



Blood, Bodies, & Booty in “Bluebeard”

Allison Lilly
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Introduction

The tale of “La Barbe-bleu,” translated to the English “Bluebeard,” by Charles Perrault revolves around the themes of 17th-Century folk tradition: magic, mystery, and a moral. The tale begins with the classic ‘once upon a time’ and introduces the audience to the character of Bluebeard, a frightful and ugly man who wishes to marry one of his neighbor’s daughters. What is curious is that he has had several wives in the past, but they have all disappeared. Eventually, drawn to his wealth, the youngest daughter agrees to marry Bluebeard, and she is given the run of the castle. She is not allowed access to one of the rooms, however, in which Bluebeard clearly states she is forbidden to enter it, and if she disobeys, “[...] there will be no limit to [Bluebeard’s] anger.”¹ Bluebeard leaves, on ‘business,’ which is typically interpreted as an excuse to test his wife, determining if she will disobey him. His new wife’s curiosity betrays her, and she uses the key to access the forbidden room. In it, she sees pools of blood, followed by the bodies of the previous wives hung on the walls.² In horror, she drops the key on the ground and it becomes soaked with blood, which she is unable to wipe off. The enchanted key is her betrayer, as Bluebeard eventually makes her show him the key, and he sees its irremovable blood stain. He threatens to kill her, but she begs him for time to pray, in order to prepare for death, yet when she disappears upstairs to pray, in reality, she calls her sister to arrange for her brothers to come save her. Her brothers ultimately arrive and slay Bluebeard, saving their sister’s life. Perrault includes a moral following the tale’s end, as well: women’s curiosity can be the death of them, and that women are to obey their husbands.

Identifies the literary genre and its theme; situates the story within a literary tradition; introduces the audience to the main character of the story and gives a summary of the story
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¹ Tatar, 145.

² In Carter’s translation, the bodies are not hung on the walls, but merely lie on the floor.

The tropes present in this tale signify a much deeper understanding for an audience of 17th-Century Europe, particularly at the time of 1697 when it was written in France. Just as art is a product of its time, the literary fairy tale is a product of the cultural circumstances during the time it was written. “Bluebeard” transforms from a traditional folk tale to a terrifying study of the human body that revolves around murder and collecting. Originally published in the compilation titled *Histoires ou Contes du Temps passé avec des Moralitez* (Stories or Tales of Times Past with Morals), the moral of this tale functions much more deeply in the eyes of a reader in 1697. Using historic method, I will analyze the notions of the body represented in “Bluebeard” to make them relevant to the reception within this time and geographical period in order to discover why this story was in fact so terrifying for children and adults alike.

Identifies the socio-cultural background of the story and the audience, and connects the theme to both the audience and his/her morals.

Announces the method; announces the purpose of the paper.

Perrault was born in 1628 in Paris, and later succeeded in receiving his law degree in 1651, allowing him the privileges of the bourgeoisie. His interest in fairy tales stemmed from the oral tradition, particularly in the salon where stories were often told. The salon was a space, in the taste of Louis XIV, where stories were told, either in the oral tradition or read aloud to elite groups of women. Women were denied a formal education, so these gatherings could assure the retelling of tales through the oral tradition, for those who could not read. Moreover, the moralizing tone of the tales was written almost exclusively for women and children. While Perrault could have been considered “upper class,” he wrote his stories with literary form that could be accessed by the lower classes, particularly the uneducated, meaning his tales were accessible to all. As their popularity grew, the tales were more widely produced in the literary form. While the tales would have been written in France, the subject matter appealed more to an English sensibility. It was therefore

Identifies the background of the writer, as well as the socio-historical context of the tale’s production.

translated and reprinted for reproduction in other European countries, therefore allowing me to delve into research from France and England alike in relation to the early modern body.

