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## Secret Rooms, Locked Doors and Hidden Stories: Retelling "Bluebeard" as a Holocaust Narrative in Michèle Roberts's *Ignorance*

### Abstract

One of the most grisly European fairy tales, "Bluebeard" is also a story that has proved immensely productive, spawning numerous variants, adaptations and rewritings. This essay offers a reading of Michèle Roberts's *Ignorance* (2012) as one such retelling. Roberts employs "Bluebeard" to construct a story that utilises the format of a dual coming-of-age novel but is gradually revealed as a Holocaust narrative. Set in a provincial town in Vichy France, *Ignorance* makes repeated use of "Bluebeard" motifs to explore the complicity of individuals in Nazi crimes against their Jewish neighbours. Featuring secret rooms, forbidden chambers, locked doors and embedded narratives, the novel tells the story of Jeanne Nérin as she comes to terms with her Jewish identity and accepts her responsibilities as a Holocaust survivor. This account is complemented by several other stories, the most important of which is that of Jeanne's childhood companion, Marie-Angèle, whose *Bildung* ends in emotional and ethical failure. Fascinated with the life of bourgeois comfort and respectability, Marie-Angèle embraces what Nancy Tuana describes as "wilful ignorance," and becomes increasingly complicit in the acts of injustice, exploitation and crime she witnesses.

**Keywords:** Michèle Roberts, "Bluebeard," Maria Tatar, George Steiner, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Giorgio Agamben, Holocaust

One of the most grisly European fairy tales, "Bluebeard" has spawned numerous variants, adaptations and rewritings. Many of these are discussed in Maria Tatar's *Secrets beyond the Door* (2004). Analysing such diverse titles as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) and Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), Tatar draws attention to different uses that the fairy tale has been put to, arguing that "Bluebeard" is "not one story but many stories, multiple scripts competing with each other" (66). As a result of this complexity, she says, the tale is extremely pliable, capable of transforming itself and re-emerging in new cultural contexts. Most typically, its elements have helped to create narratives about "troubled marriages" (8), but some of its retellings are more surprising. In Chapter Four of her book, for instance, Tatar examines the resurgence of "Bluebeard"



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motifs in late twentieth-century German literature and film, revealing how the fairy tale has served to explore the most troubling aspects of German history and identity. As the critic explains,

The Bluebeard story . . . presents itself as a map for thinking about issues broader than romance, power, and marriage. In the last decades of the twentieth century, Bluebeard was a tale to which a number of German writers resorted in their efforts to come to terms with a past that could not be worked through or mastered. Faced with crimes so heinous that they defied representation, some writers found that the only way to write about Germany's past was to return to the "simple form" of the fairy tale, to begin with "once upon a time," as did Günter Grass in *The Tin Drum*. It didn't take long for Bluebeard's chamber of horrors to emerge as an apt metaphor for the gas chambers and other atrocities of World War II. (Tatar 126)

As this essay will argue, the story of Bluebeard serves a rather similar purpose in Michèle Roberts's *Ignorance* (2012). Set in a provincial town in Vichy France, the novel makes repeated references to the tale to investigate what is undoubtedly the darkest period in modern European history. In particular, it explores the complicity of individuals in Nazi crimes against local Jewish communities, revealing, in the words of Helen Dunmore, "what happens in small towns when the population faces hunger, terror, coercion and bribery."

Explaining the cultural significance of "Bluebeard," Tatar emphasises the patriarchal character of the conflict at the heart of the story. She reads the fairy tale as having its roots among foundational narratives of European culture, in Greek mythology and the Bible. In doing so, she points to its affinities with the story of Adam and Eve and the myth of Prometheus. All three texts, she observes, speak about "the seductions of forbidden knowledge" (3) and can be read as commentaries on "the moral dimensions of intellectual inquiry" (2). What they reveal, however, are powerful "gender asymmetries" that testify to women's "problematic relationship to knowledge" (3). As Tatar explains, "Eve's curiosity, for example, installs sin, mortality, and suffering into the human condition, while Prometheus's sacrilege becomes a positive foundation for the arts and crafts that produce civilization" (3). While "Bluebeard" seems to follow the biblical paradigm in focusing on the consequences of female (rather than male) curiosity, and in depicting a woman's desire for knowledge in terms of a curse (rather than a chance), Tatar draws attention to the glimmer of hope that the story offers when the wife of the bloody villain survives his death, remarries and lives on "happily ever after" (3). In fact, it may well be the suggestion of this mysterious afterlife, extending beyond the story's closure and largely unaccounted for, that has led so many authors to return to and reimagine the story.

