Culture and Society

Defending Bluebeard, Scotching the Serpent: Fixing the Sexual Problems of the Half-Human Race

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Nature to be commanded must be obeyed. — Francis Bacon

I think that Bluebeard has been given a raw deal. Even assuming that the events in his case occurred just as reported by the Grimms — and we know how easy it is for editors and transcribers to shade and skew narratives to the advantage of whichever side they favor — it is clear that the tale is not, as most readers think, a simple one of evil husband and innocent victimized wife. To begin with, the "maiden" who becomes Bluebeard's wife enters the marriage with rather worldly motives. Her father, openly mercenary, persuades her — rather easily, it appears — to marry this rich, bearded stranger, despite her fear of his "blue beard," whatever dark and shadowy terror that appendage stands for. But she, knowing from the outset that this match is a dangerous one, arranges for her brothers to listen for distress signals from her, and be prepared to dash to her rescue at a moment's notice — hardly the preparations to be expected of a young and radiantly happy bride.

All seems well with the newly married couple for a while. Bluebeard's wife — also known as the "queen," since her husband now seems to be a "king" — has her every wish fulfilled, and would be quite content, except for her continued fear of her husband's blue beard. But then he has to leave her for a while, and gives her the complete freedom of their castle, except for one special room, which he forbids her to enter on pain of death. Clearly he is testing her, since he gives her the...
golden key that will unlock the forbidden room; equally clearly, she agrees to be tested, since she accepts the key from him. And she promises him that she will not enter the forbidden room.

But of course she breaks her promise, and finds the corpses of all the ex-wives that her husband has killed — and the bloody key betrays to her husband, when he returns, that she's done so. Bluebeard tells her he's going to kill her for her disobedience, but he agrees to give her time, and privacy, to say her prayers. She takes advantage of his leniency not to pray, but to call to her brothers for help. They arrive just in time to rescue her, and they kill Bluebeard. She returns to her maiden home with them, taking all Bluebeard's treasures with her.

Even taking this tendentious account at face value, and feeling the obligatory horror at Bluebeard's past as a serial killer of women, his young widow hardly presents a very edifying picture herself. She has accepted a husband she fears, partly (one charitably supposes) to please her father, partly (one suspects) to enjoy being a rich queen; she anticipates trouble, and prepares an escape path for herself; then she breaks a solemn promise made to that husband, a promise she knows to be very important to him; then she tricks him by pleading a need to pray (a favor this monster is too soft-hearted to deny her); then has her brothers kill him, and takes all his valuable goods with her when she leaves.

What it all "means" is hard to say, perhaps because it doesn't mean any single thing, but one strand in the fabric is surely the observation that women cannot stand any holding back on the part of their men. They want total intimacy and "sharing," while men — and not just those who have a roomful of corpses to hide — are unwilling to be totally open, but insist on keeping some small part of themselves to themselves. The true horror, in the wife's eyes, is not so much the contents of the forbidden room, but the existence of something of her husband's that is forbidden to her. Of course, in this case the wife herself is hardly completely open to her husband, but that's different, right?

The truth is that Bluebeard is not a monster, he is Everyman — and the brothers who come to the heroine's rescue are not heroes, they too are Everyman. They save her because she is their sister, but at home they are Bluebeards to their own wives; by the same token Bluebeard himself may well have rescued a sister of his own from her husband. When Bluebeard forbade his wife to open the one door, he was not trying to keep her from discovering his nature — he expected her to be quite familiar with his nature, because it is ordinary male human nature, not some anomaly or aberration. He was asking her to...
help him keep the wolfish side of his nature locked up, not asking her to remain ignorant. In opening the door that confined his wolfish side, she failed him, and the danger she was exposed to was her own fault, or the fault of those who should have taught her better.

Men are, when being most characteristically men, selfish, aggressive, violent, and abstract (I'll abbreviate this list of traits as SAVA for ease of reference hereafter). I'm tempted to add "and these are their good points!" but that would sound like a joke (although it's not), and would be misleading as well. Luckily, men aren't always SAVA; they have quite a few moments when their testosterone and adrenalin levels give them, and those around them, some peace. Men are werewolves who know what they are, and try, during their human phase, to construct cages to contain themselves when they turn wolf. Throughout most of history, women have known this, and worked with men to build such cages; many modern women, particularly very young ones, seem to have forgotten it or never known it.

