

"Bluebeard's Brides: The Dream of the Blue Chamber,"

Critic: Marina Warner

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Criticism about: Charles Perrault (1628-1703)

[(essay date 1989) *In the following essay, Warner analyzes the themes of the color blue and forbidden knowledge in the "Bluebeard" tale, and suggests that the prevalence of death in childbirth was one context for the story.*]

In 1697 Charles Perrault, poet, courtier, deviser of pageants for His Majesty Louis XIV, published a collection of stories, under the title *Tales of Olden Times, or Mother Goose Tales (Contes du temps passé, ou Contes de ma mère l'Oye)*. This firm attribution of the stories to an ancient oral tradition, to Mother Goose--the epitome of old women, nurses and grandmothers--was emphasized by the frontispiece, which showed a crone in apron and cap, spinning by the fireside, as three children listen enraptured at her knees.

In a preface, Perrault also renounced creating the stories. He faced critics of the fairy-tale genre by appealing to a national didactic lineage: the romances and fables of the Ancients, he pointed out, were made to please without a thought for good behavior. "This is not the case with the tales that our ancestors invented for their children," he continued. "They did not recount them with the elegance and the ornament with which the Greeks and Romans adorned their fables, but they always took the greatest care that their tales contained a praiseworthy and instructive moral." Perrault presented himself as a mere conduit of past wisdom, and vowed, "I have imposed upon myself to write nothing which might wound either modesty or seemliness." He appended, as a *nihil obstat* to his enterprise, a madrigal by a young relative, Mlle Lheritier de Villandon, herself a poet and collector and writer of tales, who returned to the theme that such stories carried the seal of tradition, and had been told to her in her childhood by her nanny, who had thereby held her spirit enchanted.

When the edition of *Mother Goose Tales* appeared in print, these most famous stories ("Cinderella," "Puss in Boots," "Red Riding Hood," "Tom Thumb," "Sleeping Beauty," "Bluebeard") were thus firmly introduced to the public as traditional, improving, homegrown and time-honored fables for children. Charles Perrault, then in his late sixties, at this stage disavowed his authorship altogether, referring not only to Mother Goose, but placing his son Pierre Darmancour's name on the title page, in order to stress the pristine source of the tales, in the nursery, among women and children, far from the sophisticated regulations and constraints of the formal academician's rhetoric.

This was special pleading; Perrault's hand can be seen clearly in all the stories, not least because, in their urbanity, their crispness, and their mischievousness, they differ so remarkably from the romantic effusions of some of his contemporaries' experiments with the fairy-tale genre, like Mlle Lheritier herself. A typical story by Mlle Lheritier runs over a hundred pages; Perrault's to around six on average. But the special pleading on behalf of other authors was not only provoked by a need to excuse material which might seem indecorous and childish from the pen of a grand old man of French letters. It was necessary in order to mask the material itself, to provide camouflage for some of the stories' scabrous and violent character, for the paradoxically realistic outlook of the fantasy genre.

Perrault was very successful: sanctified by their place in national tradition, by their origin among children and old people, his *Mother Goose Tales* have become the most famous stories in the world. The brothers Grimm, who also claimed direct transmission, oral and female, for their collection of tales over a hundred years later, were in fact influenced by Perrault, it has been shown by recent examination of the Grimms' evidence for their sources. Robert Samber translated Perrault into English in 1729, before the Grimms' tales; the dissemination of the stories since then, from the earliest chapbooks and toy books to the flowering of children's publishing in the second half of the nineteenth century cannot any longer be charted, so many versions now circulate--*en clair* and in code, in fairy collections and adult advertisements.

