



Confronting *Bluebeard*: totalitarian regimes in childhood and in the collective psyche

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Abstract: Beginning with the story of *Bluebeard*, the author considers how traumatic overwhelm can occur in everyday childhood situations of a psychically murderous quality; for example, a nanny's totalitarian regime may be invisible to parents ruled by collective social and cultural norms. A child who is remote from mother and idealises a father embodying a powerful patriarchal system may remain naïvely dependent in marriage and unable to cope with the realities of human aggression. The paper describes analytic work with a woman who had suffered repeated breakdowns and needed to relinquish a fragile, socially constructed identity in order to establish her own true orientation.

Keywords: *Bluebeard*, breakdown, gender role norms, nanny, patriarchal, traumatic overwhelm

Introduction

Let me tell you a story about a man called Bluebeard who is looking for a wife, and a young girl who (in most versions of the story) has no name. There is a mystery about Bluebeard - his former wives have all disappeared. Any new bride might wonder what has happened to them, but Bluebeard seems charming and generous; he has a castle and lots of good things to offer. We are told that women are instinctively afraid of him, but our nameless girl is impressed by his wealth and charms: she consents to be given away by her father to this new provider. Bluebeard shares with her everything he has, even the key to a room that he tells her she must not enter. His instruction about the key, like the mystery surrounding the fate of his former wives, hints at a threat locked away out of sight. The girl has a choice - to comply with Bluebeard, keeping safe within his protection, or to freely explore her world. Her curiosity is strong and, as soon as he goes away, she uses the key.

When she enters the forbidden room, she finds the murdered bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. In shock, she lets the magical key fall to the floor. The key begins to drip with blood that she cannot wipe off; she cannot clean

it, it will give her away. Her blind innocence is lost - she is marked, she has seen the truth. The underlying reality was of violence too terrible for her even to imagine. Her curiosity has brought her to a place from which there is no return – now this room of horror may become *her* fate.

Bluebeard unexpectedly returns. Seeing his new wife knows the truth about him, he prepares to kill her too. She climbs to a high tower in the castle and signals for help. In the story she is rescued by her brothers, who kill Bluebeard. Does this element of the story suggest that our girl will continue to rely on men to protect her from violence? If so, her story will end much as it began - in dependency - though she may show a more sharp-sighted judgement when she chooses any future husband!

As we leave the land of fairy tale, let us hope that, beginning with the shock of opening the door into a wider reality, our nameless girl may discover within herself an energy that protects her and regulates her relationships. Moving on from innocence and dependency, may she find the ruthlessness she needs to become more fully herself.

Why did I begin in fairy tale? In stylised form, a fairy tale can bring an unconscious element of psyche alive for us, as we feel our way into the predicaments and the terrors of its characters. Around a fairy tale's symbolic core are woven skeins of meaning - parental, cultural, historical, societal. Within and between them we may hope to discern the emotional truths and narratives of a dilemma of the self.

Bachmann suggests that people may be psychically 'murdered' without physically dying, in certain types of relationship that are supported by shadow aspects of social and cultural systems with which we are familiar. She says:

For today it is infinitely more difficult to commit crimes, and thus these crimes are so subtle that we can hardly perceive or comprehend them, though all around us, in our neighbours, they are committed daily. ... still today many people do not die but are murdered ...

(Bachmann 1999, p. 4)

The Bluebeard story symbolizes a shadow side to the everyday social reality of marriage in a patriarchal culture, suggesting that it may be potentially murderous – psychically at least - when power and control inhabit one pole, and naïve dependency the other. In the tale, economic power and control belong to Bluebeard, whilst the nameless heroine is portrayed as a powerless girl who needs protection and care when she marries. With this story in the background, I hope to convey to you the essence of an analytic struggle in which both patient and analyst battled against powerful social and cultural influences of a similar kind. When such forces become an accepted part of everyday experience they may be invisible to us, but can still be deadly to psychic development.

Theoretical perspectives

Let's move on now to sketch out themes that connect the Bluebeard story with analytic work. First, the room of horror. Following Bachmann, I would suggest that a kind of psychic murder can happen subtly and invisibly, in familiar situations, when a child's dependent vulnerability is traumatically overwhelmed. Writing about trauma, Max Stern suggests that disorganising traumas occur 'normally' throughout development. If we are overwhelmed our defences against these traumas fail, but if we can access the resource to meet them they incite:

... an ever-growing urge towards mastery of reality [so] these ubiquitous traumata ... may even be regarded as responsible for the enormous development of functions specific to the human species, such as anticipation, learning etc., which through mastery of reality serve to avert the repetition of catastrophic experiences.

