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Revisiting Charles Perrault's Iconic "Bluebeard" Serial Killer in Modern French Variants

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Abstract: "Bluebeard" (ATU 321: *Maiden-Killer*), a fairy tale about a wealthy noble man and serial killer, is the most gruesome of Charles Perrault's fairy tales. Bluebeard epitomizes evil and horror. In Perrault's tale, Bluebeard's evilness is linked to patriarchy and power, as symbolized by the villain's iconic blue beard. Historically linked to Henry VIII (1491–1547), King of England, Bluebeard has also been associated with Breton commander Gilles de Rais who was hanged for sorcery and satanic abuse. This article examines how contemporary francophone "Bluebeard" variants refashion and redefine evil and whether they contain any new morals linked to evilness. Do they depict Bluebeard as a satanic, intrinsic force of evil or do they portray him in a less Manichean manner, as contemporary tales tend to do with monsters? Starting with Perrault's famous tale, this article reveals how Bluebeard, the evil mass murderer figure and polygamist, is recast in a variety of contemporary francophone texts from Morocco, Belgium and France, with retellings by Michel Tournier (1981), Marie Darrieussecq (2002), *La Barbe Bleue (Bluebeard)* (2009), Amélie Nothomb (2012), Tahar Ben Jelloun (2014), Jacqueline Kelen (2014), and Cécile Coulon (2015). These modern variants illustrate Elliott Oring's ideas about comparison and cultural context (see Oring 1986). A discussion of various French contemporary versions with a special emphasis of Ben Jelloun's Moroccan retelling of "Bluebeard" open avenues for cross-cultural dialogue, highlighting how this tale evolves to fit different cultural contexts and continues to resonate today.

Keywords: Bluebeard; Perrault; adaptations; francophone literature; French literature; serial killer



Citation: Jones, Christa Catherine. 2024. Revisiting Charles Perrault's Iconic "Bluebeard" Serial Killer in Modern French Variants. *Humanities* 13: 160. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13060160>

Received: 13 August 2024

Revised: 14 November 2024

Accepted: 14 November 2024

Published: 19 November 2024



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1. Introduction

"Bluebeard" ("La Barbe bleue"), published in Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou Contes du temps passé* (Perrault 1697), is the most gruesome of Perrault's fairy tales. The Bluebeard villain epitomizes patriarchy, evil, and horror. In Perrault's widely disseminated tale¹ about a patriarchal marriage, a wealthy nobleman murders all his wives except for his youngest and last wife, who outwits him and is saved in the nick of time by her musketeer brothers who ride to her rescue and kill the monster. Historically linked to Henry VIII (1491–1547), King of England, the character has also been associated with Gilles de Rais, a Breton commander who supposedly "fought alongside Joan of Arc in the Hundred Years' War and was condemned to be hanged for sorcery and satanic abuse—the ritual murder of scores, perhaps hundreds of children at his castle" (Warner 2014, p. 66). Born in 1404 north of the Loire River, he is described as one of the darkest and most mysterious figures of the Middle Ages who gained notoriety for committing "horrific crimes on children" (Grimaud 2012, p. 85), notably child abuse and beheading of his victims. After a valorous start in his youth—he distinguished himself during the Hundred Years' War—and following an inheritance, he became immensely wealthy and retreated to a castle where he lived in pomp, engaged in sorcery, and committed murders. Historically, Bluebeard is a mass murderer, guilty of countless infanticides. In Perrault's tale, he is a serial killer, a human monster.² An influential, rich, and powerful nobleman, the villain's evilness is linked to the patriarchy, polygamy, and the absolute power he wields over women. The otherworldly blue beard

blends masculinity, magic, and destructive power. The fact that Perrault's wife does not have a name underscores gender inequalities prevalent during the seventeenth century and to some extent today. The reality of cat calling, sexual harassment, rape,³ domestic violence, and the continued high rate of domestic violence and feminicides in contemporary France might help explain why the "Bluebeard" tale continues to be refashioned by very well-known francophone authors,⁴ including Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun (2014), Belgian writer Amélie Nothomb (2012), French novelists Cécile Coulon (2015), Marie Darrieussecq (2002), and Michel Tournier (1981), and French filmmaker Breillat (2009). Starting with Perrault's fairy tale, I examine how these authors redefine this evil character as well as morals linked to evilness. Their modern adaptations of "Bluebeard" illustrate Elliott Oring's ideas about comparison and cultural context (see Oring 1986), which is how tales evolve over time and how they adapt to different cultural contexts, in particular contemporary Morocco. A discussion of French contemporary versions with a special emphasis of Tahar Ben Jelloun's Moroccan retelling of "Bluebeard" open avenues for cross-cultural dialogue, highlighting how this tale continues to evolve to fit different cultural contexts and thus continues to resonate in unique ways today.

2. Revisiting Charles Perrault's Fairy Tale

In Perrault's tale, the blue-bearded wealthy villain marries a poor, young woman whose father just passed away. It is rumored that all of Bluebeard's previous wives mysteriously vanished. Before leaving for business, Bluebeard hands his new wife a magic key, a "symbolic representation of initiation and knowledge" (Cirlot 1962, p. 167). He allows her to entertain visitors and to open all the rooms in the castle except for one:

"Now, this little key is the key to the office at the end of the great hall of the downstairs apartment. Open everything, go everywhere, but as far as the little office goes, you may not go in there—and I am so serious about this that if you do end up opening it, my anger will know no bounds."⁵ (Perrault in Jones 2016, p. 121)

Should she disobey, he warns her, his wrath will be limitless.⁶ After several weeks, she cannot contain her curiosity, opens the forbidden chamber, and discovers the decomposed bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. In shock, she lets the key fall into the pool of blood. When she tries to wipe the blood off the magic key, the bloodstain instantly reappears. Bluebeard eventually returns, notices the indelible bloodstain on the key and tells his wife that she must die. Critics agree that "Bluebeard" is a tale about sexual transgression and marital infidelity.⁷ The beard in Perrault's tale symbolizes the villain-husband's patriarchal power that puts the wife in a subaltern position, as Molière's character Arnolphe de la Souche tells his ward, an innocent young girl called Agnès in his play *The School for Wives* (Act 3, Scene 2), published in 1662:

