
INTRODUCTION: Bluebeard

“Bluebeard” is the stuff of nightmares: raised scimitars, forbidden chambers, corpses hanging from hooks, bloody basins, and dismembered bodies. The tale made its literary debut in Charles Perrault’s seventeenth-century *Tales of Mother Goose*, a collection that took the lead in transforming the oral narratives of a peasant culture into bedtime reading for children. Like many of the fairy tales in Perrault’s collection, “Bluebeard” has a happy ending: the heroine marries “a very worthy man who banished the memory of the miserable days she had spent with Bluebeard” [148]. Yet most readers—even those willing to suspend disbelief about the pleasures of the next marriage—will find themselves unable to erase the graphic impressions left by the “miserable time” of the first marriage. In the narrative economy of Perrault’s text, the verbal energy is invested almost exclusively in exposing Bluebeard’s wife to horrors of extraordinary vividness and power.

Just who was Bluebeard and how did he come by his bad name? As Anatole France reminds us in his story “The Seven Wives of Bluebeard,” Charles Perrault composed “the first biography of this *seigneur*” and established his reputation as “an accomplished villain” and “the most perfect model of cruelty that ever trod the earth.”¹ Cultural historians have been quick to claim that Perrault’s “Bluebeard” is based on fact, that it broadcasts the misdeeds of various noblemen, among them Cunmar of Brittany and Gilles de Rais. But neither Cunmar the Accursed, who decapitated his pregnant wife Triphine, nor Gilles de Rais, the Marshal of France who was hanged in 1440 for murdering hundreds of children, present themselves as compelling models for Bluebeard. This French aristocrat remains a construction of collective fantasy, a figure firmly anchored in the realm of folklore.

Perrault’s “Bluebeard” recounts the story of an aristocratic gentleman (known in Italy as “Silver Nose,” in England as “Mr Fox”) and his marriage to a young woman whose desire for opulence conquers her feelings of revulsion for blue beards. The French tale contains what folklorists have identified as the three distinctive features of Bluebeard narratives: a forbidden chamber, an agent of prohibition who also metes

Page numbers in brackets refer to this Norton Critical Edition.

1. Anatole France, “The Seven Wives of Bluebeard,” in *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Viking, 1991) 567.

out punishments, and a figure who violates the prohibition. From Perrault's time onward, the tale has been framed as a story about transgressive desire, as a text that enunciates the dire consequences of curiosity and disobedience.

Perrault presents Bluebeard's wife as a figure who suffers from an excess of desire for knowledge of what lies beyond the door. Bluebeard's wife enters the forbidden chamber and sees a pool of clotted blood in which are reflected the bodies of her husband's wives, hanging from the wall. Horrified, she drops the key (in some versions it is an egg, a straw, or a rose) into the pool of blood and is unable to remove the tell-tale stain from the key. But Bluebeard's wife, both in Perrault's rendition and in its many cultural inflections, is a canny survivor. Her husband may try to behead her for her act of disobedience, but she succeeds in delaying the execution long enough that her brothers, summoned by Sister Anne, arrive in time to rescue her and to cut Bluebeard down with their swords.

"Bluebeard" stands virtually alone among fairy tales in its depiction of marriage as an institution haunted by the threat of murder. While canonical fairy tales like "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Beauty and the Beast" begin with unhappy situations at home, center on a romantic quest, and end in visions of marital bliss, "Bluebeard" stories show us women leaving the safety of home and entering the risky domains of their husband's castles. In these tales, mothers, sisters, and brothers mobilize to rescue the heroine rather than to do her in. "Bluebeard," as Bruno Bettelheim argues, represents a troubling flip side to "Beauty and the Beast." According to Bettelheim, "Beauty and the Beast" is a wonderfully reassuring story that relieves the "anxious sexual fantasies" to which children are prey: "While sex may at first seem beastlike, in reality love between woman and man is the most satisfying of all emotions, and the only one which makes for permanent happiness."² Perrault's "Bluebeard," by contrast, confirms a child's "worst fears about sex," for it reveals marriage as charged with life-threatening perils.

