

Title: Beauties vs. Beasts in the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales*
Author(s): Maria M. Tatar
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 [(essay date 1988) *In the following essay, Tatar examines the textual history of the Bluebeard folktale in Nursery and Household Tales, contrasting narrative elements of "Mary's Child" and "Fowler's Fowl."*]

Fairy-tale beauties may all be very much alike, but there are two quite different types of beasts in the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales*. First, there are the animal-grooms who make life unpleasant for many a female protagonist: these are the frogs, bears, hedgehogs, and other creatures that press themselves on attractive young girls. But these beasts invariably turn out to be handsome young princes in disguise and generally prove to be perfect gentlemen. The real fairy-tale beasts, even if they are beasts in only the figurative rather than the literal sense of the term, turn out to be murderers masquerading as civilized men: Bluebeard, the Robber Bridegroom (in the tale of that title), and the wizard in "**Fowler's Fowl**" ("**Fitchers Vogel**") are the most prominent examples in the *Nursery and Household Tales*.

Bluebeard, the most infamous of this entire lot of beasts, entered the pages of the Grimms' collection, but only in its first edition. For the second, revised edition of 1819, the Grimms eliminated the tale, evidently because it was too close in both substance and verbal realization to its French source. Still, Bluebeard was not done away with entirely. He stood as model for at least one villain in the Grimms' collection, and his wife lent her traits to more than one fairy-tale heroine. For this reason, it will be useful to take a brief detour into the realm of Perrault's Mother Goose, then to trace our way back to a path that leads directly into the world of the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales*.

The heroine of Perrault's "Bluebeard" may be a woman of "perfect beauty," but her character is flawed by the nearly fatal sin of curiosity. When her husband tests her by entrusting her with the key to a forbidden chamber, she is so plagued by curiosity that she "rudely" leaves the guests in her house to their own devices, then nearly breaks her neck in her haste to reach the forbidden door. At the door she hesitates as she meditates on the possible consequences of being "disobedient." But the temptation is too great, and she unlocks the door to witness a grisly scene of carnage in the forbidden chamber: "the wives of Bluebeard, whose throats he had cut, one after another."¹ When Bluebeard discovers the evidence of his wife's transgression, he flies into a rage and swears that this woman too will die by his sword. The heroine's brothers arrive in the nick of time to prevent their sister from joining the victims in Bluebeard's chamber.

Perrault harbored no doubts about the meaning and message of this story. "Bluebeard" has two different "moralités" appended to it. The first warns women of the hazards of curiosity, a trait that "costs dearly" and brings with it "regrets." The second reminds us that Bluebeards no longer exist in this day and age: "The time is long gone when there were strict husbands, / And no man will demand the impossible / Even if he is plagued by jealousy and unhappiness."² Perrault's description of Bluebeard as a "strict" husband who demands "the impossible" squares with the facts of the text. But his declaration that Bluebeard is "plagued by jealousy and unhappiness" gives us an extratextual piece of evidence concerning the motivation for testing his wives. Bluebeard, Perrault implies, is the victim of sexual jealousy--hence his need to subject each successive wife to a test of absolute obedience. In that test, which becomes as much a test of fidelity as of obedience, Bluebeard's new wife, like all the others before her, fails miserably.

Nearly every reader and rewriter of Bluebeard has fallen in line with the interpretation implicit in Perrault's two morals to the tale. Bruno Bettelheim's view is representative. In Bluebeard he sees a cautionary tale armed with the message "Women, don't give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don't permit yourselves to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed." For Bettelheim, the bloodstained key (in some versions it is an egg) that Bluebeard's wife is obliged to surrender to her husband clinches the argument that she has had "sexual relations" and symbolizes "marital infidelity."³ For another reader, that key becomes a symbol of "defloration," revealing the heroine's sexual betrayal of her husband during his absence.⁴ For a third, it marks the heroine's irreversible loss of her virginity.⁵

What Bettelheim and others do with few hesitations, reservations, and second thoughts is to turn a tale depicting the most brutal kind of serial murders into a story about idle female curiosity and duplicity. These critics follow Perrault's lead and invite us to view the heroine's quite legitimate *cognitive* curiosity (what does her husband have to hide?) as a form of sexual

