"And they all lived happily ever after": The Failure of a Happy Ending in *The Piano* (1993) and *Barbe Bleue* (2009)

Yidan HU*

Abstract

Jane Campion's The Piano *(1993) and Catherine Breillat's* Barbe Bleue *(2009) are film adaptations of the tale* Bluebeard*, both of which have a seemingly bright closure – "and they all lived happily ever after". "They", as the female, are in the becoming process since "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1956: 273), which changes the nature of the film denouement. By looking at the female protagonists Ada McGrath in* The Piano *and Marie-Catherine in* Barbe Bleue*, this research aims to deal with how female "decisions" in attempting to accomplish themselves in the face of a crisis affect the understanding of the film's ending. First, female characterisation and plot development are investigated with the construction of women's feelings and perceptions at a given moment, influencing the subsequent outcomes. Second, the significance of narrative techniques is expounded with audience's affective interaction with characters. The conclusion reached is that in both films, repressed female temperament allows women to make judgements and choices that predetermine the tragic core of the happy ending. The significance of this study is to draw attention to the plight of women in the undercurrent, to make it possible for the silent cries behind the beautiful fantasies to be heard.*

Keywords: *happy ending, feminism, folk tale, film adaptation, Bluebeard*

Introduction

The ending of a story lies at the heart of understanding a literary theme, just as in a typical fairy tale where the prince and the princess live happily ever after, which is the classic paradigm. Nevertheless, the question of whether a perfect ending to a story means the end of all conflicts is left to scholars. The French folk tale *Bluebeard ("Barbe Bleue")* tells the story of a young lady who, with the help of her siblings, fights her murderous husband and lives happily ever after. On the surface, the two films, *Barbe Bleue* (Breillat 2009) and *The Piano* (Campion 1993), follow the paradigm of the original tale of "and they all lived happily ever after" when Marie-Catherine and Ada McGrath, as figures of the oppressed, escape Bluebeard and Alisdair Stewart, both of whom stand for the oppressor. However, the research needs to explore whether such a cheerful outer core of both films is doomed to be

* University College London, UK, yidan.hu.20@ucl.ac.uk

drawn to a tragic core. In other words, researchers should be alert to the narrative traps and consider whether this apparently happy finale is a blessing or a curse for the fulfilment of female self-worth, as a form of the complex feminine consciousness is involved in the disturbing situations of the films' endings. According to the argument in *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir 1956: 27), the drama of female resides in the conflict between the longing for the subject as ego and the compulsory situation of making herself secondary, rendering the self-realisation in the female situation worthy of attention. In *Barbe Bleue* and *The Piano*, the "decisions" as choice and judgement made by the female protagonists in the face of conflicting character relationships, whether active or passive, are attempts to gain access to the self as essential.

The aim of the essay, therefore, is to compare the different ways in which the female protagonists' "decisions" on complex situations influence the direction of the endings and their significance. This study is divided into two parts: focusing on the story content of the two denouements, the first part will compare the similarities and the differences in characterisation and development, as well as their text meanings; emphasising the closural means, the second part will compare how the "decisions" of the female characters are represented by narrative techniques and how audience significance is generated. The essay will conclude that the ritualisation of closure in the female protagonists' "decisions" in *Barbe Bleue* and *The Piano* is inevitably tragic, manifesting the internal and external contradictions of female consciousness.

Characterisation and development

As the story is a continuum of events and functions like a complete organism, the construction of female characters in the plot development is intertwined with the nature of the ending. First, there is no doubt that the most significant commonality between the two endings lies in their unhappy dimension, even if all the apparent contradictions of the characters' relationships are resolved. A happy ending equates to a ritual of closure for the protagonists, with the "final couples" giving the "promises of continuation" (Macdowell 2013: 57, 77). In Breillat's *Barbe Bleue*, the ending stops at the image of Marie-Catherine touching Bluebeard's head and does not follow the original fairy tale ending in which the female protagonist is married to another man with a bright future, making it possible to conclude that the ending without "final couples" does not belong to the "happy ending" category. In the case of Campion's *The Piano*, although Ada and Baines end up living together, the new marriage has no subjectivity for the woman (Gillet 1995: 281) and is therefore not considered to be a happy

ending. After the exclusion of happy endings, the demises of Bluebeard and Catherine's sister, Ada's broken finger, and her imagery of suicide are representations of death that overshadow both films with tragedy.

