

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Challenging Bluebeard: 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), *The Piano* (1993) and *Barbe Bleue* (2009)

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In this essay, I analyse contemporary feminist retellings of the Bluebeard tale. I concentrate in particular on three revisions: Margaret Atwood's short story, 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983); Jane Campion's film, *The Piano* (1993); and Catherine Breillat's film, *Barbe Bleue* (2009). I compare these works on the basis of their challenging nature in respect to traditional perceptions of women and femininity pursued by modern understandings of the folk story. I thus argue that Atwood's, Campion's, and Breillat's variations on the Bluebeard theme complicate the view of women as passive objects of agency, and also the belief that curiosity is a vicious feminine feature that leads to disobedience that has to be punished by death. I focus on the outstanding features of the Bluebeard story: the characters of Bluebeard and his wife; the role of the secret chamber; and the meaning of the key. Showing how the three authors transform the old tale through the narrative approaches of mirroring and doubling, I explain how they reach a complex, often problematic, representation of their female protagonists.

The story of Bluebeard has fascinated writers, filmmakers, photographers, and artists throughout history and across national boundaries. Coming from the European oral tradition, the first, and most famous, written version of this tale is Charles Perrault's *La Barbe Bleue* (1697). It tells of a blue-bearded aristocrat whose numerous wives have mysteriously disappeared. Shortly after his latest wedding, he announces to his young spouse that he must leave the country for a while, and gives her the keys to his castle. She is free to open the doors to every room, except for one. Overcome by curiosity, the young girl

enters the forbidden chamber, where she finds the murdered bodies of Bluebeard's former wives hanging from the ceiling. Shocked and horrified, she drops the key into the pool of blood on the floor of the chamber and irremediably stains it. When Bluebeard learns of her disobedience, he threatens to behead her, but the girl, who is expecting her brothers to visit, implores Bluebeard to give her a few minutes to say her prayers. At the very last minute, her brothers break into the castle, kill Bluebeard, and save his bride, who inherits his great fortune. Another well-known version of the Bluebeard tale is Jakob and Willhelm Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird,' collected in their *Children's and Household Tales* (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Grimm 1812/15: 200–203). Here, Bluebeard is a sorcerer

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who kidnaps three young sisters. He orders the oldest to carry a small egg with her at all times, and when he leaves the castle he intimates to her to not enter the forbidden room. But as in Perrault's story, the woman is too curious and opens the door to the bloody chamber. Her egg falls to the floor and is stained, thus the sorcerer discovers her misbehaviour and kills her. The same happens to the second sister, but the third and youngest one is more clever: she leaves the egg in her room, goes to the bloody chamber where she finds the corpses of her sisters, which have been cut into pieces and laid in a basin, and brings them back to life by putting their body parts back together. When the sorcerer finds the egg is clean, he believes she has complied with his rules. During a party, the girl escapes the castle dressed up as a strange bird and her brothers set fire to the fort, killing the murderous host and his guests.

These are the two versions of the Bluebeard story that are most relevant to my point, as I focus on retellings that directly dialogue with them. There are, however, many other renditions, and, as Maria Tatar explains, the Bluebeard tales 'remain alive precisely because they are never exactly the same, always doing new cultural work' (Tatar 2004: 11). In this article, I focus on three feminist retellings of the story, as I agree with Cristina Bacchilega that:

Feminists can view the fairy tale as a powerful discourse which produces representations of gender...and studying the mechanisms of such a production can highlight the dynamic differences and complex interdependence between 'Woman' in fairy tales and 'women' storytellers/writers and listeners/readers (Bacchilega 1997: 9–10).

The works I analyse below are Margaret Atwood's short story 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), and the films *The Piano* (1993) by Jane Campion and *Barbe Bleue* (2009) by Catherine Breillat. I limit my investigation to

those elements that are outstanding in the Bluebeard folktales: the couple of Bluebeard and his wife, the bloody chamber, and the key. I examine rewritings that, as I will show, are worthy of notice for at least two reasons. First, they are powerfully deconstructive of the tale's message, prompted especially by prevailing notions from the eighteenth century, that curiosity and disobedience are mainly vicious feminine traits punishable by death. Second, though no less important, the authors of these rewritings do not stage spotless heroines. On the contrary, the authors complicate their female protagonists as these characters realistically come into conflict with patriarchal frames of mind.

### **Killer or Victim?**

Margaret Atwood has played with the Bluebeard theme in many of her works – *Lady Oracle* (1976), *Interlunar* (1984), *The Robber Bride* (1993), to mention some – each time moulding the fairy tale's *leitmotiv* to her own ends. In her short story 'Bluebeard's Egg,' she confronts her readers with a third wife, Sally, who claims to be very happy about her marriage (Atwood 1983: 151), but cannot help feeling there is a 'dread that seeps into things' (Atwood 1983: 151). Sally is the latest wife of heart surgeon Edward. At the beginning of the story, she is in the kitchen cooking for Ed's colleagues, who are coming to dinner together with their wives, and Marilyn, Sally's best friend. While cooking, she looks at her mysterious husband from the kitchen window and muses over her decision to marry him, his refusal to speak about his previous wives, her jealousy, his job, and her evening courses. She is attending a course in Forms of Narrative Fiction, in which she reads Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird' and for which she must write a five page transposition set in the present. She decides to write the story from the egg's point of view, which, as we shall see, she significantly identifies with her husband's. During the dinner, Sally finds out about Ed's affair with her friend Marilyn as she accidentally sees them kissing

by her new keyhole table. She pretends not to notice what is going on, the dinner proceeds without incident, and Atwood's short story ends with Sally lying on her bed after the party, thinking about what she will make of her new awareness.

