

THE FAIRY TALE AND THE WORKS OF AMÉLIE NOTHOMB

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By

Kevin R. Harrison

Thesis Committee:

Kathryn Hoffmann, Chairperson

Cristina Bacchilega

Nathalie Ségeral

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Abstract

A man who photographs dead women, another who has trapped a woman on an island without mirrors, and the chance encounter between a hideous ornithologist and jewelry model; these are the subjects of the novels studied in this thesis. Written by Belgian author Amélie Nothomb, these novels (*Barbe bleue*, *Mercur*e, and *Riquet à la houppe*), even though they are quite distinct from one another, have one common thread that runs through them: the fairy tale. Nothomb does not just rewrite the plots of fairy tales; she shows how objects affect the narrative of a tale. Through jewels, mirrors, eyeballs, and photographs, Nothomb crafts unique, sometimes hybrid fairy tales that demonstrate how the physical things that fill a story can be sites of female empowerment and community. This thesis, through a combination of literary and material cultural approaches, studies the objects that appear in Nothomb's novels and unravels their function in her narratives.

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Introduction

A man who photographs dead women, another who has trapped a woman on an island without mirrors, and the chance encounter between a hideous ornithologist and a jewelry model; these are the subjects of the novels studied in this thesis. As different as these subjects are, there is one thread, however, that runs through these works: the fairy tale. This subject of Amélie Nothomb and the fairy tale has been broached by some critics, but they are mostly concerned with individual novels.¹ No one, it appears, has yet to undertake a project to tie her works together and analyze any prevailing strategies when it comes to how Nothomb writes fairy tales. Thus, the goal of this thesis is to begin to unravel the ways in which Nothomb engages with the fairy tale tradition, and specifically how she uses objects and female relationships to tell her own fairy tales.

The daughter of Belgian diplomats, Amélie Nothomb has spent much of her life abroad, having been born and raised in Japan and later China. She has had both commercial and critical success as an author, publishing at least one play or piece of fiction per year since 1992. In 1999, she received the Grand Prix du Roman from the Académie Française for her novel *Stupeur et Tremblements*, and in 2007 she was awarded both the Jean Giono prize and le Prix de Flore for her works as a whole (“L’auteur”). She is also a member of the Royal Academy of French Language and Literature of Belgium (“Membres actuels”). Nothomb is known for her autofiction where she fictionalizes parts of her life such as her time spent working in Japan, which is the subject of *Stupeur et Tremblements* among other novels.

¹ See Amanieux “Amour, meurtre,” Chevillot, Fix, Hall, Locic, McIlvanney, and Oberhuber.

The Literary Fairy Tale

One issue central to the field of fairy tale studies is the question of oral tradition and folklore. This debate is far too complex to be sufficiently dealt with in this thesis (and indeed is the subject of many books and book chapters), but at the very least an overview of it is necessary. There are scholars such as Jack Zipes who argue that fairy tales ultimately originated from oral rather than literary sources: “Most folklorists and literary critics have, in fact, largely agreed that the fairy tale emanated from oral traditions, and that the history of tale types related to the fairy tale is complex and cannot be reduced to simple or positivist explanations” (*The Irresistible Fairy Tale* xi). Others like Ruth Bottigheimer go in the opposite direction:

It has been said so often that the folk invented and disseminated fairy tales that this assumption has become an unquestioned proposition. It may therefore surprise readers that folk invention and transmission of fairy tales has no basis in verifiable fact. Literary analysis undermines it, literary history rejects it, social history repudiates it, and publishing history (whether of manuscripts or of books) contradicts it. (1)

Bottigheimer and Zipes mark the two poles between which fairy tale scholars fall. Although I agree with Zipes when he says that the history of fairy tales cannot be oversimplified, I find Bottigheimer’s arguments for the literary history of the tale more convincing. That is not to say that there is *no* orality when it comes to the fairy-tale tradition, or that folklorists are wrong to study oral versions of tales. Rather, such orality is, as Bottigheimer suggests, unquantifiable. Thus how much of a place it truly has in fairy tale history can never be known. However what *is* traceable and demonstrable is the literary history that links fairy-tale texts together, and it is also for this reason that this thesis considers fairy tales to be works that are derived from a primarily literary tradition.

The Problem of Adaptation

Fairy tales are a well-studied literary genre, and one important concern in the field is that of fairy tale adaptations. Voluminous works have been dedicated to the subject of adaptation in general: Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O’Flynn give a detailed breakdown of adaptation methods, Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams interrogate more specific adaptations of older texts, and Thomas Leitch edited an entire volume of essays concerning the field of adaptation studies, with topics ranging from novels to films.² There is also a robust amount of scholarship concerning fairy tale adaptations in particular. The approaches to fairy tale adaptations are almost as diverse as the adaptations themselves: there are works that concern films, others that concern novels, some that focus on issues of identity such as race, gender, and sexuality, and those works that discuss secrets and justice.³

Within the critical discussions of fairy-tale adaptations, however, there are a variety of ways to conceive of how recently-created texts interact with their predecessors and each other. Cristina Bacchilega in *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-first-century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* uses a web that connects old tales and oral traditions to new tales and media. Patricia Eichel-Lojkine conceives of a similar network instead of a web, and Ute Heidmann and Jean-Michel Adam focus more on just pure intertextuality between texts, emphasizing the written tradition of fairy tales. These various ways of understanding the relationship between contemporary fairy-tale writings and a complex cultural matrix reveal the difficulties of such terms as “adaptation,” “reimagining,” and “rewriting” that often permeate the critical discussion of contemporary fairy tales. When a critic invokes a work as “an adaptation of Perrault’s

² See Frus and Williams, Hutcheon and O’Flynn, Leitch, and Murray.

³ See Bacchilega (all), Barzilai, Bobby, Duggan (all), Eichel-Lojkine, Fix, Greenhill, Greenhill and Matri, Harries, Heidmann, Heidmann and Adam, Juez, Rodríguez, Sellers, Shor, Tatar, Warner, Zipes (all).

‘Bluebeard’,” that work becomes tied to Perrault in a way that potentially reduces the vast “Bluebeard” tradition to one author and perpetuates the idea of a source text to which one must always refer in order to find the answers for the text that is the subject of their study.

I believe that new versions of fairy tales should be studied in light of the broader fairy-tale tradition that comes before them, instead of singling out one particular author or authors who are seen as the “originators” of the tale. To this end, I understand Nothomb’s novels through a combination of Gérard Genette’s ideas of intratextuality and Bacchilega’s fairy-tale web. Genette lays out five ways that texts can relate to one another: through genre (architextuality), an older text referring to a newer one (hypertextuality), one text that comments on another without naming it (metatextuality), the ancillary parts of a text such as notes and prefaces (paratext), and the presence of one text in another (intertextuality) (8-14). Bacchilega describes her web as a methodological tool:

Proposing the fairy-tale web as a general site for critical inquiry into the genre’s activity has a twofold purpose: to further the construction of a history and remapping of the genre that are not insulated from the power structures and struggles of capitalism, colonialism, coloniality, and disciplinarily; and to envision current fairy-tale cultural practices in an intertextual dialogue with one another that is informed not only by the interests of the entertainment or culture industry and the dynamics of globalization in a ‘postfeminist’ climate but also by more multifocal and unpredictable uses of the genre (*Fairy Tales Transformed?*18)

Although I do not deal with as many issues as Bacchilega does, I agree with the fundamental principle that fairy tales are interwoven into many different disciplinary and media branches. My only issue with the concept of a web is that one can look at one section of a web and only get a small portion of the wider picture. When studying fairy tales, I look for a way that helps me to see more of the web at once. For this reason, I take the title of Genett’s work, *Palimpsests*, as the basis of my conception of Nothomb’s relationship to the wider fairy-tale tradition.

A palimpsest is historically a piece of parchment whose writing has been scraped off in order for something new to be written over it, even though shadows of the old text are still visible. That is to say that one can at once read a new text and see what was written before. I propose that Nothomb's novels be seen as the latest writings on the theoretical palimpsest of the fairy-tale tradition. As a conceptual tool, the palimpsest allows us to visualize the web of fairy-tale texts and intertexts as an ever expanding project of one text layering upon another. As we unfurl the parchment and add new theoretical branches as well as new tales to old ones, the web expands both laterally and vertically. Nothomb's antecedents cannot be fully erased and one cannot fully ignore them when reading her works, thus they lie just beneath the surface of her texts as she makes her own additions.

Engaging with the Materiality of the Text

The main methodological approach of this thesis is to engage texts through a material culture perspective. This approach to literature has been developed by scholars such as Lorraine Daston, James Walvin, Kathryn Hoffmann, and Raymonde Robert. Daston's comments, although she writes on actual, physical objects, are nevertheless pertinent to the analysis of objects in a literary text: "Things are simultaneously material and meaningful" (17). Walvin writes about how objects can be connotative of the past: "I am trying to follow a similar path: exploring a broader story via a range of small items, in this case, objects and customs which emerged from the world of slavery" (10). Together, Daston and Walvin reveal that objects do not merely exist, but rather are integral parts of their surroundings. Hoffmann and Robert take a similar approach to examining the materiality, that is, the physical aspects of literary texts, such

as Hoffmann's work on glass in different fairy tales or how the depiction of humans with physical differences in fairy tales is related to broader early modern cultural practices ("Perrault's 'Cendrillon'" 52-55, "Of Monkey Girls" 67-70). Robert dedicates whole sections of her book to the study of objects—everything from mirrors and porcelain to flowers and rococo art—in fairy tales, specifically linking them to the history of the time when they were written (327-80). What these critics collectively show is that objects do not simply exist in the text, but rather can relate a text to its time period, to other cultural practices, and to other tales as well.

I take the work of those cited above as the basis of my endeavour to study the materiality of Nothomb's writing and begin to unravel how she constructs new fairy tales through the interactions among environments, objects, and characters. Meredith A. Bak wrote a book chapter on fairy tales and material culture, but her chapter focuses more on things such as fairy-tale merchandise (456-60). While such analysis is important, I am focused on the objects in the tale itself. This approach to literature is important because our world is very much defined by the physical: where we live and what we interact with comprise vital aspects of life. If such materiality is important in our everyday lives, it is fruitful, then, to examine how authors tell stories through the same relationships between individuals and materiality. Analyzing the cups, clothes, decorations, and light fixtures that might appear across a novel can be another window through which an author's narrative strategies and goals can be discerned.

In this thesis, I take up three of Nothomb's novels in an effort to show that she uses objects to define and shape her narratives, and those objects ultimately serve as the basis of communities that empower and uplift her female characters. In doing so, Nothomb contributes to

the broader fairy-tale palimpsest three tales that demonstrate how objects in a tale can be used to redefine fairy-tale characters and relationships.

The first chapter analyzes how memorial photography shapes the interactions between the main characters in *Barbe bleue* and how ultimately a bond between living and photographed women leads to the downfall of Nothomb's Bluebeard. To support my analysis, I rely on such critical works as Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, Krzysztof Pomian's *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, Cristina Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, Jean Baudrillard's *Jean Baudrillard: Fotografien: photographies: photographs 1985-1998*, and a series of articles by Elizabeth Edwards. I also relate this novel to other "Bluebeard" tales such as Giambattista Basile's "The Three Crowns," Italo Calvino's "Silver Nose," and Anatole France's *Les Sept femmes de Barbe-Bleue*. Nothomb's Bluebeard character keeps photographs of his previous victims locked in his forbidden chamber, and these photographs and the idea of a love only serving the purposes of photography are the impetus behind Bluebeard's murder of his "wives." In the end, the new "wife" bonds with the women in the photographs to create a community that uses Bluebeard's prized possession, photos, to undo his oppressive practices.

The second chapter looks at *Mercure* and how the confluence of sight, mirrors, and photography serve to create a female community that undoes male oppression. I draw on tales such as *Méhusine*, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête*, the myths of Mercury/Hermes, and Basile's "The Sun, Moon, and Talia" to show how these texts come together to form a hybrid corpus of hypotexts to which *Mercure* refers. I underpin my thoughts on the novels with many of the same critics as I do in the first chapter, but with the addition of

Ivo Maroevic's chapter "The Museum Message: Between the Document and the Information," Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet's book, *Histoire du miroir*, and Lurana Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In this novel, vision and vision technology are manipulated to tell truths and lies; they are both tools of a predatory man as well as the means by which women are freed from his grasp. Through this manipulation of strategies of vision, the oppressive, male looker that desires a woman is replaced by a woman who desires another woman.

Lastly, in the third chapter, I attempt to show how in *Riquet à la houppe*, through opposing male and female narratives, objects and female/generational bonds do not vanquish an oppressive man but rather elevate an empowered woman into a more complex fairy-tale relationship. By complex I mean a relationship where the power dynamics are not clear-cut. In order to do this, I lean on Patricia Hannon's idea of antithesis in her article "Antithesis and Ideology in Perrault's 'Riquet à La Houppe'," Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, and Lewis Seifert's *Fairy Tales, Sexuality, and Gender in France: 1690-1715*. I also show the hybrid set of fairy tale intertexts with which this novel interacts such as Marie Catherine Jumelle de Barneville, comtesse d'Aulnoy's "Serpentin Vert" and "La Belle aux cheveux d'or" as well as Charles Perrault and Catherine Bernard's versions of "Riquet à la houppe." In this novel, the male character is alone for most of his life, while the female character enjoys a singular, intense bond with her grandmother; this contrast, coupled with the fact that the male and female storylines do not intersect until the very end of the novel, highlights the lack of power that a male character normally has over a female one, as well as the strong generational ties between two women. It is through the cooperation of two women and two women alone that is responsible for the princess's "transformation," and not the cunning or deal making of a prince.

My hope is that this thesis offers new perspectives on the fairy tale and the writings of Amélie Nothomb. Her tales offer a unique way of crafting and reimagining fairy tales through objects, and this way opens up new doors to the study of gender and relationships in fairy tales. She is not concerned with a simple reworking of plot, but rather she deals with the material fabric that comprises the world in which her characters live. Much of the critical attention when it comes to contemporary fairy-tale authors focuses on Anglophone writers, and Nothomb's works make the case for searching among other languages for literary fairy tales that are innovative, remagine, and challenge the rest of the fairy-tale palimpsest.

Chapter 1

A New Bluebeard: Undoing the Prison of the Image

Amélie Nothomb, as a fairy-tale writer, does not simply take the name of a fairy tale and change its plot in order to make her contribution to the broader palimpsest of tales. Rather, Nothomb takes the Bluebeard tale, centers it around photography, and uses photography to create a new, object-based narrative of female heroism. In doing so, Nothomb fashions her own version of “Bluebeard,” one within a long chronology of retellings. For as Elizabeth Wanning Harries writes in her study of women and the history of the fairy tale, “[writers] build on, revise, and change the story as it has come down to them, rereading it in their own ways, pouring new wine into the old bottle that they know from the written tradition” (8). Indeed, the history of the fairy tale is one where “all the stories we now call fairy tales have been written and rewritten, printed and reprinted over centuries” (3). I take Harries’s comments here as a point of departure for considering Nothomb as one of the many writers of the “Bluebeard” tale, but a writer in her own right, a new point in the chronology of this tale.

Barbe bleue tells the story of a young woman, Saturnine, who, looking for an apartment in Paris, stumbles upon a listing put up by one Don Elemirio. A self-proclaimed Spanish nobleman, Elemirio lives in a lavish apartment, asking for a mere 500 euros per month. Saturnine is selected and decides to be the new roommate, despite the fact she learns that the previous eight roommates have all disappeared. Don Elemirio tells her that there is but one room she cannot enter, his photography darkroom, which is explicitly left unlocked. Once she has moved in, Saturnine and Elemirio begin a series of confrontational dialogues that take up the bulk of the novel. Despite this adversarial relationship, the two bond over food, with each one introducing

the other to a new type of food or drink. Despite her attempts to resist Don Elemirio and the way he views the world, Saturnine feels as if she is beginning to love him. This does not last long, however, as she comes to find out the truth that the women have died.

