

The Pirate and Rogue in Donald Barthelme's Anti-Fairy Tales

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In Barthelme's postmodern fairy tale, *Snow White* (1965), the novel's namesake laments, there is something wrong "with the very world itself, for not being able to supply a prince. For not being able to at least be civilized enough to supply the correct ending to the story" (*Snow White* 132). Snow White knows her role in the story requires another role, that of a prince. Though no genuine princes exist in *Snow White*, there is a prince figure, Paul. Not championed as a hero or prince by himself or any of the novel's characters, including Snow White, Paul does, however, recognize he is the novel's prince figure and the obligations this role entails. And he is not the only one. Snow White acknowledges Paul's role and his failure to fulfill that role in a modern setting unfavorable to such heroic characters. None of the novel's characters, for that matter—Paul, Snow White, or her seven live-in companions—fulfill the archetypal roles of the original fairy tale; such values do not apply in Barthelme's contemporary landscape. But Barthelme's critique of fairy tales and the archetypes they glorify are not restricted to *Snow White*, though the novel is his most well known example. Similarly, in *Forty Stories* (1987), Barthelme uses the rogue figure, often a pirate, antithetical to the idealized prince. In doing so, he illustrates the modern person's inability to fill the roles society expects of them. Barthelme's pirate stories—"Sindbad," "Bluebeard" and "Captain Blood"—are not fairy tales, but anti-fairy tales; the pirates themselves are not heroes, but anti-heroes. Playing off fairy tale elements we usually associate with social ideals and traditional virtues, Barthelme foils our usual expectations and represents common humanity, beings incapable of filling the heroic role

exalted in years past yet striving to persevere through an indeterminate, chance-filled, postmodern world.

Barthelme wastes no time in showing his characters plagued with more complex, modern problems than their literary predecessors. Thus, the first two sentences of "Captain Blood" show how the title character differs from his archetype: "When Captain Blood goes to sea, he locks the doors and windows of his house on Cow Island personally. One never knows what sort of person might chance by, while one is away" ("Captain Blood" 187). The irony, of course, is that Captain Blood *is* the sort of person who might chance by. Pirates are known for raping, looting and pillaging, and not for taking home security measures to protect such bounty. Barthelme's Captain Blood is not the same of legend; he fears his own archetype, and in doing so avoids it. But Barthelme's version of the infamous seafarer is not without the violent tendencies that often accompany his archetype. Followed across sea by the Dutch Admiral Van Tromp, "he considers throwing the women overboard," thus forcing his pursuer to "stop and pick them up" (187). He plans to fit the women with life jackets hidden beneath their dresses, and is able to justify the decision because they "will hardly be in much danger at all" (187). The idea is dismissed when Blood imagines the ferocious jaws of sea turtles hiding beneath the waves: "What could he have been thinking of?" (187).

Soon after, in a sentence isolated between paragraphs: "Captain Blood presents a facade of steely imperturbability" (187). This facade, much like the life jackets beneath the women's dresses, shows how much Blood departs from his archetype. He merely dons a mask. He wishes to throw the women overboard only as a matter of self-preservation, but dismisses the idea out of concern for the women. Here Blood is more a prince-figure than Paul and bears

little resemblance to his legendary counterpart. The narrator implores the reader to look past the pirate's archetype: "His hideous reputation should not, strictly speaking, be painted in the horrible colors customarily employed" (188). Blood spares the lives of many with his "cheerful intervention," but concedes "there are times when severe measures are unavoidable" (188). He is simultaneously a prince and a pirate, an individual born of two archetypes: a man of virtue and of vice.

Another of Barthelme's pirates, Bluebeard is a kind of trickster figure—at times violent like the legendary figure, and at other times mischievous, playful. In the first words he speaks—the first words of the "Bluebeard"—he threatens his seventh wife: "Never open that door" ("Bluebeard" 82). His wife, the narrator of the story, quickly nods obedience, for she "knew his history" and "had a very good idea of what lay on the other side of the door and no interest at all in opening it" (82). Cristina Bacchilega, examining a story about the infamous Bluebeard by Angela Carter, another postmodern fabulist, points out that "Nowadays Bluebeard's name evokes the image of a man with a dark secret, a number of murdered wives, and a bloodstained key. Everybody knows that" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 104). Bluebeard's infamous reputation, like Captain Blood's, is the starting point from which Barthelme sculpts a new character. Both Bluebeard and his wife share some commonalities with their legendary versions. Most notably, the wife of Barthelme's story shares with the wife of the original tale a curiosity of the tower. Unlike the other wife, however, the wife of Barthelme's story does not take her husband's violence as a possibility, but a certainty. Coming fresh into marriage with the pirate, she knows the myth and her husband's history, as does the reader. But, like Captain Blood, Bluebeard bears only a small resemblance to the notorious character. He does not take his bride by