As for *Barbe Bleue*, Breillat's horrifying style as a director lies in the consistent presentation of death and sex together, which always makes for a kind of affective violence (Brinkema 2006: 161). In sexual relationships, it can be argued that the woman is often passive and objectified and that the choices and judgements she makes help her to achieve the self. When the woman is considered "in view of her frustration in transcendence [of the male]", she defends 'intimate' things around her, such as the 'room' (de Beauvoir 1956: 337-378). After marrying Bluebeard, Marie-Catherine demands a room of her own in the castle and keeps picking it out in the corridors. This choice maps out a way of self-realisation through occupation. Similarly, the subsequent decision of using a key to open a forbidden room is attributed to Marie-Catherine's desire for self, which causes a dreadful ending as it clashes with Bluebeard's patriarchal repression.

Unlike *Barbe Bleue*, in *The Piano*, Ada's choice to have a special thing around her as a representation of her ego is more pronounced. According to de Beauvoir (592), a kind of "feminine sensibility" resides in the fetish for beautiful items, such as Ada's piano, where she creates her own world. The piano, as Ada's only means of self-expression, is attacked in three rounds. The first time is when the piano is thrown away with scorn by Stewart, and the second one is when Baines takes the piano as a bargaining chip for sexual favours. The first two attacks lead to Ada's decision to throw the piano into the sea to end the pre-existing world. Unlike the first two, which are reactive, the "decision" to make a devastating attack on the piano is proactive. It is Ada's desire for freedom and self rather than submissiveness to men that spurs her choice (Gillett 1995: 282). Nevertheless, the initiative of this "decision" comes at the cost of the death of the spiritual world. When a piano key and a finger are absent, Ada completely loses her voice in both the spiritual and physical worlds, and thus develops a suicidal tendency, which points to two layers. The first layer is that of Ada being pulled into the sea by sticking her foot into the rope on the boat. Scholars such as Dyson (1995: 268) consider Ada's life with Baines after being rescued from the sea in the ending as a 'new-born' New Zealander farewell to the European bourgeois culture represented by the piano, which casts a positive dimension on the ending. This argument, however, to some extent overlooks the essential contradiction between Ada and Baines. For women, the meanings in the male world are unclear, as men often invite women to violate the norms preached by their like (de Beauvoir 1956: 581). Baines' earlier seduction of

Ada is a violation of public order, but Ada is punished by her husband when she gives the key to Baines. This interaction suggests that in a patriarchal society, men are always given tolerance, while women are always strictly disciplined. As an object, Ada is not genuinely pleased in the ending. Consequently, there is a second indication of Ada's suicidal tendency, namely imagining herself floating at night with a piano that has sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Both Marie-Catherine's and Ada's misfortune endings stem from a marriage of a quid pro quo nature. The combined conclusions of San Juan (1998: 126–128) and Gillet (1995: 283) indicate that women have an exchange value transforming the social relationship between people into a relationship between people and property, and thus women are inevitably objectified. Firstly, when women become the property of their husbands, they are required to be faithful or face punishment (de Beauvoir 1956: 107). For Marie-Catherine, the death of her father forces the sisters to leave the convent and live in poverty with their mother, and she chooses to marry Bluebeard in exchange for the satisfaction of her material needs. Ada undergoes two affective relationships in exchange. The first is sold to Stewart by her father; the second is at the end, when Stewart declares that Ada wants Baines to take her away. This choice is not necessarily Ada's "decision", but that of Stewart and Baines in a transaction between men. Secondly, in a patriarchal society, marriage transfers women from the father-centred family of origin to the husband-centred marital family. Thus, unable to support themselves and without external assistance, women keep marriage as a fate given by social tradition (417). In Ada's time, only married women are respected as mothers, so she makes the "decision" to stay with Baines in the end. In Marie-Catherine's time in ancient France, a married woman is an adult ward, while a widow can enjoy all the wealth of a man (112). As a result, the "decisions" to end the relationships with male protagonists are absent in the denouement, suppressing females' self-awareness.