(Stern 1953, p. 203)

For the child, then, the opposite outcomes of emotional overwhelm and dismemberment, or learning and development, are in delicate balance. Emotional isolation increases the risk of overwhelm. If parental figures who are needed to support young vulnerability do not see that a situation is traumatic, a sense of hopelessness and betrayal may result and the child may retreat into isolation. And as I have said, the traumatic factors can be invisible because they are familiar or may seem to be acceptable because of powerful cultural and societal pressures.

My second theme concerns gender role norms, which are themselves subject to societal pressures. I should, at this point, declare that the heroine of the Bluebeard story - the nameless girl - is my main interest here. Coline Covington reviews the characteristics of the heroine in ancient Greek literature, and notes how a heroine usually 'sacrifices her life to uphold patriarchal authority and a higher moral order' (1989, p. 242). She says, 'These are women ruled by the masculine principle' (*ibid.*). Covington considers the essence of the hero's quest as being essentially about breaking free from mother and becoming independent of her. She then asks, 'Is the opposite to the hero ... the heroine? [and] Is [it] her [struggle] to break free from father?' (*ibid.*, p. 243) - this may be the father the heroine has turned to because she has been unable to internalize an absent or disconnected mother.

Women who, as children, experienced hopelessness and abandonment in the relationship with their mother may find it more difficult in mid-life to access their own autonomy; they may remain dependent in unsatisfactory relationships, emotionally vulnerable and terrified of betrayal. Their own Bluebeard ruthlessness may be projected into an angry partner, whilst social expectations and economic power imbalances keep them in place. The self-awareness that arises within the analytic situation can threaten the

safety of this compromised life and the price of change may seem too high. So analytic curiosity, thinking and emotional reality have all to be defended against – curiosity could get us all killed!

The developmental background to this stuck place is described by Christina Wieland as one of collusion:

... between father and daughter and between man and woman in order to allay father's anxiety about woman's, ultimately mother's, power. For the girl, sensing father's archaic fear of woman and femininity, will make sure she becomes his little girl, cute, flirtatious, non-threatening. It is as if the girl, wanting above all to be loved, gives up all her aggressive, active self in exchange for love.

(Wieland 1991, p. 139-140)

Enchantment in a father-daughter relationship can be developmentally important when the child is supported by *both* parents. But my theme here concerns the situation when the bond with mother has not been firmly established, so the girl may seek safety with father, identifying with his fear of woman and cutting off the threatening aspects of her own maturing womanhood.

It is interesting at this point to reflect that in the Bluebeard story, when the girl uses the key forbidden by her man and follows her own lively curiosity, she initiates change. The reality of the womanly dismemberment that then confronts her is so much worse than she could imagine – but she does find a way to survive.

So, my final theme, which is about finding a way to survive, breaks away from the drama of Bluebeard and focuses on recovery in the analytic situation. It is based on an idea of Michael Fordham's about the importance of 'steady state'. He suggests that 'one object of regression could be to realise steady states' (1985, p. 106) and that it is within the 'steady state' that the bridging between opposites occurs and is realised. An archetypal image of a steady state is that of a baby safely held in mother's arms. When things go well-enough in an analysis, states of disintegration and chaos can resolve into a steady state of containment with a sense of being safely held – and a reintegration of the maternal function brings with it the capacity to face one's own murderous feelings and the intolerable realities of a compromised life.

Anna

The themes of traumatic disorganisation and overwhelm - the room of horror - and of a heroine whose life has been sacrificed to uphold patriarchal authority, come together in the life of someone I will call 'Anna'. She came to analysis because of repeated breakdowns.

Anna's parents were mild and kind, but they were from a social class where childcare was left in the hands of a uniformed nanny. Her nanny ran a cruel and totalitarian regime, and Anna was cut off from her mother's care. Early in her analysis she described a scene that symbolized the nature of her childhood experience. She was in the nursery being forced by nanny to eat a cucumber sandwich. Like many small children she hated cucumber, and it was making her sick. Perhaps nanny thought this was the sort of food that ladies of high status should learn to eat; perhaps her demand for Anna to submit was an act of class envy and cruelty. Nanny began to count to ten, saying that the sandwich must be eaten by the time she reached 10. One, two, three, four - then mother popped into the room. Anna's heart surged with hope - perhaps now mother would rescue her. But when the situation was explained (by nanny), mother began to count alongside nanny and Anna was forced into swallowing the poison of compliance. Any safety or intimacy in her relationship with mother was denied: the nanny threatened her with terrible punishments if she said anything to mother, she had to keep silent. Anna could not understand why mother seemed so blind to the cruel reality, she was cut off from any understanding of her daughter's trauma. Perhaps it was because the nanny wore a uniform and was well-qualified to look after small children, or perhaps mother was living a compromised life, passively accepting the social mores within this upper class, patriarchal family.

