BÉLA BARTÓK'S BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE: A NEW AVATAR OF THE MYTH OF ORPHEUS?^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

Ever since its Greek and Roman mythological and literary sources during Antiquity, the myth of Orpheus has been of paramount importance in the edification of the Artist as a key-character of understanding Music as magic and Love beyond death. Over the course of millennia, the myth has underwent numerous transformations, reflecting cultural and creative views of each period. Up to this day, the myth of Orpheus continues to allure composers' creative imagination. Within the modern and even postmodern tempestuous avatars of the myth in musical creation, the myth stays true to revealing the creator's inner landscape, his/her reflective searching, and the nature of love between life and death. The current essay proposes a set of correlations between the essential motifs of this ancient myth and the symbols in Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, in a quest for answering the question whether this iconic opera of modernity could be understood, to some extent, as a new avatar of the Orpheus myth.

Keywords: myth, Orpheus, Bartók, *Bluebeard's Castle*, symbol

*. Translated from Romanian by the author.

The myth of Orpheus crosses the centuries along the history of European culture, literature, arts and music, spanning from the Greek and Roman Antiquity up to this day. In its successive transformations, it has been highlighted essential turning points in the evolution of musical style and genres, such as the birth of opera, its Gluckian reform, the emergence of *operetta*, the first electronic music experiments etc. During the 20th century, composers such as Igor Stravinsky and, later on, Philip Glass, on American ground, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric and Darius Milhaud, in French musical culture, Kurt Weill and Hans Werner Henze, in the German one, Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry in France, Italian composers Gian Francesco Malipiero and Alfredo Casella, the British composer Harrison Birtwistle, but also in Romania Marcel Mihalovici, Cornel Țăranu and younger composers such as Șerban Marcu and Tudor Feraru, have creatively approached the myth of Orpheus. The myth encompasses various musical genres, ranging from opera and chamber opera, to operetta, ballet, cantata, symphonic suite, children's music, song cycles, choral and instrumental chamber music, film music, electronic music, opera for puppet theatre, radiophonic opera and even rock-opera.² Debussy had also in plan to write an opera related to the myth of Orpheus.³

In modern and postmodern times, the orphic myth drifts further and further away from its original sources, being deconstructed and recomposed, reduced to its core or to mere symbols, in the turmoil of stylistic orientations of the time, and relating to various creative perspectives of different composers.

In the midst of the fever concerning an ample process of reevaluating mythology in modern theatre, driven by authors like Bertolt Brecht, Luigi Pirandello and Samuel Beckett, writers and poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Anouilh, Jean Cocteau or Tennessee Williams reinvigorated the

¹ This iconic question, both in the myth of Orpheus and in the opening lines of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, stays at the core of this entire path of reflection. It has been suggested to me by a student of mine, Orbán Csala (who noticed the similarity during a Music history course). Asking myself whether the connection between the two myths would open new perspectives of interpretation, I followed her path and I hereby thank her for the idea.

² See the chronological table of musical creations on the myth of Orpheus, in Tatiana Oltean, *Avatarurile mitului lui Orfeu în istoria muzicii* [The Avatars of the myth of Orpheus in the History of Music], MediaMusica, Cluj, 2012, pp. 255-261. See also Rollo Myers, "The Opera That Never Was: Debussy's Collaboration with Victor Segalen in the Preparation of *Orphée*", in *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 64, No. 4 (Oct., 1978), pp. 495-506.

³ A strange coincidence is the fact that in 1907, when Kodály Zoltán was getting his new colleague, namely young Bartók acquainted to the style and works of Debussy, the latter was in the midst of a new project that was never to be completed: an opera related to the myth of Orpheus. See Elliott Antokoletz, Juana Canabal Antokoletz, *Musical Symbolism in the Operas of Debussy and Bartók: Trauma, Gender, and the Unfolding of the Unconscious*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 44.

myth. They convincingly widened it through modern and new interpretations, in accordance to stylistic tendencies of the time: symbolism, surrealism and the absurd, in a socio-cultural context of fervor and turmoil, marked by crisis and consequent reevaluations.

