1

CHAPTER

The Attractions of "Bluebeard": The Origins and Fortunes of a Folktale

> You had the sense to see you were caught in a story, and the sense to see that you could change it to another one . . . for many things may and do happen, stories change themselves, and these stories are not histories and have not happened.
>
> —A. S. Byatt, "The Story of the Eldest Princess"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard" and Its Lessons

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

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

Just who was Bluebeard and how did he get such a bad name? As Anatole France reminds us in his story "The Seven Wives of Bluebeard," Charles Perrault composed "the first biography of this *seigneur*" and established his reputation as an "accomplished villain" and the "most perfect model of cruelty that ever trod the earth."[12] Cultural historians have been quick to claim that Perrault's "Bluebeard" is based on fact, that it broadcasts the misdeeds of various noblemen, among them Cunmar of Brittany and Gilles de Rais.[13] But neither Cunmar the Accursed, who decapitated his pregnant wife, Triphine, nor Gilles de Rais, the marshal of France who was hanged in 1440 for murdering hundreds of children, presents himself as a definitive model for Bluebeard, though both were frequently invoked in nineteenth-century pantomimes and plays to assure audiences that there was a certain historical truth to the fairy-tale tyrant, and they continue to act as narrative magnets when the story is retold. With his ghoulish forbidden chamber and his magical key that betrays intruders, Bluebeard remains a figure constructed as a collective fantasy, even if some of his features are drawn from bits and pieces of historical realities that embed themselves in the folk narrative. Like the Russian Baba Yaga, the British giants, the glaestigs of the Scottish Highlands, or the rakshasas of India, he is firmly anchored in the domain of folkloric fright.

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

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

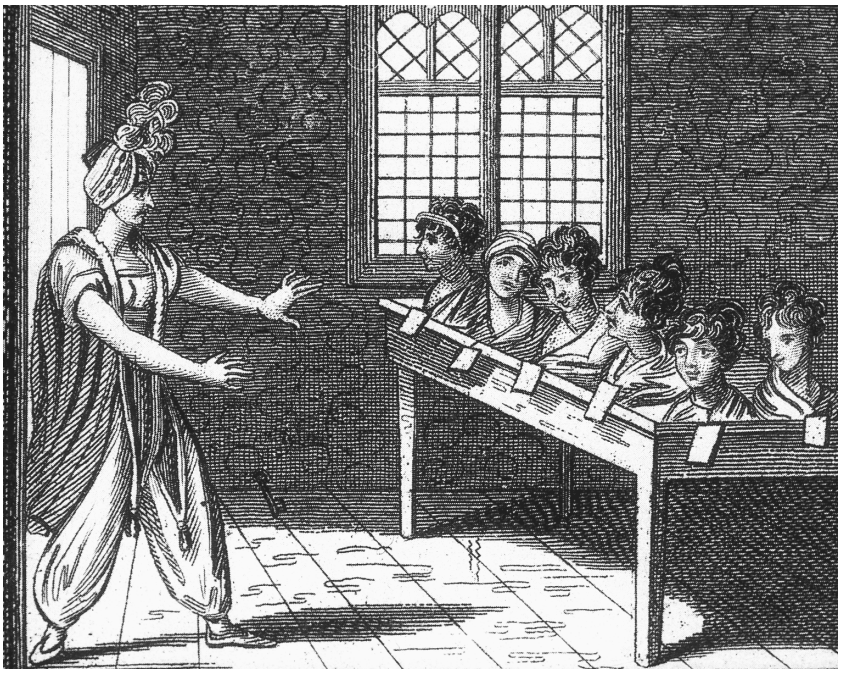

Figure 1. Anonymous, *Bluebeard, or the Fatal Effects of Curiosity and Disobedience*, 1808. Bluebeard's wife is horrified by the sight of her five predecessors, whose well-preserved heads are posed on a table, each neatly labeled. Note that the wife wears Oriental dress, while the five wives, some with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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

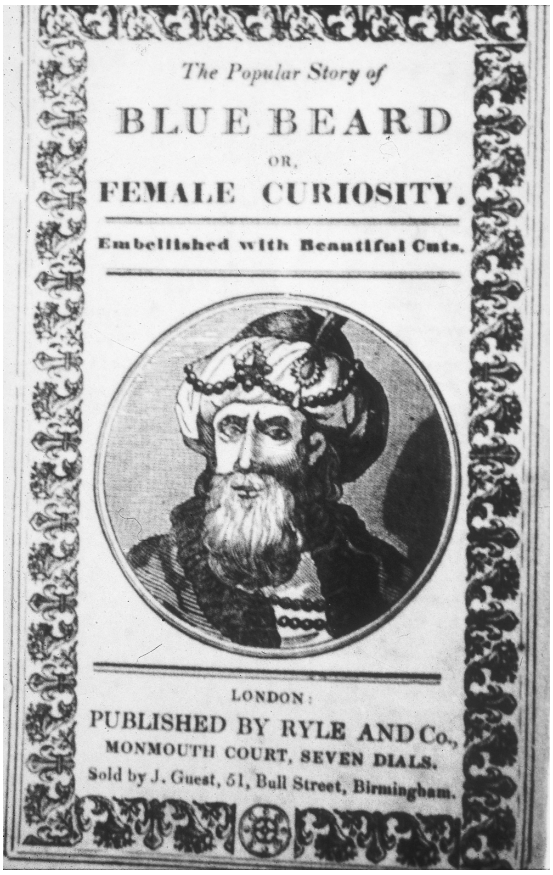

Figure 4. *The Popular Story of Bluebeard or, Female Curiosity*, circa 1850. The cover to this chapbook portrays a turbaned Bluebeard, whose story discloses his brush with female curiosity. Note how the "beautiful cuts" that "embellish" the book suggest the pleasures of the horror genre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Evidently, the moral of this tale implies it is better for a child to expose oneself to hardships than to neglect one's duty.
>
> Indeed, virtue may sometimes seem ill fated, but it is always crowned with success. Of course, reason, even at its strongest, is a weak dike against mad love and ardent ecstasy, especially if a lover is not afraid to squander rich treasures.
>
> Finally, we must take into account that clear water and brown bread are sufficient nourishment for all young women provided that they have good habits, and that there is not a damsel under the skies who does not imagine herself beautiful.

