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Bluebeard Gothic as Queer Folkloric Tradition

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Abstract

In this paper I consider the figure of Bluebeard's "female helper." Specifically, I follow the progression of this figure across four works: Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* (1938), Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith* (2002), and Park Chan Wook's film *The Handmaiden* (2016), particularly situating this character as a figure representative of queer Gothic folkloric tradition. I track this character type across literature and film, considering how this figure has evolved from the nineteenth-century Gothic romance to the twenty-first-century queer erotic thriller. Firstly, I discuss Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue," variations of Bluebeard, and how the female helper originates from select variations. Then, I examine the origins of the Bluebeard folktale and what this controversial subject entails for queer readings of Bluebeard. I follow this section with the genre of the "Bluebeard Gothic" and its relationship to *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. Finally, I discuss how Bluebeard's female helper signifies a queer Gothic folkloric tradition in *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*, and how *the Handmaiden* subverts the original folktale and articulates a narrative of queer liberation.
Keywords*:* Fairytales, Folklore Studies, Sexuality, Literature, Film Studies

Introduction

> *"I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode" (Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line," 37).*

I draw the above quote from Carter's discussion of feminist folklore rewriting in her third volume of essays and journals, *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings* (1997). In her journal "Notes from the Front Line," Carter considers how the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s largely influenced her collection of short stories *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Carter's story "The Bloody Chamber" is an experimental revision of the prototypical Bluebeard narrative. Traditionally, Bluebeard's final bride is saved by her brothers, who kill Bluebeard, and she inherits Bluebeard's wealth and property. In Carter's version, the bride is instead rescued by her mother and donates Bluebeard's wealth and property to charitable causes.

Carter's description of "new wine in old bottles" refers to her practice of revising traditional folktales and fairytales, providing "new" interpretations of "old" narratives and forms in an effort toward feminist reclamation and liberatory praxis. Her simple changes to the prototypical Bluebeard plot in "The Bloody Chamber" reconfigure the power dynamics of Bluebeard through her emphasis on matriarchal power and rejection of patrilineal inheritance.

"The Bloody Chamber" is one of many works that indicate Bluebeard's integration into a literary folkloric tradition, with the folktale being repeatedly revised and rewritten over the centuries in accordance with specific ideological and sociocultural contexts.[1] For example, in feminist Bluebeard tradition, other works include Margaret Atwood's story "Bluebeard's Egg" (1983), Joyce Carol Oates's story "Blue-bearded Lover" (1988), Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993), and Helen Oyeyemi's novel *Mr. Fox* (2011), among others. Rose Lovell-Smith, in her article "Feminism and Bluebeard," describes how these authors "refer to each other's work" and "talk among themselves, across considerable distances of space and time, about Bluebeard" (Lovell-Smith 53). She argues that "feminist critique of fairy tale may be carried out most powerfully by women writers retelling the tale they know" (Lovell-Smith 53). This suggests a feminist tradition of adapting the Bluebeard folktale, one that is well-mapped across the literary canon from the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries. In recent years, though, I argue that feminist social critique through the Bluebeard folktale has shifted toward the queer, thus lending to a new queer folkloric tradition.

Recent works of literary and visual media, such as NBC's horror television show *Hannibal* (2013-2015), Genne Murphy's comedic play "Bluebeard's Wife: a tale of (gay) marriage and (queer) death" (2016),[2] Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), and Julia Mintzer's psychological adaptation of Béla Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (2021) each to an extent render the Bluebeard folktale through a queer perspective. For example, in her chapter "*Dream House* as Bluebeard," Machado directly constructs her past abusive, same-sex relationship as a Bluebeard dynamic and describes how she "lived to tell the

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[1] In her translation of Charles Perrault's fairytales, including "Bluebeard," Angela Carter argues that "each century tends to re-create fairytales after its own taste" (qtd. in Goracci 40).
[2] I communicated directly with Murphy on the status of "Bluebeard's Wife," who informed me that while her play was performed at the Yale School of Drama in 2016, it was never formally published.

