

BLUEBEARD¹

Charles Perrault

Known as Silver Nose in Italy and as the Lord of the Underworld in Greece, the French Bluebeard has many folkloric cousins. The blue in his beard tips the reader off to his exotic, otherworldly nature. This is a man who is justifiably spurned as a husband, despite his wealth and power. With its raised sabers, forbidden chambers, corpses hanging from hooks, and bloody floors, "Bluebeard" is the stuff of horror. And although it has a happy ending (the heroine marries a "worthy man" who banishes the memory of her first marriage), it is more a cautionary tale about marriage than a celebration of marital bliss. Perrault takes us beyond "happily ever after," into a post-marital nightmare.

Cultural historians have pointed out that Perrault's "Bluebeard" may be based on fact, that it broadcasts the misdeeds of various noblemen, among them Cunmar of Brittany and Gilles de Rais. But neither Cunmar the Accursed, who decapitated his pregnant wife Triphine, nor Gilles de Rais, the mar-

1. *Bluebeard*. Beards were not fashionable in Perrault's time, and Bluebeard's monstrous growth of a shadowy color marked him as an outsider and libertine. The exotic beard inspired a number of interpretations that cast Bluebeard in the role of oriental tyrant. Edmund Dulac's illustrations set the tale in the Orient, with Bluebeard sporting a turban, while his wife lounges with other women in what appears to be a harem. Many authors who took up the story set the tale in the East and gave the wife the name Fatima.

From Charles Perrault, "La Barbe bleue," in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralités* (Paris: Barbin, 1697).

shal of France who was hanged in 1440 for murdering hundreds of children, present themselves as compelling models for Bluebeard. This French aristocrat remains a construction of collective fantasy, a figure firmly anchored in the realm of folklore.

The Bluebeard story has traditionally been seen as turning on the curiosity of the wife, who can never “resist” the temptation to look into the chamber forbidden to her. Perrault, too, presents Bluebeard’s wife as a figure who suffers from an excess of desire for knowledge, a woman who makes the near-fatal mistake of disobeying her husband. In his moral to the story, Perrault aligns the intellectual curiosity of Bluebeard’s wife with the sexual curiosity of women in general, thus hinting that his protagonist is very much a daughter of Eve. By underscoring the heroine’s kinship with certain literary, biblical, and mythical figures (most notably Psyche, Eve, and Pandora), Perrault gives us a tale that willfully undermines a robust folkloric tradition in which the heroine is a resourceful agent of her own salvation. Rather than celebrating the courage and wisdom of Bluebeard’s wife in discovering the dreadful truth about her husband’s murderous deeds, Perrault and many other tellers of the tale disparage her unruly act of insubordination.

“Bluebeard,” with its focus on postmarital conflicts, serves as a reminder that fairy tales and folktales were rooted in an adult culture. These stories were told around the fireside and in the kitchen to lighten the labors of those living in an earlier age. They encapsulate collective truths—the wisdom of the ages—about romance, courtship, marriage, divorce, and death, and they are passed on from one generation to the next. Gossip and gospel truth, gossip as gospel truth, these stories, often referred to now as old wives’ tales, represent a buried narrative tradition, one that flowed largely through oral tributaries as women’s speech until it was appropriated by editors and collectors who channeled it into a print culture.

HERE ONCE LIVED a man who owned grand houses, both in the town and in the country. His dinner services were of gold and silver, his chairs fitted with fine tapestries, his coaches covered with gold. But this man also had the misfortune of having a blue beard. The beard made him look so ugly and frightening that women and girls alike fled when they set eyes on him.

A respected woman who lived nearby had two daughters who were real beauties. The man asked for the hand of one, but he left it up to the mother to choose which of the two he would marry. Neither of the two girls wanted to accept the proposal, and they passed the offer back and forth between them, for neither one could bring herself to



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"They were rowed to the sound of music on the waters of their host's private canal." In this orientalized illustration for Perrault's French story, Bluebeard's wife, with her richly textured layers of clothing, enters a gondola filled with sumptuous pillows. Bluebeard's realm is marked by voluptuous beauty and sensual delights.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"They overran the house without loss of time." Looking more like a harem than a party of young women at a French country manor, Bluebeard's wife and her guests take pleasure in the luxuries of the castle. The soft, sensual flow of the fabrics suggests a state of quiet languor rather than an active overrunning of the household.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"And then, in a room, hung the bodies of seven dead women." Amid the somber beauty of the castle, Bluebeard's wife stops short in horror as she contemplates the corpses of her husband's dead wives. The dark room, illuminated by the light from behind the door, contains the evidence of Bluebeard's crimes.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"You SHALL go in and take your place among the ladies you saw there." With keys scattered on the ground as a signal of his outrage, a massively proportioned Bluebeard with an oversized turban is determined to add this eighth wife to the collection in his chamber of horrors.

marry a man with a blue beard. That the man had already married several women added to their sense of revulsion. No one knew what had become of the previous wives.