Marriage, Agnès, is no light matter; the role
Of wife requires austerity of soul
And I do not exalt you to that station
To lead a life of heedless dissipation.
Yours is the weaker sex, please realize;
It is the beard in which all power lies,
And though there are two portions of mankind,
Those portions are not equal, you will find:
One half commands, the other must obey;
The second serves the first in every way;
And that obedience which the soldier owes [. . .]
Is nothing to the pure docility,
The deep submission and humility
Which a good wife must ever exhibit toward
The man who is her master, chief, and lord. (Molière in Wilbur 2021, pp. 372–73;
emphases mine)

Bluebeard is determined to punish his wife for disobeying him and for discovering and exposing his dark secret (see [Lewis 1996](#), pp. 196–98). Wifely disobedience, he rules, warrants death. He plans to behead his wife to punish her for her curiosity and to also avenge her infidelity, as symbolized by the bloody chamber and the key with the indelible bloodstain ([Bettelheim 1977](#), p. 302). After imploring him to let her pray first—which he allows her to do—she climbs up in the tower and calls out for her sister Anne and her two brothers. Just when Bluebeard is about to behead her with his cutlass, her two musketeer brothers appear and kill the monster. Perrault’s cautionary tale is followed by two morals. His first moral warns against the dangers of curiosity, a nasty character trait. Curiosity provides short-lived gratification but causes much pain and regret. The price paid for curiosity is always too high:

Moral

Curiosity, in spite of its mirth,
Often costs more than it’s worth.
Everywhere and always examples abound.
No offense to the ladies. It’s an illusory crutch.
As soon as you seize it, it is nowhere to be found
And it always costs too much. (Perrault in [Jones 2016](#), p. 126)

Oddly, Perrault’s second moral tempers or even contradicts the first moral. Any smart reader, Perrault writes, will realize that this tale is but a story of yesteryear. Husbands as evil as Bluebeard no longer exist.⁸ Quite the opposite, husbands—even unhappy or jealous husbands—are often submissive and give in to their wives’ desires. They do not ask for the impossible, and it is often hard to tell who has the upper hand in a marriage:

Another Moral

Even a wit of the dimmest cast,
Who is not so very worldly,
Will discover anon that this story
Is a tale of times long past.
No more the horrible husbands of old
Whose demands were impossibly bold.
Though now he is discontent and domineering
Still with his wife he’s endearing.
The color of his beard no longer stands
To show among them who wears the pants.

3. Contemporary French Retellings

In Perrault’s tale, evil is associated with the seventeenth-century courtly ideal of the *honnête homme*. The villain is a good-mannered nobleman and a patriarch. And yet, he treats his wife respectfully by using the formal “vous” instead of the familiar “tu”. French novelist Marie Darrieussecq, who in her essay “La Bleue barbe” [*sic*] spins a staggering fifty different hypothetical scenarios that would have significantly altered the tale’s outcome (each starting with “If...”), points out that by cloaking evilness in politeness, the tale becomes even more horrid: “If only Bluebeard had used the familiar form of address with his wife, he would be less terrifying. He relentlessly and viciously employs the polite and solemn form of address, typical of those who believe their power to be limitless” ([Darrieussecq 2002](#), p. 77). In today’s world, Bluebeard would qualify as a serial killer ([Darrieussecq 2002](#), p. 75). In many parts, her tongue-in-cheek essay reads like a love letter to Perrault. Darrieussecq considers this tale to be Perrault’s masterpiece. This tale piqued her interest from early on and shaped her as a writer:

I wouldn’t be as in love with this tale, if Perrault hadn’t written: “[She] could not at first see anything plainly, because the windows were shut. After a while, she could see that the floor was covered with dried blood, in which were reflected the bodies of several dead women lined up against the walls: these were all of

Bluebeard's dead wives, the women he had married and murdered." (Darrieussecq 2002, p. 77)

Darrieussecq uses the tale as a springboard to give free reign to her imagination, culminating with a summary of the original tale in a "sophomoric sonnet" (Darrieussecq 2002, pp. 81–82). In one version of the tale, she imagines that if the heroine's "clumsy sister Anne" (Darrieussecq 2002, p. 83) had had a smartphone, she would have called 911. In yet another version, she imagines that if the heroine's sister Anne had missed a step, the tale could have turned into a farce. . . Finally, in her moral, Darrieussecq writes that the tale is a major source of inspiration for her. Declaring herself unsatisfied with any of her retelling snippets, the "Bluebeard" tale, she concludes, is perfect as it stands:

A very little share of common sense,
And knowledge of the world, will soon evince
That this story alone
Suffices for its destiny.
It haunts our stories, its motifs are legion.
I cannot choose among so many versions.
There's no need to change a line.
It has nourished me, it beckoned me.
Continuing my work is my greatest tribute:
To write my own pages as a remake of the text.
And no matter what color their beard may be:
The words tell us, "too bad": they have neither God nor master. (Darrieussecq 2002, p. 83; emphasis mine)

In his essay "Bluebeard or the Secret of the Fairy Tale" ("Barbe-Bleue ou le secret du conte"), French novelist Michel Tournier takes his cue from Charles Perrault's introduction, juxtaposing the fable (or apologue, i.e., a short allegorical story containing a moral), the realist short story, and the fairy tale with its "hidden instruction" (Tournier 1981, p. 35). The fairy tale, with its ungraspable, spectral characters and its opaque morals, he argues, clearly is a "haunted short story" (Tournier 1981, p. 37). It is a literary genre situated between the fable and the short story. Because Bluebeard is a spectral and unpredictable evil character with superhuman powers, he elicits fear and respect. Readers (or listeners) readily accept his strangeness and, in particular, his prohibition to enter the dark chamber during his absence:

The man with the blue-black beard is not an ordinary man. He is sort of a superman. His beard reflects his strength and virility, which is both repulsive and seductive, especially for the young girl he claims to marry. Right from the start, Perrault thus targets us below the belt, appealing to our affective psychological processes, archetypes as powerful as they are irrational. (Tournier 1981, p. 38)

Tournier makes an interesting point. In Perrault's tale, Bluebeard's wife is allowed to enter all of the rooms in the castle but one, the room that would allow her to discover the victims of her husband's grisly killings and thus see his evilness. Her transgression recalls another universally known biblical transgression recounted in the *Book of Genesis*. Readers will unwittingly recall the transgression, chastisement, and banishment from Paradise of Adam and Eve for eating from the forbidden tree. They are invited, by Jehovah—who Tournier notes, may also have been equally venerable and bearded (Tournier 1981, p. 38)—to eat the fruit of many trees, but are forbidden to eat from the tree that bestows knowledge of good and evil: "Thus, there is a *phenomenon of vague and elusive memory, precisely a reminiscence. . . Here we find our ghost again*" (Tournier 1981, pp. 38–39, emphasis mine; also see Darrieussecq 2002, p. 78).

4. Tahar Ben Jelloun's Retelling

Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun's "Bluebeard" depicts the villain as a barbaric, regressive, and deeply misogynistic Islamic fundamentalist. The beard in this tale is a

symbol of power and religiosity. The tale follows Perrault's plot but transposes it to a remote rural area in contemporary Morocco. It contains stereotypical tropes associated with the Maghreb, including the hammam (Turkish bath), mentions of the Quran and three of the five pillars of Islam, i.e., the *hadj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), the five daily prayers, *zakat* (alms), references to colonialism and polygamy (i.e., Bluebeard's cook Bahija, a Senegalese slave employed by Bluebeard's father; see [Ben Jelloun 2014](#), pp. 93–94), mentions of mint tea, Moroccan clothing (*djellaba*), etc. All these elements could be considered "exotic" or disorienting to Western readers unfamiliar with the traditions of North Africa. Given that Ben Jelloun's book was published in French by a major publisher, it is understandable that he panders to Western readers who expect such tropes.

Contrary to classic fairy tales, which are characterized by the one-dimensionality of their characters, abstractness, and depthlessness (see [Lüthi 1986](#)), Ben Jelloun fleshes out the villain and his many physical and moral flaws, particularly his hypocrisy. Given its realist style and the absence of morals, Ben Jelloun's variant reads more like a short story than a fairy tale, a genre oriented toward unveiling the truth ([Todorov 1982](#), p. 10). Underlining the importance of magic, sorcery, and maraboutism in North Africa, this variant contains two magical elements: a talking key and an anthropomorphic talking cat. Contrary to Perrault's tale which focuses on one main plot, Ben Jelloun's lengthy variant digresses by introducing several subplots, all of which underline the sexual impotence of Bluebeard and the perversity of Momo and Amar, the servants in his employ. A socially engaged writer and a regular contributor to *Le Monde*, Tahar Ben Jelloun's variant can be read as a critique of all the ills that characterize the so-called "New Morocco", a Morocco that struggles to move on from the past, from the human rights violations, torture, and arbitrary incarcerations that occurred during the repressive years of Hassan II's regime, commonly referred to as the Lead Years (*les années de plomb*, see [Orlando 2009](#)). Ben Jelloun's variant is an indictment of the dangers associated with the patriarchy⁹ and Islamic fundamentalism (the bearded cave men in the tale are misogynous, murderous representatives of radical Islam), i.e., honor killings (Amar's murder in the tale), human rights violations, continued deeply ingrained socioeconomic, educational, and gender inequalities linked to Morocco's 2004 Family Code,¹⁰ sharia law, and the underrepresentation of women in government.¹¹ Knowing that Morocco's illiteracy rate still stands at around 35% of the population ([Statista n.d.](#)), it is not a surprise that Bluebeard's wife ends up transforming his castle into a school to further the education of children and fight illiteracy. Ben Jelloun's long-winded variant with its many subplots echoes the centrality of storytelling in Morocco. As Moroccan linguistics and gender studies scholar Fatima Sadiqi points out, oral literature is a "fundamental component of North African cultures" ([Sadiqi 2022](#)). Storytelling, an age-old tool of empowerment, education, and the transmission of values, is a tradition that falls into the purview of Berber women:

Berber women, especially older ones, also use storytelling to empower themselves in the household and consolidate their position in the family. Through the tales, women create bonds with other members of the family, especially children. . . . Oral literature in this region has always been a mainstay of social communication, social history, and social control. ([Sadiqi 2022](#), p. 79)

Ben Jelloun's text echoes the importance of orality in Morocco, but it also hints at women's activism in the Maghreb (see [Ennaji 2022](#)).

As many of his poems and novels (and unlike Perrault's tale which uses the bloody key to symbolize the bride's infidelity), Ben Jelloun's variant is transgressive because it is sexually explicit. For example, Bluebeard's wife tells her friends all the juicy details about her wedding night and Bluebeard's multiple unsuccessful attempts to do his marital duty. Given his impotence, the women all agree: "Bluebeard is not a man. . . Not a man" ([Ben Jelloun 2014](#), p. 95). Similarly, the issues of slavery and polygamy are addressed by Bahia, who tells Bluebeard's wife and her friends how she was bought by the villain's father as a slave from Senegal and brought to his castle where she became one of his concubines. And given that Bluebeard can be seen as a polygamist (even though all but one of his co-wives

are dead), the tale surely resonates in Morocco today, where polygamy is “significantly controlled” but remains “legally accepted” (Ennaji 2022, p. 94).¹²

Though he pretends to be religious, Ben Jelloun’s Bluebeard is not a devout Muslim. He is an uneducated, wealthy, greedy, lazy, obese, and unattractive man whose servant Amar supplies him with poor or orphaned young girls for sexual gratification. Once he has grown tired of them, he is rumored to dispose of them by either decapitating or burying them alive (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 84). Like in other contemporary variants (see Breillat 2009; Nothomb 2012; Coulon 2015), Ben Jelloun’s villain has no friends. Here, he has been condemned to live a life in solitude due to an evil spell that was cast on him by his father’s illegitimate daughter (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 80). Bluebeard spends his days torturing and killing sheep, counting his gold and his money, and getting massages. He is also described as paranoid and wary of people, because he thinks they want to steal his money. Bluebeard’s small, greedy little eyes give away his evilness. As Amina says: “I don’t like his gaze: his eyes are disturbing and worrying” (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 90). But his blue beard remains the most ostentatious symbol of evil.