violence or force, as the original Bluebeard might, but instead wins her father over by sending him Poussin water colors and various other exotic gifts. Bluebeard's not-yet-seventh wife eventually warms up to the idea of marriage after hearing Bluebeard make such sophisticated remarks as, "The history of architecture is the history of the struggle for light" (82).

No matter how cultured this new Bluebeard is, the same threat of violence inherent in the original stories lurks throughout the new one, though more in his wife's mind than anywhere else. As in the original, Bluebeard forbids his wife to open the door but piques her curiosity by constantly asking her if she has yet it with the key he provided. His incessant questioning in turn forces his new wife to wonder if what is behind the door confirms what she already knows from the original story. Soon, however, she begins to doubt herself and the original tale:

Did he *want* me to open the door? To discover, in the room behind the door, hanging on hooks, the beautifully dressed carcasses of my six predecessors? But what if, contrary to informed opinion, the beautifully dressed carcasses of my six predecessors were not behind the door? What was? (84)

She is not intimidated by the possibility of the six previous wives' murders; it is until this point a certainty to her. The murder of the other wives does not shock or surprise the wife, as it does in the other tales. She does not happen into the room unawares, nor does she fear Bluebeard for the murders she knows he committed. Instead, Bluebeard's wife is intrigued only that perchance this is not the case, that Bluebeard might transcend his notoriety.

Barthelme carefully balances the old with the new, relying on the reader's preexisting awareness of the myth to write his revision. Barthelme depends on this myth, but does not

conform to it. Larry McCaffery notes that because "the changes in modern society make the holding of any mythic center impossible, we find that the mythic parallels here follow the story only up to certain points and then find appropriate alterations" (157). Barthelme realizes the values of myths and fairy tales do not exist in modern life. Instead of disposing of them entirely, he uses the original tales as springboards for a discussion of new values, for there is no better way to comment on the new than to show the failure of the old.

Thus, the use of fairy tales and their figures is necessary to comment on the new system that fails to support them, whether it be the Snow White story or pirates from pop culture and legend. These legendary characters and motifs conjure up specific ideas in the minds of readers: Snow White as virtuous and chaste, her prince as heroic, pirates as vile and dangerous. By using characters familiar to the reader from tales told in a variety of mediums for hundreds of years, Barthelme can better show how the values of the stories and the values espoused by the characters within them do not apply in today's society, though the tales themselves are still fresh in the reader's mind. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Barthelme explains his use of such familiar figures, saying that "What's attractive about this kind of thing is the given—you have to do very little establishing, can get right to the variations" (Interview 42). The opening sentences of both "Captain Blood" and "Bluebeard" are testaments to these variations; Barthelme does not have to establish stereotypes because they are by nature so commonplace. He has only to refute them. Barbara L. Roe suggests Barthelme's "novels and smaller studies of legendary figures engage readers' familiarity with timeworn tales yet comically upend their mythic doubles" (6). She notes that Barthelme employed a "'double-minded' perspective" to

"regenerate myth" (6). From stereotypes, Barthelme casts complete characters bearing only a semblance of their former literary selves.

Similarly, Angela Carter works with myth yet focuses predominantly on women and their mythic representations (which are really, according to her fabrications, misrepresentations). The predominant view of women in fairy tales is one of chastity and virtue, much like the original Snow White character, the same one Barthelme parodies in his novel. But this view, though a seemingly complimentary one, is still a stereotype, one failing to acknowledge the complexity of the individual woman. Carter deems these depictions of women "consolatory nonsense," which she believes "is a fair definition of myth, anyway" (*The Sadeian Woman* 5). If these tales provide any sort of value to men or women who might see themselves—or try to see themselves—reflected in such archetypal roles, Carter suggests they do "so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life" (5). In this way, Carter suggests, "Myth deals in false universals, to dull the pain of particular circumstances" (5). By contrast, the modern revisions of these fairy tales illuminate these false universals by placing the original tales' stereotypes in distinctly modern situations. They critique reality with figures heretofore found only outside of it in film and literature. Though Barthelme's versions of Captain Blood and Bluebeard are no more real than the "false universals" from which they depart, they struggle with very real, contemporary issues.

