

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Maria Tatar: Secrets beyond the Door

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2004, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

1



C H A P T E R

The Attractions of “Bluebeard”: The Origins and Fortunes of a Folktale

You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one . . . for many things may and do happen, stories change themselves, and these stories are not histories and have not happened.

—A. S. Byatt, “The Story of the Eldest Princess”

There are only two or three human stories,” Willa Cather once declared, “and they go on repeating themselves fiercely as if they had never happened before.”¹ Although each of us might have different candidates for those two to three tales, many of us would come up with the usual suspects: the stories of Oedipus or Hamlet, Eve or Cassandra, Odysseus or Jack, Cinderella or Snow White. Much has been written about the seemingly timeless and universal nature of these master narratives, which we encounter in print, on screen, and in performance as poems, myths, films, operas, fairy tales, and plays. Yet the stories rarely repeat themselves, certainly not word for word, but often not even idea for idea. Instead they are constantly altered, adapted, transformed, and tailored to fit new cultural contexts. They remain alive precisely because they are never exactly the same, always doing new cultural work, mapping out different developmental paths, assimilating new anxieties and desires, giving us high pathos, low comedy, and everything in between.

If Cather recognized the resilience of certain tales, she also implied that we are doomed to endlessly repeat history through certain plots. But if we tell one of these “human stories”—say, Cinderella or Jack and the Beanstalk—to someone from another part of the world, it quickly becomes evident that traditional tales exist in many different versions, in at

CHAPTER 1

least as many versions as there are cultures and in perhaps as many versions as there are people who know the tale. Fairy tales, for example, have an extraordinary cultural elasticity, rarely repeating themselves even when recited verbatim from a book—every voice puts a new inflection on each episode. Their expansive range and imaginative play are so powerful that they never seem to bore us. Italo Calvino once said of storytelling that the tale is beautiful only when something is added to it.² Each telling of the story seems to recharge its power, making it crackle and hiss with renewed narrative energy. Or as Tolkien put it, drawing on a different metaphorical regime, “the Cauldron of Story has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and undainty.”³

This book focuses on one of the tenacious cultural stories to which Cather refers, showing how it has repeated itself but also reinvented itself over the course of the past centuries, taking unexpected twists and turns as it makes its way into different cultural settings. “Bluebeard,” a tale that is now found between the covers of fairy-tale collections for children, began as adult entertainment, and although it seems to have fallen into a cultural black hole, it has left profound traces on our cultural memory. Even if many of us are supremely unaware of it as story—we may not be able to reproduce it the way that we can recite Hamlet’s dilemmas or identify the rivalries dividing Cinderella’s household—we are familiar with many of its chief ingredients: a barbaric husband, a curious wife, a forbidden chamber, a blood-stained key, and corpses in the closet.

The Bluebeard plot, in its standard folkloric form, features a sinister figure whose wealth wins him the hand of two sisters, each of whom mysteriously disappears. The third and youngest in the trio of young women reluctantly marries Bluebeard, who arranges a test of her fidelity when he hands over the keys to all the rooms in his mansion but expressly forbids entering one remote chamber. As soon as Bluebeard leaves for an extended journey, his wife rushes to the forbidden chamber, opens the door, and finds the corpses of her husband’s previous wives. A stained key, a blood-spattered egg, a withered flower, or a bruised apple betray the wife’s transgression to the husband, who, in a murderous rage, is about to behead his wife, when her brothers come to the rescue and cut Bluebeard down with their swords.

The story of Bluebeard and his wife has a cultural edge so sharp that it continues to be recast, rewritten, and reshaped even though the name “Bluebeard” often elicits a blank stare or an erroneous association with piracy on the high seas (the wealthy Frenchman is often confused with the seafaring Blackbeard). Despite the prominent position that “Bluebeard” occupies in the cultural archive of the West—the number of writers and

THE ATTRACTIONS OF “BLUEBEARD”

artists with Bluebeard skeletons in their closets is staggering—most adults seem only dimly aware of the plot outlines of the story. Dismissed as an obscure tale belonging to another time and place, it seems of little more than antiquarian interest.

