

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BLUEBEARD (Barbe Bleue) 2009

Catherine Breillat

OVERVIEW

For this film, Breillat has adapted her own ironic and wildly irreverent version of Charles Perrault's 17th-century French fairy tale about a man who kills his wives. Breillat revised her own retelling to soften the violence and emphasise the gentleness of Bluebeard, while also highlighting the relationship between the sisters. In addition, the film's storytelling is intercut with scenes, set in the 1950s, in which two sisters (with names like those in the fairy tale) read the story of Bluebeard. The result is a psychologically complex and visually entrancing film that explores a young girl's imagination, the power dynamics of marriage and the complexities of the sisterly bond. Throughout, the film is suffused with a soft palette, enhancing the tender emotions on display. The film-maker said that 'Bluebeard' is one of her favourite fairy stories, and her witty, subtle retelling is bloody and affecting in equal measure.

PEOPLE

Anne (or Marie-Anne)	The older sister.
Catherine	The younger sister.
Bluebeard	The lord who owns the castle.
Mother	The two sisters have a nameless mother.

SYNOPSIS

After their father dies, the future for Anne and Catherine is bleak because their mother has no dowry for their marriage. Bluebeard invites all young girls to a party at his castle so that he can choose a bride. He chooses Catherine and takes her to his castle, where they grow fond of each other. When he goes away on business, he gives her the keys to all the rooms in the castle. One room, though, he forbids her to enter. Unable to control her curiosity, she visits the room and finds all his dead wives. When Bluebeard discovers that she disobeyed him, he sentences her to death. Using clever tricks, she manages to delay her execution and allow men to rescue her and behead Bluebeard.

SCENES

Father's death In the late 1600s in France, girls dressed in long black robes and nun-habits sing a hymn at a convent school. Anne and Catherine are summoned to the Mother Superior, who informs them of their father's death. He threw himself under the wheels of a carriage, she says, in order to save a child. She instructs the sobbing girls not to despair but to find joy in his sacrifice. Then she sends them away, to collect their things and leave the school.

Bluebeard's reputation As the sad sisters are driven back to their village, Catherine points out the beautiful castle where Bluebeard lives. She is amazed at its size, but Anne comments that it was built by the poor, who 'work their hides off for the rich.' The driver tells the girls about Bluebeard's reputation for killing his wives, 'some of them young girls.' Catherine asserts that she will become rich and kill the Mother Superior.

Widow's burden When they reach home, Anne and her mother pray by the side of the father's death bed. Catherine is told she's too young to join them. Next day, as they do the washing, the mother wonders how she will manage, with two daughters to marry off and no money.

Sisters argue Catherine speaks to her dead father, saying he looks younger and less intimidating. Anne enters the room and claims that their father died on purpose, to save a child, without thinking of them. After the funeral, all the family's furniture is repossessed to pay off their debts.

Choosing a bride Amid the family's struggles to put food on the table, a man arrives and announces that Bluebeard would be interested in her daughters. When the mother refuses this offer because of

the Lord's terrible reputation, the messenger reminds her that he could make the whole family well-off. He adds that Bluebeard has invited every marriageable girl to his castle so that he can choose his bride.

Party The mother and her two daughters approach the party, where young men and women in fine dress are dancing on the castle grounds. Anne is afraid they will make fun of her black mourning dress, but Catherine is enthusiastic. Bluebeard emerges from the castle and looks down at the young people spinning around on the green grass. Later, Bluebeard and Catherine meet by accident at the side of a lake. As they talk openly, he confides in the young girl about his unfair image as a 'monster.'

Wedding Soon, Catherine is being fitted for her wedding gown in her mother's house. Then, in a cathedral, the enormous Bluebeard places a ring on Catherine's finger. She sits mesmerised as a priest pours a goblet of gold coins on her head. Just as she is being carried off by Bluebeard on large white horse, she has a sad farewell with her sister.

