

BLUEBEARD'S TRAVEL THROUGH LITERATURE

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Abstract: *Bluebeard has started his journey in literature in 1697, when the homonym fairy tale appeared in Charles Perrault's Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités. Since that time, the character and his story seduced various writers. I discuss in my paper how Bluebeard's story changes in the vision of Anatole France, Maurice Maeterlinck, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, and Lisette Marshall, together with interpretations according to the authors' Zeitgeist and Weltanschauung. Following the various changes Bluebeard passes through in literature, the paper ends with conclusions on the role of the evil character in the economy of the fairy tales' narrative, together with a brief interpretation of gender roles under the same aspects.*

Keywords: *Bluebeard, fairy tales, postmodern fairy tales, trigger-characters*

Introduction

Fairy tales are usually constructed on the imaginary archetype of good and evil¹, therefore populated by characters from both categories. Whether it is a dragon, a monster, a witch/ wizard or a bad person, the evil characters enter the narration to support the hero's path by creating a context for initiation, coming of age, or being defeated for good's victory. A specific evil category is that of a different individual, whether the difference resides in the geographical distance or the physical aspect. Lucian Boia shows that “the other” is often a real person or community observed through a deformed filter of the imaginary². In Bluebeard's case, the deformed imagination is related to a folk bias toward the individual with a physical mark, which is a sign of evil or misfortune.

The fairy tales

Bluebeard's travel through written literature began in 1697 in Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités*. The homonym fairy tale tells the story of a man with a specific appearance, a blue beard, who is known for marrying several wives who mysteriously disappeared. After marrying Anne, the daughter of a neighbouring lady, Bluebeard leaves his new wife in the house with the keys to all doors, including a key to a forbidden door to a closet. Curious by nature, Anne opens the closet, in fact, a room with floors covered in blood and the bodies of the former dead wives hanging from the ceiling. Anne drops the key on the floor, and the key is irremediably stained with blood, which is Bluebeard's sign for a disobedient wife. Long story short, attempting to kill Anne, Bluebeard himself get killed by Anne's brothers, while the

¹ Lucian Boia, *Pentru o istorie a imaginarului*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2000, p. 33.

² *Ibidem*, p. 113.

woman remains in possession of Bluebeard's immense fortune and marries "a worthy man"³.

The story has its origins in folk tales. However, folk tales often contain the story's moral as an unhighlighted text. In that case, Perrault has another preference and concludes the story with the following verses, where he shows that the real master of the house in the woman and married men do not follow an evil pattern:

“Provided one has common sense,
And of the world but knows the ways,
This story bears the evidence
Of being one of bygone-days.
No husband now is so terrific,
Impossibilities expecting:
Though jealous, he is still pacific,
Indifference to his wife affecting.
And of his beard, whate'er the hue,
His spouse need fear no such disaster;
Indeed, 'twould often puzzle you
To say which of the twain is master”⁴.

Cristina Bacchilega gives a more appropriate translation of the morals in Perrault's fairy tale:

“Ladies you should never pry –
You’ll repent it by and by!”⁵

and

“Then the husband ruled as king
Now it’s quite a different thing;
Be his beard what hue it may –
Madam has a word to say!”⁶

A similar fairy tale appears in the Grimm Brothers' collection under the name *Blaubart*⁷, this time without a formal moral. Both stories speculate on the classical symbol of the forbidden door, which is the door to coming of age and becoming an adult. In both fairy tales, the young wives fulfil their future destiny by disobeying and discovering the truth of "the other". In the beginning, even if the physical specificity of the husband is a warning for not contracting the marriage, the future husband's wealth holds a decisive role. However, a story which empowers women, the narrative and morals of Perrault's and Grimm's fairy tales do not shed a favourable light on women. As a remark for further changes in the narrative in contemporary variants, I remark that

³ Charles Perrault, *The Story of Bluebeard*, available on <https://americanliterature.com/author/charles-perrault/fairy-tale/the-story-of-blue-beard>, accessed June 8, 2024.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Charles Perrault apud Christina Bacchilega, *Postmodern fairy tales: Gender and narrative strategies*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, p. 105.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Grimm Brothers, *Blaubart*, available on https://www.grimmstories.com/de/grimm_maerchen/blaubart, accessed June 8, 2024.

the wife is saved by her brothers, meaning a masculine force, the feminine being unable of physical self-defence.