There are transference implications to the scene in the nursery: Anna must have felt me to be from a different social class, perhaps I would be envious like the nanny? I might also have seemed powerful in my analytic role; who knew what interpretations I would try to force down her throat? But the truth is that, despite Anna rehearsing it to me several times, for years I did not really 'get' the traumatic impact of that scene, just as her mother had not when it happened. Shared experience is not always necessary for empathic resonance, but my perception of her privilege as a little girl growing up in a great house with a nanny, nursery and cucumber sandwiches may have been a factor in my failure to really feel into her vulnerability, her misery and her terror under the mundane brutalities of a nanny's totalitarian regime. Or perhaps, as Don Kalsched (1998) might say, as analyst I had become infected by Anna's dissociative defences: we both disengaged from that childhood experience in areas where full emotional experiencing would be unbearable.

Father did, once, rescue Anna when the nanny was squeezing cream into her mouth from a cooking tube, knowing that she hated cream. He intervened and was very angry with nanny. Anna was devoted to Father, his 'bear hugs' meant everything to her. She was his elf, his little companion, she would do anything to please him and always believed he could rescue her. But when she was only eight, father left the family for another woman. Mother went to bed for six months and Anna sat watching the television all day, hearing

jabbering voices in her head. Life after that was fractured between different homes, and there were wicked, hated step-parents, just like those from a fairy tale. By contrast, Anna became rather a Joan of Arc, passionately standing for all that is humane and kind. She fought heroically for the light against the engulfing darkness, but it was impossible, exhausting, uphill work, a fragile ego position and, when shocks occurred, she began to suffer breakdowns.

Hers is a family in which property and wealth are inherited by men. Compliant femininity was expected of Anna and her sister, it was the world for which they had been brought up. This they had accepted, it was the way things were done in their family. If the girls had an unconscious expectation that they would be looked after in return for their co-operation, they were to be disappointed. By the time I met Anna, she described herself to me as 'broken'. She was the victim of all that she had sacrificed to fit a prescribed identity, her aggression and agency compromised.

Analysis

At the start of our work together, Anna was married to an aspiring lawyer who was the family's provider. A very recent breakdown, when her baby was only about six months old, had been devastating. It had disrupted her capacity to be a mother and she dreaded the idea that she might transmit her own psychic fragility to her daughter.

Anna and I were wary of each other. She recounted a long list of psychic healers, counsellors, therapists and psychiatrists whom she had encountered during her illnesses. None of them had really helped her, and some had behaved in confusing ways such as asking her to co-author books, perhaps wanting to share the glamour of her social sophistication and background. They did not seem to have inspired her trust or her respect and she sketched them like cartoon characters.

I found her always driven to action, caught up in the lives of her many friends and dashing off to 'rescue' them in their predicaments, ignoring her own precarious state of mind. She told me how, as a young girl, she loved to gallop downhill dangerously on her horse. She really did not appreciate my suggesting that she should stay in London for her sessions. I felt as unsure as she was that I could do anything to help; she found me a colourless, drab figure, saying I seemed rather like a librarian.

There was no possibility that she would idealise me to invest in her analysis when she had a husband such as hers; what a paragon of all the virtues was he! In her glowing descriptions, he was kind, tolerant, loved by everyone, a saintly figure. Her devotion to him very effectively kept me out: he was her bedrock. She was in denial of, or dissociated from, aspects of his character that she might find difficult to cope with.

For several years I was in the passive position, tolerating my feelings of inferiority and ineffectiveness as she dedicated herself single-mindedly, perhaps rather omnipotently, to bring joy to her family and friends. My interpretations could sound, even to me, as if motivated by an envious, destructive attack on her creativity (like the nanny), unpalatable food. Or, I was hopelessly outside and beyond her different class and situation, perhaps echoing mother's emotional remoteness during her childhood. She continued to work with me because she so wanted to stay well for her daughter. She did stay well, as she had hoped, and her daughter began to grow up.

