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A Comparative Analysis of Text and Music and Gender and Audience in Duke Bluebeard's Castle

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Volume 1 Issue 4 (December 1999) Article 6**Andrea Fábry,****"A Comparative Analysis of Text and Music and Gender and Audience in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/6>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 1.4 (1999)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/>>

Abstract: Andrea Fábry discusses in her article, "A Comparative Analysis of Text and Music and Gender and Audience in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*," the image of Bluebeard as a metaphor for gender relations. Béla Bartók's opera and its libretto represent a prime example of the metaphor that in turn can be found in a range of text types, from fairy tales through novels to films. In the article, Fábry analyzes Bartók's contribution to the metaphor, namely with his opera, *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. She relates the opera to the text of the opera's libretto, written by film theoretician Béla Balázs, and places her analysis in the larger historical framework of audience research in modernity. The analysis reveals that in a pronounced misogynistic artistic climate of the time and working from a libretto whose tragic ending denies transcendence to the female character of the opera, Bartók's opera can be understood as the representation of simplistic domesticity where the real story remains un-mediated and un-narrated.

Andrea FÁBRY

A Comparative Analysis of Text and Music and Gender and Audience in *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*

The elements of the medieval Bluebeard myth can be found in several works of art from novels to films cutting through not only a wide variety of media, but national and period boundaries as well. For example, in *Beauty and the Beast*, both the fairy tale and its later film versions we see the Bluebeard motive of a monstrous/prohibitive man with a secret past; in *Jane Eyre* we find the element of the controlling man's physical confinement of his wife; in *Look Back in Anger* there is the husband suffering from the same physical confinement as his wife; or in the film *Gaslight* there is the combination of the physical confinement of the present wife with the murder of the previous partner. The Bluebeard myth survives in many forms, but the generally recognizable story line is as follows: a young woman leaves her parents' house to marry Bluebeard. Bluebeard forbids her access to a certain part of his home. When Bluebeard leaves for business, his wife gains possession of the key to the forbidden area. What she finds there concerns the previous wives of Bluebeard -- they are either kept imprisoned in this secret room or the new wife finds the murdered bodies of the previous wives. After the new wife's revelation a reversal of power relations occurs: the new wife is rescued from Bluebeard by her brothers while Bluebeard is imprisoned. In versions where the previous wives are still living, they are also set free from Bluebeard. The subject matter of Bluebeard, in brief, can be looked at as a metaphor for gender relations.

In the original version of Bluebeard, his relationship with his new young wife moves through three formative stages: Bluebeard issues the prohibition to his subordinated wife; the wife transgresses the prohibition; and last, a reversal of the original power relation occurs (for an example of an early version of the story, see Charles Perrault [1697] in Chapter 15 of Warner). In this study, I am exploring answers to the central question: What did Béla Bartók contribute to the metaphor of Bluebeard with his opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (for Bartók, see for example, Chalmers)? The modernist composer and ethnomusicologist Bartók created his version of Bluebeard in 1911. This one-act chamber opera entitled *A kékszakállú herceg vára* (*Duke Bluebeard's Castle*; see Ferencsik) is Bartók's only opera -- although not his only stage work. It was also the one and only artistic cooperation between Bartók and Béla Balázs, the author of the libretto, a prose writer and dramatist as well as an early film theoretician and critic of international recognition (for Balázs, see, for example, John; Koch).

Duke Bluebeard's Castle begins with the newlyweds, Judith and Bluebeard, arriving at Bluebeard's castle. Judith discovers seven closed doors and asks Bluebeard to open them. Bluebeard begs Judith not to be curious about the doors, but she insists, and he complies. The first door reveals Bluebeard's torture chamber where the walls bleed. The second door leads into the armory where all the weapons are bloodstained and the third door exposes Bluebeard's treasury with its bloodstained crowns and jewels. Behind the fourth door is Bluebeard's garden with its flowers growing out from a blood-soaked soil. In the chamber behind the fifth door Bluebeard proudly presents his country, but Judith notices blood-coloured clouds passing over the fields. The sixth door hides a lake of tears. Finally, the seventh and last chamber reveals Bluebeard's previous wives, three women living in confinement. At this point, Bluebeard forces Judith to take the fourth place among the confined wives. Looking at *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* from the point of view of the original myth, Bartók and Balázs provided an astonishingly pessimistic version of the story by changing the original prohibition-transgression-reversal structure into a cyclical pattern: both the narrative (Judith joins the wives behind the seventh door) and the music (the closure of the opera returns to the motives of the opening, and the C major that characterized the centre of the opera returns to its opening tone suggest the lack of change, redemption, rescue, or transcendence.

