

THE GREY WOMAN AND BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE:

Comparisons between Elizabeth Gaskell's short story 'The Grey Woman' and the tale of Bluebeard

By Michael Hiltbrunner

Introduction

The short story *The Grey Woman* by Elizabeth Gaskell gives a description of female oppression set within a Gothic context. The story is reminiscent of the English fairy tale *Mr Fox*, and there are thematic similarities between *The Grey Woman* and the German fairy tales *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Bluebeard*. In spite of a direct connection with *Bluebeard*, Gaskell's tale, with its focus on women's rights and love without marriage, can be seen to anticipate contemporary receptions of the *Bluebeard* tale.

A Story of Oppression and Friendship

Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *The Grey Woman* for Charles Dickens's journal *All the Year Round*. It was intended to become a full-length novel, but was published as a short story in three parts in January 1861. The story is told from the perspective of the protagonist, Anna Scherer, daughter of a German miller, who relates her marriage to the French nobleman Monsieur de la Tourelle, a 'gay, young, elegant' (Gaskell 2000, 339) man, who turns out to be a robber. She and her servant Amante escape from his castle, Les Rochers, and settle in Frankfurt. During their escape, they become bound in friendship and in the shared fear of the revenge of Anna's husband. Amante is finally discovered and killed in Frankfurt by de la Tourelle's people, and Anna marries her attending physician Dr Voss. She has a daughter by de la Tourelle and finally writes the letter through which the story is presented, to prevent her daughter from marrying a Frenchman, who could be a member of the de la Tourelle gang.

The short story was later published in the collection *The Grey Woman and Other Tales* in 1865, but was rarely discussed by Gaskell's early critics. The story was described briefly by Annette B. Hopkins in 1952: 'It is an extravaganza, in the Radcliffian style, of foul crimes, mystery and terror with unnatural characters and flimsily motivated action' (Hopkins 1952, 259). At the very least, *The Grey Woman* can be seen as a comment on Gaskell's novel *Ruth*, published in 1853. Like *Ruth*, Anna raises a child on her own, and lives under a false identity; in *Ruth*, the heroine's sadness only leads to further suffering, and in *The Grey Woman*, the viciousness of the husband's character is the source of the heroine's anguish. The death of the protagonist in each story, leaving her child with her family, creates a parallel ending, but the possible guilt of the female protagonist in *Ruth* is replaced by the stirring testimony of female suffering in *The Grey Woman*.

Love as Trustfulness

Marriage in general is questioned in Gaskell's work, especially in *Ruth* and *The Grey Woman*. Married or not, both protagonists suffer under a complete lack of rights and see no possible help in the law. These fictional marital states correspond with the situation of married women in Great Britain in the nineteenth century, which was comparable to 'the condition of slaves' in the *Petition for Reform of the Married Women's Property Law Presented to Parliament 14 March 1856* (following d'Albertis 1997, 120).

Initially, Anna does not wish to get married at all: 'I had no notion of being married, and could not bear any one who talked to me about it' (Gaskell 2000, 293). She obviously feels forced to stay with her husband:

I said to my father that I did not want to be married, that I would rather go back to the dear old mill; but he seemed to feel this speech of mine as a dereliction of duty as great as if I had

committed perjury; as if, after the ceremony of the betrothal, no one had any right over me but my future husband. (Gaskell 2000, 298)

She cannot bear to miss all the love she received from her relatives and to be tied to her future husband alone, as his love does not make her feel well, not before the marriage, when he ‘almost frightened’ her ‘by the excess of his demonstrations of love’ (Gaskell 2000, 296), nor afterwards: ‘His love was shown fitfully, and more in ways calculated to please himself than to please me’ (Gaskell 2000, 304). His love and their marriage work as forms of imprisonment and he keeps her under constant watch: ‘the flower garden [...] was designed in order to give me exercise and employment under his own eye’ (Gaskell 2000, 308). Isolated from her family and friends, Anna’s only companion is Amante, the personal servant employed by her husband.