Catherine's bedroom Bluebeard brings his young wife to the castle, which Catherine explores with girlish delight. The only trouble concerns her sleeping arrangements. She is upset not to have her own bedroom and threatens to return to her mother. Bluebeard points out that she has her own bed, a small one, at the foot of his. Adamant, she gets her own room and forbids him to enter it.

Bluebeard departs Bluebeard and Catherine enjoy each other's company, picking mushrooms in the forest and playing music on the piano. When he leaves to go a long trip, he gives her the keys to every room in the castle and tells her to enjoy herself. Following her advice, she invites her sister and many young people to the castle for food and entertainment. When he returns, Bluebeard is upset to see that his wife is enjoying the luxurious life at the castle. She assures him that she missed him and is happy that he has returned.

Golden key Bluebeard and Catherine carry on a contented (non-sexual) married life until, once again, he goes away. This time, he gives her all the keys, including a small golden key to a special room, which he forbids her to enter. She promises to obey, but curiosity defeats honesty. Pushing open the door, she sees Bluebeard's past wives hanging from a beam, with pools of blood on the floor beneath them. As she walks toward the hanging bodies, she drops the key in the blood. Back in her room, she finds it impossible to wipe the blood from the key.

Sudden return Bluebeard returns the next day, saying that he couldn't bear to be away from her a second time. While ripping pieces from a meaty carcass at the dinner table, he asks her to return the keys. She does, but the golden key is not among them. Her attempt to deceive him fails, and she finally hands over the blood-stained key.

Death sentence He says that she must die for her disobedience. 'You wanted to go into that room,' he tells her with deep regret. 'And now you will join the other ladies there.' She begs forgiveness, but he says she will die immediately. When she begs for time to pray for her soul, he allows her a quarter hour in the tower.

Beheaded She races up the tower, where Bluebeard follows with a sharp sword. When the fifteen minutes are up, Catherine is granted an extra minute to prepare herself. After a third delay is agreed, armed men arrive and behead Bluebeard. The last shot shows Catherine stroking the Bluebeard's bodiless head.

THEMES

Marriage At its core, this is story of a marriage, with all the joys and pain of that relationship. Being a fairy tale, of course, it ends with blood and death, but the main events of the plot are simply a 17th-century version of a doomed romance: older rich man meets young poor girl; they marry; he goes off on business; he gets jealous; she can't control her curiosity; he is angry; it ends in tragedy.

Bedrooms ___The first crisis in any (pre-1950s) marriage is the wedding night, which is dramatised here with a subtle touch. When Catherine is shown into her husband's large bedroom, she is not

pleased. She says that she was promised her own sleeping arrangements. Her husband points out that he bought her a bed, which stands at the foot of his. But she wants her own bedroom, where she can have privacy. When she threatens to go back to her mother, she is given a room of her own. Typical marital disagreement—the husband doesn't understand what his wife wants, so she has to demand it, even threaten to leave the marriage. The scene also has humour and the director's feminist touches. When the apologetic husband says that he bought the little bed just for her, she retorts, 'I'm not a dog who sleeps at your feet.' A minute later, she adds, 'I bet you snore like an ogre.' How many men have heard that from their wife?

Power Another feature of the marital set-up is that Bluebeard, like other husbands, sets out to test his young wife. He loves her, but he doesn't completely trust her, so he lays a trap in order to determine her obedience, for which we can read 'fidelity.' Catherine is not yet a sexual person, so her faithfulness must be measured by other means. Accordingly, before his second trip, Bluebeard hands her the golden key and forbids her to use it. This is an archetypal event, as old as God tempting Eve with forbidden fruit, used to establish a man's power over his spouse. Catherine's curiosity, symbolic of sexual desire, proves to be greater than her adherence to her husband's command. She must therefore be punished.