What I am concerned with in analyzing *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is how Bartók and Balázs used the myth to comment upon power and gender relations as well as upon the relationship between an artists and their audience (for theoretical background, I use, among others, Crary; Epstein; Grace; Gunning; Hansen). My proposition is that *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* contains many aspects of contemporary discourses on filmic audiences specifically and the commercialization of art in general. Further, I argue

that these features -- clearly ahead of their time -- originate from the librettist Balázs and I contend that the opera's structure as well as its textual and visual contents can be meaningfully separated into components of Bartók's and Balázs's work. In other words, I understand *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* as "precious jewelry with pearls of Béla" ("Bélagyönggyel fényes ékszer") -- to use a line from the opera itself for my metaphor: a work of art that bears the influence of both of its creators, Béla Bartók and Béla Balázs.

Predicated on his interest in film, the direct impact of Balázs on the opera is obvious: *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* is a very visual opera where each door hides a *tableau*. With the opening of each door, the orchestra "paints" the *tableau* behind the door in musical terms. Bluebeard then poses the question to Judith: "Mit látsz?" ("What do you see?"); all subsequent translations are mine, they are literal translations which do not render the formal aspects of the original such as rhythm patterns, number of syllables, rhymes, etc.) and Judith's response turns against the impressionistic image "painted" by the orchestral score. In the torture chamber scene, for instance, the orchestra characterizes the chamber with a playful melody of woodwind and xylophone flourishes. When Judith starts her interpretation of what she sees, however, the xylophone, that conveys the playful part of the torture chamber depiction, stops, suggesting that an essential part of the *tableau*'s "truth" is missing from Judith's description. In the armory scene, Judith's interpretation of the armory as solid and fierce ("kegyetlen," "szörnyü," "rettentő"= cruel, horrible, frightening) clashes with the flute, oboe, and clarinet playing a melody reminiscent of a marching tune, a melody performed in a childish boasting manner placing emphasis on the performative aspect of Bluebeard's masculinity. In the treasury scene, Judith voluntarily describes what she sees without Bluebeard asking her, but suddenly a piercing sound cuts through the text, signaling that she again missed a point by not noticing the blood on the jewelry.

These incongruencies between Judith and the musical *tableaux* could easily give the audience the impression that a visual image is interpreted away by Judith and that this act of misreading leads to an increasing gap between Bluebeard and Judith. Looked at this way, Bartók's music seems to be following Balázs's libretto in suggesting that Judith is unable to be an equal of Bluebeard in intelligence, perception, in understanding life, etc. The opera in this light becomes less of a heroic and emotional rendering of the universal of failed communication between man and woman -- as many critics would like us to believe (see, for example, Antokoletz) -- than a gender-biased, historically specific comment on women as readers of cultural texts, where the male authors' attitude to female audiences is crystallized in Bluebeard's comment to Judith: "Látni fogsz, de sohse kérdezz!" ("You will see, but never ask!"). Looking at the historical background of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in terms of modern visual art and a female audience, we find that the period of 1890s to the 1910s was a formative period where the gradual democratization of visual culture in terms of class and gender progressed hand in hand with the increasing sophistication and development of artistic expression.

Modernist artists responded to the widening of their audience negatively by heightened self-reflexivity and an aesthetics of rejecting the commercialization of art and its consequent possibility of general accessibility. Artists and critics joined in the condemnation of the new commercial culture and its feminine audience (see Huyssen; Kracauer). In the first period of the history of film (1894-1912), the expansion of its audience coincided with the radical social transition. The early cinema of the 1890s was cinema as "spectacle" that offered interesting and exciting public events both as technological novelty and as new artistic expression. But it catered to a predominantly male audience -- as opposed to readership, which we know to have been to a large extent female in congruence with the large number of women prose and poetry authors. In line with its origin in fairground and exhibition attraction, this early cinema had the single aim of bringing a visual act to the audience, a "sight" they had not experienced before and for which they paid willingly. Early films lacked narrative development, since the visual spectacle enfolded the audience in the temporality of a "never-ending" present. In contrast, by the 1910s cinema has evolved to a type of entertainment where its narrative form increasingly addressed a female audience (for a recent discussion of this, see Swirski <<http://docs.lib.psu.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/4/>>). By the early 1920s, some critics of commercial film making such as the Surrealists, advocated a return to "pure" image and endorsed the celebration of the non-narrative image for its own sake. Impressionist film theory, for example, by this time had solidified its position that the ultimate artistic quality in film (*photogénie*, see Epstein) resides in the