Dead & Dead-er

Death was looked upon much differently in an early modern sensibility, as one's period of life was much briefer in 1697 in England or France. Death was not welcomed so much as it was accepted in everyday life. Childhood mortality, for example, was the highest in the first year of life: life was less common than death was. Therefore, the practices needed to prepare for death were readily accepted by society and encouraged as is demonstrated by the *Ars Moriendi*.

contextualizes one of the themes of the story: argues different views towards death in the early modern period

The *Art of Dying*, translated from Latin, was a treatise along with an illustrated manual in place during the fifteenth century up until the eighteenth century, as a rulebook outlining the rituals, prayers, and practices required for an individual to die a good death, regardless of an individual's religious affiliations. Judgment following death became a huge source of anxiety for those who knew the history of famine, plague, and other communicable diseases and their impact on life expectancy in Europe in centuries previous. The instances of mass mortality altered the state of thinking about death, and the concern for the afterlife became increasingly concerning. To console the population, the outline of these guidelines provided a peaceful attitude toward death, ergo the acceptance of death instead of the fear of death. In relation to "Bluebeard," the production of the *Ars Moriendi* in France peaked during the 1670's, making this a legitimate document for the early modern audience to have consulted to live a good life by preparing for a good death.

describes two different judgments about death: good death

While there are many descriptions regarding how one should die, accounts of people whom actually are dying are rare, as it is unlikely they would be writing while dying. One of the accounts found by Wunderli and Broce describes the ‘bad’ death of Alice Gysbye in 1538. A bump had formed on her neck, leaving her unable to speak, and eventually, the growth got so large that it ruptured and bled out. Soon after, a priest was called to provide the last prayers and Eucharist for her to receive; however, she did not look upon the priest, or receive the wafer. Her friends and family urged her to look upon the wafer as a sign of her devotion and an acknowledgement of her faith, but she did not, and her death was considered bad. “Alice had no chance for her last carefully planned words of pious devotion.”³ Conversely, the account from Wunderli and Broce (1989, 270) of good death provided recounts the following prayer, constituting an ideal death: “John Burre testified that James Monford uttered these final words: “I thanke god nowe I haue received my maker, and I doo aske all the worlde forgyvnes, and I pray you bear me records that when I shall dy, I doo dye a true Christian”

describes “bad death,” offering textual evidence for argument

Furthermore, the *Ars Moriendi* including writings related to the final thought before death: proper mental composure could become the final determinant in salvation, yet a mental slip could deter it. Dying therefore was an active decision, whether the deathbed was a choice between angelic inspiration and demonic temptation. The anonymous illustrations within the *Ars Moriendi* (to the right) show the dead surrounded by a crowd, with the central figure most likely in his own bed, and



describes active death (good death)

Here is a visual that helps to establish the claim about what accounts for the ‘good death’.

³ Wunderli and Broce, 269.

accompanied by a priest or holy representative. The image of the cross is affixed in the image, along with depictions of angels and demons, amid angry looking demons, as they have lost the battle between the angels for the dying man's soul. The dead person is shown as heroic and exemplifies dying well, and the images are present to illustrate what is necessary for a good death, even for those who cannot read, signifying its accessibility and importance.

An equivalent Catholic work was written in 1619 by Robert Bellarmine titled *The Art of Dying Well*. An unexpected death was the most frightful aspect of his text, therefore, there is emphasis placed on the continued meditation about death that one should be practicing for his or her entire life in case unanticipated death was to occur. Whereas the Catholic requirements for death required a last minute confession, presence of a priest, and acceptance of the Eucharist, the Humanist text by Erasmus of Rotterdam of 1534 states that a priest is not necessary, as the dying man can confess directly to God and receive forgiveness if he has lived a good life. On the contrary, according to Calvin, the soul would go automatically to heaven, despite the life lived by the individual, as one's salvation was determined at the beginning of time. Conversely, Luther believed that the soul would rest and only be judged at the Final Judgment. The Reformation, catalyzed in 1514 by Luther, would have significantly changed the views on death, and specifically the Catholic notion of time spent in purgatory before the soul could enter into Heaven.⁴

comments on unexpected death

Whether the dead wives of Bluebeard were Catholic, Protestant, or Calvinist women, the fear of dying a bad death would be felt by all of them. Firstly, the unexpected death would have been cause for anxiety, as they were not able to pray or receive penance for their sins. They would not have been expecting to die when they did, as Bluebeard was so quick to jump to the conclusion that the current wife needed to die, that the deaths for the

discusses bad death more broadly in the tale

⁴ The soul's time spent neither in Heaven nor Hell following an individual's death

previous wives could also be assumed to be swift. “You must die quickly,”⁵ says Bluebeard.

