The Evolution of “Beauty and the Beast”
by
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A Study
Presented to the Faculty
of
Wheaton College
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for
Graduation with Departmental Honors
in English

Norton, MA
May 9, 2012
Acknowledgements

A week into my Senior Year, I made the rather impetuous decision to embark on a year-long thesis project on the form of literature that has always enchanted me most: fairy tales. Despite my lack of academic background in this area, I received only support and encouragement from my faculty advisors and committee members, without whom this thesis would be nothing more than another wild fancy in my head.

I’d like to thank Professor Drout for being the first to believe in my vision, hazy as it was, and for supplying me with the necessary conceptual framework;

Tommasina Gabriele
for always telling me, *ce la fai*;

and most of all, Bev Clark
for taking me on with no questions asked
and being exactly the advisor that I needed.

And thank you to everyone else who expressed an interest in my topic, challenged me to reexamine my arguments, and listened to me talk endlessly about fairy tales.
“Charting the circumstances of [the] making and remaking [of fairy tales], analysing the politics and history embedded in the tales, does not mean trampling, I hope, on the sheer exuberance of their entertainment, or crushing the transcendent pleasures they so often give.”

- Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* xxiii
# Table of Contents

Introduction: A Timeless Tale .............................................................. 5

Chapter 1: From the Salon to the Nursery ........................................... 17

Chapter 2: Collectors of Culture ....................................................... 39

Chapter 3: New Media ................................................................. 60

Chapter 4: The Rise of a Heroine ..................................................... 82

Conclusion: Disenchanting the Fairy Tale ........................................... 109

Works Cited ..................................................................................... 118
Introduction: A Timeless Tale

A petite brunette in a yellow gown and a hulking monster in a suit dancing in an elegant ballroom--this is the image generally conjured by mention of the title “Beauty and the Beast.”¹ This fairy tale is one of many that Walt Disney Studios fished out of the pool of cultural heritage and served to thousands of spectators with their own special garnish and musical flare. Although it would be an exaggeration to call the story of “Beauty and the Beast” a “tale as old as time,” it is no stretch of the truth to say that it is a tale as old as written language, and perhaps older still, a tale with roots that extend to nearly every age and every culture of the world. Coincidence cannot account for the 300-year worldwide popularity of the fairy tale, which is often one of the first forms of literature that we are exposed to as children, but perhaps a close study of the evolution of one specific tale will explain the phenomenon of how the same story has fed and satisfied millions of readers since the dawn of literature.

Defining the Fairy Tale

Everyone knows what a fairy tale is, and yet arriving at a definition of the genre that includes everything that is considered a fairy tale from “Snow White” to “Rapunzel” to “Rumpelstiltskin” is not such an easy feat. Jack Zipes dares to say that “there is no such thing as the fairy tale; however, there are hundreds of thousands of fairy tales” (Oxford Companion xv). Although Zipes claims that there is no authoritative definition, many of the great minds in fairy tale scholarship have worked toward defining fairy tales with different approaches and, consequently, different results.

¹ I will use quotation marks when referring to the tale in general terms.
At the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars began to attempt to codify fairy tales according to scientific standards. In 1910 Antti Aarne was the first to propose a comprehensive classification system in *The Types of the Folktale*. This system, which was revised by Stith Thompson in 1928 and became known as the Aarne-Thompson (AT) Index, categorizes tales according to the structure of their thematic components. “Beauty and the Beast,” for instance, is classified as AT 425C: it falls under the broad categories of “Ordinary Folk-Tales” (distinct from “Animal Tales” and “Jokes and Anecdotes,” among others) and “Tales of Magic” (fairy tales), with the more specific heading of “Supernatural or Enchanted Husband,” and finally listed as a variant of Type 425, “The Search for the Lost Husband.”

The theory behind a structuralist approach to fairy tales was first iterated in Vladimir Propp’s influential 1928 study, *Morphology of the Folktale*.² Like Aarne, Propp searches for the smallest unit of the fairy tale, but he finds themes and motifs too vague. Instead, he proposes the ‘function’ as the basis and enumerates thirty-one functions, such as *absentation, interdiction, departure, struggle, victory, transfiguration,* and *wedding,* from which all fairy tales are constructed. He accounts for the similarity of tales by the limited number of functions, and their multiformity by the endless selection of different characters to fulfill the functions in different ways. The definition that Propp concludes with is that “a fairy tale is a story built upon the proper alternation of [certain] functions in various forms, with some of them absent from each story and with others repeated” (99). The premise behind works like Aarne and Thompson’s and Propp’s is that tales are fixed arrangements of certain tropes in a definite structure.

² Although the title is translated in English as ‘folktale,’ the Russian word is simply ‘tale’ (*skázka*), and Propp disambiguates the terms when he states that his “work is dedicated to the study of *fairy* tales” (19).
A contemporary scholar, Ruth Bottigheimer, also defines fairy tales in terms of their structure, but more specifically by their plot trajectory. She identifies two types of fairy tales: the Restoration Fairy Tale, in which a protagonist of royal origins is deprived of his or her rightful standing until he or she overcomes certain trials and regains a throne by marrying royalty, and the Rise Fairy Tale, in which a hero or heroine of low birth attains a higher status by enduring hardships and eventually marrying a princess or prince. Common to these two models, and thus to all fairy tales, is the upward trajectory, the “happily ever after” ending.

J. R. R. Tolkien believed that this happy ending was one of the defining features of fairy tales. According to Tolkien, fairy tales are valuable because they give the reader fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation, but of all these things the last is the most important. He coins the term eucatastrophe to describe “the consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous ‘turn’” (68). Although other works of literature can supply fantasy, recovery, and escape, the delightful relief of the eucatastrophe is unique to fairy tales. “The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function,” writes Tolkien (68).

Other modern scholars have sketched a definition based on characteristics of the fairy tale. “More so than the presence of fairies, the moral function, the imagined antiquity or oral anonymity of the ultimate source, and the happy ending (though all these factors help towards a definition of the genre), metamorphosis defines the fairy tale,” writes Marina Warner (Beast xix-xx, emphasis added). From a different angle, Jack Zipes cites “the sense of wonder” as the distinguishing feature of fairy tales (Why Fairy Tales Stick 51). Stephen Swann Jones provides the most conclusive definition of the
fairy tale based on essential features, enumerating “the use of fantasy, the confronting of a problem, the successful resolution of that problem, the use of a sympathetic protagonist, and the presence of a thematic core” as the key characteristics of a fairy tale (xiv).

Any definition I suggest will be subject to criticism, but in an attempt to synthesize the various approaches cited above, I propose the following as a definition of the genre: A fairy tale is a short, imaginative story in which a sympathetic protagonist overcomes obstacles and achieves (material) happiness by means of a magical transformation. This definition is not without its problems, but it serves the purpose of collecting certain entities into a group and distinguishing them from other similar entities, such as folktales, legends, and myths.

A Brief History of the Fairy Tale

Rather than seeking to unravel the long and tangled history of the fairy tale, I will pull out a single strand and survey the origins and development of one tale, the canonized classic “Beauty and the Beast.” According to Jerry Griswold, “what has been the history of fairy tales in general has also been the history of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in particular” (63). However, this tale is unique insofar as it has maintained its original title and plotline intact across the span of centuries, mainly because it is primarily a literary tale and thus free of the plethora of variations caused by oral tradition.

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3 By ‘sympathetic’ I mean human, mortal, and not endowed with any special powers, distinguishing the fairy tale hero and heroine from their counterparts in legend and myth.
4 The most significant problem is the exclusion of certain tales, such as “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” and possibly “Little Red Riding Hood,” which are generally (and perhaps mistakenly) considered fairy tales, and this is but one of many issues that necessarily ensue from the institution of a definition.
5 Merriam-Webster defines a folktale as “a characteristically anonymous, timeless, and placeless tale circulated orally among a people.” Fairy tales are often based on folktales and can be considered a subgenre.
“Beauty and the Beast,” like many fairy tales, draws its origin from the Greek myths, in this case the myth “Cupid and Psyche” in Lucius Apuleius’s The Golden Ass, which was written in the second century. In this myth, Psyche is sent to a mountain where she will supposedly be wed to a winged snake because she has offended the goddess Venus with her beauty. Instead, she is carried by winds to a beautiful palace, where she is visited nightly by her mysterious bridegroom, and she soon finds herself pregnant with his child. Persuaded by her jealous sisters and her own curiosity, Psyche brings a lamp to bed with her one night and shines it on her lover, revealing the god Cupid. Oil from the lamp drips on Cupid’s shoulders, waking him, and he flies away. Disconsolate, Psyche pursues him and falls under the power of his mother, Venus, who tells her that she must complete three trials to win her husband back. Her curiosity betrays her during the third task: she opens the jar of beauty that she has collected from the underworld and faints. Cupid comes to save her, and the two are reconciled. Psyche is immortalized and joined in lawful marriage to Cupid.