Anna accepts her husband’s rigorous rules, and only enters his private rooms when she expects a letter from her family. One day, she discovers his horrible crimes; with this discovery, she loses the respect for her husband’s system of reward and punishment, which is based on the system of patriarchy. This system betrays his innate disbelief in his own powers, since men in general, according to Jack Zipes, are troubled by ‘the deep knowledge that the grounds for their superior power vis à vis women, backed by laws and rules, are groundless’ (Zipes 2006, 164). However, Anna’s final reflection on the entire process shows not only the male ‘miscalculation of power’ (Zipes 2006, 165), of which she is a victim, but also her own naivety regarding her situation.

Anna’s fate is determined by the difficulties of living as a single woman. As a young woman, she bases her network entirely on relatives and friends: ‘I had several people to love me – thy grandfather Fritz, the old servant Kätchen, Karl, the head apprentice at the mill’ (Gaskell 2000, 292). However, her sister-in-law, Babette Müller, questions her position as an unmarried woman in the household, and Anna blames her for her first marriage: ‘That Babette Müller was, as I may say, the cause of all my life’s suffering’ (Gaskell 2000, 292). However, Anna also develops a strong dependence on Amante, and later, on her second husband, Dr Voss. To live on her own seems completely impossible or unimaginable in this hostile environment.

While Anna’s first husband’s love is bound to marriage, hers, on the contrary, is bound to trust and therefore not directed to one person alone. The friendship she shares with her servant Amante (which means ‘lover’ in French) plays an important role in the story. The night before their escape, Anna speaks to Amante about her loneliness and isolation from her family: ‘Amante listened with interest, and in return told me some of the events and sorrows of her own life’ (Gaskell 2000, 306). One of the servants obviously had been killed for some ‘jesting talk’ (Gaskell 2000, 306), so both women are in a similar danger. When they flee, their friendship becomes stronger, and more silent: ‘We had not spoken a word; we did not speak now. Touch was safer and as expressive’ (Gaskell 2000, 317). Amante takes care of Anna as a mother of her child: ‘Amante sat a little above me, and made me lay my head on her lap. Then she fed me’ (Gaskell 2000, 318). To escape de la Tourelle’s revenge, Amante puts on men’s clothes and they live disguised as a heterosexual couple – Amante working as a tailor and Anna raising the daughter she had by de la Tourelle.

Amante acts as a disobedient servant towards de la Tourelle, like the female helper Daniela Hempen has described in fairy tales like *Castle of Murder* and *The Robber Bridegroom*. In these tales ‘the heroine has come upon a sight more grisly still than the bloody and mutilated corpses of Bluebeard’s female victims: she has encountered Bluebeard’s female helper’ (Hempen 1997, 46). This female helper lives under the power of Bluebeard and participates in the slaughtering of his wives. However, ‘it is only through the old woman’s intervention that this story ends with the rescue of the heroine and the punishment of the master’ (Hempen 1997, 46). The female helper is absent in the end: ‘Forgotten is the old woman who has saved the heroine’s life; she quietly disappears from the scene’ (Hempen 1997, 46). Even Amante has to die, and it is her death which allows the marriage between Anna and Dr Voss, and a less fearful life for Anna, to take place.

Nevertheless, Amante clearly differs from the female helpers in other tales like *The Robber Bridegroom*, since she does not participate in the murders and breaks with her master by following Anna. The 'revolutionary function of domestic servants' (Stoneman 1987, 48) in Gaskell's work has been pointed out by Patsy Stoneman, and Rose Lovell-Smith remarks that Amante, contrary to similar characters in tales like *Castle of Murder* or *Jane Eyre*, 'offers a model of female strength and solidarity' (Lovell-Smith 2002, 204). The words Gaskell uses to describe their relationship implies that this 'model' could even include a lesbian relationship. This might be the reason why the idea of love based on trust and mutual support is incompatible with love in marriage; love has to be allowed to develop in manifold ways. Anna's and Amante's love is not explicitly homosexual, but their disguise as a heterosexual couple suggests some homoerotic undercurrents.