One day, inspired by the members of a sect of blue-bearded mountain dwellers, he decides to let his beard grow and to color it blue. In North Africa, beards are symbolically associated with religiosity but also with misogyny and religious extremism, as indicated by the French term “les barbus” (bearded men). In Ben Jelloun’s variant, the blue beard symbolizes evil which is essentially radical Islam, and the violence and misogyny associated with it. His retelling is an indictment of Islamic fanaticism. A subplot recounts the legend of misogynous, blue-bearded mountain dwellers that are endowed with exceptional powers. They are rumored to be Satanists or beings from a different planet who fell to earth after a storm. These alien beings supposedly have six fingers and four toes:

They were called the blue men of the mountain. Their philosophy was simple: women are responsible for the world’s misfortunes. They must be fought against and, if possible, eliminated. Hiding in inaccessible caves, the sect taunted the authorities who were unable to neutralize it. (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 85)

Periodically, the sect members descend from their mountain caves to visit the town and abduct a young girl. After raping their abductee, they throw her off a cliff.

Unlike Perrault’s tale, Ben Jelloun features a magic helper cat. The anthropomorphist cat, which recalls the trickster cat in Perrault’s “Puss in Boots”, is as large as a leopard and endowed with human intelligence and speech.¹³ In Berber folktales, cats—the sons of lions—are magical beings: they are *iâssassen*, that is guardians of domestic order and guarantors of fertility (Lacoste-Dujardin 2010, p. 60). The cat advises Bluebeard to become a good Muslim, to be more generous with women, and to get married instead of using women (Ben Jelloun 2014, pp. 82–83). Bluebeard follows the cat’s piece of advice and throws a sumptuous feast with mountains of gifts for his future wife. As in Perrault’s tale, because of his generosity, the bride Khadija (Khadija n.d.) eventually finds that his beard—now symbolic of money, power, and generosity—is rather charming and therefore wants to marry him. Khadija, the young, orphaned girl who marries Bluebeard has an older sister, Amina (the equivalent of Anne in Perrault’s tale). In Islam, Khadija was “the first wife of the prophet Muhammad, who was the first to embrace Islam. She is known as *Khair al-Nisaa*, ‘the best of women’ (Salahuddin 1999, p. 276). In Arabic, the first name Khadija means precocious or premature child. The personality associated with this name is that of a courageous, disciplined, strong-willed, ambitious, mysterious, and family-oriented woman (enfant.com). After a luxurious wedding, Bluebeard tells Khadija that he has to leave her for a while to make all the necessary arrangements for his pilgrimage (*hadj*) to Mecca. As in Perrault’s tale, Bluebeard entrusts her with keys to all the rooms in the castle, including a key to the forbidden chamber. He expressly admonishes her not to succumb to her “nasty penchant: curiosity” (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 91) but to forget about the little key. Encouraged by her female friends, Khadija enters the forbidden chamber and discovers over ten decomposing female bodies suspended from butcher hooks. These are all the girls that Amar had kidnapped and brought to his master. Interestingly, Bluebeard’s secret was

known to his cook: “Bahija knew all of this but had said nothing because she wanted the young bride to discover for herself the true face hidden behind the painted beard” (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 97). Just when Khadija frantically tries to wipe the blood off the magic key, Bluebeard returns from his hadj and demands sex. Khadija again comes up with a ruse: she bargains for time by saying that having had her period, she is impure and has to first perform her ablutions in the hammam. When she returns from the hammam, she sees the true nature of her husband who by then is out of control, violently kicking and shouting, demanding to see the key: “She was terrified and didn’t know how to confront the monster” (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 99). Interestingly, the magic key in Ben Jelloun’s “Bluebeard” variant can talk. The magic key tells him: “I have been used; the door opened, and your wife and her friends saw what there is to see. Now you just have to discard it. Clean off this gooey blood” (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 101). Another digression—the unexpected visit of government officials enquiring into the death of Amar—allows Khadija to escape from the castle and seek refuge at her mother’s house. The entire family clan—Khadija, her brothers, her sister Amina, and her mother—devise a plan to trick Bluebeard. They decide to assuage the monster by inviting him to Amina’s—staged—wedding to her cousin Houssine. But the plan fails, because Bluebeard has run out of patience. Armed with a blinding powder in her pocket, Khadija returns to the castle, accompanied by her brothers who hide inside the castle. Things are about to turn sour when Bluebeard is about to slash Khadija’s throat with a saber. At this crucial moment, the magic helper cat starts talking to the villain. The cat orders him to turn himself in and to repent:

Poor fellow! You think you can do anything you want. But if you dare approach the lady, I’ll pounce on you, and it’s you who will be slaughtered. I have claws that turn into sharp and dreadful little daggers. Now all you can do is surrender to justice and pray to God for mercy in hell, because you will go to hell. Your journey to Mecca won’t help you. With one hand, you take the lives of poor women, and with the other, you pray to almighty God! (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 107)

When Bluebeard gets up from his prayer rug and threatens to cut Khadija into pieces so that she may join all the other corpses, the cat attacks him and claws his throat with its paws. The two brothers appear, put a sack of burlap over his head and lead him to the judge who has him imprisoned. After his trial, Bluebeard is sentenced to death:

Prison guards shaved the monster’s beard. His face was ravaged by smallpox. He was hideous and sinister. His small eyes grew even deeper. On the day of the verdict, he said that he had no regrets. He was sentenced to death and executed the very next day. (Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 109)