How do we account for the way in which “Bluebeard” has kept so powerful a hold on our imagination, yet at the same time fallen into cultural oblivion? Charles Dickens offers a clue in his childhood memories of a story called “Captain Murderer,” which was told to him by a nursemaid incongruously named Mercy. This Captain Murderer, as the adult Dickens realized, was an “offshoot of the Blue Beard family,” and he terrorized the young Dickens over a period of many years. That “Captain Murderer” was not really a story for children becomes evident in Dickens’s account of his response to its telling:

Hundreds of times did I hear this legend of Captain Murderer, in my early youth, and added hundreds of times was there a mental compulsion upon me in bed, to peep in at his window as the dark twin peeped, and to revisit his horrible house, and look at him in his blue and spotty and screaming stage, as he reached from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall. The young woman who brought me acquainted with Captain Murderer had a fiendish enjoyment of my terrors, and used to begin, I remember—as a sort of introductory overture—by clawing the air with both hands, and uttering a long low hollow groan. So acutely did I suffer from this ceremony in combination with this infernal Captain, that I sometimes used to plead I thought I was hardly strong enough and old enough to hear the story again just yet. But, she never spared me one word of it.⁴

“Bluebeard” is one of those stories that did not travel well in the great eighteenth-century migration of fairy tales from the fireside and parlor to the nursery. “The ugly story of the famous or infamous French Count” should be “cast out of the society of fairy-stories,” Aline Kilmer declared. “It is not folk-lore but yellow-journalism.”⁵ A tale that centers on marriage and focuses on the friction between one partner who has something to hide and another who wants to know too much, it did not prove attractive to tale collectors, who were eager to assemble stories that would appeal to adult sensibilities about what was appropriate reading for children. And so while “Bluebeard”—an anomaly among “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Cinderella,” and “Jack and the Beanstalk”—got lost on its way from adult storytelling cultures to children’s books, the tale managed to lead a powerful literary afterlife without our ever being fully aware that its constituent parts belong to a narrative whole.

CHAPTER 1

In his autobiography *Black Boy*, Richard Wright tells us exactly why “Bluebeard” is a story that has refused to go away. “Once upon a time there was an old, old man named Bluebeard.” These are the words read by a “colored schoolteacher” named Ella from a book containing a story called “Bluebeard and His Seven Wives.” In this coming-of-age portion of Wright’s autobiography, we learn how the folktale about Bluebeard introduces the boy growing up in the Jim Crow South to the world of adult secrets and intrigue. The European folktale about Bluebeard elicits what is described as a “total emotional response.” When Wright’s grandmother cuts the narrative short, denouncing the tale as “Devil’s work,” the boy is distraught. “I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breath-taking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me.” The “whispered story of deception and murder” feeds a “thirst for violence” and “for intrigue, for plotting, for secrecy, for bloody murders.”⁶

What Wright discovers as a boy is that narrative can elicit a somatic response, sending a chill up his spine and taking his breath away. Nothing is as irresistible as melodrama, and the “Devil’s work” has always proved more compelling than pious feelings and saintly behavior. “Bluebeard and His Seven Wives,” with its solemn mysteries, grim carnage, and damsel in distress, produces the suspense of all stories in which an enigma about a killer must be solved by one of his potential victims. And by casting the killer as husband and the victim as wife, it adds the ingredients of intimacy, vulnerability, trust, and betrayal to make the story all the more captivating.

It is above all the pathology of the husband—“intrigue,” “plotting,” “secrecy,” and “murder”—that captures the young Wright’s attention. “Bluebeard and His Seven Wives” fascinates because it stages secret anxieties and desires taken to a criminal extreme—anxieties and desires that are foreign yet also fascinating to those on the threshold of becoming adults. Beyond that, it produces in exaggerated terms what the young often long for in literature, and sometimes in life as well: not Wordsworth’s sweet serenity of books but the excitement and revelation that keep them on the edge of their seats while they are reading.

