

## Abstract

This essay explores the “Bluebeard” fairy tale and six works of fiction inspired by it, from a feminist perspective. It mainly focuses on how the difference of power between men and women is portrayed in the stories, as well as where they place responsibility in cases of violence against women.

The fairy tales of the “Bluebeard”-type are about a conflict between a serial killer groom and his bride, who discovers his secrets. This conflict manifests itself as a struggle between physical and verbal powers. This is seen in the fact that the bride always saves herself from death by the hand of her lover by using her words, either by buying herself time with the right words or revealing her lover’s secrets through carefully timed storytelling. The concepts of responsibility, blame and repercussion are also touched upon in the tales, as Bluebeard kills his wives when they disobey his rules. The tale is often interpreted as a fable showing the consequences of wifely disobedience, while this essay claims that the story celebrates the heroine’s bravery in opposing the murderer’s patriarchal rules.

The essay further examines how these concepts of power and blame are dealt with in six retellings of “Bluebeard” and its variants. These retellings span 150 years and are penned by four male and two female authors. Charles Dickens’ “Captain Murderer” and Angela Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” underscore the importance of physical power. Dickens’ characters conform to traditional gender roles, while Carter’s do not. Anatole France’s *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard* and Neil Gaiman’s “The White Road” endeavour to absolve Bluebeard of his sins, while Helen Oyeyemi’s *Mr Fox* and Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* emphasize the severity of them instead. Most of the authors acknowledge the complexity of the fairy tales’ issues and refuse to provide simple solutions to them.

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## Introduction

The classic fairy tales, those familiar stories of ambiguous origin, have been a part of our culture for centuries. They have been read and told so often that they sometimes feel set in stone, unchangeable. There is a grain of truth in this. In her book on the history of the fairy tale, Harries points out that, “all the stories we now call fairy tales have been written and rewritten, printed and reprinted over centuries” and we do not have access to any original versions of the tales (3-4). The tales have been read and discussed as literary works since they were written down, as each version of a tale makes its “literary debut” (Tatar 138) when it is first published in print. For better or worse, this imposes a definite immutability on these written versions which is impossible to ignore, as these are the only versions we have access to.

In spite of this, we cannot overlook the fact that fairy tales have an oral history. Before they were written down, they survived by constantly being told. There still exist many different written versions of the tales. The fairy tale scholars Hallett and Karasek emphasize that when writing about fairy tales, it is important not to build substantial theories about attitudes or messages upon a single variant of a tale (311). While some versions of essentially the same story may reinforce stereotypes, others seem radically feminist. Furthermore “few fairy tales dictate a single, univocal, uncontested meaning; most are so elastic as to accommodate a wide variety of interpretations” (Tatar xiv).

Because of the preservation of fairy tales in oral tradition, we must not look at them as we do with modern novels. Fairy tales are not static, but fluid. With the change of a few words, for example, a cunning heroine can turn into a damsel in distress. Authors of novels and short stories have found inspiration in this fact and written their own versions of the tales. Angela Carter’s view is that „fairy tales have always existed in a kind of communal melting pot, narrative raw material that anyone who wishes to can access and reconfigure in forms to suit a particular purpose“ (Gamble 22).

Stories such as “Cinderella,” “Jack and the Bean Stalk,” and “Sleeping Beauty” are made into children’s picture books, Disney-animations and 3D blockbusters. Romance and fantasy writers use them as inspiration for their novels, and their messages that true love conquers all and that hard work and luck bring success, are recited to children and adults alike. Almost no classic fairy tales escape these reiterations and adaptations. Some of them, though, do keep a lower profile than others. One of these is “Bluebeard,” the story of a serial

killer who brutally murders his wives. Perhaps it is too gruesome to make into children's animations, or its message not obvious enough. Nevertheless, the story's controversial plot and the fact that it can be understood in many ways has appealed to a number of authors throughout the years, who see this as a chance of exploring, or asserting their opinion on, the tale's subject matter.

In addition to considering interpretations of "Bluebeard" and its variants, this essay will examine six different retellings or adaptations of the fairy tales from a feminist perspective. The retellings span 150 years, are of various lengths, and are penned by four male and two female authors. The works are diverse and adapt the source material in vastly different ways. It is interesting to look at how the retellings interpret the fairy tales' prominent themes, what elements they change and which ideas they subvert. The difference between the genders is a prominent theme. In many of the retellings, the power of words is focused on, and is often contrasted with the perceived male power of violence, though a clear dichotomy is often rejected. The issues of blame and responsibility are brought up in many adaptations. Some retellings try to show the traditionally villainous character in a more positive or at least more complex light, while others repudiate such perspectives. Most of the authors, however, refuse to provide simple solutions to the fairy tale's issues, but build on them and in turn ask even more questions.

### **“Bluebeard” and its variants**

The tale of a virtuous woman, who discovers the murdered bodies of her husband or fiancé’s previous wives in a forbidden chamber and narrowly escapes her death, is widespread throughout Europe in different versions. Folklorists have identified three distinctive features of Bluebeard narratives: “a forbidden chamber, an agent of prohibition who also metes out punishments, and a figure who violates the prohibition” (Tatar 138). Versions of the tale were recorded by Perrault, Grimm and Jacobs in the 17th-19th centuries. These unusual fairy tales explore the power relations between the genders and question the rules set by men.

