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Elisabeth Panttaja

*Tufts University*

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The Poor Girl and the Bad Man: Fairytales of Feminine Power

Elisabeth Panttaja

Ever since Perrault pinned a moralité on the ending of his “Bluebeard,” the real value of the Bluebeard story and of stories like it has been obscured. With depressing regularity, critics have echoed Perrault’s idea that “Bluebeard” is a cautionary tale that warns against excessive female curiosity.¹ This reading defies both the logic of the plot, in which the movement of the story is toward the heroine’s triumphant escape from a murderous husband, and the spirit of the genre, which is notoriously hero-centered. Interpretations which pathologize the heroine’s curiosity, rather than the villain’s lust for blood, are more than just wrongheaded; they are actually pernicious. In effect, they reconceal the horrific crimes which it has been the heroine’s business to expose, reinscribing the violent, anti-feminine values of the villain himself. Any sane reader cannot help but be angered to discover that the curiosity, intelligence, and cunning which allow the protagonist to save her own life and escape a vile marriage are the very traits for which she is considered flawed.

Before we consider these stories from a pro-heroine perspective, however, it is interesting to examine how the emphasis on female duplicity and weakness came into—and remains—in such wide circulation. There are really two answers. The first has to do with the purposes for which fairytales were “discovered,” retold, and circulated. Retellers of the tales, whether Perrault or the Brothers Grimm, had two conflicting impulses. While they wanted to codify and preserve what they perceived to be a national treasure, the oral storytelling traditions of their respective cultures, they also wanted the stories to contain and transmit values appropriate to their readers. Perrault kept the tales’ simplicity and rustic charm, but he added moralités which were in keeping with the values of the French aristocracy.² The Brothers Grimm aggressively edited and reshaped the tales, preserving much of their original flavor, but also deleting or deemphasizing objectionable (by their standards) parts and adding explanations that would appeal to an emerging
middle class. As many critics have noted, the editorial work of Perrault and the Brothers Grimm has created a rather schizophrenic genre, in which it is not uncommon to find pious morals and bland, insipid sentiments mixed in with the most bloody scenes of aggression and revenge. Certainly Perrault's "Bluebeard" is an example of such editorial patchwork. The pagan, pro-feminine plot, in which a cunning girl vanquishes a wicked husband, is distorted by a pseudo-Christian, anti-feminine moralité which upholds the supposedly "civilized" value of wifely submission. Regrettably, the fact that the ancient stories of Eve and Pandora had already portrayed female duplicity as one of the primary destabilizing forces in society only gave Perrault's moralité more authority.

The second answer has to do with the premises and methodology of psychoanalytic criticism, which has dominated the interpretation of fairytales in modern times. By reading the fairytale predominantly as a map of intra-psychic realities, psychoanalytic criticism neglects both the fairytale's historical veracity and the genre's deep concern with the problem of evil in the world. In other words, the psychoanalytic critic fails to see the ways in which the protagonist is legitimately beset by forces outside of his or her control. In the case of the Bluebeard cycle of stories, this tendency is carried to an almost absurd extreme in the critical tendency to read the contents of the villain's secret chamber as a symbol rather than a plot element. Critics have almost universally assumed that the roomful of bloody, dismembered corpses should "mean" something, that it should refer to something other than itself. To this end, the corpses have been understood as representing defloration, the primal scene, the heroine's fear of sex, and/or her fear of death. I shall not stop here to comment on the kind of logic that would link human sexuality to atrocity; suffice it to say that the heroine is usually already well married by the time she confronts her husband's secret chamber. The point is that psychoanalytic criticism does not allow the villain's crimes to stand as crimes. It waters down and domesticates the most dramatic moment of the story, the moment when the heroine confronts the reality of evil in the world. This is unfortunate, since the knowledge of the room as reality is precisely the knowledge which allows the heroine to outwit the villain and save her own body from being numbered among those supposedly symbolic corpses. Thus psychoanalytic criticism actually inverts and erases the real psychological significance of the text. In eliding the difference between the...
villain’s crimes and the heroine’s psychic state, psychoanalytic criticism manages, like Perrault’s moralité, to hide the real (textual) issue of patriarchal power and corruption behind a false (extra-textual) issue of a supposedly universal and primarily female pathology.

