

Childish, superficial, sentimental, naïve: these are the generally accepted terms for a fairy tale. The stories they depict of toads really being young and handsome princes and of chambermaids becoming queens of the ball do not conform to the laws of reality and seem illogical, inconsequential, and arbitrary. They are nothing of the sort. If, from popular tradition to Walt Disney's sterilized versions, fairy tales have spanned the centuries, it is because they are connected both to our most intimate life and to the great moral and political questions that drive human societies. Their formal simplicity and their fantasy hide unspeakable conflicts.

Fairy tales are allegorical representations of the transitions between stages of the human being's psychological development. In most of them, the obstacles the hero or heroine runs up against embody the difficulties of the passage of childhood to the adult age, the period of instability during which the child loses something of his /her identity without knowing what he /she is going to gain. By identifying with archetypal characters, their victories and defeats, the reader faces his own anguishes, his own fantasies. The psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim emphasizes the fairy tale's therapeutic properties for children as well as for adults. "By becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams – ruminating, rearranging and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures,"<sup>1</sup> the reader succeeds in relieving certain psychological tensions and, in the case of a child, overcomes narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas and other interior obstacles.

In Alice Anderson's film adaptation of Charles Perrault's literary tale, *Bluebeard*, she explores this notion of passage, emphasizing the violence of the transformations engendered by the loss of innocence. This is the way she modifies the original meaning of *Bluebeard*. A comment on forced marriage and the mysteries of sex becomes an illustration of the wrench that is the separation with the mother, returning to an omnipresent theme in her work. Spilt blood is not that of defloration but of the cutting of the connection joining child and mother. The classic symbol of *Bluebeard*, the blood-stained key evoking soiled virginity, is replaced by two sharp tools, scissors and a razor. By establishing a visual and symbolic parallel between these instruments, the artist reveals an essential affinity between Bluebeard and the apprentice. In Anderson's tale, they both manifest this sexual indifferentiation that is the mark of a troubled identity, both are victims of the mother's betrayal and abandon and carry their indelible trace, the blue of the bear for one, the wound of the cord for the other.

The spool of thread comes back like a leitmotiv all through Anderson's tale and is also laden with a symbolic dimension, expressing the fundamental stake of her work. She refers to an experience described and analyzed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the game of the spool or *Fort-da*. The psychoanalyst's grandson, 18 months old, throws a spool attached by a thread over the edge of his bed while pronouncing the long drawn-out sound o-o-o-o (that, according to his mother, means *fort*, or *gone*, in English) and then brings it back to him while exclaiming "Da!"

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Shambhala publications, London, 1993, p. 7.

("Here") Freud links the child's game, having to do with disappearance and reappearance, to his mother's departures and absences. Through the repetition of the maternal presence/absence sequence, the child tries to overcome the painful experience of separation. As Freud expresses it: "At the outset he was in a passive situation – he was overpowered by the experience, but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was as a game, he took an active part."<sup>2</sup> With this game the child seeks to become master of a traumatic situation; he constitutes himself as an active subject. The spool game, like Alice's work, illustrates the psychological work of detachment.

The abundance of symbols, the lack of depth of the characters, and the over-simplification of the situations have made fairy tales a favorite field for psychoanalysts who endow them with universal significance. They nevertheless testify to a political order and to signs of specific historical situations. In his *Stories of Times Past, (Tales of Mother Goose)*, for example, Perrault weakens the initiatory character of the popular stories by introducing a conformist morality and thus places them in the service of the aristocracy that grants them an educational role.

Moreover, the tales reflect the ideology governing relations between the sexes. They play an essential role in the construction of sexual identities for men as well as for women. But the woman's position as storyteller or reader is more problematic. The work of the British writer and critic Marina Warner are truly enlightening from this point of view. In her benchmark work, *From the Beast to the Blonde*<sup>3</sup>, she uncovers the essential links between fairy tales and feminine speech. Etymologically, the word "fairy" comes from the Latin *Fata*, the feminine variant of *Fatum* that designates Destiny. *Fata* is also the past participle of the deponent verb *Fari* (speak) and thus means "having talked" in the feminine. Fairies are the heirs of the Parcae who weave men's destiny: they speak in the feminine form and their words have a prophetic dimension.

