

“But what will come out of it?”

Exploring the Unsolvable in Margaret Atwood’s
“Bluebeard’s Egg”

JULIA SCHABAS

Julia Schabas’ lovely essay on “Exploring the Unsolvable in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Bluebeard’s Egg’” recognizes the mystery that lies in the old fairy tales and the way that mystery engages contemporary writers. The tales were widely circulated and retold because of some inexplicable attractive mystery to listener or reader. This mystery was first critically analysed by Romantics like Schlegel and Novalis. As the latter said: “In a genuine fairy tale everything must be incoherent.” But for them, and for modern writers like Atwood, this apparent incoherence of meaning was a call to the reader to find some kind of higher order coherence or insight. That is what Julia Schabas finds carried over by Atwood from the older tale of “Bluebeard”: the unpredictable and inexplicable shifting power politics in an uneasy marriage are now enhanced and opened up to us in all their contradictions.

—Dr. William Barker

Fairy tales often end with unanswered questions. Unexpected plot twists, surprising character developments, and haphazard endings can leave us wanting more. The dissatisfaction that we can experience when reading fairy tales is common but compelling occurrence in the genre, and many scholars and writers explore this phenomenon. The ending of the well-known Grimm fairy tale, “Fitcher’s Bird” is particularly inconclusive. A variant on Charles Perrault’s folktale “Bluebeard,” “Fitcher’s Bird” tells the story of three sisters

who are magically kidnapped by a warlock. The warlock tests whether they are able to suppress their curiosity, and refrain from entering a forbidden room in the castle, where he keeps the dead bodies of his former wives. The first two sisters fail the test, and the wizard consequently dismembers and throws the girls into that same room. The third, cleverest sister passes his test, saves her sisters, and arranges for the warlock to be killed. “Fitcher’s Bird” celebrates the intelligence of the third sister, and it is this version of “Bluebeard” that Margaret Atwood adapts in her short story, “Bluebeard’s Egg” (1983). Atwood tells the story of the modern-day married couple Sally and Ed Bear. Sally, Ed’s third wife, loves her husband, but also wants to find her way into the chamber of Ed’s seemingly empty yet secretive mind. While we might be quick to associate Sally with the clever third sister of the Grimms’ story, Atwood makes us question who takes charge over whom – who is the trickster, who is the victim, and who comes out on top? “Bluebeard’s Egg” calls attention to the unresolved questions at the ends of fairy tales, and how the unexplainable elements of these tales can be translated into modern short stories. First, by studying the mysterious qualities of the original “Fitcher’s Bird”, I will explore how Atwood’s text maintains and expands upon the tale’s unsolvable aspects, and finally look at the ways in which contemporary adaptations of fairy tales allow us to address and explore the impenetrable qualities of modern life.

Though diverging slightly from the Perrault's original version of "Bluebeard," Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Fitcher's Bird", places a strong emphasis on the tale's magical qualities. They describe the Bluebeard figure as "a warlock who [takes] on the shape of a poor man and [goes] from house to house begging, and [takes] pretty girls captive" (138) and does this just by "touch[ing][...] and[...][forc[ing them] to jump into his basket" (138-39). The Grimms immediately create a sense of sorcery and magic in the story's villain and in his ability to capture young girls. Upon arrival at his home, the warlock sets a psychologically difficult test for his young detainees: before leaving the castle on a journey, he gives them the keys to all the rooms in the house, but they must refrain from opening the "small room, which this little key will unlock[...]on the pain of death" (139). In addition, the women must also hold onto an egg "constantly, for if it were to be lost a great calamity would come of it" (139). While the first two sisters fail to follow the warlock's instructions, and consequently return the egg stained with blood from the secret chamber, the third sister manages to fulfill her curious desires but decides to "carefully put away the egg" (140) in order to enter the room, revive her sisters, and appear to successfully pass the warlock's test by returning the egg unblemished. The clever sister is then granted total power over her new groom and he is "forced to do what she demand[s]" (140). This reversal of power of the bride over her future husband seems almost bizarre and out of place, as it is common for fairy tales to involve

men asserting their power over naïve and shallow women. In this story of subverted gender roles, the witty bride rescues her sisters and takes revenge on the warlock. First, she disguises her sisters in gold and has the warlock unwittingly carry them home in a basket. Next, she invites the warlock’s friends to the castle for a wedding feast, and finally has her brothers set fire to the castle with the warlock and all his guests trapped inside. Her own escape from the castle proves especially strange as she disguises herself as a feathered bird, while her groom, on his return, believes his bride to be a “bedizened death’s head” (141) decorated “with jewellery and a garland of flowers” (141). These unusual components in the Grimms’ telling of the tale establish an enigmatic mood as they cause us to contemplate their true meanings. Of course, these plot elements could merely be due to the fanciful qualities inherent to the fairy tale genre, but they also signal an underlying mystery for readers to contemplate beyond the text itself.