This would bring an inordinate amount of terror to an early modern viewer, as great preparations would be taken for the moment of death, and the Eucharist, priest, or crowd, to name a few, would not be present for the death ritual.

Additionally, the wives would have been away from home and also alone as they died, which were two concerns for those who died unexpectedly. Typically, the family would be quick to claim the body of the dead so as they could bury it as soon as possible, assuring the soul rest. The families of the wives of Bluebeard did not come looking for their dead daughters. “They were even more suspicious of [Bluebeard] because he had been married several times before and nobody knew what had become of his wives.”⁶ No one came to look for any of the previous wives, bringing an uncomfortable sense of foreboding for the reader, as there are unclaimed, missing bodies of these women. Wunderli and Broce discuss the preparations from the *Ars Moriendi* and specifically the importance of having others present for the moment of death. “For both Catholic and Protestant writers, attempts to control [the dying person’s] final moment also were seen as communal affair in which neighbors, lawyers, and family help him avoid the temptations of despair, vainglory, and infidelity. These were appeals to bolster the mental state of [the dying], to provide him with comfort, to resign him to his worldly end, and to ensure that he died a good death, thus assuring his salvation.”⁷

adds more evidence to establish claim for bad death of the characters in the tale

After Bluebeard discovers that his current wife has gone into his secret room, he declares that she must die. “Since I must die, give me a little time to pray.”⁸ The prayers for death were outlined in the *Ars Moriendi*, and prayers were not only given for the

discusses aspects of unexpected death in the tale.

⁵ Carter, 36.

⁶ Carter, 31.

⁷ Wunderli and Broce, 264.

⁸ Carter, 36.

dying individual to utter, but also those surrounding her, and any holy representative who was present. However, his wife will be alone when she dies, only with her murderer, which is why she wishes for time to pray: no one is there to remind her of the words she must utter before she dies, and she must die alone without her loved ones or a Godly representative. For a Catholic reader, this would be slightly more terrifying, as she cannot pray directly to God for the forgiveness of her sins, as there is no priest present, she can only pray and hope that she will be later forgiven. On the other hand, a Protestant reader would be comforted in her later judgment following death and could justify a simple prayer before she died.

“The poor woman turned her terrified eyes upon him and begged him for a last moment in which to prepare for death.”⁹ The fear that was experienced by the wives before they died would also be considered practice for bad death. She begged Bluebeard not for her life, but for proper time to pray for her death and prepare her soul accordingly. Being calm and accepting of the foreboding death would have been viewed in good taste: it was necessary to retain a sense of peace and overall acceptance of death before one died, hence the importance of the *Ars Moriendi* as a manual to come to terms with future death.

identifies further evidence for the claim 'bad death'

Bluebeard does not follow the protocol outlined within the *Ars Moriendi* for living a good life, and ultimately receives his punishment from the brothers of his current wife, the same treatment he gave to his previous wives. Instead of reflecting on living a good life to translate to a good death, he inflicts bad death on all of his wives, leading him to his bad death as well.

identifies evidence for bad death of the main character

The Treatment of the Bodies: A Cabinet of Curiosities

⁹ Carter, 38.