Barthelme's revisions, then, reflect contemporary reality. In doing so, they showcase the absurdity of the original tales. Jack Zipes contends the main "premise of a revision is that there is something wrong with an original work and that it needs to be changed for the better" (9). Barthelme's versions, as well as the other postmodernist revisions, are not better necessarily for

their literary merit, but for the degree they reflect the new reality and its striking departure from the old fantasy. Barthelme's tales usurp power from the legends and fairy tales, and in doing so leave the original stories bereft of meaning and sway. Richard Oilman notes of Barthelme's *Snow White* that "From the beginning we are aware that the fairy tale is undergoing a modernization, becoming the up-to-date expression of a change in human typology and self-estimation" (31). This modernization is key to the anti-fairy tale, for, as Wolfgang Mieder suggests, most contemporary people find the traditional fairy tale "simply too far-fetched to accept, and it is the anti-fairy tale that appears to give a clearer symbolic view of what the human condition is really like" (91). Though they reexamine the lives of fantastical characters, most anti-fairy tales infuse the old tales with contemporary language, settings and especially social issues. Mieder believes modern people refuse to accept "the positive value system of the old fairy tale as even a possibility to be hoped for, since they are too occupied with real-life problems" (91). The success of anti-fairy tales, which are almost exclusively a postmodernist convention, instead depends upon the way they "hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale, playing with its framed images out of a desire to multiply its refractions and to expose its artifices," according to Bacchilega (*Postmodern Fairy Tales* 23).

The other pirate story in *Forty Stories*, "Sinbad," epitomizes this difference between the anti-fairy tale and the fairy tale because it "initially dramatizes the difference between real and mythic worlds" (Roe 23). Barthelme's story juxtaposes two worlds: a man teaching in the day for the first time with the "mythic world" of Sinbad and his adventures. As with "Bluebeard" and "Captain Blood," the first sentence of "Sinbad" suggests the title character's experiences, as with the traditional fairy tale, have stagnated: "TKe *Beach*: Sinbad, drowned animal,

clutches at the sand of still another island shore" (19). But unlike Barthelme's other pirate-figures, Captain Blood and Bluebeard, Sindbad does not drastically differ from the seafarer upon whom he is based. Instead refuting such archetypes and getting "right to the variations," Barthelme reiterates the Sindbad's expectations, his obligations:

He should, of course, rouse himself, get to his feet, gather tree fruits, locate a spring, build a signal fire, or find a stream that will carry him toward the interior of this strange new place, where he will encounter a terrifying ogre of some sort, outwit him, and then take possession of the rubies and diamonds, big as baseballs, which litter the ogre's domains, wonderfully. (18)

The means are quite different, the results the same: Barthelme reveals the tired, formulaic nature of the original tale by mimicking and exaggerating this quality in a single sentence. Within this sentence Barthelme employs a single word—"should"—to demonstrate his character's imprisonment to an exhausted role and narrative. Like Sindbad, *Snow White's* prince-figure, Paul, is equally aware of his archetypal role:

Probably I should go out and effect a liaison with some beauty who needs me, and save her, and ride away with her flung over the pommel of my palfrey, I believe I have that right. But on the other hand, this duck-with-blue-cheese sandwich that I am eating is mighty attractive and absorbing, too. (33-34)

Unlike Sindbad, however, Paul dismisses his archetype and role in favor of a trivial—albeit tasty—sandwich. The sandwich is not the only distraction from his archetype; Paul is compelled "toward that monastery located in a remote part of Western Nevada" (84). He realizes his role as the novel's prince-figure, and the duties and expectations accompanying it, but also his true

calling as a monk, not a prince. And, like most of Barthelme's characters, he creates art. Snow White finds social value in his art but thinks it is ultimately poorly executed. The dwarves (or dwarf-figures; Barthelme never refers to them as dwarves) justify Paul's lack of artistic success by saying that, for him, "Carrying the mace is a bit much, perhaps" (55).