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

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

CHAPTER 1

"Bluebeard" and Its Illustrators

In the long and distinguished line of artists who illustrated Perrault's "Bluebeard," virtually none focused on the carnage in the forbidden chamber. What would seem to be the most spectacular scene in the story, the very scene that has aroused curiosity, is occluded and denied representation. Rather than drawing attention to the moment when curiosity is satisfied, illustrators portray either the arousal of curiosity or the excitement and dread awakened by the anticipation of satisfaction. The curious woman becomes the real curiosity, the figure that cries out for representation, and that also becomes the source of our attentive fascination and wonder. A figure of excess in her own right, she may not be able to compete with the breathtakingly morbid tableau beyond the door, but she nonetheless becomes something of a curiosity, if not of a monstrosity.[21]

Gustave Doré, the prolific nineteenth-century French artist who illustrated *The Divine Comedy*, the Bible, Shakespeare, and Poe, presents Bluebeard's wife as a young woman seduced by the desire for the forbidden. Bluebeard dominates the compositional space in the first of a series of four engravings to accompany Perrault's "Bluebeard," with one hand raised in a cautionary gesture, the other tendering the key to the prohibited chamber. Transfixed by the key, his wife encircles it with her two hands, oblivious to her husband's warnings. Even as Bluebeard and his wife fill the visual space and are almost joined in compositional terms, it is clear that the wife is on more intimate terms with the key than with her admonishing husband, who in turn seems fascinated by and fixated on the curiosity that his wife has become.

Dwarfed by sumptuous surroundings that include oversized candelabra, plates, tables, and suits of armor, Bluebeard's wife and her female companions manifest their collective curiosity as they peer behind draperies and open chests in Doré's second illustration for Perrault's story. The drawn sword on the left prefigures the risks of curiosity, while the open book next to the serpentine candelabra base could allude to the biblical tale concerning the consequences of curiosity. Here again, Doré, like many illustrators of the Bluebeard story, is at pains to take his cue from Perrault's first moral and to emphasize that this story is about, more than anything else, the perils of curiosity and how easily its seductive power takes hold of all women.

In two additional scenes, Doré illustrated the scene of rescue, showing the brothers of Bluebeard's wife galloping in the direction of the castle, from whose turrets Sister Anne waves her handkerchief. In a typically vast

and majestic landscape, the brothers penetrate the dark spaces of the forest surrounding Bluebeard's castle. At the castle, the brothers plunge their swords into Bluebeard's back, while their sister nearly expires with fear in the background. A gargoyle with breasts is positioned above a decorative sword penetrating a heart and encircled by a snake, which seems to signify the marriage of love, treachery, and violence in this tale. Doré's illustrations, with their technical sophistication and iconographic density, clearly address an adult audience, one that will be attuned to the marital issues at stake in the story and will recognize how curiosity and monstrosity are wedded in the figure of husband and wife.

Walter Crane published his illustrations to "Bluebeard" in the popular series *Walter Crane's Toy Books*, just sixteen years after Doré's *Tales of Mother Goose* had appeared in Paris in 1859. Crane's Bluebeard, like Doré's, is presented as an aristocrat, a nobleman who is both "rich and grand." The British illustrator seems to have been inspired by Doré's temptation scene, for he too shows husband and wife in an intimate moment, with the husband observing the wife's fascination with the keys offered to her. Again the raised finger, the warning, and the arousal of desire.

In Crane's next illustration, Bluebeard's wife is shown, key in hand, on her way to the forbidden chamber. She descends the stairs, her body framed by a tapestry depicting Eve face-to-face with the serpent while she is picking an apple from the Tree of Knowledge. In the background, six of the wife's companions, driven by the desire to penetrate the secrets of enclosed spaces, rummage through trunks, inspect the contents of cabinets, admire themselves in mirrors, and explore the deepest recesses of the mansion. "Succumbing to temptation" is the "sin of the fall, the sin of Eve," one representative critical voice asserts. A nineteenth-century Scottish version of the tale summarizes in its title what appears to be the collective critical wisdom on this tale: "The Story of Bluebeard, or, the effects of female curiosity."[22]

Although we never see the "horrid sight" that meets the eyes of Bluebeard's wife, we witness her reaction to what is described in the narrative accompanying the illustrations: "For there upon the floor was blood, and on the walls were wives, / For Bluebeard first had married them, then cut their throats with knives." Less expressive than most wives of Bluebeard, Crane's figure seems almost serene as she absorbs the horrifying spectacle of the dead wives.

In Crane's interpretation of the story, Bluebeard becomes increasingly demonic in visual terms. His first appearance marks him as a sophisticated, elegantly dressed nobleman, whose charming smile suggests benevolence rather than malice. But when he is seized by the brothers who rush

Figure 10. Gustave Doré, "Bluebeard," 1861. Bluebeard's wife is paralyzed by fear, while her two brothers plunge their swords into her husband's back. A gargoyle observes the murder with disapproval, while below him, a sword penetrating a heart and entwined by a serpent adds a macabre decorative touch.

in with their swords and are about to "cut the murderer down," he takes on the stereotypical features of the wicked Jew, bearded, robed, hook nosed, with satanic furrows in his brow. The sandy-haired assailants, despite their actions, stand in sharp physiognomic contrast to Bluebeard.

If there was any strategy at all to the efforts of nineteenth-century illustrators to align Bluebeard with aristocrats, devils, and Jews, it was no doubt to distance the "ordinary man" from the kind of behavior manifested by Perrault's villain.[23] Perrault, in assuring us that Bluebeard's behavior could only have happened "once upon a time," also created a link to what became in France the supreme trope for "once upon a time": *The Thousand and One Nights*, which had captured the imagination of the Continent beginning in 1704, when Antoine Galland published the first

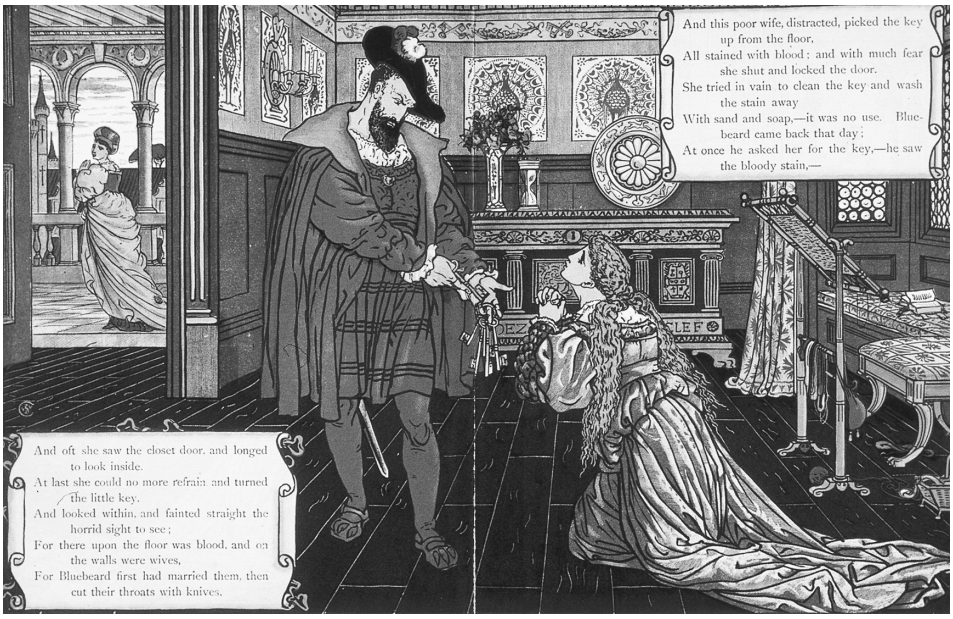

Figure 14. "Bluebeard." *Walter Crane's Toy Books*, 1875. Bluebeard's wife, confronted with the blood-stained key, begs her husband for mercy. Sister Anne can be seen, dressed in a flowing pink gown, about to summon the brothers of Bluebeard's wife.