“Bluebeard,” the best known tale, was recorded in a 1660 fairy tale collection by Charles Perrault. The story tells of a very rich man who has a frightfully ugly blue beard and an ominous past with women. However, his lavish parties and richly decorated house manage to impress an initially sceptic girl who Bluebeard desires. A month after their marriage, Bluebeard goes away and leaves his wife with the keys to his rooms filled with treasures, where he tells her she is free to go as she pleases. One key on the keychain, however, the girl is not allowed to use under any circumstances, the key to a small room on the lower floor. His wife promises to follow his orders. But the temptation to open the door is too great for the girl to resist. Inside, she discovers bodies of Bluebeard’s previous wives hung up on the walls and a floor covered with blood. In her fright, she drops the key to the floor and is unable to clean the blood from it. Bluebeard returns, sees the bloody key and tells his wife that she must die. She asks for a little time to say her prayers. When she is alone, she calls to her sister Anne, who happens to be visiting, and tells her to keep a lookout for her brothers, who are expected to arrive that day, and signal them to hurry. Bluebeard grows impatient and tells his wife to hurry up, but she asks for “just a moment more” (Perrault 147). By stalling Bluebeard with her words, his wife buys her brothers enough time to arrive and save her by killing Bluebeard. Bluebeard’s widow inherits his riches and marries “a very worthy man, who banished the memory of the miserable days she had spent with Bluebeard” (148).

“Mr Fox” is the English version of the tale and was recorded by Joseph Jacobs in his 1890 collection *English Fairy Tales*. “Mr Fox” tells of the young and beautiful Lady Mary who is engaged to Mr Fox. She is unsatisfied with her fiancé’s discretion about his life and abode and she seeks out his house uninvited. Despite ominous warnings on the gates and in the house, Mary bravely proceeds until she finds a bloody chamber full of brutally murdered

women. From a hiding place, she sees Mr Fox arrive home, dragging a dead young woman behind him. He cuts off her hand, which flies into Mary's lap. Mary escapes and during a feast on the morning before their wedding, she relates a "dream" that she had about Mr Fox's dastardly nature, which is really her account of the night before. "It is not so and it was not so and God forbid it should be so," is Mr Fox's answer. But Mary then reveals the dead woman's hand as evidence, and the tale ends by Mary's brothers killing Mr Fox by cutting him into a thousand pieces.

Other versions of the tale are very similar to these ones with some aspects changed. In the Grimm brothers' fairy tale collection, published in 1812, two similar tales are of note. "The Robber Bridegroom" is akin to "Mr Fox," with the addition that the groom is also a cannibal and the bride has the forethought to throw peas on the path to the groom's house and can therefore find her way home. "Fitcher's Bird" on the other hand shares more similarities with "Bluebeard." The bride has to carry an egg with her at all times, which she drops into a basin of blood when she discovers the bodies. She dies, as well as her younger sister, but the third sister cunningly revives them and smuggles them out of the house in baskets covered with gold.

### **Interpreting the Fairy Tales**

In the fairy tales, the difference of portrayal of power between the sexes seems, for the most part, clear cut. The males hold all the physical power while the women have to rely on men to save them. In all the versions of the Bluebeard tale, the bridegroom exerts this power by brutally murdering his wives, thus signifying the dangerous and destructive side of physical power. Contrastingly, the bride's brothers' violent lynching of the villain is seen as just retribution. "Eye for an eye" is evidently the accepted conventionality in these tales. On the other hand, the women do not seem to possess much power. The bridegroom has defeated and killed a number of women before the story even starts. The unfortunate heroine of the story cannot defend herself against her malignant husband, but must wait between hope and fear for her brothers to do so.

However, the power dynamics are more complicated than that. The conflict is not only between the physical power of the bridegroom on one hand, and the physical power of the brothers on the other, but more importantly between physical power and power of words. The power of words, which the heroine possesses in abundance, is

demonstrated through cunning, language and quickness of thought. In *Mr. Fox*, Lady Mary exposes the murderer at the right time by recounting events in the guise of a story told at the perfectly right moment. In “Bluebeard,” the wife escapes her death by stalling Bluebeard with the right words until her brothers arrive. In all the versions, the heroine bravely discovers the misdeeds of her husband, ingeniously manages to delay the execution of his murderous plans and is able to engineer her own rescue (Tatar 141). Thus, while the bridegroom uses weapons and force, the bride uses the power of words and is, in the end, victorious.

When interpreting the “Bluebeard”-type of fairy tales, folklorists have focused more on the wife’s disobedience than on her husband’s criminal behaviour. Her opening the chamber is said to represent a woman’s sexual infidelity and the blood-stained key is read as a sign of both moral and sexual transgression. Tatar criticises this and points out that “if we recall that the bloody chamber in Bluebeard’s castle is strewn with the corpses of previous wives, this reading of the blood-stained key as a marker of sexual infidelity becomes wilfully wrongheaded in its effort to vilify Bluebeard’s wife” (141). In an examination of Bluebeard’s plot, Bacchilega comments that it was not simply curiosity, but bravery that lead the heroine to unlock the forbidden chamber, and that “she must be clever to see him not as the Law but as the enemy“ (110).

Bluebeard’s unfortunate wife is not only vilified in academia. In Perrault’s collection, two morals are printed after the tale. In one translation, these morals are: “Ladies, you should never pry,/You’ll repent it by and by!” 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!” (Bacchilega 105). Perrault himself does not seem to side with the murderer’s wife, but Bluebeard is never shown in a positive light in the stories themselves, as opposed to in the retellings, which will be elaborated on later.