The peculiar qualities and gender reversals in “Bluebeard” give it what Maria Tatar calls “a cultural edge so sharp that it continues to be recast, rewritten, and reshaped” (12). Though here Tatar is referring to Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” the Grimm version explores the same power dynamics between men and women. The warlock’s test of his potential brides’ ability to resist curiosity and the successful bride’s ultimate power over him explore loyalty and dominance in marriage. In other words, in order for a husband to obey his wife, the woman must suppress her

desire to know and learn what lies beyond his forbidden door. Tatar addresses this problematic idea, asserting that the tale's exploration of the dynamics between men and women, "are the issues that, with all their rich figurative and literal variations and their sudden reversals, have kept the story alive as a vehicle for thinking about questions of trust and fidelity in marriage" (54). The "Bluebeard" tale, therefore, allows the enigmatic qualities of fairy tales to attach themselves to questions of marriage and gender relations, and therefore leave room to explore and expand upon within contemporary literature and culture.

In her story "Bluebeard's Egg," Margaret Atwood investigates gender dynamics at play in fairy tales. Sally and Ed are a bourgeois couple, living in what we assume to be a Canadian city in the 1980s. Ed is a heart doctor and Sally – though she spends most of her time at home – is the number-two at a company magazine where she "runs the show[...][but her male boss] gets official credit for everything Sally does right" (141). Sally is surrounded by powerful men, but it does not bother her since she believes "she suffers from fear of success" (142) and does not wish to be praised for the work she does for "the boys" (141). Not only does Sally prefer to submit to and work under men, but she is also attracted to her husband's "stupidity, his monumental and almost energetic stupidity" (134). Ed is a reserved man: he struggles to pick up on emotional signals and is a social bumbler who even mispronounces the word "feminist" as "femininist" (161). Though the story is told in third person, it is often focalized through

Sally — a defining break from the fairy tale tradition, which typically does not show the inner thoughts of its characters — and how she approaches Ed’s perplexing character as a mysterious fairy tale in itself. Sally views Ed both as a “handsome” (135) prince as well as a “Bearskin” figure whose “inner world [is] a forest, which looks something like the bottom part of their ravine lot, but without the fence. He wanders around in there, among the trees, not heading in any special direction” (152). Both attractive and reticent, Ed is a jigsaw puzzle for Sally to admire and solve. Sally feels that she is caught in a fairy-tale marriage with Ed, though not necessarily in a happy one. His quiet character leaves her “locked outside, [and she] must hack her way through the brambles” (135) like a young girl on a quest for her prince. Sally also worries that, since she is Ed’s third wife (calling upon the familiar rule of three), “one day [...] [if he] decides that she isn’t the true bride after all, but the false one [...] she will be put into a barrel stuck full of nails and rolled downhill endlessly, while he is sitting in yet another bridal bed, endlessly drinking champagne” (136). Sally obsessively searches for ways to understand the state of her marriage to Ed and to interpret how her husband perceives her.

Atwood’s use of Sally’s perspective not only allows us access to Sally’s motivations, but it also calls attention to femininity and gender roles in the “Bluebeard” tale. By offering insight into Sally’s consciousness, Atwood shows us the inner workings of Sally’s inquisitive nature and how her curiosity can lead her — like the failed sisters in the

Grimm tale—into dangerous territory. The narration in “Bluebeard’s Egg” emulates gossip—or, as Tatar calls it, “girl talk” (110)—a stereotypically feminine form of communication. Much of how Sally perceives Ed is revealed through Sally’s conversations with her outspoken friend, Marylynn. Incidentally, Marylynn’s character is very apt for the “Bluebeard” tale: she is a divorcée (meaning she has survived a bad marriage) and an interior decorator (she knows how to deal with rooms). Atwood presents the story in a highly gendered fashion; she calls on stereotypically feminine gossip to give us insight into Sally’s female consciousness.