tale" (Machado 65). In *Hannibal*, the character Dr. Bedelia du Maurier refers to psychiatrist Dr. Hannibal Lecter's patient, Will Graham, and herself as "Bluebeard's wives" (Season 3, Episode 12).[3] Julia Mintzer's adaptation of Béla Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* similarly reimagines Bluebeard as a psychiatrist who enters abusive romantic relationships with his patients and centers its narrative on a male homoerotic dynamic as *Hannibal* does.[4] In fact, rather than guiding her Bluebeard narrative toward a climactic killing, the arc of Mintzer's adaptation hinges on a kiss between two men.

Another queer Bluebeard adaptation that precedes both *Bluebeard's Castle* and *Hannibal* and mirrors these Bluebeard relationship structures is Charles Ludlam's off-Broadway play "Bluebeard" (1970). In these three works, the killer Bluebeards transform the minds and bodies of their patients into artistic "creations." One of Bluebeard's helpers in Ludlam's play refers to Bluebeard as "Master and possessor of both sexes" (Ludlam 1.4.8), who responds "And so I swear that while my beard is blue, I'll twist some human flesh into a genital new" (Ludlam 1.4.11-12). All the queer Bluebeard works mentioned above use the relationship between Bluebeard and his wife-victims (also referred to as his "brides") as frameworks for the central same-sex relationships of their narratives. Whether the perspective of Bluebeard or his victim is privileged within the narrative, these queer relationships are irremovable from their unethical and abusive contexts, thus maintaining the imbalanced power dynamics of the original folktale.

Rather than focus on queer depictions of the relationship between Bluebeard and his bride or of Bluebeard's sexual identity, in this paper I instead consider a figure tangential to Bluebeard who can be also read as queer: Bluebeard's "female helper." Specifically, I track the progression of this figure across four works: Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847), Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* (1938), Sarah Waters' novel *Fingersmith* (2002), and Park Chan Wook's film *The Handmaiden* (2016), particularly situating this character as a figure representative of queer Gothic folkloric tradition. I track this character type across literature and film, considering how this figure has evolved from the nineteenth-century Gothic romance to the twenty-first-century queer erotic thriller.

Firstly, I will discuss Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue" and variations of Bluebeard and how Bluebeard's female helper originates from select variations. Then, I will consider the scholarly debate surrounding the origins of the Bluebeard folktale and what this controversial subject entails for queer readings of Bluebeard. I will then follow this section with the topic of how Bluebeard has established itself as a work of Gothic folklore and how Heta Pyrhönen's construction of the "Bluebeard Gothic" genre relates to the figure of the female helper, specifically in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. Finally, I will discuss how Bluebeard's female helper

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[3] For further reading on Hannibal as a queer Bluebeard narrative, refer to Marisa Mills' dissertation "Fatal Attraction: The Relationship Between Women and Bluebeard" (2015) and Kavita Mudan Finn's and E.J. Nielsen's anthology *Becoming: Genre, Queerness, and Transformation in NBC's Hannibal* (2019).

[4] Director Julia Minzter provided me the director's note of her production, where she writes "Bluebeard treats his patients by leading them through… a guided tour of their own imagination… He (Bluebeard's patient) loves him… wants Bluebeard's process to lead him through the discovery of each room of his own mind, because he loves Bluebeard and what he stands for" (Mintzer 2).

signifies a queer Gothic folkloric tradition in *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*, and how *The Handmaiden* subverts the original folktale through its affirming representations of queer desire and futurity.