The gullible Bluebeard

The Nobel-awarded writer Anatole France uses the story of Bluebeard in an ironic story of the unlucky and gullible man who marries several times only to be hurt repeatedly without learning the lesson of women's capacity for evil deeds. France starts from the following premise: "Charles Perrault, who, about 1660, had the merit of composing the first biography of this *seigneur*, justly remarkable for having married seven wives, made him an accomplished villain, and the most perfect model of cruelty that ever trod the earth. But it is permissible to doubt, if not his sincerity, at least the correctness of his information. He may, perhaps, have been prejudiced against his hero. He would not have been the first example of a poet or historian who liked to darken the colours of his pictures."⁸.

Anatole France tells a different story, *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard* (1920), where Bluebeard is not defined by his specific beard and is, in fact, Bernard de Montragoux, a wealthy nobleman who moves into the country with his first wife Mademoiselle Colette Passage, a former wanderer, travelling the country with a dancing bear and making money out of this occupation. Bored by love and material comfort, she leaves one night through the opened door of the Cabinet of Unfortunate Princesses. The second wife, Jeanne de La Cloche, is a heavy drinker. During an episode of drunkenness, she enters the Cabinet of Unfortunate Princesses, sees some figures on the wall and believes they are real bodies. Running from her husband, she falls into a pond and dies. A third wife, Gigonne, the daughter of Bernard's steward, appears as an unsophisticated, not-so-clean woman seduced by the idea of becoming a noble and even the king's mistress. Unable to achieve her wishes, she becomes ill with jaundice and dies. The fourth wife, Mademoiselle Blanche de Gibeauxmex, an attractive and intelligent woman, deceives her husband and has multiple erotic affairs, many times hidden in Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses. This is the place where she dies, killed by one of her jealous lovers. The fifth wife, Mademoiselle de La Garandine, is so naïve in a pathological manner that she believes everything is told to her. She ends up leaving her husband for a friar who tells her, "Angel Gabriel was waiting in a wood, to give her a pair of pearl garters"⁹. The sixth wife, Alix de Pontalcin, initially intending to become a nun, refuses to have a physical relationship with her husband and spends many nights alone in the Cabinet of Unfortunate Princesses. After a while, Bluebeard asks for an annulment of the marriage and becomes a free man again. The seventh and last wife, Jeanne de Lespoisse, plots the killing of Bluebeard in the infamous Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses, which her husband advises her not to enter since it would bring misfortune to their marriage. The cabinet is also where she meets her lover while cheating on Bluebeard.

Anatole France's story brings to the reader a story of wicked women where Bluebeard is just an innocent victim, a good man suffering and dying by women's hands. The Cabinet of Unfortunate Princesses is just a twisted pretext of the forbidden door. It

⁸ Anatole France, *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard*, available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/25411/25411-h/25411-h.htm>, accessed June 10, 2024.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

does not bring death to women, nor coming of age. The unfortunate one is the man. The key from the fairy tales also appears as a pretext and plays a role in the killing of Bluebeard. In building the new narrative, France often refers to Perrault's line of the story and to pretended facts of historians, discussing the relation between reality and imaginary. He even subtly shows that the story depends on the narrator: "The authority of the texts does not so far impress us as to compel us to believe"¹⁰. Anatole France does not only play with the story of Bluebeard, leading it to an opposite direction from the original one, he also plays with literary devices, employing plenty of intertextuality.