Of the eight tales in Perrault's *Contes du temps passé*, Bluebeard contains perhaps the most deeply disturbing explicit adult material besides Red Riding Hood for unlike Perrault's other ogres, the giant in "**Puss in Boots**," or the wicked fairy in "**The Sleeping Beauty**," Bluebeard is a Jack the Ripper, who perpetrates his evil on young women in their sexual maturity, not on children in their needs. His very name Bluebeard stirs associations with sex, virility, male readiness and desire. Beardedness divided the men from the boys in the Olympic Games; in Saint Augustine's view "the beard signifies strong men; [it] signifies young, vigorous, active, quick men." Beards were also the mark of the goat, and given the goat's lustful and diabolical character, its kinship with satyrs and other classical embodiments of lubriciousness, like the god Pan, beards came increasingly to define the male in a priapic mode. Orderic Vitalis, for instance, in the twelfth century, complained of the influence of the East--of the Saracen--on Norman fashions: "Now almost all our fellow countrymen are crazy and wear little beards, openly proclaiming by such a token that they revel in filthy lusts like stinking goats." Well out of fashion in the court of the Sun King, the beard of Perrault's villain betokened an outsider, a libertine, and a ruffian. The very word in French--*barbe*--looks as if it is related to "*barbare*," "barbarian," though this isn't etymologically so. A mid-century Victorian version took up the echo, calling Bluebeard a "Barbe-hairy-un." And it's customary, beginning with the first woodcuts of the first edition, and continuing in the watercolors of Arthur Rackham and later artists, to portray Bluebeard as an Oriental, a Turk in pantaloons and turban, who grasps his wife by the hair when he prepares to behead her with his scimitar. In later tellings of the story, she is called Fatima; he is sometimes given a code foreign name, like Abomélique, and the setting of his fabulous estate is sometimes specified: in Rackham, for instance, it is Baghdad.

By the blueness of his protagonist's beard, Perrault intensifies the frightfulness of his appearance: Bluebeard is represented as a man against nature, either by dyeing his hair like a luxurious Oriental, or by producing such a monstrous growth without resorting to artifice. The color blue,

the color of ambiguous depth, of the heavens and of the abyss at once, encodes the frightening character of Bluebeard, his house and his deeds, as surely as gold and white clothe the angels. The chamber he forbids his new wife becomes a blue chamber in some retellings: blue is the color of the shadow side, the tint of the marvelous and the inexplicable, of desire, of knowledge, of the blue movie, of blue talk, of raw meat and rare steak, of melancholy and the unexpected (once in a blue moon, out of the blue). The fairy tale itself was first known, in France, as a *conte bleu*, and appeared between the covers of the *Bibliothèque Bleue*. As William Gass has written, in his uniquely marvelous essay, "On Being Blue," "perhaps it is the blue of reality itself": and he goes on to quote a scientific manual: "blue is the specific color of orgone energy within and without the organism."

One of the many peculiar aspects of the story Bluebeard--and there are many peculiar aspects--is that the narrative focuses on Fatima's disobedience, not on Bluebeard's mass murders. The initial weight of the story swings the listener or reader's sympathies toward the husband who instructs his young wife, and presents his request for her obedience as reasonable, the terror she experiences when she realizes her fate as a suitable punishment, a warning against trespass. Walter Crane, in his sumptuous full-color illustrations at the end of the century, shows the heroine against a wall painting of the Temptation in the Garden of Eden, thus disclosing the inner structure of the fable: Bluebeard begins as God the Father prohibiting knowledge, the forbidden chamber is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and Fatima is Eve, the woman who disobeys and falls into sin.

After Perrault, the story often comes with a subtitle, "The Effect of Female Curiosity." Or--in case we miss the point--"The Fatal Effects of Curiosity," to bring it in line with cautionary tales about women's innate wickedness: with Pandora, who opened the forbidden casket, as well as Eve, who ate of the forbidden fruit. In many illustrated tellings of the story, the key looms very large indeed: the mid-nineteenth century caricaturist Alfred Crowquill featured a key so monstrously enlarged that Bluebeard's young wife staggers under its weight like one of Beardsley's obscene marginalia; in Gustava Doré's engraving, Bluebeard reveals the forbidden key--also of gigantic proportions--to his wife with the leer of a pornographer. When the heroine enters the blue chamber and discovers there the bodies of Bluebeard's former wives, she drops the key in the blood on the floor, and then finds that she cannot rub away the stain of blood on the key. In rather the same way as Adam and Eve try to hide from God but cannot, she cannot disguise her fault. And how the writers gloat on her unpleasant newfound knowledge:

[She] looked within and fainted straight the horrid sight to see,

For there upon the floor was blood, and on the walls were wives,

For Blue Beard first had married them, then cut their throats with knives.