Soon after this confrontation, we learn the women died of hypothermia after being locked in the room and the temperature automatically dropping to freezing. Elemirio explains that such a death allows the body to be perfectly photographed. The room, then, is filled with photos of his previous victims. Saturnine convinces Elemirio to take pictures of her for a change, someone alive. The next day, Don Elemirio proposes that he place one of the photos in the darkroom among the others. Saturnine resists this up until the point when they enter the darkroom. Once inside, she cannot handle the suffering that the room represents and rushes out, closing the door behind her and activating the device. She then leaves Don Elemirio to suffer the same fate as his victims and calls on Corinne to share a bottle of champagne with her.

***Barbe bleue*, Photography, and Collections: De-Objectifying the Woman**

What makes a tale a “Bluebeard” tale? Jack Zipes has suggested that, despite the presence of seemingly similar stories, there is no evidence to indicate that there are other “Bluebeard” tales that precede Perrault’s writing of the tale:

Numerous studies have linked Perrault’s tales to the Greek myth about Pandora, biblical stories of Adam and Eve and Judith of Holofernes, folk tales related to the “Robber Bridegroom” and “Fitcher’s Bird” and the history of the known murderer, Gilles de Rais. They are all interesting stories and events that comprise the heterogeneity of this tale. Perhaps they may have influenced Perrault. Yet there is no conclusive evidence that he used or referenced any of these myths and stories. Instead, it is quite clear that this particular tale is one of the few stories that Perrault did not base on particular literary antecedents. (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 158)

Yet if one looks at Charles Perrault’s “La Barbe bleue” for a moment and unpacks some of its essential elements, it indeed becomes possible to find other literary corollaries. So to return to

the question at the start of the paragraph, if Perrault's "La Barbe bleue" is taken as a point of departure, a "Bluebeard" tale might contain a hidden room or another place that a character is forbidden to enter or look at. To engage in the forbidden act may also cause the transgressing character to witness something horrible, bring about dire consequences, or some combination of the two. These elements can serve as lenses through which other, similar tales can be discovered.

Nothomb's *Barbe bleue* takes part in a longer tradition of "Bluebeard"-esque tales and taps into some of the qualities of this tradition. Most notably she draws upon issues of vision, secrets, and female agency. In Perrault's version, the issue of the secret is obvious, as it is the revelation of the secret that puts the wife in danger. But her witnessing to the secret, and to the truth of his past, is founded in her own agency; she acts on her own will to open the door. Also, in doing so, she initiates the only action that could lead to Bluebeard's downfall: had she not opened the door and uncovered his secret, Bluebeard would have gone on to survive and potentially threaten even more women, but through female initiative, he is brought to this end. Similarly in the tale in Italo Calvino's collection, "Silver Nose," the same issue of the hidden women and witnessing the secret returns, but the female protagonist plays an even more active role.⁴ The hidden women are simply trapped instead of dead, and the wife orchestrates their escape, duping Silver Nose and freeing the women. Calvino's other tale, "The King of Animals," elaborates on the issue of female agency in the face of dangerous secrets. In it, the main wife, Stellina, is led by a handsome young man to a magnificent palace where she is seemingly alone until the invisible servant is revealed to her and they both learn that the young man is the king of animals who lures people to the palace and eats them. Even though she meets a knight who will

⁴ Calvino's tales are twentieth-century iterations collected/rewritten by Calvino.

lead them to safety, Stellina is the one who discovers the truth of the King of Animals, and she is the one who kills the King at the end of the tale.

The “Bluebeard” tradition of tales has been the subject of much scholarship. While some maintain the orality and folkloric nature of fairy tales, a number of scholars point to “Bluebeard” as taking part of a literary tradition instead of an oral one (Heidmann 161; Juez 490-91; Barzilai 10-15; Bottigheimer 1-9). Some have focused on the interrogation of male power and masculinity, the male/female dynamics in the context of seventeenth century France, and the representation of love and relationships (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 155-70; Hannon, *Fabulous Identities* 55-63; McGlathery 66-73). Other studies range from the psychological to a focus on ancillary characters in “Bluebeard” stories and the relationship between Perrault’s tale and the baroque to a description of the dramatic/cinematic qualities of the tale (Odajnyk 247-55; Lovell-Smith 197-202, Barchilon 19-21; Malarte-Feldman 107-18). Raymonde Robert, in her in-depth study of seventeenth and eighteenth-century fairy tales, underscores the presence of objects in “Bluebeard,” but only mirrors and not photographs (with photographs being a nineteenth-century invention) (357). Marina Warner discusses attempts to identify a historical model for “Bluebeard” as well as how Perrault’s tale not only interrogates male and female sexuality, but also the rights of both spouses in a marriage (81-94). Much scholarship has been done on contemporary “Bluebeard” tales such as novels and films, such as Maria Tatar’s extensive study of the history of the tale in her book *Secrets Beyond the Door*. In it she traces representations of Bluebeard and his wives, from the classically patriarchal to the anti-patriarchal. In regards to modern-day writers of “Bluebeard,” tales, she writes that “our own culture has turned (Bluebeard’s wife) into something of a heroine, a woman whose

problem-solving skills and psychological finesse make her a shrewd detective, capable of rescuing herself and often her marriage in the bargain” (3-4). Few studies have been undertaken on Amélie Nothomb as a “Bluebeard” writer.⁵ Simona Locic’s article on this novel only goes as far as to say that Nothomb’s characters are more complex than traditional fairy-tale characters (379-80). Florence Fix writes on Nothomb’s *Barbe bleue*, but Fix’s study focuses on the relationship between Bluebeard and his secret across different versions of the tale. This thesis focuses on the “thingness” of Nothomb’s novels. Thus, the emphasis in this chapter is on the objects that appear in the tale, not on Bluebeard and his secret.

The Forbidden Room: Bluebeard’s Cabinet of Curiosities

One of the most recognizable aspects of the “Bluebeard” tale is the forbidden room, and many varied iterations of this room have appeared across the versions of this tale. Giambattista Basile in “The Three Crowns” offers a room filled with three living women instead, while Perrault’s version of the room is well-known with its collection of murdered women. Joseph Jacobs’s “Mr. Fox” certainly leans on this idea for this forbidden chamber, and in Calvino’s “The Animal King,” mutilated bodies fill the room, however this time it is a pile of non-specific victims. In Anatole France’s *Les Sept femmes de Barbe-Bleue* ‘The Seven Wives of Bluebeard’, the chamber is decorated with paintings of suffering women as opposed to being filled with actual women (however one of the seven wives is killed there, albeit by her lover and not by

⁵ For broader works concerning contemporary Bluebeard tales, see Bacchilega *Postmodern Fairy Tales* and *Fairy Tales Transformed?*, Harries, Zipes *Why Fairy Tales Stick* and *Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Juez “La Réécriture,” Eichel-Lojkine, Bobby “Introduction,” Sellers, and Sweeney “Female Strategies.” Many of these studies, when they focus on writers, analyze anglophone authors such as Anne Sexton or Angela Carter.

Bluebeard). And as a final example, in Calvino's "Silver Nose," the locked room is a portal to hell, and the women are not dead so much as they are damned, waiting to be freed.

The scholarship on the forbidden room is just as varied as the literary versions of the room. When discussing the potential origins of the tale, Ruth Bottigheimer discusses the particular similarities between Perrault's "La Barbe bleue" and Basile's "The Tree Crowns":

Basile's heroine is, of course, overcome by "curiosity" and she opens the door, behind which she finds three girls. This would later become none other than the pivotal moment in Perrault's "Bluebeard" tale. Its ancestry has long been alleged to lie in a folk memory of earlier centuries' infamous mass murderers. But "Blue Beard's" origins lie closer to hand, for if Perrault rejected the rest of Basile's verbally suggestive "Three Crowns," he seized upon just this material to construct a warning morality tale of his own making. (66)

Cristina Bacchilega notes the diversity of representations of the forbidden room by saying that "the forbidden chamber can therefore be the husband's bloody chamber, a room where the heroine is asked to consume human flesh, or Hell itself" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 110).

Bacchilega also notes that the bloody chamber can serve as a place for empowering encounters with death:

In a genre-specific way, the scene [of entering the forbidden chamber] also makes visible the empowering potential that fairy tales as fantastic encounters with death, violence, and injustice may have for the young, the small, and those who read them not wanting to turn into "fresh meat." (*Fairy Tales Transformed?* 91)⁶

Marina Warner notes that the forbidden chamber is often associated with forbidden knowledge: "His house, his castle, his forbidden chamber become synonymous with forbidden knowledge" (92). When Hannon analyzes the room in Perrault's version, she focuses on how Bluebeard's power rests on the secret contained in the room, and how this power is maintained at the cost of noble blood: "Rather, her challenge to the villain's power, the latter synonymous with the secret

⁶ This is said in reference to Catherine Breillart's film *Barbe bleue*. In the same chapter, Bacchilega also discusses Nalo Hopkinson's "The Glass Bottle Trick" and notes the intersection between the bloody chamber and the tale's overall creolization with the inclusion of Caribbean folklore (46-47).

knowledge locked in the chamber, threatens to exact the price of blood; Bluebeard's fantasy of power is sustained at the high price of female blood" (59, 61). Harries's analysis of one version of the forbidden chamber emphasizes the discovery that the wife has entered it, and associates it to the character's innocence: "This stain [on the key] reflects her half-conscious complicity in her own near-destruction, the guilt that resides within her apparent sexual innocence" (156). Zipes argues that "in the case of 'Bluebeard,' there is a very specific masculine narrative strategy that Perrault developed in defense of arbitrary phallocratic power that he unwittingly shows to be impotent, and this strategy has been cultivated in different ways by most male adapters of the tale" (161). In a psychological/archetypal study, V. Walter Odajnyk argues that the blood in the chamber represents shame: "The bloodstained key and egg, or the singed flowers in the Italian version, are analogous to the feelings of shame, guilt, and self-consciousness experienced by Adam and Eve" (262). Tatar, when discussing "Bluebeard" tales in general, incorporates a variety of media into her analysis, and thus she includes an analysis of the visual representations of the forbidden chamber alongside her literary analysis. She notes that while some illustrators like Gustave Doré and Walter Crane bring the reader to just before the chamber, Edmund Dulac brings us inside: "We see Bluebeard's wife as witness to the grim spectacle behind the door, and the carnage is hidden from view" (40). As a final example, Claire-Lise Malarte-Feldman relates the secret chamber to baroque art: "Images of death and other morbid evocations, another fascination of the baroque, can also be found throughout Perrault's tales, and most of them lead to terrifying and everlasting visions, such as the evocation of Bluebeard's secret cabinet" (115).

In Nothomb's invention, she transforms Bluebeard into an obsessive photographer who entraps women in a photographic plot that kills the women who fall into it. The forbidden room,

now a photography darkroom, becomes the anchor of the trap that Bluebeard's dead "wives" have fallen into. Don Elemirio explains at one point that indeed the only purpose of photography is to capture death:

Le rôle de l'art est de compléter la nature et le rôle de la nature est d'imiter l'art. La mort est la fonction que la nature a inventée dans le but d'imiter la photographie. Et les hommes ont inventé la photographie pour capter ce formidable arrêt sur image qu'est l'instant du trépas. (97)

The role of art is to complement nature and the role of nature is to imitate art. Death is the function that nature invented with the goal of imitating photography. And men invented photography in order to capture in an image this great stop that is the moment of death.⁷

Photography not only shapes his ideas of death, but also those of love:

Le but de l'amour me semble d'aboutir à une photo, une seule, absolue, de la femme aimée. Et le but de la photographie est de révéler l'amour que l'on éprouve en une seule image. (90)

The purpose of love, it seems to me, is to end in a single, absolute photo of the woman loved. And the purpose of photography is to reveal the love that one feels in a single image.

Bluebeard is no longer a mysterious murderer with less-than-clear motives behind his *modus operandi*, but rather one who has a very clear objective with regards to his actions, and he shapes everything he does around the goal of having one sublime photograph of the perfect woman. Indeed it is through these photos that he fashions a narrative into which each woman falls: they meet Don Elemirio, they fall in love, they enter the room, they die, and they are photographed.

The obsession for women and photography, and the weight of the empty space in the collection to be filled by the next woman, can be explained in the words of Florence Fix in her study of this novel, "Barbe-Bleue est en quête d'un idéal féminin réductible à un objet" ("Bluebeard is in search of a feminine ideal that is reducible to an object"; 78). As Locic puts it, a woman is only a photograph for him (391). The visual aspect of the images is only one part of

⁷ All translations from French to English are my own. The equivalency between death in photography is reminiscent of Roland Barthes's comments in his work, *La Chambre claire*, in which he describes photography as a micro experience of death (30).

the formula that creates the collection, and Elizabeth Edwards calls on those studying photography to pay attention not only to the visual aspect of the image itself, but also to the materiality of the photograph, that is, the way it is presented as the presentation also affects our interactions with the photograph (222). With this in mind, it is important to note that there are only photos of the women, no bodies, and they all “*ryhtmaient*” ‘gave a certain rhythm’ the walls of the room, which seems to indicate that some kind of pattern is formed with the images (120). The space becomes constructed for some form of “visual consumption” that materializes at the end of the novel.⁸ The space for the ninth photo is prepared, and its emptiness restarts the photographic plot and its attempts to claim another victim.

The darkroom, though, is not just about the space that needs to be filled with photos, but rather there is also a temporal element inherent to the collection. The criteria for a woman to be worth photographing are such that the woman must be a person Bluebeard loves, for he loves all the women that entered the room, which he declares to Saturnine: “Vous ne remplacez pas les huit femmes qui vous ont précédée. Je continue de les aimer” (“You are not replacing the eight women that came before you. I still love them”; 80). This sentence is key, for it underscores that Saturnine is not literally *replacing* anyone, she is a new addition to an existing collection. She is also not supplanting the place that these women hold in Don Elemirio’s heart, for he claims to still love the women—even in death. As Edwards notes, the act of keeping a photograph holds time still in order to create a memory, which is what Don Elemirio does in keeping these women: he keeps them frozen in time, at the moment of their death so that he can hold on to each woman

⁸ Jonathan Crary offers an in-depth study of the practices of observing subjects in the nineteenth century: “The nineteenth-century optical devices I discuss, no less than the panopticon, involved arrangements of bodies in space, regulations of activity, and the development of individual bodies, which codified and normalized the observer within rigidly defined systems of visual consumption” (18).

in the present tense (222). Roland Barthes argues that “ce que la Photographie reproduit à l’infini n’a eu lieu qu’une fois: elle répète mécaniquement ce qui ne pourra jamais plus se répéter existentiellement” (“What photography reproduces infinitely has only taken place once: it repeats mechanically what can never be repeated existentially”;15). The women are not just present for Bluebeard, but as long as the photos exist, the women’s state captured in photos will carry on in perpetuity. Even though Edwards notes that physical interaction promotes closeness with the image, Don Elemirio continues to feel close to the women despite the fact that, by his own admission, he has never interacted with the pictures after taking them (227-28). This continued presence of the women also calls to mind Jean Baudrillard et al.’s reflections in the collection *Jean Baudrillard: Fotografien: photographies: photographs 1985-1998*: they argue that the photo should be a place of the absence of the subject, rather than the presence.

