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The key of knowledge

Abstract

Keys are used to gain access, knowledge, and power but what happens when these everyday items are transformed into supernatural objects? Do they, in turn, become a source of knowledge and power? Charles Perrault played with this concept by portraying a key as a magical lie detector in his infamous 'Bluebeard' fairy tale (1695). In this story, the husband is portrayed as a serial killer who uses the lure of forbidden knowledge to manipulate his wife and instigate a series of events to justify her murder. This structuring of crime and punishment within the framework of marriage makes this fairy tale unique.

The scholarship attached to Bluebeard's key includes an examination of this object as a metaphor for female sexual curiosity and infidelity (Bettelheim, 1991, p. 301), and a means of accessing feminine consciousness (Estes, 2017, p. 40). In his 1796 English translation of the French text, R.S. Gent writes that the 'key was a Fairy' (p. 28). Gent's words stirred my imagination; What if the key had been a woman, magically entrapped as a key? Would she tell a different story? This creative interrogation explores the gendered violence and power structures in Perrault's 'Bluebeard' narrative.

'The key of knowledge' uses a socio-historical, Foucauldian framework and creative writing research methodology to examine Perrault's 'Bluebeard' as a discourse of disciplinary punishment.

Due to her curiosity and disobedience to patriarchal law, Bluebeard's wife has been linked to Eve and Pandora (Tatar, 2004, p. 3). This creative interrogation explores the personal cost of female autonomy in relation to the accrual of knowledge in 'The Fall' (the biblical story of Adam and Eve), and Perrault's 'Bluebeard'. It does this by using creative fiction to deconstruct Eve's story in relation to the 'Bluebeard' narrative and subvert the constructions of negative femininity portrayed in these pre-existing stories. The comparative narrative structuring invites readers to question the dominant gender ideologies that have evolved over time in relation to Eve and Bluebeard's wife. Through the writing process, Eve's voice emerged and she became the key of knowledge.

A literary/poetic-prose style is used throughout the Eve narrative. The use of first-person narration creates a strong, mature feminine voice. This styling creates a foil for Bluebeard's young wife, Genevieve, and the historical romance conventions embedded in the Bluebeard scenes. These sections were written using a hybrid literary/historical romance/fairy tale writing style. Genevieve is portrayed as a victim of domestic abuse through third person, multi-character focalisation. Her vulnerability, and transition from besotted bride to disillusioned wife, challenges the 'happily ever after' fairy tale trope traditionally constructed in historical romance fiction and fairy tale retellings. Collectively, these narrative techniques highlight the fragility of feminine power and autonomy within patriarchal societies.

'The key of knowledge' offers an alternative socio-historical, Foucauldian interpretation of the 'Bluebeard' fairy tale. This story adds to 'Bluebeard' scholarship and to our understanding of how creative writing facilitates the research process. It further contributes to feminist scholarship related to fairy tale revisioning.

'The key of knowledge' is an extract from *Silence the Key*, the creative component of my Creative Writing PhD thesis. This greater body of work uses a socio-historical, Foucauldian lens to examine Perrault's 1695 fairy tales as discourses of disciplinary punishment and adds to the emerging genre of Australian literary fairy tales.

Biographical Note

Claudia R. Barnett is undertaking a Creative Writing PhD at Deakin university. She has completed a Master of Arts in Writing and Literature, also from Deakin, and was the Editor-In-Chief of the Australian Fairy Tale Society's ezine (Issues No 5 & 6) in 2017-2018. Barnett is interested in how femininity is represented in 17th Century French fairy tales.

Keywords

Bluebeard – Perrault – Foucault – disciplinary punishment – fairy tale reversions

English translation of Dead Sea Scroll #1007 – The Book of Eve

My husband named me Eve. Mother of all mankind. Because mine was the womb whence all others came. But our descendants use my name as a curse. When the crops fail and women die in childbirth, I hear their whispered prayers: Protect us from all evil, Lord. Wash us clean of our mother's sins. Take away the pain of childbirth and let the land grow fruitful once more.

Others cast sly glances my way. Perhaps we can kill her, they say. Smother her as she sleeps. Then the frozen earth will soften and yield to our hands. We will bring forth an abundant harvest.

But fear of retribution from a God they have never seen stops the flow of poison before it is poured into my cup. They know this truth: He still loves me. The Creator. The one who sowed the seeds in Eden and sculpted me from the clay man's bones. I am his daughter. Breath of his breath, grown from his Word. Linked through the flesh of his first-born son.