“Bluebeard” and its variants enjoyed widespread circulation in European cultures, and the tale is broadly disseminated in England, France, Germany, Italy, and Scandinavian countries, even reaching into Slavic traditions. Via trade routes, the story found its way to Africa, India, and Jamaica, where Bluebeard sported beards of different hues, sometimes red, occasionally green, and even blond.⁷ In Italy Bluebeard is a devil who hires young women to do his laundry; in Germany he is a sinister wizard who dismembers his brides; in Norway he is a mountain troll who twists

THE ATTRACTIONS OF “BLUEBEARD”

off the heads of women who spurn his advances. It was in France that the story seems to have originated and taken particular hold, and Paul Delarue, in his magisterial study of French folktales, lists dozens of versions of the tale.⁸

Margaret Atwood once warned that we should never ask for the “true story,” for it is always “vicious and multiple and untrue.”⁹ Nothing could be closer to the truth about folklore. When it comes to folktales, there is no authoritative, original version. We have only variants, “multiple” and “untrue,” each unfaithful to the previous telling and inflecting the plot in a slightly different way. And yet all these variants—oral, literary, or a hybrid of the two—can lay claim to unwavering fidelity to their own time and place. As Italo Calvino put it, while he was preparing *Italian Folktales* for publication, “I too have the right to create variants.”¹⁰ In every sense, we are right to perpetually reinvent the story, for the true one fails to ring true to our cultural values. “Why do you need it?” Atwood shrewdly asks.

And yet understanding how “Bluebeard” has engaged in shape shifting over the centuries challenges us to think about the ways in which stories that we think of as “timeless” and “universal” constantly have to reinvent themselves in order to ensure their survival. For that reason, I want to look at multiple untrue stories that have emerged over the past three centuries. I begin with Charles Perrault’s “La Barbe Bleue,” for no other Bluebeard story has been invested with as much cultural authority as this French variant from *Tales of Mother Goose* (1697).

CHARLES PERRAULT’S “BLUEBEARD” AND ITS LESSONS

“Bluebeard” made its literary debut in a collection that drew on a culture of oral storytelling for adults to craft stories that would appeal to children.¹¹ For the peasants who distracted themselves from the monotony of manual labor through gossip, banter, and tale telling, “Bluebeard” did not fall short of the entertainment mark. In an age without radios, televisions, or other electronic diversions, farm laborers and household workers demanded fast-paced narratives with heavy doses of burlesque comedy, high drama, scatological humor, and freewheeling violence. “Bluebeard” seems to have escaped the heavy editing to which Perrault and the Grimms had subjected stories like “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Rapunzel” (the one story had featured a striptease performed for a lecherous wolf, the other a young woman wondering why her clothes were too tight after indulging in daily romps with a prince up in her

CHAPTER 1

tower). Perrault's "Bluebeard" retained the dark mystery, suspense, and horror of versions told by adults to other adults around the fireside. It does not mince its words about the bloodied bodies in Bluebeard's chamber of horrors and invests much of its narrative energy in exposing the title figure's wife to terrors of extraordinary vividness and power.

Just who was Bluebeard and how did he get such a 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."¹² 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.¹³ 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, presents himself as a definitive model for Bluebeard, though both were frequently invoked in nineteenth-century pantomimes and plays to assure audiences that there was a certain historical truth to the fairy-tale tyrant, and they continue to act as narrative magnets when the story is retold. With his ghoulish forbidden chamber and his magical key that betrays intruders, Bluebeard remains a figure constructed as a collective fantasy, even if some of his features are drawn from bits and pieces of historical realities that embed themselves in the folk narrative. Like the Russian Baba Yaga, the British giants, the glae-stigs of the Scottish Highlands, or the rakshasas of India, he is firmly anchored in the domain of folkloric fright.