Ben Jelloun’s tale has a proverbial fairy-tale ending: Khadija and her sister end up happily married and have many children. Khadija inherits Bluebeard’s fortune and moves in with her mother and sister. She transforms the castle into a school. As for the magic cat, it meets an acrobat cat and becomes a circus cat. Ben Jelloun’s tale, with its many allusions to socio-economic and cultural conditions in contemporary Morocco, is very much an unveiled call for more social justice and gender equity. Bluebeard’s trial is open to the public and, to the satisfaction of all the citizens, he is tried for the many crimes that he committed throughout his lifetime (see Ben Jelloun 2014, p. 109). Unlike Perrault’s tale, Ben Jelloun’s tale contains no explicit morals other than an implicit warning that evil often takes the guise of hypocrisy and entrenched religious and ideological conservatism that effectively make women second-class citizens. However, the ending points to important positive changes for Moroccans regarding access to education. This is important given the continued high level of illiteracy of Moroccan girls in some rural areas. The tale’s ending underscores the empowerment of Moroccan women and the importance of education and human rights, which is interesting, given archaic inheritance laws today, under which a Moroccan woman gets half a man’s share upon inheritance.¹⁴

5. Retellings by Breillat, Nothomb, and Coulon

Catherine Breillat's made-for-television adaptation [Breillat \(2009\)](#) recasts Bluebeard (Dominique Thomas) in a slightly more positive light than Perrault. A complex and lonely fatherly figure, he is less physically aggressive or openly evil but rather an introvert thinker who is articulate about his inner vulnerabilities. Spectators are invited to ponder what led him to become a feared serial killer. In a conversation with his young wife Marie-Catherine (Lola Créton), he blames society for making him an outcast and thus shaping his monstrous identity:

Bluebeard: "I am a monster."

Marie-Catherine: "Certainly not."

Bluebeard: "People see me as one. Their perception has made me what I am, you see?"

Marie-Catherine: "Yes."

Bluebeard: "And you're not scared of me?"

Marie-Catherine: "No, I am much more afraid of wickedness that cannot be seen."

This dialogue underscores how societal labels and judgments can transform individuals into monsters based on their physical or behavioral deviations from the norm.

According to the editors of *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, the "Bluebeard" tale targets an adult readership, because it uses the murder motif ATU 312 ([Greenhill and Matrix 2020](#), p. 184). This claim certainly does not hold true in the French context where the "Bluebeard" tale enjoys an enduring appeal, particularly among children, as Catherine Breillat, Marie Darrieussecq, Amélie Nothomb, and Jacqueline Kelen¹⁵ point out:

My mother had read the tale to me when I was three years old. It terrified and fascinated me. When I was thirteen years old, I read it myself. I thought that the Bluebeard character was absolutely right. The right to secrecy is absolute! With the extremism of that age, I thought that in his place, I too would have murdered those foolish wives who not only violated his secret but were also unable to defend themselves. ([Nothomb 2015](#), p. 159)

In her filmic retelling, set in 1950s France, Breillat uses a frame story in which Catherine, a little girl, relishes in torturing her older sister called Marie-Anne by reading "Bluebeard" to her in their parents' attic. Catherine savors every single word while her sister is truly scared. The frame story is not just about a little girl learning to read, it is also about bullying and infant cruelty, since the younger sister is arguably responsible for causing her sister to fall to her death.

Set in the twenty-first century in Paris's seventh arrondissement, Amélie Nothomb's retelling focuses on Saturnine Puissant,¹⁶ an emancipated art student who moves into Bluebeard's, i.e., Elemirio Nibal y Micar's, luxury apartment and becomes his roommate. When, after many shared dinners and conversations, she finds out his dark secret, she takes matters into her own hands by killing Elemirio to save her own life. Nothomb's variant diverges from the cautionary narrative of Perrault's original and its one-dimensional character by painting a more nuanced, human monster figure. As in Catherine Breillat's film, "the monstrous serial killer is ironically depicted as an intellectual loner" ([Zipes 2012](#), p. 51). Breillat's villain is a refined, intellectual figure with eclectic tastes. Though overweight and physically unattractive, Elemirio is highly educated, intelligent, polite, and sensitive. Adding to the sense of mystery, he is a Spanish expatriate aristocrat with an unconventional lifestyle—he is so wealthy that he does not need to work for a living. Nothomb's Saturnine and Elemirio engage in intellectual discussions and culinary delights. Unlike Ben Jelloun's Bluebeard, this villain is not a womanizer. Nothomb elaborates, "Elemirio is a contemporary ogre figure. He's a dandy ogre, very refined, mythical and esthetical. He has nothing of a Don Juan. His attitude is closer to [that of] the Faustian wager" ([Nothomb 2015](#), p. 149). As fairy-tale scholar Jack Zipes reminds us, the classic Bluebeard tale is "about power among other things; and who is in control of power, and why power should always be in the hands of men" ([Zipes 2012](#), pp. 53–54). In this feminist

rendition, it is Saturnine who wields power and control, challenging traditional narratives where power remains predominantly male-centric.

Saturnine, representing strength and independence, stubbornly refuses Elemirio's advances and later traps him in the forbidden chamber—a darkroom—where he joins the eight female corpses already there. Contrary to the *deus ex machina* ending in Perrault's tale (where the bride relies on the help of her sister Anne and brothers to be rescued in the nick of time), Saturnine embodies a powerful, emancipated, and intelligent trickster heroine. The shrewd and inquisitive heroine also refuses to give up her independence by marrying the middle-aged villain. As hinted by her name, she does not need to be told what to do but it is Bluebeard who should watch out for himself. A strong and independent woman, Saturnine's homicide could be interpreted as an act of self-defense and her murder of Bluebeard will probably go unpunished.

