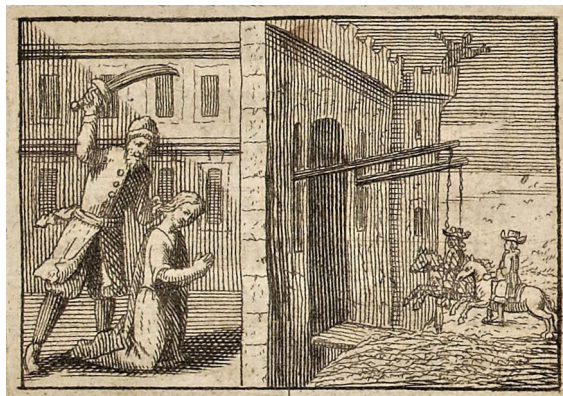


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FEMINICIDE THROUGH THE LENS OF BLUEBEARD A CONTRIBUTION TO A REREADING OF PERRAULT'S TALE

As the literary archetype of the serial femicide perpetrator — whatever its historical sources¹ — the figure of Bluebeard stands alongside Don Juan as the archetype of the seducer, Faust as the archetype of the scholar who sells his soul to the Devil in exchange for universal knowledge, and Tristan and Isolde as the paragons of courtly love. Like Don Juan, Faust, and Tristan, Bluebeard has given rise to a genuine myth that has enjoyed an immense legacy in the West and has touched every art form.² In France, the academician Charles Perrault definitively fixed its features through the tale entitled “La Barbe bleue” (“Bluebeard”), collected in 1697 in his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*.³

Unlike its two neighbours in the collection (“Little Red Riding Hood” and “Puss in Boots”), “Bluebeard” reads more as a tale for adults than as a fairy tale for children. Perrault does not merely wish to frighten or entertain through his narrative; he also aims to provoke reflection, in keeping with one of the essential roles of myth, namely its capacity to offer keys for interpreting the world. And the subject is of the utmost importance, for it concerns “uxoricide” — what we would today more readily call “femicide”.

I) The Masculine, the Feminine, and a Relationship of Domination

La Barbe bleue [*The Bluebeard*]: the character's name is itself both a clue and a stroke of genius on Perrault's part. By attaching a feminine determiner to a figure who defines himself above all by his hyper-masculinity, the storyteller immediately blurs the genders and achieves a double effect: 1) He signals the duel between the masculine and the feminine as the underlying theme of the story about to be read; 2) He announces the feminisation that will take place at the end, when it is the woman who “wears the beard.” A feminisation that, taken to its extreme, will result in an inversion of the roles of victim and perpetrator, inspiring, from the late nineteenth century onwards, an entire parodic strain in which the tables are turned and it is the wife who disposes of her successive husbands.⁴

In the French original, the tale opens with “il était une fois un homme” (once upon a time there was a man), placing the masculine pronoun “il” (he) first, thus presenting the patriarchal order as the immutable natural order upon which society rests. Perrault also creates a redundancy with “il”/“un homme” (he/a man), reinforced by the demonstrative anaphora⁵ “this man” at the head of the following sentence. From the outset, a universe saturated with virile values

1 Gilles de Rais (1404–1440), a child killer who ended on the stake, and the King of England Henry VIII (1491–1547), who had no fewer than six wives, have been cited as possible historical sources.

2 For a comprehensive overview of these reinterpretations, from literature to music and cinema, see: MONTANDON, Alain. *Mélusine et Barbe-Bleue. Essai de sociopoétique*. Honoré Champion, 2018.

3 PERRAULT, Charles. *Contes*. Critical edition by Gilbert Rouger, Classiques Garnier, 1987. The third tale in the collection, “La Barbe bleue” occupies pages 123 to 129.

4 We may cite *Madame Barbe-Bleue*, a vaudeville comedy in two acts by Lockroy and Choquart, 1843. More recently (2002), Marie Darrieussecq, “with *La Bleue Barbe* imagines several possible rewritings of a monstrous blue-bearded woman” (Montandon, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 307).