There are even, within the feminist camp, those who think that men must be radically modified so as to be werewolves no more, but simply women with different genitals. Camille Paglia is a rare exception; she knows what men are, and is exhilarated by their nature. She thinks men in their wolf phase are attractively dangerous and exciting, but need to be, and can be, controlled, and despises women who cannot master the simple skills needed. She is particularly contemptuous of women who think that the answer to the problem of how to handle men is to castrate them, literally or figuratively. She thinks that men, with all of their SAVA, are necessary to the human race; all that's necessary for safety is to remember their double nature and how to deal with it. She is right; men as presently designed are necessary because the struggle of the human race for survival in the face of uncaring nature is not over, and the SAVA qualities of men are needed in this struggle.

Many feminists today seem to think that this struggle is over, that civilization has been secured once and for all, and that force and the willingness to use it are atavistic relics of the dark ages that can be safely jettisoned now. Their mistake is profound and dangerous; we live on a fragile crust of civilization that is always crumbling and in need of repair, and is furthermore under attack from outside. It cannot be saved without men's SAVA qualities, and the attempt to change men radically would be lethal if successful; it may be lethal even without succeeding. And the tricks that women must remember in order to control men are so simple — wolves are not complicated animals — that it is incomprehensible why so many cannot. It is especially easy to do because men, as I've said, are women's allies in this effort; they know they have
periods when they are amok, and they want women to be able to control them, if only for men's own sakes, when they are in the wolf phase: laws and social institutions of all sorts were created by men for just that purpose.

The modern, ignorant view of monsters and their behavior is to be seen in Hollywood's horror movies, which all end the same way: the hero, Jack, has to leave the heroine, Jill, alone for a while, first extracting from her a promise not to do any roaming while he's gone, but to remain in the safe place in which he leaves her. But of course she breaks her promise; when she hears maniacal laughter or uncanny moans coming from the monster's lair, she cannot resist locating and confronting it. And so, carrying a guttering candle or, if a modern miss, a flickering flashlight whose batteries are almost spent, she bravely mounts the creaking stairs to the aerie atop the sinister tower, or descends the dank and treacherous steps down to the loathsome crypt below, while the audience screams "No, no!" in happy terror. And just as the audience hopes and fears it will, the monster leaps out to seize her, and is about to drag her into its lair and do unspeakable things to her when, in the nick of time, Jack returns and, deploying his magic sword or wizardly spell or Freudian analysis, as the movie's target audience was judged by the producer to require, he defeats the monster, who crashes headlong into a fiery pit, there to remain until the studio decides that it's time for a "Return of the ..." sequel. Thus the movies; in real life all goes the same way until the monster appears — and it's Jack.¹

**The Baconian Solution to the Control of Men's Bestial Nature**

I think that the major finding of neuroscience so far is that the human brain is formed by accretion: the more modern parts of the brain have not replaced the more primitive, they have simply overlaid them and built on top of them, as later geological layers overlay earlier ones. The generally accepted model of the human brain is the "triune" or three-layer model first proposed by Dr. Paul MacLean in 1952. The three layers are the reptilian system, or *R-complex*, the *limbic system*, and the *neocortex*. Each layer has its own functional specialty, although there is much interaction and communication among them. The most primitive of the three layers, the "reptile" brain, is responsible for basic life-preserving functions; the middle layer, the limbic system, brings emotions and memory; the most recent, the neocortex, introduces language, symbolism, and "higher" morality. So inside today's human brain are all the layers it has ever had, with the older ones now to some extent under control of the newer, but with even the oldest still trying to do what it evolved to do. (That oldest, most primitive part of the parfait that is our brain is called the "reptile brain" because it is little different from the entire brains of today's reptiles.) Of
course, half a century of work by neuroscientists has resulted in a highly elaborated model of the brain that goes far beyond the simple picture just presented, but that simple picture is perfectly valid as far as it goes, and it goes as far as is needed for present purposes.

One of the implications of the triune model is that copulation, because it has been historically a necessary step in human reproduction and hence the survival of the species, is still largely controlled in humans, especially in human males, by the reptilian layer of the brain, and that this fact is the key to dealing with modern sexual problems. Men's inner reptile urges them strongly to impregnate as many women as they can. Men who obey that urge react in a variety of ways; at one end of the spectrum, they may boast themselves glorious fellows and cocks o'the walk because they have impregnated many, or have a middling reaction of feeling guilt for being disloyal to a particular woman they are supposedly (and often really) uniquely attached to, all the way to the opposite extreme of feeling such horror at their own bestial promiscuity that they castigate and even castrate themselves (the relationships of the three layers are strikingly like those of Freud's id, ego, and superego). But however a man's limbic system and neocortex regard his behavior, it's all epiphenomenal to their reptilian elder brother, who cares nothing what they think, but just wants to propagate the genes of its host, and of the species in general. About the two extreme reactions of men to their own reptilian promiscuity I have nothing to say here; I want to consider the far more common reaction, that of the man who finds himself strongly attracted to a variety of other women even though he considers himself happily attached to one particular woman, and would be glad to be faithful to her if it were not for the intolerable itch in his loins.

