

**Agentic Childhoods in At-Home Theatricals:
How Taming Perrault's "Bluebeard" Empowered the Victorian Girl**

Charles Perrault's "Bluebeard," a fairy tale which deals with the serial killer husband narrative and warns about the grave consequences of female curiosity, has been adapted, transformed, and reinterpreted thousands of times over, across different media. Jack Zipes, a scholar of comparative literature and cultural studies, emphasizes that "Little did Perrault know when he created the fairy tale about the serial killer Bluebeard that his villain would become a mematic icon in most Western societies by the 21st-century" (Zipes 3). If one were to think of any story about a male serial killer in literature and film, it is quite possible that early tales, such as this one, are the source of inspiration. One small, yet striking adaptation occurs during a scene in Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*, where children retell the story of "Bluebeard" on stage at their Christmas pageant. Here, they sing a tune about this dangerous man, whose ominous shadow is projected behind them. What is interesting about this is how the words they recite deal with dark themes, yet their tone of voice and the tune they sing are rather bright and whimsical. It is fascinating to think about the extent to which the young actors in this film understood the underlying themes of "Bluebeard", or to acknowledge the possibility that they were simply given the music and nursery rhymes to learn, without much awareness of these deeper meanings.

This calls into question the ways in which Perrault's tale has been modified, to domesticate the story for young people who either read, watched, or performed it. Several scholars have commented on the mature themes in this story. One notes how it "contains perhaps the most deeply disturbing explicit adult material..." and that Bluebeard "perpetrates his evil on young women in their sexual maturity" (Warner 123). Another suggests that "if he really hadn't wanted [his wife] to enter, he wouldn't have given her the key. Bluebeard wants her to transgress

his interdiction so that he can kill her” (Ruddick 348). These implications evidently go beyond the mere plot. While younger children may not be able to completely understand ideas about sexual predators, manipulation, misogyny, and domestic violence, the tale would have to be slightly altered, at least, granted that they could internalize these.

The taming of this narrative has been accomplished by Marion Adams in her *Bluebeard: A Nursery Tale Play for Boys and Girls*, the primary text this research project is centred on. Published in 1904 in London, as part of his cheaply printed and sold Books for the Bairns Series, W.T. Stead intended for this chapbook to support the development of literacy skills. The paratext also confirms that this play was designed to be performed in the home, for leisure and entertainment purposes. Gathered from the contributions of various children’s literature and theatre scholars, existing research on these widely popular Victorian at-home theatricals proposes the idea that this type of a project, pastime, and art form provided nineteenth-century English girls with the opportunity to transgress cultural and gender stereotypes and expectations of their society. At a time when girls and women were considered subordinate and subject to male authority, resulting in their voices being suppressed, Adams’ retelling of Perrault’s fairy tale into her children’s theatrical aimed to position the Victorian girl as actor and agent. This was achieved not only by creating characters and roles that departed from the realities of Victorian girls’ quotidian lives, but also through the processes of reading, practice, preparation, and performance. In fact, Edel Lamb points out that reading, especially for girls, served as a means for accessing knowledge, forming identities (Lamb 153), and producing alternate gendered childhoods (154), all of which were associated with at-home theatrical adaptations of subversive fairy tales. In the context of juvenile theatricals, young people had to learn and perform their lines. This, along with merely understanding the content of any story, required at least some

degree of literacy. It appears Stead had the right idea by noting the importance of literacy skills upon an age of increasing readership.

Using interdisciplinary, literary/historical approaches that closely examine Adams' text through the lenses of cultural history, women's studies, literary history, and print culture, this essay will uncover the kinds of childhoods for and in this theatrical adaptation of "Bluebeard". It will attempt to do so by first briefly highlighting the context of Victorian at-home theatricals and the expanding children's literature market at the time. Following this, it will draw on discourses of theatre, Orientalism, adaptation, and gender. This will not only chart the change between the source text and adaptation, but it will also demonstrate how performing this specific play gave young English girls a sense of agency by allowing them to imagine alternate childhoods and identities that were not confined by Eurocentric, patriarchal structures. As this research paper unfolds, it should become clear that it was essentially the domestication of Perrault's "Bluebeard" in Marion Adams' *Bluebeard: A Nursery Tale Play for Boys and Girls*, which paved the way for more feminist retellings, interpretations, and manifestations of this fairy tale.