No death variant

Another Nobel writer, Maurice Maeterlinck, was seduced by the story of Bluebeard, which he exploits as a libretto for an opera by Paul Dukas, *Ariane and Blue Beard* (1910). The narrative is once again very different from Perrault's fairy tale. Bluebeard is known by the villagers living on his lands as a man whose wives disappear. They suspect Bluebeard killed all of them, and they are furiously manifesting when he brings home a sixth wife, Ariane. She is very young and comes with her nanny, which raises the question of Bluebeard's paedophilia. Like the fairy tale, the husband has to leave, and his new wife remains home under the interdiction to open a specific door, even if she has the key. Ariane enters the room, which is a darkened one, where all the previous five wives are alive but imprisoned. She frees them and takes care of them, restoring their beautiful appearance. Like France's approach to Bluebeard, the wives have names such as Selysette, Ygiane, Mellisande, Bellangere, and Alladine. When Bluebeard returns, the villagers tie him and decide to kill him, but Ariane saves him from their hands by proving that she is alive. The final act leaves Bluebeard in the company of the first five wives, while Ariane leaves, considering that she has fulfilled her role. Even if she invites them as companions for the future, they prefer to remain with Bluebeard¹¹.

Known for his symbolist drama, Maeterlinck transforms Ariane into a symbol for women's liberation. Still, even freed, they chose to remain with the abusive husband, respecting the initial commitment, possibly motivated by his wealth. There is no death in Maeterlinck's play; all survive. This aspect is specific to the writer's conception of modern drama, as highlighted in his collection of essays, *The Double Garden*:

"It is certain that, on the actual stage, we have far fewer extraordinary and violent adventures. Bloodshed has grown less frequent, passions less turbulent; heroism has become less unbending, courage less material and less ferocious. People still die on the stage, it is true, as in reality they still must die, but death has ceased—or will cease, let us hope, very soon—to be regarded as the indispensable setting, the *ultima ratio*, the inevitable end, of every dramatic poem. In the most formidable crises of our life—which, cruel though it may be, is cruel in silent and hidden ways—we rarely look to death for a solution; and for all that the theatre is slower than the other arts to follow the evolution

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Maurice Maeterlinck, *Ariane and Blue Beard*, available on <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858047124536&seq=9>, accessed June 10, 2024.

of human consciousness, it will still be at last compelled, in some measure, to take this into account"¹².

Postmodern twists of Bluebeard

One of the most famous interpretations of *Bluebeard* belongs to Angela Carter, under *The bloody chamber*. In this case, Bluebeard appears as a wealthy seductive experienced man who lives secluded in a castle. The story abounds in erotic preferences and symbols. The many references to lilies suggest the purity of the new wife, while her almost implacable destiny is suggested by the red choker she receives from her husband. Bluebeard leaves his new wife alone in the castle, under the pretext of having to resolve business affairs and gives her a bunch of keys, among which a small key which should not be used. The wife is aware that it is a test, but she just cannot resist it; she is in love and overwhelmed by jealousy of the former wives and the desire to know everything about her husband, even if he warns her: "Every man must have one secret, even if only one, from his wife"¹³. There is no warning in the narrative about the death of the previous wives unless the reader is familiar with Perrault's fairy tales and recognises them as a pretext for Carter's story. Still, they appear to be dead by torture in the forbidden room, unlocked with the small key, which, once in the lock, becomes stained in the shape of a red heart, impossible to remove. At Bluebeard's return, the bride tries to steal time and not return the key, but eventually, she must return the stained key and suffer the consequences of her curiosity. Awaiting her death, she also bears the sign on the key imprinted on her forehead. The wife is saved by her mother, here the story taking a feminist turn, since, except for Maeterlinck's variant, all the saviours are men. Unlike other surviving wives in Bluebeard's story, she donates the money, opens a music school, and marries the blind man who helped her in the castle. The red stain on her forehead remains: "No paint nor powder, no matter how thick or white, can mask that red mark on my forehead [...] my shame."¹⁴. The heroine's initiation is not only sexually, she is also initiated in the consequences of contracting a marriage for money, selling the innocence for material gains.

