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To what ends do interdictions function within the fairytale tradition?

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'Be quiet and don't move' (Straparola)

Interdictions in Charles Perrault's *Bluebeard* and Giovan Francesco Straparola's *Biancabella and the Snake* (*Biancabella*) function as narrative catalysts and ideological mechanisms testing the limits of authority. Aside from enforcing patriarchal command, both tales expose the instability of power detached from traditional, nobility-led hierarchies. In *Bluebeard*, bourgeois authority asserts itself through overt and violent control, whereas in *Biancabella*, it is mediated through female bonds but adopts patriarchal logic. However, in both, the violence provoked by disobedience reveals these alternative orders as self-destructive which collapse to reaffirm the noble patriarchy, weaponising moral warning as a tool of political social consciousness.

In *Bluebeard*, interdictions stage a form of patriarchal domestic control that regulates and contains female behaviour through marital ownership, prohibitive command, and the seemingly incontestable authority of the husband, whose authority is paraded as natural, but destabilised by the exposure of his ignoble lineage. Bluebeard's social control over his wife operates first through characterisation and narrative. The unnamed wife is defined only in relation to others, first as from a family 'of quality', implying nobility – unlike Bluebeard, whose biological difference is marked by name – and then possessively as 'his wife', demonstrating marital ownership (Perrault 732). This denial of individuality prefigures systematic confinement to a narrow set of permitted behaviours, expressed through contradictory instructions: She may 'make up [her] mind' about marrying Bluebeard, but this is rendered illusory as the real 'choice [was] up to the mother'. Furthermore, when Bluebeard 'ask[s] her to amuse herself [...] during his absence', saying to 'go everywhere', his interdiction 'forbid[s]' her from entering one 'little room' (732). His initial approach of offering unrestricted freedom and equal standing in 'ask[ing]' her is immediately undercut by the biblical force of 'forbid', affirming absolute authority even in his absence. The room's 'little'-ness underscores the arbitrariness of his command, which relies on no justification as

he demands unquestioning obedience from ‘his wife’, foregrounding idealised passive femininity which she must either accept or deny, propelling the narrative into a violent confrontation between Bluebeard’s patriarchal command and her female agency.

Like Bluebeard’s wife, Straparola’s Biancabella faces interdictions as social control. However, the authority figure that is her sister, Samaritana, complicates purely patriarchal readings. Samaritana’s first command, ‘Be quiet and don’t move’ (Straparola 407), instantly suppresses Biancabella’s agency. Her warning, ‘if you will obey my commands, I’ll make you happy, but if [...] you disobey me, you’ll be the most unhappy and dissatisfied maiden’ (407), mirrors patriarchal rhetoric in linking female well-being to female submission. Like Bluebeard, Samaritana asserts dominance through surveillance and absolutist rhetoric, threatening punishment. However, her interdictions, while restrictive like Bluebeard’s, enable female collaboration and production: Biancabella’s obedience allows Samaritana to ‘endow [...] her with [...] qualities,’ producing ‘precious stones [...] from her head’ (409). Marcia Lieberman observes that ‘[s]ubmissive, meek, passive female behaviour is suggested and rewarded by the action of these stories’ (390) which is partly true as Bluebeard’s wife gains access to his ‘money [and] jewels’ (Perrault 732), and Biancabella’s obedience generates wealth, but Biancabella’s riches derive from her sister’s active gifts. This wealth tied to ‘comb[ing] and shap[ing Biancabella’s] blond hair’ (Straparola 409), links economic value to feminine cosmetology. Far from being merely passive, this female-led production, stimulated by Samaritana’s interdictions, subversively redefines the domestic sphere as productive rather than ornamental, placing women in an unusual position of power for contemporary Venetian norms. If interdiction in Perrault operates as patriarchal domestic control, Samaritana’s interdictions in *Biancabella* rework the very mechanisms of social control, working within patriarchal codes of female obedience to transform a structure designed to regulate female behaviour into a site of agency.

However, this ability to turn interdiction into power is depicted as unnatural, undercutting feminist readings. Samaritana, who wields masculine-coded authority, is a ‘snake’ (Straparola 407). Snakes have no easily distinguishable sex, creating a sense of androgyny around Samaritana’s power. For Suzanne Magnanini, Samaritana’s transgression of natural boundaries ‘mirrors the [...] ability to slip the bounds of social hierarchies’ (52), but this slippage problematises her power as the tentative androgyny and phallic snake imagery produce only a fragile link to masculine authority, which, in its instability, tends towards absolute assertion, depending on policing Biancabella through interdictions.