Perrault would have been aware of the bourgeoisie's interest in displaying their materiality and wealth in the form of collections due to his status as upper class. Cabinets of curiosities were collections for those who could afford to purchase and collect objects; therefore, they were a sign of the interest in the accumulation and display of 'curiosities.' In terms of collection, Bluebeard devotes considerable effort to hanging the bodies for not only him to see, but also the curious wife whom he predicts will enter. He hangs them up like pictures on the wall, enlisting his collection of bodies and their morbid presence for the next wife as a lesson.

starts discussing curiosity as a theme of the tale.

Bluebeard controls the bodies of the wives by using their corpses as a warning for his current wife.¹⁰ He continually controls his current wife by feeding her curiosity for knowledge, and not only controls her, but also the reader. Desire for knowledge is a curse, here punishable by murder, followed by an unburied body. The bodies therefore not only become a means to assert Bluebeard's dominance, but also as a collection to be put on display. He leaves the bodies, uncovered, either hung or lain on the floor, able to be stumbled across and viewed. It is as if he expects each of his wives to open the door, as if he knows they will succumb to their curiosities, and therefore he will be able to add to his collection with each murder. If he truly did not want anyone to enter his forbidden-murder-room, he would not tell any of his wives of its existence and he would hide the key. Notably, he does not provide any sort of light source in the room with which to view the bodies: he relies on the wives opening the door to allow light to seep through, proving that they are arranged for visual discovery by them and not everyday display for himself. He wishes for them to discover the bodies so he can continue on his murderous rampage, stringing them up, and leaving the bodies exposed and unburied.

claims dominance by 'control' as the policy of the main character of the tale, argues for the claim by providing evidence

¹⁰ Kim, "Corpse Hoarding", 407.

If the people in the tale knew about the murder of the bodies and the treatment of the dead, they may have attacked Bluebeard for what he had done. As mentioned above, the protection of the dead was an important part of the death ritual. Burial was necessary for proper passing of the soul into the afterlife indicating that Bluebeard would have been seen as an increasingly terrifying murderer for denying these women their right to rest.

Bloody Murder & Bloodier Murder

The understanding of blood in the early modern period is essential to the understanding for a deep understanding “Bluebeard” as a text and the reception of a 17th-Century audience. In terms of physiognomy, the blood was one of the four humours believed to flow through the body. In terms of religion, the blood of Christ was a significant sacrifice and this sacrifice was the reason that human existence continued. The blood was housed in the body, which also housed the soul, what was thought to be part of the individual that could be rescued by Christ. The 17th Century reader would view the spilt blood of Bluebeard’s dead wives not only as a signifier of the body’s death, but also the soul. “The idea that the soul was somehow physical and expressed by blood was present in both medical theories and popular beliefs...”¹¹ For either a Catholic or Protestant audience, the blood signified the connection between the body and the soul but also the dichotomy between life and death.

The first sentence claims importance of blood (thesis), the rest of the paragraph argues for the claim by providing evidence from different perspectives

...her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom and she saw that the floor was covered with clotted blood. In the blood lay the corpses of all the women whom Bluebeard had married and then murdered, one after the other.”¹²

contrasting two translated excerpts of the original text

¹¹ Matteoni, 172.

¹² Carter, 34.

“...she began to realize that the floor was covered with clotted blood and that the blood reflected the bodies of several dead women hung up on the walls...”¹³

Writing from an English point-of-view, Carter’s translation of the above text places the bodies of the dead wives in the blood and laying on the floor, whereas Tatar’s translation places them hung on the walls. The hanging bodies, if read logically, would have been killed by Bluebeard via cutlass, or slashing sword, and then hoisted up onto the walls where the remaining blood would have then drained to the floor. The blood would have happened onto the floor first by the slitting of their throats, and then drenching Bluebeard in blood. Not only is Bluebeard collecting the bodies of the wives, but he also does not wash the blood from the floor between the different murders, collecting layers of blood as well. The blood acts as an embellishment to the murder and adds further terror whenever a new wife encounters it.

This thesis statement claims the cognitive effect of the blood.