L’enjeu, c’est de faire que l’objet, au lieu que lui soient imposées la présence et la représentation du sujet, devienne le lieu de son absence et de sa disparition. L’objet peut d’ailleurs être une situation, une lumière, un être vivant. (83)

What is at stake is to make it so that the object, instead of the presence and representation of the subject being imposed on it, becomes the site of its absence and disappearance. The object can, for that matter, be a situation, a light, a living being.

It is a game between absence and presence, both of the photos and of the women in them, that comes to dominate the character relationships in this novel. The women are absent, but their suffering is present in the photos. The photos are absent for much of the novel, but their presence shapes its very course.

Nothomb’s Bluebeard is engaged in a practice of posing dead bodies, photographing them, and keeping these photographs in a private space for his own memory.⁹ Such an activity

⁹ Although I disagree with her psychoanalytic methodology, Elisabeth Bronfen offers a comprehensive study of the act of posing and depicting dead women in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*.

parallels the practices of a particular form of photography: memorial or postmortem photography.¹⁰ The practice of memorial photography becomes integral to his character insofar as it is the material practice that frames his interactions with each woman. He poses the bodies of the women, dressing each one in the article of clothing he created for them so that he can capture the beauty of the color: “La couleur est la partie aristocratique de chacune” (“Color is the aristocratic aspect of everyone”; 121). Don Elemirio can be seen as both naming, categorizing, and defining the women he kills in terms of color. Francisco Vaz Da Silva writes on colors and fairy tales, but he only focuses on three colors and “Snow White” tales (240-45). The women, then, are also separated from the rest of society that does not fit his chromatic tastes. And thus having separated the perfect colors from the rabble, Don Elemirio engages in what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls “visuality”:

Visuality is composed of a series of operations that can be summarized under three headings: first, visuality classifies by naming, categorizing, and defining . . . Second, visuality separates groups so classified as a means of social organization . . . Third, it makes this separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic. (3)

Moreover, Elemirio abhors the thought of sharing these photos with anyone beside himself:

“Quoi de plus assommant que ces photographes qui tiennent absolument à vous montrer leurs oeuvres?” (“What is more boring than these photographers that care so much about showing you

¹⁰ Memorial photography involves taking pictures of a dead body, usually of a loved one or family member, and keeping these images. Ingrid Fernandez, in her study on American memorial photography, notes that this practice was much more prevalent in the nineteenth century, with the practice dying out of public popularity beginning in the twentieth century as medical technology advanced and death became a taboo subject (344, 351-55). Despite this, the practice continues, as Laurel Hilliker notes in her article on the relationship between mourning and memorial photography. She writes that these pictures, while still taken, are kept out of circulation and are often privately held by the individual who took them or to whom they were given (246). The bodies of the deceased were not simply photographed immediately after the moment of their death, however, but rather they were posed, dressed, and positioned by the family members/photographers, often so that that body would look as if they were alive but sleeping. This was done so that the surviving family members would have a more meaningful memento of the deceased (Hilliker 250). Even though Hilliker’s study, like that of Fernandez, focuses on American memorial photography practices, Hilliker notes that it is a practice that transcends ethnic boundaries (252). Jay Ruby and Stanley Burns also made significant contributions to the study of memorial photography in their works *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* and *Sleeping Beauty: Memorial Photography in America*, respectively.

their works?"; 86). This practice is the culmination of his relationship with the women, for the women exist only to become objects to be posed and manipulated, and as Susan Sontag notes, taking a photo is a quest that limits the photographer to the search of the photogenic (9).

Bluebeard is indeed on a photographic quest, and it is this material conception of women and life that is undone by the end of the novel.

It is important to note also that this collection of photos of dead women is not merely a collection, but rather a sort of cabinet of curiosities. This term, as described by Susan Pearce, refers to the rooms in which early modern collectors would store their acquired oddities (109). These sorts of private collections were born out of "modernist knowledge" systems that emphasized the presence of physical evidence to create knowledge (111). Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor write that the contents of these cabinets and their collectors are quite diverse, with anything from nature samples to Renaissance antiquities being kept within them (2-4).¹¹ Krzysytof Pomian notes that although these collections were common, the only ones that actually impressed were those that expressed great monetary value; anything else "is perceived merely as a narcissistic and slightly frivolous pastime-nothing more than a trifle" (1). Much like these cabinets of curiosities, Don Elemirio's collection is a private one. And its contents, since they are of no economic importance, only serve to stoke the collector's own ideas and plans for his life. Lastly, the room is unequivocally filled with physical evidence, however not evidence that leads to the foundation of scientific knowledge, but rather evidence that later confirms Saturnine's knowledge of his crimes.

¹¹ The french word *cabinet*, from which cabinet of curiosities takes its name, refers to a room rather than a piece of furniture.

Resistance to a Prison of Obsession

The photographic narrative that has doomed other women acts like a prison that attempts to subjugate yet another woman to its devices. It is unclear why Saturnine is the epitome of yellow, but Nothomb establishes her as such through Saturnine's remark about the quality of gold in a dish that Don Elemirio serves: "Ce jaune opaque dans cet or baroque, c'est d'une beauté!" ("This opaque yellow in this baroque gold, it's a beauty!"; 24). After this proclamation, Don Elemirio is sure of her status as befitting the final place in his collection and declares his love for her, trying to entrap Saturnine. Even though she is not a literal prisoner, as she can move about the house freely, the narrative trap has been set in motion.

While there are efforts to entrap women in this novel, equally present are efforts to resist this entrapment. One of the ways this is accomplished is through a denial to engage with the narrative in the first place. Uninterested in the photos and the black room from the start, Saturnine is determined to show Don Elemirio that she is unafraid and unaffected by him: "Je veux lui montrer qu'il ne m'impressionne pas" ("I want to show him that he does not impress me"; 45). Moreover, she also wants to keep him from adding anymore women to his collection: "Aussi longtemps que je suis là, il ne risque pas de zigouiller une nouvelle femme" ("As long as I'm here, there's no risk of him killing another woman"; 47). She even tells her old roommate, Corinne, that she will not fall in love with him, placing herself apart from the other women. Despite this self-sacrifice, the photos remain unrevealed, and thus the truth as well, and such ignorance will return to complicate this resistance to entrapment.

The machinations at work are further unraveled when efforts to resist them begin to multiply. Specifically, the image Bluebeard has created, both of himself and of the world around him, is challenged. Don Elemirio's claim to be a photographer is called into question:

Vous n'avez pas les attitudes d'un photographe. Je vous ai observé. Jamais vous ne cadrez avec vos yeux, jamais vous ne vous taisez devant une image. (67)

You don't have the qualities of a photographer. I've observed you. Never do you frame with your eyes, never do you go silent in front of an image.

Beyond this, his beliefs and views are also attacked. One of the earliest examples of this comes after Don Elemirio explains to Saturnine his admiration of the Spanish Inquisition and its processes of justice, which she calls "une parodie de justice," ("A parody of justice"; 15). Later she challenges him for having created a purposefully tempting room to create a trap for women: "Vous vous croyez en position de faire passer des tests? Pour qui vous prenez-vous?" ("You believe yourself to be in a position to give tests? Who do you think you are?"; 33). At these different moments, Bluebeard's authority over this environment deteriorates, pulling the curtains back on the world he has created for himself, thereby bringing in the light and allowing change to come through.

Amicability, however, becomes a barrier to complete resistance to Saturnine's entrapment. Despite the damage done to Bluebeard's hold over his world and the new "wife," bonds begin to form between the two, especially over food, and these bonds prevent a fuller resistance to Bluebeard's trap.¹² In the beginning, Don Elemirio only serves eggs to Saturnine, but after only a few days, he begins to experiment with new foods, such as baking a Saint Honoré cake.¹³ It is also at this meal that Saturnine reintroduces him to champagne, something he

¹² The study of food and fairy tales is supported by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Le Cru et le cuit*.

¹³ Don Elemirio's predilection for eggs might be a reference to Margaret Atwood's short story, "Bluebeard's Egg."

has not indulged in for some time. In this exchange of new foods and new experiences, the traces of a bond have begun to form:

-Délectable! S'écria-t-elle. Je ne sais pas ce que vous valez comme aristo, mais comme pâtissier, vous me convainquez. Allons bon, vous pleurez?

-Pour la première fois, j'ai l'impression de vous plaire. Je suis un émotif. (37)

-Delicious! She cried. I don't know what you're worth as an aristocrat, but as a baker, you convince me. Alright now, you're crying?

-For the first time, I feel like I've pleased you. I'm an emotional man.

Later, Saturnine receives from Don Elemirio a perfectly fitting yellow skirt, one that he handmade himself. She then wears this skirt to dinner where she is offered a meal she has always wanted: "J'ai toujours rêvé d'un dîner caviar-vodka" ("I've always dreamed of a dinner of caviar and vodka"; 60). Through the exchange of new experiences, gastronomic or otherwise, the adversarial relationship that was formed begins to break down, as does the wall that was erected to block the narrative trap.

It is ignorance of the photos that punctuates this breakdown and further erodes resistance to machinations of entrapment. During a restless night, Saturnine believes that she has fallen in love with Don Elemirio, and this change of heart is accompanied by a moment of self loathing: "Je suis une idiote comme les autres" ("I'm an idiot just like the others"; 73). She even searches to exculpate him:

Il ne les a pas tuées! Les colocataires ont disparu, ça les regarde, sans doute ne sait-il pas où elles sont! Elles sont allées dans la chambre noire, elles l'ont déçu, mais il ne les a pas punies. C'est son mépris qui les a amenées à s'en aller. (73)

He didn't kill them! The roommates disappeared, that much is true, doubtless, however, that he doesn't know where they are! They went into the black room, they disappointed him, but he didn't punish them. It's his disdain that made them leave.

This abandonment of the fight against the photographic entrapment is rooted in the fact that the truth represented by the photos has not been revealed. This ignorance allows false theories to

enter the picture and it thus becomes a destructive force that tears down Saturnine's defensive barriers.

Ignorance, however, is only temporary, for Nothomb has created a fictional world in which truth is a liberating force, allowing characters to fully engage in resistance efforts. The opposition to emplotment returns in full strength once a modicum of truth is revealed, causing the trap to fall apart. It is one sentence, in response to Saturnine asking which Catholic doctrine Don Elemirio's camera illustrates, that shatters the brief hold he had over Saturnine's feelings for him: "L'immortalité de l'âme, répondit-il comme une évidence. Et la résurrection des corps" ("The immortality of the soul, he responded as if he were giving evidence. And the resurrection of bodies"; 91). These words cause her to wake up in the middle of the night and interrogate Don Elemirio, finally extracting the truth of what happened to the women. Once this truth is revealed, any love Saturnine may have had for him evaporates as she becomes a sort of shield, standing in the way of future victims. Ignorance prevented any efforts to derail Bluebeard's plans to take firm root, but once the truth is at least partially revealed, those efforts are now more fixed. There is a surety now that was not present before, and this surety is an empowering force that is elaborated upon with the photos and eventually leads to Bluebeard's downfall.

Truth serves as a liberating force in Nothomb's novel, but this element is not unique to it. Even in Perrault's tale, it is only after learning the truth of what happened to the other women that the new wife is even able to precipitate Bluebeard's downfall. Even though her life is put in danger, knowing the truth is a necessary step for her salvation. Similarly in "Silver Nose," knowing the truth of what happened to the other women allows the new wife to free them from hell. The truth becomes liberating, not only for the new wife, but for her predecessors as well.

Again in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's "Fitcher's Bird," the sister who does not bring her egg into the forbidden chamber is able to profit from her knowledge of the truth and to plot with her sisters in order to defeat the sorcerer. What is unique about the freeing power of the truth in Nothomb's novel is that the whole, unambiguous truth comes through photography.

A New Kind of Photography, a New Collection

Not only is Bluebeard's masterplan undone, but his very conception of photography becomes animated and upended, infused with the agency of an authoritative photographic subject. After a discussion of color as the ultimate pleasure, Saturnine poses to Don Elemirio the earth-shaking question of what would happen if he were to take a picture of a living person. Despite his hesitation, Saturnine is able to take control and draw Don Elemirio out of his tradition and bring him into a new kind of photoshoot:

L'expérience les sidéra. Jusque-là, Saturnine n'avait été immortalisée que sur des clichés familiaux, la bouche pleine de tambouille dominicale, et don Elemirio n'avait eu affaire qu'à de dociles défuntes. La nouveauté de l'exercice les excita comme des puces. Chacun donna à l'autre quelque chose d'inconnu. (117)

The experience stunned them. Until that point, Saturnine had only ever been immortalized in family photos, her mouth full of Sunday food, and Don Elemirio had only dealt with docile, deceased women. The novelty of the exercise excited them like sweethearts. Each gave to the other something unknown.

This scene demonstrates Mirzoeff's idea of "countervisuality," that is, the assertion of an "irreducible autonomy" in this photographic ballet that upheaves not only Bluebeard's authority in his own home, but also over photography (24). Mirzoeff also notes that countervisuality plays into what he calls "the right to look," which is the liberation of one's self from oppressive visuality (24). Fix writes that in this moment, Saturnine changes the rules of photography, undoing the power of the image to subject others: she upsets the idea of a fixed portrait of one

woman and she redirects and troubles his look (166-67). Furthermore, I note that Don Elemirio's brand of photography is not just any, but memorial photography, Saturnine upsets the practice of memorial photography as well. Memorial photography is an essentially asymmetric interaction with the photographer and perhaps the family of the deceased posing the body, but it is now the subject, Saturnine, who directs the photoshoot and the collaboration therein: she is not dressed and posed by Don Elemirio, she does it herself, choosing to wear the article of clothing he made for her. She introduces cooperativity into Don Elemirio's photographic practices. In doing so Saturnine also subverts the power dynamic in the household: even though there is a level of cooperation, she is still the one who instructs her landlord on what to do, she is the one who chooses what to wear, and she is the director of this photoshoot. By reappropriating a practice reserved for the dead and turning it into one for the living, new life is added to photography, inserting female power and agency to a practice that, in the hands of Don Elemirio, *objectified* the women he killed. It is not just the power of the image that is undone, but also the authority of the man over the photographic process, turning it into a process where the woman is the director.

Indeed, apart from the change to the very nature of the no-longer-murderous photographic process, there is also the fundamental transformation of the collection itself. The photographs in play have multiplied in number, disturbing the single portrait as Fix observes, literally giving Bluebeard multiple perspectives of a woman, undoing the monolith of a woman he has created in his head. What is striking, however, is that Don Elemirio fully participates in this upheaval of his worldview, showing only the slightest resistance at the outset. The cooperation of this scene and its almost positive connotations may lead one to believe that a sort

of harmony is beginning to reform between Saturnine and Don Elemirio. Yet the truth is now known by Saturnine, albeit partially, and the strict plan Bluebeard had laid out is destroyed.

Saturnine ex machina: from Collection to Exhibition, from Truth to Freedom

Once the photos are actually shown and materialize in the plot, they become semiophores, to borrow Pomian's term, which are objects with meaning (36). The photographs become laden with the suffering of the women and culpability of Bluebeard (32). Following Don Elemirio into the blackroom to add her own photo, Saturnine gazes upon its interior for the first time:

Ce vide la fit frissonner, elle eut l'impression de sentir les huit agonies qui avaient eu lieu dans la pièce et respira à fond . . . Non seulement on ne pouvait ignorer que ces femmes étaient mortes, mais on ne pouvait douter qu'elles avaient été assassinées. (120)

The emptiness made her shiver, she felt as if she sensed the eight agonies that took place in the room and she breathed deeply . . . Not only could one not ignore that these eight women were dead, but one could not doubt that they had been assassinated.