But clouds began to gather in Anna's marriage. Her husband resented all the time and effort she was putting into charitable activities for her daughter's school and for her friends. She was so exhausted at night after the marathon efforts of her days that she had little energy for him. A sense of psychological threat was developing; now she felt always under pressure, always on the precipice of breakdown. Her husband's black moods increased in frequency, but Anna remained in denial that anything very serious was happening in her marriage, and her dissociation again infected me. It came as a great shock when, during a holiday break, her text came telling me that her husband 'had gone over to the dark side'. He had fallen in love with someone else and he soon left.

Anna's symbiotic connection was ruptured, her world was ripped apart. The shock and pain were completely disorganizing. She had walked, like Bluebeard's wife, into a room of corpses – the severed parts of a broken identity that she had built to meet what she understood as her side of the bargain of innocent dependence in a patriarchal system. Now she had walked into a psychic space that had always been there but had been unknown, denied.

For the first time, I was witness to the full impact of a return of her infant terrors as she again experienced the overwhelm of betrayed dependency. She lost all capacity for bodily or psychic regulation. She could not eat because of crippling anxiety and nausea; she rapidly lost weight. She came to her sessions with absolute regularity but would arrive shaking and retching, disorientated. The train journey to sessions (in this state she was unable to drive) was a daily challenge, though our meetings provided some structure through a chaotic time. With a vertiginous fear of falling still deeper into depression, she had intrusive thoughts, the same anxieties over and over again. She was virtually sleepless for many months, feeling 'wired' but in mesmerized inertia.

She was desperate to find some secure plan to hold onto, but it was extremely hard to take in information and she could not concentrate to read. A further maddening twist of the knife was her horror that she could not offer emotional support for her daughter: Anna's daughter was only a little older than she had been when her own father left her mother.

Over time, Anna found herself able to bear the horror and grief of the breakdown of her old life, her disappointed expectations. This all happened

several years ago and since then she has walked a long road of recovery. There is no rescue from traumatic overwhelm, but I remained non-intrusively and consistently there as Anna worked through challenge after challenge. Using me not as her bedrock, but as a huge, primitive mammalian presence (she thought of me as an elephant, or like a whale who would push her up to the water's surface when she began to sink into the depths), she began to find a desire to live. She took up boxing, she engaged a divorce lawyer. She developed a self-image of a horse who gallops through fire and emerges as a tiger.

She plumbed the Bluebeard in her husband to its depths during their years of conflict over a divorce. She learned ways to combat his aggression without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. It was slow, hard work but she had to do it for the sake of her daughter as well as for herself. The friends to whom she had always been loyal were now loyal to her, and she was able to listen to the advice of her lawyer. Finally, the law created a bridge on which husband and wife could meet on more equal terms as their relationship dissolved, neither murdering the other.

Conclusion

Anna's analysis has been a place of safety where she has found with me the steady state she needed to process emotional overwhelm, a place of bridging between the opposites. She found an inner, as well as an outer, 'other' who could help her break through the restrictions of her socially constructed identity. As the outer 'other' I was very different from her, but in the early years of our work was able to bear without retaliation her dismissal and also sometimes her denigration. This helped her digest and detoxify such dynamics, which had been, and still were, to be borne in her own life. Anna's analysis proved to be a place of development in which she became more able to master the realities of human aggression and to find, at last, her true response.

Bluebeard offered a metaphor for thinking about patriarchy and power, vulnerable femininity and the experience of traumatic overwhelm. The fairy tale also, however, tells us about curiosity that leads to the recognition of terrible truths, driving its naïve heroine on towards recovery and development.

I hope to have made some sense of these, through the story of one woman.

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 TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Prenant pour point de départ l'histoire de *Barbe Bleue*, l'auteur examine comment le débordement traumatique peut se produire dans l'enfance dans des situations de tous les jours qui ont une qualité psychique meurtrière. Par exemple, le régime totalitaire d'une assistante maternelle (nourrice) peut être invisible aux yeux de parents régis par des normes collectives sociales et culturelles. Un enfant émotionnellement à distance de sa mère et qui idéalise un père incarnant un système patriarcal puissant peut rester dépendant d'une manière naïve étant marié et incapable de se débrouiller de la réalité de l'agressivité humaine. L'article décrit le travail analytique avec une femme qui a vécu des dépressions à répétition et qui devait renoncer à une identité fragile, construite selon des normes sociales, afin d'établir son orientation personnelle authentique.