Schinderhannes and the Chauffeurs

In *The Grey Woman*, de la Tourelle is described as one of the chiefs of the robber gang, the Chauffeurs. During their escape, Anna and Amante hear talk about 'the savage and mysterious band of robbers called the Chauffeurs, who infested all the roads leading to the Rhine, with Schinderhannes at their head' (Gaskell 2000, 328).

The group 'les Chauffeurs' is based on real robber gangs that existed in Germany and France around 1800. In the confusion of the revolutionary wars which began in 1792, with French troops occupying various parts of the declining German Reich situated West of the Rhine, many such gangs were active both in France and the occupied German territories. Group executions of gang members took place in Bruges in 1798, in Chartres in 1800, and finally in Mainz in 1803, with the execution of Johannes Bückler, known as 'Schinderhannes', and his gang. Schinderhannes was a legendary womaniser and married several times. Admired especially by peasants in the occupied German zones, and renowned as an enemy of the rich, the French and the Jews, Schinderhannes became a legend during his own lifetime and was fictionalised in books like *Schinderhannes, the Robber of the Rhine*, published in 1833 by Leitch Ritchie. The robber and his gang members are described as charismatic and the story is filled with anecdotes and incredible – or implausible – stories of their lives.

Robber tales fascinated Gaskell, who also wrote an article entitled *An Italian Institution* about the Italian criminal organisation 'La Camorra' in *All the Year Round* in 1863. Gaskell was an enthusiastic storyteller, especially of ghost stories. She collected ghost stories on her journeys, and used some in her non-fiction works (Foster 2002, 126). Gaskell had several chances to hear stories about Schinderhannes during her trips with her husband to Germany; according to Foster, 'In September 1858, and again in June 1860, she went to Heidelberg, reliving the trip she and William [Gaskell] made in 1841' (Foster 2002, 60). In the *Grey Woman*, the main narrative is delivered in the form of a letter, which was given to the narrator of the frame narrative in a 'mill by the Neckar-side', where she went to drink coffee 'with some friends in 184-' (Gaskell 2000, 287). The letter is written in German, in 'passionate, broken sentences' (Gaskell 2000, 289).

The robber gangs described in *The Grey Woman* use the lack of governmental force to develop their own terrorizing power structures. Yet despite the many differences between Anna's practice of love and de la Tourelle's practice of terror, they are evidently attracted to each other. The two seem to have a certain affinity for each other, and they fluctuate between attraction and disdain. By dramatising this clash between citizens and cruel outlaws, Gaskell follows a tradition in German literature which was common after 1800.

German Robber Tales and *Bluebeard*

Stories of robber gangs, already popular in eighteenth-century German literature (such as in Friedrich Schiller's play *Die Räuber*, 1782), became more gruesome in several German short stories written after 1800. One example is the short story *Ignaz Denner*, written by E.T.A. Hoffmann and published in the *Nachstücke* collection in 1817. It is about a poor huntsman living

in the woods between Fulda and Frankfurt, who is haunted for his whole life by the chief of a band of robbers who killed his family. The motif of robber gangs also appears in four grisly fairy tales in the collection *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, first published in 1812, and better known in English as the *Children's and Household Tales*. All four were later identified as belonging to the group 'AaTh 312: Maiden-Killer (Bluebeard)' in the fairy tale motif index by Antti Aarne, Stith Thomson, and Hans-Jörg Uther (Uther 2004, 192f).

The first known version of the tale of Bluebeard, which is apparent in this motif group, is *La Barbe bleue* (*The Blue Beard*), published by Pierre Perrault in his famous fairy tale collection *Contes de ma mere l'Oye* in 1697, but now believed to have been written by his father Charles Perrault. In this tale, a rich man with a terrifying blue beard wants to marry one of the two daughters of a woman in the neighbourhood. One of the girls agrees to the marriage. Her husband allows her to do everything she likes, but forbids her to open the door to one specific chamber in his house. She cannot resist the temptation and disregards his order in his absence; in the forbidden chamber she sees the bodies of the man's dead wives. The key to the chamber falls on the floor, and becomes stained with blood that cannot be removed. Her husband discovers her disobedience and seeks to kill her. In her distress, she asks her sister Anne to call their brothers. They finally come, kill Bluebeard, and his widow inherits his fortune and has the chance to re-marry.