Perrault's "Bluebeard" recounts the story of a man's courtship and his marriage to a young woman whose desire for wealth conquers her feelings of revulsion for blue beards. After a month of married life, Bluebeard declares his intention to undertake a journey. In a seemingly magnanimous gesture, he gives his new bride keys that will open the rooms of the mansion and provide unlimited access to strongboxes holding gold and silver and to caskets filled with jewels. But he is not willing to share everything. Handing over the key to a small, remote chamber, he tells his wife: "Open anything you want. Go anywhere you wish. But I absolutely forbid you to enter that little room, and if you so much as open it a crack, there will be no limit to my anger."

"Plagued by curiosity," Bluebeard's wife does not wrestle long with her conscience: "The temptation was so great that she was unable to resist it." She opens the door to the forbidden chamber and finds a pool of clotted blood in which are reflected the bodies of Bluebeard's dead wives, hanging from the wall. Horrified, she drops the key and is unable to re-

THE ATTRACTIONS OF "BLUEBEARD"



Figure 1. Anonymous, *Bluebeard, or the Fatal Effects of Curiosity and Disobedience*, 1808. Bluebeard's wife is horrified by the sight of her five predecessors, whose well-preserved heads are posed on a table, each neatly labeled. Note that the wife wears Oriental dress, while the five wives, some with smiles on their faces, have Western hairstyles and hair ornaments. The spiderlike hands of the wife heighten the horrific effects.

move the telltale bloodstain left on it. Bluebeard returns home to discover the evidence of his wife's transgression and is about to execute her for her act of disobedience, when his wife's brothers, summoned by "Sister Anne" (who has evidently been in the mansion all along), come to the rescue and cut him down with their swords.

Perrault's "Bluebeard" frames the conflict between husband and wife as a conflict between the familiar and the strange, between the family (mother, sister, and two brothers) and a foreigner (one whose blue beard marks him as an exotic outsider). From the start, mother and sisters alike are resistant to the thought of marriage to a man "so ugly and terrifying that there was not a woman or girl who did not run away from him."

CHAPTER 1



Figure 2. Harry Clarke, “Bluebeard,” 1922. Bluebeard gazes intently at the viewer from his perch at the apex of a triangle formed by the faces and elaborate hairstyles of his wives and other aristocrats. Bluebeard’s imposing qualities are further emphasized by the sinister flow of his beard, which reaches down to the floral decoration forming the lower border.

But seduced by Bluebeard’s wealth and power, the younger of the two girls resolves to marry. It is also she who turns to her family for rescue, first to “Sister Anne,” pleading with her to keep watch for the two brothers who were to visit her that very day. Sister Anne receives a reward for her services in the form of a dowry; the brothers are promoted to the rank of captain after their sister pays their commissions. This is a narrative that has less at stake in a successful resolution to the marriage plot than in a serene closure that installs the heroine’s immediate family in comfortable material circumstances.

Perrault’s title raises immediate questions. What is the significance of the blue beard to the husband, to the wife, and to their story? Although the color blue is encoded today with powerful cultural associations—it is often seen as the color of the marvelous, the distant, the dreamy, and the exotic—it no doubt resonated with earlier readers in a different way.

THE ATTRACTIONS OF “BLUEBEARD”

From Michel Pastoureau’s magisterial study of the color blue, we know that, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the color blue experienced a stunning rise in its fortunes. No longer considered a “second-rate color” as it had been in antiquity, blue came to be considered both “aristocratic” and “fashionable.” The French monarchy contributed in powerful ways to the developing taste for blue by using the color in its coat of arms, at coronation ceremonies, and at jousts and tournaments, and thereby turning it into what Pastoureau calls “the color of kings, princes, nobles, and patricians.”¹⁴ The “blue” beard of Charles Perrault’s fairy-tale figure can be seen as a mark of aristocracy, a sign that this man of means is affiliated with royalty and aristocracy, with both the kings of fairy tales and the royalty of seventeenth-century France. Although Perrault’s Bluebeard is not designated as an aristocrat, his literary progeny were, in many cases, elevated to the knighthood (“Ritter Blaubart” becomes a standard German designation for Bluebeard, with “Ritter” the equivalent of “Knight”). One critic has seen Bluebeard’s elevation in social rank as symptomatic of a growing desire to politicize Perrault’s story and to define Bluebeard’s tyranny in class terms. The bluebearded tyrant becomes, in the course of the nineteenth century, an aristocratic blueblood.¹⁵