Although fairy tales are often set in a period evocative of the Middle Ages, they did not come into being until the early Renaissance, when Greek myths like “Cupid and Psyche” were recovered by Giovanni Boccaccio as part of a trend of renewed interest in classical literature. Production of literary fairy tales was sparked in sixteenth-century Venice, where men like Boccaccio and Giovan Francesco Straparola were writing collections of tales in which a protagonist rose to wealth by means of magic and marriage. Straparola’s Le piacevoli notti (often translated as The Pleasant Nights) contains one story, “Il Re Porco” (“The Pig King”), which is an Animal Bridegroom tale.

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6 I use the term “Animal Bridegroom tale” to designate any short story in which a woman disenchants her husband or lover from his beastly form.
related to “Beauty and the Beast.” The motifs from tales like Straparola’s entered into European culture and influenced later fairy tale authors and collectors.

Some of these motifs circulated through the courts of seventeenth-century France, where aristocratic ladies amused one another by inventing fantastic stories. A select few of these tales were written down and published, among them the first “Beauty and the Beast.” Fairy tales then passed across the Channel, where they flourished as early children’s literature in English nurseries. The peak of fairy tale popularity in Europe came in the 1800s, when the Brothers Grimm and Andrew Lang, among others, collected folk stories and set them in anthologies marketed to families and especially children. Their collecting was coupled with research and theorizing on the origins of the stories, which helped to launch folklore as a scholarly field of study.

In 1946 a French film director, Jean Cocteau, produced the first cinematic version of “Beauty and the Beast,” and towards the end of the century Walt Disney Studio made the story into an animated movie. The twentieth century witnessed an efflorescence of new feminist and postmodern interpretations of the story which often sought to subvert the messages of their literary predecessors.

The story of “Beauty and the Beast,” like many classic fairy tales, crosses national and temporal boundaries and acquires a specific significance to each culture; in order to endure, it must appeal not only to each (re)teller of the tale, but also to general society. This relevance is not fixed, and the meaning of the story shifts with every retelling, even when the narrative itself is not much altered. My purpose in this thesis is to analyze the key productions of the ever-evolving “Beauty and the Beast” tale in their respective
socio-historical contexts to determine how the story appeals to each age in which it is reproduced.

**Overview of Criticism and Approaches**

In order to establish an approach to this project, I will examine some of the ways in which critics have approached the fairy tale, specifically “Beauty and the Beast,” in the past. I will adopt the criticism that best explains the paradox at the heart of the fairy tale: how a story can display, simultaneously, such versatility and stability that it maintains a familiar form and yet reveals countless new dimensions with every retelling and every rereading.

We have already seen the structuralist perspective, exemplified by Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Vladimir Propp. The advantage of this approach is how it breaks stories down to their component parts and rebuilds them, which creates a comprehensive and empirical system for categorizing and comparing tales. However, this method treats only the archetype of each tale and does not take into account the different variations. Marina Warner uses a cooking analogy to illustrate the shortcomings of the structuralist approach:

> [T]his taxonomy provides a list of ingredients and recipes with no evocation of their taste or the pleasure of the final dish, nor sense of how or why it was eaten. However universally distributed, stories spring up in different places dressed in different moods, with different twists, and regional details and contexts which give the satisfaction of particular recognition to their audiences. (*Beast* xxii)

Although the Aarne-Thompson Index and Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* are useful for comparing tales and for recognizing the recurring patterns and tropes that characterize
the genre, their failure to take into consideration the individual variations of each tale makes them unsuited to this argument.

The structuralist macro-approach finds its counterpart in the focus of psychoanalytic studies on the effect of fairy tales on the individual. In 1976 Bruno Bettelheim formulated a Freudian approach to interpreting fairy tales in his groundbreaking book, *The Uses of Enchantment*. Bettelheim views fairy tales as designed to help children overcome their internal psychological struggles, usually with their own sexuality, by means of symbolism. In his analysis of specific tales, including “Beauty and the Beast,” he often interprets the core of the story as the resolution of an oedipal complex: “Sex must be experienced by the child as disgusting as long as his sexual longings are attached to his parent…but once detached from the parent and directed to a partner of more suitable age, in normal development, sexual longings no longer seem beastly--to the contrary, they are experienced as beautiful” (308). In this psychoanalytic interpretation of “Beauty and the Beast,” Bettelheim reads the story as the redirection of Beauty’s sexual attachment from her father to the Beast; the Beast’s metamorphosis is more symbolic than literal. Although Bettelheim provides good insight into the murky realms of sexuality and symbolism and his theoretical work influenced all subsequent rewriting of fairy tales, his perspective is limited insofar as he treats the characters of the stories as types, not individuals. In his reading of “Beauty and the Beast,” for instance, he regards Beauty as the only significant character and the others as mere obstacles to avoid or goals to attain, not recognizing that, as in many versions of the story, the Beast must also prevail over his own psychological difficulties.
Jack Zipes is a contemporary scholar of fairy tales and the leading proponent of a socio-historical and Marxist perspective on the history of the fairy tale. In his view, each fairy tale is born of a specific socio-historical period, and when a tale is retold it takes on the coloring of the age in which it is reproduced. As a Marxist, Zipes also believes that the struggle between classes is intrinsic to social history, and so class struggle is encoded or apparent in each story. It is this socio-historical approach to fairy tales that is most suitable for a study in how they change over time, and thus it is Zipes’s approach that will form the backbone of this thesis. However, since class struggle is but one of many complex factors in any given snapshot of a society, the Marxist aspect will be minimized.

Marina Warner is the main proponent of another approach to studying fairy tales, namely from a feminist angle. Her work *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* is another of the great landmarks in fairy-tale scholarship. As the title implies, Warner’s focus is on the storytellers as well as their stories, and she surveys not just the ‘original’ tale (when there is a definable original) but also the reproductions of it up to contemporary times. As a feminist, Warner emphasizes the gender politics behind the authorship of fairy tales and the depictions of male and female characters.

The approach that I will take synthesizes aspects of Zipes’s socio-historical perspective and Warner’s feminist studies to analyze the evolution of the tale of “Beauty and the Beast” with respect to its author, its cultural and literary context, and its permutations. The author is significant not only as a function of a certain social and historical space, but also as an individual who makes the conscious choice to produce or reproduce a fairy tale; for that reason, I will determine, to the degree possible, the author’s motivation for telling a fairy tale. I will also briefly examine the cultural and
literary context of the publication of the tale in order to see how the individual piece relates to larger movements of literature, criticism, and culture. A close textual analysis of each “Beauty and the Beast” narrative will provide clues to both the author’s project and the cultural context; additionally, a study of the alterations the story undergoes from one version to the next will reveal how it is adapting (or being adapted) to a new cultural climate in order to speak to a society’s interests. Each of the next four chapters will discuss specific stories (under the heading “The Tale”), the author’s project (“The Teller”), and the socio-historical context of the retelling (“The Times”).

To explore the mechanics behind the cultural reproduction of a tale like “Beauty and the Beast,” I will use a theory based on genetics and biological evolution. “There is a virtue to using a biological analogy to make sense of the great tradition of the literary fairy tale,” writes Jack Zipes; “in fact, the literary fairy tale has evolved from the stories of oral tradition, piece by piece in a process of incremental adaptation, generation by generation in different cultures” (Why Fairy Tales Stick 3). Stories, like living organisms, adapt in order to survive and be reproduced. Just as the underlying mechanics of biological evolution involve mutating and replicating genes, the evolution of the fairy tale is propelled by the mutation and replication of units of culture, which Richard Dawkins terms “memes.” The premise of this argument is that culture consists of these particulate units, which, analogously to genes in bodies, seek to replicate themselves in human brains: “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (Dawkins 192). Some examples of memes that Dawkins gives are “tunes,
ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (192), all of which are building blocks of culture. Literature, as one of the chief vehicles for the transmission of culture, is integrally involved in the replication of memes, hosting the units of culture in an enduring form that is likely to circulate and be reproduced.

Drawing on meme theory, we can understand how a story such as “Beauty and the Beast” endures the test of time, simultaneously maintaining its same form and adapting in order to be relevant to its replicators, the author and the society. In other words, meme theory explains how a single instance of a tale can give rise to a literary tradition.

**Selections**

The abundance of “Beauty and the Beast” retellings in the past three centuries necessitates a measure of selectiveness in the examples that I will undertake to study in this thesis. I have chosen to focus exclusively on prose forms in order to narrow the field of possibilities. The set of authors whom I have selected--Madame de Villeneuve, Madame de Beaumont, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Andrew Lang, Jean Cocteau, Disney Studios, Robin McKinley, Angela Carter, Tanith Lee, and Emma Donoghue--are garnered from the studies of Betsy Hearne and Jerry Griswold, with some additions of my own.

Because my goal is to study change over time, I will approach the stories in chronological order. Each of the successive four chapters covers a century: Chapter 1 investigates the origins of the literary tale in French salons and English nurseries of the eighteenth century; Chapter 2, the nineteenth century, discusses the birth of scholarly interest in the fairy tale and its canonization in anthologies; the subject of Chapter 3 is the
cinematic productions of the twentieth century; and Chapter 4 treats of contemporary literary versions. A section at the end of each chapter will highlight theoretical issues that surface in each century, such as the inscription of patriarchal values in literature, the formation of a genre, the transition of a tale into a different medium, and the relationship between a text and its literary tradition. Although these questions arise from the study of a single tale, they hint at matters of integral importance to the fairy-tale genre as a whole and, in some cases, to concerns that implicate all of literature.
Chapter 1
From the Salon to the Nursery: The Origins of “Beauty and the Beast”

Fairy tales were a fashionable form of entertainment in eighteenth-century Europe. They were told in royal courts, published in magazines and anthologies, and read to children as moral lessons. Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy, a French countess, coined the term *Contes de fées* (“fairy tales”) in her 1697 collection, and in that same year Charles Perrault published his *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, more commonly known as the Mother Goose tales. With their collections of imaginative stories, D’Aulnoy and Perrault set a trend that would lead to the formation of a new genre: the literary fairy tale.