As Shuli Barzilai has noticed, 'Bluebeard's Egg' begins with an emphasis on Sally's role as 'the good wife' (Barzilai 2009: 130). To please her husband, Sally casts aside her desires: she would like to reorganize the garden and demolish the playhouse at the bottom of the garden, but she does not change them because 'Edward says he likes it the way it is' (Atwood 1983: 131). What is more, she renounces the idea of having a child with him because he 'was neutral about it' and she 'didn't want to force the issue' (Atwood 1983: 148). Nevertheless, Sally also feels intellectually superior to Edward. Throughout the first half of the story, the narrative repeatedly remarks on how stupid her husband is: 'Sally is in love with Ed because of his stupidity, his monumental and almost energetic stupidity ... colossal and endearing thickness' (Atwood 1983: 132).

Atwood uses what Barzilai calls a 'restricted internal focalization' (Barzilai 2009: 132): Sally is the only agent of focus in the story, yet, the narrator inserts extradiegetic comments or impressions that discredit the protagonist's reliability. The reader is therefore urged to doubt Sally's attitude. We immediately perceive that her imagination has been nourished on happily-ever-after stories. Thus, if at first she is the princess Ed manages to conquer (Atwood 1983: 132–3), later on she is the 'clever and witty heroine' (Atwood 1983: 133) of one of Agatha Christie's murder mysteries. Who is Sally? The bold heroine or the passive wife? Is she Bluebeard or his victim? Atwood seems to suggest she is both. Doubling, in fact, occurs not only at the diegetic level – the evening course where she reads Grimm's 'Fitcher's Bird', which gives her the idea of interpreting Ed as the egg, first perfectly white and then irremediably stained – but also in the creation of the characters

(Bacchilega 1997: 114). Sally, in fact, hunted Ed down (Atwood 1983: 133), like the sorcerer does with the three sisters in the German tale, and plays with the idea of getting rid of the other women: '*Trouble with your heart? Get it removed*' (Atwood 1983: 138, original emphasis). At the same time, however, as Bacchilega notices, 'her seemingly clever orchestration of married life does not save [her] from being victimized herself' for, in the end, 'Ed fools her' (Bacchilega 1997: 114–115). And who is Ed? He is initially presented as stupid, earnest and easy-going. He seems 'an unlikely candidate for a modern Bluebeard' (Nicholson 1994: 250). There is no evidence that he is a womanizer, and in their house there is no forbidden room. Nevertheless, as the tale unfolds we learn that:

On bad days [Sally] sees his stupidity as wilfulness, a stubborn determination to shut things out. His obtuseness is a wall within which he can go about his business, humming to himself, while Sally, locked outside, must hack her way through the brambles with hardly so much as a transparent raincoat between them and her skin (Atwood 1983: 133).

Sally is curious, and she is particularly curious about Ed. The former remark, indeed, epitomizes Sally's struggle to understand her husband and her fear that he might have a secret, as well as her vulnerability, which is symbolized by the transparent raincoat, as opposed to the impenetrable wall of Ed's mind. Ed's thoughts are locked in a 'secret chamber', the key to which Sally does not have. What is more, sometimes Sally feels she is utterly under her husband's power. This is made clear when Ed shows off his new X-ray facility at the hospital: 'Her heart looked... like...something that would melt, fade, disintegrate, if you squeezed it even a little...beating over there all by itself, detached from her, exposed and under his control' (Atwood 1983: 145).

Ed is as ambivalent as Sally: on the one hand, he is the egg, 'blank and pristine and lovely' (Atwood 1983: 157); on the other, he is a Bluebeard figure, one who keeps terrible, shocking secrets locked in the chamber of his inscrutable mind. At the end of the story, Sally manages to find out her husband's secret and feels empowered with a sense of clarity and relief – contrary to traditional Bluebeard tales in which curiosity is punished by death.

I now turn to Jane Campion's *The Piano*, her second major film production. *The Piano* tells the story of a Scotswoman, Ada McGrath, who is sold into marriage to a New Zealand frontiersman, Alistair Stewart, together with her beloved piano and her daughter Flora. Ada is mute, though the audience can hear her thoughts in voice-over. There is no room in Stewart's house for McGrath's piano, so the retired sailor Baines, a friend of Stewart's, trades some land that the frontiersman wants in exchange for the piano. Baines starts taking lessons from Ada, but their encounters soon become a sexual game in which he offers the woman to buy the piano back one key at a time in exchange for letting him caress and undress her while she plays. They soon fall in love, but when her husband discovers their affair, he forbids Ada to leave the house. She secretly sends her daughter to Baines with a single piano key where she has inscribed a love declaration. Flora, who has grown fond of Stewart, betrays her. Her husband furiously cuts off Ada's index finger with an axe and sends it to Baines. Finally, upset by his own fury, he decides to dissolve his marriage and sends Ada and Flora away with Baines. Her piano sinks into the sea, and she deliberately follows it, choosing to drown. But in the end, however, Ada changes her mind, and sets off for her new life with Baines.