Saturnine's reaction to the photos appears to be a reversal of Sontag's observation when she says: "To take a photograph is to participate in another person (or things's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (15). It is Saturnine the newly photographed woman and not Don Elemiro the photographer who participates in the mortality and suffering of the women on the wall. For Don Elemirio, the women are still present for him, so their mortality means less to him than it does to Saturnine who fully takes in the slaughter of the women. Moreover, the presence of the photos erases any doubt of Bluebeard's guilt. Sontag's comments help explain this scene: "Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it" (5). Barthes's more general comments on what makes a photograph horrible appear relevant to the

emotion of this scene: “Si la photographie devient alors horrible, c’est parce qu’elle certifie, si l’on peut dire, que le cadavre est vivant, *en tant que cadavre*: c’est l’image vivante d’une chose morte” (“If photography becomes then horrible, it is because it certifies, one might say, that the cadaver is living *as a cadavre*: it’s the living image of something dead”; 123). These are no longer just photos for Bluebeard’s aesthetic pleasure, they become objects burdened with the truth and significance of the murders, making their suffering present and immediate. As she absorbs the emotional weight of the images around her, Saturnine refuses to become part of the collection and leaves Bluebeard to die in the room. Fix remarks that Saturnine closes the collection by adding the one who started it all (193).

The unfolding of the scene in the black room calls to mind Margaret Iversen’s idea of performative photography, which states that there is an element of “task setting” whereby a subject submits themselves to arbitrary structures, and “on the other hand, there is the reorientation of the picture toward the recording of an ongoing, open-ended event open to unanticipated consequence” (102). It is never clear what exactly is going to happen in the room once they enter, and despite her brief obedience to Don Elemiro’s project, Saturnine takes hold of the situation and brings it to an “unanticipated” conclusion. The conclusion is unanticipated in the sense that she had never expressed a desire to kill Don Elemiro, merely to coexist with him and keep him from harming others. It is the performative nature of the scene, with its dramatic *mise en scène*, that lends Saturnine the opportunity to do what she decides at that moment.

This performative aspect of the scene is underscored by the fact that it transforms the private collection into an exhibition. Pearce’s comments on collecting seem to describe Don Elemiro’s relationship with his own collection: “We create ordered space through our

collections by arranging them on shelves, organizing their internal sequences and relationships, and putting them on display. We treat our collections as play, making out our own special ground, and playing within it to rules of our own devising” (21). Pomian’s notes are also relevant to this scene: “The collection . . . must satisfy the following criteria: a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed places adapted specifically for that purpose and put on display” (9). Yet Don Elemirio is more than a simple collector, for from the moment Saturnine sets foot in it, his black room transforms the collection from a private affair to an exhibition, albeit not for the public but still an opening of the collection to a wider audience. Ivo Maroevic describes an exhibition as “an event where society and time meet and link in a defined space” that ultimately is a creative act meant to “communicate defined messages” to the audience (30). Flora E. S. Kaplan elaborates on the communicative aspect of exhibits and underscores that they communicate through the senses (37). With this exhibition, Don Elemirio’s message with his photographs is not one of ideas, but rather he communicates his atrocious actions. This is not the stated message of the exhibit, but it is the one Saturnine receives during its performative unveiling.

The black room only transforms from a private collection to an exhibition after it is opened up and offered for broader consumption. It is kept hidden and secret from Saturnine, and not even Don Elemirio has apparently laid eyes on his photographs after taking them. The purpose of the trip to the room is not only to add another item to the collection, but to display what is already there. It is a methodically organized, dramatic display of corpses and photography, a grotesque arrangement of the dead. The purposefulness of the construction is nothing like an encounter with a pile of photos in an envelope, but rather an encounter with an

intentionally organized space of semiophores that serve as a bridge, as Pomian puts it, between “the visible and the invisible,” the living and the dead (24).

The emotional significance of the photos, their exhibitiv setting, and their ability to communicate suffering also allow the photos to serve as a community-forming medium between pre and post mortem women. Sue Short, in her chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Media and Fairy-Tales Cultures*, writes that in “Bluebeard” tales, women often band together or with other people to put an end to and exact justice on Bluebeard: “Modern variants make a woman fully responsible for defending herself, uniting with other females who were formerly considered rivals, an outcome that suggests the influence of progressive sexual politics (even as it points to continued failings in terms of official protection for women)” (61). Bacchilega also takes up a similar point: “‘Bluebeard’ and related ‘Forbidden Chamber’ tales (AT312, AT311 and AT955) are therefore tales of initiation in which the protagonist successfully confronts death because she is bold and clever or because she has strong community ties” (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 110). However Saturnine is noticeably alone throughout much of the novel, except for a few brief exchanges with her friend Corinne and the two male house servants. Yet despite the lack of other, physical people to help her, Saturnine bonds with the photos on the wall, creating a post-mortem community with the murdered women, taking part in their suffering. It is this material community, one founded with the photographs themselves, that drives Saturnine to vanquish Bluebeard. While she does call for Corinne at the end of the novel, Corinne plays no role in helping Saturnine enact her justice. Only Saturnine, the final woman of the collection, in communion with her predecessors, can put an end to the cruelty the collection inspired.

Semiophores and Female Agency

The complex and layered usage of photography in this novel highlights the uniqueness of Nothomb's approach to writing fairy tales. Specifically through photographs, Nothomb focuses the narrative on objects and uses their material nature to open up new avenues for exploring the "Bluebeard" plot and characters. Memorial photography especially emerges as a powerful visual medium by which the protagonist not only bonds with the other women that have come before her but also overcomes the profound cruelty of the male antagonist. At the end of this novel, the photograph is an impactful semiophore that takes its meaning from the suffering it depicts and enables and encourages female agency. This use of photography underlines the protagonist's agency that is already evident in other Bluebeard tales. Scholars note the lack of passivity in regards to the character of Bluebeard's wife in that it is her curiosity and other personality traits that allow her to act independently such as openly defying Bluebeard's orders and trying to save herself (Juez 499; Hannon, *Fabulous Identities* 61-62; Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales* 110-11; McGlathery 69). Nothomb shows the possibilities for how objects can furnish a heroine with the means by which she can vanquish her villain. No one needs to cry for help or wait for it to arrive; there is no need for an external intervention, there is just a self-defined, object-enriched path to heroism.

Chapter 2

Nothomb's Second Bluebeard: Strategies of Vision and Community Building

With *Mercure*, Nothomb creates a hybrid fairy tale that continues to explore the use of objects in the narrative, although this novel goes beyond just objects and explores the many facets of vision as well. There is a complex interplay between language and object, between the absent and the present, that shows how objects and vision relate to linguistic and social issues such as truth and lies. In essence, Nothomb explores the verbalization of vision and vision technology, that is, how these elements work with language, and the way this verbalization affects female community forming. The use of objects and vision in this novel is distinct from their usage in *Barbe bleue* in that *Mercure* shows the active use and manipulation of sight and related things throughout the narrative, whereas in *Barbe bleue*, the main object in question remains hidden for much of the novel and its affective potential is postponed to the end. In both, however, objects emerge as essential mediums that facilitate the development of a community of women, a community that saves women from danger and oppression.

Mercure takes place around the fictional town of Noeud (French for “knot”) and centers on a nurse, Françoise, who is summoned to the island of the mysterious Omar Longcours to care for a patient, Hazel. Hazel is incredibly beautiful but she is unaware of this fact; Omar, who saved her from a bombing, convinced her that she is horribly disfigured. Greatly disturbed by this, Françoise endeavours to try and free Hazel. She eventually finds out that there was another girl, Adèle, who came before and killed herself after living several years on the island. One of Françoise's attempts to free Hazel ends up getting her caught by Omar: she was trying to

construct an ad-hoc mirror using mercury from broken thermometers. After this, Françoise is imprisoned as well on the island.

Françoise manages to escape her prison room one night and convince Hazel to come with her and confront Omar. Hazel learns of her true beauty, but does not turn on Omar because he lied to her about her beauty, but rather because he is apparently only in love with her because she resembles Adèle. The women do not kill Omar, however, and instead they leave with his vast fortune and live in New York together where Françoise learns that Omar has died. After this point in the novel, Nothomb inserts a note to the reader saying that there are two endings that she finds equally logical. This second ending begins where Françoise's attempt to convince Hazel to confront Omar fails. The next day, Françoise takes Hazel outside to talk and, spying from a window, Omar thinks that Françoise is revealing everything. Despondent, Omar rushes over to the two women, and drowns himself. Françoise, however, did not reveal anything to Hazel, and they live out their lives together on the island. Hazel eventually is told about her resplendent beauty, but only after the two women are well into their golden years. Hazel is not angry, however, and is happy in fact that she was not thrust into the world with the burden of beauty.

Mirrors, Reflections, and Female Bonds

The mirrors, or the lack thereof, in Nothomb's novel take on connotations of honesty and dishonesty: mirrors and reflections come to represent both truth and lies, and the lack of mirrors only serves dishonesty. Struck by her beauty, Françoise, the nurse brought in to take care of the sick Hazel, is confused as to why the latter believes herself to be disfigured and ugly. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar note, mirrors in literature often create self-loathing in women:

The “killing” of oneself into an art object—the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging, with hair which invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick—all this testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying *not* to become female monsters. (34)

She is then told that Hazel survived a bombing because of Omar, who later showed her in a mirror her maimed visage as proof of the attack. However, this mirror is a trick which was made for Omar’s first prisoner, Adèle, to fabricate the tale that she is disfigured. As Omar explains at one point: “J’allai chez un miroitier et lui demandai de me confectionner un miroir à main le plus déformant possible” (“I went to a mirror maker and asked him to make for me the most deforming hand mirror possible”; 111). The women are not, however, only physically trapped by these lies, but they are mentally trapped as well, with the image of their “disfigurement” seared into their minds. The mirror becomes an object of subjugation, as noted by Veronica Schanoes: “In turn, then, many feminist critics have justifiably developed analyses that focus on the mirror’s role in subjugating women. Writers representing two different schools of feminist criticism find in mirrors a perfect metaphor for patriarchal subordination of women” (6). Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar, with a psychoanalytic bent, write that mirrors and other glass objects as tools of the patriarchy, a medium for its oppressive voice (3-25). Also, the fact that Omar has trapped Hazel on the island so that he can be the only one to enjoy her beauty brings into focus Lurana Mulvey’s notion of scopophilia, or the love of looking, as an imposing male activity. As Mulvey puts it, “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” (383).

The trick mirror laid down the foundation for a prison, and the absence of mirrors is equally important in maintaining this prison. This lack of mirrors is in direct contrast with Gilbert and Gubar’s ideas of mirrors and prisons:

Interestingly, though works in this (nineteenth century) tradition generally begin by using houses as primary symbols of female imprisonment, they also use much of the other paraphernalia of

“woman’s place” to enact their central symbolic drama of enclosure and escape. Ladylike veils and costumes, *mirrors*, paintings, statues, . . . appear and reappear in female novels and poems (85, emphasis mine).

After being convinced by the trick mirror, Hazel now lives in a house with nothing to remind her of her supposedly maimed visage: “J’ai conscience de ma chance, aussi: être arrivée dans une maison qui semblait conçue pour moi, sans miroirs ni même la moindre surface réfléchissante” (“I’m aware of how lucky I am, too: to have arrived at a house that seemed designed for me, without mirrors nor even the slightest reflective surface”; 30). Françoise is vigorously searched upon arrival at Omar’s island for anything that could be used to reveal the truth to Hazel such as eyeglasses or other reflective surfaces. Jenijoy La Belle argues that a character often can find a mirror in their environment, yet at least in the beginning, that is not true for the women of this novel: “Even without taking such precautions (securing mirrors everywhere), characters with a strong mirror compulsion usually manage to find a mirror wherever they are” (7). The lack of reflective surfaces serves to maintain the lie initiated by the false mirror. There is nothing that can contradict the lie or disabuse the ignorance that underpins it because of this skillful manipulation of objects.

Even though there apparently are no reflective surfaces in the house, there are attempts to create mirrors, and these attempts begin to forge female community bonds. The first attempt consists in Françoise constructing an ad hoc mirror using the mercury from the thermometers she purchases daily from the local pharmacy on Noeud. However Omar discovers her ruse, saying that the way she went about creating a mirror would have done more harm than good: “Tendre ce miroir déformant à la pauvre enfant, c’eût été le comble du sadisme, vous ne trouvez pas?” (“Hand this deforming mirror to the poor child, that would have been the most sadistic thing,

don't you think?"; 75). Andrea Oberhuber's only comment on this scene is that in attempting to create a mirror, Françoise brings Hazel back to the mirror stage of development in psychoanalysis:

Ce sera grâce à Françoise Chavaigne que les manigances d'Omer seront dévoilées et qu'Hazel vivra une nouvelle fois le stade du miroir . . . l'infirmière apportait un thermomètre pour y extraire le mercure qui lui servait à fabriquer un substitut de miroir. (117)

It will be because of Françoise Chavaigne that Omar's schemes will have been unveiled and that Hazel will experience the mirror stage once more . . . the nurse would bring a thermometer in order to extract its mercury that served to create a mirror substitute.

Despite her failure to secure a means by which she can show Hazel the truth of her appearance, the attempt to create a mirror shows Françoise's doggedness in her pursuit to save Hazel. As La Belle writes, Françoise is attempting to undo the power of the mirror: "There are women who . . . have not been free from mirror-mindedness since their childhood and instead must struggle for their freedom. These are not lost women . . . but revolutionaries who rebel against the mirror as the primary tool of female self-realization" (137). It is important to note that it is Françoise who seeks to undo the power of the mirror and not the subject of the mirror, that is, the person who stands in front of it, Hazel. Nevertheless, the drive to undo the power a mirror has over one woman's image of herself. Furthermore, the idea of one woman coming to save another also calls to mind a particular tale in the Hermes/Mercury mythology: in Homer's the *Odyssey*, he once saved Odysseus from falling under the spell of a witch. Here, a similar partnership is at work, but the roles have been replaced by women. This moment of one woman risking herself for another speaks to the female solidarity and community bonds that Bacchilega addresses (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 110-11).

This truth can still only begin to emerge when a reflective surface introduces an objective reality that disrupts the one perpetuated by false and absent mirrors. The first time reflection actually appears is not through a manufactured surface, but with Françoise's eyes, in a moment that allows the truth to be transmitted by a reflective surface. Desperate to convince Hazel to confront Omar and believe that she is beautiful, Françoise makes Hazel look into her eyes: "Je vois un visage lisse et d'aspect normal" ("I see a smooth and normal-looking face"; 144). While still unaware of the full extent of her beauty, Hazel at least knows that it is more likely than not that she has been held prisoner by a lie. Through this pair of women, a bond is formed and they are able to share in each other's sight and, at the very least, partially reveal the truth. This moment of seeing an actual reflection is the first step towards liberation, a liberation only possible through the initiative of another woman. One woman begins to truly see herself as others see her, instead of through the image her captor has constructed for her. What this scene also does is complicate Mulvey's notions of "woman as image, man as bearer of the look" and "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (383). The bearer of the look has transformed from a male role to a female role, allowing the woman to take on an active role in the dichotomy of the looker and the seen. To use Jackie Stacy's language, in this replacing of a male role by a female one, there is an "inscription of active female desire" (395). While Hazel is still "passive" in this scene in the sense that she must be coerced into looking at Françoise, the women in this novel have still stripped the man of his gazing power and present themselves as active characters.