Crowquill again provides a fearsome drawing of the hanged wives, tongues lolling, eyes popping out of their heads, while his jocular collaborator, F.W.N. Bayley, exclaims,

Oh fie! Oh fie!

There they all were hanging up to dry!

Bluebeard plays two parts at least in his own story: the patriarch whose orders must be obeyed on the one hand, and on the other the serpent who seduces by exciting curiosity and desire and so brings death. His beard is emblematic of this ambiguity, a patriarchal ornament, a devilish goatee. For Freudian commentators, like Bruno Bettelheim, the story of Bluebeard faces the mystery of sexuality, and by dramatizing so bloodily the terror of defloration, helps to assuage it. However, as in the story of the Fall, the serpent may be at fault, but Eve is blameworthy too. In many of the later retellings of Bluebeard, the blue chamber is presented as the fitting penalty for his wives' previous wickedness in defying a husband's commands. Some storytellers, sensitive to the narrative inconsistency that Bluebeard's first wife cannot have been issued the same instruction, since there was at that point no forbidden knowledge to be found in the blue chamber, invent ingenious reasons for her murder, the start of the series. In "The Six Wives of Bluebeard," by Sabilla Novello, illustrated by George Cruikshank around 1875, the first victim is actually called Basbleuella, or Blue Stocking Ella, and is thereby already credited with knowledge both dangerous and unseemly in a woman. When a drunken Bluebeard reproaches her for her lack of merriment, she turns his beard blue in vengeance. (It is actually rather difficult to tell which side the authors are on, for an air of glee hangs around the telling, although Cruikshank himself was an earnest advocate of Temperance, and wrote a Cinderella in which everyone at the ball and later at the wedding is on the wagon.)

Perrault's original tale seems to side with Bluebeard and his strictures at the start in order to send the narrative bowling on its way, but his tone remains tongue in cheek throughout. In this story, as in the first tales he published ("**Griselda**" and "**Donkeyskin**") Perrault dramatizes the abuse of privilege, by a husband, or a father, and vindicates his heroine at the end. Bluebeard is a story, like Cinderella, in which the mighty are cast down. The overbearing husband, like the incestuous father in "**Donkeyskin**," is thwarted, to the joy and edification of all. "**Bluebeard**" is a version of the Fall in which Eve is allowed to get away with it, in which no one for once heaps the blame on Pandora. Though Perrault, who cannot bear to be solemn, has it both ways, and appends a catty moral, declaring that there aren't any longer any husbands as terrible as Bluebeard, and that besides, between man and wife these days, it's hard to tell who is master, whatever the color of the beard.

Perrault's precise source for Bluebeard isn't known. Gilles de Rais, the Breton nobleman, marshal of France and companion at arms of Joan of Arc, who was hanged in 1440 for satanism and the murder of over one hundred and forty children, has been long associated with the fairy-tale ogre. In *Saint Joan*, Shaw even calls him Bluebeard and gives him a blue goatee. Another Breton

story, first written down in the sixteenth century, but set in the sixth, contains certain thought-provoking similarities. According to his legend, Saint Gildas resurrected a young woman--Tryphima--from the dead by joining her severed head to her body again. Tryphima, wife of the Breton king Cunmar, had visited the tombs of his previous wives and learned from their ghosts that the king killed his wives as soon as they became pregnant. As she knew that she too was pregnant, she had fled, but Cunmar had pursued her into a wood and killed her.

Perrault was familiar with hagiographies printed in his lifetime, and they provided inspiration for some of his other tales; he wrote some saints' lives himself, and illustrated them in his own hand, according to one of the scholars who has worked on his manuscripts. Interestingly the vignette in the first edition of *Mother Goose Tales*, showing Bluebeard's sword raised above the kneeling maiden, resembles the popular iconography of any number of female martyrdoms.