Interdictions propel the narratives of both texts by suggesting a female choice between obedience and disobedience. While this grants women narrative visibility, this apparent choice is coercive and pre-structured by the ‘anger’ (Perrault 732), ‘unhapp[iness]’ (Straparola 407) and violence provoked by disobedience. In *Bluebeard*, interdiction simultaneously stages female disobedience and pathologises it, performatively limiting female agency. Bluebeard's wife experiences ‘impatience [...] to such a degree that [...] she ran down a back staircase in such haste that she nearly broke her neck’ (Perrault 733). Rendered irrational and destructively hysterical, she experiences ‘temptation [...] so strong that she could not withstand it’ (733). The syntax reduces her to an object acting on uncontrollable urges, ironically overriding her direct defiance, mirroring Bluebeard’s control over her through form. As Jack Zipes asserts, ‘moral standards are set only by the people in power’ (854), reflecting the interdiction that appears to prefigure female resistance when her agency is caught within Bluebeard’s standards that pathologises activity and validates violence.

Bluebeard’s immediate violence, deployed to reassert obedience, highlights his fragile order by revealing that the apparent freedom he grants women are merely illusory and confined within tightly prescribed limits. When his wife enters the chamber, she drops the

key, leaving it ‘stained with blood’ (Perrault 733). The key is ‘enchanted [with] no way of cleaning it’ (733), permanently marking her disobedience. Upon seeing it, he ‘know[s]’ (734) that she has discovered his murdered wives and decrees her punishment: ‘you shall enter it, and you shall take your place among the ladies you saw there [...] You must die’ (734). The ‘stained’ key evolves into the objectified female body itself, becoming the site where moral failure is physically inscribed. Her ordered death conveys brutal male authority, but Bluebeard rhetorically reframes this by saying she ‘shall enter’ and ‘take [her] place’, performatively obscuring his direct involvement. He ironically grants her symbolic power by foregrounding her activity while transforming her death into a perverse re-enactment of her defiance, overriding her agency with his control. His repeated imperatives mimic judicial sentencing, highlighting his class pretensions as he self-performs as the fountain of justice. Rather than mere arbitrariness, he casts the punishment as moral law that ‘must’ occur. However, his failed interdiction reveals the overstated punishment exposing his fragile control, and his bourgeois authority relies on shifting performances of power that undermine his stability and produce the illusion of female agency, only to violently contain it.

Biancabella’s tale displaces authority onto female figures while similarly caught in Bluebeard’s paradox. Like *Bluebeard*, *Biancabella* hinges on female agency with interdictions prefiguring disobedience, but female power remains bound within patriarchal logic that anticipates defiance to legitimise control. Samaritana's only explicit interdiction is her ‘order [...] not to tell anyone what had happened’ (Straparola 409), but her most significant interdiction is a lacuna, as neither Biancabella nor the readers learn what constitutes defiance. Biancabella is only vaguely aware that ‘she had not followed her sister’s orders in some way’ (410). This omission symbolically withholds information, extending Bluebeard’s model of overt control and reflecting the invisible restraints on women. Alison Lurie, cited by Cristina Mazzoni, claims that fairy tale ‘women are as competent and active

as men' (71), but such activity is restrained in *Biancabella* by unspoken interdictions demanding obedience. Omitting the interdiction that provokes Samaritana's abandonment suggests that obedience itself may be Samaritana's construction, a development from Bluebeard's illusion of female agency as it produces Biancabella's 'defiance' without her knowledge. This manipulation is not only patriarchal but is mediated through sororal bonds, complicating Lurie's idea of female competency. Samaritana's power reproduces an internalised, punitive logic of patriarchal command, simulating defiance to validate punishment as social control.

Straparola only hints at Samaritana's perception of disobedience when she abandons Biancabella after her wedding, provoking a clash between female and male authority as Biancabella's father gives 'his consent to the nuptials' (409) but Samaritana does not, highlighting how readily patriarchal authority overrides Samaritana's through conflicting control. Interdictions thus expose the instability of female power, as Samaritana's power is generative but dependent on controlling and threatening Biancabella, and it collapses within patriarchal structures, pre-emptively undone when Biancabella marries with her father's permission rather than Samaritana's. As Biancabella moves from Samaritana's household to Ferrandino's, Samaritana's threat that she will be the 'most unhappy [...] maiden' (407) mutates into the 'impetuous stepmother [that] plans to kill Biancabella' (410). Dennis Romano explains how '[b]y limiting their access to urban space, Venetian men attempted to guide and control women' (340), a control echoed in Biancabella's ejection into the 'woods' (Straparola 410). The stepmother extends this to a permanent end to agency: the 'servants' in their 'pity [...] cut off both [Biancabella's] hands from her body and tore her eyes out' (410). This mutilation, framed ironically as mercy in 'decid[ing] not to murder her' (410), cements Biancabella's total violation and lack of bodily autonomy. Thus, interdictions in *Biancabella* function ideologically, staging a problematic female power that, in detachment from kingly

