



Bluebeard Revisited: Knowledge Is Power

Long seen as a cautionary tale about women’s curiosity, it should be reinterpreted as the story of a woman’s emancipation.

While reading worrying stories of **violence against women** in the media, including news of adult **princesses** being unlawfully deprived of their liberty by their powerful father, I was reminded of the terrifying fairy tale of “Bluebeard”. Charles Perrault published the first and most famous version of this French folktale in 1697. Since then, it has never lost its fascination, appearing in theatre, **opera** and film across the world.

The tale starts with the marriage of a young woman to a wealthy man named Bluebeard. Although notorious for his ugly appearance, Bluebeard uses his wealth to lure girls into marriage. Presenting each new wife with all the house keys, he tells his bride that she may enter every room except one and then sets off on a long solo journey.

Of course, this becomes an invitation to do the opposite. As is to be expected, Bluebeard’s most recent wife – like the ones before her – yields to her curiosity and unlocks the forbidden room to discover a grisly scene: The floor is covered with blood and the bodies of Bluebeard’s previous wives are hanging from the walls. In a panic, she drops the key. Later, despite her desperate efforts, she is unable to wipe the blood off of it.

Upon his return, Bluebeard discovers the bloody key and claims the consequence of his wife’s

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defiance. However, she has no intention to go quietly to her slaughter. She begs for a little time to say her prayers and prepare for her death. In the meantime, she sends word to her brothers. They arrive at the castle in time to slay Bluebeard and free her from his wrath.

Despite the gruesome scenes, the fairy tale has a happy ending – at least for the latest wife. With Bluebeard’s demise, she becomes mistress of his grand estate. She remarries, but this time, on her own terms. Seemingly powerless when she was Bluebeard’s wife, she is transformed into someone who is in control and a person in her own right.

A timeless tale

A key theme contained in the Bluebeard story is the dangers implicit in male–female relationships. Bluebeard is often interpreted as a cautionary tale that women should curtail their curiosity and obey their husbands so that no harm would come to them. Of course, this message was well received by Perrault’s 17th century contemporaries. Knowledgeable, powerful and wilful women were perceived as dangerous then – a belief that still holds sway in some quarters now.

However, just as dreams shouldn’t be taken literally, the same can be said about fairy tales. Often, these

strange tales are a dance between many unconscious archetypal forces, in this case the masculine and the feminine, as they manifest themselves in the collective and individual psyches.

The Bluebeard tale also taps into deep undercurrents of sex and violence. Based on a rather simplistic psychoanalytic perspective, the key could be associated with the phallus, the room with the womb, and the keyhole with the vagina. The blood on the key could even suggest the loss of virginity.

Perhaps the most worrisome part of the tale is its timelessness. Many women have and continue to live this story, sometimes quite literally. They begin a relationship, only to discover that their chosen partner is a physically or emotionally abusive monster.

The price and prize of curiosity

We can ask ourselves the obvious question: If Bluebeard didn't want his wives to go into that room, why did he bother to give them the key? Most likely he was expecting them to disobey, which would give him an excuse to murder them. The biblical story of Adam and Eve is a prime example of such a perverse trap. The prohibition against eating the apple piques Eve's curiosity, whereupon she gives into temptation and eats the forbidden fruit. Her defiance comes at a high price: Man's fall from grace is attributed to Eve's **desire for knowledge**.

But we could also look at curiosity and defiance as the symbol of life and transformation for the wife, and of death for Bluebeard. By disobeying her husband, the wife may have lost her innocence, but had to confront Bluebeard's dark side. By opening the door, she became conscious of the ugly reality of male-female power dynamics. Her action also sent her on a path towards truth and inner transformation.

In fact, without her curiosity – coupled with her continued defiance and intelligence – she would never have freed herself from the constraints of her marital relationship. In other words, a more appropriate interpretation of the Bluebeard tale is to look at it as a story of a woman becoming independent. By being curious, our hero discovers what lies beyond appearances. She attains knowledge, becomes more conscious and develops a sense of purpose.

Knowledge stands for power

This fairy tale also exemplifies how some men feel threatened by female curiosity and appetite for knowledge. Even today, far too many Bluebeards are scared of sharing knowledge with women and

empowering them. This is just one of the causes of persistent gender discrimination in the workplace, whether **implicit or explicit**, that continues to ensure the under-representation of women in senior management positions. Stereotypes – and **resistance** – abound regarding women bosses. Not to mention, the **Covid-19** crisis has exacerbated pressures for women to abandon their careers.

Across the globe, millions of women still have no control over their own lives and bodies. Based on the belief that women must be subjugated to the wishes of men, laws explicitly mandating “**wife obedience**” govern the marital relations in a surprisingly large number of countries. Marital rape is yet to be criminalised in many parts of the world.

In many of the same places, laws also continue to institutionalise second-class status for women with regard to nationality and citizenship, health and other rights. For instance, in certain countries women are denied the same **employment rights**, parental rights, as well as **inheritance** and property rights, that men enjoy.

Empowerment through education

Although women in most countries have now a right to education, **equal access** remains a problem. But education is the key for women to achieve economic independence. What many men don't seem to understand is that educated women will have **healthier, more educated children**. And these better educated children will be the building blocks for a better society.

Educating women is the most powerful tool to change the world. Perhaps we should pay heed to the African proverb: “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. But if you educate a woman, you educate a nation.”

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