Anti-Housewives and Ogres’ Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard’s Female Helper

Abstract

In 1997, Daniela Hempen published a short research paper in *Folklore* (108: 45–8) about a somewhat unexpected character in some Bluebeard stories. Hempen calls her “Bluebeard’s female helper.” An old woman employed in Bluebeard’s home in two tales in the first edition of the Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812), she is found by the newlywed or newly betrothed heroine already at her grisly work: in “The Castle of Murder” (Das Mordschloss) (no. 73) scrubbing the intestines of a former victim; in “The Robber Bridegroom” (Der Räuberbräutigam) (no. 40) with water on to boil, ready to cook the chopped-up corpse of the heroine. To discover the meanings of this odd character, help cannot be sought from the scholarship of the past for, as Hempen remarks, the female helper has “been constantly overlooked in ‘Bluebeard’ criticism.” The present essay seeks to rectify this neglect.

According to Daniela Hempen, the “female helper” found in Bluebeard’s castle in some versions of the story is an ambiguous figure. The servant and ally of robbers, murderers, even cannibals, living with them in “an intimacy almost beyond words” (Hempen 1997, 46), the helper appears to be a loyal assistant to the robbers, although the reader may suspect that she is also their victim or prisoner. Yet she becomes, at least in part, the heroine’s saviour. Information from Bluebeard’s female helper, as well as the heroine’s own curiosity and enterprise, will prove to be essential to the heroine’s escape and thus to the happy resolution of the tale.

Hempen is right to find the presence of this additional female character in Bluebeard’s house a thought-provoking one. As the Grimms ejected Das Mordschloss from later editions of the Kinder- und Hausmärchen, and Der Räuberbräutigam has never been a children’s favourite, the female helper has not been very prominent in the popular image of the tale. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, “Bluebeard” as reproduced in print in fairytale collections has mainly followed Perrault, who tends to concentrate attention on the figures of the male and female protagonist. Yet although her existence has not been much noticed, an extra female character is often found in Bluebeard’s house, for instance, even in Perrault’s version, in the form of Sister Anne. Sister Anne is mysteriously necessary to the final effect of the tale, given that she is quite unnecessary to the story and unmentioned for much of it. Her survival against odds—that is, despite the very superfluity of the character—might therefore point to her and other female helpers’ having greater importance in tales of type AT311 (“Rescue
by the Sister”), AT312 (“Bluebeard”), and AT955 (“The Robber Bridegroom”) than has been generally recognised [1]. Clearly Sister Anne’s role requires investigation, for Perrault’s La Barbe-Bleue (1697), a far from well-made tale [2], retains its authoritative status as both the eponymous, and the first, published version of the tale type.

Sister Anne’s first function is as a warning. During the opening courtship sequence, the older sister’s repugnance to Bluebeard as husband tells us that her younger sister is acting unwisely in marrying him. As “Bluebeard” is a thriller of a tale, “un des drames les plus palpitants qu’on ait écrits” [3] (Charles Deulin, quoted by Velay-Vallantin 1992, 45), such portents and threatening or mysterious circumstances abound in the early stages of many versions: in oral and traditional versions, a creature at the Bluebeard’s house may utter a warning to the heroine, a female helper may offer a warning, the heroine may feel doubts or uneasiness, or the situation and appearance of the bridegroom’s house may be sinister [4]. The common motif of following a trail of stones, peas, or ashes for fear of getting lost in the forest is another contributor to a general sense of unease in the audience.

In Perrault’s version, the sister—as yet unnamed—is absent from the text during the early days of the marriage, when all those visitors arrive but so unaccountably disappear again. Perhaps the presence of a sister to act as bridesmaid during the honeymoon period would have been taken for granted by Perrault’s contemporaries. But later, Sister Anne re-appears to act as lookout, her ritual dialogue with the heroine helping to create suspense in the final scene. Delaying tactics by the heroine in other versions, such as asking for (or taking off) clothing, or for time to pray, have the same function of increasing suspense. Sister Anne’s involvement at this moment, too, reminds us that the bride does still have a birth family whose responsibility for her has not been entirely abrogated by her marriage. From the birth family will come the brothers to save the new bride from her murderous husband. Yet Sister Anne’s resultless helpfulness, and Perrault’s peculiar silence over whether she even knows what is going on and, if so, why she does not intervene to save her sister, are some of the most marked oddities in this powerful but disjointed tale. The effect is to put Anne into an ambiguous position. She is there but not there [5], and to this extent resembles the apparently compromised but potentially compassionate “female helpers” in the tales discussed by Hempen.

To discover the meanings of this odd character, help cannot be sought from the scholarship of the past for, as Hempen remarks, the female helper has “been constantly overlooked in ‘Bluebeard’ criticism” (Hempen 1997, 45). A better source of enlightenment is examination of the additional female characters in the Bluebeard’s home that have proved to be important in female re-interpretations of the tale. For, in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century literary revisions of “Bluebeard” by women, peripheral female characters come into their own. This seems to indicate that the common interpretation of the tale in terms of the evils of female curiosity and female sexual transgression was not as all-prevailing as it might seem from Maria Tatar’s account of commentary on “Bluebeard” in the past two centuries [6]. Tatar paints a striking picture of moral and critical obtuseness over the meanings of “Bluebeard”—even more striking than the parallel lack of interest in the female helper noted by Hempen. But I would
argue that while male critics were officially interpreting “Bluebeard” as a moral tale for females, female re-tellings of the tale were unofficially carrying on another work of re-interpretation. From this alternative tradition, a less depressing picture emerges, a picture of diversity in female re-tellings of “Bluebeard” that involve various new visions of the female helper. These helpers are not very consistent in narrative function; evidently, women writers had very different ideas about how the tale of “Bluebeard” should work out in the end; but the inconsistency is definitely not associated with accepting the line of interpretation identified by Tatar. Rather, diversity appears to be caused by, and to be in itself an indicator of, a high degree of instability in the form and meanings of the tale type. “Bluebeard”, and I suspect this may be true of all good horror stories, is a thoroughly unsettling tale. Within English-language traditions, oral and literary, in the past two centuries, women have re-told “Bluebeard” in ways that run counter to the contemporary scholarly moralistic silencing of the uneasiness generated by this tale type.