Mirrors appear as important objects across literature, especially in fairy tales. One could go back as far as the medieval period, in Jean d'Arras *Mélusine*, whose serpent-tailed protagonist

looks at herself in a mirror. There are also the numerous mirrors that appear in Basile's *Pentamerone*, such as the one found in "Goat Face" that reveals the hideous transformation to the princess, the truth telling mirror in "The She-Bear," and the one into which Penta looks, finding no beauty, in "Penta with the Chopped-Off Hands." It is also important to note there are full-length mirrors in Perrault's "La Barbe bleue." In Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's *La Belle et la Bête*, Belle uses a mirror to see her father. Two other literary mirrors are the magic mirror in the Grimm's "Snow White" and the mirror-portal in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. Lastly, Jean Cocteau's film *La Belle et la Bête* and its link between mirror and desire mark an important moment in the representation of mirrors in art.

The critical discussion around mirrors in fairy tales is not as varied as the usage of the mirrors themselves. Little attention, it appears, has been lent to the study of the actual mirrors that appear in different fairy-tale texts. Melchoir-Bonnet offers a detailed monograph on the history of the mirror, and notes the mirror's important role in creating an idea of the self and how man's relationship with mirrors has evolved from expensive commodity to banal house decoration. Even though Melchoir-Bonnet does not focus on literature specifically, she does note that literary descriptions of reflections are an essential part of the history of the mirror:

La recherche a donc été élargie aux récits de fiction lorsqu'ils convergent avec l'observation médicale, tout en sachant ce que ce type de documents doit à la sensibilité personnelle d'un auteur ou à la rhétorique d'une époque. (13)

The research had therefore been enlarged to include stories of fiction since they coincided with medical observation, all while knowing what this type of document owes to the personal sensibilities of an author or to the rhetoric of a certain period.

In one of the most extensive studies of mirrors in literature, La Belle analyzes the semiotic role of the mirror in creating identities and selfhood in the female characters that interact with them;

extensive as her study is, there is no discussion of mirrors in fairy tales (152-72). Robert dedicates some time to the discussion of mirrors in fairy tales, and notes how the prevalent usage of mirrors in early modern French fairy tales coincides with the contemporary explosion of the mirror trade and new techniques in mirror-making (357-61). Bacchilega writes about the mirror in the Grimms' "Snow White" and its relationship to nineteenth century attitudes about women's sexuality and domesticity ("Cracking the Mirror" 2-3). Jessica Tiffin explains the usage of glass work in general to feminist ends in the fairy tale writings of A. S. Byatt (48-50). Schanoes examines mirrors in contemporary fairy-tale fiction as a site where female fantasies and desires are explored under oppressive circumstances. Lastly, Carl Yoke briefly touches on mirrors in fairy tales, but they offer more of a general overview of the usage of mirrors for fantastic purposes (87-91).

In this novel, Nothomb deploys mirrors and reflections as community-forming mediums. Nothomb is not just centering the bonds between Hazel and Françoise on vision technology as she does in *Barbe bleue*, but rather she is playing with the broader notion of reflections. Indeed Nothomb shows how mirrors can be "verbalized," that is, used to tell truth or lies. It is their association with truth that turns the mirrors into a liberating tool. It is not, however, the truth in and of itself that frees Hazel and Françoise. Rather it is a cooperative, female counter-manipulation of male weapons that undo the power dynamic between Hazel and Omar and elevate the women to a position of knowledge and solidarity. The women, in a way, turn the mirror back on Omar, exploiting the same communicative potential, thus showing the cracks in how one man maintains his control.

***Mercure* and the Fairy-Tale Tradition**

No major study has been dedicated to *Mercure*, but the novel does appear in a handful of articles. Nausicaa Dewez focuses on the act of reading in the novel, and the specific novels that are read by the characters (292-93). Susan Bainbrigge takes a similar approach and discusses the intertextuality of this novel, but only in regard to nineteenth-century novels, especially those that comprise Omar's library (115-20). Laureline Amanieux and Lisa Signori have analyzed the phenomenon of reflection, yet neither devotes time to the discussion of the physical mirrors, a central feature of the text. Amanieux talks about characters mirroring each other and switching roles, and Signori focuses on how aspects of the plot mirror each other ("Amélie Nothomb" 56-58; Signori 74-80). Oberhuber appears to be the only critic so far to suggest a connection between *Mercure* and fairy tales, particularly "Beauty and the Beast," "Cinderella," and "Sleeping Beauty." Yet her study sees the act of rewriting as a psychoanalytic exploration of Omar and Hazel's relationship. It is worth noting that Oberhuber does not specify which version of "La Belle et la Bête" she believes is Nothomb's model. In any case, I do not agree with her observation of "La Belle et la Bête" elements. There is a reference to the tale at the end of the second ending, but I believe that the elements cited by Oberhuber—such as a woman held captive by a man—are more indicative of "Bluebeard" because of the series of women suffering the same fate. Also, Oberhuber's discussion of Cinderella is limited to only noting that both Hazel and Cendrillon are unaware of their beauty (116-20).

Mercure pulls from multiple fairy tale traditions, one of which is the "Bluebeard" tradition.¹⁴ This novel does not, however, bear any surface resemblance to other "Bluebeard"

¹⁴ See pp. 12-14 for examples of tales in this tradition and for a summary of scholarship related to it.

tales throughout history, with its title referring both to the toxic substance mercury and the roman god. Nevertheless like *Barbe bleue*, this is a story that focuses on issues of vision, secrets, and female agency, although now there are multiple secrets, two living women, and two endings involved. Even though there is not a series of women that Bluebeard has killed, there is still the common element of one man taking a woman, and her being in danger of suffering the same fate as the one who preceded her. There is also the return of strong female communities being formed and coming together to undo Bluebeard. In light of the other members of the “Bluebeard” chronology, it becomes possible to include *Mercure* among its kin tales.

Apart from the “Bluebeard” elements of this story, it is hard to ignore elements pulled from another recognizable tale: “Sleeping Beauty.” Tales in this tradition tend to feature a type of supernatural sleep, one person finding another in such a slumber, and something specific that wakes up the slumbering individual. In *Mercure*, a beautiful girl is hidden away on a remote island and she is asleep, as Oberhuber writes, in the sense that she is unaware, both of her own beauty and of the world around her, and someone must come and “awaken” her (117). This quest, which is what drives much of the plot, is not simply a means to carry out a marriage plot. Rather, Françoise tries to wake up Hazel to save her from meeting the fate of Adèle.¹⁵

The Sleeping “Beauty” tradition is one that is well and thoroughly studied. Patricia Hannon and Seifert both study Perrault’s “La Belle au bois dormant” and its representation of

¹⁵ This is not unlike other “Sleeping Beauty” tales: Marie de France, in her lai “Eliduc” has both a man and a woman discovering and lamenting over the perfectly preserved body of a woman hidden in a chapel who is later brought back to life by a rose. In the anonymous *Perceforest*, the prince is overcome with love at the sight of the naked princess before him, hidden in a castle. He kisses her while she sleeps to no avail. Basile’s “The Sun, Moon, and Talia,” however, offers a grimmer story of a sleeping princess who is raped by her prince; Hazel is as well, although on a regular basis by Omar. In Perrault’s “La belle au bois dormant,” the princess is still a sleeping princess and kept in a castle hidden away in a forest while she sleeps for a hundred years, only to be woken up by her prince after he spots her castle during a hunt. These versions were provided to me by Kathryn Hoffmann’s seminar on the fantastic in the French imagination (FR 735, Fall 2019).

female passivity, sensuality, and sexuality (*Fabulous Identities* 50-55; *Fairy Tales, Sexuality* 34, 119). James M. McGlathery makes a similar analysis of the tale, but his is broader in scope and includes not only “La belle au bois dormant” but also other versions of the tales by the Grimms and Basile (118-20). Bottigheimer makes a similar connection, as does Jacques Barchilon, but Barchilon adds *Perceforest* to the list of related tales (Bottigheimer 88-90; Barchilon 22-23). Marc Soriano affirms the parallels between Perrault’s “La belle au bois dormant” and Basile but he attempts to retrieve a folkloric origin to the tale, which he admits might not exist (125-35). Malarte-Feldman and Seifert both discuss issues of time in Perrault’s tale (Malarte-Feldman 108-09, 116-18; “Queer Time” 22-24). Harries writes on how contemporary iterations of the tale focus on what might have happened at the end of “Sleeping Beauty” and she also underlines the traditional marriage plot forwarded by these types of tales (100-01).

Lastly, there are many things in this novel that relate to “Mercury,” both the substance and the god. The most obvious is the thermometers that Françoise uses to try and fashion an ad hoc mirror. Moreover, thermometers are a medical device, and Mercury’s caduceus is a symbol of medicine. Additionally, Mercury/Hermes is the god of travel, and Françoise is forced to travel by boat every day to Omar’s island. He is also the deity responsible for messages and communication, and appropriately Omar has a room where he can listen to messages the rest of the house transmits to him. Of all these mercury-related elements that are in this novel, there is one that is of particular interest in this novel: mirrors. The mirrors are related to Mercury because they are responsible for communicating messages, either truthful or untruthful.

Through this intermingling of elements of myth and fairy tale, Nothomb, in *Mercure*, creates a hybridized tale that does not explicitly belong to one fairy-tale tradition. These

elements work together to form a new tale about female community and undoing abusive male practices, not unlike *Barbe bleue*. Beyond that, Nothomb reverses the gender roles commonly found in these tales and myths: the prince who finds a beautiful sleeping bride is replaced by a woman who is trying to save a sleeping girl from her captor. The male god Hermes/Mercury who brings life saving messages to other men is now a woman who does the same for another. In reversing these gender roles and centering the novel on women working together through objects and vision, Nothomb seeks to strip away the power from male fairy tale characters and elevate the female characters to the position of those who determine their own destinies.

Photography: Creating a Living Metonymy of the Past

Photographs reemerge as a central object in this novel as they do in *Barbe bleue*, and they remain associated with a similar truth: that of women being molded to fall sequentially into the same trap. There is, however, only one photo in question, that of Adèle. After hearing about and investigating a rumor of another woman who had lived on Omar's island thirty years ago, Françoise begins searching Omar's desk while he is away, in which she finds the single photograph: “‘L'année de ma naissance' eut-elle le temps de se dire avant de s'apercevoir qu'il montrait une jeune fille belle comme un ange” (“‘The year of my birth,' she had the time to say to herself before noticing that the picture showed a young girl, beautiful like an angel”); 65-66). The significance of the photo is all the more profound when viewed in light of an earlier observation that was made—that “les goûts vestimentaires du Capitaine n'ont pas changé”—when she learns that the previous woman who killed herself wore the same white nightshirts that Hazel wears (“The Captain's [Omar's] taste in clothing hasn't changed”; 59).

Later, when Françoise and Omar discuss the photos, they agree that the two women share the same expression:

- . . . Je m'agenouillai près du corps et soulevai le linge: ce fut un choc. Vous savez ce que c'est de découvrir un tel visage. Pour être différent de celui d'Adèle, il n'en était pas moins semblable par cette forme supérieure de grâce dont il portait la marque.
- C'est vrai, la même expression - pour autant que je puisse en juger d'après une photo. (117)

- . . . I knelt down near the body and lifted up the cloth: it was a shock. You know what it's like to discover such a face. For being different from Adèle's, it was no less similar by this superior form of grace whose mark it bore.
- It's true, the same expression-as far as I can tell based on one photo.

These similarities between the two women cause Omar to create a narrative in which Adèle did not die, but was simply reborn as Hazel, Adèle's consciousness being transferred to Hazel at the moment of her "death." Signori notes that intratextual similarities between the two women underline Omar's belief that they are the same woman, although her comments do not go much further than that: "Tying together this series of intratextual similarities shows how Loncour is predisposed to regard Hazel and Adèle not just as mirror images, but as one and the same" (79). One woman thus becomes modeled after another. As a result, in a manner similar to *Barbe bleue*, one woman falls into the same trap as her predecessor. The photo of Adèle, then, becomes emblematic of the fact that Hazel is just the next woman in a series of victims. This is not a complex photographic entrapment as it is in *Barbe bleue*, but it is the same concept of a man creating a photography-linked narrative into which he tries to force another woman.

There is more at work than simply repeating the same trap for multiple women; rather there is a return of the intermixing of the physical and the temporal in regards to the photograph in this novel. Sontag writes that "like the collector, the photographer is animated by a passion that, even when it appears to be for the present, is linked to a sense of the past" (77). In terms of

the physical, the photograph serves as a metonymy of Omar's idea that the women are one and the same. In regards to the temporal aspect, Omar links his current prisoner, Hazel, to the past that is represented in the photo. In order to uphold the linear connection between the women, the women are treated in the same way: they are dressed in the same clothes, put in the same room, and told a similar lie. These physical actions keep the present rooted in the past, the present prisoner linked with her absent predecessor. Through Bluebeard's actions, the Adèle in the photograph is no longer absent to him, but present in Hazel.

Lastly, the single photograph of this novel is not just any photograph kept as a memento, but rather it could also fall into the category of memorial photography. Although it is likely not an image of a dead body, many of the practices surrounding the photograph of Adèle call to mind those associated with memorial photography. It is unknown how often he contemplates this image, however it is not hidden in a deadly blackroom as it is in *Barbe bleue*, but rather in a drawer, which is still a private space. It could be noted that Omar's practices of keeping the image of both Adèle and Hazel for himself are reminiscent of scopophilia, the love of looking. It is unclear if his gaze is purely sexual, such as Mulvey notes in regards to scopophilia, but his gaze still "projects its fantasy" onto Hazel and looking at her serves as a reminder of the photo locked in his desk (383). As in *Barbe bleue*, the photograph of this tale is kept a secret, and thus the memory of the woman that guides the actions of Bluebeard is a sort of private relic. It also serves as a link to the past. Taking this into consideration, it is possible to consider this photo of Adèle to be a sort of memorial photography, a secret connection with the dead. That is not to say that any photograph of a dead person is memorial photography, but rather the way that this

photograph is treated, as a private collectible, calls to mind the specific practices that surround memorial photography.¹⁶

Photography and Reflection: Undoing Male Strategies of Vision

Omar's Bluebeard-esque plan to keep another woman trapped begins to fully collapse in the face of a real mirror, in a moment of truth and female solidarity.¹⁷ In the first ending, after being partially persuaded by Françoise of her beauty and having restrained Omar, the women discover a giant, full-body mirror hidden behind a bookshelf. After some hesitation, Hazel is pushed in front of it and beholds herself: "Son visage était celui qui revient une ou deux fois par génération et qui obsède le coeur humain jusqu'à l'oubli de sa misère" ("Her face was that of one which comes once or twice in a generation and that dwells on the human heart until it has forgotten its misery"; 148). Melchoir-Bonnet's comments appear relevant to this scene: "Car telle est l'ambiguïté et la fécondité du reflet, à la fois identique et différent de son modèle" ("Because such is the ambiguity and the richness of the reflection, at once identical and different from its model"; 16). The image beheld in the mirror is both identical to Hazel and foreign, foreign in the sense that it is the opposite of the image she held in her mind. Now fully awakened and conscious of her true image, even though it is not the exact reason for her to turn against Omar, Hazel is no longer held by the lie of her disfigurement. Mirrors and reflective surfaces, both the presence and absence thereof, were used to create a mental prison, and now these very objects return to dismantle that very prison. Sight does not provide the same liberating truth as it does in Nothomb's *Barbe bleue*, but it is nonetheless an important step in Hazel's liberation. It is

¹⁶ See p. 20 for an overview of memorial photography as a practice.

¹⁷ The mirror is found in Omar's bedroom, which can be seen as a sort of forbidden chamber. See pp. 14-16 for examples of scholarship on and other versions of the forbidden room in the "Bluebeard" tradition.

also important to note that Hazel does not go in front of the mirror willingly, she is pushed by Françoise. Such an act testifies to the female cooperation needed for this plan to work; the bond that brought them into the room in the first place is completed by the act of one woman helping another to face the truth.