curiosity and sexual betrayal that can only bring in its wake serious "regrets." The genuinely murderous rages of Bluebeard and his folkloric cousins would presumably never have been provoked had it not been for the symbolic infidelity of his wives. As horrifying as those multiple murders may be, they do not succeed in deflecting attention from the heroine's single transgression. That transgression, like the opening of Pandora's box, comes to function as the chief source of evil. In Ludwig Tieck's "Ritter Blaubart," even Bluebeard's wife is appalled by her inability to resist temptation. "O curiosity," she declaims, "damned, scandalous curiosity! There's no greater sin than curiosity!" Her self-reproaches are uttered in full view of the scene of carnage for which her husband bears responsibility. Bluebeard himself confirms his wife's appraisal of her high crimes (by contrast to his misdemeanors): "Cursed curiosity! Because of it sin entered the innocent world, and even now it leads to crime. Ever since Eve was curious, every single one of her worthless daughters has been curious. ... The woman who is curious cannot be faithful to her husband. The husband who has a curious wife is never for one moment of his life secure. ... Curiosity has provoked the most horrifying murderous deeds."⁶ This is surely a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Whether intentionally or not, Tieck revealed the extent to which literary retellings of Bluebeard blame the victim for the crimes of the villain. Is it any wonder that in the nineteenth century Anatole France attempted to rehabilitate Bluebeard by pointing out that there never really were any corpses in the forbidden chamber: Bluebeard's wife headed for that room with such breakneck speed because a handsome young man was waiting for her on the other side of the door.⁷ Here, once again, the heroine's cognitive curiosity in the folktale is taken as a sign of sexual curiosity, while Bluebeard's murderous sexual curiosity (he takes one wife after another) is taken as rage at his wife's sexual curiosity.

As Bluebeard became appropriated by the literary culture of the nineteenth century, it was transformed from a folktale describing the rescue of a maiden from a murderous ogre (AT [Aarne-Thompson] 312) into a text warning of the evils of female curiosity. Oral folktales (even those of relatively recent vintage) rarely embroider on the theme of curiosity and disobedience; instead the tales' narrative energy is funneled into the mounting dramatic tension that arises as the heroine's brothers race to Bluebeard's castle while the heroine stalls for time, resorting to various tactics to keep her husband from cutting her throat or decapitating her before the arrival of her brothers. A related tale type (AT 311) focuses on the clever ruses mounted by the youngest of three sisters to outsmart and defeat an ogre who has slaughtered her sisters.⁸ It was Perrault, in his literary version of an orally transmitted tale, who took the first steps in the direction of converting a dramatic encounter between innocent maiden and barbaric murderer into a moral conflict between corrupt woman and corrupted man.

That female curiosity has been enshrined as the central subject of this tale is confirmed by a brief glance at the pictorial history of Bluebeard. One illustrator after another emphasizes one of two "key" scenes in the tale: the arousal of curiosity is masterfully put on display in Gustave Doré's illustration for Perrault's "Bluebeard"; the satisfaction of curiosity is depicted in one of ten sketches prepared by Otto Brausewitz. Again and again these two scenes capture the attention of the tale's illustrators. Walter Crane's drawing of Bluebeard's wife on her way to the forbidden chamber is also revealing. As the curious heroine slips away from her guests, she passes by a tapestry that provides a moral gloss on her action: Eve is shown succumbing to temptation in the Garden of Eden. The sin of Bluebeard's wife originated with Eve, and all of Eve's daughters (as the tableau of inquisitive guests opening cupboards, chests, and drawers tells us) suffer from it. "Succumbing to temptation," as one commentator on Bluebeard feels obliged to remind us, "is the sin of the Fall, the sin of Eve."⁹ When women give in to temptation, they symbolically reenact the Fall, committing a deed tainted with the evil of sexual curiosity. Like Eve, they may begin their quest in a search for cognitive knowledge, but it ultimately ends in the desire for carnal knowledge.

In light of the interpretive vicissitudes of Bluebeard, it is easy enough to see why the Grimms may have had moral reservations--in addition to their other objections--for including that story in the second edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*. The second edition, after all, was rewritten with a view toward producing a collection of tales suitable for children's ears. And Perrault's version of the tale, as we have seen, lent itself all too easily to interpretations that veered off into areas that most parents preferred to avoid for bedtime reading. For whatever reasons the Grimms decided against including in their collection the tale of Bluebeard that had come into their hands, they were not at all opposed to including variants of that tale type, even in their second edition. Those variants, however, branch out into two radically different directions.