Elizabeth Wanning Harries identifies the two most popular strands of fairy tales in the eighteenth century: the fantastic romance for adults and the didactic tale for children (80). These two branches represent an early divergence in the fledgling genre, a split that implicates style, social class, and audience. The story of “Beauty and the Beast” straddles that divide: it was first conceived by Madame Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve as a salon tale, but reshaped by Madame Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont sixteen years later into a didactic children’s story. Subsequent retellings of the tale adhere to Beaumont’s model, while Villeneuve’s original is relegated to the archives, significant only as Beaumont’s inspiration.

Part 1: Madame de Villeneuve

The Tale
Madame de Villeneuve’s “La Belle et la bête” was published in 1740 as part of her collection of stories (entitled *Les contes marins ou la jeune Américaine*) and later reissued in *Le Cabinet des fées*, an anthology of fairy tales that circulated in France and beyond. The original story is embedded in a frame narrative in which a young girl’s chambermaid entertains her with stories during a voyage to Saint Domingue. This framing structure, adopted from the Italian storytellers and their Greek predecessors, was a common feature of eighteenth-century fairy tales: “Many of the conteuses’ tales are set within a longer narrative…the conteuses rarely send a story naked into the world without the mediation of an exterior frame” (Harries 106). The frame narrative links the literary stories to their oral origins: “Fairy tale writers of the eighteenth century were very conscious of how talk and conversation formed the basis of their tales and continually embedded their tales within frame narratives that highlighted the exchange of literary fairy tales and dialogue” (Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick* 76). By maintaining the figure of the storyteller within the story, authors like Madame de Villeneuve (and Madame de Beaumont, who uses a similar technique) reproduce the effect of an oral tale in a written work.

A further complication of the story’s structure is the proliferation of embedded stories: “Many of the tales, already situated within an exterior frame, become the frames for other stories, often told by the characters in the central tale” (Harries 106). As Harries observes, this now-obsolete trope is part of a storytelling tradition.

“La Belle et la bête” is told in the manner of a salon tale, an oral and literary movement that began in the 1690’s in the court of Louis XIV. “The salon tales were

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7 Villeneuve and Beaumont both wrote their stories in French (though Beaumont also translated hers into English), but in the interest of distinguishing the two I will use the French title of Villeneuve’s and the English title of Beaumont’s.
marked by the struggles within the upper classes for recognition, sensible policies, and power,” writes Jack Zipes (Beauties 6), and they often expressed “utopian visions that stemmed from a desire for better social conditions” (Zipes, Beauties 4). The imaginative quality of fairy tales enabled writers to encode social critique in metaphor, and the genre was especially popular among women, who faced greater social inequality. Although the force of this literary movement had mostly spent itself by the time Villeneuve penned “La Belle et la bête” in 1740, her tale is strongly influenced by the style.

Villeneuve was inspired not only by the literary climate and the Animal Bridegroom tales being propagated by Straparola as well as Perrault (“Riquet with the Tuft”) and d’Aulnoy (“The Ram”), but also by the Greek myth of “Cupid and Psyche.” She acknowledges this source by comparing the Beast in his human form to the god of love: “A young man, as handsome as any portrait of Cupid ever made, spoke to her in a voice that touched her heart” (169). If Villeneuve was familiar enough with Greek mythology to make casual allusions, she probably knew the tale of “Cupid and Psyche,” and similarities between the plots suggest that she modeled her story on that myth.

Madame de Villeneuve’s story opens with the depiction of a prosperous merchant and his twelve well-educated children, six sons and six daughters. When the family’s house is burnt down and all the merchant’s goods are lost at sea, society shuns them: the merchant’s agents betray him, and his daughters’ suitors abandon them. The family moves into their small, secluded country house in the forest, where the children must take up the duties formerly assigned to their servants. In the midst of their misfortunes, the youngest daughter, known as “Beauty,” displays “a strength of mind much beyond her
sixteen years” (Villeneuve 154), resolute cheerfulness, and good-natured patience that inflame her sisters with envy and hatred.

Two years pass in this way, and the merchant embarks on a six-month journey to recover some of his lost wealth. The materialistic sisters beg him to bring them jewels and fine clothes, but Beauty, when pressed, asks only for a rose. The merchant’s mission fails, and when he becomes lost in a snowstorm on his return journey, he stumbles upon a mysterious castle. After warming himself by the fire and refreshing himself with magically provided food, he loads his bags with treasures because he believes the castle to be uninhabited. As he leaves, he plucks a rose for Beauty and incurs the wrath of the Beast. The Beast pardons the man his life upon hearing his story, but only on the condition that one of his daughters give herself up in his stead. The tormented merchant returns home, and when his children coax the story from him Beauty immediately offers her life in exchange for his.

Beauty’s arrival at the palace with her father is greeted with a display of fireworks so splendid that it prompts Beauty to say jestingly, “The preparations for my death are more splendid than the bridal pomp of the greatest king of the world” (165). She responds to the appearance of the Beast himself with courage and courtesy, despite the fact that his horrifying appearance is matched by his lack of wit, and she tells him that she willingly submits her life to his intentions. The grieving merchant departs, laden with gifts, and Beauty begins her life in the enchanted palace. She diverts herself with the palace luxuries, which include books, musical instruments, theatrical shows seen through a magic window, talking birds, and costumed monkeys. Her delight in the palace is disrupted only by the Beast’s nightly proposals.
As Beauty sleeps, she is visited in a dream by a handsome prince who speaks words of love and comfort, begging her to free him from his prison. Immediately after this vision she dreams of a fine lady who advises her not to be deceived by appearances. The regular nightly visitations by the Dream Prince, whom she calls “the Unknown,” combined with her days of luxury and magical entertainment, send Beauty into a state of confusion, and she struggles to distinguish reality from illusion.

When Beauty requests two months’ leave to visit her family, the Beast grants it, but he warns her that he will die if she does not return by the appointed time. At home, although Beauty is annoyed with the attention that she receives from her sisters’ suitors and although she misses her dreams of the Unknown, she nevertheless yields to the pleas of her father and brothers and defers her departure. A dream shows her the Beast mourning her absence, and the lady from her first vision tells her that if she stays away another day, he will die.

Beauty returns to the castle by means of a magic ring and resumes her usual pastimes, but takes no enjoyment from the entertainments. When the Beast fails to appear to make his evening proposal, she searches for him, rebuking herself for not having accepted him. She finds him by following a path that she recognizes from her dream, but he does not rouse from his comatose state until she sprinkles him with water. They return to the castle, and Beauty dreams again of the Unknown and the lady, both of whom advise her that marrying the Beast will bring her happiness. The next night, Beauty accepts the Beast’s proposal, and they exchange vows. Her two dream visitors assure her of her impending joy, and when she wakes she finds the Unknown lying next to her. Beauty realizes immediately that the prince is the same Beast that she wed, but
she cannot wake him. He wakes at last when the lady from Beauty’s dreams, who is a fairy, arrives with the prince’s mother, a great warrior queen. The queen, when she learns of Beauty’s humble origins, refuses to give her consent to the match with her son. The queen is deaf to all entreaties, even her son’s, and she yields only when the fairy reveals the secret of Beauty’s noble birth to a family of royal blood.

The prince then tells his story, how he refused the attentions of a wicked old fairy and how she punished his vanity by transforming him into the Beast, and how the good fairy contrived to break the spell by luring Beauty’s father to the castle and inducing Beauty herself to come. The King of the Fortunate Isle, Beauty’s true father, arrives, and the fairy tells the tale of Beauty’s parentage. Beauty’s mother was the fairy’s own sister and a fairy herself, but when she covertly married the king in the disguise of a shepherdess, she was stripped of her powers by the Fairy Court and imprisoned. The same wicked fairy who tried to seduce the young prince stole the infant Beauty away and tried to kill her, but the good fairy rescued her. To protect her from danger, the good fairy substituted Beauty for the merchant’s youngest daughter, who had just died, and allowed the merchant to raise her as one of his own children.

At the end of this tale, Beauty’s mother magically appears in the midst of the gathering to tell of the trials she has undergone, including turning herself into a snake, in order to be released from her imprisonment and reunited with her husband and daughter. Finally, the merchant arrives with his eleven children and his daughters’ suitors, and everyone celebrates Beauty’s marriage to the prince.

Villeneuve presents the themes of her story in the form of dialectics: appearance and reality, vanity and virtue, humanity and monstrosity, and duty and affection. This
confrontation and, in some cases, reconciliation of opposites is suggested by the title of the piece.