Nonetheless, one of central ideas shared by *Barbe Bleue* and *The Piano* is that, even though female self-realisation is silenced by the form of marriage, the female protagonists' "decisions" on their gender identities have a fluid external relationship: to occupy an active position by passive means. In *The Piano*, Baines is naked in front of Ada, and Stewart is the object of Ada's touch at first. In *Barbe Bleue*, only Bluebeard is shown naked. These reversals of the classic heterosexual dynamic are mediated by the female gaze (Bruzzi 1995: 261) and subvert the binary relationship between the male as a subject and the female as an object in the sexual partnership of touch (de

Beauvoir 1956: 399). However, in the face of these reversals of sexual discourse, both Ada and Marie-Catherine make the conservative "decisions" to adopt a passive stance, thus ensuring survival in the end. This idea is supported by de Beauvoir's theory that men are so keen on conquest that women make themselves prey (649). Similarly, it is also in line with Breillat's thoughts that Bluebeard is Eve and gives Marie-Catherine the opportunity to commit the original sin (Wheatley 2010: 42). In the denouements, Bluebeard and Stewart believe that they are on the side of justice, that their wives are the ones to be judged and that they can hunt them down for their dishonesty. Nevertheless, in both cases, of Bluebeard and Mare-Catherine, and of Stewart and Ada respectively, the marriages are sexless, the masculinity of the two husbands is invisible, and they are the actual prey to be castrated in a formal marriage. Moreover, in the ending of Ada's story, keeping herself in a low profile also allows Baines the pleasure of being the rescuer. This satisfaction is in fact controlled by Ada, compensating for the deficit of being the Other in the relationship. In short, since "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 1956: 273), the complexity of the environment creates a fluidity of position for the woman, enabling her to make dynamic "decisions" that allow her to survive crisis and repression, and to always persevere in her counterattack, which brings positive significance to tragic endings.

Narrative technique and audience significance

According to Chatman (1975: 302), the story itself is a virtual rather than a real object, and the aesthetic object of the narrative is the story as expressed by the discourse, composed in the language of the medium and the canvas, so the aesthetic apprehension of two endings requires the narrative devices of cinema to be studied. First, as the narrative implies communicative acts where there is a sender and receiver (304), the narrative persona is of importance as a link between the audience and the narrator. It can be argued that Catherine in *Barbe Bleue* and Ada in *The Piano* are both "dramatized narrators" who act as story characters (19) and "implied authors" who are responsible for the narrative worldview (Herman and Vervaeck 2015: 17). For Barbe Bleue, the adoption of the third-person narrative allows the plot of the story to be driven through Catherine's reading. In his book *Ways of Seeing* (2008), Berger asserts that, in the world of the screen, it is the audience that is at the centre of the picture and the film image is the result of the audience's presence. Therefore, Catherine is not only reading the fairy tale to her sister, but also narrating to the audience, giving them a dual identity. On the one hand, the audience, like Catherine, is a spectator, a naratee of the

seventeenth-century story, in which case the audience can be divorced from the Marie-Catherine tragedy for the time being. On the other hand, the audience coexists with Catherine in the modern world, as her audience, and is on an equal footing with Marie-Anne. Thus, Catherine's "decision" to continue to tell her story while ignoring her sister's fears intertwines the audience with the tragedy of the characters. At the same time, cinematography aids this intertwining (Figure 1). In contrast to the passive participation of the audience in the narrative in *Barbe Bleue*, *The Piano*, borrowing the role of Ada, adopts a first-person narrative that allows Ada to be silent in front of other characters but gives voice to herself and the audience synchronously. Accordingly, the audience becomes one with Ada and supports any "decisions" made by the character.