This essay examines, from a feminist perspective, several variants of the poor girl/bad man story type. From the Grimm’s collection, I will consider aspects of “Fitcher’s Bird,” “The Robber Bridegroom,” “Bluebeard,” “The Castle of Murder,” and “The Three Sisters.” I will also look at a particularly rich Finnish variant called “Jurma and the Sea God.” All these stories have at their heart a conflict to the death between a powerless, unknown (often unnamed) girl and an extremely wealthy, socially prominent male who has special powers. With unusual wit and cunning, the girl vanquishes the male, actually killing him or performing acts which lead to his execution by others. In so doing, she not only escapes death, but also corrects the original social, economic, or psychological imbalance which lead to her exploitation. In discussing these stories, we must ask two questions: Why is the girl so exploited in the first place? And how does she accomplish her own survival?

In most of these stories, the father plays a significant role in the daughter’s unfortunate marriage. It is the father, after all, who is usually responsible for marrying the daughter off. Indeed, the historical fact of male-dominated kinship rituals in which the father “gave” or “sold” the daughter in marriage to another man sets the groundwork for the conception of woman given in these stories. The fathers of these poor girls are often portrayed as fearful, careless, or greedy. In general, the father’s moral failure is associated with economic failure, since the only descriptive information we are given about him is that he is poor, or poor and absent from home, or poor and tired from his labor, or that he has recently fallen into debt. Sparked by the stresses of poverty, these fathers trade their daughters to unsuitable men for their own selfish reasons. The daughter, already objectified by her own father, is then lead into a confrontation with a sort of primal father figure whose use of her, despite his soothing talk, reflects the most violent and acquisitive aspects of a deeply class- and gender-stratified society. The poor girl and the bad man now act out one of the most extreme power imbalances existing in such a society, the power imbalance between a wealthy and powerful male, who can always
get another wife, and a powerless and impoverished female, who is always expendable. These stories stress the historically correct fact of the poor woman's tradeability, replaceability, and disposability in the grotesque recurring image of numerous, dismembered female bodies. Just as the last room in Bluebeard's castle is filled with women's corpses, so the basin in "Fitcher's Bird" brims with dismembered bodies, the Sea God's keg of tar is stuffed with the remains of the protagonist's sisters, and the cellar belonging to the Robber Bridegroom is the site of one murder after another. In all these cases, the father's role, however briefly noted, remains central for it is the father who surrenders the daughter and keeps the machinery of murder moving.

In some cases, one father can make a sizeable donation to the bad man's cemetery: Jurma gives a daughter not once but three times to the Sea God. The father in "The Three Sisters" offers not one daughter but all the daughters that he has. In both stories, the fathers surrender their daughters to the bad man with apparent unconsciousness, although they are not so unconscious that they fail to appreciate the financial gains of the sale. The father in "The Three Sisters" sells his three daughters to a bear, an eagle, and a whale, each for more money than the last one, and each time the transaction flows a little more smoothly. By the third time, the father does not wait to be approached by the beast; rather, he offers his daughter for sale even though we are told at the same time that "he felt as if a thousand knives were cutting his heart" (677). It is clear that, at least for a time, the father finds the money to be a sufficient recompense for the lacerating pain of his loss for, as the fairytale simply states, "When the king saw the gold, he felt consoled" (675). The father in "Jurma and the Sea God" does not get paid by the Sea God; rather, he sacrifices his daughters out of fear for his own life. But the fact that he naively repeats the same error three times and his inability to deal squarely with either the Sea God or his daughters mark him as an immature man bent on avoiding his responsibilities: "When Hella's father reached his tupa, he could not bear to tell what had happened. He simply said, 'Hella, I have forgotten my fishing spear in the boat. Fetch it to me' " (557). With this blend of cowardice and deceit, Jurma sends his daughter to the spot where the Sea God will abduct her. In other stories, the father's role is more subtle but nonetheless pivotal: in the case of "The Robber Bridegroom" and "Bluebeard," for example, the respective fathers give their daughters in marriage
almost carelessly and in spite of their own or their daughter’s misgivings. In “Fitcher’s Bird” and “The Castle of Murder,” the fathers are absent, but it is their very absence which proves to be the problem, since we can assume from the stories that it is largely because the father is not there that the sorcerer appears to entice the girls.

Given that the original power imbalance is economic, it is not surprising that the fairytale’s happy ending includes a redistribution of economic power between the male and the female, the rich man and the working man. After Jurma’s third daughter foils the Sea God and manages not only to save her sisters and herself but also to steal a good portion of the Sea God’s treasure, the fairytale ends on the unabashedly happy note of “solvent ever after”: the farmer and his wife “sold the treasures and jewels that Vieno had brought with her, and forever after had plenty, and to spare” (559). Likewise, the third daughter in “Fitcher’s Bird” fills baskets with gold and has the sorcerer carry them to her parents’ home so that when she herself arrives her father is no longer a poor and (therefore) weak protector. We are told of Bluebeard’s wife that, after his death, “all Bluebeard’s treasures belonged to her” (663) and we assume from that she is not likely to be married off to the wrong man again. In recovering or finding wealth, the daughter insures her own future safety in a marriage market that sells the poor girl cheap. Thus, the story eventually Comes full circle: the father’s weakness, rooted in his poverty, is resolved by the cunning daughter, who steals the money necessary to make the father and herself less vulnerable to exploitation.