But it does not stop their wanting. In their ignorance they think my death will break the scourge on our bloodline. But it is a double curse and cannot be undone. Mother to daughter, father to son. Fruit of the womb and fruit of the earth are brought forth with laboured pain. That was our punishment for eating the forbidden fruit. The man and I, who grew like saplings in the Garden of Eden.

You will cultivate and guard the garden, the Creator told Adam. But do not eat from the tree that gives knowledge of what is good and what is bad. He did not mention the other tree, hidden in the depths of the forest. The tree whose nectar gives eternal life.

Château de Merbleu,

France, 1693

Henri, Comte de Merbleu, had been so patient with his new bride. He had fulfilled her youthful dreams of courtship by writing her poetry and sending her pretty trinkets. And after the wedding he had played the ardent lover with remarkable ease for she was an enchanting little creature with her ink-stained curls and merry laugh. But now the stage was lit and the last act had begun.

Henri examined his wife across the breakfast table. She was gazing through the window with an absorbed expression on her face. Tiny furrows marred the skin of her brow and the hand that stirred her tea trembled ever so slightly. His pulse leapt. Had she opened the forbidden door? He studied the long, slim fingers and the pink curvature of her nails. The gold band on her left ring finger gleamed in the morning light. It was still shiny and unmarked after three months of marriage.

‘You look pale, *chérie*. I trust you have not been exerting yourself in my absence?’

Genevieve's hand jerked, and liquid splashed over the rim of her teacup.

‘Forgive me, Henri.’ She smiled and pushed back the damp hair that clung to her temples.

He motioned for the footman to refill his wine goblet. ‘You appear distracted. I have caught you glancing at the clock several times since we sat down.’ He took note of her sharp inhalation and watched in fascination as beads of moisture materialised above her upper lip. She lifted her napkin and delicately applied it to the corners of her mouth. Henri smiled. ‘Perhaps you have grown bored with my company?’

‘Not at all, *mon cher*. I have begun refurbishing the west wing, as we discussed, and the task of choosing the correct wallpaper has me somewhat preoccupied.’

For a just a moment he felt a fission of regret. Off all his brides, she was the one who most resembled Eve. Eve of the Garden who had woven Madonna lilies through her hair. It was the air of innocence they both projected towards the world.

The Book of Eve

Adam’s rib. Daughter of bone. For a thousand years I have roamed these desert plains in a swirling tempest of regret. A lonely traveller in a sea of nomads. Before I consumed wisdom and swallowed the bitter seeds of consciousness, I was as naïve as the birds or a lamb frolicking in the meadow. I lacked discernment to judge what was good and what was bad and trusted the blue sea serpent who entered the garden in the spring of long shadows. He came seeking power – for knowledge is power – and we bid him welcome, the clay man and I, with the innocence of childhood clouding our gaze. In those halcyon days we became a family. All the animals and birds were our friends. We played in the meadows and dwelt in the forest, Adam, the sea serpent and I.

Until the blue snake stole wisdom from the glowing red fruit and told me wonderful tales. You can learn this too, Eve, he said. Wouldn’t you like to know how the earth and sea were formed and how our bodies were made? He taught me the natural laws of the universe and told me that I need never be cold again. This is how you make fire, Eve. See, strike the flint against the stone and the leaves will catch alight.

I trusted him and I was tempted because I yearned to learn more. And so did Adam. He never said a word during our discussions and feigned indifference. But he did not move away and afterwards, I observed the thoughtful expression on his face.

Château de Merbleu,

France, 1693

The courier had promised to deliver the package by nine o'clock in the morning but it was now 11:15. Genevieve dropped her hands beneath the table to hide their trembling.

Henri caught the scent of her perspiration and stroked his beard to hide his smile. The soft blue strands curled around his fingers like tentacles and tickled the palm of his hand. He gently pulled free.

'You appear overheated, Genevieve. Shall we open the window?'

She held up her palm. 'No. I'm fine, thank you.'

'Did you attend the *fête* at Versailles?'

'Yes.' Genevieve cleared her throat. 'Yes. Anne-Catherine accompanied me. It was overcrowded as usual. We stayed at the *hôtel de Merbleu* overnight.'