In reviews published shortly after its publication, *Ignorance* was repeatedly compared to Roberts's 1992 novel, *Daughters of the House* (cf. McDowell, Holland, Hagestadt). Indeed, the two novels show interesting parallels. Both rely on a similar geographic and temporal setting, and both investigate "the impact and legacy of the Holocaust in France" (Parker 90). What they also share is that they can be read as following the format of a dual coming-of-age novel. This generic provenance, as well as the presence of "Bluebeard" motifs, might suggest a plot development that should lead its characters from childish naivety and immaturity towards responsibility and knowledge. In *Ignorance*, however, this trajectory is only followed by its central heroine, Jeanne Nérin, but not by her childhood companion and the second major figure in the novel, Marie-Angèle Baudry. Jeanne—a half orphan, whose mother converted from Judaism to Catholicism to escape anti-Semitic persecution—is depicted as an avid reader and a self-learner, who develops a passion for painting and grows into a mature, self-conscious adult. In the case of Marie-Angèle, a daughter of *petit-bourgeois* shop owners, the path to adulthood seems to lead, not to knowledge, but rather to what the American feminist philosopher, Nancy Tuana, refers to as "wilful ignorance" (11). Tuana defines the concept as

referring to "a systematic process of self-deception, a wilful embrace of ignorance that infects those who are in positions of privilege, an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one's role in that exploitation" (11), and Roberts's novel shows how Marie-Angèle brings this strategy to perfection. As a schoolgirl, she destroys "nasty notes" passed in the classroom: "you tore them up," she reflects, "If necessary you put the tiny pieces into your mouth and swallowed them . . . Then you could deny they'd ever existed" (Roberts 76). During the war, she also chooses such seemingly innocuous gestures to turn a blind eye to acts of injustice, exploitation and crime she witnesses. If "Bluebeard" emphasises the negative effects of female curiosity, Roberts's novel speaks about the dangers of its opposite, revealing, in Marie-Angèle, the moral consequences of a deliberate refusal to know. At the same time, the central narrative of the novel, which focuses on Jeanne, can be read as an attempt to provide a more positive rewriting of the fairy tale where female curiosity is celebrated rather than condemned, and depicted as an ethically constructive attitude.

The cultural critic George Steiner has used the motif of Bluebeard's chamber to argue that the pursuit of knowledge is deeply instilled in human nature. In "Tomorrow," one of the essays included in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), he claims:

We cannot turn back. We cannot choose the dreams of unknowing. We shall, I expect, open the last door in the castle, even if it leads, perhaps *because* it leads, onto realities which are beyond the reach of human comprehension and control. We shall do so with that desolate clairvoyance . . . , because opening doors is the tragic merit of our identity. (140)

Yet, as Steiner makes clear in another essay in the same volume, "A Season in Hell," the behaviour of the overwhelming majority of European citizens during the Second World War demonstrates the persistence of such "dreams of unknowing." Steiner recognises these dreams in attempts at "collaboratively unknowing" and includes them among attitudes that paved the way for the Holocaust (35). He discusses them under the rubric of "active indifference," a term that seems to correspond to what Tuana identifies as "wilful ignorance." Whatever the preferred label, it is the historical reality of this phenomenon that comes under scrutiny in Roberts's novel, and it is analysed through motifs borrowed from "Bluebeard."