volume of his French translation. Although it took nearly two centuries for the English translation to appear—Sir Richard Burton's translation did not appear until 1885—chapbook versions of tales from *The Thousand and One Nights* appeared in English within a year or so of Galland's translation. And so it is small wonder that Bluebeard—as he entered the twentieth century, though also even earlier—was resettled in the Orient, complete with robe, turban, and scimitar. As a serial murderer of wives, Bluebeard could be easily aligned with King Schahriyar, who plans to murder successive wives on his wedding night but is dissuaded from this practice by Scheherazade.

That Bluebeard was repeatedly associated with the Near and Far East becomes evident from Andrew Lang's insistence, in the introduction to *The Blue Fairy Book*, that "Monsieur de la Barbe Bleue was *not* a Turk!" "One of the ladies' brothers was a Dragoon, the other a Mousquetaire, of M. d'Artagnan's company perhaps," he added. "They were all French

folk and Christians; had he been a Turk, Blue Beard need not have wedded to but one wife at a time."[24] These remarks, published in 1889, fell on deaf ears, for illustrators found Bluebeard's connection to the Orient congenial to producing lavishly exotic costumes and settings.

Edmund Dulac, whose illustrations for "Bluebeard" in Arthur Quiller-Couch's *The Sleeping Beauty, and Other Fairy Tales from the Old French* (1910) cemented the connection between Bluebeard and the Orient, had built his reputation as an illustrator with images for the *Arabian Nights*. The first of his seven illustrations for Quiller-Couch's retelling of Perrault's story shows a turbaned Bluebeard assisting a wife with European features into a barque floating on his private canal. Fatima, who is finally given a name in Quiller-Couch's version, is depicted in haremlike surroundings.[25] One of four women in Bluebeard's mansion, she and her companions luxuriate in a posh setting that suggests a state of quiet languor.

Unlike Doré and Crane, Dulac does not take us to the threshold of the forbidden chamber. Instead he takes us inside the room containing the corpses of Bluebeard's previous wives. But Dulac does not let us view the scene through Fatima's eyes. We see Bluebeard's wife as witness to the grim spectacle behind the door, and the carnage is hidden from view. The keyhole view of Fatima, who is illuminated from behind by the light issuing from the door, produces a compelling visual effect in the beauty of its composition and colors. An alluring snapshot, it captures Bluebeard's wife with a look of dread written over her face and gives us the obverse of the grotesque scene of corpses hanging from the walls.

Dulac's remaining scenes show the Oriental tyrant in all his fury and his wife in a state of apprehension. Bluebeard towers over his dainty wife, determined to add Fatima to his chamber of horrors. She, in turn, summons Sister Anne, who has retained her European appellation, while Bluebeard, wielding his scimitar, orders his wife downstairs for her execution. In an architectural setting that is classical rather than Oriental, Bluebeard's brothers pursue the husband and slay him as he tumbles down a staircase.

When Arthur Rackham turned his hand to the Bluebeard story, he too moved its location from France to eastern regions. His famous silhouette of a turbaned Bluebeard shaking his fist at his wife who in turn beseeches Sister Anne to look out for her brothers gives us delicate latticework and eastern turrets that create the effect of a story from the *Arabian Nights* rather than from a French anthology. Rackham, more skillfully than any other artist, also depicted, in another illustration, the excitement, energy, and desire that draw Bluebeard's wife to the forbidden chamber. With a furtive look on her face showing that she is as anxious about transgression as she is eager to engage in it, Bluebeard's wife turns the key in the

lock and is about to push open the door that will reveal her husband's dark crimes.

The extravagant attention paid to the scene of temptation and to the scene of disobedience in "Bluebeard" seems to have exhausted the ability of illustrators to portray what might otherwise be considered a scene that invites visual representation. The German artist Hermann Vogel produced in 1887 one of the few scenes that disclosed what Bluebeard's wife finds in the bloody chamber. Capturing a moment of shock, he showed the key falling from her hand as she sets eyes on the corpses hung on the walls, as if on display. Vogel gives us six previous wives, the standard number once a French variant of Perrault's tale established the seventh wife as the tale's protagonist.[26] A chopping block and ax in the foreground reveal the scene of the crimes that reflect Bluebeard as a master in the art of murder.

Whose Story Is It?

"Bluebeard and His Seven Wives," the title of Anatole France's Bluebeard story, alerts us to the centrality of the bloodthirsty protagonist, whose nameless wives remain in his orbit, without real identities. Yet although most folktales and literary versions of "Bluebeard" identify only the villain by name, the story, as we know from Stephen King's *The Shining*, is intuitively seen as focusing on the wife. When Danny, the clairvoyant child in King's novel, reflects on the Bluebeard story, he notes: "Actually the story was about Bluebeard's wife, a pretty lady that had corn-colored hair like Mommy."[27] That view is supported by other commentators on the story, who point out that, even if the tale has two subjects, its "rightful protagonist" is the wife.[28] The ethical issues connected with Bluebeard's wife—disobedience, betrayal of trust, intrusiveness—have repeatedly preoccupied critics, who associate her disruptive behavior with the transgressive acts of Pandora, Eve, Psyche, and all those other mythical, biblical, and folkloric women who seem to be too curious for their own good or for the good of the human race.