It will probably never be known exactly where Perrault drew his inspiration. What is easier to establish, from the internal evidence of the story, is what he meant by it.

Bluebeard is presented as a man of enormous wealth: his castle is filled with treasures, paintings; luxurious feasting and entertainments take place be he absent or present, in a veritable potlatch of expenditure. At the beginning of the story, the heroine's widowed mother, rather like a Jane Austen character, considers him a good match for one of her "perfectly beautiful" daughters precisely because of his riches. In all Mother Goose tales, money and romance are bound up together, but of the two, money is by far the more pressing problem. Cinderella is deprived of her birthright so that her stepsisters may have larger dowries; in "**Donkeyskin**," the king sacrifices the magic donkey that shits gold, the source of his wealth, to his illicit love for his daughter. The conclusion of Bluebeard is also practical: after the heroine's brothers, arriving in the nick of time, have saved her from Bluebeard's wrath and killed him, they discover that there were no other heirs for his fabulous wealth except his one surviving widow. She takes the money gratefully, and she first endows her sister Anne so that she can marry the man of her choice, then she buys her two brothers commissions as captains in the army, and finally, she settles down with "*un fort honnête homme*" "who made her forget the dreadful time she had spent with Bluebeard."

If this sanguine dénouement is compared with other happy endings in *Mother Goose Tales*, Perrault's partisanship can be seen: he was the first man to write down fairy tales, though they were women and children's literature, as he was the first to admit. But unlike some of his colleagues, Perrault was eager to espouse the woman's cause, and in his stories, however frivolous his tone, he took the part of daughters against the arranged marriages of the day, with their hard-nosed ambitiousness for social position and wealth and their disregard for personal inclination. He also issued a plea, by means of his tales, for the right of women to administer their own wealth: had Bluebeard had any relatives at all, his widow would not have been in the position to endow her sister or buy her brothers commissions.

It is interesting that by the middle of the nineteenth century, when the story was expanded for English audiences, the same point doesn't have to be made, as a widow was expected to inherit. In one version, she's described as a Victorian Lady Bountiful, using Bluebeard's goods to benefit the poor in a manner the present Chancellor and his chief would approve: "Instead of the miserable hovels usually inhabited by the labouring poor, she had annually several comfortable

and pleasant cottages built, and to each one she added a large plot of ground. ... Where there were a family of children, she added to this gift a cow and a few sheep. By this means she enabled them, by their own exertions ... always to secure a humble competence, and in a very short time, every person upon her estate was rendered happy and became her firm friend."

Taking a cue from the legend of the pregnant Queen Tryphima, we find that Perrault's tale discloses another stark truth about the reality of women's lives in his time, and one which listeners and readers today might well miss, as they delve deep into the universal psychological secrets of the story. Often the seventeenth-century fairy tale yields most interesting evidence when taken at face value: stepmothers favored their own children over the offspring of a previous marriage, peasants starved but could advance through cunning, and, in the case of Bluebeard, men married many times in quick succession because wives died young. The absence of other claimants to Bluebeard's fortune represents his childlessness: childbirth was a principal cause of death before the nineteenth century, and both child and female mortality was high. Eugen Weber gives some statistics for rural France: in 1800, women of Lower Burgundy, for instance, could expect to live about twenty-five years; by mid-century, this had risen to around forty years; by the end of the century, the average female lifespan stood at fifty-two years. Remarriage among widowers was very common indeed in France--80 percent in the nineteenth century, a figure which fell to 15 percent in the twentieth. Bluebeard, a rich man, and a widower many times over, would not have been such an oddity in Perrault's world.

In the blue chamber, Bluebeard's wife finds herself face to face with the circumstances of her own future death. The story will bear many interpretations, as is the way with fairy tales--and a source of their pleasure--but it is possible that the bloody victims of Bluebeard represent the historic dangers of childbirth. Charles Perrault, a realist who clothed his witness in fancy dress, spun a tale of reassurance, in which his heroine is spared one of the terrors of young women in the past: that marriage would be the death of her.

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