Set in rural twenty-first century France, Cécile Coulon's retelling "The Boarding School" ("Le Pensionnat") takes place in a remote boarding school situated in the middle of the woods. At this prestigious institution, 150 boys from aristocratic families are trained to become future politicians and leaders. After school, the boys play tennis, soccer, and secretly smoke cigarettes. The Bluebeard villain, called Paul, is an unapproachable introverted genius. Paul is an extremely gifted senior. Bluebeard's secret chamber in this adaptation is the piano room where Paul plays Debussy and Chopin and gives piano lessons to the younger boys. The piano room is his kingdom where no one, not even the teachers, are allowed to enter without his permission. Paul's fear-inspiring, strange personality is visualized by his black eyes and his forehead that bears a white mark that extends all the way to his right eyelid. Paul's anomalous large white spot is seen as evil. It makes him a monster and explains his strangeness. This "mark of the devil" (Coulon 2015, p. 104) also endows Paul with "divine powers" (Coulon 2015, p. 102). Some students speculate that the white spot may be attributable to a difficult childbirth. In any case, it is symbolic of his superior intelligence, his cruelty, and otherworldly beauty:

For others, this snow-white spot would have been the mark of the devil, but for him, it was that of angels. The strangest thing was that it made him more beautiful than beauty itself. (Coulon 2015, p. 104)

Paul's piercing gaze and his sheer presence spread fear throughout the school. His classmates worship him as if he were a semi-God but are also scared of him; he is "feared more than admired" (Coulon 2015, p. 105). Each year, the students elect a so-called Sphinx, a student who functions as leader, advisor, and spokesperson for the school, and whose portrait adorns the school's entrance hall. The Sphinx is a composite, marvelous, and enigmatic supernatural being that adequately characterizes Bluebeard/Paul in this adaptation:

The Sphinx at Thebes had the head and breast of a woman, the body of a bull or dog, the claws of a lion, the tail of a dragon and the wings of a bird. *Being the supreme embodiment of the enigma, the sphinx keeps watch over an ultimate meaning which must remain forever beyond the understanding of men...* The mask of the sphinx pertains to the mother-image and also to nature-symbolism; but beneath the mask lies the implications of the myth of multiplicity or of the enigmatic fragmentation of the cosmos. According to esoteric tradition, the Gizeh sphinx is a synthesis of all the science of the past. It is shown contemplating the rising sun and seems to embrace both heaven and earth in its meaning. It is, of course, a symbol which unites, in the midst of the heterogeneity of existence, the four Elements (corresponding to the tetramorphs) with the quintessence of the spirit (signified by the human part of the figure). (Cirlot 1962, pp. 303–4; emphasis mine)

Like the mythical Sphinx, the enigmatic Paul is the guardian of a terrible secret, and like it, his personality and physique combine heavenly and satanic characteristics that account for his strangeness and supernatural powers. Paul was miraculously re-elected Sphinx four years in a row and all his rivals mysteriously disappeared. None of the students discussed the atrocities that happened. Shortly before Christmas, a new student

called Édouard arrives. The freshman shortly greets Paul and leaves, leaving the latter dumbfounded. Though he is terrified of Paul, Édouard nonetheless socializes with him. He overcomes his fear and even befriends him, hoping that this friendship will help him out in the long run, given his mediocre school results. Because of his friendship with Paul, Édouard becomes an outcast. The other boarders are convinced that Édouard is groomed to become the next Sphinx because Paul is about to graduate. Édouard becomes obsessed with Paul's secret: he wants to know what happened to the other boys who disappeared. Did Paul kill them to remain the Sphinx? Given Paul's obstinate silence, Édouard realizes that he needs to go to the music room to find out what happened to all the boys who vanished. When he asks for Paul's permission to listen to him play, Paul is infuriated and forbids him to come anywhere near him:

—You will never go anywhere near the piano. Never. The music room is off-limits to you; don't make me remind you of that.

His breath was warm. Even burning. The tongue wasn't far away. Dry. Sharp. Édouard felt his heart stop and then leap out of his chest as if trying to escape his tormentor. (Coulon 2015, p. 113)

The other boys are overjoyed when Édouard is finally rebuffed. But Édouard is determined to discover Paul's terrible secret. One night, he starts rummaging in the two closets that contain musical scores and school supplies. After removing a loose plank, he discovers hair, teeth and various body parts.

"These are my trophies" said a voice, far away, behind him.

Édouard didn't need to turn around. Paul had followed him. Paul had been following him all along. From the beginning. Perhaps the latter had wished for Édouard to find his treasure, or maybe he wanted to test him because he was leaving school next year? The child he had known initially had grown; he had become stronger and appeared less afraid of him. Édouard had desecrated a temple, he had entered a forbidden sanctuary, and Paul, he felt, had led him to this place like a puppet.

"These things are mine. Do not touch them." (Coulon 2015, pp. 115–16)

Édouard is terrified that Paul might kill him for discovering his secret but when day breaks, it appears that Paul has lost his magical powers, and he simply vanishes:

Paul disappeared. Paul left. Before the end of the year. He had vanished. By dawn, he had left, and his parents came to the boarding school to see the principal, to make arrangements with him. *Our son is very ill, he doesn't feel well, he has a headache, you know, those migraines, you know, he can't come back.* (Coulon 2015, p. 117)

While all the other students are relieved, Édouard is left in a state of uncertainty. Burdened by the secret that Édouard has not shared with anyone else, he appears to have taken over from Paul and must carry on his legacy. Unable to laugh, or cry, Édouard must simply wait for the name of the new Sphinx to be announced. Since this text is a short story characterized by realism and an unexpected ending, there are no explicit morals. Paul's sudden disappearance—textualized by ellipses—is a somewhat disappointing ending. But the implication is that Édouard was meant to discover Paul's secret and to undergo this rite of passage to bring about his own ascent to leadership and power. Readers are to infer that evil is infectious—passed from Paul on to his disciple Édouard—and that leadership and power always go hand in hand with evil and the tacit acceptance of evil and the secrecy that shrouds various crimes.