At the Beast’s palace, Beauty is overwhelmed by a world of sensuous pleasure, of music and performing animals and windows into theatres across the world, all of which serves to disconnect her from reality: “she discovered that she had not seen actual objects but their reflections through a crystal mirror” (Villeneuve 175). In her nightly visions she is able to communicate with the Unknown, but when she wakes she wonders whether he is real or simply “an idle illusion conceived from the vapors of the brain and destroyed by the light of day” (189). All the while, she is advised to “beware of allowing [her]self to be swayed by appearances” (170), and she must ultimately reject the illusive “Unknown” in favor of the ugly but familiar Beast. Paradoxically, it is her very rejection of illusion that causes her dream prince to become real.

The dialectic of virtue and vanity, which is related to appearance and reality, is illustrated by Beauty and her envious, materialistic sisters. Her industry and genuinely cheerful nature are contrasted to their shallow spitefulness. Beauty’s virtue is held up as a moral standard, which Beaumont will use to impress children with a model for good behavior and true ‘beauty.’ Unlike the other dualities of the story, this one is not resolved because, in the author’s view, virtue and vanity are irreconcilable.

A less conventional dialectic is the perceived conflict between duty and affection. Although Beauty is grateful to the Beast for his boundless generosity, her affection (perhaps synonymous with sexual attraction) is directed toward his dream persona, the Unknown. Beauty strikes a precarious and uncomfortable balance between her conflicting feelings: “Torn between affection and gratitude, she could not lean to the one
without doing injustice to the other” (Villeneuve 187). The plot moves her toward the gradual realization that she must sacrifice her self-indulgent feelings and submit to the dictates of duty in order to be happy. Her reward for this sacrifice is the reconciliation of duty and affection, met in the person of the transformed Beast, who is both her host and her beloved.

Villeneuve also calls into question the nature of humanity, a topic that will not be explored in revisions until Jean Cocteau’s 1946 film. The enchantment of the castle seems to warp human and animal nature and blur the distinctions between the two. One of the first things the merchant notices as he approaches the castle are strange life-size statues “the color of human flesh” (157). The fairy later reveals that these statues are the prince’s subjects, whom she froze⁸ to prevent them from revealing the secret of the Beast’s true form. Although Beauty is the only being that is unequivocally human in the castle, she is entertained by costumed monkeys and talking parrots that enact performances for her pleasure and serve as her courtiers. The monkeys and parrots partake of some aspect of humanity--the monkeys by dressing up and acting out shows and the birds with their mimicry of speech--but neither is truly human. Nor are the two protagonists depicted as being entirely at opposite ends of the spectrum: after living with him for a while, Beauty recognizes that the Beast’s “heart is humane,” and that “this monster is one only in form” (182). When Beauty asks to leave for two months, the Beast accuses her of being “inhumane” (181), which suggests that there is something less than (or other than) human even in her. The irony of this accusation being leveled by the Beast suggests an inversion of characteristics between the two main figures.

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⁸ A fairy-tale trope commonly found in the “Sleeping Beauty” tale.
The Teller

Little is known about the personal life of the author of this tale, Madame de Villeneuve, save that she was married to a lieutenant colonel for a few years, and after his death she remained a widow, supporting herself with her writings (see Zipes, Beauties 152). In Villeneuve’s tale (and, to a lesser extent, Beaumont’s) there is a subtext that hints at arranged marriage in Beauty’s relationship with the Beast. The scenario of the young woman parted from her father and sent to live with the strange and frightening gentleman is a paradigm suggestive of arranged marriage, and Beauty’s anxieties about the Beast’s evening proposals are evocative of the fears such young women must have faced. Although the arranged aspect of Beauty’s relationship is mitigated by her power to consent or refuse, she is constantly pressured towards acceptance. When she returns home, for instance, her father urges her strongly to accept the Beast’s proposals because, “in his opinion, all the order, opulence, and good taste that he had noticed throughout the Beast’s palace were not the mark of a fool. In sum, he found him highly worthy of his daughter’s consideration” (Villeneuve 185). The father’s reasons for encouraging the match between his daughter and the Beast are “order, opulence, and good taste,” qualities which pertain more to the Beast’s wealth than to his disposition. The merchant thinks the Beast would be a good husband for Beauty because he is rich enough to provide for her, a standard reason for a middle-class gentleman to give his daughter away to a stranger. The anxieties of arranged marriage expressed in this tale type are symptomatic of a societal, and specifically feminine, concern. Maria Tatar suggests that the beastly bridegroom is a symbolic representation of the young woman’s fears: “The woman who was to make the [arranged] match had every right to feel frightened by an alliance of such
intimacy to a stranger; hence it is no wonder that fairy tales turn the grooms of these unions into beasts” (*Heads* 141). The Animal Bridegroom tale encodes social fears through metaphor, and thus it appeals to a culture in which “marriage customs...reflect exogamy or inherent male dominance” (Leavy 112), where young ladies’ marriages are determined by their fathers.

**The Times**

Villeneuve’s “La Belle et la bête” was reasonably well-received as a work of literature in its own time, but it is almost completely obscure today. “Madame de Villeneuve’s text is practically unknown, and justly so,” writes Jacques Barchilon (82). He criticizes the work as “excessively long,” “cumbersome,” and “voluminous and rather indigestible” (82). Besides criticisms of its length, the novel has been criticized for its complex form, “an odd mixture of extravagant descriptions, fairy-tale conventions, innovative dream sequences, and rational arguments,” all of which serve to “dispel the sense of the marvelous” (Swain 197). The enchantment of the castle, in other words, is secondary to the fascination of its riches: many passages are devoted to describing the gold and precious gems that adorn everything, and invisible waiters, magic rings, and speedy horses seem like a mere extension of the luxury. Betsy Hearne, while acknowledging that the elaborate detail obscures the magic of the tale, describes the plot as “mechanically ingenious” (23). Everything is explained in the tale, and every problem, from the prophecy that Beauty will marry a monster to the problem of the disparity of social class between herself and the prince, is resolved through the intervention and contrivance of the fairy.
Virginia Swain suggests that one reason for the motley form of Villeneuve’s tale is its position between two aesthetic movements: the grotesque, a visual style, and literary realism. The emphasis on perception and sensory pleasure is typical of the grotesque, as is illusion and the blurring of the line between fantasy and reality. However, Beauty is urged not to be deceived by appearances, to see beyond the superficial beauty: “the repeated stress on inwardness is at odds with the grotesque aesthetic that seems to dominate the tale” (Swain 200). Swain explains this inconsistency as interference from the realist movement. The two movements collide in the transformation of the Beast into the dream prince, “the merger of the apparent and the real” (Swain 201). That Beauty’s illusion becomes flesh seems to contradict the fairy’s injunction not to trust appearances, because the result of Beauty’s choice of the ugly Beast over the handsome prince is that she is rewarded by the incarnation of her dreams, suggesting contradictorily that “some appearances are more true than others” (Swain 202). Tensions between the grotesque and realism are unresolved in Villeneuve’s work, which occupies an ambiguous position between the two.

Part 2: Madame de Beaumont

The Tale

Madame de Beaumont’s tale was published in 1756 in her work, *Le magasin des enfans*, an anthology of didactic stories and anecdotes intended to instruct young ladies in the ways of virtue. It quickly became the authoritative “Beauty and the Beast,” and it is still considered the classic model of the story. Because “the two versions coincide in

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9 Full title: *Le Magasin des enfans, ou dialogues entre une sage gouvernante et plusieurs de ses élèves de la première distinction, or The Young Misses Magazines, Containing Dialogues between a Governess and Several Young Ladies of Quality, Her Scholars* (Griswold 27)
plot and incidents,” as well as in title (Barchilon 82), it is evident that Beaumont was inspired by Villeneuve, whose story was published just sixteen years prior. Beaumont adapted the story to her own purposes, paring the lengthy romance down to a pithy fairy tale.

In this “Beauty and the Beast,” Beauty has two sisters, three brothers, and a rich and doting father, whose abrupt change in fortune forces the family to relocate to a small country house. The rough and rustic lifestyle brings out Beauty’s virtues of industry, sensibility, and patience, as well as her sisters’ vices of vanity and envy. When the merchant sets out to reclaim his fortunes, the sisters ask for all sorts of finery, while Beauty requests only a rose. The merchant’s journey is futile, and he is further confounded when a snowstorm causes him to lose his way in the woods. Luckily, he finds a mysterious palace where he seeks rest, refuge, and refreshment. However, when he picks a rose for Beauty as he is leaving, the fearsome Beast appears and demands his life as forfeit. After he hears the merchant’s story, the Beast changes his demand and asks for the merchant’s daughter instead.

Although the merchant does not intend to sacrifice Beauty, she insists on taking his place, even though she believes that in doing so, she will be devoured by the Beast. Beauty returns to the palace with her father, and after a last meal together, she is left alone with the Beast. That first night, a fine lady visits her in a dream and tells her that her good deed will be rewarded.

Beauty’s anxieties are eased by the books and music with which she passes the time, and the only things that trouble her are the vision of her sorrowful father in a magic mirror and the Beast’s nightly proposal of marriage. She nevertheless treats the Beast
with politeness and compassion, and she comes to enjoy their evening conversations, despite the Beast’s hideous appearance and his lack of wit. Missing her father, Beauty asks that she be permitted to return home for a while. The Beast grants her request, but he tells her that he will die of grief if she does not return.

