



Gilles de Rais: A Biography of Bluebeard

Jean Benedetti

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This is George Bernard Shaw's description of Gilles de Rais in 'Saint Joan.' Thereafter he is indicated in the script as Bluebeard. Shaw was right about Gilles' fundamental unhappiness, but he never had a blue beard and was never known in his own time by that name.

Shaw was following a long tradition. Gilles had become Bluebeard by the time Perrault came to write his elegant Fairy Tales in the 17th century. There he could be found side by side with Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood.

In real life, Gilles had more in common with the Marquis de Sade. Born in 1404, Gilles de Rais became by inheritance on of the richest nobles in France. He accumulated glory: the foremost champion of Joan of Arc, he was made a Marshal of France at 25. Then, following her death, a shadow fell over his life: his name became linked with 140 to 200 highly organized, premeditated and monstrous sex crimes, his extravagance exceeded all bounds, and as his fortune declined he turned to black magic and alchemy. He was hanged and burned for his crimes in 1440.



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