In continuing with this first ending, it is not reflection alone that liberates Hazel, but rather the cooperation between reflection and photography.¹⁸ This unification of things centers around the hidden mirror, but the first part of this unification focuses on the attempt to make Hazel enter the bedroom. In order to get Hazel in front of the mirror, Françoise needs to first convince her to come with her. Before using her eyes as mirrors, she invokes the photograph of Adèle and tries to tell Hazel that Omar has been forcing her live the same life as Adèle:

Moi, j'ai vu une photographie d'elle: si belle qu'on en a le coeur poignardé. Je n'ai connu qu'une seule personne dont la beauté m'ait fait plus d'effet: vous. (139)

I myself saw a photograph of her: so beautiful it was like getting stabbed in the heart. I've only met one person whose beauty had a greater effect on me: you.

However the photo proves insufficient to convince Hazel: she is only convinced when she looks into Françoise's eyes and sees that at least she does not know the whole truth. The relationship between the story of the photo and the mirror eyes is striking. The photo is not there to support Françoise's argument, and while it can never be known how it would have helped her argument, Hazel remains unmoved by words alone and no visual proof of the lie holding her captive. That is, until Françoise's own eyes offer enough evidence so that Hazel is at least open to the idea that she has been lied to. Her eyes also, however, reveal a displaced power dynamic between the two women. Françoise is the only one of the two who knows the truth, only her eyes have seen it, so

¹⁸ At this point in the novel, Françoise has escaped her room and is trying to convince Hazel that she is beautiful and to free her. In order to do so, she talks about the photograph of Adèle she saw in Omar's desk and her own eyes to make her case to Hazel.

it is only through Françoise and her eyes, both literally and figuratively, that an attempt can even be made to free Hazel. It appears that in this scene the photo and the trap it represented have been replaced with the true vision provided by another woman; one woman has freed another from having to see herself through a lie.

The photograph is not completely effaced, however, as its relationship with reflection fully develops before the great mirror. After seeing her true self, it is not the reflection that turns Hazel against Omar, but rather the knowledge that she is not his first love. Before this moment in front of the mirror, the photo was insufficient on its own to convince Hazel of Omar's deception. However, after having seen herself—both for herself and in the eyes of someone else—she is not only aware of how beautiful she is, but she appears convinced now by the story of the photo, based on her citation of it in her final confrontation with Omar: “Pendant toutes ces années, vous ne m’avez aimée que par me ressemblance avec une autre? Je hais cette idée!” (“All these years, you only loved me because I look like another woman? I hate that idea!”; 160).¹⁹ Had the photo and the story of Adèle not been revealed previously, Hazel's status as a copy of Adèle would not have been known, thus she may have never turned on Omar. Language, the photo, and the reflective surface together form a trinity that allows for the whole truth to come through and destroy Omar's lie. Neither element is successful on its own; only when vision and objects are integrated with each other does such a revelation occur. Once the truth is known, the women can now be freed.²⁰

¹⁹ Melchoir-Bonnet's observations are pertinent to this culmination of the truth being revealed: “La vérité se capte dans la sphère de l'altérité” (“the truth is captured in the sphere of alterity”; 268) The alterity of this moment is Hazel coming face to face with the truth of her betrayal, both in terms of the lie Omar told her and the woman he hid from her. This alterity is where the truth is revealed, where it is captured, so to speak, and never to be let go.

²⁰ See pp. 25-26 for discussion of truth as a liberating force in other “Bluebeard” tales.

Dismantling Omar's Prison Museum

Taking into account the different objects in the novel and their manipulation by the characters, it becomes possible to consider Omar's house as a sort of museum. Just like Don Elemirio's dark room, the house is a controlled space where the environment and its contents are manipulated in such a way as to communicate a specific message.²¹ As Maroevic writes: "The [museum] exhibition thus becomes a creative act in which its space of ambience, the objects and knowledge of them are joined in a unique system, the final intention of which is to communicate defined messages" (30). Visitors to the house are searched, they are given instructions about what they can and cannot bring, what they can and cannot do once they are inside. The home itself is configured in a specific way to support the idea that Hazel has been deformed and should not look upon herself; reflective surfaces are moved, hidden, or otherwise altered to communicate Omar's message. There are no mirrors or any reflective surface at all in the house, and any windows are placed too high to be useful. The whole building itself is monitored by Omar so he knows exactly what is going on inside. And lastly, there are servants on the inside to enforce the rules of the environment and respond to the needs of the director. All of these elements paint the picture of a building that is not a home, but a well-regulated museum where a beautiful young girl and the story of her "deformation" are on display. Just as Don Elemirio stages his photos of dead women in his exhibition, so is Hazel staged by Omar, in his elaborate performance that paints him as the noble savior. The effectiveness of this museum lies in Omar's strategies of vision that allow him to, for a time, keep Hazel in the dark and maintain the narrative he is trying to tell with his home. In the control he exerts over his environment and

²¹ For discussion of the darkroom as a sort of museum, see p. 21.

relationship with Hazel, Omar exemplifies the violence that Elizabeth B. Hall describes as characterizing the relationships in some of Nothomb's novels: "In the case of the heterosexual couples, violence is a means of preserving the relationship, of arresting its development, and therefore controlling the other" (104).

In a mercurian fashion, these strategies of vision are disrupted when an outsider comes bearing a message. Just as Hermes saved Odysseus with a message on how to stop his adversary, so does Françoise attempt to bring a message of salvation to Hazel. The words of Michel Serres are relevant to this discussion, as he posits communication as a mode of travel, as an intermixing of language and space:

Communiquer, c'est voyager, traduire, échanger: passer au site de l'Autre, assumer sa parole comme version, moins subversive que transverse, faire commerce réciproque d'objets gagés. Voici Hermès, dieu des chemins et carrefours, des messages et des marchands. (10)

To communicate is to travel, to translate, to exchange: going to the site of the Other, taking up their word as your own, not so much subversive as intersecting, conduct business with wagered objects. This is Hermes, god of roads and intersections, of messages and merchants.

Françoise indeed must travel to communicate her message to Hazel. Moreover, at the moment when Hazel looks into Françoise's eyes, there is this crossing of space and language to which Serres refers. Looking into Françoise's eyes allows Hazel to be in Françoise's place for a moment, see what she sees in a way, and thus verify what Françoise was trying to tell her. This exchange, between two pairs of eyes, disrupts Omar's own strategies of vision. The museum exhibit has now begun a process of self-discovery, one that chips away at the museum built around her. Omar's grip is loosened because he no longer has control over the message his museum was trying to communicate. It is only when female vision literally comes together that oppressive, male-driven strategies of vision begin to fail and fall apart.

Now that the truth is revealed, there remains the question of what to do with Omar, one that returns to the question of vigilante justice explored by Short. As Françoise and Omar discuss earlier in the novel, the law will be of no help to them:

-Je n'ai rien à dire à aucun tribunal. Nul doute que vos arguments phonétiques seront convaincants.
-Viol, incarcération . . .
-Ni viol, ni incarcération. Je ne les ai pas prises de force et je ne les ai pas empêchées de partir.
(127)

- I have nothing to say to any court. Doubtless your verbal arguments will be convincing.
- Rape, false imprisonment . . .
- No rape nor false imprisonment. I didn't take them by force and I didn't prevent them from leaving.

As Short mentions, often Bluebeard is beyond the reach of the law, leaving the women to take justice into their own hands (249-53). In the first ending, Françoise finds a gun and both women contemplate killing Omar, Hazel even contemplates killing herself, but neither one of them actually does it. Instead, Omar lets them escape after bequeathing Hazel his fortune. They leave to establish a life in New York City, and Françoise later finds out that Omar has killed himself. While the women of this novel do not take justice into their own hands like Saturnine does, a form of justice is still carried out in depriving Omar of his prized possession. Their decision is still an empowering one because they decide their own fate like she does and they are able to walk free of their prison. Even though Omar has left them a fortune and let them escape, their new life is still only possible because Hazel and Françoise's cooperation with each other and their engagement with reflections and mirrors brought them into his room in the first place and revealed the truth. The community the women formed in order to escape Bluebeard remains after they have defeated him.

Photos, Mirrors, and Deception: Deconstructing *Mercure's* Two Endings

Even though the two endings are quite different, if the focus is on what they have in common, central themes of analysis begin to emerge. The differences between the two endings are significant: in the second ending there is no invocation of a photo, no reflections, no battle of wills between the characters, and certainly no picturesque voyage for the protagonists to the United States. Indeed Oberhuber argues that a decision cannot be made between the two endings:

Le choix ne pourra (ne devra ?) se faire, parce que le dédoublement conclusif de la même intrigue incite à faire face au leurre fictionnel, à naviguer constamment, comme Omer et Françoise, entre la vérité et le mensonge, l'île et la terre ferme. (119)

The choice could not (should not?) be made, because the conclusive doubling of the same plot incites the reader to face the fictional lure: to constantly navigate, like Omar and Françoise, between truth and lie, the island and dry land.

It is not necessary, however, to make a decision as to which ending is “correct.” Instead, the focus is on what the two endings have in common. In both endings, Omar dies as a result of the women’s actions: their departure in the first ending and Françoise’s deception in the second both cause Omar to kill himself. Also in both endings, Françoise and Hazel remain with each other, even though it is under different circumstances. Lastly, it is only through the combined efforts of both women that they are even able to rid themselves of Omar and be together in the end.

Without Françoise’s eyes and story of Adèle, Hazel would not have rejected Omar in the first ending. In the second, Omar would not have killed himself had Françoise not used Hazel to stage a fake confession. An analysis of these commonalities between the twin endings yields a broader insight into the importance of objects and community bonds in this novel.

In both endings, images and sight—and their various forms and manipulations—remain the causes of female liberation. Moreover, in both outcomes, Omar is still undone by his own

weapons. In the first ending, Omar witnesses the moment when Hazel sees herself for the first time since her imprisonment, and he sees how the image changes her and causes her to eventually resent him. The mirror has betrayed him and added truth to Françoise's argument, setting Hazel free. In the second ending, unable to reveal to Hazel her true reflection, Françoise is resigned to performing her duties as normal, until Hazel proposes a walk on the beach. Omar watches the two women speak, believes that the truth has been divulged, and runs to them to confirm his worst fears. Françoise lies to him, saying that she has indeed told the truth, after which he promptly throws himself in the water and commits suicide in the same way as Adèle. After this, Françoise does not reveal the truth to Hazel, and the two live alone on the island until, when they are old, Françoise finally tells Hazel how beautiful she was. There is no visual technology here, yet vision still is essential in deciding Omar's fate: Françoise takes advantage of Omar's ignorance of what was actually happening when he saw them talking, and uses it to tell her own lie. Signori writes that in this moment, Françoise becomes, in a way, Omar's reflection: "Françoise serves as Loncours's mirror, and he in turn serves as hers, reflecting who he is back onto who she will become in the second ending. Once Loncours believes that Hazel knows the truth, he commits suicide" (83). Indeed, in doing so, Bluebeard's weapon has again been turned against him. Nothomb has placed not just visual technology at the center of how her characters are freed, but also the actual sense of sight. She plays with the different ways in which sight is manipulated and defined in order to open up the possibilities as to how a character like Bluebeard might be undone. Beyond this, Françoise has also completely replaced the man as the bearer of sight: she has fully assumed the role of the one who controls, watches, and enjoys the view of another. It is now "active feminine desire" that is dominating what was once, according

to Mulvey, a male activity. This is not, however, exactly like the homosexual desire that Hall notes, whereby “violence is a way of reducing the other to such a state that she is dependent (mainly on an emotional level) on the one” (104). It cannot be known how much Hazel actually depends on Françoise, thus this effacement of the other in a homosexual relationship cannot be fully perceived in this novel.

The downfall of Bluebeard is also heavily dependent on the community bonds formed and strengthened over the course of the novel. Even though the nature of how the two women work together is affected by the fact that only Françoise knows what she is doing and not Hazel, Omar’s undoing is only made possible when the two women work together. In either ending, neither woman could have done it alone, with Françoise being a closely surveilled prisoner and Hazel being completely ignorant of the truth of her situation. But a trust is still founded between them, and without this trust there could not have been a bond. This bond begins to build as elements of mirrors, photos, and sight are mixed in. Nothomb has kept these female bonds strong throughout both endings, although now it is a bond between two living women instead of a bond linking one living and eight dead women.

Vision as an Oppressive and Liberating Force

It could be said that this novel essentially revolves around vision and the ways in which it can be manipulated to serve a particular goal. This fairy tale, then, becomes a vehicle by which the many powers of vision are explored. In *Barbe bleue*, Nothomb is mostly engaging with photography and as such, vision technology. While such technology is still present and important in *Mercure*, Nothomb shows a much broader interest in expanding the possibilities of what

vision can do in a novel. Vision as a bodily sense and an activity can be more than just a forbidden look, a magic mirror, or a site of male power. Instead, in a tale that undoes the male power found in other “Bluebeard” tales, it can be both freeing and oppressive, present and absent, a source of lies, or a source of truth.

Chapter 3

***Riquet à la houppe*: Antithesis, Transformation, and Generational Ties**

After a journey through *Barbe bleue* and *Mercure*, gone are the murderous husbands, kidnapping plots, prison islands, and trick mirrors; what remains, however, in *Riquet à la houppe* is still a tale that continues to interrogate male and female power dynamics in fairy tales by creating two parallel yet contrasting storylines that strip away power from the prince character and elevate the status of the princess character. Moreover, Nothomb also continues to explore the ways objects facilitate uplifting, female community building. Even though this novel's title signals a connection to the "Riquet à la houppe" tradition, Nothomb draws on elements from a variety of fairy tales to support her thesis of female empowerment. Where in *Mercure* and *Barbe bleue* there is a reversal of the predatory male antagonist trope whereby the female victims undo the oppressor through strong bonds, *Riquet à la houppe* offers a more egalitarian vision of a fairy tale. No one character has any more real power than another, rather the prince and princess, after their differing lives converge, come to live in equal harmony with one another.

This novel is set in modern day Paris and alternates between the lives of Déodat, a horribly ugly but intelligent boy, and Trémière, a beautiful although reclusive girl. The story opens with Déodat's story and recounts his birth, and the shock his family has at the sight of him. He is nevertheless raised with love and his intelligence only grows. He is bullied, however, by his classmates, and while he has a series of girlfriends, no one in his life remains for very long. Nothomb then transitions to Trémière. She is remarkably pretty, but she only really enjoys sitting and looking around at her environment, which causes people to think she is stupid. For this reason, she only bonds with her grandmother. An older Déodat has another failed affair with his

physical therapist and he obtains his doctorate in biology, after which he writes a book on birds in world cultures. Trémière finishes her secondary education and becomes a famous jewelry model. Later, a talk show host decides it would be funny to put a beautiful model in the same room as a hideous ornithologist with a new book out, thus Déodat and Trémière are put on a collision course to each other. They meet at the talk show studio, immediately connect, and decide to abandon the program and vacation in Nantes. The novel ends with the two of them living out their unmarried lives together as they inspire the world with their love.

Meaningful Contrasts: Decentering the Male and Elevating the Female

Little work has been done on this novel, however Ibtissam Amamou argues that Nothomb has written the novel in response to the inhumane practices of the world of high fashion (53-56).