5 Anaphora: “Repetition of a discourse segment (antecedent) by an anaphoric word” (*Le Robert* online).

seems to be established, within which Bluebeard embodies a hegemonic masculinity that draws its power from the devaluation of women. Women appear as interchangeable: “*One of his neighbours, a lady of quality, had two daughters who were perfectly beautiful. He asked her for one of them in marriage, leaving to her the choice of which one she wished to give him.*” (My emphasis.) The heroine, destined to be Bluebeard’s seventh wife, has no name — a sign of the anonymity to which wives are consigned. Yet through Bluebeard’s failure to produce any offspring despite having had six wives, Perrault insinuates that this posture of conjugal authority is sterile and that such a system cannot prosper. To challenge this dynamic, the storyteller takes pains to underline the monstrousness of a Bluebeard whom he likens to the popular figure of the Ogre. Thus his beard “made him so ugly and so terrible that there was no woman or girl who did not flee from his sight.” Thus the lady of quality and her daughters are terrified by this sinister character, surrounded by an unspeakable mystery: “What put them off even more⁶ was that he had already married several women, and no one knew what had become of them.” Furthermore, Perrault insists on his manipulative side, which becomes apparent when, before his departure for the provinces, he entrusts his wife with the bunch of keys containing the one whose use he forbids her, while indicating to her precisely the room she is supposed to be able to open: “The prohibition imposed by Bluebeard,” notes Brigitte Le Juez, “is so senseless that it can only be a means by which the husband establishes a position of dominance that is, in reality, unacceptable.”⁷

II) Witnessing Femicide Through the Prism of Fiction

The account of the seventh wife’s discovery of the forbidden chamber can be read as an initiatory and cathartic journey founded on a visual progression: “At first she saw nothing, because the windows were closed; after a few moments she began to see that the floor was entirely covered in clotted blood, and that in this blood were reflected the bodies of several dead women hanging along the walls (they were all the women that Bluebeard had married and had slaughtered one after the other).” The recurring visual lexicon illustrates the fact that femicide is that reality which, given the state of society at the time — namely France under the Ancien Régime — one refuses to acknowledge, and which is therefore, in the literal sense, rendered invisible. And yet this reality, Perrault compels us to objectify through a profoundly shocking scene in which the bodies are displayed like cuts of meat at a butcher’s. The concatenation⁸ “slaughtered one after the other” confirms that we are indeed confronted with a serial killer, prefiguring Jack the Ripper or Landru.

Initially, the heroine sees nothing — a sign of a blindness that may also be partly self-imposed (she does not want to see). Then comes the moment of revelation: the verb “to see” in its infinitive form, denoting the fullest extension of visual apprehension encompassing the entirety of the spectacle of bodies, points to the timelessness of a phenomenon that belongs to every age. This vision of horror has no equivalent in the civilised universe of fairy tales. Then comes the moment of reflexivity, in which the bodies seem to mirror themselves in the blood covering the floor: *se mirer*, a polysemous verb corresponding to the “mirror stage,” inseparable from a global awareness of the situation. The explanatory parenthesis — “(they were all the women that Bluebeard had married and had slaughtered one after the other)” — provides the key to the enigma by resolving the mystery of the disappearances and “opening one’s eyes” to the femicidal phenomenon. Isabelle Mattazzi has admirably summarised this complex journey, as much visual as intellectual, ordered according to four stages: “Perception of colour, perception of the image (two-dimensional), perception of the object (volumetric), reflection (moral condemnation of the serial killer).”⁹

The visual lexical field continues to unfold in the remainder of the tale, after the wife’s eyes (and the reader’s!) have been opened. Thus Bluebeard threatens his wife: “(...) You shall take your place beside the Ladies you saw there.” One must also cite the dialogue between the youngest wife and her sister Anne, who watches for the arrival of their brothers from the top of a tower: “Anne, my sister Anne, do you see anything coming?” The exercise in lucidity unfolds in two stages: Anne is at first in a state of blindness (repetition of the negative formula: “I see nothing but the sun which glitters and the grass which looks green”) before acceding to a progressive clarity (“I see a great dust which comes from this side” / “I see two horsemen coming from that way”).

The sacrificial murder scene that takes shape is a scene of spectacular kinetics in which the movement appears decomposed and, as it were, suspended: “Then taking her by the hair with one hand, and raising his cutlass in the air with the other, he was about to cut off her head.” Beforehand, the wife had implored her husband’s mercy in vain,

6 Dégouter carries a strong sense in classical French, synonymous with visceral aversion. Here it also overlaps with *dégoutter*, meaning “to drip”, which evokes, once the story’s ending is known, the bodies of the previous wives drained of their blood.