Beauty returns to discover that her sisters have entered into unhappy marriages: they have married for looks and intelligence, and their vain, witty husbands despise them. Seeing Beauty so content enrages them, and they plot to keep her at home an extra day in hopes that the angry Beast will eat her. Their trick to detain her is effective, and Beauty stays, guilt-ridden, until she dreams of the Beast near death and hastily returns by means of a magic ring. Finding the Beast ailing as in her dream, Beauty revives him with water and tells him that she will marry him because she has discovered that she cannot live without him. The castle fills with light, fireworks, and music, and the Beast’s monstrous form disappears, replaced by a handsome prince who tells Beauty that she has broken his enchantment with her willingness to marry him. Together they enter the castle, where the fairy from Beauty’s dream has already magically summoned Beauty’s family. The fairy lauds Beauty for making the right choice, turns her duplicitous sisters into statues to bear eternal witness to her happiness, and transports everyone else to the prince’s kingdom to celebrate the marriage.

The Teller

Madame de Beaumont effectively carried Villeneuve’s tale over age and class boundaries when she brought it across the Channel. A former member of the French nobility, Beaumont suffered from an unhappy arranged marriage, which she soon had
annulled. Moving to England, she found work as a governess, eventually remarried, and published her own writings. Marina Warner expresses Beaumont’s crucial role in the social transformation of the fairy tale:

In the case of Mme de Beaumont, the figure of the élite, lettered lady of the salon merges with the proverbial storyteller of the nursery for the first time on the social plane, when she ceases to be a member of the idle nobility and becomes a working woman in a household commanded and owned by another. (292)

Beaumont’s change in social status, which is reflected in her “Beauty and the Beast” tale, is representative of a cultural shift in which the power of the aristocracy gives way to the rise of the bourgeoisie.

Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast” can be considered a ‘governess tale’ in several respects: it was written by a governess; it is set in the larger narrative framework, *Le magasin des enfans*, of a governess telling stories to her charges; it contains a moralizing fairy who serves as the figure of a governess; and Beauty’s own situation as a subordinate permitted to wield some power in the house of a wealthier patron resembles the inverted power dynamic of a governess and her employer (see Griswold 52).

Modeled on the author’s own situation, the governess tale becomes an effective means of communicating a moral lesson to a child.

Although Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast” adheres to Villeneuve’s in many technical details, the themes that Beaumont promotes are different. Beaumont promotes Beauty’s virtues of honesty, humility, and filial duty in contrast to her sisters’ duplicity, pride, and selfishness, recommends that a good heart is more important in a prospective husband than attractiveness or intelligence, and establishes that gratitude and friendship rather than love are the proper basis for entering into marriage. In Beauty’s great revelation, she soliloquizes thus: “It’s neither good looks nor intelligence that makes a
woman happy. It is good character, virtue, and kindness, and the Beast has all these good
qualities. It’s clear that I don’t love him, but I have respect, friendship, and gratitude for
him” (Beaumont 224). In this moment of epiphany, Beauty discards her notion of
romantic love; in order to be happy, she must let her affections be ruled by her sense of
duty. Her statements are presented as universal truths to be embraced by the reader as a
guiding moral, and her romance becomes a model for marriage based on companionship.

Madame de Beaumont’s major changes to Villeneuve’s tale are drastic reduction
of length and change of characterization. The liberties that Beaumont takes with the
characters of “Beauty and the Beast” are in the interest of emphasizing the personalities
of the protagonists and exaggerating the differences between the good and bad characters:
Beauty, although still the paragon of female virtue, is depicted as an introverted
intellectual who takes pleasure in books and music; the Beast, while still a shadowy
figure, has considerably more dialogue with Beauty than Villeneuve’s retiring monster;
the sisters are depicted as irredeemably evil, spiteful, and duplicitous to the point of
rubbing their eyes with onions to seem sad at Beauty’s departure; 10 and the greedy
merchant of Villeneuve, who stole jewels from the Beast’s palace, is replaced by a timid
and indecisive man. The elimination of the story of Beauty’s royal background makes
her a mere merchant’s daughter, a change from what Ruth Bottigheimer would term
“Restoration Fairy Tale” to the increasingly popular “Rise Fairy Tale”; the elimination of
the story of the Beast’s curse makes him, as a prince, a reward for Beauty’s good
behavior rather than a character in his own right. These small changes of character are

10 Note that while Beauty’s sisters in Villeneuve’s Beauty and the Beast dance at her wedding, the
sisters in Beaumont’s version are turned into statues; the good and bad characters of the story
have become more stereotyped. This polarization of good and evil has become another
distinctive characteristic of the classic fairy tale.
symptomatic of larger shifts: a shift in audience from aristocratic ladies to bourgeois children, and a shift in genre from romance to fairy tale.

**The Times**

Beaumont’s alterations in characterization serve as signals of a greater cultural transition. The eighteenth century was the site of a shift in social power from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Additional literary changes represented are the birth of children’s literature and the creation of the genre of the fairy tale.

Jack Zipes, who views fairy tales with a Marxist lens, discusses the rise of literary fairy tales in eighteenth-century France in terms of social class. The aristocracy, according to Zipes, appropriated motifs from folklore and created new stories in order to “legitimize the aristocratic standard of living in contrast to the allegedly crass, vulgar values of the emerging bourgeoisie” (*Magic Spell* 10-11). In Villeneuve’s “La Belle et la bête” this “instrumentalization of fantasy” (*Magic Spell* 11) is evident: the protagonists, both royal, belong to the highest class, and there are pages of descriptions of the palace luxuries. In Beaumont’s story, however, Beauty is a middle-class merchant’s daughter, a member of the bourgeoisie. In her version of Villeneuve’s tale, she reshapes the characters to reflect bourgeois ideals of social ambition; she adapts the tale to her own social class. The shift in audience parallels a cultural shift: “Pointing to a middle-class readership, LePrince de Beaumont’s tale demonstrates how the evolution of fairy-tale discourse through the centuries follows the development of the bourgeoisie, gradually setting itself apart from the aristocracy” (Talairach-Vielmas 274-75). Besides the alterations of character, Beaumont’s simplification of Villeneuve’s romance is a reaction
to elaborate aristocratic plots: “Bourgeois educators...strive to infuse their reformist concern with usefulness and sincerity into ‘perspicuity and simplicity of style,’ the aesthetic equivalent of the hostility toward aristocratic manners that informs so much of the [Georgian] period’s literature for children” (Myers 38). The revision of Madame de Villeneuve’s story represents a shift in social class both of the protagonists and of the assumed audience.

Beaumont’s second major change, and arguably her greatest, was to tailor “Beauty and the Beast” to the needs and interests of children, as she perceived them. In order to effect this change, she felt she had to remodel some of the more risqué allusions and emphasize the moral qualities of the story. Villeneuve frames the Beast’s disquieting question to Beauty as “Will you go to bed with me?” and his transformation does not take place until the morning after she consents. Beaumont changes the Beast’s question to “Will you marry me?” and has his transformation occur as soon as Beauty professes her love and agrees to marry him. Thus Beaumont desexualizes the tale and makes it more suitable for a younger middle-class audience, beginning the trend of using the fairy tale as an instrument of socialization, a means of inculcating children with cultural values.

The moral tone of the tale suggested by Villeneuve is dramatized by Beaumont: Beauty is the emblem of goodness who is rewarded for her virtue, and her envious sisters are punished for their vicious natures. The tale ends with the governing fairy restoring order, and Beauty and the prince living “in perfect happiness, because their relationship [is] founded on virtue” (Beaumont 245). The powerful fairy as an authority figure and the repeated emphasis on virtue and vice are two of the didactic aspects of “Beauty and

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11 In Zipes’s translation of Villeneuve, he follows the Beaumont convention of the Beast’s proposal, and he cuts the scene in which they get in bed together. Cf. Virginia Swain.
the Beast.” The “didactic coloring” which Beaumont gives to the tale will become “nearly inseparable” from it for the next several generations of retellings (Tatar, Heads 11), although the moral itself will change to reflect the ideals of the time period in which it is retold.

Finally, “Beauty and the Beast” properly enters the domain of the fairy tale with Beaumont’s version. From the beginning, the formulaic opening “once upon a time,” to the promise of perpetual marital bliss of the end, the story fits the paradigm of a “classic” fairy tale. Brevity is also an aspect of the definition of the fairy tale, and Betsy Hearne locates Beaumont’s three major cuts to Villeneuve: the descriptions of Beauty’s entertainments at the palace, her dream visits with the prince and the fairy, and the elaborate explanations of Beauty’s parentage and the Beast’s history (26). The effects of these cuts are a simplification of the story, a reduction to the essential action of the plot sequence. The loss of detail also makes the magical and symbolic items of the story (the magic ring and mirror, the rose) seem more potent, and the resolution of the ending is clear of Villeneuve’s interlacing plots and assumes the form of the happy ending that Tolkien considers the defining feature of the fairy tale. Beaumont takes Villeneuve’s elaborate romance and molds it into what is now considered a proper fairy tale.

