

# Robbing the Bride



**Sue Williams** was born in Redruth, Cornwall, in 1956. After leading a peripatetic existence for many years, she now lives and works in Cardiff. She has held solo exhibitions in Wales and Europe and has contributed to international group exhibitions.

She has received a number of awards, including a Rootstein Hopkins grant, an Arts Council of Wales Bursary and an Eisteddfod Gold Medal. Her work has been purchased for the National Museum of Wales Collection and for the Welsh Assembly Collection. She has been shortlisted for the Artes Mundi Prize 2006, and a major exhibition of her work will be shown at the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea this year. She is currently working on new multi-media project with the feminist film-maker, Michele Ryan.

Poet **Zoe Brigley**, whose own creative work shares Sue Williams's preoccupation with the role of women in contemporary society, went to interview Williams in her Cardiff studio as she put the final touches to the pieces that are currently on show at the Artes Mundi exhibition alongside the work of the other seven shortlisted artists – Eijja-Liisa Ahtila, Thomas Demand, Mauricio Dias & Walter Riedweg, Leandro Erlich, Subodh Gupta and Wu Chi-Tsung. The winner of this year's award will be announced on Friday 31st March, and the show will run at the National Museum of Wales until 7 May.

ABOVE: XXX  
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*Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride,  
In a house of murderers you've arrived.*

The bride looks up. A bird is perched in a cage above her head. From its beak come the ominous words again: 'Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride.' The house is dark, the time for meeting has come, yet though she searches the house from top to bottom the bride cannot find the bridegroom. Instead she comes upon an old crone who is weary of life in that house of thieves. 'If they find you here they will kill you,' the crone tells her. 'You must hide here amongst these barrels and in the morning run home.' The young woman hides and in the early hours she hears voices. A group of men burst into the room carrying a struggling girl. They fill the victim's mouth with red, white and yellow wine until her heart bursts. The bride watches the bridegroom sever the poor creature's limbs, salt her wounds and eat her body. The victim's severed finger still holding a ring is flung aside and falls beside the bride where she is hiding.

The story is the Grimm brothers' *The Robber Bridegroom*, a variation on the traditional Bluebeard fable, and the severed finger with its ring represents the fate of the bride in heterosexual relationships. There are many versions of the Bluebeard story, a folk tale which tells how a bride discovers her husband's murdered wife or wives. A precursor of the gothic and horror genres, the Bluebeard story prefigures what some critics call 'paranoid woman's stories'. From Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, from Hitchcock's *Suspicion* to Zemeckis' *What Lies Beneath*, the Bluebeard themes of doubt and anxiety concerning male intentions prevail. Bruno Bettelheim writes that the Bluebeard stories realise a young woman's 'worst fears about sex', since the betrayal reveals a fraught and violent world of relationships. The underbelly of heterosexual union is exposed, and an uncanny fear is heightened as Bluebeards stalk women's dreams, capturing them physically or emotionally.

Women's doubts and anxieties form significant themes in the work of Sue Williams, one of the artists nominated for the Artes Mundi Prize 2006. The Prize stipulates that the chosen artists must explore notions of the human condition, and Williams' interrogation of the relationship of heterosexuality is illuminating in a very human way. Her compositions are disturbingly squalid, consisting as they do of muddled lines, uneven boundaries, graffiti-like text and rough spontaneous sketches. Williams' art often expresses moments of doubt or betrayal where trust fails, and in interview she admits that such issues emerge out of her own personal concerns: 'I trust on a level that worries people around me. I put myself into dangerous positions.' Like the bride of the Grimm fairytale,

the women of Williams' lingering portraits seem to be in danger.

In one of a series of paintings entitled *Wish U Were Here*, a woman veiled in white material poses with a wreath on her head, holding long-stemmed flowers at her side. She stands silently like a statue about to be unveiled. Williams admits that the veil is a significant symbol in her art and she links it to a moment of personal doubt. She describes her first experience of marriage in terms not unlike those of *The Robber Bridegroom*:

*I stared at my shoes as I walked up the aisle. I kept wondering if I had left the price-tags on the soles with their huge red Xs. I couldn't help feeling that there was something wrong. I was sure that I could not play the role of wife. I refused to wear a veil when I married, although I came from a very religious background. The veil to me represents the farce of the virgin, another role that women have to play.*

The white sheet is a symbol of the hymen and virginity, yet the wreath and flowers suggest that she is some kind of sacrificial offering. Hovering slightly above her head is a dark shape like a cloud, a hole or a rift. Behind the figure, a graffiti scrawl 'Wish U were Here?' is barely legible, yet it compounds the rift, the hole, the doubt. The situation is unsettling, and the suggested purity and hence immaturity of the subject seems to relate to Williams' idea that 'as children, women are taught to be the seductress yet we are ignorant of what to expect or how to deal with it'.

The white sheet, then, also represents a certain ignorance of heterosexual relations. An interesting comparison can be made here with Isak Dinesen's story 'The Blank Page', which tells the tale of an order of nuns who weave the royal linen. On the morning after the royal marriage, the linen is hung from the window in order to display the evidence of the bride's newly-lost virginity. In return for their linen, the nuns receive the central piece of the sheet which they frame in a gallery and hang like art, yet one sheet in the gallery is blank of virginal blood, thus raising several questions. Had the bride already lost her virginity? Did she escape marriage – and thus this brutal parading of female pain – altogether? We cannot know. Similarly, in Williams' painting, the white sheet is a blank page, recalling Jacques Derrida's suggestion that the veil both 'hides and shows the truth of what is present'.