7 LE JUEZ, Brigitte. La réécriture des mythes comme lieu de passage : l’exemple de Barbe-Bleue. *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, 2013, n° 348, p. 489–501 (p. 499).

8 Concatenation: “Chaining (of terms)” (*Le Robert* online).

9 MATAZZI, Isabella. Barbe Bleue entre Charles Perrault et Amélie Nothomb. La réécriture littéraire comme miroir du monde sensible. *Féeries* [online], 15/2018 [consulted 16 July 2023]. Available at: <http://journals.openedition.org/feeries/1449>

“throwing herself at his feet, weeping and dishevelled.” The realism of such a scene must be emphasised; it takes us far from the marvellous of traditional European fairy tales.

III) The Proper Use of Virility and the Civilising Woman

“Bluebeard,” as we have said, is a literary myth that has been rewritten and reinterpreted many times over, whose subject is the ritualised repetition of a criminal act. And yet Perrault’s tale poses a question that retains all its contemporary relevance: how can we put an end to feminicide? How can recidivism be avoided and the murderous series interrupted once and for all? As if, through its structure founded on the repetition of the same narrative pattern, the myth alone were capable of breaking this logic.

In Perrault’s version, it is the seventh wife who brings the series to an end, laying the groundwork for a feminine emancipation. If her marriage to Bluebeard is motivated by the riches he ostentatiously displays — which cause her (as the storyteller observes, not without a touch of mischief) to find his beard less blue¹⁰ — she nonetheless goes on to play the role of an “instrument of destiny” charged with tipping the balance of power and restoring equilibrium. Thus the number 7, a highly symbolic number, marks both an ending and a beginning: the decline of a feudal order and the beginning of a fraternal one. It carries us from a serial and vertical logic (the murderous logic of uxoricides; the sterile logic of the succession of wives without offspring) to a dual and horizontal logic (two sisters and two brothers coming to the rescue — a fine example of family solidarity).

In this sense, the myth of Bluebeard is a myth with a happy ending. We witness the triumphant return of a positive virility represented by the brothers of the seventh wife, who come to her rescue and ultimately kill Bluebeard. Is it not, in this instance, a matter of preserving gallant and chivalric values? Of the two brothers, one is a “Dragon” and the other a “Musketeer,” two military ranks which, in the eyes of contemporaries, represent the royal order that comes precisely to suppress the retrograde feudalism embodied by Bluebeard.

The story of Bluebeard is therefore also the story of a restoration of the masculine and a return to civilisation after femicidal barbarism. In this new order, the woman has an eminent role to play, an emancipatory role: if she takes possession of her late husband’s wealth, it is to distribute it to those close to her, according to a logic of generosity and, at the same time, of judicious investment, which stands in contrast to the ruinous and excessive, and ultimately self-destructive, extravagance that was Bluebeard’s: “It was found that Bluebeard had no heirs, and so his wife remained mistress of all his estate. She employed one part of it to marry her sister Anne to a young gentleman who had loved her for a long time; another part to buy captains’ commissions for her two brothers; and the rest to marry herself to a very worthy man, who made her forget the ill time she had spent with Bluebeard.” The *clausula*¹¹, through the notion of forgetting (forgetting associated here with an act, and moreover a masculine act), suggests a process of deliberate resilience. The “ill time” that is past (which has nothing to do with the anachronistic “good old days” of conventional fairy tales) is destined to be redeemed by the construction of a happiness which Perrault takes care to tell us is possible. The writer does not fail to reflect on life afterwards for those women who have been victims of domestic violence. Love, within a freely consented conjugal framework within a reconstituted household, appears then as the principal restorative element of such a trauma — as underlined by the double marriage of sister Anne to a “young gentleman” and of the heroine herself to “a very worthy man” (an expression already used to designate Bluebeard), thus marking both the rescue and the redemption of masculine values.

IV) A Double Moral in the Service of a Hidden Meaning

“Bluebeard” closes with two successive morals that may at first appear contradictory. The first, simply entitled “Moral,” presents itself as a moral condemnation of female curiosity, that “nasty fault” (as the proverb has it) rightly punished.¹² A moral which it is clearly important not to take at face value, insofar as the story that precedes it has demonstrated exactly the opposite: had the wife not been curious, she would have been unable to unmask the predator and would have figured among his victims. One might therefore read Perrault’s tale, *a contrario*, as a praise of curiosity. Is not the desire to know the dynamic driving force of a narrative — Perrault’s narrative — that defines itself

10 It is Bluebeard’s ostentatious display of wealth that persuades the youngest daughter to marry him: “She began to find that the master of the house no longer had such a very blue beard, and that he was quite an honest man.” Throughout the first part of the tale, the visual lexicon refers to the outrageous luxury of Bluebeard’s home, whose splendour the reader is invited to “admire”, visible in the many “mirrors in which one could see oneself from head to toe.” A dazzlement which Perrault denounces as illusory and which will subsequently be overturned into a vision of horror and a devastating “mirror effect.”