His golden eyes fixated on the pulse pounding in her throat. He could hear the rapid beating of her heart and the gentle whoosh of blood flowing through the vessels. His elliptical pupils dilated and contracted in rapid sequence as he imagined the slight resistance against the scalpel when he sliced open the skin. He would peel it back gently as though she were a ripe peach and expose the tendons and fibrous red meat beneath the surface.

'And did you and your sister entertain guests here, at the *château*?'

'Yes.'

Henri's concentrated regard made her want to bolt from the room. The key! Had he guessed the truth? If he saw the blood stains on the key he would kill her too. But she sensed that if she ran, he would pounce. Genevieve averted her gaze to the linen tablecloth and rubbed the edges of the fabric between her fingers. Steady, she told herself. Stay calm. Breathe.

'I held a fairy tale *soirée* here, two nights ago. It was a great success. All the Fairies attended. Madame d'Aulnoy, Madame l'Heritier...'

She jumped when Henri's fist landed on the table and drew her shoulders inwards. If she had looked up she would have noticed the laughter lurking in his eyes.

'Those women are fools and preach revolutionary nonsense! Whoever heard of women owning their own property or arranging their own marriage? Imagine the chaos that would cause. They should be locked away.'

Genevieve forced herself to respond. She needed to distract him until the courier arrived.

'You allowed Anne-Catherine and I to decide which of us would marry you.'

Henri laughed. 'Your uncle and I gave you the illusion of choice – marriage to me or take holy orders. We both knew that your financial circumstances and aversion to convent life would dictate your response.'

'That's not true! I fell in love with you, Henri.'

'Love. Such enchantment did not exist even in Eden.'

‘I’m sure Eve loved Adam. It was the snake she despised.’

An icy wind whipped through the room and rustled the drapery and tablecloth. The hearth fire flickered in response. Genevieve looked around for the source of the draft but the windows and door were shut. A hard grip encircled her wrist. She looked up and met the rage in Henri’s eyes.

‘You are forbidden to associate with those women!’ He tightened the pressure of his fingers until she cried out. ‘And you will not fill your head with their stories.’

‘Henri, *please*. You’re hurting me!’

Remembered images from the hidden chamber made her want to scream. *Women hanging like marionettes. Mutilated bodies suspended from the wall, bound by iron shackles around their wrists. She guessed their identities from the wedding rings that glinted in the glow from her lantern. Six rings, six bodies, six dead wives. The stench of blood and decay coated her tongue. She could taste it as it slipped down her throat. Her stomach clenched and she gagged. The key fell from her hand...*

‘I will obey, Henri! I will obey!’

Henri twisted her wrist. Genevieve screamed. Was it broken? She froze when his other hand reached out and his fingers found the bounding pulse at her throat. She braced herself for more pain. Perhaps this was the end. Perhaps this was the way he had murdered the other wives and then carved out their throats with a knife. She drew back in shock when Henri’s fingers caressed the smooth, soft skin and slid across to the other side. From this close angle she could see the individual colours in his beard; turquoise, indigo, periwinkle blue, an oceanic palette stirred up by a storm.

Henri glanced up and met her grey gaze. For a few moments he stared as though transfixed, and then the icy breeze circulating around the room stopped as suddenly as it had come. He kissed the back of her hand.

‘My apologies, *chérie*. I have behaved somewhat impetuously.’ He wiped away her tears with a monogrammed handkerchief and kissed her swollen eyelids. ‘Why must you challenge me? If you hadn’t goaded me, I would not have lost my temper.’

‘Forgive me, Henri,’ she whispered.

He nodded and returned to his seat. ‘It is not your fault. Eve’s daughters are all the same. Wilful and foolish. They think that by accruing knowledge they can rise above their station. Your Fairies are no different.’

Genevieve cradled her injured wrist against her waist and pushed back her chair.

‘If you will excuse me, Henri. I have some correspondence to attend to...’

‘Wait!’

Genevieve turned back and saw that malice had returned to his features. He stretched out his palm.

‘I have need of my keys, Madame wife.’

The Book of Eve

The woman who rebelled against God had the mind and innocence of a child still attached to its mother’s breast. The serpent bid me eat and I ate the fruit, then offered it to my husband. Knowledge spread through our bodies like a creeping vine. It smothered our ignorance and drew the veil from our eyes. We saw the serpent in all his cunning, but by then it was too late. Come with me, Eve, he said. Together, we can make a new race and create an Eden of our own. But in my newfound wisdom I heard the selfish desire in his words and refused his offer. My rejection filled him with incandescent rage and he promised revenge on me and my bloodline. I have drunk the nectar from the tree of life, he said.