Another postmodern take on Bluebeard's story appears in Lisette Marshall's *The bleeding key*, a combination of classical fairy tale story line with horror elements of experiments on people and magic. This time, the story returns to the magic realm. The wife is the Cate, the daughter of a disgraced and killed wizard, sold to Bluebeard, Duke of Sapphire Maner, The King's First Sorcerer. Like Scheherazade, who takes her youngest sister into the bedroom, Catherine brings Anne and her sister to her husband's dark castle, filled with magic and esoteric books. He does not express sexual interest toward the new wife.

In contrast, she is determined to discover the destiny of the previous wives in an attempt to save herself and her sister from their situation. She discovers the mutilated

¹² Maurice Maeterlinck, "The modern drama", in *The double garden*, available on https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/48504/pg48504-images.html#Page_115, accessed June 10, 2024.

¹³ Angela Carter, "The bloody chamber", in *The Bloody chamber and other stories*, New York, Penguin, 1993, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

bodies of former wives, their abdomens lacerated, and some notes on their bleeding. When Bluebeard discovers her activities by night, breaching his secret lab, he calls for Catherine and discloses his plan of having children in abnormal experimental ways. Catherine is the one who, with Anne's help, manages to kill Bluebeard and save their life. The story pretty much follows the pattern of classic fairy tales, with Catherine's brothers who sold her being refused help from her and a possible future marriage of the heroine with the man she loves¹⁵.

Bluebeard as symbol

Bluebeard also appears as a pretext in Margaret Atwood's short story *Bluebeard's Egg*. The Canadian writer tells the story through Sally's voice of the third wife of a cardiologist, who divorced his previous wives. He appears clumsy, stupid, despite his professional intelligence, man: "Sally is in love with Ed because of his stupidity, his monumental and almost energetic stupidity: energetic, because Ed's stupidity is not passive. He is no mere blockhead; you'd have to be working at it to be that stupid. Does it make Sally feel smug, or smarter than he is, or even smarter than she really is herself? No; on the contrary, it makes her humble. It fills her with wonder that the world can contain such marvels as Ed's colossal and endearing thickness. He is just so stupid. Every time he gives her another piece of evidence, another tile that she can glue into place in the vast mosaic of his stupidity she is continually piecing together, she wants to hug him, and often does; and he is so stupid he can never figure out what for¹⁶.

Still, despite his pretended stupidity, Sally is often jealous of the women he meets as a doctor. She does not foresee, though, that he can cheat her. A friendly gathering where Sally's best friend, Marylynn, is invited brings a shocking revelation to Sally when she catches Ed in physical contact with Marylynn. He later pretends nothing happened.

Sally, trying to fill her afternoons, attends various courses for adults. The latest is Narrative fiction, where the assignment is to write a story starting from that of Bluebeard. Atwood uses the forbidden room in Bluebeard's tale. However, the symbol of female disobedience for the necessary coming of age and liberation is not the key, but an egg, falling in a basin of blood, becoming red and bearing the sign of trespassing the closed, forbidden door. Searching for a creative idea, Sally thinks about writing the story from the egg's perspective. Playing with the subject in her mind, her thoughts lead again to her husband and his history of wives: "Ed isn't the Bluebeard: Ed is the egg. Ed Egg, blank and pristine and lovely. Stupid too. Boiled, probably"¹⁷.

After seeing Ed and Marylynn together, Ed's pristine quality disappears; he is the stained egg. This experience changed Sally's worldview and her creative capacity. Thinking of her assignment, she sees "the egg, which is not small and cold and white and inert but larger than a real egg and golden pink, resting in a nest of brambles, glowing softly as though there's something red and hot inside it. It's almost pulsing; Sally is afraid

¹⁵ Lisette Marshal, "The bleeding key", in Brittany Saunders (ed.), *Fractured folklore: A twisted fairy tale anthology*, Tidworth, Ink & Fable Publishing Ltd., 2021, pp. 214-241.