Two “Gothic” female romances, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, have been especially influential in establishing Bluebeard motifs, including female helpers, in popular nineteenth-century and twentieth-century fiction for women, generating numerous literary imitations as well as film and other media versions. Elizabeth Gaskell’s little-known tale “The Grey Woman,” a chilling anti-romance with a tragic ending, nevertheless shares much with these famous works including one major plot element, the death of the female helper. The female bonding within the husband’s house offered by these helpers was apparently sensed by all three writers to be a dangerously subversive element. I will also mention other women writers who display a similar degree of inventiveness about the number and role of extra female characters in “Bluebeard”-type tales. Most of them maintain what Hempen sees as the ambiguous position of the female helper—she is found acting as servant, ally, relation, or even lover of the husband, while at the same time doubling as companion, informant, confidante, or saviour of the heroine. Indeed, my study of such characters as developed by female authorship shows that they are more properly defined as the heroine’s helpers than the Bluebeard’s. Perhaps as a result of the threat sensed to be offered by a female/female bond, where male film-makers have capitalised on the inventions of Charlotte Brontë or Daphne du Maurier, it is possible to trace the radical and uncomfortable implications of female helper-figures being re-assimilated into more conventional narrative patterns. Before I embark on my study of the female helper, however, it may be useful to ponder her ancestry. Various antecedent texts appear to have contributed to the development of this figure.

The first, and surely most influential, prototype must be the old woman who keeps house for the bandits in Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*. This woman shows a little (not very much) sympathy for the predicament of Charitê, a young bride who has been kidnapped by the bandits; she appears to possibly be a fellow-prisoner or victim of the bandits, yet their active accomplice. When Charitê and Lucius (in the form of an ass) try to escape, she makes a determined effort to thwart them and then hangs herself before she can be punished for failing to do so. Yet this aged crone may be inwardly sympathetic to Charitê. She also plays adviser, interpreter of dreams, and storyteller to the narrator Lucius and, as the
gifted teller of Apuleius’s famous Cupid and Psyche tale, is revealed to be a contradictory crone who dreams of love triumphant [7].

The bandits’ housewife has much in common with a figure of later European oral tradition, the Ogre’s wife or housewife who greets and cares for the abandoned child or children who accidentally find their way to an ogre’s house in tales of type AT327, “The Children and the Ogre.” Here is a second thoroughly ambiguous figure, for these narratives endow the ogre’s wife with the potential to become either a sympathetic helper of the children or to remain a loyal assistant to her monstrous husband/employer: alternatively, she may develop as a female trickster, contriving to stay on good terms with both sides. In terms of the production of narrative tension, wonder, ambiguity, irony, and grim humour, this unpredictable figure is therefore a superb creation. Her version of “home” is both a promise of the ultimate return to safety of the protagonist(s) and a mocking and horrific inversion of home—an extension, that is, of the parents’ original betrayal of home. Yet, as far as I can ascertain, little attention has been paid to her: in the AT classification of 327, for instance, she is barely mentioned [8].

Apuleius’s housekeeper for bandits and the ogre’s housewife spring from similar—possibly continuous—oral traditions. The persistence and power of the character no doubt derive from the conflict she embodies, of motherly (compassionate) versus wifely (subordinate and loyal) roles. She also has aspects of the witch, for hers is a monstrous housekeeping, inventing normal women’s work [9]: the Grimms’ female helpers, with their hideous cooking and cleaning of human flesh, are comparable instances of the gruesome humour that the “anti-housewife” can generate. Apuleius’s crone inverts housewifely normality when she performs for her gang of ruthless cut-throats the praiseworthy tasks of welcoming weary travellers or homecomers. She has hot water, a roaring fire, oil for massage, wine, and a meal on offer. Perrault’s Petit Poucet and his brothers, similarly, after their eloquently described wanderings in the forest, are invited to warm themselves “après d’un bon feu” and offered “bien à souper” [10] by the ogre’s wife, although her proffered meal is an unhomely one, the ogre having directed that the children should be fed to make sure they do not get thinner (Perrault 1989, 289–90).

Evidently, this is too good a character to waste. It is unsurprising to find her re-appearing in elite literature in tales only loosely related to either “Bluebeard” or “The Children and the Ogre.” I suspect she contributed to many sinister Gothic chatelaines, most influentially, perhaps, to Urfríðr/Úlfríðr in Walter Scott’s Ivanhoe (1819), an enormously popular novel all over Europe throughout the nineteenth century. Urfríðr (as she is known to the Norman conquerors of England) is first discovered by the reader spinning in a “distant and sequestered turret” (Scott 1996, 247) of the castle of Torquilstone, rather like the old woman in Perrault’s “Briar Rose”. Yet Torquilstone is more of a Bluebeard’s castle than a Briar Rose’s castle, ruled over as it is by a Norman robber baron. Scott’s reader is taken on a tour of its bloody chambers, each full of grotesquerie and violence. Out of this proliferation of nasty rooms, however, readers have always (and quite rightly) chosen to concentrate their attention on the remote turret chamber where the heroic Jewess, Rebecca, successfully defies the Templar, Brian de Bois-Guilbert. Rebecca’s centrality to the novel is, in fact, signalled by her
meeting with Urfried, a storyteller, prophetess, and informant [11], or in Scott’s phrase, an “old sybil” (Scott 1996, 247). Despite her ostentatious (and rather gloating) hostility to Rebecca, Urfried will finally betray the Normans and set fire to the castle, thus bringing about Ivanhoe’s rescue and, eventually, Rebecca’s escape, as well as her own death. Her functions, therefore, are similar to those of the “helper” as characterised by Hempen. Living with her captors in the conditions of dreadful intimacy [12] and apparent collusion so noteworthy in the Grimms’ tales, she is released by the arrival of this last, fortunate, courageous and cunning female victim from her shameful servitude, even if only by arranging her own death. The final scene at Torquilstone is especially memorable. Ulrica (her Saxon name restored to her by the narrator) sings a defiant battle-hymn on the flaming battlements of the castle, then perishes in the flames (Scott 1996, 340–2).

With such antecedents in mind, attention may now be turned to the phenomenon of women writers’ revisions of “Bluebeard”. Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre has been seen as standing in a direct line of literary descent from Scott’s Ivanhoe [13]. It is a novel rich in other materials, but it has as the bones of its plot the attempt of a wealthy and sexually experienced hero to marry an innocent young woman although a forbidden chamber within his castle-ish home conceals the dreadful secret of an earlier marriage: according to John Sutherland, Jane Eyre “can claim to be the first adult, non-burlesque treatment of the Bluebeard theme in English Literature” (Sutherland 1997, 68) [14]. And interestingly enough, that Jane Eyre still invites reading as a “Bluebeard” tale is best illustrated by Sutherland, whose commentary on the novel makes a case against Rochester as a genuine wife-murderer. Sutherland claims that Rochester, after attempting to dispose of his legal wife gradually by making her live “in squalid, solitary confinement, with only Grace Poole as her wardress,” proceeds, when an “alcoholic crone, a diet of porridge, and a garret” have not disposed of her, to take advantage of the house fire to say “something” to Bertha on the battlements that causes her to jump to her death (Sutherland 1997, 70).