The beardedness of Perrault’s celebrated autocrat is also revealing. As Marina Warner tells us, beards were “well out of fashion in the court of the Sun King,” and Bluebeard’s facial hair signals his status as “an outsider, a libertine, and a ruffian.” *Barbe* itself seems related to *barbare*, or barbarian, even if etymological investigations do not bear out the connection. Beards, as Warner further notes, came increasingly “to define the male in a priapic mode,” and for her, Bluebeard’s name “stirs associations with sex, virility, male readiness and desire.”¹⁶

“Bluebeard” deviates from fairy-tale norms by turning the groom into an agent of villainy. Most fairy tales that end in marriage begin with families in crisis, in homes that prove inhospitable, with hostile parents and siblings. Mothers, fathers, and same-sex siblings often seem more interested in stirring up trouble, creating conflicts, and standing in the way of a happy marriage than in facilitating a “happily ever after” ending. Whether we consider Snow White’s mother (turned into a stepmother in the Grimms’ version of the story), Cinderella’s stepsisters, Donkeyskin’s father, or Beauty’s sisters, it becomes clear that the path to a happy marriage is paved with maternal envy, sibling rivalry, and paternal lust. “Bluebeard,” unlike the fairy tales that form an acknowledged part of our cultural heritage, turns the groom into the source of danger and endorses fidelity to parents and siblings even as it writes large the theme of marital infidelity.

CHAPTER 1

Folklorists have shown surprising interpretive confidence in reading Perrault's "Bluebeard" as a story about a woman's failure to respond to the trust invested in her. The homicidal history of the husband often takes a back seat to the disobedience of the wife. "Bloody key as sign of disobedience"—this is the motif that folklorists consistently single out as the defining moment of the tale. The bloodstained key points to a double transgression, one that is both moral and sexual. For one critic it becomes a sign of "marital infidelity"; for another it marks the heroine's "irreversible loss of her virginity"; for a third it stands as a sign of "defloration."¹⁷ If we recall that the bloody chamber in Bluebeard's mansion is strewn with the corpses of previous wives, this reading of the bloodstained key as a marker of sexual infidelity becomes willfully wrong-headed in its effort to vilify Bluebeard's wife. Furthermore, as one shrewd reader points out, "Blue Beard wanted his new wife to find the corpses of his former wives. He *wanted* the new bride to discover their mutilated corpses; he *wanted* her disobedience. Otherwise he wouldn't have given her the key to the forbidden closet; he wouldn't have left on his so-called business trip; and he wouldn't have stashed the dead Mrs. Blue Beards in the closet in the first place. Transparently, it was a setup."¹⁸

And yet from the start, the finger of blame has unmistakably pointed in the direction of Bluebeard's wife. Perrault's "Bluebeard" highlights the curiosity of its female protagonist in a number of ways. First of all, the wife loses no time getting to the room forbidden to her. While her frivolous female neighbors are busy proving themselves to be true daughters of Eve by rummaging through closets, admiring themselves in full-length mirrors, and declaring their feelings of envy for so much wealth, Bluebeard's wife is "so overcome with curiosity" that she nearly breaks her neck running down the stairs to open the door prohibited to her. Although she does briefly reflect on the harm that could come to her "as a result of disobedience," she quickly succumbs to "temptation" and opens the door. Here is what she sees: "The floor was entirely covered with clotted blood, and . . . in it were reflected the dead bodies of several women that hung along the walls. These were all the wives of Bluebeard, whose throats he had cut, one after another."