6. Kelen's Spiritual Reading

In her spiritual rereading of Charles Perrault's tale that recalls Michel Tournier's spectral interpretation of evil, French writer and radio producer Jacqueline Kelen argues that the "Bluebeard" tale illustrates the existence of a worldly path and an otherworldly,

spiritual path that opens up a celestial, invisible world (embodied by the two brothers who appear out of nowhere and the older sister called Anne, a name of Hebrew origin meaning “grace”). The invisible world leads humans to salvation and immortality, while the worldly path—our earthy reality—leads us to the bloody chamber, death, and damnation (Kelen 2014, pp. 95–96). The supernatural villain is an allegory of time and the mortality that characterizes all human beings. Bluebeard is the grim reaper:

There is nothing human about Bluebeard. He stands above humans, forcefully imposing his law upon them. He is Time. Time of youthful and carefree pleasures. Time merciless with a sharp scythe, as depicted by Chronos-Saturn. . . . Bluebeard wreaks havoc around him. Who can overcome Time? But who can oppose it? Who can defeat Death? Is there a higher power in this world that governs time? (Kelen 2014, pp. 88–89)

Bluebeard reminds us of our mortality: “You must die, Madam” (“Il faut mourir, Madame”). At the same time, she argues, curiosity is a wholesome and healthy character trait, because it allows the younger sister to leave behind her state of ignorance and dependence (Kelen 2014, p. 91). Perrault’s “Bluebeard” is a thought-provoking tale that invites young listeners to think, to develop their critical thinking skills, and to exercise their freedom of choice by making informed decisions. All of us hold the keys to our own lives: those that open the door to futile pleasures and passion, or those that open the door to power, wealth, ambition. But most importantly, we also possess the small key that opens the door to consciousness (Kelen 2014, p. 93). In short, we need to always remember that time is fleeting. The tale, Kelen argues, is a wake-up call. It reminds us that we are “driving the bus” and that we are responsible for what happens to us in our lives.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, the many contemporary retellings of “Bluebeard” illustrate Elliott Oring’s concept of comparison and cultural context and lend themselves to cross-cultural discussions. Revisiting tale variants across time and geographical borders reveals how these tales adapt to cultural contexts and continue to strangely resonate today in different places. Evil in all these tales takes many shapes that disguise the true nature and danger associated with this force. Fairy-tale scholar Anne E. Duggan points out that Perrault’s enormously wealthy villain holds festivities for eight days to display his wealth and seduce the young woman and that he is “described in terms of artifice and counternature” (Duggan 2005, p. 157). Evil in contemporary versions of Perrault’s cross-cultural tale manifests itself in the shape of an untrustworthy supernatural being that wields absolute, crushing power over other individuals, mostly women but also men, as in Coulon’s retelling about bullying and murder. Gender-based violence and stories thereon continue to be relevant today, as Nothomb’s and Breillat’s feminist retellings underline. Reflecting the rise in women’s post-Arab Spring social activism in North Africa today (see Ennaji 2022; Orlando 2009), Ben Jelloun’s variant can be read as an indictment of religious extremism, a critique of gender inequalities, and a portrayal of entrenched socioeconomic, linguistic, and geographical divides (poor/rich, rural/urban, Berber/French/Colloquial Arabic/Standard Arabic, etc.). In Ben Jelloun’s “Bluebeard” tale, evil is not only associated with Islamic fundamentalism, domestic violence, and misogyny. It is also associated with backward traditionalism rooted in outdated social mores. As in the French variants, physical violence and gender inequalities are the evils that befall women in his tale. The tale reverberates in contemporary Morocco, given inadequate access to education and the continued high level of illiteracy among Moroccan women in some rural areas. Undoubtedly, gender inequalities and educational disparities are necessary to maintain the patriarchy, since an illiterate population is easier to control. Ben Jelloun’s tale calls for more social justice, a judicial system that would grant Moroccan women the right to inherit the same as their male counterparts. Female agency, however, is still limited, it suggests, because Bluebeard’s wife must rely on the help of outsiders—a magic cat¹⁷ and her brothers—to survive. As we have seen, other contemporary authors paint a nuanced portrayal of evil, underlining

the importance of empathy while also foregrounding the empowerment of young women in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The women in these contemporary versions are not as easily victimized as in earlier English, French, German, and Italian variants (see “Bluebeard” variants collected by Collognat and Delmas, pp. 331–583). Nothomb’s retelling contains no explicit morals. However, considering that the text was published shortly after the beginning of the #MeToo movement, called #balancetonporc in France (starting in 2006 in the United States, it then moved to France and the rest of Europe), it indicates that female curiosity and knowledge are absolutely necessary for women’s empowerment and can indeed be lifesaving. Evil, Breillat and Nothomb suggest, might be linked to loneliness, mental illness or paranoia. Ben Jelloun, Breillat, and Nothomb present their versions of Bluebeard as embodiments of “moral monstrosity” (Pharo 2009, p. 157), a construct that links monstrosity to both the ethical and the esthetical and manifests itself in indifference, cupidity, ambition, authority, vengeance, and pleasure. In Ben Jelloun’s tale, which calls for more social justice for women, the power of the villain/patriarch is much more virulent and real than it is in the French variants. Here, evil takes the shape of violence against women and state-sanctioned gender discriminations in the law.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See Collognat and Delmas (2007) for a selection of regional French variants, as well as Anatole France’s pastiche *Les Sept femmes de la Barbe Bleue et autres contes merveilleux* (1909). As Maria Tatar points out, “When it comes to folktales (of which fairy tales are a subcategory), there is no “original” text, only an infinite number of variants, each anchored in a specific time and place. For this reason, the reading of fairy tales is precisely the activity that invites adult intervention, for the “original version” that has been captured between the pages of a book has the “power to enchant”, but perhaps in a way that may not be appropriate for the time and place in which it is being retold” (Collognat and Delmas 2007, p. 77).
- ² The term “monster” is derived from the Latin word *mōnstrum*, which describes a terrifying creature, an evil individual, a heinous act, or an atrocity. *Mōnstrum* is derived from *monēre*, meaning to caution, while the verb *monstrāre* translates to show or to display. Historically, children’s literature has often depicted monsters and creatures as menacing “Others”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes “monster” as usually large-sized creatures that blend human and animal characteristics, often exhibiting a fierce demeanor. These monstrous figures typically symbolize human anxieties related to impending events, perilous or unsociable actions, physical impairments, moral transgressions, and the concept of human mortality (see Jones and Schwabe 2021).
- ³ The highly mediatized ongoing accusations of sexual assault and rape directed at French actor Gérard Depardieu by a number of women in the film industry highlight the French’s increased awareness and interest in issues linked to violence against women. One of the few internationally known actors and considered a “monstre sacré” of French cinema, Depardieu is now increasingly portrayed as a monster, as suggested by a documentary titled *Gérard Depardieu: The Fall of an Ogre* that was shown on French TV on 7 December 2023. As in 2013, when he left France and even became a Russian citizen to avoid paying taxes in France, Depardieu has been hiding out in one of his Belgian properties to weather the storm at home (see Poirier 2023).
- ⁴ See Hermansson (2009) for an analysis of the tale’s permutations in the English literary tradition as well as in music, art, and film.
- ⁵ All English language translations of Perrault’s tale are taken from Christine A. Jones’s *Mother Goose Refigured: A Critical Translation of Charles Perrault’s Fairy Tales* (2016); all other translations are mine.
- ⁶ While the tale of the cruel husband could be an original invention of Perrault, the motif of the forbidden chamber and the magical key with the indelible bloodstain originate from earlier popular tradition (Barchilon and Flinders 1981, pp. 93–94).
- ⁷ The bloody key, fairy-tale scholars agree, symbolizes moral and sexual transgression, i.e., the wife’s adultery and loss of virginity (Tatar 1992, p. 111; Barchilon and Flinders 1981, p. 122; Bettelheim 1977, p. 302).
- ⁸ Even though Perrault in his second moral dismisses “Bluebeard” as a tale of yesteryear, its imagery firmly anchors it in seventeenth-century absolutist France and the reign of Louis the Great. The text abounds with descriptions of luxurious furnishings, full length mirrors, luxurious tapestries, paintings, and golden chandeliers, all of which evoke the luxurious decorum of castles such as Louis XIV’s lavish Château de Versailles, Nicolas Fouquet’s Château de Vaux-le-Vicomte, Fontainebleau, and other royal castles.
- ⁹ State-sanctioned patriarchy in the Maghreb is marked by gender segregation; it relegates women to the inside, domestic sphere, while men wield authority in the public sphere (see Sadiqi 2015, p. 168).