Bettelheim clearly prefers the "permanent happiness" promised by the myth of perfect romantic love in "Beauty and the Beast" to the disturbing anxieties about love and marriage aroused by "Bluebeard." To be sure, "Beauty and the Beast," with its messages about the transformative power of love, makes for better bedtime reading, and that fact alone may explain the apparent erosion of cultural interest in "Bluebeard" in the United States. But while "Bluebeard" may not necessarily be an appropriate story for children, it remains a powerful text challenging the myth of romantic love encapsulated in the "happily ever after" of fairy tales and presenting a message with a social logic compelling for Perrault's day and age. Anxious fantasies about sex and mar-

2. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 306.

riage would hardly be surprising in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, where women married at a relatively young age, where the mortality rate for women in childbirth was high, and where a move away from home might rightly be charged with fears about isolation, violence, abuse, and marital estrangement. While it is tempting to promote stories that stage the joys of heterosexual romantic unions and to banish grisly stories about murderous husbands (especially once the venue for the tales shifted to the nursery), it is important to preserve our cultural memory of this particular story and to understand exactly what is at stake in it. "Bluebeard" may not appear with great frequency between the covers of twentieth-century anthologies of fairy tales, but it is a story whose cultural resilience becomes quickly evident when we enter the arena of contemporary literary and cinematic production for adults.

Folklore often trades in the sensational—breaking taboos, enacting the forbidden, staging transgressive desires, and exploring pathologies with uninhibited investigative energy. The story of Bluebeard is without doubt the most stunning piece of evidence that folktales can be seen as the legitimate precursors of cinematic horror, another genre notorious for trading on collective fears and fantasies. Stories like "Bluebeard" prefigure the gothic plots of modern horror and construct desires and fears that remain remarkably intact (despite cultural variations) as we move from one century to the next and as we cross from one popular form of entertainment to another. In "Bluebeard," as in cinematic horror, we have not only a killer who is propelled by psychotic rage, but also the abject victims of his serial murders, along with a "final girl" (Bluebeard's wife), who either saves herself or arranges her own rescue. The "terrible place" of horror, a dark, tomblike site that harbors grisly evidence of the killer's derangement, manifests itself as Bluebeard's forbidden chamber.³

It is not only in cinematic horror from the 1970s onward that the Bluebeard story manifests its cultural staying power. In what one critic has tellingly called "paranoid woman's films," we also find the Bluebeard syndrome at work.⁴ These films, which were made in the wake of Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and include such classic thrillers as Robert Stevenson's *Jane Eyre* (1944), George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944), and Fritz Lang's *Secret beyond the Door* (1948), all feature a heroine who is beset by fears that her husband is planning to murder her. Driven by hermeneutic desire, these women investigators search for the key to understanding the sinisterly cryptic behavior of their husbands, always by penetrating the mysteries of a chamber in the house where they

3. Carol J. Clover draws up an inventory of generic properties of the horror film in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992) 26–44.

4. Mary Ann Doane, "Paranoia and the Specular," in *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 123–54.

have taken up residence. In Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, the boathouse and Rebecca's bedroom are forbidden or uncanny spaces for the character played by Joan Fontaine; in *Jane Eyre* the title character must unlock the secret of the tower room in which Bertha Mason is housed; in *Gaslight* it is the attic, along with the husband's locked desk, that are taboo; and in *Secret beyond the Door*, the heroine is barred from entering room 7, a replica of her own bedroom built to provide her husband with the scene of his next crime.

In much the same way that cinema criticism has been obsessed with the "paranoia" of a wife rather than by the very real threat posed by a husband who seems to be rescripting the Bluebeard story, folklorists have shown surprising interpretive confidence in reading Perrault's "Bluebeard" as a story about a woman's marital disobedience or sexual infidelity rather than about her husband's murderous violence. "Bloody key as sign of disobedience"—this is the motif that folklorists consistently read as the defining moment in the tale. The blood-stained key points to a double transgression, one that is at once moral and sexual. For one critic, it becomes a sign of "marital infidelity";⁵ for another it marks the heroine's "irreversible loss of her virginity";⁶ for a third, it stands as a sign of "defloration."⁷ If we recall that the bloody chamber in Bluebeard's castle is strewn with the corpses of previous wives, this reading of the blood-stained key as a marker of sexual infidelity becomes willfully wrongheaded in its effort to vilify Bluebeard's wife.