Women's sexual potency, or rather impotence, is very much at stake in Williams' work, and some of her portraits portray knowing and aggressive women. If these women are framed in relation to stories like *The Robber Bride*, they come to represent those who have suffered vio-



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lence and brutality rather than those who have escaped their Bluebeards. Critic Tania Modleski, exploring the gothic genre to which the Bluebeard fable belongs, describes how the typical Gothic heroine 'feels a strong identification with a woman from the remote or very recent past, a woman who in almost every case has died a mysterious and perhaps violent or gruesome death'. In the Bluebeard tale, the women who communicate with the heroine are her husband's dead wives, those who have suffered the brutal consequences of marital relations.

Some of Williams' works empathise with the Bluebeards' murdered victims rather than the heroine. In her *dirty linen on line* sketches, the grubby paper is etched with images depicting what happens to women who trust and are betrayed as a consequence. One explicit image features an act of coitus, with the woman's legs splayed open. The sexual act is mechanical or forced, and the faces of the lovers are smudged, blank. A



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scribbled caption reads '10 pounds' work', revealing the sordid nature of this pecuniary exchange. The fate of the gullible woman is to be leeches of identity, to become less than human. Like the murdered maiden in *The Robber Bridegroom*, Williams' subject is devoured both emotionally and physically.

Communication between the murdered wives and the struggling heroine is an important element of the Bluebeard folk tale. Williams is similarly exercised by the figure of the woman who has suffered pain herself and who is trying to warn a younger woman about the dangers that lie ahead. One painting in the *Wish U Were Here* series reflects this dynamic, portraying an encounter between two women. The prominent female in the conflict is a mixture of stereotypical 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements: the agitator takes up a powerfully aggressive stance, pulling the hair of the other woman, yet she retains her high-heeled shoes and fem-

inine tutu. Williams explains the aggression in some of her works in relation to the survival of artists in 'a male world': 'Sometimes we rebel against this and try to behave like a man – we survive by taking on a male role in a male world... There are "male" attitudes within me, yet I also suffer acutely female pain: no man can understand this painful area.'

The symbol of the veil is also developed here, as the aggressor in the conflict is shrouded by her own hair. The veil of hair represents burgeoning sexuality, yet the way in which it covers the face is also reminiscent of vengeful and dangerous women, from Dali's *La Sirene* to Sadako in Nakata's *The Ring*. The veiled woman is aggressively present, yet there is an uncanny sense of blankness about her. Williams describes how sometimes 'the veil refers to the woman not quite knowing who she is – a certain lack of identity'. This explains the frustrated pose of the subject as she grips the hair of the other woman who gazes, preoccupied, at some point beyond the frame. The active stance of the central figure offers a stark contrast to this image, and there is a sense that two halves of a single self are at war as the vengeful victim of betrayal reproaches a potential new victim for her blind trust. Yet Williams' view of heterosexual relationships is not as bleak as her art might suggest, and she relates this to her own experience of bringing up a son: 'I made sure,' she says, 'that he was very aware of women, and I taught him to never hurt another human being.'

Women writers who offer re-workings of fable and folk tales, such as Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and Lorna Sage, have all emphasised the importance of re-visiting stories in which heroines win by using their own cunning. In these tales, we can see female playfulness, nonsense and laughter, or perhaps what the feminist Luce Irigaray calls *jouissance*. Williams' *Mmmmm!* seems to be an expression of defiant *jouissance*. The title's unintelligible, onomatopoeic sound indicates the subversive feminine, while the mass of jumbled bodies, feminine objects and graffiti text aggrandise the female figure that leans forward at the centre of the chaos. The subject does not exist on a blank page, yet she is portrayed as sexually and physically powerful.

*The Robber Bridegroom* ends not with the heroine's escape but with the cunning manipulation of her Bluebeard through the art of storytelling. On the day of celebrations for the wedding, the guests sit around the table and tell stories, but the bride is silent until the groom asks her to join in. The bride tells of a 'dream' she has had, a dream of a dark house, a bird's warnings, an old crone and a hiding place amongst barrels. She tells of the struggling maiden: of her burst heart, severed limbs and salted wounds. She tells of the ringed finger that was chopped from the maiden's hand, and with these words she holds it up for all to see. The robber is seized at once, to be executed with the rest of his gang, but the bride's fate is a blank page.



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**Bibliography** Bruno Bettelheim: *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Jacques Derrida: *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987); Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'The Robber Bridegroom' in *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. Maria Tatar (London: Norton, 1999); Tania Modleski: *Loving with a Vengeance* (Hamdon, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982).

**Zoe Brigley** teaches Creative Writing at the University of Warwick, where she is completing a PhD. She won an Eric Gregory Award in 2003, and her poems have been published widely in magazines and anthologies. Her latest poems feature in *Seren Selections*, an anthology of work by new poets just published by Seren,