²² In regards to general scholarship on “Riquet à la houppe” tales, many focus on the gender dynamics and power struggles displayed by tales in this tradition. Harries writes about “Riquet à la houppe” as it appears in the writings of Perrault, Catherine Bernard, and Beaumont: she argues that Perrault’s version is a male-centered tale whereas Bernard focuses on the struggles of a woman who never reaches autonomy and Beaumont lacks the irony of both Perrault and Bernard (35-39). Barchilon also treats these three same versions, although for him, Perrault’s version is merely symbolic of the psychological realities the princess faces to accept her reality, Bernard’s is simply an antecedent that Perrault simplified to create a better tale, and Beaumont denies the magical transformation of Riquet in order to show the newfound mental maturity of the princess (24, 92). Felizitas Ringham follows a similar line of inquiry as Harries, as she argues for the

²² Amamou specifically focuses on issues relating to anorexia and body image. While the inhumane nature of modelling is discussed in this chapter, it is discussed in a more literal *inhuman* practice rather than in reference to abusive industry practices.

female struggle and hardship of Bernard's version and the male power at the center of Perrault's (294-95). Catherine Marin argues that the relatively positive light in which the princess is depicted in "Riquet à la houppe" is an exception to the rest of Perrault's work (273).

Seifert, in his works, comments on how Bernard's writing centers on love not being a source of happiness, and he also compares Bernard's "Riquet à la houppe" to that of Perrault and Lhéritier, saying that while Bernard and Perrault show the perception of female imagination as dangerous, Lhéritier offers a more optimistic fate in her princess that climbs the social ladder (*Fairy tales, Sexuality* 205-11; "Catherine Bernard" 70-71). Hannon has also spent a significant amount of time studying this tale, commenting that royal maternity in Perrault's version connotes suffering and that Perrault underpins the tale with the dichotomy of intelligence vs. beauty and uses antithesis as a rhetorical tool to reinforce this idea (*Fabulous Identities* 71; "Antithesis and Ideology" 107). Robert writes that female versions of the tale, particularly Bernard's, are always evaluated in the light of Perrault's work. Moreover, she writes that Beaumont's tale is but a simplified version of Perrault's, and that the interest in a text like "Riquet à la houppe" comes from the seemingly irresolvable problem at hand: a beautiful idiot must fall in love with an ugly genius, and vice versa (91-197). Other interpretations include that Marc Fumaroli's, who argues that Perrault hides traces of his praises of seventeenth century France in the tale, M.J. Muratore who notes that Perrault's choice to name the tale "Riquet à la houppe" reduces the character to a physical attribute, thereby dehumanizing the character attached to it, and Malarte-Feldman who only really discusses the tale in relation to Gustave Doré's illustrations of it (Fumaroli 789-91; Muratore 114; Malarte-Feldman 120).

Iterations of “Riquet à la houppe” are not as numerous as “Bluebeard” ones, but as the scholarship on this tale indicates, several variations exist nonetheless. These include Catherine Bernard and Perrault’s “Riquet à la houppe,” Beaumont’s tale in *Magasin des enfans*, Marie Catherine Jumelle de Barneville, comtesse d’Aulnoy’s “Serpentin vert,” and Marie-Jeanne L’Héritier de Villandon’s “Ricdin-Ricdon.” Perrault and Bernard present similar stories where the prince of an underground kingdom is ugly but intelligent, and a princess is beautiful but stupid, with each one having a magical gift to give the other the quality they lack. Perrault, however, shows the princess as unaware of her gift until Riquet à la houppe reveals it to her, and does not decide to marry him until after a year and a day. In Bernard’s tale, Riquet à la houppe is much more maniacal and keeps the princess a prisoner, eventually punishing her and her lover by returning to the princess a portion of her stupidity, and making her lover resemble him.

Beaumont’s tale is not named, but rather it is the subject of the twenty-fourth dialogue in the fourth volume of her *Magasin des enfans*. It has a familiar beginning of an ugly, intelligent prince who can make the one he loves intelligent as well. He meets a beautiful princess who was made stupid so that she would match the stupidity of the prince whom she is supposed to marry, however the prince gives her intelligence and the princess chooses to marry him despite his ugliness, forgoing an opportunity a fairy provides to make him handsome. “Ricdin-Ricdon” recounts a young girl who is traded by her mother to a prince for her supposedly amazing sewing skills, but she cannot actually sew. A mysterious man offers her a ring that will make her a skilled seamstress, but on the condition that, if at the end of three months she cannot guess his name (Ricdin-Ricdon), she goes with him wherever he goes. After a series of misadventures

between the prince, the girl (later to be discovered to be a princess) and other characters, the prince reveals the name to the princess and saves her from Ricdin-Ricdon.

This chapter takes Hannon's idea of antithesis as the base of its analysis. In her article, Hannon identifies antithesis as "a form of persuasion" in Perrault's writing, one that underpins his "seductive symmetry" that carries "a gender-coded ideological message that opposes mind as male to matter as female" ("Antithesis and Ideology" 107-8). Nothomb uses the same tool as Perrault, setting up opposing plotlines for her main characters, in a way that creates a less male-centric "Riquet à la houppe" tale. That is to say that Nothomb uses the oppositions between her characters and their stories to valorize the female and female communities. This is achieved not just through opposition, but also by drawing on the wider history of fairy tales, objects, and the communities those objects form. The end result is not a tale that demonizes the man, but rather a hybrid one that elevates the woman.

Community vs. Solitude

It is the contrast between solitude and community, between ephemerality and continuity that defines one of the meaningful distinctions between Nothomb's male and female protagonists. Déodat, the distinctly un-princely, ugly ornithologist, never forms lasting bonds with anyone during the novel. As the narrator puts it, "il aimait la solitude: livré à sa propre compagnie, il n'avait plus à composer avec les apitoiements et pouvait s'adonner à l'ivresse d'explorer son cerveau" ("He loved solitude: left to his own company, he no longer had to compromise with the pity and could devote himself to the euphoria of exploring his mind"; 17).

Such a solitude brings to mind Beaumont's Riquet à la houppe, a prince named Spirituel, who also prefers the solitude of his intellectual pursuits:

Spirituel céda sans murmurer la couronne à son frère, & rebuté de la sottise des hommes, qui n'estiment que la beauté du corps, sans se soucier de celle de l'âme, il se retira dans une solitude, où, en s'appliquant à l'étude de la sagesse, il devint extrêmement heureux. (161-62)

Spirituel ceded his crown without a word to his brother and, repulsed by the stupidity of men who only valued the beauty of the body without caring for that of the soul, he withdrew into a solitude where, by applying himself to the study of wisdom, he became extremely happy.

As he goes through childhood, Déodat becomes isolated by his peers that bully him to no end.

The relationships he does have are often only transitory; his first "friend" is abandoned almost as quickly as he is acquired, and Déodat goes through a series of girlfriends, none of whom last long. His one attempt at a serious relationship, with his physical therapist, fizzles out as well once his therapy sessions are over. Like Beaumont's prince, Nothomb's retreats from society to live a relatively monastic life; the prince's arc, then, becomes characterized by this solitude and lack of close relationships. It is important to note that the prince's narrative is the first one introduced in the novel, and thus the prince and his solitude can be seen as a springboard from which the story of the princess can launch and the comparison between community and solitude can fully come into shape.

Against the backdrop of a narrative concerning a lack of human connection, Nothomb writes one of generational ties and kinship. Trémière's childhood, in some respects, is not that much different from Déodat's: she too is isolated by a child, preferring to consume the world around her rather than engage with other people. While her mother is apt to criticize her daughter for her apparent "stupidity," it is Trémière's grandmother, Passerose, that advocates for Trémière: "Je pense seulement que Trémière a un grand sens de la magie . . . C'est une enfant

d'une intelligence supérieure" ("I only think that Trémière has a great sense of magic . . . She's a child of superior intelligence"; 86). This solidarity on the part of the grandmother shows the beginnings of the bond that continues to mature between the two women. This nascent bond is further underlined by the importance Trémière places on regularly seeing her grandmother: "L'unique chose qui lui importait était de retrouver sa grand-mère" ("The only thing that mattered to her was to visit her grandmother"; 89). Where there was a lack of relationship in the prince's life, there is now kinship in the princess's. There may not be numerous close bonds being formed, but this one important connection is more than the prince ever has. As the grandmother-granddaughter relationship develops, it becomes much more prominent vis-à-vis the prince's narrative.

The generational ties in this novel deepen after secrets and objects are introduced. Moreover, unlike other "Riquet à la houppe" tales, vision returns as a central, truth-revealing force as it is in Nothomb's other novels discussed in this thesis. Vision does not appear to be a critical element in other similar tales. Bernard and Perrault's discussion of vision is limited to how people are horrified by the appearance of the prince, and Beaumont writes that "Quand il fut devenu raisonnable, tout le monde souhaitait de l'entendre parler ; mais on fermait les yeux," ("When he could think and talk, everyone wished to hear him speak; but they closed their eyes"; 161). Nothomb takes up again the issue of vision present in her other novels, and while it does not have as much of a role as it does in the other novels studied in this thesis, it nevertheless remains an important element.

Trémière's gift is her ability to find beauty in the world around her. When Trémière looks at something she looks at "les objets avec extase," telling her grandmother, when asked if she is

bored, that she “remarque toujours quelque chose de nouveau” (“Objects with ecstasy,” “Always notices something new”; 90). Indeed, she is able to draw out what to her is the true magnificence in even the most banal of objects:

Au bout d’une douzaine de minutes se produisit la magie: la boîte devint translucide et laissa transparaître l’étoffe phosphorescent des mouchoirs, une dentelle arachnéenne comparable aux merveilles de Bruges et de Calais. (171)

After about twelve minutes the magic happened: the box became translucent and let the phosphorescent material of the tissues appear, a spider-like lace comparable to the marvels of Bruges and Calais.

Such a visceral response created by sight brings to mind the notion of scopophilia, however now the male part of the gazing equation has been fully removed, and there is just a girl who enjoys looking at the world, without subjecting anyone in particular to her gaze.²³ When Passerose realizes this gift Trémière possesses, a scene reminiscent of *Barbe bleue* unfolds: the young girl is led into a secret room where her grandmother reveals to her a hidden collection of jewels. She offers these words as an explanation for the secret:

Bref, si ta mère connaissait l’existence de ce trésor, elle m’obligerait à prendre au moins une assurance. Cela supposerait une expertise-quelle horreur! Soumettre ses bijoux à une expertise, c’est prouver qu’on ne les aime pas. Moi je les aime au point d’avoir besoin de les porter chaque nuit. Si j’ai conservé mon éclat, c’est grâce à eux. (95)

Essentially, if your mother knew of the existence of this treasure, she would force me to insure them at the very least. That would mean an appraisal-how horrible! To submit these jewels to an appraisal is to prove that they are not loved. But me, I love them to the point of having to wear them every night. If I’ve preserved my radiance, it’s thanks to them.

This is a powerful moment of trust, one that is only brought about after Passerose recognizes Trémière’s gift of sight. The secret of the jewels could have simply been recounted verbally, but

²³ Bernard’s writing also evokes a notion of scopophilia, when the disfigured prince tries to convince the princess to abandon the pleasures of looking: “Je suis le Roi des Gnômes, vous en serez la Reine ; & si vous voulez me pardonner ma figure, & sacrifier le plaisir de vos yeux, tous les autres plaisirs vous seront prodigués” (“I am the King of Gnômes, and you will be their Queen; and if you wish to forgive my appearance, and sacrifice the pleasure of your eyes, all other pleasures will be bestowed upon you”; 289)

instead the grandmother decides to physically show them to her granddaughter, fully entrusting their secret to her. In *Mercure* and *Barbe bleue* one of the functions of vision is as a vehicle of truth, and thus it takes on a similar role in *Riquet à la houppe*, however now with truth also comes trust instead of someone's downfall.

The sight of the jewels marks a moment of intimacy and trust between the older and the younger generation that allows stronger generational bonds to form. In *Barbe bleue* there is a similar moment when Bluebeard trusts his current companion enough to show her the forbidden chamber himself, but that trust ends in the death of Bluebeard. Here, a similar trust is on display, one made over jewels, but this trust is about the link between one generation of women to another, rather than about one woman finding justice for others. But just as Saturnine bonded with the women in the photograph, so do Passrose and Trémière bond over jewels. Objects return as a community forming medium that, as I explain later, empowers women.

This scene of women sharing in a secret also displaces the often gendered nature of secrets in fairy tales. In tales like “Riquet à la houppe,” for example, the prince always has a secret: he either has an underground kingdom, as in the case of Perrault or Bernard, or his very name is kept hidden, as is the case of “Ricdin-Ricdon” and other Rumpelstiltskin-esque tales. The “Bluebeard” tradition is, of course, full of deadly secrets the men keep from the women, and in the same vein of deadly secrets, Apuleius's tale of Cupid and Psyche (in the fourth and fifth books of his *Metamorphoses*) features a man whose image must be kept hidden from a woman. Across fairy tales of all kinds there is a prevalence of secrets being associated with men and some kind of danger to women, but Nothomb proposes a tale where a secret instead becomes a moment of connection between two women.

The contrasting storylines between the prince and the princess serve as a purposeful use of opposition that shifts the emphasis from the superiority of man found in other “Riquet à la houppe” tales to an emphasis on female kinship. Déodat’s life is distinctly marked by solitude that is at once willful and imposed. When the reader passes from Déodat’s to Trémière’s story, the strong bonds that develop between grandmother and granddaughter may appear more pronounced. This method of setting a man’s loneliness against a community of women that Nothomb uses can be seen as a way to underscore the very community of women that is forming. In doing so, Nothomb uses dichotomies and opposition not in a way to serve ideologies of male power, but rather to emphasize female solidarity. This solidarity becomes a vehicle by which an older generation fortifies a younger one through the passing of wisdom and strength.

Female Community and Female Transformation

Transformation is at the heart of many “Riquet à la houppe” tales and, accordingly, Nothomb opposes two different transformations. This contrast is an extension of the contrast between community and solitude, and thus Nothomb showcases the power of close, personal relationships in meaningful transformations. In Trémière’s narrative, the generational bonds formed over jewels serve to empower the younger generation and facilitate their metamorphosis.

In fairy tales in general, and certainly in “Riquet à la houppe” tales, objects, and specifically jewels and riches, feature prominently. As Robert writes of fairy tales in general:

Tous les auteurs de contes de fées profitent en effet de la possibilité que leur offre le genre pour mettre en place un univers imaginaire dont ils présentent l’image gratifiante aux lecteurs de leur temps. Or parmi les éléments essentiels de ce décor, les richesses occupent une place exceptionnelle. (349-50)

All fairy-tale authors indeed take advantage of the possibility that the genre offers them to create an imaginary universe whose gratifying image they presented to the readers of their time. Yet among the essential elements of this decor, riches occupy an exceptional place.

One significant object-based scene, the banquet scene, is found in Perrault's writing:

La terre s'ouvrit dans le même temps, et elle vit sous ses pieds comme une grande Cuisine pleine de Cuisiniers, de Marmitons et de toutes sortes d'Officiers nécessaires pour faire un festin magnifique. Il en sortit une bande de vingt ou trente Rôtisseurs, qui allèrent se camper dans une allée du bois autour d'une table fort longue, et qui tous, la lardoire à la main, et la queue de Renard sur l'oreille, se mirent à travailler en cadence au son d'une Chanson harmonieuse. (280)

The earth opened up at the same time, and she saw under her feet a grand kitchen full of cooks, kitchen hands, and all sorts of officers necessary to make a magnificent festival. From there emerged a band of twenty or thirty roasters who went to make camp in an alley of trees around quite a long table, and who all, roasting sticks in hand and Renard's tail on their ear, began to work in cadence to the sound of a harmonious song.