Illustrators, commentators, and retellers alike seem to have fallen in line with Perrault's stated view in his moral to the story that "Bluebeard" is about the evils of female curiosity. Walter Crane's illustration of Bluebeard's wife on her way to the forbidden chamber shows her descending the stairs, framed by a tapestry of Eve giving in to temptation in the Garden of Eden. "Succumbing to temptation" is the "sin of the fall, the sin of Eve," one representative critical voice asserts. A nineteenth-century Scottish version of the tale summarizes in its title what appears to be the collective critical wisdom on this tale: "The Story of Bluebeard, or, the effects of female curiosity."⁸

Bluebeard's wife may suffer from an excess of transgressive curiosity, but that curiosity is clearly intellectual rather than sexual. Her curiosity turns her into an energetic investigator, determined to acquire knowledge of the secrets hidden behind the door of the castle's forbidden chamber. Perrault's story, by underscoring the heroine's kinship with certain literary, biblical, and mythical figures (most notably Psyche, Eve, and Pandora), gives us a tale that willfully undermines a robust

5. Bruno Bettelheim, *Uses*, 302.

6. Carl-Heinz Mallett, *Kopf ab! Gewalt im Märchen* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhring, 1985), 201.

7. Alan Dundes, "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics," in *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980) 46.

8. These critical voices are cited in Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978) 157-64.

folkloric tradition in which the heroine is a resourceful agent of her own salvation. Rather than celebrating the courage and wisdom of Bluebeard's wife in discovering the dreadful truth about her husband's murderous deeds, Perrault and other tellers of the tale often cast aspersions on her for engaging in an unruly act of insubordination.

The French folklorist Paul Delarue has mapped out the evolution of "Bluebeard," documenting the liberties taken by Perrault in transforming an oral folktale into a literary text.⁹ The folk heroines of "Bluebeard" delay their executions by insisting on donning bridal clothes for the event (thus buttressing the folkloric connection between marriage and death) and prolong the possibility of rescue by recounting each and every item of clothing. Perrault's heroine, by contrast, who asks her husband for "a little time to say my prayers" [146], becomes a model of repentant piety. Unlike many folk heroines, who become agents of their own rescue by dispatching fleet-footed pet dogs or talking birds to their families with urgent calls for help, Perrault's heroine sends her sister up to the castle tower to watch for the brothers who were to visit her that very day. Most importantly, folk versions of the tale do not fault the heroine for her curiosity. To the contrary, when the young women stand before the forbidden chamber, they feel duty-bound to open its door. "I have to know what is in there," one young woman reflects just before turning the key. The pangs of conscience that beset Perrault's heroine are absent. These folkloric figures are often described as courageous: curiosity and valor enable them to come to the rescue of their sisters by reconstituting them physically (putting their dismembered parts back together again) and by providing them with safe passage home.

While the story of Bluebeard has been read by countless contemporary commentators as turning on the issue of sexual fidelity, what really seems to be at issue, if one considers the folkloric evidence, is the heroine's discovery of her husband's misdeeds, her craft in delaying the execution of his murderous plans, and her ability to engineer her own rescue. In its bold proclamation of the perils of some marriages, "Bluebeard" endorses, above all, allegiance to family and celebrates a return to the safety and security of home, a regressive move back to the household of the heroine's childhood. Bluebeard's wife becomes a double of the British Jack, liquidating the ogre and climbing back down the beanstalk to live happily ever after with his mother.

When we consider the form in which "Bluebeard" circulated in an oral culture, it quickly becomes evident that the story must be closely related to two tales recorded by the brothers Grimm. The first of these, "Fitcher's Bird," shows us the youngest of three sisters using her "cunning" to escape the snares set by a clever sorcerer and to rescue her

9. Paul Delarue, "Barbe-Bleue," in *Le Conte populaire français* (Paris: Editions Erasme, 1976) 1: 182-99.

two sisters. The heroine of "The Robber Bridegroom" also engineers a rescue, mobilizing her wits and her narrative skills to escape from the thieves with whom her betrothed consorts. Oddly enough, however, these two variants of the "Bluebeard" story seem to have fallen into a cultural black hole, while tales like Perrault's "Bluebeard" have been preserved and rewritten as cautionary tales warning women about the hazards of disobedience and curiosity. It is telling that an author like Margaret Atwood has turned to "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Robber Bridegroom" for narrative inspiration and that a visual artist like Cindy Sherman has created a picture book of the Grimms' "Fitcher's Bird." This new cultural investment in old tales about bad marriages clearly has something to do with the discovery that older versions of "Bluebeard" stressed the resourcefulness of the heroine and with the revelation that Perrault's "Bluebeard" was not the sole source of narrative authority for this particular marriage tale.