The focalization also allows us to see how Sally struggles to reconcile herself in a world full of women who approach Ed with their heart problems. Atwood explains, “Women corner [Ed] on sofas, trap him in bay-windows at cocktail parties [...] [E]verywhere he goes he is beset by sirens. They want him to fix their hearts. Each of them seems to have a little something wrong—a murmur, a whisper” (139). Sally feels threatened by women who are attracted to Ed and his profession, even though she understands that Ed truly knows nothing “about the workings of hearts, real hearts, the kind symbolized by red satin surrounded by lace and topped by pink bows” (139). Sally knows that Ed genuinely understands neither the unspoken sexual language of women nor their desires of the heart; therefore, the irony of Ed’s occupation is “not lost on Sally” (139). Nevertheless, Sally desires to maintain control over this risky territory, as she worries that her

position as the third wife of a heart doctor makes her vulnerable to being replaced. Because of this fear, Sally tries to be submissive and dote on her accomplished and handsome husband; but she also plays the trickster – determined to see into her husband’s mind and remain his rightful wife.

Much like the heroine in the Grimm story who fears the warlock’s wrath, Sally does not want to face the potential punishment of losing Ed that would come at the cost of investigating his secrets. This worry leads Sally to ask Ed if she can visit him at the hospital to look at his new heart monitor; it has uncharacteristically “revved [him] up” (145) and thus serves as a prime opportunity for Sally to see the real and personable Ed. After asking him to test the machine on her, she discovers that her “heart look[s] so insubstantial, like a bag of gelatin, something that would melt, fade, disintegrate, if you squeezed it even a little” (147). The vulnerability of her heart in the bloody chamber of Ed’s examining room makes Sally uneasy in the same way that the first two sisters in “Fitcher’s Bird” experience shock and fear upon entering the warlock’s secret room. Sally discovers that

this transaction, this whole room, was sexual in a way she didn’t quite understand; it was clearly a dangerous place. It was like a massage parlour, only for women. Put a batch of women in there with Ed and they would never want to come out. They’d want to stay in there while he ran his probe over their wet skins and pointed out to them the defects of their beating hearts. (147)

After having the “wet and slippery and cold” (146) probe run over her chest, Sally understands how women fall under Ed’s mysterious and alluring spell. This moment of seduction forces Sally to confront the vulnerability of her status as Ed’s wife. She worries that this is a common occurrence for Ed: that he falls for one woman after another as he examines and takes apart their hearts in his bloody chamber. Of course, this passage is focalized through Sally, so the seductive mood of the space could be a product of her own imagination. Nonetheless, this pivotal moment in the story shows the inescapable vulnerability Sally feels in her marriage with Ed. Though she tries to assert herself as a clever bride, one step ahead of her simple-minded husband, dread underscores Sally’s view of her relationship.

While Atwood signals to us that Sally’s marriage may not last forever, she overtly challenges Sally’s role as a clever bride and trickster figure when Sally is assigned to rewrite “Fitcher’s Bird” from a new perspective in her night class on “*Forms of Narrative Fiction*” (152). After hearing the story read aloud to the class, Sally decides to do “something more clever” (158) in her rewriting of the tale by looking at how it connects to her own marriage. She decides, “Ed certainly isn’t the wizard; he’s nowhere near sinister enough” (158), and consequently chooses to write from the perspective of the warlock’s egg. Atwood writes, “no one will think of the egg. How does it feel, to be the innocent and passive cause of so much misfortune? (Ed isn’t the Bluebeard: Ed is the egg. Ed Egg, blank and

pristine and lovely. Stupid, too. Boiled, probably. Sally smiles fondly.)” (159). Sally thinks her idea is clever and original; it also gives her the opportunity to write from a perspective she sees as parallel to her husband’s, allowing her further access into Ed’s reticent mind. However, as Tatar aptly notes, “Sally would like to think that she plays the trickster to Ed’s simpleton, but she clearly has not done all her homework[...][T]he simpleton, the numbskull, and ne’er-do-well usually ends up duping nearly everyone else in the story” (112). Sally’s choice to write from this perspective may overturn her long lasting perceptions of Ed, and of herself.

