependence, the spinsterhood and plain denial of a human being's emotions are some of the reasons that at once provoke, summon and ignite violence in Lizzie, but her future is left to the reader to decide for themselves (Schofield 95).

Another reason for Lizzie to release her pent up emotions is the fact that her sister Emma Lenora, unluckily was away on the morning of the ill-fated day. Although Lizzie too "was invited away" but she remained in the town as if on purpose "to mortify her flesh, as if important business kept her in the exhausted town . . ." ("The Fall" 105). Though according to Carter, Emma, the elder daughter of Mr. Borden is "more mysterious" than Lizzie, she is like "a blank space," a white canvass who has "no life" and no colours of her own ("The Fall" 108). Like a typical Gothic script, the heroine's mother in Carter's story is dead and in her absence it is Emma who becomes Lizzie's surrogate mother because it is she who "lavish[es] the pent-up treasures of a New England spinster's heart upon the little thing?" Perhaps, Lizzie the "motherless child, orphaned at two years old, poor thing" craves for her mother whose memory "remains an abiding source of grief" for her ("The Fall" 114). Possibly, yearning for her dead mother's "unknown love" and the brief absence of her proxy mother Emma, goad Lizzie to use the same hatchet "the instrument of destruction" (with

which the father had killed her birds) to act and strike at Mr. and Mrs. Borden together (“The Fall” 114,121).

On the morning of the double murder, Carter informs her readers, because of a “heavy linen napkin” which Lizzie had strapped between her legs on account of her menses, did not let her sleep “and this last, stifling night [she] has been [in trouble] . . . by vague nausea and the gripes of her female pain; her room is harsh with the metallic smell of menstrual blood.” Hence, she admits that this sleeping time in this uncanny Borden castle was her only me-time and in this private hour Lizzie enjoyed the much desired freedom from constrictions (“The Fall” 103, 114). In this scene, Langlois states: “Carter seems to superimpose the image of the vampiress’s blood-flecked nightgown in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ from *The Bloody Chamber* over this bedroom scene, and so disrupts Lizzie’s harmless sartorial attempts to offset her father’s conflicted Victorian codes and shifts her towards butchery.” In this regard, he further quotes Rushdie’s observation:

this double (con)fusion of menstrual and murder victims’ blood, and of historical personage and dramatis personae of fairy tale . . . ‘Beneath the hyper-realism, however, there is an echo of *The Bloody Chamber*; for Lizzie’s is a bloody deed, and she is, in addition, menstruating. Her own life-blood flows, while the angel of death waits on a nearby tree. (qtd. in Langlois 199)

But Lizzie, has difficulty in remembering her dreams and what she remembers is that she “slept badly” and the ““peculiar spells,”” the “somnambulist fits” which she has experienced since she was a small child; Carter describes this as Lizzie’s unconscious struggle against the genteel tags that incarcerate her as another last supernatural cause for blood and violence within her (Waite 40, “The Fall” 114, McClenagan 60).

Besides the sweltering heat and Lizzie’s repression there is another incident which furthers the plot. It is the burglary incident in which an intruder penetrates into the Borden House particularly in the absence of the master and the mistress. This incident utterly “disconcerted” Mr. Borden. It “violated” him; he felt he was “a man raped.” Aptly Langlois observes that the omniscient narrator in discussing the locked in and locked out theory pertaining to the intrusion of an outsider into the Borden’s castle makes the burglary “a prelude” to “the double murders.” Since the burglar aimed primarily at Mrs. Borden jewels, and defecated on the masters’ bed this seemed a reason enough for the old Borden to dissuade the police from probing in, thus locking inside the secret that Lizzie might be the suspect because she was a kleptomaniac and might have had a hysteric spell just like her mother during her period of menstruation (Langlois 198). Carter writes after the unexpected break-in “Lizzie stared with vague surprise at the parlor window; she heard the soft bang of the open screen door, swinging idly, although there was no breeze. What was she doing, standing clad only in her corset in the middle of the sitting-room? How had she got there? Had she crept down when she heard the screen door rattle? She did not know? She could not remember” (“The Fall” 108-09). Indeed, it is Emma, the big sister who comforts her baby sister in her trance. But, Lizzie’s failure to recall such incidents at once links to her natural (absent) mother, “the first Mrs. Borden,” who too suffered “fits of sudden, wild, inexplicable rage”

(“The Fall” 114). Such “an ancestral connection” links the good but dead mother and natural daughter in their spontaneous hallucinations and further casts doubt on Lizzie’s “proclaimed innocence”—thereby, offering another personal cause for the double murders in the Borden home (McClenagan 61).