But while many scholars and fairy tale collectors interpret the story as a fable preaching obedience to wives, I suggest that the tales do in fact encourage women not to follow patriarchal rules without question. In the “Bluebeard” fairy tale, as well as in its variants, the breaking of rules is a big theme. Women breaking rules set by their tyrant husband leads them to discover the horrifying truth about them. Most of the women lose their lives, as the fact that they broke the rules seems, for the villain, to be enough reason to murder them. The women breaking the men’s rules in the fairy tales can be seen as a metaphor for women breaking society’s rules, and being punished for it. These rules are set by the patriarchy; the “social arrangements that privilege males, where men as a group

dominate women as a group, both structurally and ideologically” (Hunnicut 557). But the stories always focus on the woman who escapes, the one who manages to use her extraordinary cunning or power of words to outfox the villain and precipitate his destruction. Seen through that lens, the Bluebeard-type of fairy tales seems to condemn the deplorable sides of patriarchy and promote not following its rules.

An example of this is Mary’s forwardness in “Mr Fox.” When Lady Mary arrives at Mr Fox’s castle, she finds an inscription on the gate which reads: “Be bold, be bold.” She goes through the gate and sees that over the castle doorway, there are the words: “Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.” When she gets to the Bloody Chamber she finds, written on the door: “Be bold, be bold, but not too bold. Lest that your heart’s blood should run cold” (148). This is a direful warning to those who attempt to visit Mr Fox’s castle, but Mary is not easily scared and proceeds anyway. The message is eerily similar to the one women constantly receive from society: take care not to be too daring, too resolute, too opinionated – which makes Mr Fox a manifestation of the patriarchy. Mary disobeys this message but does not face the consequences, that her “heart’s blood should run cold” (148) as foreboded by the rhyme. Instead of being punished for breaking the oppressive rules, Mary saves her life by disregarding them. She manages to expose what her husband was hiding before it is too late, and by doing that she discovers the ramifications of following social rules blindly. The dead women’s fate clearly demonstrates how abiding by society’s repressive rules on behaviour is ultimately damaging for women. The rule-breaking is even more pronounced in Perrault’s version. More distinct than writing on gates and doors, Bluebeard specifically instructs his wife in person not to go into the small chamber. When she then disobeys, she is to be punished by death.

If one keeps this in mind, it is apparent that men also possess power of words. But because the power men possess is a given, their controlling use of words is less noticeable. Hunnicutt points out that “patriarchy is a chief characteristic of social structures but is easily obscured. So pervasive, it is hard to “see” it unless the lens is calibrated to gauge it” (556). Although Bluebeard and Mr Fox’s words are not powerful enough to defend their lives in the end, they have aided them in their evil deeds for a long time. While the women’s use of powerful words is defensive and significant, the men’s use is more ingrained and entitled.

These issues are delved into, to varying degrees in retellings of the tale. The dichotomy of power is explored; the authors exaggerate the differences, simplify them, reverse them, or renounce them. The matter of responsibility for the violence and murders is



also touched upon; while some authors find excuses for Bluebeard's actions, other condemn such endeavours.

### **Dickens' "Captain Murderer"**

In Charles Dickens's 1860 short story retelling, the difference of power is focused on. In the retelling the villain is the ominously named Captain Murderer who "must have been an offshoot of the Blue Beard family" (Dickens). Captain Murderer kills all his wives after a month of marriage. He orders each of his wives to bake a pie crust of enormous size. When she inquires what kind of pie she is preparing, he tells her it is a meat pie and tells her to look in the glass to see the meat. She tells him that she still sees no meat, but the captain only laughs, baring his sharpened teeth, and draws his sword.

When she had lined the dish with crust and had cut the crust all ready to fit the top, the Captain called out, "*I see the meat in the glass!*" And the bride looked up at the glass, just in time to see the Captain cutting her head off; and he chopped her in pieces, and peppered her, and salted her, and put her in the pie, and sent it to the baker's, and ate it all, and picked the bones. (Dickens "Captain Murderer")

One of his wives, a fair woman, has a dark twin sister, who is very suspicious of her brother-in-law. When her sister dies, the dark twin puts two and two together and determines to avenge her sister at all costs. She marries the captain herself. But before she starts on the pie crust, she has ingested a deadly poison "of a most awful character, distilled from toads' eyes and spiders' knees" (Dickens). When her husband eats her, he turns blue, becomes covered in spots and swells until he explodes.

In this story, the villain holds all the physical power. The heroine has no brothers who come to the rescue and cut Captain Murderer to pieces, which adds to the contrast between them. All the dark twin possesses, to defeat her sister's murderer, are her own instincts and ingenuity, as well as her words. She infers, from the captain's filed teeth, his jokes about the flowers in his garden being "garnish for house-lamb," and the frequent deaths of his wives, that he is a murderer. Then, she gets the captain to marry her by convincing him that she has always loved him and that she was jealous of her sister. Lastly, she cunningly makes sure that she will be the captain's last meal. She

never uses violence against him and neither does anyone on her behalf. Instead, she ensures that the captain's own violence backfires. Self-sacrifice is her weapon. The dark twin manages to defeat Captain Murderer without any help and without force. However, that victory is far from ideal, as it was only accomplished with the heroine's death. The heroine was on her own, without the traditional rescuers, and therefore she had to pay with her life. The ending is bleak and suggests that violence is, in its nature, always stronger than other kinds of power.