In the Grimms' 1812 collection of fairy tales, Perrault's tale, *Blaubart* (*Bluebeard*), was included as no. 9. The tale was shortened and some changes to the setting were made. Instead of a mother with two daughters, there is now a father with one daughter and three sons living in the woods; Bluebeard is a king instead of a wealthy man. The alterations fit the aforementioned stories of robber gangs and produce a stronger relation to another fairy tale, *Der Ränberbräutigam* (*The Robber Bridegroom*), no. 40 in the Grimms' 1812 edition. In this tale, the daughter of a miller is to marry a strange man; before the marriage, however, she secretly visits his house in the woods. The strange man's servant helps her find a hideout, from which she witnesses how this man and his companions kill and eat a woman. When they are attempting to get a ring from the victim's hand, the murderers hack off a finger, which flies directly to the girl's hiding place. The severed finger later becomes her piece of evidence and helps her convict the murderers.

A similar plot takes place in another fairy tale in the collection: *Fitcher's Vogel* (*Fowler's Fowl*), no. 46. In this tale, a sorcerer uses his magical powers to kidnap three sisters, one after the other. He kills the elder two, but the youngest outwits him, and brings her sisters back to life. Before the planned wedding, she covers herself with feathers and places a skull in the window of the sorcerer's home, making her future husband believe she is waiting for him there. However, when he enters the house, he and his house are burnt down by the girl's brothers and relatives.

The fourth and final relevant story is no. 73, *Das Mordschloss* (*Castle of Murder*). In this tale, the daughter of a shoemaker marries a rich man who has killed her sisters. She escapes to another castle with the help of an old servant, and invites the murderer to the castle, where he is trapped and imprisoned. She then marries the son of the owner of this second castle. *Das Mordschloss* and *Blaubart* were left out in the later editions of Grimms' fairy tales; only *Der Ränberbräutigam* and *Fitcher's Vogel* remained in the collection.

All these German stories are written in a sinister tone, and describe terror and agony in detail. In all of them, people living in the countryside are confronted with a strange person who turns out to be a criminal, but in none of them are the Chauffeurs mentioned. Some tales belong to the motif group of *Bluebeard*, but these stories, including the Grimms' version, are quite different from the tale written by Perrault.

The Reception of *Bluebeard* in the Nineteenth Century

Before 1800, *Bluebeard* was known in Germany as a tale from Perrault's collection. It was translated possibly for the first time in 1780, and familiar due to André Grétry's opera *Raoul Barbe-Bleue*, which premiered in France two months before the French revolution in 1789. In this opera, the protagonist, Raoul, is a despot who is finally killed. The political interpretations of *La*

Barbe-Bleue became popular and the opera was soon translated into German, possibly providing a model for Ludwig Tieck's drama *Ritter Blaubart* and his novel *Die sieben Weiber des Blaubart*, both published in 1797. In England, Perrault's *La Barbe bleue* was translated into English for the first time as early as 1729 by Robert Samber in *Histories, or Tales of Past Times*, and achieved great popularity due to George Colman the Younger's play *The Grand Dramatic Romance Bluebeard, or Female Curiosity*, staged for the first time in London in 1798. This entertaining musical-play defined English perceptions of *Bluebeard* and inspired numerous *Bluebeard* burlesques, extravaganzas, and pantomimes in the nineteenth century.

Gaskell herself refers to *Bluebeard* in her humorous short story *Curious, If True*, published in 1860 in William Makepeace Thackeray's journal *Cornhill Magazine*. In it, an Englishman recounts a dream he had in France, in which several fairy tale characters are described long after the course of the fairy tale action, living together in a retirement castle. Gaskell inverts the fairy tale plot, so that Bluebeard's widow is still mourning her dead husband, blaming her brothers and her sister Anne for killing him. It could be that Gaskell is alluding to Thackeray's short story *Bluebeard's Ghost*, published in *Frazer's Magazine* in 1843, which describes events after Bluebeard's death. Here, his wife Fatima is in deep mourning for her husband, rebuking her sister for calling the brothers.