These modern literary approaches fostered the creation of musical works which transfigure the myth to almost dissolution: in Darius Milhaud's *Les malheurs d'Orphée* (1927), Orpheus goes back to his vocation of a healer that Antiquity consecrated him with, but finds himself unable to heal his own Eurydice from a mysterious disease. The author also places the plot in his urban contemporary settings, adding to it an ethnic touch (Eurydice belongs to a gipsy community). In the last of three version of Orpheus' myth (*Orphée '53*) by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, Orpheus is depicted as the interrogative conscience of Eurydice, reflecting on the orphic destiny of every man; in Ernst Křenek's *Orpheus und Eurydike* (1923, with the libretto following a drama of the painter-dramatist Oskar Kokoschka), Eurydice finds her peace only after killing Orpheus herself. Composers such as Hans Werner Henze and Harrison Birtwistle obsessively return to the myth of Orpheus along their works, conveying new strata of significance to it. Birtwistle, in *The Mask of Orpheus* (1986), as well as Křenek before him, introduces the theme of rape; but in Birtwistle's version of the myth, Orpheus sells out his vocation of singing to find out secrets that would enhance saving Eurydice from the Underworld (what radical a solution, even by the standards of postmodernism!). In Philip Glass' rendering, Orpheus loses confidence in his own vocation. Other versions include Orpheus and Eurydice growing estranged following the progressive dissolution of their love, or even Orpheus and Eurydice wandering separately in a train station in Berlin (signaling the day-to-day urban Inferno of "mortar, metal and paper cities"¹), almost forgetting whom they were looking for, under the imminent shadow of death (understood as lack of spiritual life and oblivion), in Kurt Weill's *Der Neue Orpheus* (1925).

Thus, topics like alienation, oblivion, indifference, cowardice, infidelity and rape, nightmare, illness (both of the body and of the mind), crime and suicide, or even incidental death (in both Henze's and Glass' versions), as cynical as it may be, penetrate one of the most touching love stories humanity was ever able to produce.

In the context of a fervent transfiguration of the myth in modern culture, which can only be compared to the fertile time of the Baroque, Béla Bartók writes in 1911² his only opera, *A kékszakállú herceg vára* [*Duke Bluebeard's Castle*], op. 11,

¹ Tatiana Oltean, *Ibid.*, p. 208.

² The score was revised in 1912, 1918, 1921 by the composer. The original libretto is set in Hungarian, with a German adaptation of the text by Wilhelm Ziegler, which met the composer's approval. The

Sz. 48, BB 62, following a libretto devised by Béla Balázs and inspired by a fairy tale (*La Barbe Blue*) best known in the published version of Charles Perrault. Balázs had also written a drama by the same title in 1910, which he used to call „the ballad of inner life”¹, advancing from start the allegorical input of the myth, and the libretto is closely following the drama.

Let us not slip here into historical and documentary details concerning the circumstances of the creation of the libretto and of the opera, nor into the storytelling of the two myths. We will draw some correlations instead, followed by a series of parallel motives which are to be detailed in a comparative manner.

A synthetic overview of both parallel and opposite aspects of the two stories could be summarized as follows:

The myth of Orpheus	The libretto of <i>Bluebeard's Castle</i> ...
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mythologic source /fairy-tale - a recent love story, a recent marriage - a psychological confrontation - the Inferno / the Castle - a path, a journey that leads to the inevitable loss of the beloved - iconic phrases: <i>Are you still following me?, Believe me and ask no questions</i> - the look backwards/the condition of Gods - the ending: her death and his survival - the metaphor of night and darkness - she keeps living after death, in a sublimated way - the motif of fatality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Orpheus – superhuman (partly godly) - the Inferno is outside - linear story - the condition is explicit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bluebeard – just human - the Inferno is inside (inner Inferno) - cyclic story - the condition is implicit

As far as the mythological source is concerned (in *Bluebeard Castle's* case, the fairy tale), it sets an indefinite space and time, which also opens the possibility of translating them into any time and place, by reinterpreting the story in different cultural and social contexts. For both Monteverdi (*L'Orfeo, favola in musica*, 1607 – the symbolic birth of opera in music history) and Bartók (*Bluebeard's Castle*, 1911, being a corner-stone in the establishment of modern opera), the myth as a source of creativeness has been intensely stimulative and inspiring. Nevertheless, whilst in

premiere took place on May 24, in Budapest. The publication of the piano score in 1921, and of the general score in 1925 belong to Universal Edition.