¹⁶ Margaret Atwood, "Bluebeard's egg", in *Bluebeard's egg*, New York, Anchor Books, 1998, p. 110.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

of it. As she looks it darkens: rose-red, crimson. This is something the story left out, Sally thinks: the egg is alive, and one day it will hatch. But what will come out of it?"¹⁸.

The ending has a double meaning. Ed continues to be the egg, but not the pristine one; he may hatch into a man Sally never thought he was. He may be adulterous, cunning, or deceitful. On the other hand, the egg pulsing may be Sally's understanding of the reality of her marriage. The new insecurity of the relationship has yet to predict results. For Sally, the new circumstances form and condition a new ego. Marie-Louise von Franz states, "As an illustration of the ego formation, we might remember certain processes in a frog's egg. At a given stage, a gray spot is produced on one side of the frog's egg. Experiments prove that this gray spot later develops into the head"¹⁹. The stain on the egg in Bluebeard's story and the key in other variants may symbolise the formation of a new ego for the women passing through the forbidden door or entering the forbidden room. Ed does not die like Bluebeard, but his perception of Sally dies.

Bluebeard appears as a main symbol in Kurt Vonnegut's homonym novel, where the main character is Rabo Karabekian, an expressionist painter. The forbidden room is this time, a locked barn, where he works on what he considers to be his masterpiece, a mural titled "Now It's the Women's Turn", presenting women's suffering during wars or in oppressive contexts. Bluebeard is, this time, a possible feminist²⁰.

Toward a psychological interpretation of Bluebeard's story

In her book *The interpretation of fairy tales*, Marie-Louise von Franz advocates for a psychological interpretation of fairy tales, showing that the emotional factor of the observer may be important²¹. There are several aspects in the Bluebeard narrative, from its old form published by Perrault to the more contemporary reinterpretations. The observer-narrator delivers various perspectives of Bluebeard's story, depending on the Zeitgeist and according to their view of the world.

Firstly, the symbolism of the closed door appears both in Jungian and Freudian psychology. For Jung, the closed door symbolises the border between the conscious and unconscious mind, containing the hidden aspects of the self. The challenge of opening the door led to an opportunity for a personal journey in the process of self-realisation. For Freud, the closed door mainly represents a repression mechanism for the defence against forbidden thoughts and desires. Opening the door represents exploring the unconscious mind and facilitating the healing process if the case.

In almost 400 years, Bluebeard has travelled through literature in various forms, inspiring narratives on gender roles and initiations. In the beginning, he appears as an evil character who takes a feminist approach to postmodernism. However, is it so simple to classify the character considering the opposition good-evil?

In terms of perceiving the evil character, the story changes according to the observer-narrator. Jolande Jacobi writes that one must observe beyond mythological and ethnographic approaches to understand the evil animal. Instead, there is necessary

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

¹⁹ Marie-Louise von Franz, *The feminine in fairy tales*, Boulder, Shambala Publications, 1993, p. 21.

²⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, Notting Hill, Fourth Estate, 2019.

²¹ Marie-Louise von Franz, *Interpretarea basmelor*, București, Editura Trei, 2019, p. 28.

research on its symbolic significance in the psychic²². She even reminds us that the devil is described in Goethe's *Faust* as "Part of the Power that would Always wish Evil, and always works the Good"²³. In a similar manner, most of the time, Bluebeard appears to produce a positive change in his last wife's destiny, and *Weltanschauung* establishes a model for other women.

In all initiating stories, like fairy tales and their reinterpretations, the evil/ negative character has a significant role in triggering the change, the start on the new path. Therefore, instead of using a dichotomous classification, we can use the approach of trigger characters necessary for the growth of another character. The reinterpretation of Bluebeard even shows us that trigger characters are not related to gender since women and men, as observed in our paper, may be either aggressors or victims.

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²² Jolande Jacobi, *Complex, arhetip, simbol în psihologia lui C.G. Jung*, București, Editura Trei, 2018, p. 177.

²³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 56.