The boundaries between the dead and living, like the humours in the body, were in a state of transformation and fluidity. Blood could be considered as a means for communication of the dead to the current wife. The early modern audience would believe in miraculous blood. “The body and especially its fluid, the blood, became the means of exchange between a supernatural force and the physical world.”¹⁴ The already murdered wives’ souls were thought to be un-rested due to their non-burial, therefore they could send messages to the living through their blood; ergo, the unwashed blood from the murders could have been washed and then have reappeared magically as a message from the dead. “The physical metamorphosis of spilt blood [in “Bluebeard”] can stand for the double nature of violence.... blood serves to illustrate the point that the same substance can stain or cleanse,

identifies the role of blood as ‘communicator’ and brings evidence from the literature to support the claim.

¹³ Tatar, “Bluebeard”, 145.

¹⁴ Matteoni, 27.

contaminate or purify, drive men to fury and murder or appease their anger and restore them to life.”¹⁵

The mind in the early modern period had the ability to disturb the humors and therefore the blood. For example, when an expectant mother thought disturbing thoughts, the disturbance could pass to the nourishing blood, and therefore lead to a distorted child.¹⁶ Even the current wife of Bluebeard having seen the dead bodies could have her mind disturbed, which would lead to changes in the humoral balance of her body. Continually, the curse of her terrible memories could also be passed along to her children, furthering the curse placed upon the body by Bluebeard and causing eternal punishment, just as he had intended. The impact of her fright on her memories and the recurring images of the dead woman could lead to a stillbirth, as the child would take the shape of whatever the imagination was disturbed by.¹⁷

Rephrases thesis statement, and draws on examples from the literature and the tale to support the claim.

Conclusion: Aftereffects and the Afterlife

prepares the reader for the content of the conclusion by adding content heading to the generic ‘conclusion’ heading

The tale of “Bluebeard” has a clear moral, which in turn could protect the bodies of children and other young women from following in the footsteps of Bluebeard’s wives. Children’s blood was the richest of all as it was full of both spiritual and physical force waiting to be actualized.¹⁸ The moral of the tale would then teach children, especially young girls, not to disobey the male figures in their lives, or be more cautious about whom they are marrying, saving their blood from spilling.

makes a concluding claim about the moral of the tale and its relation to children; then supports the claim with evidence from literature and draws a life lesson from that.

The time taken by Bluebeard’s wife to let her pray allowed her time to be rescued by her brothers, saving her from a ‘fate worse than death.’ The punishment of Bluebeard

¹⁵ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* pp. 37-38 from Matteoni, 22.

¹⁶ Roodenburg, 701.

¹⁷ Naphy and Roberts, 1997.

¹⁸ Matteoni, 116.

equally reflected the punishment he inflicted on his wives, as well as the terror he evoked in his current wife, for those repercussions could be felt through her physical and emotional state forever. If anyone happened to find out about his pattern of murder, as a criminal, Bluebeard would have suffered dissection following execution, considered a fair punishment for what he has done. His body would therefore be split up, and he would be left unburied, leaving his soul un-rested, like that of his wives. It would be assumed that once his widow remarried and took possession of his castle, she would have dutifully buried the bodies of the dead women, allowing their souls rest, but Bluebeard eternal retribution.

What would be comforting for a reader of "*Bluebeard*" is clearly stated by Perrault: the latest wife will be able to use her inheritance to secure a brighter future with her new husband. However, the memories of the bodies seen on the floor would haunt the woman, for memory and imagination was what distinguished man from animal, and the memory rooted in the mental would affect the blood through the inner flux of the body. Prolonged psychological pain or bad memories could affect the physical body because of the relationship between the imagination and the humors. This memory could also penetrate into her future children or affect her health in the future, so while it might seem that she would provide rest for the dead women, and Bluebeard would be left for unburied damnation. In reality, she is not completely safe from the wrath of Bluebeard, nor will the reader ever be free of the terror that has been read into the text.

here the writer argues for a claim which comes towards the end of the paragraph and that concerns the everlasting feeling of lack of safety for the affected character in the tale and the readers.

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