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A Reading of “My Last Duchess”: “Perspectives, Preintentions, Recollections” of the Victorian Reader of “Blue Beard”

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Abstract:

In a dramatic monologue, the monologist strives at suppressing any attempt at interpretation and the audience is constructed “through the very silence it enforces upon the textual auditor” (Wagner-Lawlor 288). The reader of the text has the freedom of bringing in a “sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections” (Iser 192). Browning, also felt that his works depended upon “the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success” (qtd. in Woolford 44). This essay seeks to argue that during the nineteenth century when readers across all classes was familiar with the fairy tale “Blue Beard”, the reader of “My Last Duchess” takes into cognizance the resonance of the fairy tale and engages in a complicated play of expectations, memory and strategic textual clues.

Keywords: Implied Reader, Actual Reader, Dramatic Monologue, Fairy Tale.

In “My Last Duchess”, as Browning engages in a dramatizing “the dialectical relation between seeing and being seen” (Starzyk 690), the real reader occupies a privileged space of interpretative performance. The implied auditor is tossed once among faceless “strangers” who could never commission Fra Pandolf and then lifted as “Sir” to share the Duke’s suspicion regarding the glance or blush on the Duchess’ portrait. The reader of the text has the freedom of bringing in a “sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections” and though the author has “has the whole panoply of narrative techniques at his disposal,” he will never “attempt to set the *whole* picture before his reader’s eyes” (Iser 192 emphasis author’s). For Browning, the readerly activity is crucial in the construction of meanings and he observed in the preface to *Paracelsus* that “a work like mine [his] depends more immediately [than acted drama] on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success” (qtd. in Woolford 44). Hence, his dramatic monologues offer a performative space to the actual reader who can interpret and hence turn into “a detective who wrests away control the Duke desires by seizing on the ‘objective’ clues that have been provided” (Knoepfmlacher “Projection and the Female other” 155). Thus, the actual reader of “My Last Duchess” is not entirely limited within the textual parameters. Nineteenth century has been described as an age when “it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected” (Dickens 1), and readers across all classes were familiar with “Blue Beard”— the popular fairy tale with its preoccupation with female disobedience held a particular appeal for the middle-class readership and the figure of polygamous and murderous

figure of Blue Beard “terrified generations of children from James Boswell to Charles Dickens” (“Preface” Hermansson x). This essay seeks to argue that during the nineteenth century when, the reader of “My Last Duchess” takes into cognizance the resonance of the fairy tale and engages in a complicated play of expectations, memory and strategic textual clues.

The Speaker, Auditor and the Reader in Dramatic Monologue

In the dramatic monologue as a form, the auditor “cannot help but hear, as it were; he is, by generic definition, absolutely silent, a passive receptor of a verbal tour de force that leaves him no opportunity for response - indeed, that often actively discourages him from doing so” (Wagner-Lawlor 287). The monologist strives at suppressing any attempt at interpretation and the audience is constructed “through the very silence it enforces upon the textual auditor” (Wagner-Lawlor 288). Thus, attempts at identifying the silent implied auditor, who is the target of the speaker’s manipulations, with the reader is rather problematic since “line by line, and image by image, the reader is presented with a situation which he assesses by interpreting in his own way the words of the speaker” (Watson 75). The reader frees him/herself from the voiceless stature of the implied auditor through his/her freedom of interpretation and through the “performance of interpretation, the reader distinguishes her/himself from both the speaker and the auditor; in doing so, the reader both fulfills, but also ironically undermines, the speaker’s apparent tyranny over the communicative situation that makes up the discourse of the poem” (Wagner-Lawlor 288).