"La Barbe Bleue" and Bluebeard Variants

Most works that refer to Bluebeard, consciously or not, allude to French author Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue" ("Bluebeard") from his 1697 collection of fairytales *Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé* (*Stories and Tales of Past Times*), which is most regarded as the canonical Bluebeard source-text. According to folklore scholar Maria Tatar in *Secrets Beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives* (2004), the standard Bluebeard plot based on Perrault's version features:

> A sinister figure whose wealth wins him the hand of two sisters, each of whom mysteriously disappears. The third and youngest in the trio of young women reluctantly marries Bluebeard, who arranges a test of her fidelity when he hands over the keys to all of the rooms in his mansion but expressly forbids entering one remote chamber. As soon as Bluebeard leaves for an extended journey, his wife rushes to the forbidden chamber, opens the door, and finds corpses of her husband's previous wives. A stained key, a blood-spattered egg, a withered flower, or a bruised apple betray the wife's transgression to the husband, who, in a murderous rage, is about to behead his wife, when her brothers come to the rescue and cut Bluebeard down with their swords (Tatar 12).

In sum, the "chief ingredients" of Bluebeard are: "a barbaric husband, a curious wife[5], a forbidden chamber, a blood-stained key, and corpses in the closet" (Tatar 12). When considering the Bluebeard folktale and its variations, I follow the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index to track related folktale tropes and types throughout literature.[6] Dozens, if not hundreds, of Bluebeard variants exist, though I have found that only two in this index that contain a female helper to Bluebeard: "Castle of Murder" (Das Mordschlofl) and "The Robber Bridegroom" (Der Rauberbrautigam). I draw this conclusion from Daniela Hempen's article "Bluebeard's Female Helper: The Ambiguous Role of the Strange Old Woman in the Grimms', 'Castle of Murder' and 'The Robber Bridegroom'" (1997). As of now, only Hempen and Lovell-Smith[7] have discussed the relationship between Bluebeard's female helper and the folktale variants.

In both variants, the female helper works alongside Bluebeard to lead his new brides to their deaths. In "Castle of Murder," it is the helper herself who is found within the "forbidden

[5] Hilary M. Schor's book *Curious Subjects: Women and the Trials of Realism* (2013) examines the social and legal implications for "curious" women in nineteenth-century literature and connects these "curiosities" to Bluebeard.
[6] In her chapter "Intertextuality as a Key to Sexuality in Bluebeard's Rewritings" in *Male Perspectives in Atwood's "Bluebeard's Egg" and Hazzard's The Transit of Venus* (2016), Giada Goracci provides a complete list of Bluebeard fairytale rewritings according to ATU codes. A bibliographical list of Bluebeard variants can be found in Casie E. Hermansson's *Bluebeard: A Reader's Guide to the English Translation* (2009).
[7] For further reading, see Rose Lovell-Smith's article "Anti-Housewives and Ogres' Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard's Female Helper" (2002).

chamber deep down in the cellar" (Hempen 46) and cooks the "chopped up corpses of the female victims" (Hempen 47).[8] It is in the "Robber Bridegroom" where his female helper has greater sympathy for his victims, referring to one as a "poor child" and expresses her wish to "escape with the heroine" (Hempen 47). Despite the extents to which his female helper abets his actions, the relationship between Bluebeard and the female helper remains unequal. She always inhabits an "inferior, dependent position" (Hempen 48) marked by class and gender differences. This position of the female helper is maintained throughout literature – though she never quite reaches a state of equity with her master, in *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*, she disobeys Bluebeard and becomes liberated from her position.

Ur-Bluebeard and Queer Controversies

While most authors, when alluding to Bluebeard, are often referring to Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue" or other variants such as Grimm's "Robber Bridegroom," some have sought to reach further back in the folklore's genealogy and trace its historical origins. The origins of the "Bluebeard" folktale have been a longtime subject of scholarly debate, as well as what these various possible origins and sources constitute for readings and rewritings of this folktale, especially for those that are queer. Cultural historians often refer to real-life mass murderers Conomor of Brittany and Gilles de Rais as definitive models for Bluebeard,[9] though this quick attribution of the folktale to these historical figures remains a problematic practice. In reducing Bluebeard to a set of historical characters and circumstances, it disregards the complex development of the folktale that can be attributed to myriad social and cultural contexts.