¹ Elliott Antokoletz, Juana Canabal Antokoletz, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

the original version of the myth, as well as in its following musical renderings, the unfolding of the story is linear, inevitably leading to the tragic ending, in *Bluebeard's Castle* the unfolding is cyclic. The opera opens and ends in the same tonal atmosphere, revolving around a tonal-modal centre on *f sharp*, and reworking the same melodic material and orchestration, as Bluebeard deplores the darkness and his deep loneliness, in the same way he must have been deploring it every time his sad story repeated itself over and over.

Monteverdi lays the foundations of the genre through a myth of tragic love, but at the same time of a symbolic character that ancient Greek culture invested with virtues intrinsically linked to music. In his turn, Bartók inaugurates modern opera relating to the same motif of tragic love, but his approach revolves mostly around the psychological confrontation between characters, which reminds rather of Gluck's version of the myth; for the first time in the history of opera, in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (first version, 1762) the entire second act appears in the form of an expanded duet between the two lovers, a deep psychological confrontation on the way back to light. As Gluck, Bartók instates between his only two characters in the opera a perfect balance.

Along the history of opera, Eurydice was portrayed, up to Gluck, as a mere apparition, the tragic element being focused almost entirely on Orpheus' struggle and failure to save her. But Bluebeard and Judith share a burden of comparable weight: Bluebeard, not being able to attain a pure love, one to complete him and not reopen old and deep wounds from his past, that even himself would not revisit, and Judith, not being granted access to the chambers of his dark soul, in order to heal him. If Orpheus is, in the myth and most of its subsequent musical versions, the one to go on the quest of saving Eurydice, in *Bluebeard's Castle* Judith is the one committed to saving him, and they both fail. In both stories, however, a persistent supplication is heard over and over: *Believe me/trust in me and ask no questions*.

None of these paths for salvation through love is successful in the end: Orpheus fails for not being able to master his eagerness, his distrust, his impulse to turn his eye back to her, and Judith, for not understanding that it is not even the right path towards healing, in other words, that they both understand love in such different ways.

The two male characters are opposite in many respects as well: Orpheus is, by descendance, both God and human. His godly nature conveys him magic powers, his human one may have taught him love, but would also ensure his failure. Conversely, Bluebeard is only a human (and how deeply human, as Judith enters the sixth chamber, the lake of tears...), but one who, as we deepen into the unfolding of the story, gains more and more of a superhuman aura, mostly at the moment of the opening of the fifth door, followed by the seventh.

If it were to reduce the myth of Orpheus to its core and fundamental motives, these are: the descent into the Underworld (the journey inside the castle), the condition set by Gods (not turning the eye back / not opening the doors to the seven chambers) and the definitive loss of the beloved.

The Castle / Bluebeard's inner Inferno

In the myth of Orpheus, the Inferno is an underworld territory (a space outside the soul), where all souls dwell after death and, as a consequence of drinking from the River Lethe waters, they lose all earthly memories, including suffering. Conversely, the Castle is an epitome of Bluebeard's inner Inferno, a metaphor of his innermost struggles, in search of pure, unintrusive love: the Castle is the Inferno, „an inner landscape of a tortured soul”¹, featuring bolted chambers where Judith discovers, one by one, all the suppressed traumas of her husband, torn to pieces by previous loves. Already the Prologue of the opera, recited by a bard, sheds light upon this inner/outer conflict of the story:

„Once upon a time...²
Where did this happen?
Outside, or within?
Ancient fable, what does it mean,
Ladies and gentlemen?

The song goes on,
You look at me,
My eyes are on you.
The curtain of our eyelids is raised:
Where is the stage: outside or within,
Ladies and gentlemen?”³

¹ See Jan Smaczny, in: <https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/LS0685.pdf>, booklet to the audio CD of Béla Bartók's *The Bluebeard's Castle*, London Symphony Orchestra, conductor: Valery Gergiev. Accessed on April 14, 2020.