Perrault devotes a good deal of space to judgmental asides about the envy, greed, curiosity, and disobedience of Bluebeard's wife and her intimates, but he remains diffident about framing any sort of indictment of a man who has cut the throats of his wives. To be sure, it may seem superfluous to comment on Bluebeard's character once the corpses of his wives come to light, but, unless we take the view that this is a story of "dangerous curiosity and justifiable homicide" (as does one nineteenth-

THE ATTRACTIONS OF “BLUEBEARD”



Figure 3. Anonymous, illustration for U.S. children’s book, circa 1950. “The young wife turns the forbidden key / And, horror of horrors! what does she see? / The luckless victims of Bluebeard’s crime, / But she herself is rescued in time.” The youthful wife is about to enter the forbidden chamber. Her diminutive figure, which suggests a child rather than a young woman, tells us that the tale could be oriented toward children, reminding them of the perils of curiosity and disobedience.

century British playwright), the censorious attitude toward the curiosity of Bluebeard’s wife seems more than odd.¹⁹ What is at stake in this story, Perrault suggests, is the inquisitive instinct of the wife rather than the homicidal impulses of the husband.

In her short story “The Key,” Luisa Valenzuela gives us the thoughts of Bluebeard’s wife as she muses on how Perrault and others distorted her

CHAPTER 1

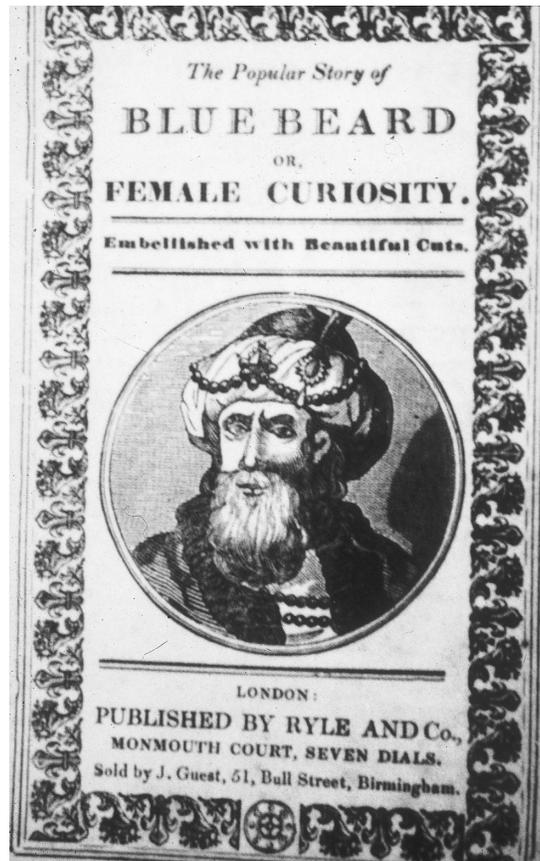


Figure 4. *The Popular Story of Bluebeard or, Female Curiosity*, circa 1850. The cover to this chapbook portrays a turbaned Bluebeard, whose story discloses his brush with female curiosity. Note how the “beautiful cuts” that “embellish” the book suggest the pleasures of the horror genre.

motives and turned her salutary inquisitiveness into a sin of indulgence: “Sacred curiosity, an ephemeral pleasure!” she declares with indignation. “. . . The curiosity that saved me forever when my lord went off on a journey, leaving me with a huge bunch of keys and forbidding me on pain of death to use the smallest of them, the curiosity that drove me to uncover the mystery of the locked room.”²⁰ This is a heroine who recognizes that ignorance is not bliss, that it might not be wise to live in a castle “with a

CHAPTER 1

room full of dead women hanging from hooks on the walls, their throats slit, living with the man who had been the husband of those women.” To those who insist that the wives were all “victims of their own curiosity,” Bluebeard’s last wife suggests that they consider the fate of the first wife: “What was the first one curious about, what could she have seen?”