While the wife may appear to occupy the "moral center" of Bluebeard tales, she is in some ways the story's protagonist only by default: "Any interest we have in the story lies with its villain," Lydia Millet tells us.[29] What arouses our curiosity, she insists, is both the character who has something to hide and the secret that he is harboring. The villain and his bloodthirsty deeds, in other words, have a narrative verve that exceeds that of the prospective victim and her act of defiance. Folktales never let us see inside the minds of their protagonists, but given the choice to read

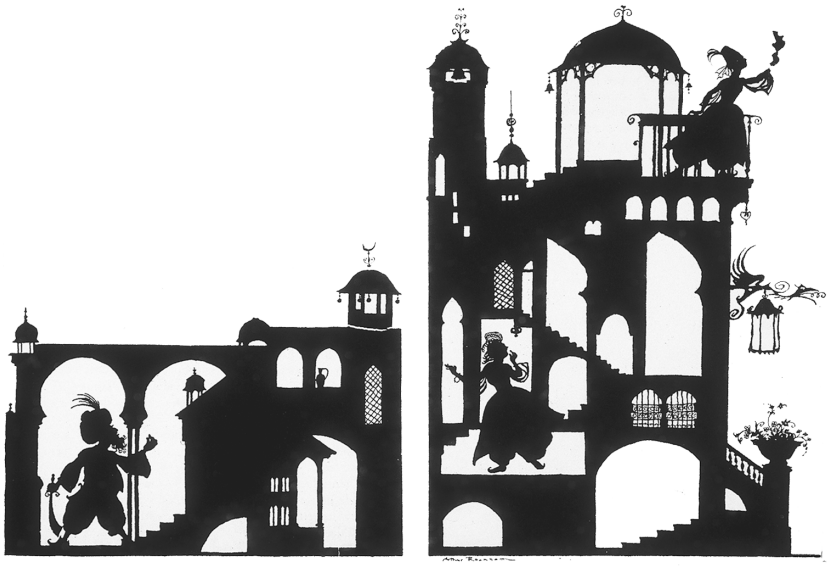

Figure 26. Arthur Rackham, "Bluebeard," 1919. Arthur Rackham's silhouette provides a fascinating cross section of Bluebeard's palace, with the husband demanding that the wife descend to her execution, the wife straining to learn if her brothers are on the way, and Sister Anne surveying the horizon for the brothers.

the mind of either Bluebeard or his wife, most readers would elect to enter the taboo regions of Bluebeard's thoughts.

"Don't you put the past in a room, in a cellar, and lock the door and just never go in there? Because that's what I do," Tom Ripley tells his friend Peter in the screenplay *The Talented Mr. Ripley.*[30] To survive, flourish, and thrive, Tom must somehow repress the two murders he has committed. That he uses the metaphor of the mind as a house, with the cellar as the space for what he wants to repress, is not at all unusual. As Mark Edmundson points out, Freud had suggested long ago "that the psyche was a house, specifically a haunted old Victorian manse," and in that metaphor, the basement becomes the perfect site for storing what is unwelcome in public spaces.[31]

When Tom embellishes the metaphor, it becomes evident how common it is to think of intimacy in terms of providing a key to a locked room containing repressed psychic material: "Then you meet someone special and all you want to do is toss them the key, say *open up, step inside*, but

Figure 28. Otto Brausewetter, "Bluebeard," 1865. With keys dangling from her waist, Bluebeard's wife recoils in horror at the sight of the mutilated bodies of her husband's previous wives in a tub. An ax leaning against the tub reveals the murder weapon.

you can't because it's dark and there are demons and if anybody saw how ugly it was . . . ." Tom Ripley perfectly articulates the double-edged nature of Bluebeard's offer of a key to his wife. In making the gesture, Bluebeard establishes intimacy and trust at the same time that he presents an instrument that invites disobedience and betrayal. "I keep wanting to do that," Ripley insists. "Fling open the door—let the light in, clean

everything out. If I could get a huge eraser and rub everything out . . . starting with myself." What Ripley realizes, of course, is that you can give someone the key, but that the room may need to be tidied up or cleaned out before its contents can be displayed to a partner. He concludes by grasping that the cleansing actually implies self-eradication, for the contents of that cellar represent the very foundations of his mental world.

The metaphor that Tom Ripley uses to characterize his inner life is literalized as a physical space in folkloric versions of Bluebeard. The importance of that space is underlined by the title of Béla Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle*, a work in which the castle becomes a haunted third protagonist in the fairy-tale plot. Harboring the forbidden chamber storing Bluebeard's secrets and inspiring the wife to uncover those secrets, the dwelling becomes the site of mystery and morbid fascination. In Bartók's opera, it actually weeps and sighs under the weight of its horrifying secrets, becoming an architectural embodiment of its owner's mind, the outside of Bluebeard's inside. If fairy tales cannot take us inside the minds of their protagonists, they easily compensate for that expressive lack by externalizing feelings in actions, settings, and props. Just as Gothic plots literalize Freudian concepts of how the psyche operates, a fairy tale like "Bluebeard" can stage the intricate workings of the mind, making manifest what is usually hidden from view.

Just whose story, then, is it? Is "Bluebeard" a cautionary tale with a moral pointed toward the wife? Is it a story of suspense focusing on the husband's mysterious past? Is it a "double-plotted narrative" about two people who mirror each other in their use of duplicity?[32] Or is it a psychological thriller located in the mansion of the mind? As we shall see, that issue has been hotly contested and has divided readers and rewriters into several distinct camps, each with its own interpretive spin on the story. Yet "Bluebeard" can also be viewed, in a compromise solution, as a story with an impassioned social purpose, a mission to broadcast what can go wrong in marriage. Situating us squarely in the domestic arena, from the honeymoon to the first lovers' quarrel, it stands virtually alone among our canonical fairy tales in its negation of a "happily ever after" ending. It gives us an up-close-and-personal view of marriage, confirming everything we didn't want to know and were afraid to ask about it.

If most fairy tales do not take us beyond the words "happily ever after," it is in part because marriage is, in some ways, an institution haunted by the threat of boredom. When we say that a story ends with marriage, we imply that marriage offers closure, balancing out the highs and lows of the courtship plot and producing a state of narrative equilibrium, one destined to have tedium as its inevitable affective outcome. "Bluebeard"

addresses the problematics of "happily ever after," challenging the notion of postmarital stability and interrogating issues that have unsettled the institution of marriage in a variety of times and places. Dismantling the myth of "happily ever after," it raises a multitude of specters haunting the institution of marriage.

The questions taken up by the story can be encapsulated in two phrases that define men as "having something to hide" and women as "wanting to know too much." The term "Bluebeard" has come to signify a roué, a rake, or a libertine, and Bluebeard's wife, as we shall see, is regularly associated with curiosity, nosiness, and prying. The friction that develops between experienced men and inquisitive women accounts for the sparks thrown by the story over the centuries.[33] If husbands in these marriage plots are threatened with discovery, the wives are equally imperiled by a sense of betrayal. These are the issues that, with all their rich figurative and literal variations and their sudden reversals, have kept the story alive as a vehicle for thinking about questions of trust and fidelity in marriage. Should a man's past be laid to rest or does it inform and color his present? When does curiosity shade into snooping and a form of prying that undermines trust? How do two people establish a relationship of which the touchstone is fidelity?