In mythology and literature, the figure of the storyteller is always feminine. From spellbinding prophets like the Sibyls, to Perrault's Mother Goose, passing by Sheherezade or Saint Ann, the characters who embody narration are women storytellers. Women have historically played a dominant role in the transmission of the oral tradition. Starting from the XVIIth century, the writers who collected and published popular tales have very often asserted their sources' feminine nature. Perrault emphasized the role of grandmothers and governesses whom he acknowledged as his true predecessors and the Grimm brothers constantly put forward one of their inspirers, Dorothea Viehmann, including on the frontispieces of their collections. In one of her letters, Mme de Sévigné writes of her fascination for fairy tales in terms borrowed from the universe of cooking: "It's called simmering them [tales]; so she simmered for us, and talked to us about a green isle where a princess grew up who was more beautiful than the day."<sup>4</sup> More generally, in the collective imagination, it is women who tell children stories of dragons and princesses. Tales nurture intimacy with the maternal.

And yet, the most famous literary versions are male creations. While French women of letters like Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy or Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier created many literary tales, their writings fell into oblivion and remain largely unknown to the general public. Unlike spoken language, which is resolutely female, writing seems to be the privilege of men. And that is not

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<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

<sup>3</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London, Vintage, 199.

<sup>4</sup> Mme de Sévigné, cited in Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London, Vintage, 1995.

without an influence on the tales themselves. Take *Little Red Riding Hood*. From popular versions to those of Perrault or the Brothers Grimm, the signification of the tale changed profoundly. These men of letters took a coming-of-age tale - a wolf helping a young girl find and assume her destiny as a woman - and turned it into a dark story of sexual aggression in which the "the heroine is obliged to bear responsibility for sexual violation."<sup>5</sup> Literary tales reflect masculine desires and the feminine figures that people them correspond to "developments and projections of the imagination [of men] who express their aspirations and difficulties in assuming their own feminine pole and in relating to women."<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, one understands that since Simone de Beauvoir, feminists have attacked the system of values at work in tales and denounced the passive role conferred on woman. The author of *The Second Sex* wrote: "Children's literature, mythology, tales, and stories reflect the myths created by men's pride and desire: it is through men's eyes that the girl explores the world and makes sense of her destiny.... She learns that to be happy she has to be loved; to be loved, she has to await love. Woman is Sleeping Beauty, Donkeyskin, Snow White, the one who receives and submits."<sup>7</sup>

*Bluebeard* is an exception in Alice Anderson's work. For the first time, the artist is setting herself an exercise of rewriting. By becoming part of the long tradition of storytellers, of "re-counting", she is challenging the whole political dimension of tales and their role in the formation and perpetuation of sexual inequalities. For Anderson, re-appropriating a literary tale through images is in itself a subversive and liberating gesture. The image becomes a way of speaking to the feminine, of renewing with the tale's feminine origins by liberating oneself from the weight of words. Unlike Cindy Sherman who, in her photographic work on *Bluebeard* (or more exactly on *Fitcher's Bird*, the Brothers Grimm version), chooses to illustrate the literary text, Alice Anderson limits the book's text to the film dialogues. A book taken from one of the artist's films ... a curious reversal that sheds light on Anderson's process, reveals the central place she grants to the visual in her work of rewriting. Through image, the artist means to escape the misogyny haunting literary tales.

To accomplish this and perhaps even more explicitly, Anderson inverts the sex roles. "My heroines are always powerful and determined women, never passive and sometimes violent. They are the exact opposite of the traditional masculine projections. If I had to compare them, I would choose Nancy Spero's<sup>8</sup> women warrior frescoes." In her book, the artist carries this reasoning to the extreme as Bluebeard is a woman. The symbolic associations are telling: the beard evokes virility, physical strength (in Ancient Greece and during the Olympic games, men were separated from boys according to their beards) but also lust, sexual energy (the beard is the sign of the billy goat and thus of the satyr). Anderson turns upside down the terms of the phallogocentric system that has longtime held sway and that undoubtedly still holds sway over relations between the sexes today. Associating the masculine with highly valorized notions (activity, reason, culture, etc.),

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<sup>5</sup> Jack Zipes, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, South Hadley, Massachusetts, Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1983, p. 227.