*The Piano* had enormous commercial success, and has been the subject of many controversies concerning female emancipation, colonial politics, and historical accuracy. In the words of Harriet Margolis, 'For many

feminists, male or female, *The Piano's* tale of sexual bartering and supposed choices is not what it is touted to be. And many people sensitive to racism and colonization take offense at its representation of Maori' (Margolis 2000: 2). In this analysis, what I am interested in is its reinvention of the Bluebeard tale, especially with regards to its inversion of conventional gender roles: as Maria Tatar puts it, 'in *The Piano* it is Ada who carries the burden of a troubled past' (Tatar 2004: 122–3). Thus, Ada is figured as a female Bluebeard, and indeed she attracts the two male figures into the mystery of her muteness. In fact, we learn from her thoughts in voice-over that 'silence affects everyone in the end.' The two men, her husband Stewart and her lover Baines, react differently to her silent spell, which forces them to reveal their real nature. The latter is attracted to it, both emotionally and sexually, and tries to learn the secret language of her music by taking piano lessons; the former is at the same time curious and scared. Stewart is the stereotype of the gentle but repressed Victorian man, and of the capitalist colonizer. According to him, Ada's strength of will and her attachment to her piano verge on madness, though he nonetheless feels attracted to them and wants to enter the secret chamber of her inner world. He does not possess the key, though: her piano. All he can do is voyeuristically spy on her making love to Baines in an attempt to indirectly get what he wishes for, her desire and her affection. In this sense, both men possess the feature of curiosity, which in Bluebeard tales was traditionally attributed to women, as they both wish to enter Ada's secret inner world, whose threshold none of them is initially allowed to cross. Conventional gender roles are subverted on many levels. For instance, 'a point often noted about *The Piano* as a feminist film is that it simultaneously makes a man the object of the gaze and the female protagonist the active sexual agent' (Margolis 2000: 14). This is especially noticeable in a scene where Ada, caressing Stewart's back,

prohibits him from touching her. As she, with her clothes on, explores his naked body, she is in a position of supremacy over him – visually, too, as he is lying on his stomach while she is sitting on the bed. Campion herself, referring to the kind of relationships she presents in her films, explains that ‘it becomes a relationship of power, the power of those that care and those that don’t care. I’m very, very interested in the brutal innocence of that’ (quoted in Margolis 2000: 14). In this sense, Ada seems to be in the lead in the relationship with Stewart and she does not ‘care’ about him since she excludes him from the only two emotional bonds that are important to her: the one with her daughter and the one with her piano.

However, as in ‘Bluebeard’s Egg,’ role-distribution in the film is not that simple. Ada, in fact, is not alone in being figured as Bluebeard, since here too every character is split between victimization and empowerment. If on the one hand Ada functions as the sorcerer of the Grimm’s tale and as Perrault’s Bluebeard – for she lures Stewart and Baines into her secret world – on the other, she is the victim of trade, ‘of Victorian repression and oppression’ (Bacchilega 1997: 130), of a sexual game, and of patriarchy. Her duality is also visually expressed through her clothing: black, symmetrical, severe like her impenetrable face. Her clothes seem to communicate her will to erect a wall between her inner world and the outer reality. At the same time, she powerfully articulates her innermost feelings through music. When she plays, her face is transfigured, as if she is letting all her emotions flow with the notes. The same ambiguity is exposed in her relation to her daughter, Flora. Ada is in fact as tense and as closed towards the world as she is spontaneous and relaxed when alone with her child – in most of these moments, in fact, they are both dressed in white. She finally reaches a balance, the film seems to suggest, thanks to Baines’ love: when she is with him, she is seen wearing her soft, white underwear, and at the very end of

the film she also learns to express her emotions through speech. Stewart, too, undergoes change as the story develops: he slowly turns into Bluebeard. He travels on business shortly after Ada’s arrival, then, enraged and violent, he forbids his wife to go to her lover’s hut (which, as we will see, stands as another secret chamber in this retelling), and chops off one of her fingers with an axe. As a Victorian man, he needs to conquer and dominate, to be recognized as the ruling authority, to relegate Ada to the role of disobedient wife. In the end, though, contrary to any Bluebeard figure, he renounces his will to punish Ada for her betrayal, and lets her and Flora set off with Baines.

Duplicity infests not only the married couple, but Baines as well. This man, depicted as the white settler who has ‘gone native,’ is the wizard in the sexual game he imposes on Ada. He, in a sense, casts a spell on her in so far as she falls in love with him, and cannot help running back to his hut despite him cutting the deal off that he had originally proposed. At the same time, he is the victim of Ada’s mysterious fascination to the extent that he feels contented only in her company: ‘Now you’re going and I feel miserable,’ he tells her after making love. Like his mute lover, at the end, he finds his balance between ‘native’ sensuousness and a partial return to ‘civilization,’ which is why he is depicted, in the last shot we see of him, wearing for the first time a Western outfit, outside his brand new – white – home with Ada, who is learning to speak, and Flora, cheerfully playing in the garden. All the characters in *The Piano* are both Bluebeards and curious wives, and all seem to finally reach a stage where they are able to reconcile the killer and the victim inside of themselves.