But beyond the economic conflict between the girl and the bad man, there is another, more subtle and complex struggle taking place: it is a struggle over knowledge and language, over the control of the symbolic economy. The bad man conceals the only really important information about himself—the fact that he is a murderer—and relies on a manipulation of his signs and symbols to both limit and reveal the extent of the daughter’s knowledge of his identity. Thus, the daughter’s struggle with the bad man’s power is inextricable from her struggle with his language and with knowledge in general, specifically with knowledge concerning “true” male identity. The daughter who would survive her sojourn in the bad man’s castle must inevitably deal with the question of how patriarchal language hides exactly those truths which are vital to her survival. In the end, the cunning daughter finds that she has
become, as an inevitable part of the process of survival, a manipulator of the man’s own sign system and an artificer of a new, subversive language.

But how does she accomplish this? In “Fitcher’s Bird” and “Jurma and the Sea God,” her success depends on the interpretation of a crucial symbol—an egg in one case, a ring in the other. The egg is, of course, a traditional symbol of female sexuality and of the woman herself. But in this text, the egg is also the sorcerer’s treacherous tool. It burdens the woman, restricting her movement, making her transparent to him, and eventually conspiring with him against her. It is a signifier which destroys what it signifies, the woman herself. As the political instrument of its creator, the egg represents the idea of “woman” that is current in the sorcerer’s symbolic economy. It denotes the sorcerer’s concept of woman and the role that she is offered in his world. The girls who accept the egg that Bluebeard gives them, and who treat it according to his direction, place themselves perilously in his power. His terms are stringent: in accepting the egg and what it implies, the sisters have agreed, in effect, to remain unconscious. It is a promise they are bound to disappoint, for their natural desire for knowledge is not so easily repressed. The woman who wishes to survive must give the egg a radically different interpretation. She reads it literally, as something laid by a hen. In so doing, she essentially refuses to participate in the sorcerer’s symbolic economy and transcends his power. Thus, female independence is here, as in other stories, associated with the literalizing of male symbols.

The theme of literal reading is most thoroughly developed in “Jurma and the Sea God” in the Sea God’s charm, the symbol of the ring floating in a keg of tar, and in the bottles marked with labels. In this story, the daughters are entranced by a charm that celebrates romantic love and assures them that they are highly prized. The Sea God chants, “Golden one, priceless one, / My heart to you, yours to me” (555). Like the egg in “Fitcher’s Bird,” this verse represents a way of evaluating femininity that is universally known in the symbolic economy and that yet could not be more false in the actual economy of the Sea God’s world. The daughters are far from golden and priceless; they are, indeed, completely disposable and easily replaced. The two daughters who are killed by the Sea God are seduced not only by the charm, but also by a golden ring, the traditional symbol of love, legitimacy, and the self. In reaching to touch the ring, they become enmired and eventually drown in the keg of tar.
the ring by reading it in context: she sees that it is floating in a keg of tar and recognizes it as a trap. Because she reads literally, she also reads more. She immediately sees beyond the ring and the tar to the bottles on the shelf marked The Water of Life and The Water of Death. Thus, she comes to understand the Sea God’s true power and identity, that he is an evil sorcerer who commands the power either to kill or immortalize whomever he wishes. We notice here that reading correctly is not enough; the third daughter must actually change the relationship between the signifier and the signified. By changing the labels on the bottles, the daughter assumes a creative role vis à vis language. She becomes an artificer and manages to kill the Sea God with the manipulation of his own terms.