Mots clés: *Barbe Bleue*, patriarcal, débordement traumatique, normes concernant les rôles liés au genre, assistante maternelle, dépression

Ausgehend von der Geschichte von Blaubart betrachtet die Autorin, wie traumatische Überwältigungen von psychisch mörderischer Qualität in alltäglichen Situationen der Kindheit auftreten können. Zum Beispiel mag das totalitaristische Regime einer Kinderfrau für Eltern unsichtbar sein, die ihrerseits von kollektiven sozialen und kulturellen Normen bestimmt sind. Ein Kind, das fern der Mutter ist und einen Vater idealisiert, der ein mächtiges patriarchales System verkörpert, kann in der Ehe naiv abhängig bleiben und unfähig sein, mit den Realitäten menschlicher Aggression fertig zu werden. Der Aufsatz beschreibt die analytische Arbeit mit einer Frau, die wiederholt Zusammenbrüche erlitten hatte und eine fragile, sozial konstruierte Identität aufgeben mußte, um ihre eigene wahre Orientierung zu finden.

Schlüsselwörter: Blaubart, patriarchal, traumatische Überwältigung, Normen der Geschlechtsrollen, Kinderfrau, Zusammenbruch

Iniziando con la storia di Barbablù, l'autrice considera come una inondazione traumatica, con una qualità potenzialmente omicida, possa avvenire in situazioni quotidiane dell'infanzia; per esempio, il regime totalitario di una bambinaia può essere invisibile a genitori guidati da norme sociali e culturali. Un bambino distante dalla madre e che idealizza un padre che incarna un potente sistema patriarcale, può rimanere ingenuamente dipendente nel matrimonio e incapace di affrontare le realtà

dell'aggressività umana. L'articolo descrive il lavoro analitico con una donna, che aveva sofferto ripetuti crolli ed aveva bisogno di rinunciare ad una identità fragile, costruita per la società, al fine di definire il proprio vero orientamento.

Parole chiave: Barbablù, patriarcale, inondazione traumatica, ruoli gender, bambinaia, crollo

Начиная со сказки про Синюю Бороду, автор рассматривает, как травматическая охваченность убийственного для психики качества может случиться в повседневной жизни ребенка. Например, тоталитарный режим, введенный няней и невидимый для родителей. Ребенок, который удален от матери и идеализирует отца – носителя мощной патриархальной системы, может оставаться наивно зависимым в браке и не уметь справляться с человеческой агрессией. В статье описана аналитическая работа с женщиной, которая страдала от повторяющихся эмоциональных срывов. Ей было необходимо отказаться от хрупкой, социально сконструированной идентичности, чтобы установить свои подлинные ориентиры.

Ключевые слова: Синяя Борода, патриархальное, травматический захват, гендерные ролевые нормы, няня, срыв

Comenzando con la historia de Barba Azul, la autora considera cómo una devastación traumática puede ocurrir en situaciones cotidianas de infancias con cualidades de asesinato psíquico; por ejemplo, el régimen totalitario de una abuelita puede resultar invisible a los padres regulados por normas colectivas sociales y culturales. Un niño controlado por la madre y que idealiza a un padre que representa un sistema profundamente patriarcal, puede permanecer ingenuamente dependiente del matrimonio e incapaz de hacerle frente a las realidades de la agresión humana. El artículo describe el trabajo analítico con una mujer que sufrió repetidas crisis y necesitó renunciar a una frágil identidad, socialmente construida para poder establecer su propia y verdadera orientación.

Palabras clave: Barba Azul, patriarcal, devastación traumática, normas basadas en roles de género, abuelita, crisis

文章以蓝胡子的故事作为开始，作者讨论了创伤性的压制可以出现在童年日常情境中，表现为心理谋杀的特性。比如，在集体社会和文化规范统治之下的父母可能看不出保姆所持有的极权主义状态。远离母亲并把父亲理想化的孩子，体现了一个有力的父权体系，它会维持对婚姻天真的依赖，无法应对人类攻击性的事实。文章描述了和一位女性的分析性工作，她重复性地经历了崩溃的状态，她需要放弃一个脆弱的、被社会建构的身份，以便于建构她自己的真实取向。

关键词：蓝胡子，父权，创伤性的压制，性别角色规范，保姆，崩溃