Reading “Blue Beard”

(a) Nineteenth century England

During the nineteenth century “majority of households of the period across all classes came to know Bluebeard” (Hermansson 69) particularly through the chapbooks like *Blue Beard, or, Female Curiosity* and *The History of Blue Beard; or, the fatal effects of curiosity & disobedience* (1805) which has the epigraph in its title page: “Inquisitive tempers to mischief may lead:/ But placid obedience will always succeed.” The English reader had been introduced to the tale of the Blue Beard through Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé. Avec des moralités* [*Stories or Tales of Past Times, with Morals*] (1697) translated into English by Samber in 1729 and known popularly as *Tales of My Mother Goose*. In his collection of translated fairy tales in *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), Andrew Lang included “Blue Beard” among the eight fairy tales from Perrault. The figure of Blue Beard is often considered to be a cumulative portrait of the misdeeds of various noblemen, like “Cunmar the Accursed, who decapitated his pregnant wife Triphine”, and “Gilles de Rais, the Marshal of France who was hanged in 1440 for murdering hundreds of children” (Tatar 138). In *The Blue Fairy Book*, Blue Beard is introduced as a “man who had fine houses, both in town and country, a deal of silver and gold plate, embroidered furniture, and coaches gilded all over with gold” but unlucky as to have a blue beard, which “made him so frightfully ugly that all the women and girls ran away from him” (225). Moreover, his polygamous past and the mystery surrounding his previous wives

also made him a rather intimidating figure. However, one of the young women succumbs to the extravagance of his parties and begins to consider him “a fine fellow” (225) and they marry. After his wedding, he leaves the keys of his mansion with the strict injunction to his wife: “go into all and every one of them, except that little closet, which I forbid you, and forbid it in such a manner that, if you happen to open it, there's nothing but what you may expect from my just anger and resentment”(227). The wife swears obedience and she enters the secret chamber after a brief moment of self-debate: “Coming to the closet-door, she made a stop for some time, thinking upon her husband's orders, and considering what unhappiness might attend her if she was disobedient; but the temptation was so strong she could not overcome it.” (227). She enters the locked chamber to find it strewn with corpses of Blue Beard's previous wives and the floor covered with clotted blood. She drops the key which becomes tainted with an indelible stain. While the chamber exposes the husband's murderous past, the husband violently charges the wife with disobedience and transgression, and delivers the sentence of death upon her:

“You were resolved to go into the closet, were you not? Mighty well, madam; you shall go in, and take your place among the ladies you saw there.” Upon this she threw herself at her husband's feet, and begged his pardon with all the signs of true repentance, vowing that she would never more be disobedient. She would have melted a rock, so beautiful and sorrowful was she; but Blue Beard had a heart harder than any rock! “You must die, madam,” said he, “and that presently.” (228)

The narrative concludes with the two brothers saving the wife of Blue Beard and she comes to inherit the entire property of Blue Beard.

The Blue Beard narratives are marked by three distinctive features: “a forbidden chamber, an agent of prohibition who also metes out punishments, and a figure who violates the prohibition and the tale has been framed as a “text that enunciates the dire consequences of curiosity and disobedience” (Tatar138-39). In the French original, Perrault had aligned the intellectual curiosity of Bluebeard's wife with the sexual curiosity of women in general, willfully undermining a robust folkloric tradition in which the heroine is a resourceful agent of her own salvation.

Nineteenth century England was witnessing a reworking of the Blue Beard motif. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) has been called “the first adult, nonburlesque treatment of the Bluebeard theme in English literature” (Sutherland 68). Brontë describes the locked upper floor Thornfield Hall with an explicit reference to the Blue Beard - “looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle”(154). In 1871, Anne Thackeray Ritchie published “Bluebeard's Keys” in her father's conservative *Cornhill Magazine* and Louisa May Alcott drew on the Bluebeard story as a coded commentary on the Victorian

oppression of women’s freedoms, intellectual ambitions, and sexuality in works like *Under the Lilacs* and *A Modern Mephistopheles*.