Let us begin with the variant that makes of the tale type a cautionary tale pure and simple--one in which the evils of curiosity are writ even larger than in Perrault's "Bluebeard" and in which the figure substituted for Bluebeard is beyond reproach. "**Mary's Child**" ("**Marienkind**") gives us a remarkable recasting of the story of a forbidden chamber. The Grimms' heroine, who has been rescued from starvation and taken up to heaven by the Virgin, cannot resist the temptation to unlock a door to which Mary has given her the key. Behind the door, she sees the blinding splendor of the Holy Trinity and touches it with her finger, which becomes gilded. When Mary discovers the evidence of the girl's transgression, she makes the unrepentant child mute and sends her back down to earth. In one tale variant heard by the Grimms and recorded in their annotations, the Virgin silences the girl by slapping her on the mouth so hard that blood gushes forth. That the Virgin Mary could slip with ease into the same functional slot occupied by Bluebeard is telling and does much to explain why it became easy for rewriters and critics of the tale type to let Bluebeard off the hook. The heroine's disobedience is so unattractive a trait that violence and bloodshed pale by comparison. What is even more remarkable than Mary's adoption of Bluebeard's role is her assumption of the part, in

the second half of "**Mary's Child**," ordinarily played by an ogress. After the heroine's marriage to a king, the Virgin returns on three occasions to demand a confession, each time kidnapping the queen's latest newborn in retaliation for her failure to tell the truth. When the queen confesses at last (just before she is about to be burned at the stake), Mary releases her and restores the three children to her. "Now that you have told the truth," Mary declares, "you are forgiven." The Virgin spells out one lesson of the story; the other lesson has to do with the perils of curiosity, with the girl's inability to avoid taking a peek at the forbidden.

In this story, we have something of a reversal of the ground rules operating in classical children's fairy tales. In the final analysis, it is the heroine's antagonist who wins; the heroine, stubborn as she may be, must admit defeat in the end. "**Mary's Child**" is only one of several such cautionary tales that side with adults. "**Frau Trude**," one of the less well known texts in the *Nursery and Household Tales*, is a story that few children could find satisfying. "Once there was a girl who was stubborn and insolent, and disobeyed her parents." In addition, she is unable to curb her curiosity and is driven to see with her own eyes Frau Trude, a "wicked" woman who does "godless things." In the end, the girl is turned into a block of wood that Frau Trude casually throws into the fire to provide heat. Here, the evil witch wins for once. But more than that, the world of adults wins out over the child, taking revenge for childish stubbornness, insolence, and disobedience. There is only one other story in the *Nursery and Household Tales* that surpasses "**Frau Trude**" in its stark portrayal of the punishment of children. "**The Stubborn Child**" ("Das eigensinnige Kind") tells of a naughty youngster who refuses to do what its mother commands. "God was displeased and made it fall sick." The child dies, is buried, but still asserts itself even beyond the grave by thrusting an arm into the air. Only when the mother makes her way to the grave and whips the arm with a switch does the child find peace.

Each of these three stories preaches a straightforward lesson about the virtues of telling the truth, suppressing curiosity, and practicing obedience. It is therefore surprising to hear the Grimms declare, in the preface to the *Nursery and Household Tales*, that their stories were never intended "to instruct, nor were they made up for that reason." These tales seem consciously designed to impart specific lessons framed by adults for children. As cautionary tales, they demonstrate how children with undesirable traits--deceitfulness, curiosity, insolence--come to a bad end.

We have seen how the breathtaking, bloodcurdling story of an ogre's murderous schemes against a young woman could be recast to create a didactic tale celebrating the triumph of adult authority over childish deviousness and deviance. But the conversion took place only with time, as oral folktales moved from *Spinnstuben* and workrooms into the nursery and household, as the audience for the stories shifted from adults to children.¹⁰ The revisions in the Grimms' second edition were motivated in part by harsh contemporary criticism of the first edition, which was deemed adult entertainment rather than children's literature.¹¹ For the second edition it was logical to replace "**Bluebeard**," with its forbidden chambers, bloody keys, and maimed corpses, with "**Mary's Child**," a story that few adults in the Grimms' day and age would have found offensive. There, the figure who incarnates authority in its most tyrannical form is turned into a saint and therefore becomes impossible to associate with villainy. Instead, evil emanates solely from the tale's obstinately disobedient protagonist, who in the end is punished for her transgression. The quickest way to "teach someone a lesson," as our language puts it, is to punish them. "**Mary's Child**," with its foregrounding of the transgression/punishment pattern, stands as one of the most striking examples of a fairy tale crafted to teach a lesson both to its protagonist and to its youthful readers.

There is another story in the Grimms' collection that belongs virtually to the same tale type as Bluebeard, yet its conclusion moves in a very different direction, and it is therefore designated as AT 311 rather than 312. "**Fowler's Fowl**" casts an evil wizard in the role of Bluebeard and features three sisters, two of whom succumb to curiosity, disobey the wizard, discover a bloodbath behind the door forbidden to them, and are executed by their cold-blooded fiancé. The third and youngest sister is "clever and sly." She has the foresight to put into a safe place the egg that her two sisters dropped in their fright at witnessing the scene of carnage. With not a single shred of evidence for her transgression, the wizard loses his power over the heroine, and she is able both to resurrect the mutilated corpses of her sisters and to engineer the downfall of the wizard. The plot of this story follows the classic lines of children's fairy tales: it begins with a display of weakness and victimization at the hands of an all-powerful adversary and ends with a tableau of revenge and retaliation.