"Bluebeard" versus "Beauty and the Beast"

That Bluebeard takes a bow in virtually every one of the great national fairy-tale collections compiled in the nineteenth century offers evidence that the story's preoccupations had a powerful hold on the imagination of our ancestors. Whether we leaf through Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose*, thumb the pages of the Grimms' *Children's Stories and Household Tales*, browse in Joseph Jacobs's *English Fairy Tales*, or pore over Alexander Afanasev's *Russian Fairy Tales*, Bluebeard is there with his forbidden chamber of horrors, as if to give the lie to the myth of romantic love broadcast by other tales in those collections.

Fairy-tale anthologies from the nineteenth century suggest that the story of Bluebeard was once at least as prominent a tale type as "Beauty and the Beast." While the one tale takes us beyond marriage, showing how a man can turn into a figurative beast, the other unfolds during the period of courtship, revealing how a real beast can have warm human qualities. "Beauty and the Beast," like "Cinderella," "Snow White," and other classic fairy tales, begins with an unhappy situation at home, centers on a romantic quest, and ends in visions of marital bliss.

"Bluebeard" represents a troubling flip side to "Beauty and the Beast," that quintessentially reassuring story that, according to the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, relieves the "anxious sexual fantasies" to which children are prey. "While sex may at first seem beastlike," Bettelheim declares, "in reality love between woman and man is the most satisfying of all emotions, and the only one that makes for permanent happiness."[34] "Bluebeard," by contrast, confirms a child's "worst fears about sex," for it places the marriage partner in the functional position usually reserved for the villain, ogre, or monster of the tale and shows marriage as an institution charged with life-threatening perils.

The "permanent happiness" promised by the myth of perfect romantic love in "Beauty and the Beast" is clearly more appealing than the disturbing anxieties about love and marriage articulated in "Bluebeard." "Beauty and the Beast," with its messages about the transformative power of compassion, makes for better bedtime reading, and that fact alone may explain the apparent erosion of cultural interest in "Bluebeard" in the United States. But while "Bluebeard" may have disappeared from the nursery, it has retained its power as a narrative for adults, as a story that challenges the myth of romantic love and acknowledges the realities of marital life.

Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera*, the nineteenth-century French novel on which the hit Broadway musical was based, reveals under what conditions "Beauty and the Beast" can modulate into "Bluebeard" and does much to explain why we prefer the one fairy tale to the other. Erik, the "monster" and "beast" who rules the Paris opera house, is so frightfully ugly that his own mother required him to wear a mask. As the Angel of Music, he woos the singer Christine Daaé, telling her: "Love me and you shall see. . . . If you loved me I should be as gentle as a lamb; and you could do anything with me that you pleased."[35] In the end, Christine is unable to translate compassion into the kind of passion required for marriage. Refusing to play Beauty to the Phantom's Beast, she turns into an "inquisitive" woman who first rips off the Phantom's mask, then seeks to enter his forbidden chamber. "I want to look at this room which I have never seen and which you have always kept from me. . . . It's a woman's curiosity" (294–95), Christine says in a playful tone, hoping to cajole Erik into compliance so that she can end his murderous streak. But when Erik recognizes that his Beauty has turned into a wife of Bluebeard, he retorts: "I don't like curious women, and you had better remember the story of *Blue-Beard* and be careful." "Beauty and the Beast" gives us a story in which compassion breaks the spell of monstrosity to produce a happy couple; "Bluebeard" shows us a woman so determined to dis-

cover her husband's dark secrets that she risks becoming twin monster to her husband.

It may be tempting to favor stories that stage the joys of heterosexual unions over grisly stories about murderous husbands, but it is important to understand the ways in which we have preserved our cultural memory of "Bluebeard," despite its virtual effacement in popular consciousness by the competing myth of "Beauty and the Beast." Why do writers, artists, and filmmakers keep repeating a story that seems to have slipped out of our collective cultural consciousness?

The tale of Bluebeard, one could argue, has a social logic that was probably more compelling for earlier cultures than for our own. Anxious fantasies about sex and marriage would hardly have been surprising in seventeenth-century France (where the story had its literary origins) and in other times and places where a woman might be promised to a man on whom she had never set eyes. The words of Mary Granville, a young British woman, married in 1717 at age seventeen to a sixty-year-old suitor, speak volumes about the ordeal of arranged marriages: "As to his person he was excessively fat [and] negligent in his dress, and took a vast quantity of snuff, which gave him a dirty look." She finds the man to whom she is betrothed "disgusting" rather than "engaging," and bemoans the fact that he is "hardly ever sober."[36]

On one level, "Bluebeard" can be read as culturally specific, revealing the risks women run when they marry at a relatively young age and enter the household of a stranger, often an older man. Women were the principal victims of family violence in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, as the French historian Michelle Perrot reports, and "one staple of the crime reports of the period was the woman whose body was hacked to pieces."[37] But on another level, "Bluebeard" is a tale that addresses, in the form of a horror story, with all its grotesque exaggerations, perennial anxieties about what can happen once the honeymoon is over.

The Woman Is Mobile

Before looking at variants of "Bluebeard" to discover how the narrative has been reframed in other cultures, I want to speculate further about why this story has undergone a kind of collective cultural repression and how it came to be revived by filmmakers in the 1940s and then once again by writers, filmmakers, and artists in the 1960s and after. It is telling that authors like Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter turned to "Bluebeard" for narrative inspiration and that a photographer like

Cindy Sherman created a picture book of the Grimms' variant of "Bluebeard" (a story that goes by the name of "Fitcher's Bird"). This new cultural investment in an old tale about a bad marriage has, I believe, little to do with a rise in divorce rates or with renewed concerns about conjugal intimacy and marital fidelity. But it does have a great deal to do with the nature of the tale's heroine and with the story's inversion of the traditional relationship between the seeker figures of fairy tales and the goals of their searches.

The Soviet semiotician Jurij Lotman has made a strong case for identifying two contrasting figures operating in mythic plots: an active, nomadic hero who crosses borders and boundaries to explore an enclosed space and an immobile figure who inhabits that space and figures as the target of the hero's conquest.[38] That myths have traditionally gendered the one male and the other female seems obvious. But as the film critic Carol J. Clover has shown, the distribution of these roles is not graven in stone, for mainstream horror films (think of *Silence of the Lambs*, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, or *Halloween*) position women as heroic combatants, figures who are not at all passive and who succeed in outsmarting formidable male adversaries, many of whom operate out of dark, subterranean spaces. The gendered division of labor to which Lotman alludes was also not as rigorously enforced in folktales as in myths. If we look, for example, at some of the tales from the Brothers Grimm that did not make it into our fairy-tale canon, we find that there are many male Cinderellas who suffer in silence and many active women who undertake journeys and carry out tasks to disenchant bridegrooms.