- ¹⁰ As the editors of *Women and Resistance in the Maghreb: Remembering Kahina* note, Maghrebi feminism is not as pervasive in Morocco as it is in the West. It varies greatly from urban to rural areas where patriarchal power structures linked to tribal family patterns continue to prevail: “Examining the condition of women in the Maghreb through a Western prism does not provide a clear image. Whatever science of refraction is used, it does not provide a clean breakdown of social realities. For example, older women still accept clannish understandings of social bonds, that is, relations defined long ago in village communities far outside urban centers. High levels of illiteracy certainly explain this attitude. In some places, for example in the Moroccan Atlas, masculine rule over women is still common practice and only beginning to be questioned. Daughters-in-law are still confined to a secondary feminine domestic space” (Boudraa and Krause 2022, p. 6; emphasis mine).
- ¹¹ Moroccan linguist Moha Ennaji notes that additional institutional and social reforms are needed to fight gender inequalities in the Maghreb and to increase women’s political representation: “In North African countries such as Morocco, this gap in formal and substantive equality between men and women remains profound despite recent reforms. This is one reason why many feminists demand changes in thinking and further reforms to consolidate women’s presence in public space. . . .Such reforms are urgently needed to make up for decades of discrimination and exclusion” (Ennaji 2022, p. 99).
- ¹² Bluebeard’s sexual voraciousness recalls the wife-killing sultan King Sharyar in *The Arabian Nights* (see anonymous in Anonymous 1990).
- ¹³ For more on the “cat” in fairy tales, see (Nikolajeva 2008, p. 169). In Muslim culture, unlike dogs, cats are “considered clean animals, worthy of human affection and protection” (Abdo and Bobroff 2022, p. 164).
- ¹⁴ Even after the October 2004 reforms, in particular legal reforms of the Moroccan Family Code, the so-called *Moudawana*, inheritance rights for Moroccan women are based on Islamic jurisprudence and remain profoundly unjust. After the death of a parent, daughters of the deceased inherit half of what their male relatives inherit. In Islamic jurisprudence, the so-called *ta’sib* (inheritance law by agnation or kinship through males, i. e. brothers and male cousins of the deceased) was justified by the fact, that at a certain time, only men had obligations and responsibilities in taking care of the family. This discriminatory inheritance law is outdated and no longer reflects social realities (see Mahmoud 2023, p. 14). See Ennaji (2022) for a catalog of the main articles of the *Moudawana* pertaining to Moroccan women’s rights or lack thereof.
- ¹⁵ Jacqueline Kelen attributes the tale’s appeal to its graphic details that enhance children’s self-awareness and their realization that the world is a dangerous place and that they better watch out. The tale teaches, she argues, an eye-opening lesson: “Once a child has heard this tale, he or she cannot forget the terrifying details: the dried blood, the dark cabinet, the slaughtered women, the large knife, Bluebeard’s voice that makes the walls shake. After that, it will be impossible to fall asleep. . . .It is time to wake up” (Kelen 2014, p. 89).
- ¹⁶ Amélie Nothomb projected part of herself on her protagonist, Saturnine Puissance. Saturnine is a champagne lover, mirroring Nothomb’s own passion, evident from her fridge stocked solely with bottles of champagne. The name “Saturnine”, originating from the Greek Cronos, reveals her as an ogress.
- ¹⁷ The necessary miraculous intervention of a supernatural helper cat to combat Bluebeard and save the heroine underlines the limits of female agency in contemporary Morocco. The political agenda of King Mohammed VI (popularly referred to as M6) includes gender equality. However, much work still needs to be done to improve the lives of Moroccan women and to alter their subaltern status in society. As Moha Ennaji explains: “Thus, although state feminism succeeded in giving women access to education, health, and employment, it did not really challenge the negative social attitudes toward women, who are still regarded as dependent on men” (Ennaji 2022, p. 100).

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