Part 3: Issues in Literature

A question that seems to be a matter of debate is whether these early tales, both written by women, subvert or confirm the patriarchal framework within which they are produced. The presence of strong female characters in Villeneuve’s version, such as a queen who leads an army into battle, a fairy council that contrives most of the events of
the story, and Beauty herself as the heroine, suggests that the author is resisting the norms of a society where men hold power. These influential women, Swain suggests, are a representation of the salon society in which “La Belle et la bête” originates: “As social arbiters the salonnières taught moral values and rules of conduct…They assumed the right to govern their world” (140). Similarly, though less forcefully, Beaumont’s version with its happy ending orchestrated by a Queen and a Good Fairy reflects the role of the governess as an overseer. By featuring female characters in powerful and instructive roles, “women can redefine power as the realization of internal capacities…as pedagogic and philanthropic power” (Myers 43). Betsy Hearne also notes that Beauty, unlike the analogous Psyche in the myth of “Cupid and Psyche,” has an active role in determining her fate, while the men in the story (the Beast and the merchant) are relatively passive (16). The internalization of power and the depiction of the heroine as an active character in control of the situation are two ways in which Villeneuve and Beaumont rebel against patriarchal gender roles.

However, a closer inspection of the stories reveals that the authors’ attempts to subvert the patriarchal system ultimately fail. Beauty’s virtues of domestic industry, dutiful obedience, and self-sacrifice are all forms of self-denial, and she must renounce her dream life with the Prince in order to save the Beast and be happy. “There is an insidious message that equates male nobility with rightful rules and female virtue with sublime submission,” writes Jack Zipes (“Social History” 24). Beauty’s happiness is assured only after she submits herself to the Beast, sacrificing her affection for the Prince to her sense of duty. Although Beauty has the right to refuse the Beast’s proposals, she is still imprisoned in the castle, a victim of her father’s trespass and the Beast’s will.
Beauty is defined in relation to men, first as the merchant’s daughter and then (although at first she resists it) as the Beast’s wife.

The heroine, then, may be a submissive victim, but the fairies are not. Virginia Swain identifies an inconsistency in Villeneuve’s depiction of women and attributes it to a generational shift in the story: “If the Beast’s Amazonian mother and Beauty’s fairy godmother belong to a generation of powerful, independent, and single women, the daughters (exemplified by Beauty) are being taught to marry, devote themselves to husbands and family, and be content with their lot” (141). The powerful women behind the story may belong to some utopian society (“the Fortunate Isle,” where Beauty’s father reigns, suggests utopia), but the ultimate message is that a woman’s happiness lies in obedience and self-sacrifice. Despite Villeneuve and Beaumont’s superficial attempts at rebelling, the patriarchal framework is not broken; it will remain intact until twentieth-century feminist retellings dismantle it and open the story to new possibilities.

The transition of the tale of “Beauty and the Beast” into the fledgling genre of children’s literature raises the issue of audience: Are fairy tales rightly intended for children? Beginning with Madame LePrince de Beaumont and affirmed by nineteenth-century collectors such as Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm and Andrew Lang, fairy tales become associated with children. Jerry Griswold considers “Beauty and the Beast” in particular to be “the special property of the young” (17), as do Marina Warner (Beast 237) and Stephen Swann Jones (17). Bruno Bettelheim argues that fairy tales play an important role in a child’s psychological growth: “While it entertains the child, the fairy tale enlightens him about himself, and fosters his personality development” (12), and
individual tales can help a child deal with the specific psychological problems that he or she begins to face in the process of maturation.

However, J. R. R. Tolkien proposes that “children have less need of fairy tales than do adults” (7) because it is the adults that need the consolation of the happy ending. Jack Zipes affirms Tolkien’s idea of audience but from his own socio-historical perspective: “History shows that it is not so much children as adults who have created, cultivated, needed and continue to need fairy tales” (“Social History” 23). Fairy tales, folktales, and myths have existed in every human society in every country throughout time, suggesting an instinctive need for something that only these tales can supply. Zipes suggests that the tales arise as “cultural endeavors to interpret and understand natural and social phenomena” (“Social History” 23), to provide some sort of understanding or explanation of the world. It is understandable, then, that they should be employed in our times as instruments of socialization and that children should be the target of such socialization processes. “Tradition feeds off the young to maintain itself and will do anything to preserve itself,” Zipes writes (Why Fairy Tales Stick 235), and his implied analogy to parasitism supports an understanding of literature in terms of biology. Children make good hosts for memes because they are (generally) receptive to new material, and they have a longer lifespan ahead of them in which to reproduce the memes. Adults often invest tradition in children as their successors, instructing them in certain rituals and telling them the stories that they want to be passed on to the next generation.

The endurance of fairy tales in the province of children’s literature attests to their suitability to that genre; the tradition of telling the story for a young audience has established a powerful trend that sets constraints on all subsequent revisions, such that it
is nearly impossible to isolate the tale from its function as a means of socialization. However, to say that “fairy tales are for children” is to over-generalize. As we have seen, fairy tales are difficult to define because they resist categorization. Each teller approaches the fairy tale with a different project, which may include different age ranges; the appropriate audience can only be determined on an individual, tale-by-tale basis. So it is that Madame de Villeneuve’s “La Belle et la bête” is a tale oriented toward adults while Madame de Beaumont’s is specifically written for children.

The story that Madame de Villeneuve crafted from the raw material of Greek myths and Italian motifs was pared down by Madame de Beaumont, her immediate successor. In this lighter, compact form the tale will rise to cultural prominence on the wave of folkloric scholarship that crashes through the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2
Collectors of Culture: Fairy-Tale Scholars and Anthologists of the Nineteenth Century

A movement to recover and preserve folktales began in the nineteenth century, when such tales were revered as cultural heritage. There was often a nationalist impulse motivating the desire to collect old tales, a sense of folktales as the purest and most authentic expression of a nation’s beliefs and values. Anthropological curiosity about the tales of other cultures spurred later collectors to extend the boundaries of their anthologies to encompass tales from foreign and exotic places as well.

The project of many of these nineteenth-century fairy-tale anthologists was not only to preserve and record the tales, but also to investigate their origins and nature, joining theorization with collection. The Brothers Grimm were the leaders of this
movement, which spread across Europe and culminated in the scholarly and literary work of Andrew Lang.

Part 1: The Brothers Grimm

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm are the most famous fairy-tale collectors of all time. Their seminal work paved the way for folklore research and the publication of fairy-tale anthologies in nations across the world. Furthermore, in the fifty-year course of the publication of their *Nursery and Household Tales*, they developed their own theories of folktales and their own style, which have left an indelible mark on the history of the fairy tale.

*Nursery and Household Tales* contains no “Beauty and the Beast” tale as such, but it does include an AT Type 425 (“The Search for the Lost Husband”) variant, “The Singing, Soaring Lark.” Although this particular tale does not constitute a link in the chain of the “Beauty and the Beast” tradition, it is worth studying as a closely related alternative version of the story.

The Tale

In “The Singing, Soaring Lark,” a man goes on a journey and his youngest daughter asks him to bring her a lark as a gift. On his return journey he finds the lark in a forest, but when he captures it a lion accosts him and tells him that in exchange for the lark he must return bringing the first thing he sees when he gets home, which turns out to be a horse.

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12 *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, the actual title of the Grimms’ work, has often been mistakenly translated as “Fairy Tales,” which leads to further confusion of the term, given that the collection includes beast fables, religious tales, and other stories that are not properly considered “fairy tales.” A more literal translation of the title than the one I have chosen is *Children’s and Household Tales.*
be his youngest daughter. The girl willingly goes to the lion, and she learns that he is an enchanted prince who is human by night. They marry and live a nocturnal lifestyle.

The girl returns home twice to attend her sisters’ weddings, and the second time she begs her husband to come with her. He does so under the condition that no ray of light shine upon him. When a chance ray does hit him through a crack in the door, he turns into a dove and tells his wife that he cannot be disenchanted unless she follows his trail of blood and feathers for seven years. She does so for many years, but when she eventually loses the trail, she must go to the sun and the moon and the four winds to ask them if they have seen her husband. The sun and the moon each give her a gift, and one of the winds reveals to her that her husband, in lion form again, is battling a dragon, and he tells her how to disenchant him.

The girl finds her husband locked in battle, but when she lifts the spell on him the dragon, now transformed into a princess, seizes him and flies away on a griffin to make him her husband. The girl, bereaved again, journeys around the world until she finds them, and she trades the bride her sun and moon gifts in exchange for two nights in the prince’s bedroom. The first night she sobs out her story to him, but the princess drugs him so that he does not wake and hear her. The second night he does not take the drugs, hears his wife’s voice, and returns home with her on the back of the griffin.