Clover sees this unsettling of gender conventions as a legacy of woman's liberation, which has given horror the image of "an angry woman—a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator of the kind of violence on which, in the low-mythic universe, the status of full protagonist rests."[39] To this persuasive analysis one could add that modern horror may also be tapping into an earlier narrative tradition, one that included folktales such as "Bluebeard," "The Robber Bridegroom," or "Fitcher's Bird," in which women figure as investigative agents (uncovering crimes and outwitting villains), while men function as the criminal guardians of dark, secret places. Like the heroines of high opera described by the cultural critic Catherine Clément, these women cross over a "rigorous invisible line" that makes them "unbearable" and places them in a situation of desperate vulnerability.[40]

In Perrault's narrative, Bluebeard's wife may show a certain investigative determination that links her to the heroines of modern horror, but she is decidedly less resolute than many of her folkloric cousins, who have

receded from cultural memory. Folklorists have succeeded in reviving these brides of ogres and showing how they use craft to defeat treacherous bridegrooms.

Bluebeard's Wife as Trickster

The French folklorist Paul Delarue has mapped the evolution of "Bluebeard," documenting the liberties taken by Perrault in transforming an oral folktale into a literary text.[41] The folk heroines of "Bluebeard" delay their executions by insisting on donning bridal clothes for the event (thus buttressing the folkloric connection between marriage and death) and prolong the possibility for rescue by recounting each and every item of bridal clothing. One of Bluebeard's wives plays for time with words suggesting that she wishes to tart herself up for her execution: "I must get my prettiest blouse . . . I must get my prettiest stockings . . . I must get my prettiest hat."[42] Perrault's heroine, by contrast, who asks her husband for "a little time to say my prayers," becomes a model of repentant piety. Unlike many folk heroines, who become agents of their own rescue by dispatching letter-carrying pet dogs or talking birds to their families with urgent calls for help, Perrault's heroine sends her sister up to the castle tower to watch for the brothers who had planned a visit that very day. Most important, folk versions of the tale evidently did not fault the heroine for her curiosity. To the contrary, when the young women in those stories stand before the forbidden chamber, they feel duty-bound to open its door. "I have to know what is in there," one young woman reflects just before turning the key. The pangs of conscience that beset Perrault's heroine are absent. These folkloric figures are often described as courageous: curiosity and valor enable them to come to the rescue of Bluebeard's previous wives (often the heroine's older sisters) by putting their dismembered body parts back together again and by providing them with safe passage home.

Although the story of Bluebeard has been read by countless contemporary commentators as turning on the matter of sexual fidelity, what really seems to be at issue, if one considers the folkloric evidence, is the heroine's discovery of her husband's misdeeds, her craft in delaying the execution of his murderous plans, and her ability to engineer her own rescue. In its bold proclamation of the perils of some marriages, "Bluebeard" endorses a regressive move back to the household of the heroine's childhood. Bluebeard's wife becomes a double of the British Jack, who liquidates the ogre and climbs back down the beanstalk to live happily ever after with his

mother. In fact, a Norwegian version of "Bluebeard," "The Hen Is Tripping in the Mountain," gives us a protagonist who is modeled on Molly Whuppie, the female counterpart to "Jack" of British folklore. The daughter of a widow whose sole possession is a hen, this girl succeeds in outwitting a "big, ugly mountain troll," rescuing her two sisters from his clutches, and living happily ever after with her family.[43]

When we consider the form in which "Bluebeard" circulated in an oral culture, it quickly becomes evident that the story must be closely related to two tales recorded by the Brothers Grimm. The first of these, "Fitcher's Bird," shows us the youngest of three sisters escaping the snares set by a sorcerer and rescuing her two sisters. "Clever" and "sly," she succeeds where her sisters failed. "Nobody raps her knuckles for being curious," Margaret Atwood points out, for she outsmarts the wizard, makes her escape "through the forest, alone, with the aid of nothing but wits and guts and a talent for improvised costumes."[44] The heroine of "The Robber Bridegroom," though not faced with a forbidden chamber and a test of obedience, rescues herself from a murderous suitor, mobilizing her wits and her narrative skills to escape the cannibalistic thieves with whom her betrothed consorts.

Embedded in a narrative tradition that positions the heroine as trickster, both these stories have counterparts in the folklore of other European cultures. The Italian "Silvernose," for example, features a "gentleman attired in black" who is "the height of courtesy."[45] Though the odd metallic facial feature is a tip-off for danger to a washerwoman, her three daughters successively insist on marrying Silvernose. Each is warned about the perils of opening a forbidden door, but all three succumb to their curiosity, with the third escaping death by adding craftiness to curiosity.[46] "Sly Lucia" succeeds in outwitting Silvernose, who has lured the girls to his house in order to fling them into the fires of Hell. Like "Fitcher's Bird" and "The Robber Bridegroom," "Silvernose" spotlights the investigative curiosity of its heroine and links it with other virtues such as cleverness and courage.[47]

That "Bluebeard" can be mobilized as a story empowering women to take control of their lives has been recently recognized by the psychologist Clarissa Pinkola Estés, who sees in the tale a celebration of the "Wild Woman." "Bluebeard," in her view, teaches something that moves directly against the grain of its interpretive history. "We must unlock or pry things open to see what is inside," Estés declares. "We must use our insight and our ability to understand what we see. We must speak our truth in a clear voice. And we must be able to use our wits to do what needs be about what we see." Relying on Eastern European and Slavic variants,

Estés was able to divine that the tale does not necessarily demonize feminine curiosity.[48]

"Bluebeard" has also been linked with other folkloric traditions, most notably "Rumpelstiltskin" (also known as "Tom Tit Tot"). There are many British and European variants of this story of a miller's daughter who gives her firstborn to a gnome capable of spinning straw into gold. One of these, a British story called "Perrifool," conflates "Bluebeard" with "Rumpelstiltskin" to produce a plot in which a princess saves her sisters (who have been captured by an ogre) even as she succeeds in harnessing the services of a "peerie yellow-headed boy" to discharge the tasks assigned by the ogre.[49] By discovering that the boy is named "Perrifool," the girl is freed of her obligation to him and then proceeds to liberate her sisters by tricking the ogre. The rescued girls and their mother murder the villain by pouring hot water over his head.