### **Carter's "The Bloody Chamber"**

Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber," published in 1979 in a collection of the same name, is one of the best known Bluebeard retellings. The bride to be is a seventeen year old piano player who is a little wary but mostly fascinated by her thrice widowed fiancé, the much older Marquis. She feels a "desirous dread for this mysterious being" (21). On their wedding night, he leaves her alone in his sea-girt castle for the purpose of, as she herself realises, show his mastery over her. She does not waste much time before she unscrupulously uses the key to open the forbidden chamber. Amid medieval torture instruments, she discovers the bodies of his three former wives. She begins immediately to plan her escape, but those plans are thwarted when the Marquis returns early. She tries to seduce him to delay the showing of the bloody key, but without success. Then, she simply gives up. She bathes and dresses, as ordered, to prepare for the "sacrifice" and uses no words to delay her execution. Eventually, she goes to the courtyard where her husband plans to decapitate her. At the last moment, the bride's mother arrives on horseback, and shoots the Marquis in the head.

In this adaptation, the focus is clearly not on the dichotomy of different kinds of power. Instead, Carter mainly explores the conventional notions of the power discrepancy between the genders. The difference in age and fortune between the bride and groom is huge, and thus the difference in power. The heroine, the unnamed bride, is depicted as physically powerless, similar to Dickens' dark twin. But unlike her and her fairy-tale antecedents, she is also powerless in other ways and, does not engineer her own rescue.

Although the most obvious opposites in the story are the debauchee groom and the innocent bride, they are not depicted as opposites on equal footing. Carter has deprived the damsel in distress of her power to concentrate on the bride's rescuer as the main opponent of

the Marquis. Traditionally the rescuers, the ones killing the murderous bridegroom and therefore saving the bride, are the bride's brothers. But in "The Bloody Chamber," the bride's mother comes to the rescue, a figure not even mentioned in many versions of the fairy tale. Here, she is an almost legendary character with an adventurous past. According to her daughter, she has, for example, "outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague [and] shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand" (7). When she arrives to her daughter's rescue, she is described as a "wild thing," a gun-wielding horsewoman with a white mane blowing in the wind, who uses violence without hesitation but with purpose. She is an honourable avenger who brings down the corrupted serpent. Carter sets physical power against physical power, but the important thing here is who wields it, and the intentions behind it.

Gender roles are of essential importance in literary versions of fairy tales (Bear 45). By changing the gender of the rescuer in "The Bloody Chamber," Carter challenges "the conservative norms of social behaviour and the implications of gender roles in fairy tales" (Tosi 369-70) as well as exposing patriarchal values in the tale. Carter contradicts the conventional structure "in which women must wait for men to rescue them" (Bear 45).

But the implications of the tale are not black and white. Angela Carter does not provide a clear-cut feminist reversal of the Bluebeard tale. The bride is not a self-sufficient heroine, able to escape on her own accord. She may be brave, but she is not cunning and the power of words is of no help to her. She even recognizes in herself "a rare talent for corruption" (20), and a completely happy ending is not even provided, as when all is over, she feels ashamed. Like in many of the retellings I discuss, simplicity is rejected.

### **France's *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard***

As previously mentioned, some interpreters of the "Bluebeard" fairy tales defame Bluebeard's wife while exonerating Bluebeard himself. A number of retellers of the tale appear to share that same outlook. They place the blame on Bluebeard's wives not by stripping them of their powers, but by adding to them and making them the villain of the story, thus making Bluebeard the victim. However, in these retellings, Bluebeard is made out to be innocent and the reader's sympathy is with him.

One of these retellings is *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard*, a 1909 novella by Anatole France, which sets out to clear Bluebeard's soiled reputation by proving that he

was not a murderer, just extremely unlucky in his love affairs. The narrator suggests that Perrault was “prejudiced against his hero” (France). France gives Bluebeard the name Bernard de Montragoux and tells the story of each of his seven tragic marriages. Monsieur de Montragoux lives in a Gothic castle, which contains a small room usually called the “Cabinet of the Unfortunate Princesses” because on the walls hang paintings showing dying women from Greek mythology. “These figures had a look of life about them, and the porphyry tiles with which the floor was covered seemed dyed in the blood of these unhappy women” (France). Montragoux’s first wife abandons him, escapes through the cabinet with her pet bear, whom Montragoux had kept in chains. His second wife is an alcoholic who thinks the paintings in the cabinet are real and is so frightened that she flees the castle, screaming murder, and drowns in a pond. His third wife is so hungry for power and wealth that when she is unable to get it, she “pined away with vexation, contracting a jaundice, of which she died.” His fourth wife is an adulteress, whose lover kills her in the cabinet. His fifth wife is a fool who believes anything she is told and plainly tells Montragoux about her affairs, as she does not know she is doing anything wrong. He feels compelled to “tell the simple creature that she was a goose, and to box her ears. This, for him, was the beginning of a reputation for cruelty, which was not fated to be diminished.” The girl is finally abducted by a monk. His sixth wife refuses to have sex with him, which causes Montragoux “the cruellest sufferings” and he “applied to Rome for the annulment of a marriage which was nothing better than a trap.” Finally, his seventh wife bands together with her mother, her sister Anne and her two brothers, to kill Montragoux and keep all his wealth for themselves.