² The original libretto in Hungarian opens with the words „*Haj regő rejtem / Hová, hívá rejtsen*” (poetically translated as “once upon a time”), which is a variation of an enchantment, frequently used in peasant's rituals and children's traditional games.

³ In the original language: „*Haj regő rejtem / Hová, hívá rejtsen / Hol volt, hol nem: kint-e vagy bent? / Régi rege, haj mit jelent, / Urak, asszonyságok? / Im, szólal az ének. / Ti néztek, én nézlek. / Szemünk pillás függőnye fent: / Hol a színpad: kint-e vagy bent, / Urak, asszonyságok?*”. Translation by Péter Bartók, in <https://www.chandos.net/chanimages/Booklets/LS0685.pdf>. All citations in the [Hungarian and English libretto in the present essay use the same translation source](#)). In the general score (pocket edition) published in 1963 by Universal Edition, the Hungarian text is replaced by a revised German one, along with an English translation which, according to Péter Bartók (the composer's son who devised in 2005 a new English translation, in accordance to the content and versification of the original version), grows farther and farther apart from the original libretto and its initial poetry and expressive

Literary descriptions of the Underworld ever since the Greek Antiquity, are to be found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Georgics*, the fundamental renderings of the myth in its original form. The Avernus, the Tartarus, the Hades, The Erebus, as it is often named in Ancient literature, is portrayed as „the bad and bitterly dwelling (...) where swamp roars furiously and waters overflow in torrents the high-strained reeds” (in *Leontion* by Hermesianax, 3rd to 4th century BCE)¹, or as „the black Tenarus, (...) the dead waters of the horrendous swamp” (in Virgil's *Georgics*, 1st century BCE)².

In Béla Balázs' drama, the Castle is enlisted as a standalone character, along with Judith, Bluebeard and the bard reciting the Prologue. The Castle moans, trembles, sighs, and right after the opening of the seventh door, the fifth and the sixth doors swing and shut back by themselves. The castle seems to protect itself in front of Judith's invasion, like wounds that heal by themselves, if let alone to heal. Bartók suppresses this allegoric character, but conveys it with its own personality through musical means: meandering melodic lines, modal-diatonic atmosphere, enriched with chromaticism, in minor structures, usually descending, lower register and lower strings' and brass timbre, along with minor thirds parallel mixtures in the clarinet sections, the use of the motif of the blood – namely the harmonic minor second in the higher register, strident and percussive.

The description of the castle is multi-layered: along with the musical portrayal of the sordid and cavernous ambience, we can also “see” its gloomy appearance, as described in the stage directions in the libretto, and “hear” it, as both characters do.

Some of the stage directions contain descriptions of the castle and of its dark and uninviting atmosphere. For instance: “No windows, no ornamentation. The hall is empty, dark, and forbidding like a cave hewn in the heart of solid rock. When the curtain rises the stage is in total darkness.”³. In front of the torture chamber, “The door opens without a sound. It reveals a blood red rectangle in the wall like an open wound. A red glimmer comes from deep within, throwing a long beam across the floor.”⁴

intentions. Cf. Péter Bartók, *Bluebeard's Castle*, <https://bartokrecords.com/articles/bluebeards-castle>. Accessed on April 14, 2020.

¹ See Ion Acsan, *Orfeu și Euridice în literatura universală* [Orpheus and Eurydice in Universal Literature], Albatros, Bucharest, 1981, p. 10. Our English translation.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29. Our English translation.

³ Original text: „Sem ablak, se dísz. A csarnok üres, sötét, rideg, sziklabarlanghoz hasonlatos. Mikor a függöny szétválik, teljes sötétség van a színpadon, melyben a regós eltűnik.”

⁴ Original text: „ Az ajtó feltárul, vérvörös négyszöget nyitva a falba, mint egy seb. Az ajtó mögül mélyből jövő véres izzás hosszú sugarat vet be a csarnok padlójára.” Each chamber is assigned in the stage directions a specific, symbolic colour, on a chromatic scale that ranges from the two characters' shadows against the semi-obscure at the beginning of the opera, towards blood-red (first chamber), blinding white (fifth chamber), and blue (seventh chamber).