In the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales*, we have few dragon slayers and giant killers. What we have instead are endless variations on male Cinderellas: Hans Dumm, the youngest of three sons, or a fearless simpleton. Helplessness and abject self-pity are the characteristic poses struck by these figures. Female heroines fare little better: Cinderella, Thousandfurs (Allerleirauh), Snow White, King Thrushbeard's wife, and a variety of princesses must wash dishes, haul firewood, scrub floors, polish boots, and carry out all manner of domestic chores before they are translated into a higher social sphere. But the tables are turned before the tale ends. The hero's accession to wealth and power drains the strength of his adversaries, who become helpless targets of revenge. Punishments overshadow nearly all else in the coda to a large number of the Grimms' tales. The description of Cinderella's wedding is almost wholly devoted to an elaborate account of how doves peck out the eyes of the stepsisters. Snow White's wedding really has only one central event: the death of the stepmother after she is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes. The king, the queen, and her six brothers may all live happily ever after in "**The Six Swans**," but not until the queen's wicked mother-in-law has first been burned at the stake. The hero of "**The Knapsack, the Hat, and**

the Horn" triumphs in the end by blowing on his horn until everything around him collapses, crushing to death the duplicitous king and princess of the tale. "Revenge can be as sweet as love," Musäus points out in the version of "Snow White" that he published in his *Volksmärchen der Deutschen*. Revenge comes to function as the main motor of the plot in countless fairy tales.¹²

The protagonists of classic children's fairy tales have never placed a premium on good manners and virtuous behavior. The hero of "**The Golden Bird**" lies, cheats, and steals his way to success, all the while ignoring the advice of his helper. Rapunzel deceives her enchantress-guardian by arranging secret meetings with a prince. And the princess of "**The Frog King**" dashes against the wall the importunate amphibian who once came to her aid. Fairy-tale heroes are also rarely prepared to forgive and forget. Wicked stepmothers are forever being stripped and rolled down hills in barrels embedded with nails or turned out into the woods to be devoured by wild animals. That Two-eyes forgives her sisters in the story "**One-eye, Two-eyes, and Three-eyes**" is a startling exception to the rule of fairy-tale conduct. Virtually any tactic used to work one's way up the ladder of social success is considered legitimate; once on the top rungs, the protagonist has no reservations about toppling those above him. Still, from Perrault on, there has been no end to inscribing moral lessons even on tales that clearly have no moral. When Wilhelm Grimm was preparing the second edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*, for example, he gave the father of the princess in "**The Frog King**" an additional line of dialogue: "[The frog] helped you when you were in trouble and you mustn't despise him now." But the father's pronouncements on the importance of keeping promises and remaining loyal move against the grain of the story itself. The Frog King is not released from his enchanted state until the princess displays her contempt for him through an act of physical violence. Passion rather than compassion leads to a happy ending. The protagonists of fairy tales rarely achieve their ends by observing strict ethical codes.

The textual history of "**Bluebeard**" in the Grimms' *Nursery and Household Tales* illustrates clearly the way in which a single plot can be channeled into two separate and distinct types of stories. The one trusts Perrault's tale and its literary "moralité" on the hazards of curiosity; the other relies on the oral folktales on which Perrault himself probably based his text. What started out as a story pitting a Beauty against a Beast was turned, on the one hand, into a story staging a struggle between a pathological liar and a saint. "**Mary's Child**" shows us how adult patience wins out over childish disobedience, deception, and stubbornness. Children are guilty of transgressions; adults visit punishments on the transgressors. Power is invested solely in adults, who use their superior strength and intelligence to teach children a lesson. These stories, with their single-minded focus on the transgression/punishment pattern, their unique power relationships, and their explicit morals, belong to a breed apart—one that is best designated by the term cautionary fairy tale.