Catherine Breillat’s reading of Bluebeard may seem, at first glance, more conventional than that of Atwood’s and Campion’s. More, it is also very different from her previous audacious creations. In her career, in fact, her primary interest has been to create art films that challenge the objectification of women

through their main characters' 'quest...for a sexual identity' (Keesey 2009: 2). *Barbe Bleue* is the first of her productions that has little to do with sex, though it explores themes familiar to the French *regisseur*, such as the bond between teenage sisters or the rebellion against restrictive social norms. Breillat's revision of the folktale is an historical retelling of Perrault's version interspersed with moments of the lives of two young sisters from the mid 1950s. In the 1950s, Catherine and the older Marie-Anne enter the attic of their house, disobeying their mother's orders. Catherine scares Marie-Anne by reading Perrault's *La Barbe Bleue*, and as she reads, the film moves back to 1697, when two sisters who have just lost their father, Anne and the younger Marie-Catherine, attend a party thrown by the rich Lord Barbe Bleue, who is in search of a new wife. The young Marie-Catherine is fascinated by him and soon becomes his spouse. They develop a close bond, though he must leave her periodically to attend far-off business, and on these occasions he gives her the keys to the castle and forbids her to enter one single, small, room. Just as in Perrault's version, she opens the door to the bloody chamber, sees the corpses of his previous wives hanging from the ceiling, and drops and stains the key. Barbe Bleue threatens to behead her but she begs for some time to say her prayers. In the meantime two men – who, contrary to Perrault's tale, are not her brothers – kill her husband and rescue her. Towards the end of the film, the older girl from the 1950s falls to her death as she is trying to escape her younger sister Catherine, who refuses to stop telling her Bluebeard's scary story. The final scene moves back again to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and sees Marie-Catherine holding Barbe Bleue's head on a platter.

The most obvious Bluebeard figure in the story is, obviously, Barbe Bleue - Bluebeard himself. The heroine, Marie-Catherine, on the verge of adolescence, dreamy and naïve, seems to be the perfect candidate for the role of victim to the murderer. When the two

newlyweds are seen together, Breillat highlights their contrast on visual terms: as much she is light, fragile, and soberly dressed, he is heavy, massive, and dressed in pompous, convoluted clothes. Similarly to Atwood and to Campion, though, Breillat complicates things. Marie-Catherine reveals from the very beginning a certain propensity towards violence. Indeed, talking of the Mother Superior of the strict religious school she attends with her sister, Anne, she claims: '*je la ferai étrangler. Je la suspendrai par les cheveux et je la regarderai crever, rejoindre le royaume des cieux.*' (I'll have her strangled. I'll hang her by her hair and watch her join the kingdom of heaven).<sup>1</sup>

Not only does this cruel side of her character align her with the murderous Bluebeard of traditional tales, she also finds a certain artistic beauty in death. To her, the corpse of her father is 'much handsomer' than her living genitor: '*tu ressembles à une statue,*' (you look like a statue) she says, '*plus du tout intimidant*' (you're not intimidating now). Breillat's film challenges traditional gender roles, as the patriarchal authority – the father – becomes the object of his daughter's gaze. This happens several times throughout the narrative, as when Bluebeard falls asleep and Marie-Catherine gets closer to observe his face, touching his hair and his hand. As she aspires to be cruel, powerful, and rich, she is apt to be a Bluebeard of the future. At the same time, though, she is the curious wife who longs for knowledge ('*vous m'apprendrez tout,*' teach me everything you know – she tells her husband).

The actual Bluebeard in Breillat's story assumes gentle traits. If his first appearance is sinister – he looks at the crowd from above the stairs, silent, threatening and still – when Marie-Catherine meets him again in the woods he is kind, smiling, and fatherly. The girl, standing, looks down at him sitting on the grass. Again subverting gender roles, she observes and questions him: '*vous, vous ne dansez jamais?*' (don't you ever dance?). The '*monstre*' that a moment before looked so menacing now smiles sadly,

and acknowledges he would look silly and inadequate; after all *'il faut avoir conscience de ce qu'on est'* (one should realize who one is). Breillat thus enhances the fairy tale villain with an unexpected side of his character. Melancholic, sympathetic, and gentle, Bluebeard is as much a victim of society's biases as he is a bloodthirsty serial killer.

Even in the final scene, Marie-Catherine retains her ambiguity. The final shot of the film indeed associates Marie-Catherine with the heroine of the book of Judith, a deuterocanonical book included in the Old Testament of the Bible. It tells the story of an Israeli widow, Judith, who liberates her Jewish countrymen from their Assyrian conquerors by going with her maid to the enemy camp and decapitating their general. In Breillat's depiction, Bluebeard's severed head on a silver plate, his widow's docile eyes, and her crimson mantle all resemble paintings such as Titian's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1515), Catena's *Judith* (1520–25), and Lucas the Elder's *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (1530). This association may, perhaps, elevate Breillat's protagonist to the status of model or *exemplum* of the cunning woman who, through her intelligence, wins over the enemy. However, the girl might also be viewed as an ironic counterpart to the more audacious Judith, as the former's only effort has been delaying her execution while waiting for (male) help.