influence, adopts masculine logic only to become self-destructive, demanding literal blind and bodily submission. Ultimately, Samaritana's power is destabilised by her detachment from patriarchal sanction, and Bluebeard's ignoble lineage similarly casts his authority as aberrant, framing the interdiction in both tales as dangerous when outside the bounds of divinely or nobly sanctioned male sovereignty.

If both tales ended with a linear progression of interdiction, disobedience and punishment, they could be easily categorised by their violent containment of women. However, both end cyclically with marital resolution that reintegrates the women into patriarchal order. Lieberman calls Bluebeard's wife a 'helpless damsel-victim' (390), but this neglects the active, however small, role she plays in her rescue. Though Bluebeard demands her death 'immediately' (Perrault 734), she subversively delays it through exaggerated submission. She 'flung herself at [his] feet, weeping and begging his pardon with all the signs of true repentance' (734). By lowering herself and pleading for life, she assumes the ultimate pose of subservience, but this paradoxically grants her power. By performing the 'signs' of obedience, she buys 'a little time to say [...] prayers', which she uses to orchestrate her rescue, telling her sister to 'signal [their brothers] to make haste' (734). Complicating readings of *Bluebeard* as a mere warning against female disobedience, Perrault constructs a house where disobedience becomes justified. 'Bluebeard', marked in name by his unnatural body and defined by bourgeois wealth rather than inherited nobility, embodies a form of self-made wealth and authority that was perceived as threatening to King Louis XIV's noble hierarchy that relied on blood nobility, a threat which Bluebeard figures through the brutal violence against the wife's noble body. His house becomes a microcosm of this power, collapsing from within as when he is reduced to animalistic rage, he 'roars so loudly that the whole house shook' (734). The brothers' murder of Bluebeard and the wife's remarriage 'to a very worthy man, who made her forget [...] Bluebeard' (735) symbolise the restoration of a

stronger, nobler and stabler patriarchy, devoid of the bourgeois order that necessitated female disobedience in the first place.

Biancabella ends with a similar harmonious reintegration, though women play a larger role. Samaritana and Biancabella's bond is restored only once Samaritana aligns her power with patriarchal order by helping her 'see again' (Straparola 412), restore her hands, and orchestrate her reunion with King Ferrandino. Samaritana commands the room, 'order[ing people] to comb Biancabella's [...] hair' to 'convince the king' of her identity (414). Her subversive authority within a room that hosts the king, who is supposedly the ultimate source of power though he is silent while she speaks, contrasts her earlier dissolution under Biancabella's father's orders. This reveals a strengthened power permitted precisely because it facilitates the reunion of the royal couple. She directly enables Biancabella's production of 'legitimate heirs' (415), with 'legitimate' conveying a distinctly political tone that aligns the ending with the assurance of a supposedly righteous order. This finality symbolises a female agency that is active but only acceptable if it is bound within and serves a patriarchal framework. Thus, both Biancabella, guided by Samaritana's interdictions, and Bluebeard's wife survive only to see their eventual marriages restore noble hierarchy, reinforcing a vision of legitimate authority in which female agency is tolerated only when it preserves male-sanctioned order.

In conclusion, interdictions in *Bluebeard* and *Biancabella* operate as covertly political mechanisms that rework and reinforce the ego boundaries of patriarchal nobility. Far from simply controlling women, the tales stage deviant and destructive social orders while containing female transgression by manipulating it into a stabilising power. In *Bluebeard*, Perrault exposes the deeper instability of the bourgeois order that provoked female obedience by momentarily legitimising it, and in *Biancabella*, female authority is only able to maintain a restorative, generative status insofar as it serves the patriarchal nobility. Together, both texts

confirm that defiance from ‘legitimate’ (Straparola 415) frameworks of noble patriarchy collapses self-consciously, reaffirming a noble patriarchy capable of ‘rescuing’ and wholesomely reabsorbing women, an ending veiled as moral resolution but cements the weaponisation of fairytales as political propaganda.

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