While there are no jewels in this scene, it is exemplative abundance of materiality that can exist in a fairy tale. In Bernard's tale, Riquet à la houppe offers Mama all the riches he owns: "Je possède les trésors renfermés dans la terre, vous en serez la maîtresse" ("I possess the treasures enclosed in the earth, you will be the master of them"; 289). In other fairy tales, such as d'Aulnoy's "Serpentin Vert," jewels are abundant. When Laideronnette is beset upon by a horde of pagodas, she remarks how they are all made of precious materials: "Ils étaient de diamants, d'émeraudes, de rubis, de perle, de cristal, d'ambre . . ." ("They were made of diamonds, emeralds, rubies, pearls, crystal, amber . . ."; 261). Also in d'Aulnoy's "La Belle aux cheveux d'or," the titular beauty is described as constantly wearing jewels: "Elle allait toujours couverte de fleurs sur la tête, et des habits brodés de diamants et de perles" ("She always went covered with flowers on her head, and clothes embroidered with diamonds and pearls"; 287).

Trémière's object-related transformation only begins with the death of her grandmother. After being mistreated by a boy at school, Trémière falls deathly ill and her grandmother abandons her jewels for the night to give her warmth and care. In the morning, it is revealed that

the jewels have been stolen, and it is now Passerose's condition that deteriorates. As she lays dying, Trémière and her grandmother have this exchange over the importance of the jewels:

-Sans mes bijoux, à quoi bon?
-Et moi, grand-maman? J'ai besoin de toi.
-Tu vivras, mon enfant. Tu en as la force. (128)

- Without my jewels, what's the point?
- And what about me, grandma? I need you.
- You'll live, my child. You have the strength for it.

After she dies, the narrator writes that "elle sentit combien l'aïeule dit vrai : la force qui était en Passerose coulait désormais dans ses veines" ("She felt how much her ancestor had spoken truly: the strength that was in Passerose flowed henceforth in her veins"; 129). Even though the jewels are removed from the narrative for now, they remain essential not because their absence is the cause of Passerose's death, but rather as a result of the jewels and the shared secret around them. A closer bond was cemented between two generations of women, and this bond facilitates the transfer of strength from one generation to another. They were already close since Trémière was a small child, but objects and secrets come together to form the base of generational ties that become a source of power.

The bonds presented in *Riquet à la houppe* maintain their association with female liberation that they hold in Nothomb's other novels, however this liberation is from a gendered narrative rather than from a physical threat. Trémière, like Déodat, is exposed to bullying throughout her childhood. Her habitual reticence leads her to be shoved into the category of a dumb beauty. However, after this moment when the strength of one woman is passed on to another, Trémière abandons her old life and becomes a model. She is not a normal model, however, but rather a jewelry model, and her ability to see the beauty in everything allows her to

transform the jewelry industry itself. When she speaks to a jewelry store owner, she outlines for him what he is lacking: “Vous recourez à des mannequins mains ou à des mannequins cou. J’ai dix-huit ans, mon visage n’a jamais été montré. Il pourrait devenir emblématique de la joaillerie Trébuchet” (“You use hand and neck models. I’m eighteen, my face has never been shown. It could become emblematic of Trebuchet jewelry”; 160). The effect of such an idea is immediate: “La campagne d’affiche fit grand bruit. On salua combien, par la seule grâce d’un visage inconnu, on mettait en valeur ces oeuvres d’art” (“The poster campaign was sensational. One hailed how much, by the sole grace of an unknown face, one accentuated these works of art”; 161). The princess was typecast as the dumb beauty, but she has freed herself from that stigma to become a titan of the fashion industry. She has shed off the ideas that others put upon her to embark on a new life that will also shake up other female-related narratives.

Vision as a revealing, truth-telling force accompanies this transformation and helps to transform the very meaning of jewels in the novel as well. As Passerose lays dying, she tells her granddaughter essentially that life is not worth living without her jewels. There is an equivalency between objects and life that is rejected when Trémière, drawing on her gift of sight, decides to show her face in the advertising campaigns. In the old ads, they were filled with anonymous body parts, a space where the value of the object was placed over the person wearing it. Instead, humanity is added to the jewels, breaking the hold they had over the previous models, and in a way, the equivalency between life and object. It is vision, one that reveals the hidden beauty of objects, that also unveils the human that was hidden prior, and brings that personal quality forward, ahead of the object worn.

The powers of sight are not, however, alone in creating this effect, as generational wisdom also contributes to the transformation of jewels. The reader comes to find out that Trémière relies on an additional piece of wisdom handed down to her by her grandmother to accomplish what she does: when she is shown the jewels, Trémière is told that jewels need to be worn with love or else they will be ruined,²⁴ and later during an interview, Trémière says this about her success as a model:

Ce qui fait la valeur d'un bijou, c'est l'amour qu'il suscite. Certains artistes sont capables d'insuffler une âme dans le métal ou dans la pierre, ou plutôt de les sculpter et de les sertir de manière à révéler leur âme. (162)

What makes up the value of a jewel is the love it inspires. Certain artists are capable of breathing a soul into a metal or stone, or rather to sculpt them and set them in a way so as to reveal their soul.

The love that the old generation speaks of is taken by the new generation to turn the jewels into a symbol of humanity and empowerment, rather than objects that efface the life and person out of the people they touch. Through this image of a woman breathing life into jewellery, generational wisdom can resound across a broader audience.

In other “Riquet à la houppe” tales, the princess’s transformation centers on her transition from stupidity to intelligence. Such is the case in Perrault and Bernard’s version where the transformation is exchanged on the condition that the princess must marry the prince who makes her intelligent. Beaumont presents a similar metamorphosis, and Harries notes that she is not just smart but wise as well (88). Scholars have also pointed out that, in Perrault’s “Riquet à la houppe,” the prince tells her that she can transform him too, thus putting the prince’s intellect over the princess’s, thereby reducing the significance of her transformation (Ringham 293; Hannon, “Antithesis and Ideology” 114; Seifert, *Fairy Tales, Sexuality* 208). Harries writes that

²⁴ “Un bijou porté sans amour peut se ternir d’un coup” (94).

in Bernard's tale, the princess's transformation does nothing to help her, as she becomes a prisoner to her husband (37-38). Barchilon argues that the princess in Perrault's tale becomes an object of love, both in a physical sense and in the sense that she is "la «vraisemblance psychologique de l'amour»" ("The psychological verisimilitude of love"; 6). Seifert and Ringham both argue that in both Bernard and Perrault's tales, the gift of intelligence to the princess "exacerbates an innate penchant for irrationality," with Perrault's princess being gifted with faulty intelligence that enforces the antithesis Hannon notes, and Bernard using her princess to show the perils of love that face a woman (*Fairy Tales, Sexuality* 209; Ringham 294). Seifert also writes that in Lhéritier's "Ricdin Ricdon," the princess is already intelligent, although she still falters between the rivalry of beauty and intelligence, sometimes choosing the former over the latter (*Fairy Tales, Sexuality* 211-17).

In this novel, the princess's transformation becomes about how objects and kinship come together to free women from being bound to objects. Unlike other tales, Nothomb's princess is never stupid, that is merely the outward perception of her. When she does transform from meek little girl to groundbreaking model, she only does what she always has: look and see the beauty and potential in something. Nothing, then, has really changed in her intellectual capacity. Thus, what is on display in the princess's metamorphosis is rather the effect of strong generational bonds between women, bonds that are formed through and based on objects. Her transformation owes itself only to her grandmother, the prince plays no part in it. The absence of the prince in this process emphasizes the fact that the princess's transformation is a female-driven process. For Nothomb, these generational ties have freed women from being relegated to the value of an object, and have undone the equivalency between life and object.

The other character to “transform” is of course the prince, but the prince’s transformation does not vary widely in the “Riquet à la houppe” tradition. In neither Bernard nor Beaumont’s version does the prince actually transform. In fact, Beaumont’s princess purposely eschews the opportunity to transform the prince: “Spirituel me plaît tel qu’il est; je ne m’embarrasse guère qu’il soit beau, il est aimable, cela me suffit” (“Spirituel pleases me such as he is; I hardly care that he is handsome, he is lovable, and that is enough for me”; 168). In Perrault’s tale, the transformation of the prince is less clear; Seifert notes that the prince’s “transformation” is not actually real because the tale does not say that the prince is transformed, only that the princess stopped seeing him as repulsive (*Fairy Tales, Sexuality* 209). Barchilon writes that the prince’s transformation for Perrault is but a symbol of the princess's acceptance of the reality of marriage. He also argues that in Beaumont’s writing, the lack of transformation of the prince is a denial of magical transformation altogether (6, 92).

Nothomb contrasts her princess who transforms rather early in her life with a prince whose transformation is delayed *until* he forms a close, personal bond. Déodat’s main interest since childhood has been birds. In his adult life, he dedicates his life to the study of birds, becoming an ornithologist and writing a book on the cultural significance of birds. This obsession with birds could be a reference to the aviaries found in Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve *La Belle et la Bête*: “Des oiseaux de toute espèce mêlant leur ramage au bruit confus des eaux formaient une aimable harmonie” (“Birds of every kind mixing their warbling with the chaotic sounds of the water formed a lovely harmony”; 29). Over the course of the novel, Déodat does not so much transform as he dives deeper and deeper into the person he already was. He turned a childhood hobby into a career. The birds that once were an escape have flooded his

understanding of the world. When he is with his physical therapist, Saskia, he seeks to understand her behavior in avian terms: “Il observait son comportement à l’aune des moeurs aviaires, d’abord parce qu’il l’aimait, ensuite parce qu’elle échappait à toutes les règles de l’adultère humaine” (“He observed her behavior in regards to avian habits, at first because he loved her and then because she escaped all rules of human adultery”; 143). Riquet à la houppe remains Riquet à la houppe, even during his adult life. He has only succeeded in becoming more and more connected to his childhood interests.

The prince’s transformation eventually takes place, but only at the hands of the princess, thus reversing the idea that the man has to change the woman. Once Déodat and Trémière form a couple, the spectacle of ugliness vs. beauty that the talk show host wants to showcase never comes to fruition. Instead, the couple becomes a symbol of love: “Quand les jeunes gens se promenaient ensemble, ils donnaient une image de l’amour si convaincante qu’ils inspiraient le respect” (“When the youths walked together, they gave an image of love so convincing that they inspired respect”; 180). This is a critical moment in the life of Déodat, because this is the first time in the novel he is ever associated with respect. From childhood through adulthood, he was always a target of some sort of bullying. But because of Trémière, he has become a person to be respected, one who is just known as an ornithologist, not the ugly ornithologist. The prince went through his life essentially the same person, but once he actually finds a true connection with another human being, he can finally transform into someone else.

What is also telling about the contrast between the prince and the princess is that the power of the prince found in other “Riquet à la houppe” stories is stripped from him. Perrault and Bernard write of a prince who is really the one in control of the relationship, who holds the

princess's fate in his hands. Beaumont presents a similar gender dynamic, but her princess has slightly more choice in what she wants to do with the prince, whereas in Perrault and Bernard, the princess is locked in a deal. Here, in Nothomb's story, the prince holds no power at all over the princess: he is not privy to any secret knowledge, he does not rule a kingdom of gnomes, and he has no magical powers of his own. In fact, it is the princess that transforms the prince, the princess who has the ability to raise his social standing. The male-centered power of other tales in the "Riquet à la houppe" tradition has been handed over to the female protagonist. No longer do jewels and objects rule over women, but it appears men no longer do either.

Introducing an Equalizing Space

Another dichotomy found in other "Riquet à la houppe" tales, as well as in fairy tales in general, is that of place. In Perrault and Bernard's "Riquet à la houppe," there is a dichotomy between the above-ground kingdom where the princess lives, and the underground territories where the prince reigns. The prince in these tales is the prince of gnomes, and when the prince and princess are married, the princess must descend into the gnome kingdom, abandoning her place of birth. Such an act further underscores the uneven power dynamic between the two: it is not the prince who ever has to abandon anything, but the princess. "Sleeping Beauty" tales offer a similar conception of place, in that the female-inhabited space is often being invaded by the male prince, signifying that the female space only exists to be subsumed by the male space. In many "Bluebeard" tales, there is the creation of a forbidden space on the part of the man, thus allowing the man to set the rules of the environment, rules to which the woman must conform or

be punished. This creation of two opposing spaces encourages the idea of the powerless princess, subjected to the will of the man.

Instead of creating her own version of this juxtaposition, Nothomb undoes it altogether. When Déodat and Trémière finally meet, it is while they are waiting to go on a talk show together. There are no indications that their respective green rooms are underground, but the prince and princess both inhabit the same place, meeting in a neutral location. Such a locale brings to mind the forest where the prince and princess meet in Perrault and Bernard's tale, but in those tales, the prince is actively searching for the princess. In Nothomb's writing, neither is searching for the other, they are simply brought together. There is this sense of equality, then, that surrounds their meeting: no one forces the meeting upon the other, and they inhabit the same place, both of them belonging to the same world.

This equality is elaborated upon by a transition of environment that makes it so that neither the princess nor the prince gives or takes anything. After meeting each other, Déodat and Trémière decide to leave the television show and get on the first train they can find. They go to Nantes and stay there, away from their respective worlds, before eventually coming back to Paris. There is this transition from one location to another found in Perrault and Bernard's writing, but Nothomb's transition is firstly only temporary, and secondly a lateral transition as opposed to a vertical one. The princess is not ripped from one world to another, but rather the happy couple take a simple vacation, to a place ostensibly unfamiliar to them both. Neither one is dominating the other, and they both return to where they came from. The antithesis between the above and the below, between the male and the female worlds is eliminated. Both the prince and princess stand on equal footing, however the princess is likely wealthier than the prince. No one

is forced to give up anything, rather the gendered power dynamics of older tales are supplanted with the image of a prince and princess who live in harmony and equilibrium with each other.

Amélie Nothomb: The Optimistic Opposer

In a manner consistent with other members of the “Riquet à la houppe” tradition, Nothomb keeps the center of the novel focused on comparison. However her method of appropriating this text has, in a way, degendered the antithesis and contrasts that are found in other tales. In doing so, she is not making a tale where the man is evil and the woman is good. Rather, through her manipulation of dichotomy, Nothomb removes male power not at the expense of vilifying the man, but rather with the goal of elevating the woman. Indeed, it is through attributing positive qualities to women beyond beauty while maintaining the positive qualities already associated with the man that Nothomb achieves a more egalitarian tale. In a story about a beautiful princess and an ugly prince, a more optimistic version for the female character is offered in *Riquet à la houppe*.

Conclusion

Amélie Nothomb's novels are complex, often hybrid tales that place an emphasis on how objects and the physical environment of a narrative affect the narrative itself. She is engaged in writing tales that show how the materiality of a story can be a site for empowering communities to be formed among women. In doing so, Nothomb elevates the women in her tales, placing them into positions where female cooperation is what saves or uplifts them. Through her novels *Barbe bleue*, *Mercure*, and *Riquet à la houppe*, she offers a window into how fairy-tale relationships and issues such as gender can be tackled and manipulated through attention to the very things that fill a story.

The goal of this thesis has been to use a combination of literary and material studies methodologies to bring to light the strategies at work in Nothomb's writing. Through analysis of the text informed by museum studies and photographic theory, I have shown how in Nothomb's universe, communities can be formed among women through photographs, communities that allow one woman to defeat a murderer. Using similar theories as well as ideas regarding vision in general, I demonstrate how women can undo one man's strategies of vision and turn them against him in order to free themselves from his prison. Lastly, through Hannon's idea of antithesis, I argue that contrasting storylines do not need to enforce gender ideologies, but can in fact, through the help of jewelry, undo such ideologies. My interdisciplinary approach has made it possible to uncover the unique some of the features of Nothomb's writing. My hope is that I have shown how these novels are indeed additions to be included within the ever-expanding palimpsest of fairy tales.

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