The only possible reaction to Sutherland’s provocative reading is that it is driven by the fairytale: evidently, that old rogue Bluebeard has taken yet another potential narrator by the throat, for there is really no evidence at all that Rochester is a murderer. Moreover, in referring to Bertha’s guardian, Grace Poole, as a “crone,” Sutherland is well away in the realms of tradition, as Grace Poole is “a woman between thirty and forty” with “a set, square-made figure, red-haired, and with a hard plain face” (Brontë 1974, 108). Yet Sutherland’s irreverent (and at times misleading) [15] interpretation of the novel raises an interesting point with regard to my subject, that of Bluebeard’s female helper. Sutherland is only partially wrong in identifying Grace Poole as the traditional crone. The female helper does exist in the novel, but she exists split by Brontë into three aspects; Grace Poole, Mrs Fairfax, and Bertha Mason Rochester.

Grace Poole is Rochester’s servant and the gaoler/guardian of his crazy wife and his secret. She frightens and fascinates Jane, who is wrong about her most of the time, and by being at once prosaic and sinister offers an especially gripping version of the “unhomely” housewife. But it is Mrs Fairfax who has most of the other necessary qualifications for a Bluebeard’s helper, being an
“elderly” woman, a dependent relation of Rochester’s, and his housekeeper: she plays the helper’s role in volume 1 chapter 11, welcoming Jane to the Bluebeard’s castle, seating her by a warm fire, plying her with food, and informing her about the house and its inhabitants. Her position is also ambiguous vis-à-vis both Jane and her employer. Womanly sympathy makes her anxious for Jane’s welfare, but as a loyal employee she keeps the secret of Bertha’s imprisonment.

The ambiguities Hempen noted in the helper’s position are found here, then, in a flourishing state. Stolid servant Grace and genteel little old Mrs Fairfax, a genuine housekeeper (and keeper of keys), together help conceal in Thornfield the presence of mad imprisoned Bertha, the wife of the Bluebeard, herself a key-stealer and a pyromaniacal house-destroyer to boot. Moreover, Sutherland is surely correct in drawing attention to Rochester’s suspicion that Mrs Fairfax has guessed the secret of his first marriage (Sutherland 1997, 78; see Brontë 1974, 315). While Jane, looking out for herself as a good heroine should, provides one crucial piece of the information that gets her false marriage stopped by writing about her intentions to her uncle in Madeira, it must be Mrs Fairfax, as Sutherland surmises, who had earlier “helped” Jane by sending secretly to Bertha’s brother, Mr Richard Mason from Jamaica, the information that Mr Rochester was intending to re-marry.

Apprentently a malign force in the novel, the spectacular madwoman Bertha Mason Rochester is nevertheless best identified as the third aspect of Jane’s helper. Daniela Hempen remarks of the female helper that she is found, in the two Grimm tales, actually within the forbidden chamber. The terrible knowledge offered by Bluebeard’s female helper is identical in narrative function to the gruesome sights— butchered bodies and dripping blood—that confront the heroine in other tales: even the dead offer knowledge that is necessary to the heroine if she is going to survive. Therefore Bertha, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar persuasively argue in The Madwoman in the Attic (Gilbert and Gubar 1979), only appears to be Jane’s enemy. She is actually on Jane’s side, for “What Bertha … does … is what Jane wants to do” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 359). Her appearance in Jane’s room the night before the wedding, for instance, when she destroys the wedding veil, offers a warning against the marriage that Jane badly needs. Similarly, Bertha’s punishment of Rochester by burning his house and causing his injuries is the necessary precondition for his repentance and reform. In Jane Eyre, then, division of the “female helper” figure into three characters assists Brontë to arrive at an unusual ending—the assertion of Jane’s independence and self-reliance on the one hand, and the reinstatement of a repentant Bluebeard and his eventual marriage to the heroine on the other. That a socially “dead” wife functions as a helper in this novel suggests, too, that Brontë had perceived in the classic Bluebeard tale the underlying sympathy between the macabre bodies of Bluebeard’s dead wives and his living wife: they too are her helpers, the ghastly signs that inform her and insist on their kinship with her (in many tales, they are in fact her own sisters). Bertha similarly, visually horrific, seems to lack personality or individuality: she is all sign. The common motif of the dismembered hand or finger that directs the heroine to the truth about her bridegroom in tales of type AT955 is another version of the helper as sign, as even a dismembered finger can point to a murderer. As Cristina Bacchilega explains:
If the “Forbidden Chamber” rather than the “Bloody Key” is treated as the tale’s central motif, then “Bluebeard” is no longer about the consequences of failing a test—will the heroine be able to control her curiosity?—but about a process of initiation which requires entering the forbidden chamber ... The heroine’s knowledge of her husband, of herself, and of sexual politics is what matters. The test is whether she can acquire this knowledge and use it cleverly enough to triumph over death (Bacchilega 1997, 107).

Note, too, that the significance of the superior age of the female helper is explained by this interpretation: it is necessarily an older woman who plays the role of initiator, offering the way to necessary knowledge.

Bertha’s benign aspects are well concealed by Brontë, who describes her “lurid visage” (Brontë 1974, 287) in blood-chilling terms. But the positive aspects of the female helper intensify later in the century in Elizabeth Gaskell’s long short story “The Grey Woman,” first carried in Charles Dickens’s journal All the Year Round in 1861. Jenny Uglow, who included the tale in Virago’s Curious, If True: Strange Tales by Mrs Gaskell in 1995, rightly remarks about “The Grey Woman” that this “sensational tale has an echo of Bluebeard, of wives entrapped in castles on high cliffs, of sadism, torture and murder concealed beneath polite exteriors” (Gaskell 1995, xii). But Gaskell’s tale resembles the Grimms’ Das Mordschloss even more precisely than Perrault’s “Bluebeard”—a resemblance revealed if the tale is detached from its elaborate narrative framework of old houses, portraits and letters. Anna Scherer, daughter of a miller on the Neckar River and a beauty in her youth, has resisted pressure from family and friends to marry. However, a potential bridegroom appears, a handsome but rather effeminate young Frenchman, M. de la Tourelle, recently arrived in the area but known to be a landowner, with a chateau in the Vosges mountains and “a large income from some sources quite independent of this property” (Gaskell 1995, 198). Anna overcomes her initial reluctance and nervousness, and “bewitched,—in a dream,—a kind of despair” (Gaskell 1995, 199) she marries de la Tourelle and departs for his castle [16].