The fairy tale is evoked for the first time in the opening pages of *Ignorance* as Marie-Angèle's mother walks the two girls to a convent school where they are to become full-time boarders. As Jeanne looks in the direction of the house adjoining the school, she is introduced to the story of its sole inhabitant and owner, Monsieur Jacquotet. The man is a successful, recognised painter, but Marie-Angèle refers to him as "the Mad Hermit." What Jeanne learns about Jacquotet on that day is that he is "a misfit" who comes "from a foreign background," eats "strange food" and refuses to "mix up with the neighbours." She also hears that he had "a beautiful young wife," whom he "kept . . . hidden away" and who died "mysteriously" (Roberts 11). It is at this point in the novel that Marie-Angèle actually refers to the man as Bluebeard. As Jeanne tries to remember the fairy tale, her words signal to the reader that it is not only the death of his wife that may have earned the man the nickname "Bluebeard" but also his Jewishness. Even before his story is recounted, the painter is identified as Jewish through comments that expose anti-Semitic attitudes of both Marie-Angèle, who laughs at his big nose, and her mother, whose description turns into a violent anti-Semitic tirade: "He does all right for himself. All right for some. They know how to manage, those Jews. We let them in, we let them have jobs. And now, the money that they've got squirreled away" (9). Steiner associates European anti-Semitism with "the long tradition of *petit-bourgeois* resentment against a seemingly aloof, prospering minority" (34), and Madame Baudry's derogatory remarks offer an apt illustration of his words.

To explain the link between Monsieur Jacquotet's Jewish background and his reputation as Bluebeard, the narrative evokes pictorial representations of the fairy-tale figure—threatening, powerful and exotic—to be found in children's books. As Jeanne recalls her experience of reading the story, her memory is filled with images of a "huge Blackamoor" with "black eyes [that] shot red sparks" and a dishevelled beard (Roberts 11–12). Other details of the villain's description also point to the racial prejudice inherent in the pictures as Jeanne remembers "a gilded purple turban, a gold coat and gathered gold trousers, slippers with curled-up toes" and a "curved scimitar" (12). Her words clearly allude to nineteenth-century illustrations of the fairy tale, many of which showed Bluebeard as a dark-skinned, dark-eyed Oriental tyrant "in sharp physiognomic contrast" with the "sandy-haired" knights who come to their sister's rescue (Tatar 32). A good example of such a representation can be found in Walter Crane's *Toy Books* (1875), where, in Tatar's words, the villain displays "the stereotypical features of the wicked Jew, bearded, robed, hook nosed, with satanic furrows in his brow" (32).<sup>1</sup> By introducing Jacquotet to the novel as an object of idle gossip that stems from prejudice, fear, envy, and crude racial stereotyping that belongs to the realm of myth and fairy tale, *Ignorance* provides a troubling insight into anti-Semitic sentiments prevalent in early twentieth-century European societies. What is more, by showing how such attitudes are present in, and disseminated through, important products of culture (such as illustrations for a canonical European fairy tale), it forces the reader to consider whether, as Manfred Gerstenfeld has suggested, anti-Jewish "hate and discrimination" should not be seen "as inherent to European culture and a part of European 'values'" (3).

The "Bluebeard" scenario envisaged in this early scene of the novel is continued soon afterwards, when Jeanne and Marie-Angèle find themselves inside Monsieur Jacquotet's house. As the three play hide-and-seek, the man allows the girls to "go anywhere you like, hide anywhere you like, but not to the top of the house" (Roberts 22). The forbidden room is the painter's studio, and when Jeanne and Marie-Angèle disobey and break the rule, what they find inside is a series of paintings depicting "the same dark-eyed woman in a red frock again and again" (23), which Jeanne—in another echo of "Bluebeard"—describes as "a red chorus" of wives (24). When inside the studio, the painter also shows the girls a cupboard, which he claims to allow a secret passage to the attic over their dormitory. The escapade ends when during a game of play-acting, Marie-Angèle adopts a sexually explicit pose, and the man gets so angry with her that Jeanne thinks he might attack her with a palette knife he is holding in his hand. As he approaches the girls, the two run away.

As they are later interviewed by the nuns about the events, Jeanne has a feeling that she is expected to corroborate "the story they wanted me to tell," a story where the painter, now described as "Bluebeard-the-Jew," "made us do it" (19). What the "it" means is never clarified, but the transgression is serious enough for the nuns to threaten to inform the gendarmes while also promising to "keep an eye" on Jacquotet in the future. In spite of these declarations, however, an official complaint is never made, and the girls are actually forbidden to discuss the event with their parents and schoolmates. Contrary to what the nuns imagine, and to what one reviewer spells out when she discerns "a hint of paedophilia" in the painter's behaviour (McDowell), Jeanne's narrative clearly shows that the accusation is unfounded. The only paedophile that the girls need to confront