What all of these characters share in common—Captain Blood, Bluebeard, Sindbad and Paul—is an acute awareness of their respective archetypes, of the maces they bear, though they carry these maces differently. They are plagued by these roles, their every thought and decision either a reaction to or against an outdated society's expectations of them. Only Sindbad embraces his role, unlike Paul, Captain Blood, and Bluebeard. Barthelme casts Sindbad on very modern waters—playing tennis with ogres, for example—but stays true to the original character's nature, especially when compared with the role-defying Captain Blood and Bluebeard. By juxtaposing Sindbad's adventures with mundane classroom sections, Barthelme shows the teacher, departing on a new quest of his own, desirous of the adventure typified in Sindbad's exploits. He constructs two fantasy worlds: the Sindbad tale of lore, and the Sindbad tale the teacher imagines.

"Captain Blood" and "Bluebeard" are distinct anti-fairy tales. Though they play off of and depend upon such fairy-tale worlds, they also "undermine the donnees of the fairy story, to prevent it from retracing its classic parabola" (Oilman 31). In "Sindbad," however, Sindbad and the teacher construct a fantasy life, a romanticized tale. A postmodern Walter Mitty, the teacher longs for the beaches and ogres of Sindbad's adventures. In a section entitled "Water cannon," the teacher hints at an underlying frustration, a desire to escape his quiet classroom: "I wouldn't mind having a water cannon of my own. There are certain people I wouldn't mind

blasting" (23). The only realistic voice in the story belongs to the teacher's students, who constantly ask their new teacher to leave the classroom. The students, while intrigued by "the hopefulness of myths and fairy tales, are too modern to believe what they admire" (Samuels 40). Though the teacher's world at first seems distinct from Sindbad's, Roe notes that upon the story's completion, "a circling daze once again fuses the ordinary and mythic worlds" (23). In the passage preceding the teacher's final section, Sindbad "congratulates himself that on his eighth voyage the world can still reward him with new enchantments" (23). Next, the teacher implores his students to mimic Sindbad, foisting the two worlds upon the students. Lost in the original fairy tale, he dares not yield, as the pirates do: "Be like Sindbad! Venture forth! Embosom the waves, let your shoes be sucked from your feet and your very trousers enticed by the frothing deep. The ambiguous sea awaits, I told them, marry it!" (24).

The students' response is less idealistic and more cynical: "There's nothing out there, they said" (24). Through the students' more reasonable, if a bit jaded, worldview, Barthelme punctuates "Sindbad" as an anti-fairy tale, just as he did with "Captain Blood" and "Bluebeard." In these latter stories, Barthelme wastes no time dismantling the archetypal characters in favor of more complex, modern individuals. In "Sindbad," however, he resurrects a legend told many times over. His Sindbad, unlike the character upon which he is based, knows his role and fills it *because* he is so self-aware. Even in the teacher's world, Sindbad is glorified; any "real life" commentary on the Sindbad legend is absent. Like readers of fairy tales past, the teacher is so smitten with the tale he lives through it vicariously. His students provide a realistic, contemporary response to the tale. Without the student's skepticism, Barthelme's "Sindbad" would end much like the original tales, championing Sindbad as a hero while

failing to acknowledge a reality that would not support him. The students do not succumb to the original tale's magic, for they realize that, while such tales prove exciting, they do so only by escaping reality, not confronting it.

Thus, "Sinbad" ends, like "Captain Blood" and "Bluebeard," as the quintessential anti-fairy tale. All three stories demonstrate one of the most striking and necessary features of the anti-fairy tale, the layering of new texts upon older texts, the collage method for which Barthelme is so well known, the process of art-making often referred to as the "palimpsest." In this way, Mieder suggests, "modern reinterpretations of fairy tales gain in pungency when contrasted with the traditional tale, that is when reality is juxtaposed with the world of wishful thinking" (92). Barthelme romanticizes Sinbad and rarely departs from the character's archetype. Similarly, the teacher's "world of wishful thinking" fails to provide worth and a reference point. But, by contrasting these two worlds—fantasy and reality, the fairy tale and the anti-fairy tale—Barthelme forces his readers to distinguish between the two, to understand how fairy tales ignore the modern problems anti-fairy tales illuminate.