The comic perception of *Bluebeard* was predominant during the nineteenth century. But there were other tales similar to the ones by the Grimms, one of them *Mr Fox*. First known as a canto about lady Brittomart in *The Faerie Queene* (1590) by Edmund Spenser (canto xi, xii), it was included as *The Story of Mr. Fox* in the 1849 collection, *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales*, by James Orchard Halliwell. Lady Mary wants to marry Mr Fox and visits him in his castle, where she finds inscriptions leading to a chamber with dead women. She catches him bringing in one more woman and hacking off one of her hands before killing her. On the wedding day, Lady Mary discloses what she saw by re-telling it as a dream. She then reveals the hand of the dead woman as evidence, and her brothers and friends kill Mr Fox. The parallels with *The Robber Bridegroom* are obvious.

Also obvious are the parallels between another Grimms tale, *Fowler's Fowl*, and a tale by Charles Dickens published in 1860 in his magazine *All The Year Round*, in the series *The Uncommercial Traveller, Nurse's Stories*. Dickens tells the story of Captain Murderer who eats his brides one after the other. The latter marries one of two sisters, who soon dies. The other sister, who assumes that he is the killer, wants to marry him for revenge. He proceeds to eat her too, but she has poisoned herself beforehand and therefore kills him when he consumes her flesh. Instead of mentioning *Fowler's Fowl*, Dickens links the tale of Captain Murderer to *Bluebeard*: 'This wretch must have been an offshoot of the Blue Beard family' (Dickens 2000, 173).

The retellings of *Bluebeard*, already manifold in the nineteenth century, underwent another change around 1900. A tragic focus on Bluebeard and his wife became predominant in the operas by Paul Dukas (1907) and Béla Bartók (1918). By focusing on the husband and wife, the operas explored the ambiguity of the marital state itself. This ambiguity has given rise to adaptations and studies from a feminist perspective, e.g. *Blaubart, beim Anbören einer Tonbandaufnahme* (1977) by the choreographer Pina Bausch, and shorts stories like *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983) by Margaret Atwood. For Maria Tatar, *Bluebeard* exposes 'the complexities of intimacy and marriage, of a relationship that is driven by considerations both physical and spiritual, aesthetic and ethical' (Tatar 2004, 170). Feminist approaches can also be found in the *Bluebeard* monographs by Mererid Puw Davies (2001), Casie Hermansson (2001) and Monika Szczepaniak (2005).

Bluebeard is a story of 'intimacy and marriage' for twentieth-century readers, of fatal mutual fantasies in which the husband suspects his wife of infidelity, and the wife is curious about her husband's forbidden chamber. Since the start of the psychoanalytic turn in western thinking, the story has become a symbol of such fantasies, often present unconsciously or in dreams, and often connected to jealousy and the wish for stability and trust. In the unfinished, fragmentary novel *Das Buch Franzä* by Ingeborg Bachmann (written 1966, published 1978), the female

protagonist cannot escape her husband, whom she compares to Bluebeard, but prefers to stay exposed to his sadism until her death. If the wife's liberation is the goal, as it is in other works, the story of Bluebeard is replaced by a focus on tales like *The Robber Bridegroom*, *Mr Fox* or *Fowler's Fowl*, where female investigation is of importance. Such aspects, now discussed in adaptations of and research on *Bluebeard*, can be found in the far earlier text, *The Grey Woman*.

The Grey Woman from the perspective of Bluebeard

Humorous reinterpretations of *Bluebeard* were still dominant in English culture when Gaskell published *The Grey Woman* in 1861; nonetheless, some stories exposed Bluebeard as a wife-killing robber or sorcerer. It is *The Story of Mr. Fox*, especially in the scene involving the severed hand, that provides the most striking parallel to Gaskell's story. In *The Grey Woman*, Anna describes a scene she witnessed when she was hidden under a table in her husband's room:

[He kicked] something heavy that [the robbers] had dragged in over the floor, and which lay near to me; so near, that my husband's kick, in touching it, touched me, too. I don't know why – I can't tell how – but some feeling, and not curiosity, prompted me to put out my hand, ever so softly, ever so little, and feel in the darkness for what lay spurned beside me. I stole my groping palm upon the clenched and chilly hand of a corpse! (Gaskell 2000, 311)

There are other parallels too, such as a similar scene involving a finger instead of a hand, and one involving the parents' mill in *The Robber Bridegroom*.