As for the two children from the 1950s, they mirror the heroine and her sister – tellingly, their names are Marie-Anne and Catherine – but they also share some Bluebeard/victim traits. First of all, the younger Marie-Anne is a kind of wizard as she lures her sister into the 'forbidden chamber' of the attic and indirectly kills her by leading her towards the trapdoor. Catherine, thus, is the victim, in that curiosity leads her to death. At the same time though, interestingly, the more curious of the two, Marie-Anne, who *'aime bien voir'* (likes to look around), even if it is forbidden, survives. Besides, in Breillat's view Catherine succumbs because she has absorbed the

sentimental teachings of society on relationships and life: finding Prince Charming; marrying; 'kissing in public'; being 'beautiful.' In fact, as explained by Liz Constable, Breillat's films 'elaborate on Simone de Beauvoir's descriptions of young women who feel split between a passive self-estrangement engendered by the internalized cultural vocation of being feminine (docile, passive, impotent and frivolous), and their desire to be full human beings' (Constable 2004: 676). On the contrary, Marie-Anne is the brave heroine who does not shiver in front of danger (as we have seen, she 'likes to look around' forbidden places) and the pure child with a subversive imagination still not tainted by cultural and social norms. This is shown when she explains to Catherine her ironic idea of marriage: the newlyweds soon find out they are homosexuals, and the wife becomes an ogress and *'Barbe Bleue dévore tout'* (Bluebeard devours everything). All the characters in Breillat's *Barbe Bleue*, then, are both victims and executioners, and curiosity is not depicted as a vice of weak women, but rather, it is presented as the strength of courageous, cunning, and dangerous girls.

### Forbidden Chambers

There is not an actual, forbidden 'bloody' room where corpses are hidden in Atwood's short story, nor is there one in Campion's film. In Breillat's *Barbe Bleue*, although there is a real bloody chamber, it is not the only secret place in the narrative, and, further, interpretations of it are multiple and complex. I have argued that Margaret Atwood multiplies the essential features of the Bluebeard fairy tale's characters in order to adapt them to an exploration of contemporary, postmodern issues of female identity. Indeed, the secret chambers in her 'Bluebeard's Egg' are also numerous. As Sally does not understand Ed, he can be viewed as a secret room: he is inaccessible to her. If in a first moment she is convinced he is only stupid, later she realizes that, 'Ed is a surface, one she has trouble getting beneath'

(Atwood 1983: 150). Finally, the doubt about his faithfulness leads her to muse over the possibility of Ed voluntarily shutting her out of his mind, especially when she enquires about his previous wives (Atwood 1983: 134). But, if the heart surgeon is a mystery to Sally, then she too is an enigma to herself, because 'in her inner world is Ed' (Atwood 1983: 150). She has 'so thoroughly internalized her position as "his wife" that she has no solid sense of individuality apart from it' (Barzilai 2009: 136). Opening the door of the forbidden chamber is, thus, not only finding out her partner's infidelity, but also the possibility of clearing Ed out of her Self in order to reach a true comprehension of her own identity. In this sense, then, curiosity that leads to that discovery is viewed as a positive attribute. Moreover, 'Bluebeard's Egg' provides the readers with some concrete secret (though not exactly 'bloody') chambers. The hospital's X-ray room, for instance, can be considered a secret room insofar as it is 'sexual..., clearly a dangerous place. [P]ut a batch of women in there with Ed and they would never want to come out' (Atwood 1983: 145). The allusions to the Bluebeard tale are several, from the sexual quality of the room, which points to the reading of the fairy tale as an account of female sexual betrayal, to the 'batch of women' hinting at the killer's ex-wives cut to pieces in the bloody chamber. Note also that in the X-ray room, women's hearts are 'severed' from their bodies and put on a screen. Another actual 'bloody' chamber is the 'bay-windowed alcove' (Atwood 1983: 135) where the antique keyhole desk is. As Bluebeard's murderous nature is revealed to his third wife by entering the forbidden chamber, similarly Ed's deceitful inclinations are exposed to Sally when approaching the alcove.

In *The Piano*, too, the forbidden rooms are many. First of all, and most evidently, Baines' hut is a hidden chamber, as it shelters the secret of their sexual encounters.<sup>2</sup> It is also, as Bacchilega points out, 'the symbolic site of women's victimization. When she goes

there, Ada is reified or commodified by the two men's trade, and like Bluebeard's dead wives, she is soon being "dismembered" by Baines sexual preying on her "parts": 'the nape, a leg, her arms, her clothes' (Bacchilega 1997: 130). Still, 'the hut is also the site of a profoundly transforming initiation process' (Bacchilega 1997: 130). It is a liminal space where Ada learns to recover the contact with her own body and sexuality, somehow getting out of the secret room of her mind. In this space, moreover, Baines turns from 'master' to 'slave', as he finds himself missing Ada and, naked, polishing her piano with 'sensuous devotion' (Bacchilega 1997: 132). Ada's access to this room was not prohibited, but, rather, favoured by her husband. Nonetheless, when their affair is unveiled, he forbids her from returning to the hut, and the secret place finally becomes a *forbidden* chamber. Certainly, it is forbidden to Flora, whose access to it is denied by her mother from the very beginning. As the woman penetrates deeper and deeper into the 'secret chamber' of her sensuality, the child gradually detaches from her. In opposition to traditional Bluebeard tales, then (and particularly to the Grimm brothers' 'Fitcher's Bird,' where the young wife finds the corpses of her older sisters in the bloody chamber and brings them back to life, reuniting the family) the opening of the forbidden door does not here reconcile the heroine to her family. On the contrary, it sets them apart, and drives Flora to betrayal.