individual detail and the close-up, especially the latter which summons objects out of the shadow of indifference and invites the spectator to perceive their spirit (see Epstein; Balázs 1907). But even as early as the 1916, Hugo Münsterberg, in the first systematic analysis of the potentials of film as a medium, stressed the importance of the close-up by praising it as a device that goes beyond the naked narrative and has the ability to speak of psychological depth. In his early work, Balázs attributed a cinematic quality to art: the power of "freeze-framing" reality. In his 1907 study on aesthetics (*Halálesztétika [The Aesthetics of Death]*), Balázs hypothesized that art provides its audience with a feeling he called "transcendence." Transcendence is an intangible fleeting impression on the spectator that opens his/her eyes afresh to everyday phenomena of his/her surroundings: "Nézzetek körül a világban, ott helyt, ahol vagytok és csodálkozzatok el rajta. Tudtok csodálkozni rajta, mint egy titokzatos álmon, hirtelen vízion? Végigtapogattatók már saját magatokat, megdöbbent meglepéssel mondván: 'Ni-ni! Ember vagyok, élek.' Ez a transzcendencia érzése" (*Halálesztétika* 16) ("Look around in the world, there, where you are, and marvel at it. Can you marvel at it, like you do at a miraculous dream or sudden vision? Have you ever touched yourselves, uttering with deep surprise: 'Wow! I am a human being and I am alive.' This is the feeling of transcendence"). For Balázs, long before his work on cinema, the power of art depended on its reduction of life to one temporality and its ability to command our awe at reality halted. However, even in *Halálesztétika* -- similarly to the foreword in his first book on film, *A látható ember (The Visible Man)* -- he discusses the problem of inexperienced audience and untrained spectators who wish to place the work of art back into the general and everyday stream of life: "Kinek jut eszébe képzelődni azon, hogy Hermione és Paulina mint élnek majd a téli rege után? Vagy hogy Raszkolnyikov és Szonya visszajönnek-e még Szibériából?" (27) ("Who would wonder about how Hermione and Pauline live after the winter's story? Or whether Raskolnikoff and Sonya return from Siberia?"). He continues with the argument that some spectators would debase art, because they are unable to cast a trained eye on it and thus they reduce it from its whole to cheap replacements of its parts.

Taken from the above with regard to Balázs's aesthetics of filmic art, I would like to suggest that *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* can be understood as a comment on the male artist and his counterpart, the "unappreciative" female audience. However, while Balázs provided the libretto for the opera, it is Bartók's musical interpretation that shapes it. Thus, in order to fully understand this highly complex modernist opera, we must look at the music Bartók composed over the literary text, the libretto. The historical background of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in terms of music suggests that modernist music and its male composers were also caught up in definitive transformations of their field owing to the increase of women in the audience. Women's participation in musical life brought a newly formed rapture between contemporary music and canonical ("classical") music enjoying popular and commercial success through female patrons, impresarios, and advocates. Composers' reaction to this situation ranged from the adoption of a sort of "terminal prestige," a suicidal and desolate refusal of accessibility (See McClary "Terminal," 66), to an "anxiety of influence," a "heroic" and doomed attempt to deny suggestibility by canonical authors promoted by female patrons (Straus 8).

After the first period of modernity affective artistic expression and production -- when bourgeois male authors explored and formed their models of subjectivity in a wide variety of art forms from the *Bildungsroman* to the sonata -- male artists of the turn of the century found themselves in a defensive position. Rather than the heroic project of overthrowing a corrupt and insensitive aristocracy, turn-of-the-century male artists were faced with the need to defend bourgeois masculinity's superiority vis-à-vis bourgeois femininity. They found themselves in this position because they needed to justify their privileges. The result was a "supremacist culture" (see Kramer "Fin-de-siècle," 142, 150), a culture of panic that invested a great amount of energy into policing its gender boundaries (see Tick). Supremacist culture called into question the relationship between male composer and female protagonist. Previously, in the nineteenth century, a clear separation existed between women's and men's roles, one that allowed artists to engage in a form of transvestism based on the idea that women had special access to the emotional and spiritual spheres. In the changed relations of gender where women were piecemeal admitted to the public sphere, the relationship between the feminine -- and the female -- and the male artist had to change drastically. The two ways turn-of-the-century composers dealt with this problem are suggested by Lawrence Kramer's analyses of *Salomé* and *Elektra* and Susan McClary's analysis of representations of madwomen in opera ("Excess and Frame").