Love The relationship that develops between Catherine and Bluebeard is at the core of the story. Although they do not 'fall in love' and do not kiss (or have any sexual contact), the bond between them is as powerful as it is gentle. Young and romantic Catherine demands her 'space', but she falls under the magnetic spell of the aging man who is kind to her. Their mutual attraction and affection add up to something very close to romantic love.

Separation One of the most tender scenes in the film occurs when Bluebeard is about to leave his new wife for the first time. They have grown to appreciate each other's company, walking together in the woods, eating rich food and enjoying music, but now he must go away 'on business.' Both are sad, but it is Bluebeard who appears more deeply affected. Although he tells her to enjoy herself, to see young people and have fun, we sense his regret at leaving her. At the moment he mounts his horse, Catherine is also wistful. Standing beside the animal, she looks up at him and says, 'Your beard isn't blue now.' He thinks that means he doesn't please her, but she reassures him that she has just grown used to him. Against all the odds, the 'ogre' and the young girl have learned to love each other. Neither want to separate, but they must.

Reunion When Bluebeard returns after a long month away from the castle, he finds that Catherine is enjoying the luxurious life in the castle. Stomping into the reception hall, he screams, 'Where is my wife?' When he finds her, she is sitting on a castle wall. 'Madame,' he says, 'seems you forgot I'd be back.' She explains that their separation was 'interminable' and that he had told her 'to have fun.' Jumping into his arms, she says she's in the 'nest of an old eagle, born to protect me, just me.' Looking at the ground far below, she continues, 'We're high above the vanity of this world. Just the two of us.' This loving scene begins with the husband's jealousy and ends with the wife's romantic view of their reunion.

Sisterhood As with Breillat's *Fat Girl*, this film also features a key relationship between sisters. As in that earlier film, the sisters in *Bluebeard*, are aged about 15 and 12, and they are very different children. Again, as in *Fat Girl*, older sister in this fairy tale, Anne, is more practical, cautious and protective, while the younger one, Catherine, is more expansive, imaginative and bold. Their relationship is tested by two major events in the story: the death of their father and Catherine's marriage. Despite fraying at the edges, the fabric of their bond holds.

Conflict The contrast in the sisters' temperaments sometimes brings them into conflict. A good example is their brief conversation while looking at their father lying on his death bed. Catherine, already dressed in black, is deep in mourning when Anne walks in wearing normal clothes and declares, 'I'm furious he died.' Catherine says that he didn't die intentionally, but Anne contradicts her. 'He chose to save a child, without thinking of us,' she says. 'I hate him. I hate him heart and soul.' Catherine responds by saying, 'You want everyone to love you. And you love nobody.' The father's death, leaving them penniless and without a dowry, has exposed their differences. Anne is more candid and quicker to blame, while Catherine is more sensitive and forgiving. The words they throw at each other are mutually hurtful.

affection The deep feeling that binds the sisters to each other is illustrated in a moving scene. After the wedding, Catherine is being carried away by her husband on a large white steed. Anne runs out

and stands beside the horse, looking up at her sister. Seated on the horse, Catherine says, 'You'll visit me? You won't abandon me?' Anne doesn't answer, and Catherine adds that they needn't fight anymore. Anne says, 'Yes, but I liked that. I liked you being my scapegoat...I pinched you until you bled.' Catherine says that she feels the same way and that she often got her sister in trouble for nothing. A long moment of silence follows before Catherine kisses her own hand and leans down from the horse so that Anne can kiss it. Catherine has risen high in society, the wife of a rich man, but the affection between the two sisters is undiminished.

Ambivalence The love-hate dynamic in the sisters' relationship is dramatized in a scene that takes place after Catherine's marriage. She is playing a piano and singing a sad love song that Anne used to sing. Bluebeard comes into the room and praises her sweet voice, but she says that Anne had a much nicer voice. It is clear that the song has brought back memories of her sister, whom she now never sees. Bluebeard is sensitive enough to realise that and ask if she is bored without her sister. Catherine thinks for a moment and says, 'No, I miss her, but I'm also glad to be rid of her.' Catherine's feelings for her sister are honestly expressed. She cannot forget the person with whom she grew up, but she also enjoys the freedom of being on her own.