This retelling is told from the perspective of the traditional villain, and the women hold all the power, both verbal and physical. Monsieur de Montragoux is admittedly portrayed in a comic light, as a rather spineless fellow, an image of Bluebeard supposed to be a complete opposite of the one the reader is familiar with. But he is still presented as a wronged individual, an innocent man plagued by silly, malicious and disturbed women. He is constantly referred to as a worthy and good *seigneur* who loves his wives dearly, and the reader’s sympathy is with him when yet another wife betrays or leaves him.

### Gaiman's "The White Road"

Neil Gaiman's poetic short story "The White Road," published in the 1999 collection *Smoke and Mirrors*, is another example of retellings told from the perspective of Bluebeard, or in this case, Mr Fox. Inspired by several tales, "The White Road" tells of a gathering at an inn, of a one Mr Fox, his fiancée, her father and his friends. A stranger to Mr Fox, a pale, grey-eyed woman with a crooked and amused smile, tells the party a story about a young, pregnant woman who hid in a tree and saw her fiancé practice murdering her. The woman escaped and had a child who "had a fox's paw on her and not a hand" (Gaiman loc 1961 of 5947). After the strange woman has finished her tale, Mr Fox's fiancée tells of a dream she had. Her dream is a blend of the events of "Mr Fox" and Grimm's "The Robber Bridegroom." She tells how she saw Mr Fox kill his victim:

She lay there on the marble as you sliced  
 you hacked, you wrenched, you panted, and you stabbed.  
 You took her head from her shoulders,  
 thrust your tongue between her red, wet lips.  
 You cut off her hands. Her pale white hands.

(loc 2013 of 5947)

As evidence that the dream is true, she places the hand of the young woman, who she saw murdered, on the table. But it is no hand, but a fox's paw. No one but Mr Fox realises this, however, and he is killed by the men while the pale woman sneaks out, smiling, a fox's tail between her legs. It is clear that she had something to do with the bizarre turn of events.

Here, the women's power of words is seen as corrupted and convoluted and used for evil, as it is not used in response to malicious physical violence. To the contrary - even though the possibility of him being an unreliable narrator cannot be ruled out - in this tale, Mr Fox is seemingly innocent. His death is caused by the influence of the mysterious fox woman's presence and the spell of the words she speaks. One suggestion is that the fox lady is actually a polymorph, one incarnation of Lady Mary (Dezurick-Badran). If that is the case, it is possible to look at this bold portrayal as empowerment of the Mary character. The fox lady is without a doubt the most intriguing character of the story, reminiscent of the ever-fascinating trickster. As opposed to Monsieur de

Montragoux's vexing, hysterical and voracious wives, the fox lady is a strong, female character, able to manipulate the men and make them do her will. In spite of her deceitful ways, she is victorious in the end. However, Lady Mary has always had the power of words and been able to escape and get rid of Mr Fox with other's help. Since Mr Fox is apparently innocent in this version, what has essentially been changed is that a woman has been made vengeful without reason, and her account of violence is shown to be false. The sympathy is with the person who is traditionally a woman-killer. Nevertheless, "The White Road" is not as simple or straightforward in its attempts to absolve the husband as France's *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard*.

The reasons some authors make Bluebeard out to be sympathetic could be as innocuous as wanting to make the story more humorous, or to put their own twist on the tales by toying with their readers' expectations. A more worrying possibility is that it is connected to society's tendency to sympathise with the perpetrator in cases where women are attacked. The women are often seen as hysterical and excuses made for the men, who cannot possibly be as bad as they are made out to be.

Gracia writes about these public attitudes in his article "Intimate partner violence against women and victim-blaming attitudes among Europeans," published in 2014. Victim-blaming attitudes, he claims, "serve to excuse and partly absolve the perpetrators of violence and add to the notion in the public's mind that sometimes women are justifiably the victims of intimate partner violence" (380). These societal attitudes are reflected in literature and influence people's and authors' views on the message of the fairy tales.

### **Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox***

Helen Oyeyemi's novel, *Mr Fox*, deals with this question of responsibility, as well as with systems of oppression and the power of words. Oyeyemi builds upon the fact that men also possess the power of words and that words can influence violence. In the story, Mr Fox is an accomplished novelist and a usually loving husband of Daphne Fox. Unlike his fairy-tale namesake, Mr Fox is a complex character and large parts of the novel are narrated from his perspective. On the surface, he seems harmless, and many would say that he is. But he is more powerful than he realises. He has a semi-imaginary muse, Mary, who is at the same time his collaborator, lover, friend, editor and

adversary. At the beginning, Mary suggests they play a story game. The novel consists of the stories they tell each other, casting themselves in different guises. Each story is unique and has its own message and implications. Mary is trying to counteract Mr Fox's usual fiction, which always stars heroines who die or are brutally killed by men. Furthermore, in Mr Fox's stories, there is no cunning survivor, who manages to escape her savage husband. All the women die. Mary tries to explain to him that his words do not exist in a vacuum, but have power. His books normalize violence against women.

What you're doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say, "Yes, he is talking about things that really happen," and they keep reading and it makes sense to them. You're explaining things that can't be defended and the explanations themselves are mad, just bizarre – but you offer them with such confidence. [...] It's obscene to make such things reasonable (141).