I want to propose to that man that he deal with his problem in a Baconian way: by acknowledging the power of Nature — represented in this case by the inner reptile — and then achieving his own human goal by working along the lines that Nature offers. He is to begin by noting that the reptile wants him to impregnate as many women as possible, while his higher self — that is, his limbic system and neocortex — would like to be loyal to his special woman, main squeeze, or wife. But the inner reptile isn't interested in that special woman; the man whose sexual behavior it is largely in control of has already copulated with her, and she is, from the reptile's point of view, already dealt with — further copulation with her would simply be a waste of time and sperm. The fact that in urging its human host to copulate with other women it is harming him in some ways — making him feel guilty, distracting him from his work, perhaps dissolving his marriage — is nothing to the reptile; it has but one goal, and will blindly destroy the man in its single-minded zeal to make him copulate with many.
The demands of his inner reptile are known to the man by the state of his penis; if it is erect, his reptile is telling him to proceed; if not, it is telling him not to waste his sperm. How, though, does the reptile know that the man it is trying to control is facing a new woman, one he has not yet made an effort to impregnate? The reptile is completely dependent here on such inputs as the man's senses provide, especially on visual and olfactory inputs — and the reptile is extremely simple-minded. If the woman the man is now facing looks and smells different, then so far as the reptile is concerned, she is a different woman, and the reptile prepares the man physiologically — that is, causes him to get an erection — so that he can perform his sexual function with that woman as partner.

This suggests that the man can satisfy the reptile, while also being loyal to his wife and his own higher nature, by deceiving the reptile (and surely it cannot be beyond the power of a limbic system and a neocortex, working together — indeed, two of each, as will be explained — to outwit a primitive reptile?). The reptile, like a political progressive, wants diversity; good, give it all the diversity it needs, which isn't much. Let the special woman simply pretend to be a new one, acting the part well enough to fool the dumb reptile or, to focus on its outer manifestation, the penis. It doesn't take much to fool a penis — after all, it's just a schmuck — and the process of doing so is one that almost all women will find easy and even enjoyable, as well as a means to save their marriage.

Perhaps the special woman will wear a wig, or at least get an entirely new hair-do; she will wear a new perfume, making her personal scent something the reptile has never smelled before; she will play-act as someone brand new: an ingénue, a femme fatale, a geisha, a story-book princess, a hooker, a dominatrix, a harem slave — anything she's in the mood for, provided that it fools the reptile. And so with her help, the man can throw a sop to his reptile while being attentive and loyal to her, the one special woman, as well. The degree of superficial variety that an intelligent, imaginative woman can conjure up, equipped with all the tools of modern cosmetics and costumery, is in fact far greater than the variety that men driven by their inner reptiles imagine they find when drifting from one actual woman to another. And the man and special woman, united in a common effort to deceive the reptile, will find themselves becoming more closely bonded to each other; nothing unites people like working together against a common enemy.

Of course many couples have discovered this secret intuitively, and without benefit of neuroscience; play-acting in bed is fairly widely practiced, so far as one can guess about people's private lives. Then, we are told on highest authority that Cleopatra knew all about it two thousand years ago, and was rewarded by
having her lover give up mastery of the entire world in exchange for her embraces, and die without regretting it. She was only one woman, but because she knew the secret, age could not wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety. And one of the best known icons of man–woman relations is actually, though few are aware of it, a depiction of just the practices I recommend: I mean the classic image in which a mounted knight levels his lance at a dragon, while a fair princess languishes nearby, bound to a tree. The dragon is, of course, the knight’s own inner reptile (critics have remarked on how small and unintimidating the “dragon” is in many such depictions); his leveled lance his penis, whose erection shows that the “dragon” is being simultaneously obeyed and defeated; and the “princess” is of course his special woman, who is playing the classic role of damsel in distress. Even the motto that accompanies this image as it is used in the badge of the Order of the Garter, in which it is the archangel Michael killing the Serpent, hints strongly at its meaning: "Honi soit qui mal y pense" is most literally translated as "Shame be to him who thinks evil of it," where "it" stands for "this little imposture practiced by the knight and the princess on the simple-minded dragon."