<sup>1</sup> If these representations seem to conflate the Jew, the Turk and the Arab into a single image of "the oriental Other," the move can be explained by looking at recent critical discourse on the role of the Jews in Western constructions of the Orient. Kalmar and Penslar, for instance, argue that "orientalism has always been not only about the Muslims but also about the Jews" since "the Western image of the Muslim Orient has been formed, and continues to be formed, in inextricable conjunction with Western perceptions of the Jewish people" (xiii).

is the local priest, whose story further testifies to the tendency of Catholic Church representatives to squelch potential scandals, as he is hastily transferred to another parish. The painter, on the other hand, has no intention of stepping into the role of a fairy-tale villain. Rather, if we follow Steiner's reading of "Bluebeard" as a narrative about the pursuit of knowledge, the relationship that later develops between Jacquotet and Jeanne positions him an anti-Bluebeard figure. When Jeanne returns to his house as an adolescent, he teaches her to paint and introduces her to Jewish history. He stimulates her emotional and intellectual growth. Still, even though the essence of the Bluebeard tale is absent from the opening narrative, it is filled with numerous trappings associated with the story: dead wives, locked rooms, secret passages. All these elements will re-emerge in subsequent appearances of the forbidden chamber in the novel.

One of such secret rooms is the shed situated in the yard behind the shop that belongs to Marie-Angèle's parents. During the war, when food is scarce and a rationing system is introduced, the shed is used as a hiding place for contraband goods, which the Baudrys sell from under the counter in their shop. Stacked in the shed, "in locked boxes" (Roberts 52), these wartime luxuries—"not just food but also big bundles of firewood, bicycle tyres, laundry soap" (44)—are sneaked to the family by Maurice Blanchard, a black-marketeer who supervises the whole operation.

Marie-Angèle becomes infatuated with Maurice. In particular, she is impressed by the aura of wealth that surrounds him, by his knowingness and resourcefulness. Maurice stands in sharp contrast to the overwhelming gloom of wartime austerity. He is immaculately dressed in cashmere, wears a gold signet ring on his finger and smells of lemon verbena soap, exuding, in Marie-Angèle's words, "aliveness, a smell of money and newness and cleanliness" (40). He introduces himself as a self-made man and defines business as "a question of seizing opportunities" (41). His job at the town hall gives him access to information, an advantage he has every intention of exploiting:

Maurice simply had the wits to organise things. He knew how to bargain, what prices to pay . . . Maurice knew all the back ways; how to avoid checkpoints. I asked him: how do you manage to get hold of petrol? He winked. Business contacts. I didn't ask for details. I trusted him to know what he was doing. . . Not just groceries and petrol. Information too, if necessary. Papers. Documents. Whatever people needed. (43–44)

If Bluebeard epitomises "a superiority that depends on knowledge from which others are expressly excluded" (Lewis 221), Maurice is a worthy reincarnation. An ardent believer in the bourgeois values of self-interest, materialism and upward mobility, he exemplifies Michel Foucault's insights on the inseparability of knowledge and power (as envisaged in the composite notion of *pouvoir/savoir*). In an often-quoted passage, Foucault argues:

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power . . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (52)

By showing how access to municipal records allows Maurice to emerge from the war with "a dragon's hoard of gold" (Dunmore), the novel confirms the validity of these assertions. At the same time, it casts Marie-Angèle into the role of Bluebeard's dutiful wife. Unlike the actual fairy-tale heroine, whose curiosity pushes her to discover her husband's secrets and, thus, to redress the imbalance of power/knowledge between them, the young woman in Roberts's novel is quite content with her subordinate status. Although she realises that Maurice hides things from her, she is quite happy to be "protected . . . from knowing too much" (Roberts 60).