Barthelme's Sinbad does not grapple with any of these modern problems, but the students do. The characters of Captain Blood and Bluebeard, on the other hand, address these problems directly. Roe states that even though these pirates "are usually throwbacks to classical legends, their 'scrabble for existence'—and that of the rest of us—is in the 'here and now'" (18). The issue at stake in "Bluebeard" is not how to deal with a homicidal pirate for a husband, but how to trust that person. Modern relationships attest to the difficulty in trusting anyone, least of all a wife-murdering pirate. As Barthelme gradually removes the expectation of violence surrounding his character, he reveals Bluebeard as concerned ultimately with his wife's fidelity,

suspecting his wife of "a clear breach of trust" (85). Bluebeard's suspicion is justified, for his seventh wife relates simultaneous affairs with a Mexican revolutionary, the castle's chaplain, and a man named Constantin, who gives her a ring as an "unholy yet cherished symbol" (86). After a spit over her lending a machine gun to the Mexican revolutionary, Bluebeard's wife acknowledges her husband's diminishing trust: "I could see that his trust in me, not absolute in the best of seasons, was fraying" (86). In the sentence immediately thereafter, she ironically admits that her relationship with the castle's chaplain during this time is "at its fiery height" (86).

The original Bluebeard, no doubt, would violently punish such infidelity, even if mere unproven suspicion. While in the original tale the wife enters the bloody chamber out of curiosity (and is later nearly killed for it), Barthelme's Bluebeard begs his wife through the infamous door:

"You may not find, behind the door, what you expect. Furthermore, if you are to continue as my wife, you must occasionally be strong enough to go against my wishes, for my own good. Even the bluest beard amongst us, even the blackest nose, needs on occasion the correction of connubial give-and-take."
(87)

The legendary Bluebeard would not need this "give-and-take," nor would he plead with his wife in exchange for it. Instead of encouraging his wife's entry into the chamber, he forbids it. When curiosity finally bests his seventh wife, she finds the six wives hanging in the chamber before her. The wife of Barthelme's story is certain of her husband's reputation for violence, even, specifically, the murder of his previous wives. Yet Barthelme's Bluebeard does not hint at

any violent retribution or punishment, as the infamous pirate by the same name does. Instead, Bluebeard's wife gathers her husband's infamy through legend, just as the reader does through fairy tale.

Barthelme's comical Bluebeard, plagued with realistic issues of trust and insecurity, is just as curious as the seventh wife in the earlier tales; the roles are somewhat reversed. This is not to say Barthelme's version of the wife lacks curiosity; she is as perplexed by the chamber's contents as her husband is of her refusal to enter it. But her husband is more curious of her apparent lack of curiosity, roaming the grounds with a magnet on a string in an effort to find the key he knows his wife lost. Bluebeard, thrown by his wife's disinterest in the room's contents, refers to her as "a peculiar woman" (86). Barthelme's "Bluebeard," unlike the original, is not a suspenseful tale building up to violence but a curious gag leading to a punch line. It is essentially a knock-knock joke with the reader—and the wife—wondering who or what lurks behind the door. At story's end, the wife opens the door and receives the punch line: "In the room, hanging on hooks, gleaming in decay and wearing Coco Chanel gowns, seven zebras. My husband appeared at my side. 'Jolly, don't you think?'" (87).

Hanging zebras, especially ones cloaked in gowns, is largely more comical than doing the same to ex-wives. Thus, Barthelme "diminishes Bluebeard to a merry prankster" (Roe 20). Roe notes that, in addition to the differences in characters, "Barthelme's story does not end with the villain's death and the damsel's happy-ever-after remarriage" (20). Rather, the story does not end happily at all but with the wife "fainting with rage and disappointment" (87). She and her husband face issues of trust and fidelity, and because of this, Roe suggests, "Perhaps Bluebeard and his wife are just an ordinary couple" (20). The way they attempt to deal with

these issues is anything but ordinary; yet in their inability to deal successfully with modern problems, the couple implies "marital bliss is itself a myth" (20).

Certainly marital bliss eludes Captain Blood, who is more than once described as "a solitary figure pacing the foredeck" (188, 192). Blood's ship lacks the debauchery typical of such vessels. His crew is described as a "grinning, leering, disorderly, rapacious crew who are nevertheless under the strictest buccaneer discipline" (189). Here again, Barthelme reiterates the pirate archetype and subsequently contradicts it. Even after capturing another ship, the crew celebrates not in the drunken manner expected of pirates, but instead feasts on a meal prepared by Blood himself: "talkmnes *a la catalana* (noodles, spare ribs, almonds, pine nuts) for all hands" (188). Other times he dances with his men "the grave and haunting Catalonian *sardana*," which "is danced without smiling" (192). These are hardly the celebrations of a "disorderly, rapacious crew," but of one lonely man.