Inside her new home, Anna finds her movements restricted and she quickly comes to fear both her husband and his servants. But her own new maidservant, a middle-aged Norman farmer’s daughter called Amante, becomes a friend and an ally. One night Amante and the by-now-pregnant Anna secretly visit the husband’s apartments—the forbidden chamber—to retrieve a letter from Anna’s beloved father. The candle goes out, Amante goes for flint and tinder, and when surprised by intruders Anna hides under a table. There she is a terrified witness to the arrival of her husband and a gang of “Chauffeurs” bearing with them a dead body. Conversation between these men makes it clear that de la Tourelle had a previous mistress, Victorine, who has been murdered because she knew too much, and that the robber gang now fears betrayal by their leader’s new young wife.

From her castle of horror, Anna is rescued by the vigilant and enterprising Amante. Together they run away (skirting men busy digging a grave for their latest victim) and evade and baffle pursuit. Disguised as a travelling pedlar or tailor and his wife, they eventually reach Germany. One of the adventures on the journey, however, is an additional horror: at their inn, a beautiful fair-haired young lady is murdered by M. de la Tourelle and they realise that the victim has been mistaken for Anna. A further sensation is the murder of the faithful
Amante, recognised even in her exile and pursued by the “Chauffeurs.” Anna finds refuge in a bigamous relationship with a poor young doctor who assists her and her infant daughter, and the Bluebeard character is finally identified and punished. As already revealed in the “frame” story, Anna’s daughter Ursula never marries.

Gaskell’s tale thus not only encloses a hitherto unrecognised version of AT955 “The Robber Brädegroom,” but also shows some interesting awareness of a tradition, probably oral, of related tales. Notable elements are the warning, here taking the form of the bride’s fears and doubts; the way the victim’s “dead hand” touches Anna’s as she hides under the table; the glimpse of the robbers digging the grave of their victim [17]; and the death of the helper, Amante. On their journey of escape, too, Anna and Amante are hidden by an old woman, a miller’s servant, whose reluctant and fearful assistance to the two fugitives, and subsequent death at her master’s hands, reproduce precisely, in a kind of doubling, the predicament of the female helper. Gaskell’s biographer, Jenny Uglow, comments on the strength of female love in this tale (Uglow 1993, 165–6) and also remarks on the way men’s “obliteration of women, to the point of silence, torture and death, runs through Gaskell’s stories” (Uglow 1993, 473). Patsy Stoneman notes that the “revolutionary function of domestic servants in Elizabeth Gaskell’s work has been largely overlooked” (Stoneman 1997, 48) [18]. To these comments should be added another, that these concerns of Gaskell’s produce a radical transformation of a tale-telling tradition. The salient features of “The Grey Woman,” whether compared with La Barbe-Bleue, Das Mordschloss, or Jane Eyre, are the character of Amante, most unambiguously benevolent and loyal of all female helpers, and the muted, even unhappy, ending of the story. A cross-dresser who pretends to be married to her mistress in order to save her, and a financially resourceful woman able to face losing her job because by tailoring she is well able to provide an income for herself and her dependent mistress, Amante offers a model of female strength and solidarity that bypasses class barriers. Gaskell’s tale even touches lightly on a “disguised” idea of love or marriage between women. But Amante is stabbed, the “Grey Woman” marked for life by terror, and her family dies out. Both Jane Eyre and “The Grey Woman” are clearly mid-Victorian “proto-feminist” texts, as evidenced by their common interest in women’s work, in female bonding, in female independence of male financial support, and in their sensational departures from images of the centrality of the happy home and the finality of the happy marriage. The feminism of Jane Eyre, however, encoded in Gothic symbolism and ultimately well contained within a romantically resolved plot, is in my view much less radical than Gaskell’s relatively unknown but truly horrifying tale of sexual politics.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the more romantic Jane Eyre that, especially through its many film versions, remains a cultural force [19]. But in the twentieth century, Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca (1938)—also a much-dramatised novel [20]—emerged as the principal means by which the figures of Bluebeard, wife, and female helper and their disturbing setting in the unhomely home re-adapted themselves to a modern popular audience [21]. Rebecca, like Jane Eyre, is narrated in the first person by the heroine, but is something of a tour de force, in that the heroine’s name is never revealed to the reader. Rebecca is, rather, the name of
the Bluebeard-hero’s dead first wife, a name that impresses itself powerfully on the second wife’s imagination when she finds everywhere in her new home reminders of Rebecca’s beauty, charm, and dominating personality. du Maurier even suggests that Rebecca is haunting the heroine, a sinister theme of possession or loss of identity that has possibly obscured from readers the closeness of the basic plot of the book to the tale of Bluebeard. For Max de Winter did indeed murder his first wife, a murder so far successfully concealed from the world.

The novel presents many familiar motifs of the “Bluebeard” tale, albeit, as with Brontë and Gaskell, transformed to fit a realistic mode. For instance, as early as page 9 the reader hears of the husband’s “premonition of disaster,” which was “correct from the beginning,” while the heroine’s employer, Mrs Van Hopper, utters another warning: “I think you are making a big mistake—one you will bitterly regret” (du Maurier 1968, 73). When the newlywed young bride arrives at her husband’s ancestral home, too, instead of more concrete omens of his grim past, much is made of the “wall” of “blood-red” rhododendrons in the drive (du Maurier 1968, 79). Driven by her curiosity about Rebecca, the heroine intrudes into the mysterious West Wing, one of several forbidden chambers in this novel. Another is the cottage/boat house on the beach: “that cottage is supposed to be locked, the door had no business to be open” says Max (du Maurier 1968, 121) when his wife disobeys him and enters it. The final secret enclosure is the small boat in which Rebecca’s hidden body is re-discovered.

As guide to the forbidden chamber and frequenter of the West Wing, Max’s housekeeper, Mrs Danvers, plays “female helper” in this novel. While various other characters—notably Max’s sister Beatrice and his agent Frank Crawley—are the confidants, informants and comforters of the new Mrs de Winter, only Mrs Danvers welcomes the bride to her home, introduces her to her housewifely responsibilities, and has long lived with Max in the sinister intimacy of shared understanding. For Mrs Danvers knows the dark truth about Max’s apparently successful first marriage and is also familiar with the dark side of Rebecca’s personality, although unlike Max she admired and loved Rebecca for her strength and vitality, her selfish gaiety and ruthless promiscuity. Mrs Danvers is from the beginning a troubling figure, like Apuleius’s crone and Scott’s Ulrica, halfway between pitiable and evil. Ultimately, like Ulrica and Bertha Mason Rochester, she becomes an arsonist who sends the Bluebeard’s house up in flames (I take this holocaust to be the extreme version of the anti-housekeeping motif). Dressed in black, and with a “skull’s face … set on a skeleton frame,” Mrs Danvers at their first meeting lays her “dead hand” (du Maurier 1968, 81) in that of the young bride [22].