The degree of the young woman's wilful ignorance is tested in a scene that is set in June 1942, the very month when, as we learn from Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, Himmler's

directive to implement the "final solution" reached France (161). As Marie-Angèle goes to the shed in the backyard, a "big iron key" in her hand (Roberts 52), she resembles her fairy-tale predecessor, about to discover a life-changing secret. To her surprise, the door is already unlocked and, inside, she finds a local Jewish family, Mrs Fauchon and her two youngest children. Their hair is bleached with peroxide, and all their belongings are packed into three suitcases. The Fauchons repeatedly proved to be trustworthy neighbours and had strong ties within the community: the man fought with the French army during the Nazi invasion of France; the woman opened her door for the bodies of a baker's family killed in a German air raid, inviting her Christian neighbours to come and pray at her house (35). Marie-Angèle, however, shows little sympathy for the family in hiding. Her instinct tells her to get rid of the unwelcome visitors. She considers calling the gendarmes but decides otherwise, fearing that they would discover the secret boxes of contraband goods. Reluctant to confront the problem, she chooses to lock the family "back into darkness," the gesture signalling her refusal to take action and accept responsibility. She does not speak to the woman and finds herself unable to pronounce her name: "I pretended not to recognise her under her disguise. Her eyes spoke to me. Her eyes told me that Maurice had hidden her and her children in our shed. Her eyes wanted to tell me more. I turned my eyes away" (54). As elsewhere in the novel, Roberts employs the symbolism of eyes and doors to communicate a character's capacity for empathy and ethical identification. As Marie-Angèle averts her gaze from the plight of the family and locks the door behind her back, the scene indicates her selfishness and disregard for the suffering of others. What she exercises in the scene is the self-deceptive blindness that Tuana identifies as wilful ignorance.

This practice of turning eyes away and refusing to draw the most obvious conclusions becomes a staple behaviour for Marie-Angèle. She never wonders about the source of Maurice's increasing wealth. She readily accepts his lavish gifts. She prefers to see the two of them as "heroes hoodwinking the Germans" (44), failing to take note of his ruthless indifference as he objectifies the desperate Jewish family by referring to them as "another form of contraband. Just a package to smuggle out" (57). As they drop the vulnerable Jewish mother and her two young children near the local railway station, she shows little concern for what happens to them later. In doing so, she refuses to acknowledge what is obvious to Jeanne: Maurice is a villain who profits from the war by preying on human tragedy and "screwing [people] for money and sex" (190). Unlike Jeanne, however, Marie-Angèle opts for blindness even though this wilful ignorance requires of her increasingly more dubious moral compromises.

The third, and the most traumatic, evocation of the Bluebeard chamber in the novel returns the reader to where the story begins, back to the secret door that connects Monsieur Jacquotet's house and the attic room above the school dormitory. As the Fauchon family attempt to flee Nazi-occupied France, Jeanne escorts their two older children to what she believes to be the safety of the convent school. As they enter the building, she comes across Maurice as he is leaving the house of the painter. The description of this encounter is filled, again, with symbolic references to doors, and eyes, opening and closing:

I close my eyes. Open them. I'm a child too: I turn away my head so that I haven't seen Maurice and therefore he hasn't seen me. Nor the two children. Their yellow stars blaze. Maurice goes inside and closes the door. (193)

Soon afterwards, two gendarmes arrive to have a private word with Reverend Mother. They have clearly been informed by Maurice about the Jewish children and the secret door connecting the two houses as they announce their intention of taking the children away using that entrance. The whole operation is to be executed under cover of darkness. Only Reverend Mother and Sister Dolly know

what is planned for the night. The children are put to bed in their clothes and told that their father will come to pick them up. In a scene that mirrors (but also reverses) the childhood escapade of Jeanne and Marie-Angèle, they are told that this is all a secret, that they will play a game of hide-and-seek, and are asked to be silent. Indeed, the children stay quiet as the gendarmes enter from the neighbouring house and take them to a truck parked outside where they disappear into the hands outstretched from below the tarpaulin. On the very next day, the opening in the attic cupboard is sealed up, and the events of the night never enter the collective memory of the community. Like the nasty notes that Marie-Angèle used to swallow as a schoolgirl, they are relegated to oblivion as if they never really existed.