While Anatole France tells us that Bluebeard was drawn as a “perfect model of cruelty,” it was his wife who came to be positioned as a perfect model of disobedience and infidelity. Was Perrault’s story, as the evidence suggests, complicit in vilifying the wife, or have critics of the story conspired to turn her into a figure who, looking for trouble, ends up creating it? Perrault, who recognized the entertainment value of the stories between the pages of *Tales of Mother Goose*, believed that the tales had a mission beyond mere diversion. In his preface to the collection, he made it clear that each tale had a “concealed lesson” embedded in it. To ensure that those lessons were not buried so deeply that readers might fail to unearth them, Perrault added “moralités” of his own—moral glosses cast in heavy-handed doggerel. “Bluebeard,” as it turns out, was a tricky case, one so symptomatic of how fairy tales send mixed messages that Perrault, perhaps unwittingly, crafted what appear to be two very different readings of his own story.

The first of the two morals concerns the perils of curiosity and points out the high price of satisfying that urge. Curiosity is coded as a feminine trait, one that has its “attractions,” not the least of which is the “pleasure” it provides. The moral encapsulates a concise cost/benefit analysis, pointing out that the high price for satisfying curiosity never compensates for the small dose of pleasure afforded by it. Restraint, constructed as the product of reason and logic, is consequently affiliated with the authority of the male narrator, who has marked its opposite as a supremely feminine trait.

The other moral appended to “Bluebeard” is less a moral than a disavowal of any lessons transmitted about husbands. If women’s curiosity formed the subject of the first moral, men’s behavior would logically serve as the subject of the second moral. One would hence expect a commentary on Bluebeard’s vices to follow the meditation on the failings of his wife. While the wife’s curiosity is seen as a quintessentially feminine trait, Bluebeard’s behavior is framed as exceptional, deviating from the norm of masculine behavior. The second moral insists that no husband today has the “terrifying” qualities of a Bluebeard. It invalidates the notion that men could draw any lessons at all from his behavior. Quite to the contrary, men today are obliged to ingratiate themselves

THE ATTRACTIONS OF "BLUEBEARD"

with their wives, and, these days, it is not hard to tell which of the two is "master."

Perrault's two morals are not only nearly mutually exclusive (the one prescribing correct conduct by endorsing a limit to women's "innate" desire for knowledge, the other proclaiming that women are free agents and reign supreme), they are also not at all congruent with the story's plot. But for Perrault, it was not unusual to preach about matters not practiced in the tales. We need only turn to his "Donkeyskin," a tale about a girl who has to ward off her father's incestuous advances, to get a clear sense of how the lessons attached to the tales of Mother Goose do not square with the facts of each plot. Here is the conclusion to the account of Donkeyskin's flight from her father and of her marriage to a prince:

Evidently, the moral of this tale implies it is better for a child to expose oneself to hardships than to neglect one's duty.

Indeed, virtue may sometimes seem ill fated, but it is always crowned with success. Of course, reason, even at its strongest, is a weak dike against mad love and ardent ecstasy, especially if a lover is not afraid to squander rich treasures.

Finally, we must take into account that clear water and brown bread are sufficient nourishment for all young women provided that they have good habits, and that there is not a damsel under the skies who does not imagine herself beautiful.

What we have here can hardly be described as a clear sense of the moral drift to the tale. The narrator not only frantically disavows the issue of incest and the daughter's courage in deflecting her father's amorous advances, but also dismantles the notion that the story has any message at all by engaging in self-parody through the proliferation of irrelevant messages.

In "Bluebeard," Perrault uses a somewhat different strategy to undermine the possibility of deriving a lesson from Bluebeard's behavior. He alludes to the title of his collection when he emphasizes that the story is a "tale from times past" ("un conte du temps passé"). Located in the distant past, it is irrelevant for contemporary audiences, since the relationship between husbands and wives today is so completely different from the time in which the story was set. Perrault's double move of affirming the seductive pleasures of curiosity for all women and emphasizing the uniquely brutal nature of a husband who lived a long time ago set the stage for the tale's illustrators, who appear to have heeded, in different ways, the advice embedded in the two morals. (continued)