Oyeyemi does raise the theme of authorial responsibility not only in the context of how it might affect the minds of possible wrongdoers, but also in how it may affect real victims. In one of the stories she tells, Mary casts herself as a young model whose father killed her mother when Mary was a child. Her father used to keep a folder full of newspaper clippings about murders of women and he would ask her about the details of their deaths, especially about the motives of their killers.

*Why was Fatema Yilmaz buried alive under a chicken pen?*

As a punishment for talking to boys. She wasn't allowed to.

*Who punished her?*

Her father and her grandfather.

*How deep was the hole they dug?*

Three metres.

*Three metres? Are you sure?*

No – no. Two metres.

*Correct. Why was Medine Ganis drowned in a bathtub?*

[...] Her father chose a man for her to marry and she said she wouldn't do it.

*Who was there when she drowned?*

Her father was there and her two brothers were there, holding her down. (168)

Mary's father claims to be showing Mary that the world is sick and that she is not safe in it. But it is clear that he is scaring her into submission by showing her how women's disobedience is punished. This deeply disturbs Mary, who begins to imagine the faces of the murdered women in the dark and saying their names "as if calling a class register" (169). After killing her mother, her father keeps sending newspaper clippings to Mary, "as if to say, your mother wasn't the first and won't be the last" (169). For a mistreated person bombarded by messages about actual violence against women, reading novels about twisted rationalization of murdering them would most definitely be triggering, if not scarring. In that light, Mr Fox's words would be harmful.

The message seems straightforward and it might make the reader uncomfortable. Is Oyeyemi really suggesting that writing fiction about murders and death actually affects the behaviour or condition of people in real life? It is easy to accuse Mary of "the sort of logic that guides Parental Advisory labels" (Kyzer). But I believe that Oyeyemi is not making a stand on that subject, only making us aware of the power of words and that everyone possesses it. The stand I believe she *is* firmly making is against the rationalisation of violence against women and the tendency of society to sympathise with the perpetrators.

This tendency to blame the victim instead of the aggressor is horrifyingly real and has been studied. For example, 23 studies were conducted in 61 countries, where participants were asked to explain the reasons for intimate partner violence against women in various hypothetical situations. "Almost invariably, the explanations given implied that the woman was to blame." The justifications people mentioned ranged from the woman burning a meal or serving it late, neglecting a child, refusing to have sex or talking back to the husband; to infidelity, women "asking for it" and provocative behaviour (Gracia 380).

The results of these studies are similar to the excuses Mr Fox gives for always killing off his heroines: "it was because he needed to let off steam after a hard day's scraping and bowing at work, it was because she was irritating and stupid, it was because she lied to him, made a fool of him" (Oyeyemi 141). Mary simply realises these similarities and prefers the power of words to be used to counteract these attitudes instead of reinforcing them.



### Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*

Kurt Vonnegut's 1987 novel *Bluebeard, the autobiography of Rabo Karabekian (1916-1988)* is not as much a retelling of the fairy tale as a renunciation of bloodshed and discrimination such as are depicted in that story. *Bluebeard* is a fictional autobiography of Karabekian's life, interspersed with his record of the months in which he wrote it. Rabo Karabekian was born in the United States, a son of survivors of the Armenian genocide. As a young man he became the apprentice of the great illustrator Dan Gregory. Rabo had a perfect technique, but his works lacked the soul Gregory was famous for. Rabo made friends with Gregory's mistress, Marilee Kemp, and eventually they made love. Rabo was kicked out and joined the army, where he lost an eye. After the war he became a respected abstract expressionist painter of solid colour paintings, adorned with pieces of colourful tape. However, after a few years the faulty paint began to peel off the canvasses and Rabo became the laughing stock of the art world. Rabo married twice, first Dorothy, who left him, and then Edith, who died after twenty years of marriage.

At the time of writing, Rabo lives in a large mansion on Long Island with his grand collection of paintings. One day, Rabo meets a woman on the beach and by the end of the day, he has invited her to live with him. This woman is Circe Berman, a writer of young adult novels. She is a very curious person and investigates every crevice of Rabo's mansion. The only place she is not allowed to go is his studio, located in a large potato barn near the house, windowless and locked with six padlocks. In the end, though, she manages to convince him to show her what is inside. Rabo's secret is an enormous 8 by 64 feet photorealistic painting full of soul, showing the day when World War II ended in Europe, as Rabo himself experienced it. The painting depicts a valley in the countryside, where thousands of people are gathered. Released prisoners, soldiers, lunatics and concentration camp survivors, each and every one with a unique war story which Rabo can relate, if asked. He opens the barn to captivated visitors. The painting's title: *Now It's the Women's Turn*.