Like the Bluebeard story, "Perrifool" and other "Rumpelstiltskin" stories turn on the discovery of secret knowledge concerning masculine identity. In "Rumpelstiltskin," the heroine, by divining the name of the helper, acquires the means to defeat him. Knowledge, in this and in other fairy tales, is power. If the heroine of "Rumpelstiltskin" triumphs over adversity and redeems her firstborn child through knowledge, the heroine of "Bluebeard" succeeds in saving herself from marriage to a tyrant by exploring the hidden recesses of his castle. The story of "Bluebeard" can be read as part of a larger folkloric and mythological tradition enjoining women from pushing the limits of intimacy. Situated both at the upper reaches of high culture (think of Wagner's *Lohengrin*, whose heroine makes the mistake of trying to discover her husband's name and origins) and in the broad band of popular entertainments (think of Christine's impulsive curiosity in *Phantom of the Opera*), these plots point to the hazards of trying to learn more about a suitor or husband than he wishes to reveal. Sometimes cautioning against curiosity, sometimes endorsing it, they suggest that a woman with an inquiring mind can have fatal effects on a marriage but, with it, she can also avoid fatal effects for herself.

Femininity, Curiosity, and Duplicity in Cultural Myths

In Perrault's narrative, the curiosity of Bluebeard's wife is closely linked to what Laura Mulvey, in the context of an essay on Pandora, has called epistemophilia, or the desire to know.[50] This drive for knowledge turns the wife into an energetic investigator, determined to acquire knowledge of the secrets hidden behind the door of the mansion's forbidden chamber.

Oddly, this spontaneous curiosity is often perceived as delinquent and marks her as a transgressive figure courting danger. The interpretive history of Perrault's story, by underscoring the heroine's kinship with certain literary, biblical, and mythical figures (most notably Psyche, Eve, and Pandora), gives us a tale that undermines a robust folkloric tradition in which the heroine functioned as 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 often cast aspersions on her for engaging in an unruly act of insubordination.

Romer Wilson retold "Bluebeard" in 1930 with an introduction that spells out the treacherous appeal of curiosity. "If only Bluebeard's wife had not looked into the little room, they might both have lived happily ever after. But she did. Everybody knows how hard it is not to be terribly curious about things which are especially forbidden. It is just the same trouble that Eve had in the Garden of Eden, and the same trouble that made Pandora open that box of hers. There are a hundred tales about this kind of curiosity, but fortunately they nearly always come right in the end after the curious person has suffered severely in some way."[51]

Why this need to invalidate a trait that allows a woman to escape from marriage to a serial murderer? The answer, as Wilson suggests, can be traced in part to our most powerful cultural stories about the origins of the human race and about the genesis of marriage as the institution charged with reproducing the race. These stories have constructed a discourse linking femininity with evil, showing how the transition from nature to (agri)culture, from a state of innocence to a "fallen" condition, is motivated by the seductive duplicity of woman. As our foundational myths about the nature of the relations between the two sexes, these stories seep into other narrative traditions, shaping plots along with the interpretive history surrounding them.

Hesiod tells us the story of the first woman, a "manufactured maiden" given the name Pandora, a wonderfully ambiguous term that can mean "giver of all gifts" or "recipient of all gifts." Hesiod elects for the second meaning and emphasizes that "lies and crooked words and wily ways" figure prominently among the attributes with which she is endowed by the gods. After Zeus discovered Prometheus's theft of fire from the gods, he made plans to exact revenge by exchanging one deception for another. Commanding Hephaestos to fashion a "sweet and lovely maiden shape" from earth and water, he ordered Hermes to accompany Pandora to earth, where she was to seduce Prometheus's brother, Epimetheus. Naïve Epimetheus neglected to heed his brother's warning about gifts from Zeus:

"He took the gift and afterwards, when the evil thing was already his, he understood. Previously men lived on earth free from ills and hard toil and sickness. But the woman took off the great lid of the jar and scattered all these and caused sorrow and mischief to man."[52]

Pandora is more than a mere agent releasing evils on earth. She is also the beautiful work of art who is pure artifice. Combining the seductive allure of surface beauty with the intellectual traits of deception and treachery, she is the supreme incarnation of the femme fatale. Froma I. Zeitlin has articulated perfectly what is at stake in the story of Pandora: "Fashioned at the orders of Zeus as punishment for Prometheus' deceptive theft of celestial fire for men, the female is the first imitation and the counterpart to the first deception. She is endowed by the gods with the divine traits of beauty and adornment which conceal the bestial and thievish nature of her interior. Artefact and artifice herself, Pandora installs the woman as *eidolon* in the frame of human culture, equipped by her "unnatural" nature to seduce and enchant, to delight and deceive."[53]

Pandora, the first woman of classical mythology, becomes the incarnation of a seductive femininity that both conceals and releases all the evils menacing man. This figure of duplicity is further linked with curiosity, with an unruly need to explore enclosed spaces of secrecy. Pandora, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, "is now better known for her curiosity than for her origin as artifact and lure. Although she was forbidden to open the box and warned of the danger it contained, she gave way to her curiosity and released all the evils into the world."[54] Her curiosity, like Eve's, has been linked with sexual curiosity. Even sober, scholarly accounts of Pandora's transgression leap to the conclusion that the wish to discover what is in a box must have something to do with sexual desire. The classicist Sarah B. Pomeroy concludes her analysis of Hesiod's account by stating: "Pandora is comparable to the temptress Eve, and the box she opened may be a metaphor for carnal knowledge of women, which was a source of evil to men."[55]

Like Pandora, Eve, the "mother of all the living," shoulders the blame for our loss of innocence and the accompanying curse of mortality.[56] Tertullian called women the "devil's gateway" and accused them of bringing death into the world. Interestingly, though the story of Eve's temptation is often framed as the sexually charged scene of a double seduction (the snake tempts Eve, and Eve in turn lures Adam into transgression), it is knowledge that Eve seems to crave more than anything else. "But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil' " (Gen. 3:4–5). Woman's

intellectual curiosity, as we have seen from the story of Bluebeard, is easily translated into sexual curiosity and, from there, linked with deception, duplicity, and seductive sexuality. Yet it is also possible to read the story of the Fall in very different terms, as a story about the search for knowledge and about the collapse of a form of authority based on a willingness to be excluded from knowledge.

Greek retellings of the Bluebeard tale (which call Bluebeard the "Lord of the Underworld") disclose the story's kinship with one other cultural script that has powerfully shaped the connection between femininity and lack of restraint.[57] The Homeric hymn that relates the rape of Persephone and tells of Demeter's efforts to rescue her daughter from that monstrous bridegroom known as Pluto may not have the foundational power of the stories of Eve and Pandora, but it too positions woman as unable to contain her desires. Persephone, an unwilling bride, remains in the Underworld with her pitiless husband until he is ordered by Zeus to appease Demeter by returning her daughter. But Persephone, like Eve, is unable to resist partaking of forbidden fruit. After tasting the pomegranate given to her by Hades, she is condemned to spend a part of the year with him in the Underworld, and humanity must suffer the consequences of a barren season that brings death upon nature.