This solemn tone persists throughout the story, showing Blood's concern for his ship and crew. He locks his doors before setting sail; he paces the foredeck when at sea. At night "he reads, usually. Or he smokes, thinking calmly of last things" (188). He looks over charts—themselves indicative of a more modern business milieu—and reassures his crew "things will get better," despite not seeing "one bit of booty in the last eight months" (187-8). He is without a woman, too. He lacks the issues of trust that plague Bluebeard and his wife, for he has no wife to place trust in, let alone seven. Twice Blood loses himself in thoughts of women: once of the women thrown overboard, imagining "in the moonlight, a cerise gown, a silver gown . . ."; and again when raiding a ship, fantasizing of "one really spectacular beautiful women who stands a bit apart from her sisters, clutching a machete with which she intends, against all reason, to—"

(187, 189). Though he ultimately resigns himself to his situation, if not his role, he laments his current state. If "marital bliss is itself a myth," as Roe suggests, loneliness is Captain Blood's reality.

Snow Whites Paul fares no better in his search for romance. He is enamored with Snow White, yet at the same time realizes he is obligated to love her as the novel's prince-figure. He *should* love her, just as Sindbad *should* battle ogres. These traits are emblematic of the prince and pirate archetypes, respectively, and, try as he might, Paul cannot escape his role. While soaking in his bathtub, Paul muses about his place in the world: "Well, what shall I do next? What is the next thing demanded of me by history?" (61). Pursuing his interests in the arts or the monastery are not options, for history does not ask, it demands. Lois Gordon suggests many of Barthelme's characters—Paul included—strive to fill their roles. In this attempt to reconcile the archetype within themselves, they fail to acknowledge their own desires. Gordon suggests that "If man's dilemma is that there is no inherent value in the universe, and he must hence embrace a 'role' and be true to it to be authentic . . . then one is virtually fated to becoming a nonbeing" (29). Such is Paul's dilemma, and his fate. The identity Paul seeks is nothing more than "a costume, an act, a role, a 'bit'" (29).

Two critical points in the novel reveal Paul in his act: his failure to climb Snow White's hair and his drinking of her poisoned beverage at novel's end. In the first event, Snow White drops her hair from a window, knowing entirely well what the act symbolizes: "This motif, the long hair streaming from the high window, is a very ancient one I believe, found in many cultures, in various forms" (86). It is an open invitation to would-be heroes, would-be princes. Two older men consider taking action, until one of the men dismisses the idea: "Well we're

too old for all that. You need a Paul or Paul-figure for that sort of activity" (95). Like Bluebeard's infamy, Paul's reputation as the prince-figure stretches far and wide. Bill, a version of one of the original tale's dwarves, recognizes that Snow White dropped her hair because "she seeks a new lover" (98). But rather than climbing the hair and performing his expected heroics, Paul is intimidated by the hair:

"It has made me terribly nervous, that hair. It was beautiful, I admit it. Long black hair of such texture, fineness, is not easily come by. Hair black as ebony! Yet it has made me terribly nervous. Why some innocent person might come along, and see it, and conceive it his duty to climb up, and discern the reason it is being hung out of that window." (19)

Paul knows the hair symbolizes what he should be but cannot. He worries someone else might fill the role he fails to, no matter his royal ancestry. It is even more fitting that when he is "No longer able to work at his role, Paul registers with the Unemployment Office" (Trachtenberg 178). His heroic shortcomings are literal. Archetypal heroes, princes and prince figures, cannot work in modern society.