The nineteenth century literary fairy tales also reveal reworking on the Blue Beard motif. The characterizing feature of female curiosity, that endangers Blue Beard’s bride, becomes a mode of asserting female agency in Jacobs’ “Mr. Fox”. The beautiful and young bride, Lady Mary is quizzed at her lover Mr. Fox’s not inviting either her or her brothers to his castle. Hence, before their wedding day, she sets out as a female detective, to see the castle often described to her. The inscription on the gateway: “Be bold, be bold, but not too bold,/ Lest that your heart’s blood should run cold,” (*English Fairy Tales* 109) is a chilling forewarning of what is to follow. She spots bodies and skeletons of beautiful ladies inside a hall and begins retracing her steps when she sees Mr. Fox dragging a lady. She promptly hides behind a cask and watches Mr. Fox hacking the lady’s hand with his sword in order to extract a diamond ring off the lady’s finger. The severed hand lands on Lady Mary’s lap but Mr. Fox does not search behind the cask. She runs for her life along with the evidence of the severed hand. When he arrives at her home the following day to sign the marriage contract, she exposes him through an elaborate dramatic coup. She refers to a horrible nightmare she had which Mr. Fox asks her to narrate but soon he begins panicking at his exposure: “It is not so, nor it was not so” (*English Fairy Tales* 111). Finally, she produces the severed hand with the ring and cuts his recantatory refrain by proclaiming: “But it is so, and it was so. Here’s hand and ring I have to show” (*English Fairy Tales* 111).

“The Ogre Courting” is Ewing’s “variation on ‘Blue Beard’” (Warner, *From the Beast* 266), a witty tale celebrating the cleverness of Managing Molly, that “testify to the way Victorian women writers rebelled against traditional gender roles” (Talairach-Vielmas 274). The peasant girl Molly tricks an ogre notorious for marrying and “some said he tormented, and others, that he only worked them to death. Everybody knew it was not a desirable match, and yet there was not a father who dare refuse his daughter if she were asked for” (Ewing, *Old-Fashioned Fairy Tales* 46). When such an ogre courts Molly to be his twenty-fifth wife, she assumes charge of the situation. She impresses him with her skill in frugality and asks him to build a new farmhouse and fill a feather-bed with goose feathers when the “old man plucks her geese” (Ewing, *Old-Fashioned* 50). The ogre fails to comprehend the linguistic implication and during the first snowstorm Molly directs the ogre to carry shovelful of snow to the bed and fill it and quietly slips away from the wedding. He compensates the flattened feather-bed by giving all his geese to the farmer. Managing Molly thus ensures that she is dowered well enough as to have ample marriage offers.

(b) Italian Versions of Blue Beard

As Crane points out in *Italian Fairy Tales*, “How the Devil Married Three Sisters”, a tale collected from Venice, that follows a line similar to that of Perrault’s “Blue Beard” till the entry of the clever third sister. The Devil is driven with a desire to marry and takes human shape. He courts the eldest of three sisters and after marriage forbids her to open a chamber. She promptly

disobeys and on opening “saw a terrible abyss full of fire that shot up towards her, and singed the flowers on her bosom” (63) which the Devil notices and pushes her into hell. The second sister has a similar fate but the third sister suspects that her two sisters have been murdered and decides to be more careful. She also opens the door of the secret chamber after removing the flowers on her bosom and “saw behind the door the fatal abyss and her sisters therein. ‘Ah!’ She exclaimed, ‘poor creature that I am; I thought I had marred an ordinary man, and instead of that he is the Devil! How can I get away from him?’” She carefully pulled her two sisters out of hell and hid them.” (64). The Devil remains in the illusion that his secret has not been discovered and is duped to carry the three sisters back to their parental home and when he returns his wife does not respond to his call:

“Margerita, have you gone to sleep? Come down. I am as tired as a dog, and as hungry as a wolf.” But there was no reply. “If you do not come down instantly I will go up and bring you down,” he cried, angrily; but Margerita did not stir. Enraged, he hastened up to the balcony, and gave her such a box on the ear that her head flew off, and he saw that the head was nothing but a milliner’s form, and the body, a bundle of rags. Raging, he rushed down and rummaged through the whole house, but in vain; he found only his wife’s empty jewel-box. “Ha!” He cried; “she has been stolen from me, and her jewels, too!” And he immediately ran to inform her parents of the misfortune. But when he came near the house, to his great surprise he saw on the balcony above the door all three sisters, his wives, who were looking down on him with scornful laughter. Three wives at once terrified the Devil so much that he took his flight with all possible speed. (65)

A Florentine story, “The Baker’s Three Daughters” works on a similar motif of injunction and secret chamber but the third sister is able to escape

“My Last Duchess” and “Blue Beard”