11 *Clausula*: “Final member (of a stanza, an oratorical period, a line of verse)” (*Le Robert* online).

12 Following a misogynistic reading that would be that of Anatole France in *Les sept femmes de la Barbe-Bleue et autres contes merveilleux* (1909), who went as far as inverting the roles, making Bluebeard a naïve husband deceived by greedy and manipulative wives.

through the interplay of suspense and surprise? It must be inferred that this first moral serves as a lightning rod, designed to deflect any potential censure and allow the modernity of the argument to pass through. The second moral follows, which Perrault calls the “other moral” to suggest its “alternative” and innovative dimension:

*If one has a sensible mind,
And knows the ways of the world,
One soon sees that this tale
Is a story from days gone by;
There are no more such terrible Husbands,
Nor any who demand the impossible,
Even when discontented and jealous.
Near his wife he is seen to toe the line;
And whatever colour the beard may be,
It is hard to say which of the two is master.¹³*

Behind the allusion to women’s “mastery,” one will discern a reference to those literary salons that emerge in the seventeenth century, essentially around female figures who hold social power. They welcome writers who find in them both an audience, a form of protection, and financial support. Some of these great ladies even go so far as to write fairy tales of their own, such as Mademoiselle de La Force, Madame de Murat, Mademoiselle L’Héritier, and Madame d’Aulnoy, the most celebrated, who positions herself as a direct rival of Perrault.

But what most particularly characterises this moral is its ironic tone, which barely conceals Perrault’s profound indignation. When he pretends to believe that the story he has just told belongs to the past and that feminicide is a spent phenomenon — a thing of another time — he means on the contrary to underline the topicality of the subject and to convey its urgency. What he denounces, in filigree, is the hypocrisy of his contemporaries, who persist in closing their eyes to these practices. An analysis confirmed by Alain Montandon, who considers that this moral “highlights the lie, and above all the denial and the repression of a patriarchal society regarding its behaviour, its ways of thinking, its exercise of domination, its power and the consequences of this sociohistorical status and its representations.”¹⁴

From these remarks, one may conclude that the moral in Perrault does not carry a single meaning aimed solely at reinforcing established positions or reflecting the ideology of the time. If there is a meaning, it is for the reader to discover it in connection with what constitutes his or her own present. It is for the reader to read between the lines. There can be no doubt that “Bluebeard” will then appear as an incitement to reflect on the excesses of conjugal authority and on the consequences of the inferiorisation of women.

Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, which agitated the close of the seventeenth century. This controversy, which ran from 1687 to 1694, set the upholders of tradition and the imitation of the Ancients, led by the poet Nicolas Boileau, against the defenders of creative freedom and the blending of genres, eager to free themselves from “authorities,” of whom Charles Perrault was the leading figure. Let us recall, furthermore, that this same Perrault is the author, in 1694, in response to Boileau’s *Satire X*, tinged with misogyny, of an *Apologie des femmes* (*A Defence of Women*) which bears witness to the modernity of his conception of conjugal life in relation to the dominant ideas of his time. It emerges, in the final analysis, that he never ceased to champion the role of women and to plead for their emancipation.

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13 One cannot help but notice in this second moral, twice over, the presence of the visual marker associated with the indefinite pronoun (“on voit” / “one sees”), bringing to eighteen the occurrences of this item across the whole tale, where it resonates as a call for greater lucidity. One should add to this count the presentative “voilà”, composed of the imperative of the verb “voir” (to see) and the spatial adverb “là” (there), charged with staging the “gaze-impulse”: “Here, he said, are the keys to the two large storerooms, here those for the gold and silver plate which is not for everyday use, here those for my strongboxes where my gold and silver are kept, those for my caskets of precious stones, and here is the master key to all the apartments.”

14 MONTANDON, Alain, *op. cit.* note 2, p. 287.