The second part of the daughter’s escape from the sorcerer’s castle involves her construction of a false self, but a self that yet conforms to sorcerer’s expectations. In other words, the daughter makes a conscious distinction between who the sorcerer thinks she is and who she has actually become. The third daughter in “Pitcher’s Bird” constructs a false self made from a skull wreathed with flowers, a figure that the sorcerer, from a distance, cannot distinguish from his bride. She then disguises herself as a bird, the symbol of what she has, up until then, most emphatically not been, the bird can fly from place to place while the daughter has been trapped by custom and law inside the castle of her husband. These two images of the skull and the bird show the transition the daughter has made in her understanding of herself as well as her willingness to construct a different identity. As the sorcerer’s wife, she was merely a dead person wearing flowers; as an artificer, she turns herself into a bird and chooses her own destination. In “Jurma and the Sea God,” the daughter places a dummy of herself in the window as if to say, “I know now that my husband cannot tell the difference between me and a dummy.” Her understanding and acceptance of her husband’s true estimation of her is what allows her to use the superficiality of their relationship to her own advantage. She works within the sorcerer’s expectations of her—by asking for trifles, even by badgering him—to assure him that she is who he thinks she is and by camouflaging her escape with the fulfillment of his own expectations of feminine behavior. Her ability and willingness to manipulate the “bad man’s” sign system
—even to the point of deconstructing and recreating herself—is vitally important in determining her fate: as an artificer, she acquires what has previously belonged only to the Sea God, the power to create desired outcomes, to shape events. By developing this subversive power, she is able to write a different ending to the story of her own exploitation, an ending that accomplishes the primary task of saving her own life.

If there is to be a moral to these stories, it should be that poor young women—because of their tradeability—need all the wit and courage they can muster to successfully defend themselves from the exploitive plots of powerful men, even when those men are fathers and husbands. Thus, far from arguing for wifely submission, these stories argue for female cunning. And if these stories do warn against any particularly female trait, it is not curiosity, but the young woman’s romantic naiveté.

NOTES


5 A plot summary of “ Fitcher’s Bird” is as follows: The story opens with a sorcerer who is in the habit of dressing as a beggar and catching beautiful girls to take home with him. He is so powerful that he has only to touch a girl and she is compelled to go with him to his house in the dark forest. One day he appears at the home of a man who has three daughters. He touches the oldest, and she accompanies him to his house in the dark forest. He touches the oldest, and she accompanies him to his castle. Some time passes, and eventually he must leave home for a journey. Before he leaves, he gives her the keys to the house, noting that the smallest key opens a door which she is forbidden to enter. Then he gives her an egg, saying, “I’m going to go. If you eat the egg, the daughter who eats it will die. If you don’t eat the egg, you will be pregnant. If you eat the egg, you will have two children, a son and a daughter. Who will you choose?” She chooses to eat the egg, and when she eats it, she gives birth to a boy and a girl. She then goes to the castle and finds that the sorcerer has left alive only the youngest daughter, who was not touched by him. She tells her story to the sorcerer, who then tells her that she will have to choose between her life and her safety. She chooses to save her life and leaves the sorcerer’s castle.

"I'm giving you this egg for safekeeping. You're to carry it wherever you go. If you lose it, then something awful will happen" (168). The oldest daughter looks around the house and then, overcome with curiosity, opens the door to the forbidden room. Inside she finds a large, bloody basin filled with dead people who have been chopped to pieces. In horror, she drops the egg she is holding into the basin. Try as she might, she cannot wipe the blood from the egg. When the sorcerer returns, he finds the blood on the egg, concludes that the oldest daughter has disobeyed him, chops her up, puts the pieces in the basin, and then goes to get the second daughter. The second daughter meets the same fate, and so the sorcerer returns for the third daughter.

The third daughter, however, was "smart and cunning" (169). After the sorcerer gives her the keys and the egg and the instructions concerning them, this daughter "puts the egg away in a safe place" (169). She looks in the forbidden chamber and finds the dismembered bodies of her two sisters. She gathers the pieces and arranges them in "the proper order: head, body, arms, and legs" (169). When nothing more is missing, the pieces return to life and the sisters rejoice at being reunited. The sorcerer is unable to discover any blood on the egg, so he vows to marry the third sister, but she requests that he first bring two large baskets filled with gold to her parent's house while she prepares for the wedding. The sorcerer sets out with the heavy baskets, in which the two sisters are hidden. Whenever he stops, one of the sisters calls out, "I can see through my window that you're resting. Get a move on at once!" (170) Thinking that he hears the voice of his bride strangely accompanying him through the forest, he does not dare stop and look inside the baskets. While he is gone, the third sister takes a skull with "grinning teeth," decorates it with jewels and flowers, and sets it in the attic window facing outward. The she dips herself in honey, rolls in feathers, and sets out for home, looking like a strange bird. On the way, she meets the returning bridegroom, who asks her for news of his bride. "She's looking out the attic window," the sister responds, and the sorcerer, looking up and seeing what he thinks is his bride, smiles and waves to the decorated skull. Once he and his wedding guests are assembled in the house, the bride's brother and relatives arrive. They set fire to the house and the sorcerer and all his cronies are burned to death.


\footnote{Scandinavian Folk and Fairy Tales: Tales from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, ed. Claire Booss (New York: Avenel Books, 1984). Page references to "Jurma and the Sea God" refer to this collection.}