Another metaphorically forbidden room is Ada's past. It is a mystery, for we do not know why at the age of six she decided to stop speaking. It might have been a trauma, or it might have been, as Tatar suggests, an act of rebellion against patriarchal authority (Tatar 2004: 123). It is not just her past, but also her unconscious mind that is concealed from indiscrete eyes. As mentioned above, Ada's muteness, her rough manners, and her dark clothes are all means to keep the door to her sensibility shut. In a memorable scene where Ada stops Stewart from raping

her only by staring at him, he imagines her silently speaking to him and saying: 'I'm afraid of my will, it's so strange and strong.' Ada's unconscious is, in a sense, a secret place also to herself. Throughout the film, her voice-over talks of her 'will' in the third person, as if it were something she does not possess and cannot control. At the end, too, she is surprised at her will 'choosing life over death.' Her will, then, is a forbidden chamber. It is also a bloody chamber, as it leads to Stewart's violence. An additional bloody chamber is Stewart's unconscious. When faced with Ada's eccentricity, this composed Victorian man discovers himself to be a violent and possessive Bluebeard. As he cannot bear the sight of the horrors hidden inside the forbidden room of his deepest feelings, he cowardly calls for a retreat, an escape from that chamber. He looks for forgetfulness: 'I wish her gone. I wish you gone. I want to wake and find it was a dream, that is what I want. I want to believe I am not this man, I want myself back; the one I knew.'

If Atwood and Campion play with the symbolic nature of their multiple forbidden chambers, it is only Breillat in *Barbe Bleue* who takes the viewers into a real, non-metaphorical, bloody chamber. Three women dressed in white are hanging from the ceiling, their faces are hidden, their legs are rigidly open and the floor is covered in blood. The dead women suggest the split between the sexual body and the mind that the French filmmaker has so thoroughly explored in her films.<sup>3</sup>

Peculiarly, in this film it is not Marie-Catherine, but, rather, the child Marie-Anne who is seen entering the room. Here, Breillat offers the child's personal reading of the story, her identification with the heroine, in order to highlight the contrast between the reaction of Perrault's original character's – 'She thought she would die of fear' (Perrault 1977: 38) – and the brave little girl's behaviour in front of 'the horror.' Contrary to Baines in *The Piano*, in fact, she does not 'want to wake and find it was a dream', but calmly faces the horrendous vision in front

of her. The close-ups of the child's face and her calmness in opening the door, contrasted with the folktale heroine's 'shaking' hand, reinforces this interpretation. Moreover, when she walks in the pool of blood, Marie-Anne repeats '*j'ai pas peur*' (I'm not scared). Throughout the film, she has been presented as rational, determined, and strong, as opposed to her fearful and passive sister. If her vision is not tainted by society's biases and morals, if she has not yet 'internaliz[ed] the fear and loathing of the female body' (Keeseey 2009: 4), then she is the only character who can bring new life into the gruesome chamber of female death. Her curiosity is not vicious; on the contrary, it is redemptive. This, I suggest, is why she is wearing a white nightdress that contrasts boldly with the darkness of the room and the crimson colour of the blood. Her white feet and dress soak into sanguine fluid, thus finally redeeming the female body by reuniting it through blood to its soul, represented by Marie-Anne.

Breillat's bloody chamber is real; however, metaphorical secret rooms are also numerous in *Barbe Bleue*. In the convent, for instance, every emotion is figuratively relegated into a forbidden room: '*Ne pleurez pas sa perte*' (do not mourn his loss), and '*Point de démonstration de larmes inutiles*' (don't shed unnecessary tears), says the Mother Superior to the two girls who have just lost their father. Their feelings must be hidden, repressed, killed, just like their bodies under the heavy tunics. This scenario is well known to Breillat, as she and her older sister received a repressive education at a Catholic boarding school (for further reference see Keeseey 2009: 3).

The attic, too, is a secret room and, probably, a forbidden one. In fact, Marie-Anne is worried they are not allowed to enter it. She asks her younger sister '*On a le droit de venir ici?*' (Do we have the right to come here?) and '*on peut vraiment venir là?*' (can we really go there?), but Catherine does not seem to care. I suggest the attic is in fact a forbidden room, as their disobedience will actually lead to Catherine's death. Importantly,

she falls into the trapdoor not because of her curiosity (a trait which in fact is stronger in Marie-Anne), but because of her fear, which opposes her to her sister, as well as to Perrault's and, more relevantly, Grimm's cunning heroine. Furthermore, the bedroom of the Renaissance girls' father is a covert place for Marie-Catherine. She is forbidden to enter because she is 'too young,' but nonetheless, she goes there to give the last farewell to her dead father. But this time it is her mother, a female figure, who imposes the ban, again reversing traditional positions of gender authority. Once in the castle, Marie-Catherine obtains her own secret room, to which her husband is not allowed access. Finally, the girl herself is a mystery to Bluebeard: *'Tu es une étrange petite personne. ... Tu as binnocence d'une colombe et borqueil dun aigle. ... Mais prends garde que l'orgueil ne devienne jamais vanité. Car alors, tu seras perdue.'* (You are a strange little person. ... You have the innocence of a dove and the pride of an eagle. ... But don't let pride become vanity, or you'll be lost).