In an attempt at redemption, Paul drinks the poisoned beverage meant for Snow White at the end of the novel. Even in this action, though, Barthelme mocks Paul's heroic attempt. Paul imbibes Snow White's intended drink, but only because he thought it was "Vaguely exciting, like a film by Leopoldo Torre Nilson" (180). He foresees it upsetting her stomach, not killing her. Still, he comes close to voicing his feelings—or rather the prince-figure's feelings—to Snow White, stating it was fortunate he "'was able to arrive in time to wrest it from your grasp, just as it was about to touch your lips. Those lips that I have deeply admired, first

through the window, and then from my underground installation. Those lips that—" (181). Death stops Paul, and Snow White describes his last moments: "And look at all that green foam coming out of his face! And look at those convulsions he is having! Why it resembles nothing else but a death agony, the whole scene! I wonder if there was something wrong with that drink after all?" (181). This last question is the closest Snow White comes to acknowledging Paul's heroic deed, whether he acts with heroic intent or not. She depicts Paul's last moments—his potential saving grace after his failure to ascend her hair—not with appreciation, but with disgust. As Gordon suggests, Paul becomes a nonbeing, in this case literally via death, the moment he accepts the prince-figure's role. Barthelme does not venerate the hero of his modernized *Snow White*. He vilifies Paul for acting from an archetype that does not apply in modern society. His failure, McCaffery suggests, derives from "the conditions of contemporary life that make it impossible for him to sustain the archetype which he should embody" (157).

Heroes fail in such a world where good and evil cannot be easily discerned, where political and social structures, despite their attempts to systematize life, fail to capture the ambiguous nature of our identity and the complexities of our lives. Barthelme's pirates do not fill their archetypal roles because they cannot, as is the case with Paul. They refuse to succumb to their society's expectations of them and are all the more human for it. Though Paul knows his heroic role in the novel, John Leland states "Paul has trouble realizing his princeliness despite his 'blue blood'" (810). Knowing his heroic ancestry does not tempt Paul to pryncedom; he simply does not desire to fulfill the role expected of him by Snow White and most of all himself. His blue blood, Michael Thomas Hudgens notes, is "Sufficiently blue for

Snow White, but what good is it if he cannot carry out the role?" (85). Barthelme's main purpose in writing *Snow White*, Oilman suggests, is "to establish that princes no longer exist, in a crucial double sense. As a figure in reality—the strong, decisive man, the prince of good fellows—he has been driven out of existence precisely by contemporary life" (31). Furthermore, Oilman contends that the hero no longer holds any importance in literary works, "because the reality he has been abstracted from no longer sustains the values necessary to his creation" (31).

The new reality is, as Mieder suggests, that "modern people, adhering to a pessimistic if not cynical world view at the expense of the optimistic nature of the fairy tales, rather identify with the societal problems of former times that appear to resemble their own" (91). Modern people appreciate fairy tales for their heroic tales of adventure and romance and also for their honest critique of such outdated values. The problem facing Bluebeard and his wife is one of trust, not six murdered wives or seven hanging zebras. Captain Blood dwells more on his loneliness than on raids and conquests. Even in "Sindbad," an idealistic, albeit modern version of the original character's adventures, the students scoff at the heroic ideals their teacher esteems. The students, as well as modern society, realize these romanticized stories "present the world in black and white," and for them "the actual fairy tale is simply too farfetched to accept, and it is the anti-fairy tale that appears to give a clearer symbolic view of what the human condition is really like" (Mieder 91). Tired of the escapist qualities of the older fictions, modern readers embrace the direct reversals of such tales as more indicative of their own reality, and not the imagined worlds of imagined characters.

The hero, more than any of the fairy tale's archetypal characters, represents best the unrealistic and fantastical qualities the fairy tale forces upon its characters and readers. The hero has littered pages of myths and fairy tales since man first put pen to paper, chisel to stone, and this archetypal character personifies the fantasy world of such texts. As such, heroic characters in all their guises—princes and prince figures, for example—are the least representative of modern society and the most apt for a postmodern revision more reflective of this new reality. Though heroes crowd these older tales, they are also confined to them. For this reason, Larry McCaffery notes that Barthelme's Snow White "is doomed to disappointment because heroes are now created *only* in books and movies—and even there they are found less and less because reality is losing its capacity to support fictions of this kind" (*The Aesthetics of Trash* 159). Modern readers realize this and shun heroic characters, just as the students in "Sinbad" refuse to be entranced by their teacher's romantic depiction of the story's title character. This modern cynicism toward the fairy tale, Trachtenberg suggests, "is grounded in a dissatisfaction with the manner in which it is conceived, that is to say what is wrong is not simply with the world but with the willingness of the world to submit to the formal structure of a story" (170). The hero is this formal structure the story's plot and characters depend upon.