Soon after Sally decides to write from the egg’s perspective, Atwood subverts our expectations of Sally’s role in the fairy tale. Many of Ed’s colleagues and Marylynn come over for a dinner party – a gathering comparable to the feast the clever third sister in “Fitcher’s Bird” arranges for the warlock and his friends. Sadly, this party does not let Sally dupe Ed and his friends as the sister does in the Grimm tale. Instead, Sally herself is made the fool. At the party, Sally sees Ed and Marylynn in what appears to be an intimate encounter. Sally immediately tries to dismiss this interaction: “Maybe it’s just that Ed, in a wayward intoxicated moment, put his hand on the nearest buttock, and Marylynn refrained from a shriek or a flinch” (164). But then, Sally considers the possible darker reasons for their encounter. Atwood continues,

Or it could mean something more sinister: a familiarity between them, an understanding. If this is

it, Sally has been wrong about Ed, for years, forever. Her version of Ed is not something she's perceived but something that's been perpetrated on her, by Ed himself, for reasons of his own. Possibly Ed is not stupid. Possibly he's enormously clever. (164)

Sally finds herself in the position of the tricked warlock in the Grimm tale. She sees that her marriage is truly threatened, and that her fairy tale life in the "ravine lot" (152) house with Ed will not last much longer. Sally's restricted view of her life as Ed's docile and clever bride does not prepare her for this development. This unpreparedness is likely why, lying in bed at the end of the story, Sally sees her heart as the warlock's egg: "golden pink, resting in a nest of brambles, glowing softly as though there's something red and hot inside it[...] This is something the story left out, Sally thinks: the egg is alive, and one day it will hatch. But what will come out of it?" (166). Sally's alarming vision of her heart, despite having already seen its true form earlier on Ed's monitor, emphasizes the difficulty she faces in taking on a new persona. If she is no longer the third, clever wife as she thought she was, then where does she fit in? In this rewriting of "Fitcher's Bird," Sally's place in the tale is no longer clear, and it is now up to the reader to decide where she belongs and whether she will survive as Ed's wife.

"Bluebeard's Egg" transfers the unsettling qualities of fairy tales to the short story genre. Atwood's text borrows plot, structure, and character from the Grimm tale, while simultaneously focalizing the story through its protagonist, therefore drawing upon conventions more

present in short stories. Atwood’s adaptation of fairy tales into a contemporary context exemplifies several of Linda Hutcheon’s concepts of adaptation. Hutcheon writes, “An adaptation is not vampiric: it does not draw the life-blood from its source and leave it dying or dead, nor is it paler than the adapted work. It may, on the contrary, keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise” (176). Atwood revises “Fitcher’s Bird” in a way that does not necessarily negate any of the claims that the original text makes. In “Bluebeard’s Egg,” she shows how fairy tales and the issues they address – namely those of marriage and sexual power relations – are relevant in modern life. Sally faces a similar task in her own rewriting of “Fitcher’s Bird;” rather than trying to maintain her place as the clever bride in her adaptation, she learns that she must approach these tales with a fresh perspective – one where she accepts that the endings of these stories are inconclusive. As Tatar contends, “we work through Sally’s rescripting of a story that has challenged its readers to reflect not only on the deep enigmas of marital life but also on the profound mysteries of the stories that we tell to each other and to ourselves” (114). In addition to her assigned rewriting of the tale, Sally must look at the story of her own marriage and expose its realities – its unfairy-tale-like qualities. Hutcheon claims, “We have seen that adaptations disrupt elements like priority and authority [...] But they can also destabilize both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations” (174). Atwood’s reworking of the tale undermines the idea that

the story's heroine must have a happy ending; because of her over-willingness to play the part of the "true bride," it only makes sense for Sally to face an unhappy, albeit ambiguous, end.

In "Bluebeard's Egg," it is clear that Atwood takes pleasure in her playing with the fairy tale genre by exploring both its ambiguous and enduring qualities. With her ironic sense of humour, she updates the original Grimm tale by placing it within a modern day context, in which a wife searches for a fairy tale life and happy ending with her husband. Because we know that this is a remake of "Bluebeard," there will inevitably be pitfalls and heartaches. Atwood translates the magical traits of the original "Bluebeard" tales into her own story in order to comment on the unsolvable experiences of marital life in contemporary society. By borrowing from and working with the ideas that both Perrault and the Grimms put forward in their tales, Atwood explores whether conceptions of trust, understanding, and the definition of marriage itself have truly evolved. Through Atwood's own reworking of "Fitcher's Bird" in conjunction with Sally's rewriting of the same tale, she demonstrates how, as with the original story, we are still unable to come to a conclusive understanding of what it means to be in a loyal and stable marriage.

“BUT WHAT WILL COME OUT OF IT?”

Works Cited

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