What unites all these stories is a strong Gothic undertone. They embody an atmosphere typical of the Gothic novel, in particular *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe, published in 1794. In this novel, the protagonist Emily St. Aubert marries Signor Montoni, a member of a robber gang, who seems, at first, to be a noble owner of the castle Udolpho. She finally escapes to the Château le Blanc, where she marries its owner, Valancourt, whom she knew from her youth. The Grimms' *Castle of Murder* could almost be an abstract for *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.

In her study on Gothic poetry, Anne Williams states that *The Mysteries of Udolpho* does not correspond with the tale of Bluebeard, but with the Greek tale of Psyche and Amor: 'Emily is Psyche, alone in the world, who early meets and then is separated from her beloved' (Williams 1995, 163). In Williams's view, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is juxtaposed to the *Bluebeard* tale, which represents for Williams a fundamental 'Male' plot in Gothic literature: 'In the Male Gothic a man, the hero/villain, is revealed as a beast; in the Female plot, the apparent beast is transformed into a man' (Williams 1995, 241). Thus, she sees *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as an important example of a story following the fundamental 'Female' plot of Psyche in Gothic literature, whereas *Bluebeard* is 'exploiting and exploring patriarchy's definition of the female' (Williams 1995, 240).

If Gaskell's story is connected to *Bluebeard*, it is not simply 'the world of Blue Beard' and 'the room forbidden to the young wife and the stories of the mysterious absences of the husband and of an earlier wife murdered for her disobedience' (Camus 2002, 175), as Marianne Camus mentions in her study on Gaskell's fiction, but an inversion of it. In her feminist essay on *Bluebeard*, Lovell-Smith focuses on the servant Amante, an approach influenced by Hempen who observed in 1997 the key role of the female helpers in some of the *Bluebeard*-related tales by the Brothers Grimm. Lovell-Smith claims that Amante is 'most unambiguously benevolent and loyal', and that 'these concerns of Gaskell's produce a radical transformation of a tale-telling tradition' (Lovell-Smith 2002, 204).

In order to invert the plot described as 'Male' by Williams, one which usually neglects the fate of the female protagonist, Gaskell considers several aspects already mentioned. She tells the story from the perspective of the murderer's wife, explains the protagonists' own concept of love, places the story in a historical setting, and avoids any reference to *Bluebeard*. But there is another

important aspect in Gaskell's story: she does not question the reliability of her narrator, contrary to other writers at the time.

***Jane Eyre*, Female Insanity and Authorship**

This change to the 'tale-telling tradition' seems to be the more remarkable if compared to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). For Lovell-Smith,

Both *Jane Eyre* and *The Grey Woman* are clearly mid-Victorian 'proto-feminist' texts, as evidenced by [the authors'] common interest in women's work, in female bonding, in female independence of male financial support, and in their sensational departures from images of centrality of the happy home and the finality of the happy marriage. (Lovell-Smith 2002, 204)

But the novel, although related to the 'Female' Psyche-plot as outlined by Williams, is in Lovell-Smith's view 'much less radical than Gaskell's relatively unknown but truly horrifying tale of sexual politics' (Lovell-Smith 2002, 204).

In *Jane Eyre*, the happy ending with the marriage of Rochester and Jane Eyre, does not ease the reader's suspicion that Rochester is an equivalent of Bluebeard, since Rochester locks his former wife, Bertha, in his attic, where she dies in a fire; he uses the diagnosis of insanity to declare her as a patient in need of confinement. Jean Rhys explored the situation of Bertha in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and speculations about Rochester's true nature were also discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their 1979 study of 'the madwoman in the attic'; such perspectives made way for further studies by Hermansson and Tatar.