Of utmost interest is the description of the castle as seen by Judith, as she first sets foot at the entrance:

"BLUEBEARD: Now at last you see before you Bluebeard's castle.

JUDITH: Why no windows? No sweet daylight?

BLUEBEARD: Never.

JUDITH: Can the sun never glimmer here?,

BLUEBEARD: Nevermore.

JUDITH: Always icy, dark and gloomy?

BLUEBEARD: Always. Always."¹

The way Bluebeard repeats, like an echo, Judith's words, is tender and fatherly-protective², and could easily lead to the idea that Judith might be interpreted, along the entire unfolding of the story, as an *alter ego* of Bluebeard himself. In this light, the insinuating game between the two becomes, after entering the fifth door, a powerful confrontation with aggressive accents, between his mature conscious and his unpredictable subconscious, embodied by Judith's inquisitive naivety.

Two striking contrasts complete the image of the castle at the beginning of the opera, as they emerge from the dialogue: one, to reach out to the visual stimulus, and the other, to the auditive one. Let us detail them one by one. The visual contrast opposes the darkness, the damp walls, the general ambience of the castle resembling an underground cavern, to Judith's determination to let light in, to dry the walls with her own lips, to warm them with her own body: „Light must end the reign of darkness..."³.

The second contrast occurs between the sonorous world that Judith has recently left behind and the one that she encounters in the castle. Though highly efficient, auditive suggestions in the libretto are used with great subtlety: evoking the church bells mourning her departure from her beloved family, the sighs of her family as they let her go, the silence of her father's sword and shield, as he mournfully ceases fighting. Against this world of sounds there is another one,

¹ Original text: „KÉKSZAKÁLLÚ: Ez a Kékszakállú vára! JUDIT: Nincsen ablak? Nincsen erkély? KÉKSZAKÁLLÚ: Nincsen. JUDIT: Hiába is süt kint a nap? KÉKSZAKÁLLÚ: Hiába. JUDIT: Hideg marad? Sötét marad? KÉKSZAKÁLLÚ: Hideg, sötét.”.

² In Péter Bartók's translation of the libretto into English, Bluebeard repeatedly calls Judith with the word "child"; this word is not explicitly used in the original libretto in Hungarian. However, it implicitly results from the general tone of his words within the context.

³ In the original language, Judith's entire line: „Nedves falát felszárítom, / Ajakammal szárítom fel! / Hideg követ melegítem, / A testemmel melegítem. / (...) / Szél bejárjon, nap besüssön, / nap besüssön. / Tündököljön a te várad.” [I shall dry these weeping flagstones / With my own lips they shall be dried. / I shall warm this icy marble, / Warm it with my living body. / (...) / Wind shall blow through, light shall enter, / Light shall enter. / Bright as gold your house shall glitter. / Light must end the reign of darkness...].

namely that of the strange moans of the castle, whenever Judith draws closer to a new door:

"She hammers on the First Door. The sound is answered by a cavernous sighing, as when the night wind sighs down endless, gloomy labyrinths.

JUDITH: Ah! Woe! What was that? Who was sighing? Who was moaning?

Answer, Bluebeard! Mournful dwelling, piteous castle, House of anguish! (...)

Oh, I heard your castle sighing. (...) Yes, I heard a sigh of anguish. Come we'll open, both together."¹

In front of the third chamber (the treasury), "the door swings open with a sonorous, metallic sound", at times, we hear "the sound of keys clinking in the darkness", and later, in front of the sixth door, "as she turns the key in the lock a deep sobbing sigh is heard". Towards the end, as the last door is open, the previous two doors swing and close "with a gentle sighing sound."

The condition / the journey

In *Bluebeard's Castle*, the condition is not explicitly cast by gods, and does not fall like a lightning bolt upon Orpheus' head, as it happens in the myth. (He would eventually overstep the condition, betrayed by his own human nature and lose the psychological confrontation with Eurydice, who ultimately lacks confidence in him). The condition is repeatedly cast by Bluebeard himself, in a continuous and suffocating *crescendo*: at first, merely whispered ("Let the door be shut and bolted."), later, it becomes a supplication ("Child, beware, beware my castle. / Careful, it will shine no longer."²), to finally grow into a desperate and obsessive imploration ("Thou, who art my castle's daylight, / Kiss me, kiss me. Ask no questions."), and even into a commandment ("Judith, Judith, do not open!" [in front of the sixth door, namely the lake of tears]).