Child's perceptions The scenes set in the 1950s also feature a pair of sisters, although they are younger than those in the main story. One of these scenes is memorable for its revelations of the children's view of the later-life topics of love and marriage, which of course dominate the fairy tale. Catherine has broken away from her reading aloud to comment on the story. 'Marriage is difficult for Bluebeard because he kills children,' she says in a serious tone. 'He puts them in a big pot, stirs it up and eat them.' Anne, the older one, gets annoyed with her silly sister and says, 'You're an idiot. You mix everything up...Marriage is when two people love each other and kiss in front of everyone.' The two sisters' delightfully romantic ideas reveal why they find the fairy tale so fascinating.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

BLUEBEARD Bluebeard is the classic 'gentle giant', or misunderstood monster, whose bulk and wealth belie his tender feelings. Despite his well-earned reputation, he is presented sympathetically as a man resigned to his ugliness and detested public image. Although standing over Catherine like a mountain, he is always gentle with her, often even apologetic and humbled. He tells her that he will never be angry with her as long as she tells the truth. When she doesn't, well, she finds out that his kindness has limits.

Candid One of Bluebeard's most admirable quality is his candour, especially his ability to judge himself without sentiment or pride. This quality, somewhat unusual in a rich and powerful man, is illustrated in the first scene in which he speaks. During the party organised especially for him to choose a bride, he wanders off and lies down under a tree with a tankard of ale. Finding him there, Catherine asks why he isn't dancing. 'I'd look silly,' he says with a chuckle. 'One should realise who one is, don't you think?' Catherine then asks if he minds the others having fun without him, and he tells her that he enjoys other people being happy. A minute later, he confides in her that he can't have fun because everyone thinks he is 'a monster.' They think he is, so he is. Bluebeard is candid, reflective and self-effacing. Nothing monstrous about him. Not yet, at least.

Perceptive Bluebeard is a wise man, capable of discoursing with learned astrologers and of sizing up individuals. His insight into his young bride is illustrated in a brief scene just after they are married and Catherine is brought to the castle. In an unguarded moment, she remarks that his beard really is blue, and he want to know if it frightens her. 'No,' she says, 'I didn't expect it, but I like it blue.' Appreciating her directness, Bluebeard laughs heartily and says, 'You're a strange little person. You have the innocence of a dove, and the pride of an eagle. But don't let your pride become vanity. Or you'll be lost.' A man with little pride and less vanity, he sees in Catherine a tendency to assert herself, which might prove dangerous for her. And so it does.

Sense of humour One of the most delightful scenes in this otherwise sex-free story comes when Catherine has finally been granted her wish to have her own bedroom. She examines several rooms in the castle and choses one that her husband says it more like a broom closet. 'This is my private place,' Catherine says fiercely, sitting on her little bed in her little room. 'No one is allowed in.' Standing at the doorway, the enormous Bluebeard smiles and says, 'Don't worry. I can't get through the door.' Catherine seems to appreciate the sexual implications of his words and says with a smile, 'My husband is too big for me.'

CATHERINE Catherine is the younger sister. She is wilful, impulsive and dangerously curious. She loves her sister but also wants to break away from her role as the 'little sister.' Even when she moves into the rich man's castle, she is not afraid to demand that her wishes be granted. She is, however, still a young girl who looks up at the monstrous man with wide eyes and a sly smile.

Curious If Catherine has one defining characteristic it is her curiosity, which she expresses in an early scene. The sisters are being driven in a carriage from the convent to their mother's house. Catherine looks out the window and gasps, 'Anne, look!' The camera shows a tall, imposing castle with several peaked towers. 'It's so beautiful,' Catherine enthuses. She then goes on to imagine how it was built and who could possibly live in such an enormous structure. Having seen the castle, the young girl's imagination roams everywhere, constructing its past and her own future. At one point, she says that she will become rich and live in the castle. Her boundless curiosity is allied to ambition, which leads to her death.