In fact, some have even sought to "absolve" of these historical figures of their accountability (Tatar 16). Ben Parsons, in his article "Sympathy for the Devil: Gilles de Rais and His Modern Apologists," argues that many seek to "reconcile him with the moral and social order he inhabited" and considers how "modern analysts have tried to square him with history, transferring responsibility from him to wider, external factors" (Parsons 113). The moral absolutions of these historical Bluebeards thus lend to questions of the extent to which Bluebeard himself can be read as a figure of historical, social, and queer or feminist reclamation. Particularly, given these contexts and histories of patriarchal violence, is queer reclamation and liberation even possible through contemporary rewritings of Bluebeard? Further along in this paper, I will consider how rewritings of Bluebeard's female helper subvert Bluebeard's patriarchal and prototypical constructions, as well as the ways in which these contemporary narratives seek to privilege queer identity, desire, and liberation.

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[8] It is perhaps this version where Charles Dickens's childhood nurse drew inspiration for her cannibal Bluebeard, which Dickens retells in his adaptation "Captain Murderer." For further reading, see Shuli Barzilai's *Tales of Bluebeard and His Wives from Late Antiquity to Postmodern Times* (2009).

[9] Gilles de Rais is more often cited as the "original" Bluebeard. For further reading on this connection and its debate, see A.L. Vincent and Clare Binn's *Gilles de Rais: The Original Bluebeard* (1926) and Candice Black's *Dark Star: The Satanic Rites of Gilles de Rais* (2005).

Bluebeard Gothic as Romance in *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*

When considering the folkloric genealogy of Bluebeard in literature, it is necessary to acknowledge its strong connections with the Gothic and how conventions of this genre imbue themselves in contemporary Bluebeard adaptations. Even the figure of the female helper signifies the Gothic; in her book *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick cites "garrulous retainers," or talkative servants, as a trope of the literary Gothic (Sedgwick 9). Gero Bauer, in *Houses, Secrets, and the Closet* (2016), recognizes the presence of the female helper through key works such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and William Godwin's *Caleb Williams.*[10] While Bauer provides the most extensive critical analysis on queer Bluebeard yet, he fails to recognize how queerness may be encoded in Bluebeard's female helper. Rather, Bauer draws from Alan Stewart's "The Early Modern Closet Discovered" to read Bluebeard's chamber as a homosexual "closet," explicating the connection between "the metaphorical 'closet' of modern homosexuality" and "actually localisable spaces of secrecy – literal closets" (Bauer 36). This analysis then lends to queer readings of Bluebeard himself and privileges the identities and desires of the male (and often violent) figures of these Gothic narratives. As previously mentioned, rather than follow this line of critical analysis regarding Bluebeard, I will instead examine the role of Bluebeard's queer female helper and how this figure better represents a new folkloric tradition – one that perhaps gestures toward positive and affirming representations of the queer Gothic.

Another work that considers the function of the female helper in nineteenth-century Gothic Bluebeard narratives, though does not situate this character as queer, is Heta Pyrhönen's *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Its Progeny* (2010). In her text, she describes the "master trope of *Jane Eyre* as Bluebeard Gothic" (Pyrhönen 10), particularly discussing how one of the first of examples of Bluebeard's female helper in Gothic literature occurs in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*, where Brontë refashioned Bluebeard from a moral tale to a Gothic romance. Pyrhönen also tracks the Bluebeard Gothic from *Jane Eyre* to *Rebecca* in her article "Bluebeard's Accomplice: Rebecca as a Masochistic Fantasy" (2005). Since Pyrhönen establishes that the figure of Bluebeard's female helper is present in both novels, I will not rehash this debate in my argument. Rather, I focus on how Brontë and du Maurier construct a framework for future queer rewritings of Bluebeard's female helper.