Judith exerts torture herself upon Bluebeard, as she tries to relieve his suffering; when asked by him why she does this, she answers: "because I love you"³, and this is her only argument that Bluebeard is unable to stand against and finds himself constrained to give up in front of her.

¹ In the original language: „Dörömböl az első ajtón. A dörömbölésre mély, nehéz sóhajtság bűg fel. Hosszú nyomott folyosókon sír fel így az éjszakai szél. JUDIT: „Jaj! Jaj! Mi volt ez? Mi sóhajtott? Ki sóhajtott? Kékszakállú! A te várad! A te várad! A te várad! (...) Oh, a várad felsóhajtott! Gyere nyissuk, velem gyere.”.

² In the original language: „Vigyázz, vigyázz a váramra, / vigyázz, nem lesz fényesebb már.”.

³ In the original language: „Én akarom kinyitni, én! / Szépen, halkan fogom nyitni, / Halkan, puhán, halkan! / Kékszakállú, add a kulcsot, / Add a kulcsot, mert szeretlek!” [I'll unlock it, only I! / I shall do it very gently, Softly, softly, gently. / Let me have the keys, my Bluebeard. / Give me them because I love you.].

Unlike the Inferno, where the path leads from Hades' throne back to the world of living, in *Bluebeard's Castle* the journey leads from outside in, from the steps at the entrance inward (in a most unusual way, the steps to the entrance do not lead upwards, but downwards, as the descent into the Underworld, and so do the melodic contours in the opening of the opera). According to the stage directions, the central hall grants access to all seven doors, visible at all times on stage.

As Orpheus draws closer and closer to fulfilling the condition (only to fatally overstep it in the end), his tension and eagerness to turn his eye back grow steadily, and he feels betrayed by his own feelings, fearing the Gods had deceived him¹ by granting him back a mere shadow of Eurydice; hence the acute and obsessive question: *Are you still following me?* Bluebeard repeatedly asks Judith the same question, but at the beginning of the opera, as the journey foretells a bitter succession of defeats.

Ever since the beginning, Bluebeard understands the implacable ending, namely that Judith would not contend until the last door is open. After opening the fifth door, where Bluebeard has shown her the breathtaking greatness of his kingdom, which he lovingly offers to her, the two characters switch their roles. His need for her love grows deeper, as her affections towards him grow dimmer: she does not beg anymore, she does not supplicate, she commands!

It is at the same time telling and moving that, after the monumental expressiveness of the fifth door (musically portrayed in parallel major chords, in large ranges, adding the organ to the orchestral ensemble and the tonal centering around C, in contrast with Judith's *a cappella* lines, now in admiring awe), the next chamber is that of the lake of tears and the only one that is not stained with blood. It is the single door about which Bluebeard begs her explicitly: „do not open!“. In spite of his pleas, and of her noticing his deepest sorrow, she keeps insisting on inflicting pain upon him; this particular moment constitutes one of the deepest symbols to decrypt in the entire opera. If there is one particular step forward that Judith shouldn't have taken in order to rescue their love, this one would have been it, as she entered the chamber of utmost vulnerability of Bluebeard's tenebrous soul. It might also be the reason for Bluebeard's lack of begging her to stop before the last chamber, the ultimate confrontation revolving around answering questions, instead of begging for the last key: *was your previous wife fairer than I am? Are rumours true? Did you really kill your wives?*

¹ This nuance is present in the myth already by Plato (*The Banquet*). See Tatiana Oltean, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

The loss of the beloved / transfigured death / loneliness

The emblematic moment of turning the eye back, or, as Lessing put it, "the moment of anticipation", is essential in triggering the tragedy of losing Eurydice forever. Already in the ancient Greek poetic versions of the myth, this motive is developed with great mastery¹. If Virgil (*Georgics*, Book IV) blames only Orpheus' eagerness, Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, Book XI) broadens the range of reasons that made Orpheus turn his look back only one step away from the world of living to uncontrollable love, ardent longing, and even madness. Along the various avatars of the myth, in literature, the arts and music, this particular motif is treated the most inventively and intensely.