Figure 1. The audience looks up at Catherine and shares a passive identity with Marie-Catherine (Breillat 2009, 01:14:53–01:15:20)

Furthermore, Ada, as the narrator, also steers the audience into the cross-media narrative. In the end, Ada still imagines herself at night in a silent scene with the piano sinking to the bottom of the sea, regarding this silence as a strange kind of lullaby (Figure 2). In this film clip, the "sound" of the lullaby is provided by the seabed images, and the visual medium (of the image) replaces the auditory medium (of the sound) as a representation of Ada's most authentic self in her "decision". Similarly, the ritualised ending of *Barbe Bleue*, with a still image of Marie-Catherine placing Bluebeard's head on a dinner plate to demonstrate her vengeful "decision", is also a cross-media narrative. It could be considered that the still image is intertextualized with the painting *The Last Supper* and the emotions such as panic, anger, and

guilt flow through this forbidden image. Assuming that Marie-Catherine's position overlaps that of Jesus, the possibility that the audience viewing the painting is questioned as Judas adds to the drama of the ending. However, since the "real-life familiarity of finality" is always employed as the rhetoric of an ending (Macdowell 2013: 66), the lullaby, as a daily ritual of farewell closure before going to sleep, provokes a more tactile sense of the story ending rather than the painting.

Figure 2. "[T]here is a silence where no sound may be"—the piano and the body fade away, leaving the audience with the imagery of a "lullaby" in which Ada's original self is forever silenced and thus rendered void of sound (Campion 1993: 1:55:06–1:55:11)

It is worth noting that *Barbe Bleue* and *The Piano* storylines end with more than just underwater or painting shots. The multiplication of the narrative lines seems to generate a stronger sense of finality in the audience, while the double ending of the narrative discourse plays a crucial role in the presentation of the complex feature of the female characters. Firstly, the two embedded storylines of *Barbe Bleue* run through and intersect with each other, answering questions previously reserved for the audience in the finale as a "narrative closure" (71). For example, in the opening scenes, Maire-Catherine, feeling betrayed by the abbess as a sister in a religious sense, curses: "I will strangle her, hang her by her hair, watch her die" (Breillat 2009: 00:09:45–00:09:58), which is an image that coincides with the scene at the end, where Catherine replaces Marie-Catherine into the forbidden room. Thus, Catherine is given the power to make a "decision" on murder and terrorise her old sister to fall to her death. When Marie-Catherine and Catherine feel their subjects of self are violated in their love-hate relationship, their "decisions" made in the opening and ending stifle the

possibility of realising the sisterly alliance and challenge "the sisterhood" (Losser 1994: 46). Secondly, unlike *Barbe Bleue*'s narrative framework of "a story inside a story", *The Piano*'s different ending takes the form of "a new story starting at the end" when Ada tells the audience about her new life with Baines. While it suggests "what happens next", the "next" is missing, leading to an "unchanging monolithic state" (Macdowell 2013: 63). Ada's "new" self after making her life's "decision" is static and her memory shared with the audience is thin. Accordingly, when the film ends with a shot of the ocean floor, the narrative ritual is completed successfully by re-establishing the common memory belonging to the traumatised Ada and the audience. In sum, *The Piano* takes the viewer to a narrative ending at the bottom of the sea, that might be a reference to death as *Barbe Bleue*'s, which is the cost of the self-fulfilling "decision". The difference is that the former sacrifices the original being, but the latter slays the contradictory object.

Conclusion

Neither *Barbe Bleue* nor *The Piano* can avoid a tragic ending. Both protagonists suffer from the inequality of gender relations in patriarchal marriages, and *Barbe Bleue* also involves the internal heterogeneity of sisterhood. Judging by their surroundings, the choices and actions of the female protagonists are "decisions" that seek to realise their subjectivity. Although the female protagonists succeed in defending themselves in dangerous situations, the results of their self-actualisation are blank. At the same time, the narrative devices of both films allow the characters to invite the audience to build a community joining in the destruction to complete the ritual of tragedy, going beyond the meaning of the text. I believe that it is the male characters, such as the musketeers in *Barbe Bleue* and Baines in *The Piano*, who lead to female protagonists' physical deliverance, a case of Deus ex machina at the end of both films. Therefore, it could be considered that the lack of female initiative for self-redemption, a limitation of both films, is able to render more possibilities for the creation of narrative closure.

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