But for the bride, even this unpromising “helper” is once again a source of the knowledge vital for survival. In an ironic inversion of the female helper’s usual role, Mrs Danvers’ obsession with Rebecca teaches the second Mrs de Winter to share Max’s murderous hatred for his first wife. Indeed, without Mrs Danvers’ malignant presence in the house, it is conceivable that the new Mrs de Winter might feel some qualms at helping her Bluebeard evade the law. With Mrs Danvers’ hostile revelations and her hinted-at “unnatural” love for Rebecca in the background, however, neither the new wife nor (it appears) generations of readers doubt whose side they should be on. As in Jane Eyre, the surviving
couple’s marriage is marked by exile, loss of the home, and the humiliation and weakening of the bridegroom, but most readers seem to have chosen—as I did, when a teenager—to take the ending of *Rebecca* as a conventionally “happy” ending. This ending du Maurier undermines, however, even as she constructs it. As Nina Auerbach has remarked, du Maurier’s endings “become increasingly, tantalisingly irresolute the more one examines them” (Auerbach 2000, 61), and it is the reader who makes Mrs Danvers her helper who is most likely to uncover the forbidden knowledge in this book. Readers often perceive, for instance, through the frightened bumblings of the heroine and her obsessed resistance to Rebecca, the significance of her half-masked desire to be like her: they may also come to feel more sympathy for the Rebecca/Danny couple than for those sterlingly successful English criminals Mr and Mrs de Winter.

If every re-telling is also a re-reading, what can be made of the variety—the contradictory variety—of the re-tellings and re-readings of Bluebeard described here? Sutherland professes to be baffled by *Jane Eyre*, a “Bluebeard” story that makes the dead wife the villain and concludes with the monster’s happy marriage to his intended victim (Sutherland 1997, 69). One wonders how he reacts to *Rebecca*, in which the new wife connives with her husband to conceal his crime. With hindsight, we may speculate that the Victorian obsession with “Bluebeard” has much to do with the male’s guilty consciousness of sexual experience before marriage, a secret supposed to be kept from innocent brides: *Jane Eyre* was criticised for what were seen as unpleasantly explicit scenes in which Rochester discussed his earlier mistresses with Jane. Beginning as a classic “Cinderella” romance, but proceeding to a highly unconventional ending, *Rebecca* therefore signals a change of consciousness, reflecting as it does rather the predicament of the wife of an *openly* sexually experienced—or even divorced—husband. The undoubted success of *Rebecca* as conventional women’s romance (when on closer examination it proves to be so unconventional) must have something to do with the new myth it offers to wives coming to terms with the haunting continuing existence of earlier partners or even a first wife—a gratifying fantasy that she was so horrendous that the husband murdered her.

The gender of the writer has much to do with the way the tale is re-told. As noted earlier, Maria Tatar in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairytales* showed how “Bluebeard” was interpreted, until well on into the twentieth century, as a cautionary tale about female curiosity (Tatar 1987, 161). But this mainstream of interpretation, although Tatar does not so describe it, was male: the signs are that few female readers shared the instinctive male sympathy for the Bluebeard that drove this interpretation [23]. I have argued in an earlier paper, “Feminism and Bluebeard” (1999) [24], that an alternative line of female re-tellings of Bluebeard flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, attracting among others Ann Thackeray (Lady Ritchie), Katherine Mansfield, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and the film-maker Jane Campion. In their productions, as varied as Brontë’s, Gaskell’s and du Maurier’s in developing and ending the tale, female characters tend to proliferate and offer various kinds of assistance to (as well as exerting various kinds of pressure on) the heroine: in Thackeray’s “Bluebeard’s Keys” (1908) a sister, a mother, the mother’s friend, a powerful old lady of aristocratic and interfering nature, and a fairy godmother figure of a somewhat mysterious kind all take an interest in Fanny’s (does her name recalls
Fatima’s?) destiny, which is, eventually, NOT to marry: she sets up a school for orphans instead. In Mansfield’s “Bliss,” the heroine’s best friend proves to be her husband’s secret lover, and the moment when the heroine acquires her dreadful knowledge of this fact is connected by Mansfield’s symbolism of the pear tree in the garden to Eve’s hunger for knowledge. Sundry characters including the blind piano tuner in Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber” also play at helper (Carter 1979). There is deliberate gender reversal here, however, and Carter’s narrator/heroine is rescued by an unusual helper, a heroic, gun-toting mother who arrives in the nick of time—as Perrault’s brothers do. In Atwood’s “Bluebeard’s Egg,” there is another faithless best friend (Atwood 1987)—Atwood appears to have been one of the first readers to recognise that Mansfield was reflecting on Bluebeard in “Bliss” and to have shaped her tale accordingly (Lovell-Smith 1999, 47 n. 11. And the heroine’s own daughter—herself a magnificent exemplar of ambiguity and divided loyalties—acts as one of a number of would-be helpers in Campion’s film The Piano (Campion 1993).

Whatever form they may take, in however covertly or overtly feminist a re-telling of “Bluebeard,” though, it appears that the female helpers in these stories all have in common that they are at bottom the heroine’s helpers. With cruel benevolence, they offer her their dreadful knowledge: knowledge essential for life. To this extent, they “prove the importance of ... female bonding in the patriarchal world” as Hempen remarks (1997, 48). But the helpers’ very varied roles are accompanied by much inconsistency in their relationship to the heroine—which may appear hostile—and also in how the tale ends. Thus, helpers play varying parts in producing the ultimate “meaning” of each tale. There is little female agreement as to how Bluebeard should end or what its final impact should be.