In order to strike up a friendship with the family, Bluebeard threw a party for the two girls and their mother, along with three or four of their closest friends and a few young men who lived near one of his country houses. The festivities lasted an entire week. Every day there were parties—hunting, fishing, dancing, and dining. The guests were so busy cavorting and carousing that they never slept a wink. Everything went so well that the younger of the two sisters began to think that the beard of the lord of the manor was not so blue after all and that he was in fact a fine fellow. As soon as they got back to town, the two celebrated their marriage.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"The unhappy FATIMA cried up to her: — 'Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?'" Leaning over the railing, Bluebeard's wife seems only mildly desperate in the hope that her sister, up in the tower, will catch sight of the brothers who were planning to visit on that day. While Bluebeard's wife is given an Arabic name, Sister Anne retains her European Christian name.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"Then BLUEBEARD roared out so terribly that he made the whole house tremble." Wielding a scimitar, Bluebeard orders his wife downstairs for her execution. The dry leaves on the branches, which repeat the color of Bluebeard's robes, magnify the sense of desolation at the site where the wife is to be murdered.



EDMUND DULAC,
"Bluebeard," 1910

"They overtook him as he reached the steps of the main porch." With bloodied swords, the brothers of Bluebeard's wife chase the husband, who has lost his turban, down the steps and slay him.

After a month had gone by, Bluebeard told his wife that he had to go on a trip to take care of some urgent business in the provinces. He would be away for at least six weeks. He urged his wife to enjoy herself while he was away. If she liked, she could invite her close friends to go out to the country house. Anything to keep her in good spirits.

He gave his wife a ring with keys on it and said: "These are the keys to the two large storerooms where I keep my gold and silver. Here are the ones to the caskets where I store my jewels. And finally, this is the master key to all the rooms in my mansion. As for this particular key, it opens the small room at the end of the long gallery on the ground floor. Open anything you want. Go anywhere you



GUSTAVE DORÉ,
"Bluebeard," 1861

Bluebeard offers his wife the key to the forbidden chamber, admonishing her, with uplifted finger, not to use it. The wife's attraction to the forbidden object is readily apparent, and her eyes are riveted on it, as if by magic. Even Bluebeard's bulging eyes are unable to distract her from the object he puts into her hands.



HARRY CLARKE,
"Bluebeard," 1922

"This man had the misfortune to have a blue beard." Clarke's red-headed Bluebeard cuts an interesting figure with his striped hose and lavender waistcoat. An aesthete and dandy, this Bluebeard presents himself as a man who is comfortable in the solitude of his palatial domain.



KAY NIELSEN,
"Bluebeard," 1930

Kay Nielsen's sinister Bluebeard has a flowing beard and walks with an imposing cane. His coquettish wife seems unaware of the perils that await her when she takes the key to the forbidden chamber.

wish. But I absolutely forbid you to enter that little room, and if you open it so much as a crack, nothing will protect you from my wrath."

The wife promised to follow exactly the orders given by her husband. Bluebeard gave his wife a farewell kiss, got into the carriage, and set off on his journey.

Friends and neighbors of the young bride were so impatient to see the splendors of the house that they did not even wait for an invitation before coming to call. They had not dared to visit while the husband was at home, because they were so frightened of his blue beard. They lost no time exploring the rooms, closets, and wardrobes, each of which was more splendid and sumptuous than the

last. Then they went upstairs to the storerooms, and they could not find words to describe the beauty of the numerous tapestries, beds, sofas, cabinets, stands, and tables. There were looking glasses in which you could see yourself from head to toe. Some mirrors had frames of glass, others were painted silver or lacquered, but all of them were finer and more magnificent than any that anyone had ever seen.

The guests were envious of their friend's good fortune, and they praised everything they saw in the house. But the wife was unable to enjoy any of these riches, because she was anxious to get into that room on the ground floor. She was so tormented by her curiosity² that, without stopping to think about how rude it was to leave her friends, she raced down the staircase so fast that more than once she was afraid she was going to break her neck. When she reached the door to the room, she stopped for a moment to think about how her husband had forbidden her to enter the room, and she imagined what might happen to her if she were to disobey him. But the temptation was too great. She was unable to resist, and, trembling, she took the little key and opened the door.