“The Singing, Soaring Lark” is a hybrid of the Norse “East o’ the Sun and West o’ the Moon” and the French “Beauty and the Beast.” Until the moment when the prince turns into a dove, the story closely resembles “Beauty and the Beast” with some minor differences, such as the request for a bird instead of a rose, and the Beast-figure’s split humanity as lion by day and man by night. These modular changes do not significantly
alter the story; they differently represent the same ideas of a daughter’s simple request and a terrifying, partially-human beast that demands a sacrifice. A more meaningful change is the depiction of the heroine as an active protagonist. Although many of her actions are motivated by her relationship to the male characters (her father and the lion-prince), she is depicted as a heroic rescuer rather than a self-sacrificing victim. Unlike Psyche, she is not being punished for the sin of curiosity; her misfortunes (being promised to a lion, her husband transforming into a dove and being taken away by a dragon-princess) are not of her own making, but due to chance or ill-luck. How she deals with these trials is the strongest sign of her character.¹³

The motif of birds from “The Singing, Soaring Lark” recurs frequently in “Beauty and the Beast” narratives. We have already seen Beauty’s affinity for birds in the two early French versions of the tale. It is difficult to attribute this similarity to influence, given the uncertain relationship between the tale types; it is possible that birds, which can represent freedom, are simply an appropriate symbol for a story that often suggests a theme of liberty and imprisonment. The motif may simply recommend itself to this tale.

The Tellers

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were motivated to collect oral and literary fairy tales by a patriotic impulse, a desire to build a sense of national identity in a time of Napoleonic division and strife in Germany. In order to construct this German identity, the brothers looked to folklore as the most primitive and sincere expression of culture, and they saw Naturpoesie (“folk poetry”) as representing the “naïve and poetic spirit of

¹³ Unlike Beauty, this protagonist is not given a name or even a cipher-name, but since names are relatively rare in Grimms’ stories and completely lacking in this particular tale, her namelessness should not be taken as an indication of character weakness.
ancient man” (Kamenetsky 99). They were impelled to transcribe the folktales by the nostalgic belief that this poetic voice was being lost in the roar of an industrial age.

“They had in mind a scholarly project that would preserve storytelling traditions threatened by industrialization and urbanization,” writes Maria Tatar in her introduction to *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* (xxxii). To the Grimms, fairy tales had a special significance as cultural artifacts that linked them to their idealized past.

Mythology and debate surround the method of the Grimm brothers’ collecting. There is a romanticized image of the two of them wandering around the German countryside, recording stories from the mouths of old women. In reaction to this version of their process, an alternate school of thought suggests that the tales came from purely literary sources, passed to Jacob and Wilhelm by a group of aristocratic and bourgeois friends.  

In fact, the brothers seem to have gathered their stories from both oral and literary founts, from rural peasants as well as aristocratic ladies.

Jacob and Wilhelm’s chief storyteller was a woman called Dorothea Viehmann. An elderly tailor’s wife, she was “transformed by the Grimms into the ideal type of a teller of tales” by their description of her as a village peasant woman and Ludwig Emil Grimm’s portrait of her, included in the second edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales* (Rölleke 103). Frau Viehmann was not the illiterate spinster-storyteller that the Grimms depicted her to be, and although she did acquire many of her tales from oral transmission, she was also influenced by the French literary tradition through her Huguenot ancestry.

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15 While it is tempting to credit aspects of “The Singing, Soaring Lark” to Villeneuve’s or Beaumont’s influence, such attribution could not be confirmed because the chain of transmission is, in this case, tenuous: the Brothers Grimm did not individuate Viehmann’s tales from the rest,
The Grimms also transcribed stories from their own friends and peers, the aristocratic Wild, Hassenpflug, and Haxthausen families, and they themselves contributed some tales, as did their maid, a retired soldier, and other acquaintances (see Tatar, Grimm xxxiv and Rölleke 103). The Grimms’ sources, then, are mostly (but not exclusively) upper and middle class, mostly (but not exclusively) female, and mostly (but not exclusively) oral, with both French and German influences: an eclectic if not “authentic” mix of folktales.

During their process of collecting folktales, Jacob and Wilhelm theorized about the nature and origins of the stories. Jacob especially was influenced by the work of Danish linguist Rasmus Rask on the relationships among Indo-European languages, and he applied concepts of comparative linguistics to folklore, concluding that “similarities in major themes and characters were more likely to occur wherever the languages were closely related” (Kamenetsky 100). By linking related fairy tales to related languages, Jacob Grimm effectively became the first proponent of a comparative theory of folklore that would be termed “monogenesis,” or the belief “that there was one point of origin or one place of birth…that led to the formation of the folk tales” (Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick 46).

To say that the Grimms believed in monogenesis, however, is a hasty generalization. Although Jacob, the more scholarly of the brothers, developed his theories of comparative folklore, Wilhelm “was more inclined to explain folktale origins and variants in universal terms” (Kamenetsky 102). Although he never fully expounded his ideas, Wilhelm speculated that since the folktale was common to all cultures and it
maintained a stable form, it must be spontaneously generated in every nation as a natural human instinct. Wilhelm’s beliefs would have placed him on the opposite side of the origins debate from Jacob, the side of polygenesis.

The Times

Although the collection is now among the most popular and bestselling books of all time, the Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales* was astonishingly slow to achieve recognition. The brothers, especially Wilhelm, devoted their lives to this project, issuing seven different editions in fifty years of research and revision. The first edition of 1812 (and several subsequent editions) was intended to be a scholarly work, and it consisted of forty-nine tales heavily padded with a preface, comparative analysis, and commentary. Successive editions included more tales and less commentary, but the collection finally achieved success with the publication of the first “Small Edition” in 1825. This issue was specifically intended for children: fifty stories were selected from a pool of 200, and they were supplemented by several engravings. It was published in paperback, which reduced the cost, and released at Christmastime, which made it an appealing gift. For this edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*, the brothers “consciously set aside their scholarly studies and ambitions to please children” (Kamenetsky 49), and they finally began to achieve commercial success.

From the first edition to the seventh in 1857, Wilhelm Grimm gradually perfected techniques of stylization, which he applied in order to refine the oral transcriptions and make them fit his ideal of proper literature. Wilhelm created a fairy-tale formula with poetic embellishments, freely editing the original material in the interest of making it
more literary. Ruth Michaelis-Jena catalogues some of Wilhelm’s modifications: “A master of simplicity with a perfect ear for the colloquial, [Wilhelm] replaced indirect speech by dialogue, gave motivation to certain happenings, and when necessary pieced together variants, printed and oral ones, to make a better whole” (267). Wilhelm considered himself entitled to make such stylistic changes because of his understanding of himself and Jacob as “links in a chain of storytellers, each having a certain right to retell the tales in his or her own way” (Neumann 31-32). According to this view of tradition, the story is dynamic and in the course of its reproduction tellers assume a degree of authorship over the material, licensing them to revise it according to their own standards. Wilhelm’s adaptation also represents a definitive move away from the oral and towards the fairy tale as a literary art form.

The Grimms’ work in *Nursery and Household Tales* became a model for both anthologists and scholars. Collecting and transcribing native folklore became a vogue in the nineteenth century, and anthologies of nation-specific fairy tales appeared in many European countries. Even now the Grimm brothers are considered the premier anthologists; in the introduction to his twentieth-century collection, *Italian Folktales*, Italo Calvino expresses his desire to be an “Italian Grimm” (xvi).

As the interest in collecting spread in the 1800s, so too did the scholarly interest. Methods for categorizing folktales, like Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson’s, and other “systematic research into the folktale on a chronological and geographical basis” (Michaelis-Jena 273) grew out of the Grimms’ pseudo-scientific approach. Because of Jacob and Wilhelm’s contributions, folktales gained a reputation as a valid form of literature as well as a legitimate field of study.
Part 2: Andrew Lang

Among the anthologists inspired by the example of the Brothers Grimm was the Scotsman Andrew Lang. A version of “Beauty and the Beast” appeared in his 1889 collection *The Blue Fairy Book*, the first of twelve compilations that Lang would assemble and edit over the next two decades. Lang’s story of “Beauty and the Beast,” which splices the two French tales together, became the definitive English version, and it remains one of the most widely-read versions of the tale.

The Tale

In Lang’s version of “Beauty and the Beast,” Beauty is depicted as cheerful and clever, and she is especially praised for her courage. She has six brothers and five sisters whom she outshines in goodness and beauty, especially when a series of misfortunes forces the family to relocate to a small house in the forest. Her father, a merchant, sets out on an unsuccessful mission to recover a part of his lost wealth and stumbles into a disconcertingly silent castle where he is provided with food and drink. After dining and resting, Beauty’s father becomes so accustomed to the magical luxuries of the palace that he presumes to think to himself, “All this must be meant for me” (112). As he is leaving, he sees a rose bush and plucks the rose that Beauty requested. At that moment, the Beast emerges and confronts him threateningly, ordering him to sacrifice his own life or that of his daughter.

The merchant is not terribly reluctant to allow his daughter to take his place, and courageous Beauty volunteers willingly, despite the protests of her brothers. She goes to
the enchanted castle and spends the next several months living with the Beast. Their relationship is marked by the easing of Beauty’s fears and the growth of her feelings of duty and gratitude toward her generous host, but her refusals of the Beast’s nightly marriage proposals. By day she is entertained by the palace’s beauties and wonders, such as an aviary of rare birds, a sewing room, gardens, and pantomime shows, and at night she dreams of a handsome prince and a fairy who advise her not to trust appearances.