Although this is not a typical retelling, there are certain parallels between Vonnegut's *Bluebeard* and the fairy tale of the same title. Rabo himself suggests that he is a sort of a Bluebeard figure. He does not have a frightfully ugly blue beard, but he does have a nasty scar as a result of losing his eye, and always wears an eye-patch. Circe Berman often asks for the keys to the locked-up potato barn, but Rabo answers

with: “Look: think about something else, anything else. I am Bluebeard, and my studio is my forbidden chamber as far as you’re concerned” (46). Rabo does not mean this literally though, he is not a murderer, and shares only superficial similarities with that villain. In fact, his short relation of the Bluebeard tale reveals his opinion on Bluebeard’s barbarity and his rationalisation of it. “He catches her just at the point she is gazing aghast at the bodies of all his former wives in there, all of whom he has murdered, save for the first one, for looking behind the door. The first one got murdered for something else” (46), Rabo writes. Rabo focuses on the absurdity of murdering women for looking behind a door, in a world where women are often punished disproportionately for disobedience. By mentioning Bluebeard’s first wife, that she “got murdered for something else,” he also points out that disobedience is only a justification; in reality “violence against women is a manifestation of patriarchal systems” (Hunnicut 561). This is the same kind of rationalisation Mary warned against in Oyeyemi’s novel.

Unlike Gaiman in “The White Road” and France in *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard*, Vonnegut does not depict his protagonist as innocent or absolve him of all his crimes. Neither is he an almost comical looking murderous tyrant. Women are also not portrayed as suppressing their husbands or using their superior power of words to destroy them. Rabo may not have killed his wives, but he was not perfect. He was “leery of women” (147), paid more attention to art than his first wife, and was quick to accept misogynistic views from his master. However, his views develop as he learns from people with experience, such as Marilee and Circe, and by the end of the book, he is a well-rounded character.

Rabo is no Bluebeard, but another character in the novel is reminiscent of him. Dan Gregory, Rabo’s master, is a man with a secret. On the surface, he is “the most meticulous illustrator of this century” (44), a rich and famous New York artist. But in private, he regularly beats his model and mistress, Marilee Kemp, and throws her down the stairs. Like Bluebeard, Dan Gregory rationalises his violence. The reason he threw Marilee down the stairs was not that she entered a forbidden chamber, but that she sent some of Gregory’s expensive but abundant art materials to Rabo. Gregory renounces all responsibility for his actions and says that Marilee was clumsy, drank too much and fell down the stairs. “Women will never take the blame for anything,” Gregory told Rabo. “No matter what troubles they bring on themselves, they won’t rest until they’ve found some man to blame for it” (142).

In the fairy tale, Bluebeard sets his wives clear rules: do not go into the chamber. In Vonnegut's version, things are more subtle. The rules women are not allowed to break are formed by a patriarchal society and are often unspoken. As Kate Millett wrote: "When a system of power is thoroughly in command, it has scarcely need to speak itself aloud" (quoted in Fetterley, xix). Dan Gregory punishes Marilee when she does not conform to the role of a submissive, powerless woman – such as when she shows interest in someone else, or simply expresses curiosity towards modern art, a movement Gregory despises. But although Bluebeard's command is not presented in plain language, the power of words is still a very important force in *Bluebeard*.

Vonnegut explores the power of words extensively in his novel; in terms of government propaganda, the power of literature, and the power of friends and family's opinions and persuasion on oneself. Like Oyeyemi in *Mr Fox*, Vonnegut recognizes that men possess the power of words as much as women. Furthermore, although violence is depicted as a very male kind of power, the power of words is not made out to counterbalance it or even be its opposite, as it is in the fairy tales. Words can have the power to encourage violence as much as they can discourage it. They can also change and shape our worldview and, by extension, influence our actions. The message of the culture that surrounds us day in and day out influences our thinking, both negatively and positively. Rabo mentions how sick of war Americans used to be after the first World War, but that now "for the sake of the economy" the message of political speeches, newspaper columns, television and movies has to be that "the only way a boy can become a man is in a shoot-out of some kind" (67). Circe Berman, on the other hand, writes immensely popular stories for teenagers and young people, which help them figure out their place in the world. Rabo is very aware of this power of words, but is himself incredibly receptive to it. He adapts Gregory's misogynistic attitudes while he is his apprentice. For example, when Gregory tells Rabo that women always blame men for everything and that they take everything personally, and asks Rabo if he has ever noticed that, Rabo does not doubt him. "'Yes, sir,' I said. It seemed that I *had* noticed that, now that he mentioned it" (142).

Marilee is another person who influences Rabo with her words. They deeply affect him, and although he does not change right away, his painting *Now It's the Women's Turn*, shows that her views become his as well. Rabo's realisation of what men are really capable of, in terms of violence, come from his experiences in the war. It is Marilee, however, who makes him realise how often and systematically that violence

is used against women. Fourteen years after Gregory throws Rabo out, Rabo visits Marilee again. By then, Rabo is a veteran and Marilee a widowed countess in an Italian palazzo. Rabo goes to her expecting to get laid, after having told her over the phone that his marriage was on the rocks and that he had had an abundance of female attention during the war. When he arrives, he gets a rather colder reception than he expected. Marilee ridicules Rabo's alleged luck with women and makes him realise that the women who came onto him were desperate and "would do anything for food or protection, for themselves and the children and the old people, since the young men were dead or gone away" (224).

In her essay "Wartime Sexual Violence against Women: A Feminist Response," Margaret Stetz stresses that sexual violence against women during war has always existed, and the acts are ones of aggression and domination. Often, the violence and exploitation of women is organized and officially sanctioned, "especially when dealing with the procurement of women for sexual use by combatants" (Stetz 138). This is exactly what Marilee tries to make Rabo realize when she tells him that the point of war is to put women in vulnerable positions so that men can take advantage of them:

"It's always men against women, with the men only pretending to fight amongst themselves."

"They can pretend pretty hard sometimes," I said.