Modern readers empathize with characters whose problems—and not their own heroic exploits—stand at the center of the stories, and "Barthelme's stories are filled with characters attempting to cope with that centerless world, where ever manner of frustration, anxiety, and confusion seems to stand in the way of a fulfilling and creative life" (Patteson 11). Barthelme's pirates sail through disorienting seas and oceans, and Trachtenberg notes that "For Barthelme

it is the loss of reference to the world that emerges as perhaps the most troubling aspect of contemporary culture" (5). Adrift on the water, the pirates lack a worldly reference, yet they still know what the world expects, just as Paul does. Though they are fully aware of their archetypes, the pirates do not suffer the same fate as Paul, who Hudgens claims "cannot fill the heroic role. His destiny is to stop fleeing his destiny" (81). Paul's destiny is the life of the monk, the life of an artist, the life of an individual. But he is too obsessed with the expectations texts have wrapped around his archetype to actually live this life, and he dies chasing them. Travel as they might, the pirates neither pursue any heroic destiny nor conform to the destiny and archetype of the rogue figure. Instead they are the typical anti-heroes, embraced by modern readers because they combat the same issues of their time. If anti-fairy tales better reflect the reality of a modern world, Barthelme's pirates as anti-heroes better reflect the people in it.

After Snow White drops her hair in search of a new lover, Clem states he is "worried by the fact that no one responded to Snow White's hair initiative," even the "most princely" of the group, Paul (146-7). Ultimately, however, Clem, like modern readers or the students in "Sindbad," concludes that "it may be that princely is not a good thing to be" (147). Barthelme's pirates know this, and eschew the heroic archetype just as they do that of the pirate. The worrisome Captain Blood detests the conquests expected of him and commits them with the least amount of violence possible. Upon overtaking a ship captained by the American revolutionary John Paul Jones, Blood asks if the captured man will surrender, to which Jones replies: "Sir, I have not yet begun to fight" (191). Blood takes the comment as "madness," as Jones's ship is surrounded and quickly sinking, and tires of Jones insistence on

fighting: "Jones, even in America, wherever that is, you must have encountered the word 'ninny'" (191). Jones, unlike Paul, does surrender both to Blood and to his own heroic ambition, the same ambition that leads Paul to his agonizing death. Ever the anti-hero, Blood scoffs at the foolhardy values shown in characters like Jones and Paul, for he realizes such heroics fail in modern society.

As a postmodern fabulist, Barthelme exploits the arbitrary nature of values, plays with meaning-making systems and deconstructs traditional values and norms. Often, as in the case with his reworking of fairy tales, Barthelme ruins sacred truths. Like other postmodern fairy tales, the goal of Barthelme's revisions intend "not to undermine the traditional narrative conventions for its own sake, but through their undermining give a critique of the traditional 'objective', unitary vision of reality" (Kusnir 34). In works to which Barthelme responds, archetypes—princely heroes and roguish pirates—embody antiquated values. In Barthelme's refigured tales, however, he uses these same archetypes to show how such values do not apply today. Traditionally, prince and pirate archetype represent extremes of virtue and vice: one symbolizing good and order, the other evil and chaos. Of course, such binary oppositions offer equally limited views, which Barthelme exploits by ascribing his characters with complex, postmodern traits, whirling them into a world of infinite choices and radical uncertainty. In doing so, he creates the anti-fairy tale, a form that not only supplants the previous versions of the tales but also supplements them with a contemporary context and a postmodern worldview. In such a world, pirates and rogues fair far better than heroes and princes, even if only in their honest approach to a world bereft of fairy tales. Barthelme's pirates do not concern themselves with the problems that accompany their archetypal roles but with the same

crises faced in the contemporary world. His pirates do not solve their problems as easily as a prince might. Rather, they face them anti-heroically, abandoning their ineffective archetypes in favor of a more honest, individual approach. World-weary, Captain Blood vents his frustrations with modern society as represented by the pirate's sea: "The world of piracy is wide, and at the same time, narrow. One can be gallant all day long, and still end up with a spider monkey for a wife" (192). In the end, Barthelme proposes a challenge, one echoed by the teacher in "Sindbad": "Be like Sindbad! Venture forth! Embosom the waves . . . The ambiguous sea awaits . . . marry it" (24).

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