Margaret Atwood, who grew up reading the Grimms, recognized that fairy tales were not at all as culturally repressive as some feminist critics had made them out to be.

The unexpurgated *Grimm's Fairy Tales* contain a number of fairy tales in which women are not only the central characters but win by using their own intelligence. Some people feel fairy tales are bad for women. This is true if the only ones they're referring to are those tarted-up French versions of "Cinderella" and "Bluebeard," in which the female protagonist gets rescued by her brothers. But in many of them, women rather than men have the magic powers.¹

Atwood, who weaves fairy-tale motifs throughout her narratives with almost unprecedented insistence, also produced a new version of "Bluebeard," one that has embedded in it the Grimms' story "Fitcher's Bird." "Bluebeard's Egg," unlike any fairy tale, is told from the protagonist's point of view: it charts Sally's drive to solve "the puzzle . . . Ed" [169] and reveals that Ed Bear (who may not sport a beard on his face but surely has one encrypted in his nickname) is not as transparent as Sally once assumed. His inner life becomes a kind of secret chamber, a space that Sally is unable to penetrate. But Atwood challenges our interpretive faculties by refusing to write a text that offers unproblematic parallels with "Bluebeard." In the profusion of references to other fairy tales (Ed is a "third son" [157], a "brainless beast" [157], and a "Sleeping Beauty" [158] waiting to be wakened by Sally, who is both a princess and a false bride), Atwood makes it clear that she taps multiple cultural stories for this work. And by transforming the forbidden chamber of Bluebeard's castle into everything from Ed's enigmatic mind and his

1. Sharon R. Wilson, *Margaret Atwood's Fairy-Tale Sexual Politics* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993) 11–12.

“new facility” [164] to the anatomical cavities of the human heart and the keyhole desk before which Ed betrays his sexual infidelity, Atwood unsettles the traditional story of “Bluebeard” and challenges us to understand the complexities of what she calls “power politics.” Ed cannot be reduced to Bluebeard, and Sally is more than his investigative wife. In focalizing the story through Sally and showing how her effort to come to terms with the Grimms’ “Fitcher’s Bird” leads her to powerful revelations about her own life, Atwood suggests that engagement with our cultural stories can open our eyes to realities that—however disruptive, painful, and disturbing—are not without a liberating potential. Hence the story ends on an ambiguous note, with a sense of anxiety but also with the possibility of hope about what will hatch from the “almost pulsing” [178] egg of Sally’s dream vision.

CHARLES PERRAULT

Bluebeard†

There once lived a man who had fine houses, both in the city and in the country, dinner services of gold and silver, chairs covered with tapestries, and coaches covered with gold. But this man had the misfortune of having a blue beard, which made him look so ugly and frightful that women and girls alike fled at the sight of him.

One of his neighbors, a respectable lady, had two daughters who were perfect beauties. He asked for the hand of one, but left it up to the mother to choose which one. Neither of the two girls wanted to marry him, and the offer went back and forth between them, since they could not bring themselves to marry a man with a blue beard. What added even more to their sense of disgust was that he had already married several women, and no one knew what had become of them.

In order to cultivate their acquaintance, Bluebeard threw a party for the two girls with their mother, three or four of their closest friends, and a few young men from the neighborhood in one of his country houses. It lasted an entire week. Everyday there were parties of pleasure, hunting, fishing, dancing, and dining. The guests never even slept, but cavorted and caroused all night long. Everything went so well that the younger of the two sisters began to think that the beard of the master of the house was not so blue after all and that he was in fact a fine fellow. As soon as they returned to town, the marriage was celebrated.

After a month had passed, Bluebeard told his wife that he had to travel to take care of some urgent business in the provinces and that

† Charles Perrault, “Le Barbe bleue,” in *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé. Avec des Moralités* (Paris: Barbin, 1697). Translated for this Norton Critical Edition by Maria Tatar. Copyright © 1999 Maria Tatar.