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* contain signifiers of the Bluebeard Gothic. In *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, Bluebeard's second "bride" arrives to Bluebeard's "castle," (Thornfield Hall and Manderley, respectively), which contains "a room in which is buried a grim secret, connected with murder, about his past" (Tatar 68). When Eyre enters the third story of Thornfield, she refers to the hall as being "like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle" (Brontë 105). Additionally, both texts are written from the point of views of women who are presented as "youthful,

[10] In his 1832 "Standard Novels" edition to *Fleetwood*, Godwin explicitly states that "Falkland was my Bluebeard, who had perpetrated atrocious crimes… Caleb Williams was the wife, who in spite of warning, persisted in his attempts to uncover the forbidden secret" (qtd. in Jones 145). Evan Hayles Gledhill, in his article "Monstrous Masculinities in Gothic Romance: Will Graham, Jane Eyre, and Caleb Williams," uses Godwin's statement as a foundation for his queer reading of *Caleb Williams* and parallels Hannibal's construction of Will Graham as "Bluebeard's bride" to Caleb Williams and Jane Eyre.

meek, and naive" and become linked with "a sinister Prince Charming" (Tatar 68). In *Jane Eyre*, Mr. Rochester reveals to Eyre that he keeps his wife, Bertha Mason, locked up on the third floor of Thornfield Hall. In *Rebecca*, Maximilian ("Maxim") de Winter reveals to Mrs. de Winter[11] that he "fired" through the "heart" of his first wife (Du Maurier 318) and framed her death as a boating accident.

Where these two texts diverge from the typical Bluebeard plot, though, is these heroine's marital resolutions with their Bluebeards. In forgiving these Bluebeards and reconciling with their husbands' past abuses, Eyre and Mrs. de Winter act as both Bluebeards' brides and female helpers, thus situating them further alongside the actual female helpers of these novels, Grace Poole and Mrs. Danvers.

Both Grace Poole and Mrs. Danvers are appointed servants of Mr. Rochester and Mr. de Winter, respectively, who aid these Bluebeards in the suppressions of their secrets from the new wives. As in "Castle of Murder" and "Robber Bridegroom," neither Poole nor Danvers work alongside Bluebeard's victims. Rather, the women maintain their complicities through the ends of the novels, even as Bluebeards' castles are set ablaze. Where *Rebecca* diverges from *Jane Eyre*, though, is the character who instigates these arsons. In *Jane Eyre*, it is Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason who burns down Thornfield, whereas in *Rebecca*, it is suggested that Mrs. Danvers sets Manderley ablaze.[12] This is perhaps the first instance in the Bluebeard Gothic where Bluebeard's female helper contributes to the forbidden chamber's destruction rather than its maintenance. Through Mrs. Danvers' destruction of Manderley is where Bluebeard's female helper finally begins to have agency and establishes a framework for future female helpers in the Bluebeard Gothic. Particularly, echoes of Mrs. Danvers can be seen in *Fingersmith*'s Susan Trinder and *The Handmaiden*'s Nam Sook-Hee, particularly in their own destructions of Bluebeard's forbidden chambers.

Not only do *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* portray Bluebeard's female helpers as his victims' saviors, but they also shift the central romance from the heterosexual relationship between Bluebeard and his wife to a queer romance between the wife and the female helper. Additionally, both works are dually narrated by Bluebeard's female helpers and his brides. In these shifts of character relationship and narrative perspective, Waters and Park privilege the voices and queerness of those dependent on and victimized by Bluebeard, rather than of Bluebeard himself.

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[11] It is worth noting that Mrs. de Winter remains unnamed throughout the novel, only referred to as Maxim's wife. This parallels the original Bluebeard folktale where Bluebeard's wives are unnamed.
[12] In his 1940 film adaptation of *Rebecca*, Hitchcock is far more direct in indicating who sets the manor ablaze – one of the final shots of the film portrays Mrs. Danvers, triumphant, surrounded by flames. Additionally, Hitchcock's Mrs. Danvers is often read as queer-coded (as is many characters of Hitchcock's filmography) than du Maurier's, and this popular reading of Mrs. Danvers has likely influenced contemporary rewritings of her character. For further reading on queer Mrs. Danvers, see Andrea Weiss's Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema (1992).