Bluebeard accompanies Judith in her journey inside his castle, but does not enter himself any of the chambers. He gets back in contact with his own hidden sufferings only through the eyes of his wife, who describes the ambience of each chamber. Not even in the seventh and last chamber, Bluebeard does not set foot. It is the chamber where his previous wives reside, the future dwelling of Judith in her transfigured death, along the other three wives.

The finale is carefully prepared in the libretto. It follows the entering through the sixth door (the lake of tears), and it depicts the final confrontation between Bluebeard and Judith. But if in Orpheus' myth this fatal single glance backward triggers the tragic ending, in *Bluebeard's Castle* the analogous gesture of setting foot into the last chamber is merely the last fatal step to confirm the first one, as well as all the steps in between. In other words, it is a gradual process that augments with every step Judith takes. It is a *fatum*, doomed to be repeated over and over, as every previous wife has taken the same steps before her. Even so, the fact that every wife represents a special moment of the day – dusk, noon and evening, with Judith completing the circle as the queen of Bluebeard's nights – conveys a vague suggestion of an ending to the cyclic unfolding.

Both endings are dominated by loneliness and darkness. ("Henceforth all shall be darkness... darkness... darkness..."²), by loss of any hope for love and by his survival – albeit a mutilated one.

One more telling parallel with Ovid's poetic version of the myth refers to Judith's attitude in front of her destiny: in his rendering of the myth, Eurydice does not place the burden of failure on Orpheus' shoulders: "Even as she sees herself dying again, she does not blame her husband; / (Why else should she have complained, other than he'd loved her?)"³. In her turn, Judith only finds the crown and the cloak too heavy, and asks him repeatedly to spare her, while the splendor

¹ The profound meaning of this particular motif of the myth is also proven by its frequent use as a theme in Ancient Greek pottery, ever since the 5th century BCE. See Tatiana Oltean, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

² In the original language: „És mindég is éjjel lesz már... Éjjel... éjjel...".

³ See Ion Acsan, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Our translation.

of the other three wives draws her away detours her from feeling any hatred towards him.

Destiny drives lovers apart forever in both stories, and both Eurydice and Judith continue their existence in an inaccessible, sublime embodiment: Eurydice, on the Elysian Fields, in a state of beatitude and bliss, and Judith, wearing the most splendid garments, jewelry and crown, inside the last chamber, along with Bluebeard's other three wives.

Although both the libretto and score are intrinsically linked to the esthetic of symbolism and expressionism, there are still two elements of contrast worthy to be mentioned: on the one hand, between the intense poetry of the text, with a certain folkloric and balladesque touch, in octosyllabic verses, and the darkening, tenebrous, strange sonorities of the score. On the other hand, the contrast between this world of sounds in the castle and the candour and warmth of Bluebeard's attitude and words. The chambers of his soul are blood-stained, his castle moans and sighs, but his words are gentle and affectionate.

There is a new layer of significance in this possible new avatar of the myth of Orpheus: the leading theme is indeed the insurmountable difficulties that man and woman face in their communication, in sharing their mutual feelings of love, but most of all, in their fundamentally different views concerning intimacy and dealing with trauma. Thus, the myth is transported into the present; if a spectacular evolution of the myth of Orpheus can be traced, from ancient Greek writings, to medieval balladesque versions, through the first remnants of musical and dramatic performances in the Renaissance¹, and following the path through every period and genre, *Bluebeard's Castle* appears like a standstill avatar, a metaphor of light and darkness, of life and death, of love and loneliness. The continuous series of avatars of this myth up to our day enhances the reflection that "the melancholic and hopeless lament of Orpheus has come to talk, in a painful and eloquent way, about this century. Thus, Orpheus becomes a symbol of the postmodern man..."²

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¹ Angelo Poliziano, *La Fabula di Orfeo*, 1480, theatrical performance with music and dance, (the text of the play published in 1484). See Tatiana Oltean, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

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