Both of these analyses depend on a Foucauldian framework. Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish* that the nineteenth century was the cradle of a new judiciary system, one dependent on reinforced control through increasing surveillance. But this strengthened grid also allowed greater freedom and tolerance, thereby becoming a double gesture of confinement and exhibition, frame and display, in which the condemnable could be presented both for the purposes of a moral lesson and for pure titillation. In Kramer's model, the feminine is displayed as a scapegoat, a monstrous person representing the breakdown of differences, the return of the repressed and savage. In McClary's model, the feminine in the opera must function as more than a mere repository for certain qualities, since the music allows the character a sense of depth and grants the audience license to eavesdrop upon her interiority. In McClary's understanding -- although some composers mark the utterance of the madwoman clearly as "other" -- some use the madwoman character as a masquerade and hide in her utterances avant-garde explorations of transgression otherwise restricted in conservative genres such as the opera. McClary's model would therefore allow for an interpretation of Judith as an avant-garde aspect of Bartók's music that is eventually suppressed.

Turning to the musical text, we find that Bluebeard and Judith are marked very distinctly in terms of musical style: Judith sings in wide-ranging figures in whole tone, with a strong rhythm, on a chromatic scale characteristic of the avant-garde music of Schönberg at the time, while Bluebeard sings in a reserved manner, in repeated-note lines in even durational values, on a diatonic scale which is characteristic of the Hungarian folk music Bartók sought to incorporate into his music and thus his singing follows the characteristic falling pattern of Hungarian folksongs and the dactylic rhythm of the language. As a matter of fact, the entire opera depends on language: Bartók retains not only Hungarian accentuation, but word breaks. For example, at the beginning of the opera when Judith declares "nagy csukott ajtókat látok" ("large closed doors I see"), the adjective, the object, and verb (containing the subject) are all sung on three different notes while intonation and steps at the end of the characters' lines often indicate assertive (step down) or interrogative (step up) sentences. Balázs uses a language in the libretto that is reminiscent of Hungarian folk ballads using a very simple, limited vocabulary of short, 2-3 syllable words in an 8-syllable line structure. The text relies heavily on repetition, sometimes on chiasm. Repetition is partly a way to depict inner psychological development through emotionally charged variations of the same thought. At other times repetition functions as a means of self-convincing for the characters, or restatement and/or reinforcement of their intentions.

There is an ongoing negotiation between Bluebeard and Judith on the level of musical signification: Bluebeard and Judith are picking up each others' musical characteristics in the opening part of the opera where Judith convinces Bluebeard to give her the keys. They reach a common singing style that is built on each other's characteristics: it contains both the reserved small steps Bluebeard sings in and the wider-range in Judith's singing is characterized by tonal flourishes (see, for example, Bluebeard's "Áldott a te kezed, Judith" ["Blessed are your hands Judith"] and Judith's "Szörnyü a te kínzókamrád" ["Horrible is your torture chamber] before and after Judith opens the first door. The castle is portrayed as a living-crying-bleeding organism, and indeed, it is a metaphor for a gender relation that is living/in flux/negotiated by the characters. In Bartók's version this relationship becomes tragic. Communication fails between the two characters as Judith's transgression of Bluebeard's prohibition is accompanied by the "taming of her musical shrew." Although they establish a shared style at the beginning, neither Judith nor Bluebeard find their ways back to this style and their singing increasingly becomes some form of camouflaging where power relations shift quickly depending on who assumes the upper hand in the situation. In the armory scene, Judith grows assertive and demanding against Bluebeard's expectations -- he expects her to fear him and keeps on asking her "félsz-e?" ("are you afraid?") and as a result, Bluebeard softens up and sings his most masochistic line: "hüs és édes, nyitott sebböl vér ha ömlik" ("blood is cool and sweet when flowing from an open wound"). But it is primarily Judith who assumes the submissive role. In the armory scene Bluebeard ventures into high registers to experiment while Judith restricts her own previously wide-range singing to the same register. Again, with the fourth door -- which reveals Bluebeard's kingdom described by him in a very ceremonial tone backed by reinforced orchestration (extra brass and organ) -- Judith repeats his line "szép és nagy a te országod" ("beautiful and big is your country") in a colourless and resigned tone lacking the animation that characterized her score just before. We can safely assume at this point that she learned to respect his basic rule "látni fogsz, de sohse

kérdezz!" ("you will see, but never ask!") and she also learned to read the sights according to his descriptions.