At first she could not see anything, for the windows were shuttered. After a few minutes it dawned on her that the floor was sticky with clotted blood and, worse yet, the pools of blood reflected the corpses of a number of women hanging from the walls (these were all the women Bluebeard had married³ and then murdered one after another).

The wife thought that she was going to die of fright, and the key to the room, which she was about to pull out of the lock, dropped from her hand. After regaining her senses, she picked up the key, locked the door, and went back up to her bedroom to pull herself together. But her nerves were too frayed for her to recover completely. When she noticed that the key to the room was stained with blood,⁴ she wiped it two or three times, but the blood would not go away. She tried to rinse it off and scrubbed it with sand and grit as well. But the bloodstain would not

2. tormented by her curiosity. In Perrault's version of the story, as in many others, the curiosity of Bluebeard's wife is seen in a negative light. Many nineteenth-century dramatizations of the story bore subtitles such as "The Consequences of Curiosity" or "The Hazards of Female Curiosity." Note that in this story the wife's curiosity is so powerful that it nearly causes her to break her neck.

3. all the women Bluebeard had married. Bluebeard's wives are usually seven in number, which, like three, is a popular figure in folklore. Interrogating the number in this story inevitably leads to the question of why the chamber was forbidden to the first wife. Films from the 1940s revived the Bluebeard story, showing the hazards of marrying men with a past. See, for example, Fritz Lang's *Secret beyond the Door*, Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious*, and George Cukor's *Gaslight*.

4. the key to the room was stained with blood. Folklorists describe this motif as "blood-stained key as sign of disobedience," ignoring the fact that the blood is a telltale sign that you should not be trusting your husband. Perrault's key is "enchanted," and, like the eggs, flowers, and straws that come to be stained with blood in other versions of "Bluebeard," it resists attempts to remove stains.



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Bluebeard," 1919

A young oriental maiden with European features, Bluebeard's wife appears both wary and eager as she tests the key and is about to open the door forbidden to her. That door, in contrast to the other ornate openings, is constructed as an ordinary wooden door.



ANONYMOUS,
"Bluebeard"

"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." This diminutive figure from a picture book published in the United States, suggests that the lesson about disobedience applies to children as well as to women.

go away, because the key was enchanted and there was no way to remove the blood from it. When you got the stain off one side of the key, it came back on the other.

That evening Bluebeard came back from his journey unexpectedly and reported that he had received letters on the way informing him that the urgent business matters calling him away had been settled to his satisfaction. His wife did everything she could to make it appear that she was delighted with his early return. The following day he asked for the ring of keys, and she returned them, but with a hand shaking so badly that he guessed right away what had happened.



OTTO BRAUSEWETTER,
"Bluebeard," 1865

Bluebeard's wife recoils in horror when she sees the mutilated bodies of her husband's previous wives in a tub. An ax leaning against the tub gives us the murder weapon. Note how the keys still dangle from the waist of Bluebeard's wife.



HERMANN VOGEL,
"Bluebeard," 1887

Bluebeard's wife drops the key to the forbidden chamber in shock, and it falls on the bloodied floor, leaving a telltale stain as a sign of transgression. The corpses of the wives, hung from the wall as if on display, suggest that Bluebeard is a master in the art of murder. The chopping block and ax in the foreground reveal the scene of the crimes.

"Why isn't that key to the little room here with the others?" he asked.

"I must have left it upstairs on my dressing table," she replied.

"Don't forget to bring it right back to me," Bluebeard told her.

She made one excuse after another, but finally she had to bring him the key. Bluebeard inspected it, then said to his wife: "How did blood get on this key?"

"I have no idea," the poor woman replied, and she turned pale as death.

"You have no idea," Bluebeard said. "But I've got an

5. *give me just a moment to say my prayers.* Using her wits, Bluebeard's wife uses prayers as a pretext for delaying her execution. In some oral versions of the story recorded by folklorists, the wife sends a talking parrot or dog back home to fetch help.

6. *to see if our brothers are on the way here.* Note that the brothers rescue their sister and return her to her original family. "Bluebeard" is unique in the way that it begins with marriage and moves the protagonist back to her first family, a reversal of the conventional trajectory of fairy-tale heroes and heroines. How and when Sister Anne gets to the castle is not clear.

idea. You tried to get into that little room. Well, madam, now that you have opened it, you can walk right in and take your place beside the ladies whom you saw there."

The woman threw herself at her husband's feet, weeping and begging forgiveness, with every sign that she felt genuine regret for disobeying him. This beauty in distress would have melted a heart of stone, but Bluebeard's heart was harder than stone.

"Madam, you must die," he declared. "Your time has come."