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz, *La Femme dans les contes de fées*, (*Women in Fairy Tales*), Paris, Albin Michel, 1993, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with the artist, May 2007.

this system of representation thinks the feminine in opposition to the virile norm and in terms judged negatively (passivity, sentiment, nature, etc.). Anderson works at the destabilization of the phallogocentric discourse by modifying its rules. Given the Manichean distribution of characters' attributes, the fairy tale is particularly conducive to this strategy of inversion. When they revisit the literary tales, the writers Angela Carter or Pierrette Fleutiaux use a similar process. In *Métamorphoses de la Reine (Metamorphosis of the Queen)* by Fleutiaux, Cinderella is a young man called Cendron, the seven dwarfs become the seven giants and Little Red Riding Hood, whose story is told by ogresses, is dying to devour the wolf. But in Anderson's case, choosing Bluebeard confers an additional force on criticism of the patriarchal system, and can be considered a kind of ironic nod. This tale's narrative structure is similar to that of Adam and Eve: a patriarch whose prohibitions have to be respected, a prohibition that arouses curiosity, and a woman unable to resist temptation. Making Bluebeard a woman places her in the position of God, making her wear the beard of the first of the patriarchs.

If the adaptation of Bluebeard holds a special place in Alice Anderson's work, it is also because it constitutes a meditation on narration itself and on rewriting. Several of the book's elements have a symbolic dimension connecting them to the universe of the tale. The apprentice's mother is a seamstress, and just as the spinner is the emblematic figure of destiny (the three Parcae watch over the fate of mortals), it is also the symbol of narration. Since Perrault, the old woman and her spindle are represented on the frontispiece of many anthologies. Spinning a tale, following the thread of the narrative: ordinary expressions attest to the relation joining spinner and teller. Its structure carries the signs of orality, repetition, and resumptions, all so characteristic of the genre and that suggest the monotony of the work of spinners who, during the evenings, spun while telling tall tales. The cord the apprentice's mother ties to the son's belt is both the umbilical cord, the thread of destiny and that of the tale. When, like the Parcae Atropos, she cuts it with one strike of the scissors, she puts an end, in one single gesture, to her role as mother, to the life of her son and to the fairy tale. By maintaining this link from page to page in her book, Anderson evokes the continuity of narration and invites the reader to follow the thread of the story. The razor too takes on a symbolic meaning linked to the narration. Several times, the artist films a static shot of the razor that Bluebeard folds up in a quick movement. Its form in V, the click of its closing, the rapidity with which the following image is established recall the cinema "clapboard" preceding each take and opening the tale.

In this context the sexual ambiguity of the two characters – Bluebeard child looks like a boy and the apprentice looks like a woman - is given a totally other meaning. This suggests the dissembling at the origin of fairy tales. In her comparison of Perrault's works and those of his niece Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, Marina Warner exposes what she calls the "masquerade of storytellers."<sup>9</sup> As the feminine and popular contents of fairy tales did not accord with the demands of the world of letters, the writers hid behind the appearance of an old woman: Perrault took on the disguise of Mother Goose, the Brothers Grimm expressed themselves through the voice of Dorothea Viehmann. The choice of a feminine narrator enabled them to communicate certain aspects of popular wisdom in a simple and spontaneous language while at the same time avoiding being assimilated into ordinary people. While men of letters have recourse to feminine figures to keep their distance from the popular nature of the tales, women of letters, who try to defend feminine values, adopt an inverse strategy at the risk of betraying the fundamental principals of

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<sup>9</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London, Vintage, 1995, p. 194.

fairy tales. Refusing to be associated with the vulgarity and roughness of Mother Goose, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier strove to respect the aristocratic ideal using refined, precious, almost pompous language. She disguised popular thinking in a refinement conforming to laws governing the 17<sup>th</sup> c literary world, one that was almost exclusively masculine. Where Perrault adopted the appearance of an old woman, L'Héritier took on the mask of a man. While the disguises present in Alice Anderson's work (as in Angela Carter's tales) reveal instability and blurred identity, they also suggest the strategies to which men and women of letters turn to adapt oral tales.

Alice Anderson's adaptation of Perrault's work is a reflection on the art of story telling. At the time of Perrault and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier, the term *Bibliothèque bleue* (Blue Library) was used to designate a collection of popular tales, and fairy tales were commonly called blue tales. Today, blue remains associated with wonderment and the inexplicable, and certain contemporary authors, like Marguerite Yourcenar or Marcel Aymé, recall in their works (*Conte bleu* and *Contes bleus du chat perché*) the original links that tie this color to tales. Thus, the enigmatic phrase that Bluebeard's mother utters in the forbidden room takes on a new meaning that summarizes the stakes of Anderson's work: "This blue will help you to erase it forever". The tales she invents will help Alice erase the painful marks of her childhood.

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