But there is some hope in this section as well, because Judith finally recovers more of her own singing style with "Véres árnyat vet a felhö! Milyen felhök szállnak ottan?" ("The cloud casts a bloody shadow! What clouds are flying there?") and whips herself into a frenzy reminiscent of her earlier agitated sequences, demanding him again to open the last two doors. With the main scene of the opera, the still passage of the motionless pool of tears, the narrative halts, leave the audience to ponder the possibility that the two will return to their earlier relationship. Here Judith contemplates the stillness and lack of motion of the lake and Bluebeard keeps on repeating "könnnyek, Judit, könnnyek, könnnyek" ("Tears, Judith, tears, tears") each time with more emotion. In this extremely psychological and introverted passage, Judith and Bluebeard pause in their passionate negotiation of their relationship that carries them in a wave and they have a second chance to reconsider everything that is at stake. Finally Judith tells him "Kékszakállú ... Szeress engem" ("Bluebeard ... Love me") and the orchestra plays a brief intimate romantic melody. At the same time, Bluebeard sings "Te vagy váram fényessége, Csókolj, csókolj, sohse kérdezz!" ("You are the brightness of my castle, Kiss me, kiss me, but never ask") drawing upon some of his earlier motives from the opening part of the opera. At this point, a disconcerting clarinet melody consisting of half steps up and down signals the tragic end of the story. It is precisely Judith's jealousy that ruins their relationship, her obsessive comparison of herself with the previous wives: "Mond meg nekem, hogy szeretted? Szebb volt mint én? Más volt mint én? Mond meg nekem, Kékszakállú!" ("Tell me how you loved her? Was she prettier than I am? Was she different from me? Tell me Bluebeard!"). The clarinet motive at this point grows into an unbearable suspense-theme of unresolved chromatics and Bluebeard reveals the wives behind the seventh door. Bluebeard is resigned here and as a result of his resignation, his voice lacks strength and depth. In my interpretation, the wives are living because they supported him with their hard work -- for this explanation, I rely on the Hungarian expression "véres verejtékével öntözni" ("to water something with one's bloody sweat"): Bluebeard's kingdom is blood-stained by the hard work of his wives and not by the evidence of the wives' murder. At this point Bluebeard describes the wives one by one and Judith obsesses over her inferiority ("Jaj, szebb nálam, dúsabb nálam" [Oh, she is prettier than I am, more talented than I am]). It is too late already when Judith finally understands what is happening and backs out from her previous statements of inferiority into a musical quarrel with Bluebeard ("Kékszakállú, megállj, megállj! ... Hallgass, hallgass, itt vagyok még!" ["Bluebeard, stop, stop! ... Quiet, quiet, I'm still here!"]). In the final section of the opera, Bluebeard integrates Judith, as yet another submissive woman, into his kingdom maintained and supported by the pack of well used women, and the opera in a cyclical pattern returns to its opening motives.

As mentioned before, Bartók is not solely responsible for this bleak vision of gender relations: all the elements of failure are already present in Balázs's libretto. What is Bartók's contribution to Balázs's ideological position expressed in his filmic libretto is a third factor, namely the orchestra. In the opera, the orchestra has its own part: besides the musical *tableaux*, it freely takes sides with the characters. The music of *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* evolves organically in each scene and makes very little use of the only *leitmotif* of blood which allows the opera to embrace extremes while retaining a unity of style as well as the orchestra to move freely about without representing one particular protagonist. I already discussed the *tableaux* where the orchestra and Judith do not agree on the interpretation of the sights, the secrets of Bluebeard. However, in many of the scenes where Judith demands the opening of the doors, the orchestra joins *her* and gives emphasis and strength to *her* demands. In the secret garden scene, where Bluebeard sings in unusual high and mellow voice "nézd, hogy derül már a váram" ("look how my castle is getting brighter"), the orchestra runs violently against *his* statement, undermining the truthfulness of his utterances. In the scene of the pool of tears, when Judith reveals what she thinks will be behind the seventh door, the orchestra is practically suffocating her voice. It is as if the orchestra was trying to stop her from articulating her fears by suggesting that her claims about the murdered wives are not correct. The strength of Bartók's musical animation of Balázs's libretto therefore lies in his psychological and unbiased rendering of Bluebeard's and Judith's passionate negotiation of their relationship. With the freely moving, independent orchestra, Bartók refuses to comment on the events unfolding from one unified point of view and

presents his material unmediated and un-narrated, just the way Balázs's aesthetics calls artists to bring "life" before their trained and experienced audience.

In conclusion, although Bartók worked in a largely misogynistic artistic climate from a libretto whose tragic ending denies any transcendence to the female character, he created an unbiased opera that invites the listener to observe a domestic struggle represented from neither the characters' nor a single narrator's point of view. He created a musical text that does not promote the "truth" of any character or comment on their *hubris*. Ironically, in this unmediated presentation of his material, he followed the aesthetic principles of his misogynistic librettist, Béla Balázs.

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