Château de Merbleu, France, 1693

The ticking clock on the mantelpiece filled the silence in the room. The golden features of the dragons entwined around the clockface appeared to mock Genevieve’s attempts to escape unscathed.

‘If you would be so good as to wait here, I will fetch the keys, Henri.’

‘Very well.’ He gestured to the footman to refill his wine goblet.

Genevieve walked unsteadily towards the door and into the grand hall. She climbed the stairs and made her way to her bedroom where Marguerite was standing in readiness.

‘Madame!’ The young maid ran to greet her and wrapped her skinny arms around Genevieve’s waist. ‘Is all well?’

Genevieve held the child close. ‘He wants the keys.’

‘No! You must leave now.’

‘If I run, he will come after me and drag me back.’ Genevieve released Marguerite and removed the large keyring from her bureau drawer. She reached towards the back and pulled out a small object wrapped in white silk. Eve. Genevieve peeled back the material and inspected the small

gold key and chain. 'How I wish Henri had never given you to me...but then, his crimes would never have been uncovered.'

That fateful morning Henri had been travelling to London on business. Genevieve had wandered aimlessly around the library as he packed his satchel with paperwork and donned his leather gloves. He dropped a light kiss upon her head.

'Do not sulk, mon petite. I shall be back before the full moon.'

'That is weeks away! Must you leave, Henri? We have only just returned home from our honeymoon.'

'You will miss me, chérie?'

'Of course!' Genevieve looped her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoes to kiss the end of his beard. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes as the soft tendrils unfurled and caressed her skin. 'Perhaps your man of business can attend to matters for you?'

'Not this time, Genevieve.' Henri gently withdrew her arms and stepped back. He unclipped the set of keys he kept chained to the pocket of his waistcoat. *'Here. Entertain yourself while I am away and explore every room in the house. There are rugs and furniture from my travels and bolts of fabric for your gowns. You may use whatever pleases you including the gold, silver, and precious gems.'*

Genevieve's eyes lit up at the thought of replacing the heavy dark furniture and faded draperies. Decades of wood smoke clung to the fabric and no amount of sponging had removed the stains.

'I may refurnish as I wish, Henri?'

Henri laughed. 'Yes, so long as you leave my library untouched.'

'Your generosity overwhelms me, my lord.'

Henri waved his hands expansively. 'Invite your sister and friends to keep you company.'

'My thanks, Henri.' Genevieve tested the weight of the keys in her hand. *'What a lot of keys you have!'*

'All the more rooms for you to explore, my dear. Wait, I almost forgot!'

Henri withdrew a long gold chain from his waistcoat pocket and Genevieve gasped in appreciation as she caught sight of the finely wrought gold key hanging from the links. In place of the traditional narrow stem was the figure of a woman. Long hair curled around her body in waves and framed the delicate beauty of her face. Her eyes were closed as though she were sleeping and in her hands she clasped a small object.

'This one is special.'

'She's lovely, Henri. What is she holding?'

Genevieve reached out to examine the craftsmanship more closely but Henri held the desired object just out of reach so that it twinkled in the sunlight coming through the windows.

'Forbidden knowledge.'

Genevieve stood on tiptoe to get a closer look. 'How so?'

'She is Eve.'

Genevieve laughed. 'From the Garden of Eden?'

Henri nodded.

'What a splendid idea! And what room does Eve guard?'

'She unlocks a secret chamber.'

Genevieve heard Marguerite weeping as she lifted Eve from the drawer and studied the blood stains embedded in the metal. No amount of cleaning had removed them. In desperation she had taken a small chest of gold from Henri's storerooms and asked a blacksmith in Paris to use it to create a copy of the key.

'Can it be done?' Genevieve had asked.

'For a price.'

'I need it two days, hence.'

'Make your payment in advance and I will see that a courier delivers it on time.'

So much for his promises, Genevieve thought as she exited the room.

The Book of Eve

We ran and hid, the man and I. We raced through the long grass and leapt across rocks that emerged from the river. We fled, even though we knew that we could not hide our whereabouts or secrets from the Creator. He was the source of life for every shrub and tree. All living creatures had grown from his word and because of this, he knew everything. The feathery grass that brushed against our bare legs, and the wind that rustled through the trees and swept back my hair, sent him sensory information about everything they touched. The startled waterfowl knew our location, as did the deer running from the scent of our fear. My own blood thrummed in my veins as loud as waves crashing to the shore. An echoing, hollow sound that announced my presence like a beacon on a hilltop. All were linked to the arterial flow of his life source. For we were his creation too. The man and I – and the serpent who had invaded Eden.

