The flipside to fairy tale romances, and the fantasy of living happily ever after with a stranger, are encounters with beasts who cannot be romantically redeemed and who offer death, rather than deliverance, to the women they become involved with. Murderous suitors have become popularised in various tales, presented as duplicitous figures who have killed former partners and have no qualms about doing so again. ‘Bluebeard’ (ATU 312) is a familiar text in this regard; its serial-killing husband is exposed by a wife who narrowly avoids becoming his next victim and manages to put an end to his crimes. This chapter examines contrasting versions of the tale and the way various female protagonists face the same perilous situation, evaluating the attributes that enable their survival. The attraction of such tales is the sense of dread evoked, the mystery that unfolds and the plot turns involved – all conspicuous elements of the thriller. We are invited to identify with characters who are often marked by a degree of naïveté, and experience the thrill of witnessing their ordeal, as well as applauding their eventual triumph. The fact that extreme danger is located at the hands of suitors and spouses is particularly notable, provoking imperilled females to utilise considerable resources when they realise the true nature of the men in their lives and work to expose and undermine them. Such tales draw upon an often obscured lineage of cautionary tales that explicitly confront the romantic inclinations of many fairy tales, a theme cinema has continued. From damsels in distress to the female detectives (both official and unofficial) who confront killers and put an end to their crimes, films have not only exposed deceitful and dangerous men, but increasingly championed the women that defy them. How has the relationship between the murderous Count Bluebeard and his wife been critically understood and creatively reimagined? To what extent
is female curiosity and inquisitiveness rewarded or punished in related tales in which women are forced to confront murderous men? Do such narratives form an antidote to romantic ideals? And what are we to make of the abiding interest popular culture has shown in this theme?

Fairy tales rarely explore examples of domestic disharmony. In our most popular tales marriage is presented as the resolution of a heroine’s problems, not the start, and the idea that husbands might pose a threat to their wives, potentially using lethal violence against them, creates a discomfiting image, at odds with the romantic ideals often invested in the fairy tale. Far from upholding a belief in true love and abiding happiness, the potential risk of making the wrong match, and finding oneself subject to a controlling or cruel man, is an unappealing prospect – the opposite to a wish-fulfilment fantasy – yet all the more important because of this. The idea of betrothal to a stranger, taking up residence in a new home, and becoming subjected to ill-treatment, is the frightening scenario that informs ‘Bluebeard’, yet the theme was by no means instigated by Charles Perrault, even if his version is the one we know best. Stories in which a serial-killing fiend is encountered by a hapless woman date back to antiquity, often including stirring examples of female retaliation.¹ Perrault’s ‘Le Barbe Bleue’ (1697) is one of the most controversial versions, due largely to questions of blame on the wife’s part in disobeying her husband’s command, and the fact that she fails to save herself, relying instead on male protectors.

A young woman marries a wealthy man of uncertain reputation, who tests her by taking his leave soon after their marriage, giving her a set of keys to all the rooms in his household, yet barring her from entering a ‘forbidden chamber’. Her curiosity overcomes her and she discovers several female corpses within, dropping the key in horror at the sight. The bloodstain refuses to come off, however, a feature generally read as signalling her loss of virtue, and her husband, realising her disobedience, demands her death as penalty. She stalls by asking to say her prayers first, and her sister Anne (who happens to be staying with the newly-weds) urgently signals to their brothers, who arrive just in time to cut Bluebeard down. In a curious after-note, we are informed that his riches were used to advance the family’s fortunes and that his widow managed to put the ordeal behind her and marry again (a finale we might read as a tacked-on happy ending designed to sustain the virtues of marriage, while also attributing somewhat sinister motives to the original wedding). Given the two moralités Perrault appends to the story – the first condemning female curiosity, and the second assuring readers that such men no longer exist – it is easy to misinterpret his intentions.