Whether this is a menace or just a warning, Barbe Bleue seems to consider the girl a sort of young *femme fatale*. As well explained by Breillat, 'to make the woman out to be the cause of temptation demonises her. In this way the predator absolves himself, constituting himself as the victim of his prey' (Keesey 2009: 80). Barbe Bleue, in fact, feels compelled to murder, *'il faut mourir, madame'* (you must die, madam), he repeats, as if he had no choice but kill her. Keesey notices that the *femme fatale* type does not represent the truth about woman, but 'the truth about fantasy', since 'she is only the masculine gaze, a gaze of desire and fear coming from an unacknowledged inability to communicate' (Keesey 2009: 80). I suggest, then, that Breillat's Barbe Bleue stands for the man who hides his fear and 'inability to communicate' under the surface of ferocity and hostility. Hence, his violence is meant to hide a secret side, a 'secret chamber' to his character, one he is not brave (or curious) enough to reveal to himself and to the world.

As we have seen, the secret chambers are doubled at the metaphorical and symbolic levels in the three texts here taken into consideration. This helps their authors delve into the problematic nature of the ideas of secrecy and violence in relation to contemporary issues of female identity, and to reverse traditional ideas of femininity.

### The Key

Modern retellings of the Bluebeard tale also complicate the traditional role and image of the key. If Ed's mind and his wife's unconscious are the secret chambers of Atwood's story, then the key is the assignment Sally was given at her Narrative Fiction course. Reflecting on the tale of Bluebeard, in fact, enables her to 'open the door to realities that – however painful, disruptive, and disturbing – have an emancipatory potential' (Tatar 2004: 114). This means, once again, that in Atwood's retelling, revealing the truth does not lead to danger and death, but, rather, it is seen as a necessary step towards female emancipation. The comparison between 'Fitcher's Bird' and her own story with Ed challenges Sally to consider the role she plays in her marriage and finally confront her anxieties. In adapting the story Sally is forced to 'reshape it in the context of her own wisdom and experience' (Tatar 2004: 114). She decides to tell the tale from the egg's point of view, an object that is mute, mysterious, 'pristine and lovely' (Atwood 1983: 157), which is as she imagined her husband to be. But, like the egg in the Bluebeard tale she seems to forget that he is bloodstained too. In this light, then, the metaphor of the egg is a key to Ed's inner world. In Sally's dream, it glows with a crimson light, 'softly as though there's something red and hot inside it' (Atwood 1983: 164). Ed-as-the-egg is alive, and Sally can see at last that the sheer surface of his shell hides an intricate, turbulent emotional life: 'It's almost pulsing, Sally is afraid of it. ...[O]ne day it will hatch. But what will come out of it?' (Atwood 1983: 164). What will Sally's new awareness lead to? Atwood leaves us in suspense. But this

woman has, at least, succeeded in opening her husband's forbidden chamber, and is now peeping inside it. As a reader of 'Fitcher's Bird,' she knows that the third wife can rescue herself rather than await rescue from distant brothers. Finally, Atwood's story offers another, minor, key-symbol: the key-hole table. Just like Bluebeard giving the key to his wives, Sally asks Marilyn to show Ed the nineteenth-century table in the alcove, allowing the 'epiphany' of her understanding of Ed to take place. Keys are thus multiple in Atwood's story, and they are revealing of truths that the female protagonist kept locked to her own consciousness.

As for Campion's film, the rosewood piano is certainly the key to Ada. Baines senses this when he takes Ada and her daughter to the beach and listens to her passionate playing. Her music is highly individual and anachronistic, being 'marked by repetitiveness, metric shifts ... we get the impression that this music is *personal* ... she never plays from published sheet music, but from "inside her head"' (Margolis 2000: 46, original emphasis). In other words, sound is her means to express emotions that she cannot convey either through words or through body language. As Stewart's Aunt Morag puts it, her music is 'a mood that passes into you' and 'a sound that creeps into you.' Her true Self is the music she plays. And, in fact, she plays for herself: the piano, as the door of a secret chamber, is the threshold between the personal and the social. Baines understands this and tries to peep into her inner world by carefully listening to her music. The piano, furthermore, is the link that enables this Victorian woman to connect her emotions to her body. In this sense, Baines himself can be interpreted as a key: through his game, he builds a connection between music (Ada's inner self) and sexuality (Ada's body), which she gradually allows her to repossesses her body. If he enables Ada to reach an emotional/physical completeness, then her piano is what makes his entrance into the forbidden chamber of her soul possible and allows him to connect to her on a deep, emotional level. However,

as in traditional Bluebeard folktales, here too the key is associated to the husband's discovery of betrayal. In fact, what drives Stewart-Bluebeard to violence is neither Ada's music, nor witnessing the lovers' passion, but a piano key, where the mute woman has inscribed a love letter for Baines – 'Dear George, you have my heart, Ada McGrath.' This letter represents the evidence of his wife's infidelity, but also, as Bacchilega explains, '[it] ... binds the power of body and language together for all. What horrifies Stewart, who is accustomed to repressing the body, is the key's written articulation of the flesh's unspoken desire' (Bacchilega 1997: 136). The piano key is indelibly marked, 'stained' just like the actual key, egg, or other objects in Bluebeard tales. That it is subsequently exchanged with Ada's finger adds pathos to the story and links it further to traditional versions of the tale, such as the Brothers Grimm's 'The Robber Bridegroom' ('Der Räuberbräutigam', Grimm 1812/15: 184–187). Here the bride escapes her fate by showing a dead wife's finger to the incredulous crowd. Finally, as the character responsible for the violent twist in the story, Flora assumes the function of telltale key. Just as the stained object discloses Bluebeard's wife's disobedience, thus the child, out of jealousy, betrays her mother and gives the message to Stewart instead of Baines.