Vindictive Later, during the same conversation inside the coach, we see another side of Catherine. When the girls learn from the driver about Bluebeard's murderous reputation, Catherine is disturbed and asks, 'How could he do that [kill his wives] and not go to jail?' Anne tries to dismiss it as the way things are, that the rich get away with crimes. Suddenly, Catherine's eyes light up and she says, 'I understand. I'll become very rich. And I'll kill Mother Superior. I'll hang her by her hair, watch her die and tell her to shut up. Tell her that she's headed for heaven.' Eerily, Catherine's preferred method of murder is the very same used by Bluebeard. Perhaps the innocent young girl is the perfect match for the lord of the castle.

Clever Catherine's imagination comes in handy when she herself has been sentenced to death by Bluebeard for disobeying his orders not to visit the room unlocked by the golden key. At first, when he discovers her transgression, she tries to lie her way out of the situation, but he is adamant that she must die, like all his wives. Knowing the game is up, Catherine devises a number of delaying tactics to buy time. First, she requests fifteen minutes 'to prepare' herself for death. Then, she asks that he kill her with a special dagger (her pride won't let her be murdered by the weapon used on the other wives). And, finally, she begs to die in her wedding dress. Her stratagems do the trick, allowing Anne to send men to rescue her sister and kill Bluebeard. Catherine is one of many clever heroines found in fairy tales.

ANNE Anne is the older one, who looks after 'sis'. She is protective of Catherine and warns her of dangers ahead. While she is affectionate toward her sister, she also has an unforgiving view of the world, especially the rich and the church. She is said to be the prettier of the two and sings with a beautiful voice, but she is not the one chosen to be Bluebeard's wife. In any case, her instinct for danger might have led her to refuse him.

Practical Older and wiser, Anne often dispenses practical advice to her sister. The first clear example occurs during their coach ride when they see Bluebeard's castle. To counter Catherine's romantic imagination, she dishes out cold facts. Poor people, she informs her, build the castle by carrying heavy stones a long distance. When Catherine says she'll get rich and live in a castle, Anne's sober comment is, 'Dream on. The castle was built for invasions. It's a fortress.' And when her sister wants to know what she means, Anne explains that '[t]here are always invasions. Barbarism is everywhere.' Anne is practical and protective, warning her naïve sister about the danger that lurks inside the enchanted castle.

Defiant Hard-hearted Anne, who blames her father for dying and leaving the family destitute, shows her defiance in a conversation with her mother. Shortly after the father's death, she and her mother stand outside, boiling a vat for washing clothes. The sullen mother bemoans their fate and tells Anne that she'll have to send her and her sister to a convent because their father left them only debts. Hearing those words, Anne's face twists in pain and she says, 'Buried in prayer is worse than buried alive.' When her mother calls her words blasphemous, Anne screams that God should have looked after them. Her outburst shocks her mother, but Anne is determined to live her own life.

Tender Although she sometimes quarrels with her sister, Anne has tender feelings for her, as illustrated in a key scene when Catherine is being fitted for her wedding dress. The dressmaker says it fits perfectly and that she will be the prettiest of brides. Overcome with excitement, she runs outside to show off to Anne, whom she has always considered prettier than herself. 'Look,' she cries, trying to impress Anne. 'It's my first dress. No one wore it before me.' When she prances around Anne with the garment flying in the air, Anne remarks that she looks beautiful and is too young and beautiful for

the ugly Bluebeard. 'I pity her,' Anne says. 'It breaks my heart.' Her sister tried to make her jealous, but Anne's affection for her is greater than any negative feeling.



(Bluebeard and his wife, Catherine)



(The two sisters reading the story in the 1950s)