Bluebeard Gothic as Queer Erotic Thriller in *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*

When discussing his "Gothic romance" film *Crimson Peak* (2015), director Guillermo del Toro describes how he thought it would be "interesting" to make the Gothic "a little more stylized and perverse" to "to bring it back to a new generation," as well as "heighten a couple elements that, traditionally, remained hidden beneath the surface: sex and violence" (qtd. in Weeber 116). This heightening of "sex and violence" in neo-Gothic[13] cinema reflects how the genre "reworks the Gothic literary structure and adapts it into visual forms" (Weeber 115-6). Even George E. Haggerty, in his book *Queer Gothic*, considers how "transgressive social-sexual relations are the most basic common denominator of Gothic writing" (Haggerty, 2).[14]

When considering the trajectory of audience appeal for Bluebeard, Tatar claims that Bluebeard began as a work of "adult entertainment" and that it has seemingly shifted to one now "found between the covers of fairy-tale collections for children" (Tatar 12). In the past two decades, though, it seems that the Bluebeard Gothic has returned to its original form of "adult entertainment" with its eroticism in works such as *Hannibal*, *Bluebeard's Castle*, and most explicitly – *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden.*[15] Not only do these works address the subtextual "transgressive social-sexual" relations of their Bluebeard Gothic forebearers, but these subtexts are also elevated to text in their erotic portrayals of same-sex relationships.

Like *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*, *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* are told from the perspectives of female narrators who become integrated into Gothic households under the watches of their respective Bluebeards. Where *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* are recounted from the unreliable perspectives of Bluebeard's brides and his female helpers exist in the narratives' peripheries, *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* are instead mainly narrated by his female helpers.

The general plot of both works is as follows:[16] a female pickpocket (fingersmith) is hired by a wealthy conman to act as a handmaiden for a prominent gentleman's niece. The conman imbeds this servant in the household to aid him in his plot to elope the gentleman's niece, therefore cementing his wealth and inheritance. The conman tells the handmaiden that once he elopes, he will lock his new bride in a mental asylum and he and the handmaiden will enjoy the fruits of the niece's wealth. Over time, the handmaiden and the niece fall in love, therefore

[13] Other films in this genre include *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *Possession* (1981), *The Hunger* (1983), *The Crow* (1994), and *The Witch* (2015), among others. Though, for Fred Botting in *Gothic,* this neo-Gothic genre constitutes the "end of the Gothic" (Botting 115), which he argues is indicated through Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* (1992) and its "simulation of (Gothic) authenticity" (Botting 115).

[14] The late 2000s saw a period of strong scholarly interest in the queer Gothic. For further reading on this subject, see Max Fincher's *Queering the Gothic in the Romantic Age: The Penetrating Eye* (2007) and William Hughes and Andrew Smith's collection *Queering the Gothic* (2009).

[15] There is currently no scholarly criticism that connects *The Handmaiden* and Bluebeard. Only Heta Pyrhönen, in her chapter "Faith, Ritual, and Sacrifice: Rewriting the Religious Foundation of Jane Eyre" draws the connection between Fingersmith and Bluebeard.

[16] The Handmaiden is a film adaptation of Fingersmith with shifts in period, culture, and setting. Where Fingersmith is set in Victorian-era Britain, The Handmaiden is set in 1930s Korea during its period of Japanese occupation. See Chi-Yun Shin's "In another time and place: The Handmaiden as an adaptation" (2018) for an adaptation studies analysis of the film.

troubling the handmaiden's conscience and the conman's plans. In both works, though, there is a twist: it is revealed in the second act that the niece and the conman were working together all along to defraud her abusive uncle and to instead lock the handmaiden in the asylum, where she would pose as the "missing" niece.