Besides the physical, emotional, financial and supernatural causes that have a fair share of contribution in Lizzie’s violent act, Carter in particular dismisses what does not fit in her-story’s framework of apt causation. On the day of the murder another man was present in the Borden’s house, but Carter plainly wipes him out of her script quite early in the story:

The other old man is some kind of kin of Borden’s. He doesn’t belong here; he is visiting, passing through, he is a chance bystander, he is irrelevant. Write him out of the script. Even though his presence in the doomed house is historically unimpeachable, the coloring of this domestic apocalypse must be crude and the design profoundly simplified for the maximum emblematic effect. Write John Vinnicum Morse out of the script. (“The Fall” 105)

In simple words, John Vinnicum Morse in no way is relevant to Carter’s script of the domestic annihilation of Lizzie’s tale. Just like a traditional historian who easily might do away with an element or two that may not fit into his/her scheme of things, Carter expels unwanted information from her plot “to demonstrate what historians--and others such as herself--may be more inadvertently misrepresenting or misunderstanding about the past.” McClenagan continues his explanation: “Fictionalist or historian: each makes choices shaping his or her narrative” (62). Finally, towards the end Lizzie’s story returns once again to where it had begun as Carter writes: “Their day, the Borden’s fatal day, trembles on the brink of beginning” (“The Fall” 121). For the tension in the story is never resolved; in other words, Carter’s story never ends and the Borden family is never murdered and Lizzie never faces a trial. Instead, the author’s version of Lizzie’s tale is all about the “causes” and “precursors” to the event. Time is in a state of inertia in this version of Lizzie’s history, representing how history and literature can recognize and use “the past from some knowledgeable date subsequent to the historical event,” thereby, colouring the end in either black or white, the end of a historical figure. In the story the Bridget clock “leaps and shudders on its chair” about to sound its own alarm” that is, Lizzie’s alarm which is Carter’s alarm of the twentieth century interpretation of Lizzie’s tale in which an unhappy end is not the only result of the historical violent act. Since Carter in her version focuses only on the cause she liberates her heroine by opening the possibility of a happy ending. In the process she rescues Lizzie by portraying her standing on the brink of a new beginning (“The Fall” 121, McClenagan 63-65).

After the trial, to begin afresh, Lizzie changed her name to Elizabeth, thereafter both the sisters with their father’s inheritance bought the Fall River mansion which they re-named as Maplecroft (Schofield 99). This Maplecroft serves as an emblem of Carter’s postscript to *The Sadeian Woman*, writes Langlois: “History tells us that every oppressed class gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that women learn that lesson” Indeed, Carter’s heroine learnt that lesson the hard-violent way by murdering

her father and the stepmother. In this respect, Rushdie suggests that Lizzie Borden has become ““one of the dark ladies [with] unappeasable appetites to whom Angela Carter is so partial”” (qtd. in Langlois 207). Therefore, by determining multiple reasons behind Lizzie’s violent act Carter depicts the fact that as and when a culture opens itself to possible “alternative realities,” its past, present and future become more receptive to change. What Carter serves for her readers is not the received truth of Lizzie Borden’s life rather she focuses on the events of the day the murders took place. She represents Lizzie’s lived repressive reality, and “enables readers to consider and possibly even absolve, Borden’s actions” (McClenagan, Zappel 13). Fittingly, Atwood argues that Carter’s female characters in order to escape victimization must ““divest themselves of the trappings of conventional womanhood [so] they have to *denature* themselves”” (qtd. in Zappel 17). This means that women must celebrate their feminineness irrespective of the demands of the outside world. Hence, it is imperative for them to be active and speak out their side of the story in order to avoid being at the receiving end. In this sense, Lizzie by letting the heat out from within acts out her desire, which is more frightening than the claim in the past records of her madness. In her revisionist account of Lizzie Borden, Carter reminds the reader that besides the hearsay about such women, they are first and foremost human beings (Zappel 20). It may be said then Lizzie “is a mythic-every woman, the tortured and delirious Gothic soul.” By reclaiming Lizzie from a children’s nursery rhyme, Carter openly makes her a symbol of “‘domestic apocalypse’ the essence of Gothic and of the Bluebeard tale.” Throughout the story Waite observes “Carter does not resolve this dislike of and use of history and myth,” leaving the reader incoherently striving to fix their meanings on the story (41).

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