Reading *Ignorance* is no easy task. Fragmentary, incoherent and chronologically misleading, the novel is divided into seven separate accounts where sections narrated by Jeanne alternate with stories ascribed to three other female characters: Marie-Angèle, Andréé (Jeanne’s daughter) and Sister Dolly. As it moves between these narratives, the novel takes considerable leaps in time and space. Internally, the sections are no less chaotic: all of them take the form of interior monologues whose linear progression is repeatedly (and increasingly) interrupted with flashbacks and flashforwards. What complicates the reading further is that the different sections seem to exist in isolation, which means that the same events and settings are revisited from different, autonomous perspectives and a single character can be referred to with multiple names. Marie-Angèle’s father, for instance, functions as “Papa” in her account and then reappears as “Monsieur Baudry” in Sister Dolly’s story. The same applies to objects—houses, paintings, pieces of jewellery or clothing—which also “migrate” from one narrative to another. The significance of these travels is never acknowledged: the objects are mentioned in apparently casual comments, which seem to provide no more than circumstantial detail typically found in historical novels. Still, the connections we make between them matter, functioning like the lines the night gazer draws between stars in Wolfgang Iser’s famous metaphor for the process by which the reader interacts with the text to create its meaning (282).<sup>2</sup> This refers, for instance, to the clothes Maurice brings to the local brothel—“A white poplin blouse with black buttons. A green crepe de Chine frock. A red silk dress. A white satin evening frock” (Roberts 187)—which are clearly the same outfits that Jeanne wore when she posed for Monsieur Jacquotet in scenes that occurred nearly a hundred pages earlier (102). Similarly, the painting that Maurice deposits in the Baudrys’ shed (69) is probably the same one which Jacquotet has in mind when he reveals to Jeanne that he bought his freedom with a painting (177). There are further connections to be made between Jeanne’s seemingly casual reference to Madame Fauchon’s flower-shaped gold and pearl earrings (94), her later observation of “the red spot where her earring had been” (175), her mother’s information that the Fauchons have spent all their savings to buy forged papers for their escape (171), and the gifts of expensive gold jewellery that Maurice presents to the Baudrys (63, 68) and Andréé glimpses many years later (126). The journeys these objects make across the narratives are stories in themselves, hidden, unless the reader takes the trouble to fish them out from the mass of circumstantial detail that fills the novel. The most shocking of these hidden stories can be extricated when the reader realises that the house which Maurice buys for Marie-Angèle as a wedding gift is the house that belonged to the Jewish painter. In her narrative, Marie-Angèle misleadingly describes it as “an abandoned house at the top of town” (68; emphasis added), and the connection can only be made when it is clearly identified in Dolly’s account (210).

<sup>2</sup> The quote reads: “Two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The ‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable.”

Given the multiplicity of narrative voices, *Ignorance* can be described as what Mikhail Bakhtin envisaged as a "polyphonic novel" and defined as a narrative offering "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (6). Such a text requires the absence of an authoritative third-person narrator, as in *Ignorance* (where no third-person narrator appears) or in Fyodor Dostoevsky's fiction (where, as Bakhtin argues, the third-person narrator is granted no privileged status and is simply seen "as one orientation among other orientations" [98]). The effect, in both cases, is similar: the reader is confronted with "a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6) where different characters enjoy "equal rights" (6) and speak from "equally authoritative ideological positions" (18). Such a text, no doubt, places heavy demands on the reader, as the characters often represent "disparate, contradictory philosophical stances" (5) and their voices cannot be reconciled to tell a single, unified story. What it amounts to in practical terms can well be seen in *Ignorance* where the reader cannot arrive at any sustained interpretation of the novel without deciding which voices to trust and approach as reliable and which to treat with reserve and caution. In effect, the process of reading is highly contingent, forcing us to adjust our views of the characters and to re-evaluate previous events and comments in the light of emerging new details. To give just one example, when Marie-Angèle announces that Maurice has bought an abandoned house, the information seems quite harmless, but it acquires ominous gravity when we piece it together not just with what we glimpse from Jeanne's and Dolly's stories, but also with what we know of the historical realities of Vichy France, whose government, on 22 July 1941, implemented laws allowing the state to confiscate Jewish property (Marrus and Paxton 63). Subsequently, Maurice can be identified as representing the "several hundred thousand" French citizens, who—according to Marrus and Paxton—"helped rob Jews of their property, sold off at throwaway prices, or who denounced Jews in hiding or carrying false papers" (265).