In this, I suspect that my literary revisions reflect a high degree of instability and mobility in many “Bluebeard”-related tales, literary or oral. After all, there are versions on record in which the heroine’s disobedience is never found out (Hartland 1885, 198), and others in which the female and male protagonists ultimately marry. In no. 41 of J. F. Campbell’s Popular Tales of the West Highlands, a horse that has captured three sisters in turn is disenchanted by the third one striking off its head. Now a king’s son, he marries her at the end of the tale. In another version given by Campbell, an animal helper, a cat, turns out to be a king’s daughter under enchantment. The heroine, having slain the ogre herself, settles down to live in his castle and to enjoy his wealth with the ex-cat as her companion (Campbell 1994a, 2:46–7). In “The Three Sisters,” a tale of Frank McKenna tape-recorded by Linda Ballard for the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, a cat tests the heroine’s sisters for kindness (they fail) but, when the heroine passes the test, the cat turns out to be the Bluebeard figure himself. She marries him. Even more radical variations are found in the endings of another related tale type, AT956B, “The Clever Maiden Alone at Home Kills the Robbers.” In one strange variant, a princess at home alone beheads each one of a band of robbers as they creep in through a hole in the wall, but the robber chief escapes with only a head wound. He later presents himself in disguise and obtains the hand of the princess in marriage—the tale up to now following the usual pattern. But then, instead of her escaping and outwitting him a second time, the normal development, he kills her. Emmanuel Cosquin, who sum-
marises this tale of Proehle’s (Cosquin 1886, 2, no. 31), remarks that “Cette fin est complètement altérée” (ibid, 181) [25]. In Campbell’s More West Highland Tales (1994b) is found an equally intriguing development of AT956B, in which the girl who has wounded the robber chief beheads his brother, disguises herself in his clothes, and becomes a servant in a smith’s house, where the smith’s daughter falls in love with him/her. Even when the secret of the beloved’s real sex is revealed, the two marry anyway. (A tragic ending, and same-sex marriage, also occur in Gaskell’s “The Grey Woman,” and lesbian love re-appears in Rebecca.) In “The Cellar of Blood,” one of the English “Mr Fox” tales, the heroine is disguised in male dress for the scene of revelation where she recites her dream (Briggs 1971, A:390). Mr Rochester also cross-dresses in Jane Eyre. Sexual transgression thus seems to be drawn into the “Bluebeard” nexus in some vague but necessary way—like bigamy, another kind of transgression against the marriage bond, which occurs as a possibility in Jane Eyre and as a fact in “The Grey Woman.” “Bluebeard” evidently often attracted outrageous plot developments and has been highly open to change. I think this factor must relate to the way that, not just the Bluebeard’s crimes, but also the new wife’s disobedience and betrayal of her husband, her bond with a female helper, her old bond with her birth family, and (in many versions) her curiosity, independence, trickery, enterprise and/or ruthlessness, all stand on difficult or contested moral and cultural ground. The degree of control a husband may properly exert over his wife, and how far that control may be enforced by violence or even murder, for example, is an area of social conflict regularly tested in and out of the courts. The tale is not just about transgression, but is in itself transgressive, an underground or shocking tale.

This fuller account of the history of Bluebeard thus offers some insight into what at first looks like a kind of wilful blindness in the readings of the tale noted by Tatar. A part of Bluebeard’s continuing fascination (indicated not just by numerous literary male and female re-tellings of the story, but also by articles like that of Hempen [26]) must be the way it can be construed as being about either a man or a woman [27], and therefore continually invites differently gendered interpretations and re-tellings. Bluebeard does not fit easily into either the “male” or “female” type of folktale according to Bengt Holbek’s analysis of the “gender” of folktales (Holbek 1987, 417). The changeable nature of the “female helper” may thus be further understood as deriving from her role as go-between or mediator: she is a figure whose loyalties transfer, or may transfer, from one (male) to the other (female) focaliser of the narrative, and who therefore continues to be a crucial but unpredictable figure as revision of the revisions continues.

So how does the female helper fare when returned to male control? Here I think it is most instructive to look at the cinematic horror films that Maria Tatar has suggested demonstrate in the twentieth century the “cultural resilience” of Bluebeard:

The story of Bluebeard is without doubt the most stunning piece of evidence that folktales can be seen as the legitimate precursors of cinematic horror, another genre notorious for trading on collective fears and fantasies (Tatar 1999, 140).

The overall resemblance that Tatar sees between cinematic horror and “Bluebeard,” however, means that her discussion in The Classic Fairytales elides
the inventiveness of two women writers, Charlotte Brontë and Daphne du Maurier, whose work male directors were taking up in the 1940s. This is a pity, as the film industry also chops and changes these female texts into more conventional forms in which their underlying radicalism tends to get lost. For example, when the Alfred Hitchcock film of *Rebecca* (1940) underwent (at the suggestion of the Production Code Administration) revision in line with Hollywood morality, this included changing Rebecca’s murder to accidental death, cutting out any reference to a lesbian relationship between Rebecca and Mrs Danvers, and making the ending more affirmatory of heterosexual marriage than du Maurier’s book ending had been [28]. Robert Stevenson’s *Jane Eyre* (1944) made other significant changes, this time in the treatment of Bertha Mason Rochester. She is never seen directly, an absence interpreted in basically Freudian terms by Mary Ann Doane in her discussion of “paranoid woman’s films” of the 1940s and their obsession with “the specular”—with looking and being looked at. Nobody would deny the importance of occasions and images of seeing in “Bluebeard” stories, (not least the memorable mirror of blood in Perrault’s forbidden chamber) [29]. Doane’s discussion of scary movies for women reads a little strangely to the student of folktale, but Doane does not even mention “Bluebeard,” even though the defining features of this group of films are in her view the wife’s fear that her husband is planning to kill her [30], their characteristic “dramas of seeing” that become “invested with horror within the context of the home,” the common “existence of a room to which the woman is barred access,” and “the tendency to organise dramas of seeing around the phenomenon of the closed or locked door and the temptation it offers” (Doane 1987, 134 and 137). There are other ways than Doane’s of interpreting the invisibility of Bertha in the 1944 *Jane Eyre*, including the rather obvious (but none the less valid) point that it is accompanied by a general inflation of the role of Orson Welles as Rochester and a corresponding transfer of interest to his, rather than Jane’s, story, accompanied by a damping down of the youthful fieriness of Jane’s character into a rapturous and dependent adult femininity. This kind of process, which inflates Bertha’s mysterious and fearsome significance as Rochester’s secret while depriving her of the specific scenes and contexts in which her secret role as Jane’s helper may be read, seems typical of the kinds of recuperative revision that the helper’s role is especially open to because of her relationship to both protagonists. It appears that the figure of the female helper will continue to attract and exemplify the uneasiness generated by the troubling tale of Bluebeard.

**Notes**

[1] Like Daniela Hempen, Cristina Bacchilega and other scholars, I follow E. Sidney Hartland (1885) in grouping together as “sister tales” these three tale types separately numbered by Aarne and Thompson (1961).

