

### Staging Sisterhood in George Colman's *Bluebeard*

The fairy tale “Bluebeard” is most famous for its forbidden chamber filled with Bluebeard’s corpse-brides. Though the tale is originally French, and Bluebeard presumably European, George Colman’s 1798 children’s play, *Bluebeard; or Female Curiosity* first Orientalizes Bluebeard, a pervasive portrayal that many scholars have attempted to explain both politically and economically. While critics have long focused on Colman’s Orientalized male characters, I argue that Colman’s play relies on empathetic identification to train young viewers to embrace sororal bonds.

I contend that Colman’s play simultaneously participates in the solidification of the British middle class defined by traditional gender binaries and creates space for the importance of female bonds within this paradigm. Scholars have noted how eighteenth-century British actresses’ emotional performances contributed to a sense of national belonging through empathy and mutuality. *Bluebeard*’s child audience empathetically identifies with the protagonists who personify British middle-class values of virtue and moderation. Though *Bluebeard*’s conclusion upholds traditional gender roles, Colman focuses extensively on sororal bonds, an under-discussed topic that proves crucial to considering women’s participation in the formation of national identity. Colman’s play opens space for children and the nation to value sisterly bonds of friendship and feeling. I argue that he draws on the iconic sororal bond of Scheherazade and her sister Dinarzade from the widely-read *Arabian Nights*—sisters who also must escape a serial wife murder—and ultimately upholds virtuous sisterly support, implying the necessity for women’s communication and connection in a domestic space and providing young girls with more varied role models. By focusing on the role of the sisters, I expand past critical discussion to account for girls’ experiences and the function of sororal community in the British nation and cultural work as proto-activism enacted on stage.