"Reading books," Tatar explains, "we stand on the threshold of new worlds, opening doors that take us into the hidden chambers of unfamiliar mansions and into the secret spaces of other minds" (171). The comment also encapsulates the experience of reading *Ignorance* as narrative curiosity is central to understanding the characters and their motivation. Most importantly, perhaps, the reader's curiosity is also essential in interpreting the novel as a Holocaust narrative, since the theme, like the barbed wire on the book's cover, is drawn so subtly that it can easily be overlooked. That this actually happens can be inferred from the novel's reviews: some contain no references to the persecution of Jews (cf. Holland), while others depict it in a sketchy and selective manner (cf. Leonard, McDowell, Hagestadt), often misrepresenting the essential elements of the story.<sup>3</sup> The reason is that the theme is never tackled directly and can only be glimpsed from allusions, oblique comments and understatements. In consequence, even though the novel makes no explicit mention of concentration camps or gas chambers, their shadows loom large over the narrative. They are unmistakably present in the scene when gendarmes take the Fauchon children away wearing only slippers and hand their boots back to Sister Dolly, explaining that "they won't need these" (Roberts 210). The boots—which may be an echo of the "Shoes on the Danube" memorial in Budapest, commemorating the Jews shot on the banks of the river in the winter of 1944–1945—survive the war

<sup>3</sup> Michael Leonard mentions the family hidden in the shed, but he accepts Marie-Angèle's account of the events at face value, failing to notice anything untoward in Maurice's actions. Emma Hagestadt and Lesley McDowell are more perceptive: they comment on Maurice's dubious motives in helping Madame Fauchon but make no reference to the plight of her older children. At the same time, the reviewers make a number of factual errors: Jessica Holland described Marie-Angèle as having "Jewish blood" while Leonard sees Jeanne as "a woman who betrays her country" and celebrates Marie-Angèle's marriage as a testimony to "the enduring power of real love."



and are found, many years later, by Andréé. At this point, however, they are stripped of all meaning and reduced to an empty signifier as there is no surviving witness willing to tell their story.

Situating the reader as an active "producer" rather than a passive "consumer" of meaning, *Ignorance* comes close to Roland Barthes's "writerly text" (4). Composed of mere "fragments of stories, bits and pieces of information" (Roberts 103), the narrative relies on the reader to construct rather than discover its meaning. Its distance from a "classic" realist novel (or what Barthes also calls a "readerly" text) can also be measured in that it resists closure and offers no sense of poetic justice. As *Ignorance* reaches its end, many of the questions it raises remain unanswered. We never learn, for instance, whether Madame Fauchon and her two youngest children succeed in escaping to Spain. Nor are we informed about what happens to her husband and Jacquotet. Do the two children captured by Germans join their father as they have been told? Are these his hands that hold them as they are loaded onto the truck? The narrative remains silent on all these questions. What we do know, however, is chillingly disturbing. Maurice and Marie-Angèle are never exposed as German collaborators. As the war ends, they enjoy the status of respectable citizens within their Catholic community. They prosper, much like the girl in Angela Carter's "Werewolf," another retelling of a canonical European fairy tale which features a wolfish villain who sends an innocent person to death, takes over their house and creates a false story where she disguises her bourgeois aspirations "in a scabby coat of sheepskin" (Carter 127).<sup>4</sup> Jeanne, on the other hand, is falsely accused of working as a prostitute for German soldiers, paraded as a *femme tondu*e through the streets of the town, separated from her baby daughter and exiled to Britain, to ensure that the Blanchards' privileged bourgeois existence remains unthreatened.

As the novel reaches its end, we see Jeanne pondering about how much of her past she should reveal to her newly-met English friends. She constructs several possible versions of her story and presents them in the form of cooking recipes. One of them reads: "Take as many Jews as you like, crack them whip them beat them put into the oven turn on the gas wait till they're well crisped throw into the rubbish pit take another batch start again" (Roberts 230). This short passage plays an important role in the novel. First of all, it is the closest that *Ignorance* gets to mentioning the Holocaust. Second, it demonstrates Jeanne's growing readiness to break the silence about her wartime experiences. She tries to tell the story, not so much for her sake, but for the "lost ones." As she attempts to put words together, they "[totter] like a baby trying to walk" (230).