Given how ancient and widely practiced this subterfuge is, it should not need to be put forward as if it were a radical new proposal, but ours is a scientific age (or at least an age in which science has great prestige, even if few fully understand it), so the backing of neuroscience for the practice is a powerful endorsement, and should encourage many to adopt it when they might otherwise think it a merely frivolous diversion of no great import. If it succeeds, it will be something to celebrate: a measure that will do much for human happiness — and something that should make us drink a toast to that many-sided genius and great human benefactor, Francis Bacon.

Some Conjectures Awaiting Fuller Development

I suggest that the popularity of the theater — both the commercial theater and amateur theatricals — and of the long-standing tradition that it is a hotbed of immorality, and that actresses are creatures of the demimonde, are due to the origin of theatrics in sexual play-acting, practiced as a way of keeping desire alive by deceiving the reptile. Some festivals in antiquity may well have been part of this tradition; at Saturnalia, for example, the participants pretended to be others, and in those new identities engaged in sexual orgies. The masked balls of Venice may well have been part of the tradition. The entire women’s fashion industry probably owes its existence to women’s need, conscious or unconscious, to keep presenting themselves in new guises, more interesting wrappers.
And it will not have escaped the attentive reader that the story of the Garden of Eden testifies further to the ancient roots of this primordial human situation; "Eve" is, of course, merely the new persona in which Adam's one and only spouse, the Eternal Woman who was earlier called "Lilith," presents herself after she has ceased to interest Adam in her original form. Eve causes her own and Adam's downfall by letting herself be defeated by the Serpent (= the reptile) — that is, she is so taken with her own newly enlightened persona that she cannot believe that Adam will eventually weary of her in that guise, too, and that she will need to reinvent herself yet again. What she surrenders to the Serpent in exchange for the apple of knowledge is, tragically, the most important knowledge of all: the knowledge that she will need to change again. Her failure to see the necessity of that step means that when Adam (strictly, the Serpent within him) wearies of the Eve-persona, she has no way of re-igniting his passion, and she and Adam are thereby "expelled from Eden" — that is, they lose what would otherwise be perpetual happiness.

“No one said we couldn’t eat the snake.”

Practical Advice for the Woman Whose Man Is Bluebeard — That Is, Everywoman

You are bonded to someone who falls periodically under the power of his inner reptile, but this is no cause for alarm: you and he together — during his more human phases — will work as partners to defeat the reptile, and the stratagems you cook up together should be both exciting in themselves, and effective in scotching the reptile, your common enemy. (You may have to
take the lead in play-acting; your man may be so dominated at present by his reptile that he cannot play games until he has been made by you to see their combined pleasure and usefulness.) And your mate will certainly have a secret room that he will not want you to enter. Humor him (and save yourself into the bargain); what he has stored there is simply the images of the many women by whom he has been tempted so far. You will learn nothing of value by opening that door, and you may lose him. And if you must beard the monster in his den, either by climbing to the top of the tower or descending into the dungeon, make sure your flashlight batteries are fully charged, and don't gasp when it turns out the monster is the hero, your Jack.

Notes

1. This must be the third or fourth essay I've written with the same epigraph. That is because Bacon's observation may be the wisest utterance ever to emanate from a human being, excepting perhaps those in which the human was divinely inspired, and merely the vehicle for the words of a god, or God.


3. The story I would recommend to illustrate this is "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde": it too is not the story of a strange, far-fetched monster, but of Everyman. And the important thing to note is that Dr Jekyll, the respectable and civilized gentleman, knows that he periodically turns into Mr Hyde, and tries as best he can to enable others to control him when he does.

4. Interesting reversal of the standard horror-movie ending: in ‘The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’ (or, as I think of it, "Nancy Drew meets Krafft-Ebing"), it’s the hero (more accurately, the male ingénue) who, supposing the villain himself is elsewhere, decides to break into the villain's house, alone and without leaving a message explaining what he's doing. Unarmed (although he knows the villain is a ruthless murderer) and carrying the usual weak flashlight, he tiptoes through the house until, as everyone in the world but he expects, the villain's side-kick suddenly pounces. Soon he is in the (main) villain's hidden torture chamber, and about to be killed in excruciating fashion, when the heroine, who has meanwhile been engaged in researches that reveal to her the villain's identity and likely whereabouts, shows up and rescues him. As I noted in an earlier *Vocabula* essay ("Rescuing the Hero"), the superhuman feats that modern readers and viewers are no longer willing to accept when attributed to a hero are perfectly acceptable if attributed to a heroine.
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