The third act is where *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* sharply diverge: in *The Handmaiden*, it is revealed that the niece (Lady Hideko) and the handmaiden (Sook-Hee) had become aware of each other's plans with the conman and decide to join forces to defraud both the conman (Count Fujiwara) and Hideko's uncle, and their narrative ends with the men's deaths and their romantic escape. In *Fingersmith*, the handmaiden (Susan Trinder) does not become aware of the niece's (Maud Lilly's) plans with the conman (Richard "Gentleman" Rivers) and instead must escape from the asylum with the aid of her adoptive mother, Mrs. Sucksby,[17] who kills Rivers, and Trinder and Lilly reconcile at the end of the novel.

From a general plot comparison between and overview of these two works, signifiers of the Bluebeard folktale are readily apparent – Bluebeards who seek to marry and manipulate their new brides, his female helpers who are aware of his secret, the revelation of this secret to the bride, and the eventual defeat of these abusive men. In a nod to *Jane Eyre*, *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* incorporate a madhouse where Bluebeard imprisons women to elope with his new bride. Rather than the asylum signifying victimization as in *Fingersmith*, in *The Handmaiden*, it represents the beginnings of the two women's liberations from Bluebeard and their double-crossings of him.

This madhouse is not the sole chamber in both narratives, though. In fact, there are several chambers in these narratives, each revealed to be far more unconventional than the last. While the "chamber" of the Gothic madhouse establishes the conmen as Bluebeards, it is the far more transgressive forbidden chambers of the brides' uncles that cement these works in the Bluebeard Gothic, as well as where *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* largely differentiate. In *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden*, it is revealed that the brides' uncles (Christopher Lilly and Uncle Kouzuki, respectively) are collectors of pornographic books and force their nieces to read these texts aloud to male colleagues,[18] as well as have torture chambers where they keep devices and poisons. The servants of these men's households are forbidden to enter their libraries or torture chambers, with only their nieces allowed entrance upon permission. While in "Castle of Murder" Bluebeard's female helper is first discovered within the chamber, *Fingersmith* and *The Handmaiden* reverse this dynamic – the female helpers are the ones who eventually uncover the horrors of Bluebeard's forbidden chambers, with the brides privy to this knowledge and space from the beginning. These perpetual double-crossings and revelations of secrets between the two women of both narratives further equalizes their power dynamic over time, though more so in *The Handmaiden* than in *Fingersmith*.

In *The Handmaiden*, not only do Sook-Hee and Hideko plot together from Act 1 to defraud both Bluebeard figures, but the female helper Sook-Hee destroys the uncle's forbidden

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[17] There is no character equivalent to Mrs. Sucksby in *The Handmaiden*.
[18] In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Sedgwick cites "affinities between narrative and pictorial art" and "possibilities of incest" as readily recognizable features of the literary Gothic (Sedgwick 8-9).

chambers herself. Like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca*, Sook-Hee burns down the asylum after her escape, though with the intention of exposing Bluebeard's secrets rather than preserving them. She also destroys Uncle Kouzuki's library with her hands, staining his books in a blood-red ink, thus reversing the function of "bloodstains" in a Bluebeard narrative – in "La Barbe Bleue," it is the blood-stained key that leads Bluebeard's bride to her death, whereas in *The Handmaiden*, these "stains" enable these women's liberations and eliminate Kouzuki's weapon of abuse (or, his keys) against Hideko. Additionally, in *The Handmaiden*, Count Fujiwara and Uncle Kouzuki abuse and kill one another within Kouzuki's torture chamber. As a result, Bluebeard's final chamber becomes a weapon turned toward himself.

Neither the uncle's collection nor the asylum is destroyed in *Fingersmith*, instead, Trinder is rescued by external forces as in the original Bluebeard plot. *Fingersmith* more closely mirrors the feminist plot of Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" with Trinder's adoptive mother, Mrs. Sucksby, rescuing Trinder and Lilly and killing Lilly's uncle.