"They know that the ones who pretend the hardest," she said, "get their pictures in the paper and medals afterwards" (224).

Marilee tells Rabo, for the first time, that Gregory had been violent towards her. She also confides in Rabo that her father beat her every day, that she was raped by the whole high school football team, and that the Ziegfield Follies stage manager threatened to fire her and throw acid in her face if she did not become a part of his "stable of whores" (221). Marilee zeros in on the difference between men and women, and claims that men and violence go hand in hand. Lucrezia, one of her servants, lost a leg when she stepped on a mine. "Only a male would design and bury a device that ingenious [...] Women are so useless and unimaginative, aren't they? All they ever think of planting in the dirt is the seed of something beautiful or edible. The only missile they can ever think of throwing at anybody is a ball or a bridal bouquet" (225). Rabo's reactions to Marilee's opinions are not defensive and he does not go into denial like Dan Gregory. "You hit

the nail on the head,” he says instead, and then admits that he has never felt worse in his life. He asks to leave, but Marilee refuses, saying that she has now reduced Rabo “to the level of self-esteem which men try to force on women” (225) and that they might now become friends again.

There are no bodies in Rabo’s potato barn. “In Bluebeard’s secret chamber is death; in Rabo’s a painting that depicts life and death, the survivors of a six-year nightmare of bloodletting” (Rampton). But Vonnegut is not acquitting Bluebeard of his sins. On Rabo’s painting, the devastating consequences of war fought between men are apparent. The tone of the book, as well as the message of Rabo’s last painting, is decidedly anti-war. The gigantic work of art proclaims: Look what men have done! Look what men are capable of! Vonnegut expands the Bluebeard figure – he is no longer one single person, but every man who uses violence.

## Conclusion

The fairy tale “Bluebeard,” as well as its variants, is about a conflict between a serial killer groom and his bride, who discovers his secrets. This conflict manifests itself as a struggle between physical and verbal powers. The concepts of responsibility, blame and repercussion are touched upon, as the groom kills his wives when they disobey his rules. Numerous works of literature have taken inspiration from this fairy tale over the years. These retellings and adaptations are highly diverse in their subject matter, message and affinities to the source materials. The authors focus on different aspects of the fairy tales and provide various answers to the issues of blame and power discrepancy – and some provide no answers at all. Dickens’ “Captain Murderer” and Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” underscore the importance of physical power. Dickens’ characters conform to traditional gender roles, while Carter’s heroic mother-figure does not. The other adaptations also focus on the power dichotomy while discussing questions of blame and responsibility as well. France’s *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard* and Gaiman’s “The White Road” endeavour to absolve Bluebeard of his sins, while Oyeyemi’s *Mr Fox* and Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard* emphasize the severity of them instead.

In Charles Dickens’s “Captain Murderer,” the utterly horrible villain kills and eats his wives, and no one comes to their rescue. His last wife manages to destroy him, but must use her words and ingenuity to do so, as she herself does not use physical violence. Since she has to give up her own life in the process, one can wonder whether the implications of the story are that violence is more effective than other kinds of power.

Angela Carter’s short story “The Bloody Chamber” tells of a young girl who discovers that her husband is a murderous brute under his charming exterior. What is distinct about this adaptation is that Bluebeard is defeated not by the power of words, which the bride does not possess, but by physical power at the hand of a woman – the bride’s mother. By changing the gender of the rescuer, Carter denounces the conservative norms of gendered behaviour. However, the bride’s vulnerability and perceived complicity in her husband’s corruption prevents this story from handling the theme of power in a simple or clear-cut way.

Anatole France uses a different approach in *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard*. His goal is to clear Bluebeard’s name, by explaining that his reputation is due to misunderstanding. In fact, his wives were the ones who plagued Bluebeard by using

their power of words to spread false rumours about him, and eventually caused his unfair death. By absolving Bluebeard and vilifying his wives, France is concordant with many folklorists, who focus on the wife's transgressions over the husbands murders.

In Neil Gaiman's "The White Road" the women also use their words to manipulate men and kill the innocent Mr Fox. Because the women are intriguing and empowered characters, this story is not as blatant in its defamation of them as France's story. But their groundless accusations and unreasonable vindictiveness negate their good qualities and the reader's sympathies lie with Mr Fox.

In her novel *Mr Fox*, Helen Oyeyemi stresses the importance of the power of words and that men also possess it. Mary tells the novelist Mr Fox stories which are supposed to show him how damaging, as well as freeing, words can be. Mr Fox's words, for example, normalize and rationalise violence against women, even though he does not realise this. Words and violence are not depicted as opposite forces, but as influencing each other.

*Bluebeard* by Kurt Vonnegut does not have a clear villain. Aspects of Bluebeard can be seen in Dan Gregory's domestic violence, Rabo's secrecy and soldiers' taking advantage of women in war conditions. Violence is portrayed as being a male power, but both genders can use the power of words. Like in Oyeyemi's novel, the power of words is a double-edged sword, but its role in making sense of the world and influencing people in a good way cannot be underestimated.

The subject matter and message of the fairy tale "Bluebeard" and its variants are thought-provoking and have struck a chord with scholars as well as fiction writers, who have been writing about them since they were first published on print. While issues such as victim-blaming, gender equality, and the relationship between power and violence remain important to people, these multifaceted fairy tales will surely continue to be discussed and rewritten.

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