[2] Catherine Velay-Vallantin remarks that “l’arrivée inopinée des frères secourables est due à un concours de circonstances d’une platitude et d’une invraisemblance qui affaiblissent l’intrigue” [“the unexpected arrival of the saviour brothers is due to a combination of circumstances so clichéd and so unlikely as to weaken the plot”] (Velay-Vallantin 1992, 45 [my translation]). However, this is only one of several weaknesses in the tale.

[3] “One of the most thrilling dramas ever written” [my translation].
In the first (1812) version of “The Robber Bridegroom,” this motif does not appear, and the Bluebeard’s helper figure, who offers her own warning, is sitting outside the door. In the revised version of later editions, a bird in a cage hanging on the wall utters a rhymed warning.

Maria Tatar, in her introduction to Bluebeard in The Classic Fairytales, says that the heroine’s brothers are “summoned” by Sister Anne to save her sister’s life (Tatar 1999, 139), but this is not strictly true. The brothers, by a mighty coincidence, are already on their way. Sister Anne merely signals them to hurry up—she’s helpful, but not that helpful.


Apuleius’ intriguing and prophetic character may also have something in common with the Cumaean Sybil. Alive, she is suspended between life and death, one whom “Life [is] ashamed to own,” but “Death [is also ashamed] to claim” (Apuleius 1950, 84). The way she chooses to die is by hanging, a state of suspension between, neither on the earth nor off it, which resembles that of the Sybil whom Trimalchio remembers seeing “dangling in a bottle” (The Satyricon; Petronius 1986, 67).

Lilyane Mourey noted that the female characters, mother and ogre’s wife, in “Le Petit Poucet” are more benevolent than the males, but have little power—“Il est donc question d’un conflit enfant/adulte du même sexe: opposants et héros sont du sexe masculin …” [“The conflict is thus a matter of child versus adult of the same sex: the antagonist and the hero are both masculine …” (Mourey 1978, 64 [my translation]). Jacques Barchilon and Peter Flinders (1981) and Marc Soriano (1977), include material on “Le Petit Poucet” in their books about Perrault but do not discuss the character of the ogre’s wife. A welcome departure from this pattern of neglect occurred in Christine Goldberg’s paper “At the Ogre’s House” presented at the International Society for Folk Narrative Research Congress in Melbourne, July 2001. Goldberg analysed the “type scene” of a main character’s arrival at night at the house of a supernatural being, a man-eating ogre, in such a way as to give due weight to the character (often the ogre’s wife) who warns the protagonist of the dangers of the house.

Diane Purkiss, in her examination of the depositions of women at witch trials, finds that for a housewife “the witch is a kind of anti-housewife, her own dark Other who causes pollution where there should be order, who disrupts food supplies that must be ordered and preserved, who wastes what is necessary” (Purkiss 1996, 97). The female helper resembles this idea of the witch, in that she carries out “normal” housework with evil intentions. (Of course, the figure of the witch is also traditionally associated with other kinds of knowledge or “magic” that are of direct assistance to women’s work.)

“by a good fire” and “a satisfying meal.”

The daughter of the original Saxon owners of the castle, Urfried, tells how she became “the prey and scorn of the conqueror” after her father and brothers were killed there by the Normans. As a prophetic figure, she is compared by the narrator with “one of the Fatal Sisters, who spin and abridge the thread of human life” (Scott 1996, 340). Her parting words to Rebecca on their first meeting are “My thread is spun out—thy task is yet to begin” (Scott 1996, 249).

Scott gives the suggestion of horror or “dreadful intimacy” in Urfried’s past life an explicit form. Urfried became the mistress of her father’s and brothers’ killer, then, becoming in turn his son’s mistress, conspired with the son to murder the father.

Because of the resemblance between the scene of Urfried/Ulrica’s death and the melodramatic final scene in Jane Eyre when Bertha has set fire to Thornfield Hall, Margaret Smith remarks in her introduction to the Oxford World Classic’s edition of Jane Eyre that “Charlotte
The Roles of Bluebeard’s Female Helper

[Brontë] … certainly must have read of Ulrica’s leap to death from the burning battlements of Torquhilstone in *Ivanhoe* (Brontë 1974, xviii).

[14] Sutherland has noted Brontë’s reference to the story of Bluebeard in volume 1 chapter 11, but his rather vague association of Jane’s visits to the battlements of Thornfield with Perrault’s “Sister Anne on the battlements scene” (Sutherland 1997, 227, n. 3) is insufficient. In fact, Brontë’s allusion is a precise one, guiding the reader to identify Bluebeard’s “forbidden chamber” and the room in which Mr Rochester’s first wife is concealed. It is straight after comparing the “long passage” in the third story of Thornfield with “a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle” (Brontë 1974, 108) that Jane first hears the chilling laugh of the madwoman Bertha Mason Rochester.

[15] Sutherland dismisses the idea that Rochester has courted Blanche Ingram under Jane’s eyes to “test” Jane. He argues that the courtship of Blanche is genuine, and that Rochester takes Jane “faute de mieux” (Sutherland 1997, 78–80). What is actually said in the novel, that Rochester conducts the false courtship in order to raise Jane’s emotional temperature and make her jealous (Brontë 1974, 265), is much more plausible than Sutherland’s argument.

[16] De la Tourelle’s house is an interesting structure combining a new and raw building and a centuries-old castle rising close to some rocks, “Les Rochers,” from which it is named. This dual structure of new and old resembles that of Gaskell’s narrative, with its tricks and feints of modern realism and its underlying rocks of traditional narrative form.

[17] In tales of the 955 type found in England, the heroine’s moment of knowledge quite often occurs as she sees her lover digging her grave or finds a grave that has clearly been prepared for her: see “Mr Fox’s Courtship” (Briggs 1971, A:III448–50), “The Lonton Lass” (Briggs 1971, B:VIII256–7) and “The Lass ‘at seed her awn grave dug” (Briggs 1971, B:VII87–8).

[18] The date of Anna’s marriage is 1789, an appropriate date for a tale about the breakdown of class bonds and obligations.