Château de Merbleu,

France, 1693

Genevieve was halfway down the grand staircase when the footman opened the front door to allow Anne-Catherine entrance to the house. Genevieve knew that even from that distance her sister had detected her level of distress. She dropped her injured hand to her side so that Anne-Catherine would not see the bruises encircling her wrist.

‘Vivi! How delighted I am to find you at home.’ Anne-Catherine raced up the stairs and held Genevieve close. ‘I met the courier in the village and volunteered to bring your mail. Here.’

Genevieve wanted to weep. She could feel the hard outline of the key within the envelope.

Anne-Catherine kept her back to the servants and cupped Genevieve’s face in her palm. ‘Where is Henri, *mon petite*? Has he returned from his travels?’

Anne-Catherine’s rose perfume enveloped Genevieve’s senses and she closed her eyes. Home. Anne-Catherine smelt of home and all that was good. She cleared her throat.

‘He is in the blue room. I am about to return his keys.’

Anne-Catherine nodded and her blue eyes flickered towards the envelope. ‘Why don’t I pay my respects to Henri while you gather your hat and gloves? We can ride down to the village. Juliette has had her baby. She will be delighted if we paid her a visit.’

Genevieve pulled back the lace cuff around her injured wrist and saw shocked comprehension dawn in Anne-Catherine’s eyes. ‘Wait for me in the entrance hall. I won’t be long.’

Anne-Catherine shook her head. ‘Henri will grow restless by himself. I will keep him entertained until you return.’

‘Very well, Sister. I will join you shortly.’

The scent of roses enveloped her again when her sister leant forward and brushed a soft kiss against her cheek.

The Book of Eve

This all happened long ago. The man has since returned to dust and the blue serpent slipped back into the sea from which he came. But still they whisper behind my back. The tribe of Adam. Seductress. Traitor. That’s what they call me, because I ate the forbidden fruit. Of their Patriarch they have only praise. Adam was God’s friend, they say. And yet, of the three of us, God cursed Adam most of all for betraying their friendship and the job he had been entrusted to do.

The clay man and I made a choice and we both fell from grace. I saw the sadness in the Creator's eyes when he banished us from the garden. If I could have wiped it away, I would have. If I was fortunate enough to be held once more in his embrace, I would find peace again. Yet, here is another truth: The knowledge Adam and I gained was not lost. It has enriched the lives of our descendants. The very disobedience they condemn me for has made us rise above the animals in the field. It forms the laws and rules we abide by and has taught us medicine and husbandry.

But the effect of the fruit grows weaker with every generation. Even as they criticise me, they seek the knowledge in my possession. For I am the last remaining key to the garden. I am the embodiment of the knowledge they crave. But rather than concede to the value of my words, they wish to permanently silence me. For God's curse made me subject to my husband and in their foolishness the men of our tribe think that I am answerable to them too.

**Château de Merbleu,
France, 1693**

Amusement gleamed in Henri's eyes when Genevieve re-entered the room.

'Here she is. My lovely bride.'

Anne-Catherine returned her teacup to its saucer and picked up her riding gloves. 'Your timing is impeccable, Vivi. Henri has given us permission to visit the village.'

'Splendid! Here are your keys, *mon cher*.' Genevieve maintained a careful distance as she deposited the large keyring and the slender gold chain and key onto the table in front of her husband.

Henri saw that Eve was unmarked. He turned the key over and examined the back. Where were the blood stains? His fist clenched around the small gold body.

'You have done well, Genevieve.'

'How so, Henri?'

'You have abstained from curiosity and not visited the forbidden chamber.'

Genevieve feigned indifference. 'And how, pray tell, do you know that?'

Henri laughed.

Anne-Catherine got up from the table and linked her arm through Genevieve's. 'Come, Sister. Juliette and her baby await.'

'We will return shortly,' Genevieve said.

Henri ran his thumb down the length of Eve's body. He could feel the ridges of her nose and mouth pressing against his flesh. Very well. This version of the play required a fourth act.

'I await your return with pleasure, Madame.'

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