Bearing in mind that Bluebeard is often depicted as a saber-wielding tyrant dressed in Oriental robes and outfitted with a turban, we might want to consider the effect on "Bluebeard" and its interpretive history of one additional story linking women with a form of curiosity that is decidedly sexual in nature. Anyone who has read an unexpurgated version of *The Thousand and One Nights* will recall that King Schahriyar, after catching his first wife in flagrante, marries a succession of virgins, whom he beheads on the morning after each wedding. The arousal of desire, along with the satisfaction of sexual curiosity, is punished with death. By contrast, the woman, like Scheherazade, who is capable of arousing male curiosity (sexual and intellectual), rather than succumbing to it, lives happily ever after. Scheherazade both satisfies her husband and keeps him in a state of perpetual arousal by inventing a new story each night. That his curiosity is not merely intellectual becomes evident when Scheherazade bears her husband one son after another.

Whether the frame story to *The Thousand and One Nights* inspired "Bluebeard" or contaminated it, or whether it simply stands as an Oriental counterpart, is not clear. But the story of King Schahriyar and Scheherazade is revealing in its clear identification of a first wife as sexual transgressor and its insistence on woman's sexual duplicity ever after:

> Friend, trust not at all in women, smile at their promising,
> For they lower or they love at the caprice of their parts.
> Filled to the mouth with deceit, they lavish a lying love
> Even while the very floss fringing their silks is faithless.[58]

That "Bluebeard" was influenced in some way by *The Thousand and One Nights* seems even more plausible when we read the story told by Scheherazade's father in an effort to dissuade his daughter from marrying. That story turns on a secret that a wife tries to wrest from her husband. Although disclosing the secret means death for the husband, the wife still remains stubbornly determined to discover it. Her curiosity is cured by a "good beating."

The Corpses in the Closet

With so much attention lavished on the curiosity of Bluebeard's wife and on her transgressive desires, few critics have taken the trouble to investigate a scene in the story that signals a moment of real hermeneutic crisis for most readers. How do we explain the existence of those corpses in Bluebeard's castle? What is really at stake in the secret lodged behind the door to the forbidden chamber? Trying to understand the representational logic of this particular scene is a challenge that few critics have been willing to take on. What Bluebeard's wife sees when she opens the door are the bodies of the victims. Instead of eliciting visual delight and wonder at what is beyond the door, the corpses evoke horror and terror. Arranged as if on display, they are the visible signs of Bluebeard's murderous deeds.

Marina Warner, connecting the "Bluebeard" story with a Breton legend about the wife murderer Cunmar the Accursed, sees in that variant of the tale a sign that "Bluebeard" may be about nothing more than "a routine cause of mortality": "The seventeenth-century fairy tale can yield most interesting evidence when taken at face value: as stepmothers favoured their own children over the offspring of a previous marriage, or widowed mothers persecuted their sons' wives, as peasants starved but could advance through cunning, so, in the case of Bluebeard, widowers married many times in succession because wives died young, and died in childbirth, their infants with them."[59]

If one chooses to read "Bluebeard" on a symbolic level, it seems likely that those women in the forbidden chamber could also represent Bluebeard's discarded lovers, cast off once he discovered their insubordination. "He just loved a lot of women at the same time—was constitution-

ally unable to limit himself to one," the detective in Alistair Boyle's novel *Bluebeard's Last Stand* declares.[60] A Casanova who kills symbolically, Bluebeard is often recast as a serial seducer rather than as a serial killer. That the carnage in the forbidden chamber can be read as a literalization of the lady-killer metaphor suggests that Bluebeard's wives, captivated by romance, are willing victims.

From Françoise Gilot's memoir, *Life with Picasso*, we know that her famed husband may have read the story in this way, rescripting it so as to enlist sympathy for Bluebeard and then turning him into a cultural hero who commits his "murders" in the name of art. Bluebeard's wives are, after all, often put on display, with their heads on pedestals or with their bodies hanging from the walls, like portraits in a gallery.

Françoise Gilot herself used the Bluebeard story as a map for exploring the twists and turns taken by her own marriage to a man of celebrated genius. Over the course of the years, Gilot became aware of what she termed her husband's "Bluebeard complex": "Pablo's many stories and reminiscences about Olga and Marie-Thérèse and Dora Maar, as well as their continuing presence just off-stage in our own life together, gradually made me realize that he had a kind of Bluebeard complex that made him want to cut off the heads of all the women he had collected in his little private museum."[61] Although Picasso never allowed his past romantic interests to die out completely and continually played his past wives and lovers against his latest amorous interest, he was intrigued by the tactics of Bluebeard and recognized that new romances always "kill off" previous lovers: "To choose one person is always, in a measure, to kill someone else. And so one has to have the courage of the surgeon or the murderer, if you will, and to accept the share of guilt which that gives" (101).

At one point, Gilot reports, Picasso suggested that life would be much easier if he could just dispose of his previous wives in the manner of Henri Landru, a man known as the French Bluebeard: "Every time I change wives I should burn the last one. That way I'd be rid of them. They wouldn't be around now to complicate my existence. Maybe that would bring back my youth, too. You kill the woman and you wipe out the past she represents" (349). What Picasso fails to tell us is the way in which the burden of the past affects the new wife. Gilot writes poignantly about "the difficulty of trying to shake off that heavy load of his far-from-dead past, which was beginning to seem like an albatross around my neck" (212). She notes how she feels overcome by an uncanny sense of dread when she enters a house once occupied by her husband. The place appears to be a "house of Bluebeard": "I began to have the feeling that if I

looked into a closet, I would find half a dozen ex-wives hanging by their necks" (152–53).

Gilot seems to understand "Bluebeard" as a metaphorical enactment of the issues that arise in marriages between men with a past and young women without much life experience. For her, the wives in the closet are the women who played a powerful role in her husband's past and who, additionally, have a real physical presence in the day-to-day routines of her own life (Dora Maar, Olga Khoklova Picasso, and Marie-Thérèse Walter were constantly making demands on Picasso's time). Much as Françoise Gilot wanted to avoid peering into the closet of her husband's past life, she perpetually came up against the ghosts, corpses, or skeletons from the past. By positioning her own marriage in relation to the Bluebeard story Gilot found a tool for thinking through and understanding the powerful emotions evoked by her husband's past.

"Bluebeard" is, then, not one story but many stories, multiple scripts competing with each other for the status of the best, truest, deepest, or most authentic version. In the chapters that follow, I will chart the dissemination of the story, showing how it has emerged in new cultural settings and how it came to be inflected by writers and artists who are often not even aware of the story's roots and its rich history. "Bluebeard" may not be a tale that we embrace as part of our cultural legacy, but it nonetheless repeatedly asserts its vigor as it migrates and takes up residence in the stories we tell and the pictures we see. Despite its countercultural drift, it has remained a narrative that shapes, in powerful if covert ways, the plots of the tales we tell.