[19] Patsy Stoneman’s *Brontë Transformations* records an impressive list of stage versions of *Jane Eyre*, which was first staged in London in 1849 as *Jane Eyre, or the Secrets of Thornfield Manor*, and in numerous subsequent adaptations (Stoneman 1996, 9 and passim). Stoneman also lists early overseas films: four silent films in Italy between 1909 and 1918, a Hungarian one in 1920, a German one in 1926, and “at least four” in America (Stoneman 1996, 87), of which two, I assume, are the 1914 and 1921 (director Hugo Ballin) versions mentioned on the Internet Movie Database, which also records, with sound, a *Jane Eyre* in 1934 (director William Christy Cabanne), 1944 (director Robert Stevenson, with Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine), and 1996 (Franco Zeffirelli). TV movies or series appeared in 1956, 1961 (director Marc Daniels), 1963 (BBC), 1970 (director Delbert Mann, with George C. Scott and Susannah York), 1973 (mini series), 1983 (director Julian Amyes), and 1997 (director Robert Young III) (Internet Movie Database). The fullest impression of Jane Eyre’s afterlife in other media is in Stoneman’s “Jane Eyre derivatives listed chronologically” in her book *Brontë Transformations* (Stoneman 1996, 254–91): it lists illustrations and paintings; novels or poems that refer to or are influenced by *Jane Eyre*; operas and musical settings, illustrations, exhibitions, various kinds of radio broadcasts, film and televised versions, and stage plays.

[20] *Rebecca* was made into a play by du Maurier for the West End in 1940 (Margaret Rutherford played Mrs Danvers and the production was a success, but it was hit by a bomb). In 1947, there was a BBC broadcast, a studio recreation of the West End play. There have been three more radio adaptations, in 1954, 1975, and 1989. *Rebecca* was also made into an opera by Wilfred josephs, broadcast on Radio 3 in 1982, and revived five years later. A new play was adapted from du Maurier’s script in 1994, and there have been various screenplays, including the Hitchcock film of 1940. The BBC produced a television version of *Rebecca*, in which Joanna David played Mrs de Winter, in 1979, and ITV a version in 1996, in which Diana Rigg played Mrs Danvers (See Tibballs 1996, 46–9.)
Karen Hollinger calls the novel “germinal,” and notes that it “initiated a novelistic genre which has retained a remarkable popularity with women readers” (Hollinger 1993, 17). Stoneman sees it as a “link in a chain of Jane Eyre derivatives” initiated by Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Vera* (1921) and including Elizabeth Taylor’s *Palladian* (1946) (Stoneman 1996, 94).

It is tempting to see in such images deliberate reference by du Maurier to well-known fairytale motifs found in tales like Mr Fox or the Grimms’ “Fichter’s Vogel.” Max de Winter’s striking surname, too, might owe something to Victorian “mythological” folktale interpretation. However, I have not found any evidence that du Maurier was aware of fairytale antecedents to her novel.

There undoubtedly is such a sympathy: Juliet McMaster’s 1980 article on a Thackeray ms, “Bluebeard at Breakfast” describes Thackeray’s, and some other Victorian, cases. More recently, male imbalance in favour of Bluebeard is found in Philip Lewis’ essay “Bluebeard’s Magic Key,” where Lewis’s observation that the story is both Bluebeard’s wife’s story and Bluebeard’s story, and his excitement over the image of the mirror—especially the mirror of blood—leads him to describe the story as a dual or totally reflective structure in which “the two characters advance in perfectly parallel opposition: each is both criminal and victim” (Lewis 1987, 41). That is, Lewis implies that the wife’s “disobedience” weighs in on the moral scale as equal to Bluebeard’s multiple murders.

This paper, since published in the “Gender” number of *Estudos de Literatura Oral* (ELO) in 1999, was originally presented at the International Society for Folk Narrative Research Congress at Göttingen University, 26–31 July 1998.

“This ending is totally changed” [my translation].

Marina Warner, Philip Lewis and Cristina Bacchilega all also include substantial discussions of “Bluebeard” in their recent books.

Catherine Velay-Vallantin quotes Marc Soriano’s (1977) earlier comment that Perrault is exploiting “une véritable technique de l’ambiguïté […] de manière à orienter l’esprit du lecteur à la fois vers le masculin et le féminin” (“a genuine technique of ambiguity ... in such a way as to direct the reader’s mind simultaneously towards the masculine and the feminine”) (Soriano 1977, 170 and 429; quoted by Velay-Vallantin 1992, 90, note 6). Jacques Barchilon remarks that Bruno Bettelheim and Philip Lewis (for the latter, see note [23]) proceed from two diametrically opposed points of view: “En effect, Bettelheim semble s’identifier /avec la jeune épouse de Barbe bleue, et Philip Lewis avec Barbe bleue” “[In fact Bettelheim appears to identify with the young bride and Philip Lewis with the Bluebeard”] (Barchilon 1981, 16–17). Although I do not cover male literary re-tellings of Bluebeard in the present article, they are, of course, both numerous and interesting. Marc Soriano (Perrault 1989) presents an impressively long list of French works, mostly by male writers, which have “revisited” *La Barbe-Bleue*. As far as I can tell, male re-tellings show little interest in the figure of Bluebeard’s female helper.

The changes are discussed by Karen Hollinger (1993). A review by Alison Light of “Rebecca” is critical of the Hitchcock movie, asking whether the makers of the film read the book (Light 1996, 30), and remarking that Hitchcock and David O. Selznick “cannot really identify with the girl’s point of view” and fail entirely to pick up on the attractiveness of Rebecca to both the reader and the heroine. Light is, I think, the first to comment that Manderley is a “Bluebeard’s Castle,” and her comments also support my view that re-tellings of “Bluebeard” tend to present a field for gender battles: “So what seems like a woman’s film turns out to be a man’s after all. We might have guessed” (Hollinger 1993, 31).

An even more grisly image of seeing occurs in Dickens’s *Captain Murderer*, where the bride “looked up at the glass, just in time to see the Captain cutting her head off” (Briggs 1971, A:III176).

Doane’s discussion does not really take on board the fact that this fear is felt by neither the
The Roles of Bluebeard’s Female Helper

...heroine of Rebecca nor the heroine of Jane Eyre, two films that she evidently regards as central to her grouping.

References Cited


**Biographical Note**

Rose Lovell-Smith is a lecturer in the English Department, University of Auckland, where she teaches writing, children’s literature (including fairytale), and Romantic and Victorian literature. Her dissertation was about the tale of “Kind and Unkind” (AT480) and re-tellings of this story, with its two contrasting sister-heroines in the nineteenth-century British novel. She has published on Walter Scott and Emily Brontë, on Olive Schreiner, and on other topics and authors: her most recent fairytale publication was “Feminism and Bluebeard,” and an article on children’s reading of sequel and series books will appear shortly in a volume edited by Rod McGillis for Greenwood Press. Rose Lovell-Smith is currently working on children’s book illustration, especially Tenniel’s illustrations of Alice in Wonderland; she is also interested in the illustration of Grimmel’s Kinder- und Hausmärchen.