The ending of the story thus sends the reader back to the beginning, suggesting that the narrative we have been pursuing is precisely that: Jeanne's retrospective attempt to reconstruct what happened during the war, a debt she owes to those she loved and lost. It is also her attempt to understand others. Interestingly, even the sections which are apparently narrated by Dolly, Marie-Angèle and Andréé are preceded by comments suggesting that they, too, may come from Jeanne herself. The final sentence in Jeanne's opening narrative, immediately before the novel switches to Marie-Angèle's first-person perspective, reads: "But I did try to imagine what Marie-Angèle's account might be like" (30). Similarly, before Andréé takes over as the narrator, Jeanne imagines the future in which she reconnects with her daughter and attempts to "coax the words out of her"

<sup>4</sup> Apart from references to "Bluebeard," the novel often alludes to other European fairy tales, such as "Hansel and Gretel," "The Three Little Pigs," "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella." Maurice is frequently compared to fairy-tale characters, for instance, when he is described as "a black-haired prince . . . who turned into an ogre once midnight struck" (184) or a "glittery-eyed wolf" (185). Marie-Angèle's heartlessness is suggested by portraying her as the prince's "blonde fiancée, dressed in white organza, [who] sat at home, drinking hot chocolate . . . [and] approaching her soles to the red scorch of the flames" (185), and also by repeatedly depicting her in expensive furs and leather gloves that bring to mind the Countess in Carter's "The Snow Child."

(109). Finally, Sister Dolly's account also begins after Jeanne pictures "Dolly, later in her life, talking to a friend" and tries to understand how the nun might "shape her version of these times" and "what she might say" (198).

In view of these comments, Jeanne emerges as an author figure, lending her voice to others, and harnessing her imagination to create a series of embedded narratives that engage with their experiences. Earlier in the novel, while still in France, Jeanne mentions the presence of "a dark book inside me, listing the names of the lost." At this stage, however, she is not ready to respond: "I noted the book's existence, then shut it, pushed it deep down under snow and ice" (196). The ending of the novel registers a change in her: as she feels surrounded by ghosts, requesting "to hear them out" and "to become their witness," she can now fulfil her duty, meeting their pleas with compassion and hope (230). If the narrative she finally creates is riddled with silences, it is due to the nature of the material confronted, illustrating the problems mentioned in Giorgio Agamben's discussion of testimonies left by actual Holocaust survivors:

. . . the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its center it contains something that cannot be borne witness to and that discharges the survivors of authority. The "true" witnesses, the "complete witnesses," are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness . . . The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. (34)

Since what she truly wishes to recount is a Holocaust narrative that defies representation, Jeanne can only approach the task by dispersing this unspeakable story within her own account and the accounts of Marie-Angèle, Andréé and Dolly as those who have not slipped into what Dori Laub refers to as "the gaping hole of genocide and the gaping hole of silence" (65). The final effect takes the shape of a novel that is riddled with silences and heavily fragmented, and where the harrowing wartime reality is filtered through comforting paradigms of well-established genres (such as the *Bildungsroman*) and centuries-old fairy tales (such as "Bluebeard").

In its opening scenes that trace Jeanne and Marie-Angèle's childhood experiences, *Ignorance* announces its generic affinity with the dual "coming-of-age" novel. This paradigm is never quite abandoned as the narrative, for all its complexity and fragmentation, continues to follow the experiences of the two young women as they move to maturity. It registers Jeanne's emotional and moral growth, chronicling the process that allows her to come to terms with her Jewish identity and to accept her responsibilities as a Holocaust survivor. On the other hand, it reveals Marie-Angèle's story as a failed *Bildung*. Emphasising her fascination with bourgeois comfort and respectability, *Ignorance* depicts Marie-Angèle as an embodiment of "wilful ignorance," showing her growing complicity in her husband's crimes. In doing so, the novel employs some of the best known "Bluebeard" motifs—hidden rooms, forbidden chambers and suppressed narratives—which are also used to identify Jeanne's story as illustrating Steiner's claim that the pursuit of knowledge and the act of "opening doors is the tragic merit of [human] identity" (140). Most importantly, however, the same motifs also allow us to read *Ignorance* as a Holocaust narrative as their subsequent occurrences bring together the presence of anti-Semitic attitudes in pre-war Europe, the complicity of its citizens in Nazi crimes, and the annihilation of its Jewish communities.

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