"**Bluebeard**," as we have seen, also took another course in the Grimms' collection, one that resulted in the demonization of the figure named in the story's title. "**Fowler's Fowl**" (along with its variant known as "**The Robber Bridegroom**") sets up a conflict between a wholly innocent young girl and an evil mass murderer. The contrast between heroine and villain could not be more striking. Against all odds, the helpless heroine triumphs over her powerful adversary. It is easy enough to see just why this particular story would prove attractive to children. A sense of utter vulnerability in the face of a seemingly capricious all-powerful figure replicates perfectly the feelings of the young child toward adults. The movement in this fairy tale, and in others, from victimization to retaliation gives vivid but disguised shape to the dreams of revenge that inevitably drift into the minds of every child beset by a sense of weakness and inconsequence. Fairy tales such as "**Fowler's Fowl**" put on display the victory of children over adults—power is ultimately put into the hands of the powerless. For the transgression/punishment pattern of cautionary fairy tales, these tales substitute its obverse: victimization/retaliation. They do not have a lesson to preach; if a general truth or moral precept is enunciated in the course of the narrative, it rarely squares with the actual facts of the text. What "**Fowler's Fowl**," "**The Robber Bridegroom**," and other such stories give us are classic children's fairy tales—stories in which innocent young Beauties (male or female) always defeat the adult Beasts.

Notes

1. "Bluebeard," in *Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales*, trans. A. E. Johnson et al. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961), p. 81.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 88. I have taken the liberty of modifying the translation slightly to make it more literal.
3. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 301-2. Bettelheim's interpretation and those of other critics are discussed in my book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 158-61.
4. Alan Dundes, "Projection in Folklore: A Plea for Psychoanalytic Semiotics," in his *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 46.
5. Carl-Heinz Mallet, *Kopf ab! Gewalt im Märchen* (Hamburg: Rasch und Rohring, 1985), p. 201.

6. Ludwig Tieck, "Ritter Blaubart," in *Werke*, ed. Richard Plett (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1967), pp. 226, 238.
7. Anatole France, *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard and Other Marvelous Tales*, trans. D. B. Stewart (London: John Lane, 1920), pp. 3-40.
8. For summaries of or references to printed versions of "Bluebeard," see Antti Aarne, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and a Bibliography, Translated and Enlarged by Stith Thompson* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961), pp. 101-4; Paul Delarue, *Le Conte populaire français* (Paris: Erasme, 1957), I, 182-99; and Johannes Bolte and Georg Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1913), 398-412.
9. J. C. Cooper, *Fairy Tales: Allegories of the Inner Life* (Wellingborough, Northhamptonshire: Aquarian Press, 1983), pp. 72-73. The illustrations are discussed in my book, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, pp. 161-63.
10. On this point, see Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre and the Process of Civilization* (New York: Wildman Press, 1983), p. 31.
11. See the first chapter of my *Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*.
12. Johann Karl August Musäus, *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (Munich: Winkler, 1976), p. 115. On revenge in fairy tales, see also Bettelheim, *Uses of Enchantment*, pp. 133-34.

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Editor's Note: This list represents a selection of items from the notes to the individual essays, together with additional references included to enhance its usefulness as a guide to further reading on the subject of the Grimms and folktale.

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When fairy tales moved from workrooms, taverns, and the fireside into the nursery, they not only lost much of their irreverent, earthy humor but were also deprived of their contestatory stance to official culture. In this book she explores how Perrault, the Grimms, and others reshaped fairy tales to produce conciliatory literary texts that dedicate themselves to the project of socializing the child. When fairy tales moved from workrooms, taverns, and the fireside into the nursery, they not only lost much of their irreverent, earthy humor but were also deprived of their contestatory stance to official culture. *Beauties and Beasts From Blind Obedience to Love at First Sight*. 140. *Telling Differences Parents vs Children in The Jumper Tree*. 212. *Reinvention through Intervention*. *Too Grimm for Disney: Original editions of classic fairy tales offer darker side of Brothers Grimm stories - including self-mutilation in Cinderella and Rapunzel getting pregnant in her tower*. Professor Jack Zipes has translated the original stories by the German pair. Includes Cinderella's stepsisters cutting part of foot off to fit into slipper. Elsewhere it's Hansel and Gretel's biological mother who abandons them in the forest because she can't afford to feed them. When Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, from Hanau, Germany, published the first version of the now classic collection, then called *Children's And Household Tales*, they had no idea the 86 stories would reach such a wide audience. The first comprises beasts and monsters; these include wolves and bears, but also the man-eating giants who threaten to devour the hero as he makes his way through the world. The second group consists of social deviants; among them are the robbers and highwaymen who waylay innocent young women, murder them, chop up their corpses, and cook the pieces in a stew. Surely these stories, of all the stories in the Grimms' collection, have the least factual basis, even in the realities of past ages or of savage practices, or so it would seem. Another text in the first edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales* (this one too failed to enter the pages of subsequent editions) suggests that cannibalism was not unknown in times of famine.