Another way in which *The Handmaiden* differs from *Fingersmith* and further subverts the prototypical Bluebeard plot is the point in the narrative where the two women establish their relationship and plot against Bluebeard. For Trinder and Lilly in *Fingersmith*, neither woman reveals their feelings toward one another until they reconcile at the end of the novel, whereas Sook-Hee and Hideko in *The Handmaiden* establish their romantic relationship within Act 1. The relationship between Sook-Hee and Hideko is not used as a weapon against each other as in *Fingersmith* or "Robber Bridegroom" nor is it their downfall; rather, their queer relationship becomes a weapon they use against the men who seek to harm and separate them. Despite the period and cultural setting of *The Handmaiden*, their queer relationship is never a question nor a source of shame between the two women – it is their own secret and source of liberation and power, thus subverting and eliminating the shame of curiosity that is key to the Bluebeard Gothic.

It is also worth noting how *The Handmaiden* is adapted and directed by a man, Park Chan Wook, and considering how male gaze is inscribed in the content and form of the film. For example, a major criticism of *The Handmaiden* is its portrayal of a graphic, nearly voyeuristic sex scene between two queer women, one that is not present in Waters' original novel. Despite these criticisms, *Fingersmith* author Sarah Waters finds no issue in Park's portrayal of her novel, rather arguing that:

> "Though ironically the film is a story told by a man, it's still very faithful to the idea that the women are appropriating a very male pornographic tradition to find their own way of exploring their own desires" (Armistead 2017).

By the end of the film, Sook-Hee and Hideko escape from Bluebeard's castle and joyfully tread toward their new lives. Not only do they entirely reshape their lives and identities, Hideko, who throughout the film is garnished in traditional feminine finery, is revealed to be disguised as a man in public. She wears the masculine three-piece suits and accessories of her dead husband and uses the inherited wealth of her uncle to fund her future. While this inheritance of Bluebeard's wealth occurs in "La Barbe Bleue," this original Bluebeard plot resolves in the

bride's eventual remarriage, whereas *The Handmaiden* subverts this patrilineal inheritance by having Bluebeard's wealth be shared between the women who survive and live beyond him.

Conclusion

Within the past decade, queer revisions and interpretations of Bluebeard have proliferated over literature, cinema, television, and the stage. As works asserting themselves within a folkloric tradition, all these versions, queer or not, contribute to the Bluebeard canon and its literary genealogy, reshaping and rewriting the original folktale sometimes beyond recognition. Even in 1853, Charles Dickens prophesized this occurrence:

> "With seven Blue Beards in the field, each coming at a gallop from his own platform mounted on a foaming hobby, a generation or two hence would not know which was which, and the great original Blue Beard would be confounded with the counterfeits" (qtd. in Hermansson X).

Earlier in my paper, I raised the question of whether Bluebeard's controversial histories and patriarchal contexts would ever allow for the possibility of queer and feminist reclamation in its contemporary rewritings. Rather than letting Bluebeard's potential pasts shadow its present and future retellings, I refer to Tatar's definition of Bluebeard as a collective construction "even if some of his features are drawn from bits and pieces of histories that embed themselves in the folk narrative" (Tatar 16). Bluebeard is not merely a single figure that can be attributed to historical others nor must the moral codes and messages that were set by its original authors, such as Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, continue to be enforced through the folktale's adaptations.

For Hélène Cixous, fairytales not only "exert control" and "foster pre-set codes of behaviors," but can paradoxically "grant a place for subversive possibilities" (qtd. in Goracci 35). It is in the landscape of these "subversive possibilities" where I argue Bluebeard's queer adaptations exist. In the "telephone game" of folkloric tradition, value and meaning is constructed by those who continue these practices of narrative retelling. From Angela Carter to Charles Ludlam, authors have long reshaped Bluebeard beyond the structures or intents of its original narrative. In these queer retellings, particularly in Park Chan Wook's *The Handmaiden*, writers and directors use the Bluebeard folktale merely as a literary framework, utilizing its tropes, characters, and expectations to shape narratives of queer liberation, joy, and "subversive possibility."

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