During the nineteenth century, the diagnosis of insanity included such 'female sicknesses' as hysteria. Such a doctrine 'proved' *in extremis* the female inability to tell truth in general, as she could only pretend to know the truth. Annette Keck shows how psychiatrists tried to uncover true intentions by decoding the female patient's bodily behaviour as language. By reading their body positions and spasms as an expression of letters, these women did not only express words, but became literature in and of themselves. Female curiosity and the love of literature and knowledge are both seen as pathological in the nineteenth-century diagnosis of hysteria; female insanity therefore provides an unexpected connection between *Bluebeard* and the 'bluestockings', or the women's rights activists (Keck 2001, 110).

The protagonist in *The Grey Woman*, too, shows signs of mental problems. Anna's health is damaged after the cruel experiences with her husband: 'I lived in [...] deep retirement, never seeing the full light of day' (Gaskell 2000, 339). Furthermore, she 'would not stir out' (Gaskell 2000, 337), a condition which lasted for her whole life: 'Dr Voss tried to persuade me to return to a more natural mode of life, and to go out more. But although I sometimes complied with his wish, yet the old terror was ever strong upon me' (Gaskell 2000, 340). She and Amante never talk about Anna's witnessing of her husband's murder, and Amante never alludes 'for an instant to the fearful cause why flight was necessary. I made no inquiry as to how she knew, or what she knew. I never asked her either then or afterwards, I could not bear it – we kept our dreadful secret close' (Gaskell 2000, 316).

Gaskell does not question the reliability of her protagonist's report and it is implied throughout the text that these mental problems were caused by her husband's abusive behaviour. Anna is capable of expressing herself coherently in the letter that constitutes *The Grey Woman*, and her proficiency in literacy also sets her apart from Anne, the protagonist of the novel *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins, which was published in *All The Year Round* in August 1860, months before Gaskell's. Anne, the so-called 'woman in white', is described as mentally disturbed. While Anne remains mute, the 'grey woman' is able to describe her suffering under the 'life-long terror'; she 'lost her colour so entirely through fright' that she was only called the 'grey woman' (Gaskell

2000, 289). However, contrary to the imprisoned Bertha of *Jane Eyre* and the mute victim in *The Woman in White*, Anna writes her own report. Her letter, like the tapestry woven by the rape victim Philomena in Greek mythology, who is unable to express herself verbally because her tongue has been cut out, can be evaluated as a subjective testimony of her history and a description of her distress and terror. Her letter fills the gap in her biography and speaks for other women in similar situations, who are unable to find their language. By writing this letter, Anna expresses herself and becomes active as an author.

Conclusions

The Grey Woman can be seen as a literary parallel to *Bluebeard*. Although Gaskell's *The Grey Woman* is influenced by the real-life Chauffeurs who existed in Germany and France around 1800, Gaskell avoids any valorisation or heroism, as was commonplace in the legends and romances. Instead, she writes from the perspective of the victims. Earlier German writings such as the novel *Ignaz Denner* by E.T.A. Hoffmann, and several stories in the first edition Grimms' fairy tales, like *Blaubart*, show similarities to the robber gang legends.

A comparison of tales that use the *Bluebeard* motif shows a surprising concordance. As feminist *Bluebeard* research would suggest, Gaskell's 'proto-feminist' text seems to refer to cruel and shocking robber tales like *The Robber Bridegroom*, *Mr Fox*, and *Fowler's Fowl*. Meanwhile, the *Bluebeard* studies by Zipes, Hempen, Lovell-Smith, Tatar, and Keck correspond in many ways with the short story published by Gaskell in 1861. The questions discussed in relation to *Bluebeard* – such as the male miscalculation of power, the role of Bluebeard's female helper, the ambiguity of the couple's mutual fantasies, the critique of the ways in which Bluebeard's wife is declared insane (and therefore incapable of giving testimony), and the acceptance of the wife's report as a trustworthy statement – all help to shed new light on Gaskell's story. Thus, the proto-feminist qualities of *The Grey Woman* show that it was a story ahead of its time.

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