In contrast with Atwood's and Campion's postmodern stories, the key is probably the most conventional element in Breillat's contemporary retelling of Bluebeard. It is a small golden key, and its size seems to create an immediate connection to the petite Marie-Catherine. Both her family and her husband, in fact, consider the girl 'too young' and 'a strange little person.' In this version, not only is the bloodstain impossible to remove from the key, but also the telling object itself literally bleeds. When Marie-Catherine tries to hide it in the décolleté of her sumptuous golden dress, the key stains it with its indelible blood. The red mark appearing at the level of her heart, and the parallel between the key and the girl, suggests the idea of Marie-Catherine's bleeding. This stands not

only as an anticipation of her death, but can also be read as a symbol of initiation, of her acquired qualification to finally face womanhood. Breillat's heroines, indeed, develop from a stage of teenage romantic fantasy about love, life, and womanhood to a point of disillusioned independence and (often sexual) maturity (see Keesey 2009: 8–16). In these modern retellings of the Bluebeard story, then, the key or the egg is not only an actual object, but also the path to the female protagonists' understanding of their identity in opposition to traditional, often internalized, stereotypes about women and their sexuality.

### Conclusion

In the first section of my essay I examined how Atwood, Campion, and Breillat complicate gender roles in their retellings of Bluebeard tales. I then moved to a short study of how they multiply the folktale's narrative element of the secret chamber, and finally that of the stained key. I have shown that Atwood's Sally is an ambivalent character representing both the sorcerer who hunts her partner down, and also the curious wife who tries to enter the secret chamber of her husband's mind. I argued that facing the hidden truth of Ed's betrayal gives her the chance to clear him out of her Self and reach a more personal comprehension of her identity as a woman and a human being. A similar ambiguity applies to Campion's Ada, who is a female Bluebeard, as she lures the two male characters into the mystery of her muteness and special relationship to her piano. Here, as in 'Bluebeard's Egg,' the inner world of the protagonist is a secret room, the key to which is music. In opposition to traditional tales, Campion's film sees a male figure entering the secret chamber, and, similarly to Atwood's short story, the opening of its door does not lead to punishment and death, but rather symbolizes the protagonist's reconciliation of her inner self with the outer world. I have also shown that Breillat's *Barbe Bleue*, though it may seem to be a more conven-

tional retelling of the Bluebeard story, in fact reverses stereotypical gender roles, multiplies secret chambers and keys, and complicates the idea of female identity. Marie-Catherine shares some traits with Bluebeard, as violence and corpses fascinate her. At the same time, however, she is the curious wife who risks her life for disobeying her husband's command. *Barbe Bleue* himself assumes gentler traits and is depicted as a lonely man conscious of his inadequate appearance and inability to establish a good connection to people. Moreover, I argued that Breillat offers a model for female redemption in the young and brave Marie-Anne, who enters the bloody chamber and steps into the pool of blood spread under the rigidly open legs of the female corpses hanging from the ceiling. As she has not internalised the loathing for the female body, she symbolises the reunion of women's sexual bodies and their minds. With my analysis I have shown that through the clever use of postmodern narrative and filmic devices the three authors powerfully deconstruct preconceptions traditionally connected to the tale of Bluebeard, namely, feminine passivity and vicious curiosity. The protagonists of 'Bluebeard's Egg,' *The Piano*, and *Barbe Bleue*, in fact, do not fit into the stereotype of femininity constructed since the eighteenth century through more recent history. Moreover, Breillat, Campion, and Atwood take an objective stand in regards to their female characters, investigating the matter of women's relations to patriarchy by staging complex, morally ambiguous protagonists.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All translations from Breillat's *Barbe Bleue* are by the author.
- <sup>2</sup> Visually, too, it is hidden in the bush, for 'unlike Stewart's house, surrounded by mud and burnt tree stumps, Baines' shack blends into the mossy bush, signalling his close relationship to the land and to the Maoris' (Bacchilega 1997: 130).
- <sup>3</sup> To mention some: *Romance* (1999), where the protagonist, frustrated with

her monotonous sex life, experiences extreme bondage and sadomasochism, but fails to find joy in any kind of sexual encounter; or *À ma sœur!* (2001), which tells the story of sexual power games between two sisters.

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**How to cite this article:** Giuliana, E 2014 Challenging Bluebeard: 'Bluebeard's Egg' (1983), *The Piano* (1993) and *Barbe Bleue* (2009). *Opticon1826*, (16): 7, pp. 1-13, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/opt.br>

**Published:** 17 April 2014

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