"Since I must die," she replied, gazing at him, her eyes filled with tears, "give me just a moment to say my prayers."⁵

"I will give you a quarter of an hour," Bluebeard replied, "but not a second longer."

When the wife was alone, she called for her sister and said to her: "Sister Anne"—for that was her name—"I beg you, go to the top of the tower to see if our brothers are on the way here."⁶ They promised that they were coming to visit today. If you catch sight of them, send them a signal to speed up."

Sister Anne climbed to the top of the tower, and, from time to time, the poor woman cried out to her: "Anne, Sister Anne, can you see anyone coming?"

Sister Anne replied: "I see nothing but the sun shining and the green grass growing."

In the meantime Bluebeard picked up an enormous saber and shouted as loud as he could up to his wife: "Come down here at once, or I'll go up there!"

"Just give me one more second, I beg you," his wife replied and then she whispered loudly: "Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone heading this way?"

"I see a great big cloud of dust heading in this direction," replied Sister Anne.

"Is it our brothers?"

"No, oh no, Sister dear, it's just a flock of sheep."

"Are you coming down here or not?" Bluebeard roared.

"Just one more second," his wife replied, and then she

called out: "Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone heading this way?"

"I see two horsemen heading this way, but they're still so far away," she replied. A moment later she called out: "Thank God, it must be our brothers. I'll send them a signal to hurry up."

Bluebeard roared so loudly that the entire house shook. His poor wife came downstairs in tears, her hair disheveled. She threw herself at her husband's feet.

"That won't do you any good," said Bluebeard. "Prepare to die." Taking her by the hair with one hand and raising his saber with the other, he was getting ready to



ANONYMOUS,
"Bluebeard," 1865

A savage and enraged Bluebeard seizes his wife by the wrist and prepares to murder her with his sword. In the background the two brothers pass through an arch and rush to reach their sister before it is too late.

chop off her head. The poor woman turned to him and, with dimmed eyes, begged him to stop and to give her a moment to prepare for her death.

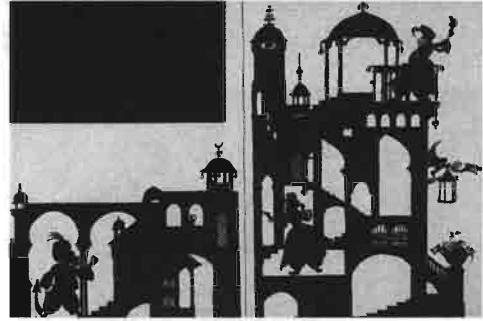
"No, no," Bluebeard said. "Prepare to meet your maker." And lifting his arm . . .

Just then there was a pounding at the gate so loud that Bluebeard stopped in his tracks. The gate was opened. Two men on horseback, swords in hand, galloped in, heading straight for Bluebeard, who realized that the

7. *The rest she used to marry herself to a very worthy man.* Technically, one can speak of a happy ending to this particular tale, despite the hair-raising events in the story. Note that Bluebeard's wife is more successful in marriage when she brings a hefty dowry to it than when she marries for wealth. The story may have served as a cautionary fable to young women against marrying wealthy men with a past.

men—one a dragoon, the other a musketeer—must be his wife's brothers. He fled at once, hoping to escape, but the two brothers showed no mercy and closed in on him before he could get to the stairs. They ran their swords through him and left him for dead. Bluebeard's wife was almost as lifeless as her husband. She barely had the strength to rise and embrace her brothers.

It turned out that Bluebeard had left no heirs, and so his wife was able to take possession of his entire fortune. She used some of it to marry her sister, Anne, to a young



ARTHUR RACKHAM,
"Bluebeard," 1919

Rackham's silhouette provides a fascinating cross section of Bluebeard's palace, with the husband demanding that the wife descend to her execution, the wife straining to learn whether her brothers are on the way, and Sister Anne surveying the horizon for the brothers.

gentleman who was deeply in love with her. And some of it went to buying commissions for her two brothers. The rest she used to marry herself to a very worthy man,⁷ who helped her banish the memory of the terrible days she had spent with Bluebeard.

MORAL

Curiosity, with its many charms,
Can stir up serious regrets;
Thousand of examples turn up every day.
Women give in, but it's a fleeting pleasure;
Once satisfied, it ceases to be.
And always it proves very costly.

SECOND MORAL

Take the time to stop and think,
And to ponder this grim little story.
You surely know that this tale
Took place many years ago.
No longer are husbands so terrible,
Demanding the impossible,
Acting unhappy and jealous.
They toe the line with their wives.
And no matter what color their beards,
It's not hard to tell who is in charge.