Monteiro makes an interesting observation regarding Richard Henry Wilde’s *Conjectures and Research Concerning the Love, Madness, and Imprisonment of Torquato Tasso* that Browning reviewed in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* (July 1842) about four months before the appearance of “My Last Duchess”. On the basis of this work, the Duke has been connected to Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara (1533-97), the patron of Dosso Dossi, Bellini, Titian and Raphael. According to records, Alfonso married Lucrezia de Medici, the 14 year old daughter of Cosimo I de Medici, the Duke of Tuscany in 1558 and returned to battlefield immediately after wedding. Around the 1560s, he invited his wife to join him. She died on April 21, 1561, possibly of poisoning and Alfonso began negotiating with Ferdinand, Count of Tyrol (<www.encyclopedia.com>) and married her in 1565. His second wife Barbara died in

1572 and he married Margherita Gonzaga in 1579. The marriage remained childless Tasso frequented the court of Duke Alfonso at Ferrara followed by his subsequent imprisonment.

For the reader familiar with the fairy tale "Blue Beard", the Duke's reference to the gallery, terrace, orchard, commissioned artists, art gallery and above all, the legacy of "nine hundred years old name", reminds of the opening description of "Blue Beard" where the nobleman's material possessions are enumerated. While the younger daughter succumbed to the extravagance of aristocratic life, the Duke cannot impress the Duchess with his possessions:

She had
A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one.

The Duchess receives no injunction from the Duke and there is an ambiguous "somehow", the pregnant pauses and hyphens that reveal a Blue beard-like mind watching the responses of the Duchess. As he draws the curtain from the portrait, he darts at her "glance", blush, smile, as signs of disobedience and challenge to his authority and the mention of Fra Pandolf becomes an immensely coded hint that he casually drops. The name evokes the image of a monk as an artist and the text hardly provides any clue for connecting it with the Duke's fatal commandment at which "all smiles stopped together". However, the reader familiar with the threats of Blue Beard to his repentant wife would connect Wilde's observation regarding "the readiness with which death, at that time, was inflicted as a punishment for conjugal infidelity among persons of rank" (qtd. in Monterio 195). Wilde cites contemporary instances of Isabella de Medici Orsini who was strangled, and Eleonora di Toledo who was Medici poniarded, both by the hands of their husbands. Thus, the sentence passed by the Duke can be linked with the suspicion of sexual infidelity and the friar becomes implicated in the whole process on the basis of a contemporary reference cited by Wilde. Referring to one of Tasso's letters to the Duke Ferrara where the poet talks of turning into a monk, Wilde provides the following footnote: "It is not undeserving of remark, that this was not an uncommon method of escaping punishment for love offences in that age. Alessandro Pandolfo, threatened on account of passion for Leonora di Toledo de' Medici, turned capuchin" (qtd. in Monterio 195). The Duke hints at a possible link between the Duchess and the artist-monk which the reader can interrogate or debunk.

Thus, the nineteenth century reader of "My Last Duchess" is not confined only within the textual parameters and brings into play a number of cultural readings and familiarities. Moreover, the familiarity with the variants of the Blue Beard also engenders other readings. The portrait of the Duchess "alone tells a story that strangers 'read,' and while the Duke would control the interpretation of this visual text, he betrays a recognition that the viewer's interpretation must already have begun" (Wagner-Lawlor 296). The Duke fails to understand the cause of her spot of joy but he provides such clues that the reader needs to decipher – thus the Duchess riding on the white mule, accepting the bough of cherries, are, as Knoepflmacher

observes, iconographic details traditionally associated with Virgin Mary (155). For the reader familiar with the active female protagonist in the various Blue Beard variants, it is interesting to note that the Duke mentions at least eight times the Duchess as an act ant: “she thought”, “she had”, “she liked”, “she looked”, “she rode”, “she thanked”, “she ranked”, “she smiled”. The Duke’s tremendous struggle to dominate, control and possess remains unfulfilled and even after murdering her, he is unable to reduce her into a corpse. In the portrait she looks “as if she were alive” and reader engages in a task of “restitution and reconstitution” (Knoepflmacher 143). Though the Duke tries to assert his claim through the expression “my last duchess”, the reader is able to free his/her interpretation by approaching the text within a shared cultural reading.

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