Beauty’s betrayal of the Beast when she lingers too long at home is attributed not to the conniving of her siblings, but rather to a timid hesitancy and indecision:

She would not have been sorry when the two months were over but for her father and brothers, who begged her to stay and seemed so grieved at the thought of her departure that she had not the courage to say good-bye to them. Every day when she got up she meant to say it at night, and when night came she put it off again. (Lang, Blue 126)

When she returns to the Beast and finds him ailing, she sprinkles his face with water to wake him, repenting of her broken promise. They dine together that night, and when the Beast makes his usual marriage proposal, Beauty accepts, prompting his transformation into the prince from her dreams. The prince’s mother and a fairy appear to approve the match, and her father and siblings are invited to dance at the wedding.

Lang’s “Beauty and the Beast” is a hybrid of Madame de Beaumont’s and Madame de Villeneuve’s narratives, but the way in which Lang incorporates elements of each creates tension in his characterizations. Beauty, for instance, is lauded as clever, and yet she fails to solve the mystery of the castle’s enchantment in spite of the hints showered upon her by the dream prince and the fairy. Similarly Beauty’s father, although described as “naturally timid” (Lang, Blue 111) as in Beaumont’s version, boldly
considers the palace and its treasures to be his own, a thought more worthy of Villeneuve’s greedy merchant.

Another difference in characterization is that Lang’s Beauty is a weaker protagonist than Beaumont’s and Villeneuve’s proto-feminist heroines. Lang eliminates all mention of Beauty’s education, an aspect of her character which was important to both French authors, and he maintains a higher degree of psychological distance from her. The same Beauty that was deeply skeptical of the return of her father’s fortunes appears light and frivolous in her enjoyments: “A most amusing pantomime was acted before her; there were dances, and coloured lights, and music, and pretty dresses, and it was all so gay that Beauty was in ecstacies” (123). Lang even creates tension between the narrator and the character when he says, “the first [room] she entered was lined with mirrors, and Beauty saw herself reflected on every side and thought she had never seen such a charming room” (119). This ironic suggestion of vanity distances the reader and the narrator from the protagonist, and it may be an instance of how Lang “had an eye on the faces of other clever people over the heads of his child-audience,” as J. R. R. Tolkien accuses him of doing (43). Lang’s Beauty takes on the features of a Victorian “angel in the house”: her physical appearance is her main virtue, and she takes pleasure in domestic activities (such as sewing) and caring for her father and her husband. Most significantly, Beauty’s attitude of self-denial marks her as angelic: “[I]t is the surrender of herself--of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both--that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act” (Gilbert and Gubar 25). Jerry Griswold notices the weak and inconsistent characterization of Beauty and wonders “why [Lang]’s Prince would want such a slow learner and dim partner, such a petted and hesitant spouse” (114). Lang’s Beauty loses
many of her qualities of intelligence and independence and takes on characteristics of the ideal Victorian housewife.

Another of Lang’s changes is the marginalization of the fairy figure, who plays a central role in Villeneuve’s “La Belle et la bête” as orchestrator of events and a no less significant role in Beaumont’s as the authority figure and distributor of reward and punishment. In Lang’s version of the story, the fairy appears on two occasions: once to warn Beauty not to trust appearances, and again at the conclusion to facilitate the happy ending. In the first instance, the fairy’s words only confirm what the dream prince has already told Beauty, and her appearance is a mere footnote to the greater promise of happiness that he represents; in the second, her role is simply to introduce the queen to Beauty so that she can give her consent to her son’s union, and she also enables Beauty’s siblings to attend the wedding. On neither of these occasions does the fairy wield any demonstrable power or exhibit any authority. Lang’s marginalization of the fairy figure, coupled with his weak characterization of Beauty, represents a move away from the proto-feminist projects of the original authors. Andrew Lang reclaims “Beauty and the Beast” for patriarchal society, editing out even the mildly subversive suggestions of female power in the tale.

“Beauty and the Beast” appears in the *Blue Fairy Book*, the first of twelve compilations of fairy tales that Lang would assemble and edit over the next two decades. The series of “Colour Fairy Books” contains tales from around the world, and it was specifically marketed to children. Unlike the tales of Madame de Villeneuve and Madame de Beaumont (and those of the Italian and Greek storytellers from whom they drew their inspiration), Lang’s fairy tales are not embedded in a frame narrative. The
absence of a frame signifies the finalization of the divorce between oral and literary fairy tales; the tales in the collection are presented as “isolated fantasies” without historical context (Harries 69). No longer imagined as being rooted in an oral tradition, fairy tales begin to acquire that sense of ‘timelessness’ that often characterizes the genre.

Collecting was a popular pastime in the Victorian Age, and Lang’s anthologies appeal to many interests of nineteenth-century British society. The scope of collecting is both diachronic, preserving artifacts of the past, and synchronic, stretching across cultural boundaries; Lang’s Colour Fairy Books simultaneously satisfy both aspects by including ancient as well as foreign tales. However, Lang’s collection has been criticized for “promulgat[ing] an European ethnocentrism” in its preference for French and Scottish tales (Bingham 339). Additionally, the removal of the tales from their country of origin severs them from their cultural context and makes them all seem homogeneously English. Sara Hines compares this process of displacement to colonization: “The Fairy Books are no longer the exoticized Other, but instead have been transformed, brought home, and colonized” (58). The Colour Fairy Books are not intended to give British children a global perspective; they are merely assembled to exhibit the similarity and diversity of folktales. Hines argues that the collections “could be viewed as metaphorically representing Britain’s political empire” (54) because of its Eurocentric multiculturalism and its ‘colonization’ of foreign tales. Although Victorian readers probably did not think of the anthologies as microcosmic empires, the Colour Fairy Books nevertheless resonated with contemporary political conditions.

The Teller
A true Victorian man of letters and a “dominant figure in the literary and intellectual life of Britain” (Bingham 337), Andrew Lang was a poet, essayist, journalist, translator, literary critic and theorist, editor, historian, anthropologist, psychologist, and fiction writer, but his passion was folklore. Besides his efforts to collect and anthologize folktales, he also developed his own theories of folklore, which are heavily influenced by their cultural climate.

Lang’s theories on the origins and development of folktales were inspired by the scholarship of the Brothers Grimm, but they ultimately lead in the opposite direction. Lang’s theory of folklore states that myths (the traditional forbears of fairy tales) arise to sanction a particular cultural mandate. In *Custom and Myth*, he uses a comparative anthropological method to demonstrate that the myth of Cupid and Psyche is rooted in “a curious nuptial taboo” (84) in which the wife is forbidden to look upon her husband. By citing more than a dozen examples of variations on this taboo in other “primitive” cultures, he reasons that “the widely distributed myths in which a husband or a wife transgresses some ‘custom’—sees the other’s face or body, or utters the forbidden name—might well have arisen as tales illustrating the punishment of breaking the rule” (*Custom* 75). Lang’s speculation that myths originate to fulfill a societal need during a specific historical time period foreshadows Jack Zipes’s theories on fairy tales as imaginative responses to certain customs and cultural situations: of the origins of “Beauty and the Beast,” for instance, Zipes writes, “There is strong evidence to suggest that the tale evolved from a ritual concerned with a young woman’s coming of age” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 139). According to this theory, myths, folktales, and fairy tales are created to help
manage societal problems; the role of such literature is to express and attempt to resolve deep-seated cultural concerns.

Another of Lang’s precocities is his use of evolution as an explanation for the diffusion and adaptation of tales. He explains the survival of folktales in terms of evolutionary theory: “Each incident of fairy-lore is found all about the earth, but some combinations are more favoured and fortunate than others” (Custom xxiii). It is unlikely that Lang’s choice of the word “favoured,” the same word that Charles Darwin used in the title of his groundbreaking work just thirty years prior, is a coincidence. “Lang applied the evolutionary theory wholeheartedly in the development of his own anthropological theories,” according to his biographer (Langstaff 14), and similarly he applied his anthropological theories to his study of folklore.

Lang’s sociological view dichotomizes peoples into “primitive man” and “civilized man,” and he maintains that “civilization is a process which refines a selection of basic myths” (Langstaff 123, 125). Society operates as a selective agent, reproducing tales that are successful and adapting them to their cultural conditions. Lang hesitates to claim that all myths stem from a single source, though he believes in the possibility, and he asserts the universality of the story of “Beauty and the Beast”:

Whether all people have borrowed from one centre, or have separately, and, as it were, fatally, evolved the same idea everywhere, I fear we shall never be able to ascertain…Beauty and the Beast, perhaps, belongs rather to the former class [of separate evolution], and the separate incidents, if not their combination, might have occurred in different lands, to different minds, without transmission or borrowing. (Custom xxiii-xxiv)

The origins theory that Lang endorses in the case of “Beauty and the Beast” is polygenesis, which stated that “since the human species was similar throughout the

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16 Full title: On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life
world, humans responded to their environment in similar ways, giving rise to identical tales that varied only according to the customs they developed” (Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick 46). At the core of this theory is Lang’s belief in the “psychological unity” (Montenyohl 273) of peoples across cultural and temporal boundaries, the essential universality of human nature that is expressed in literature.

Andrew Lang keeps his anthropological folktale scholarship isolated from his actual anthologies. “Beauty and the Beast” appears in the Blue Fairy Book alongside several other Animal Bridegroom tales from different cultures, but Lang proposes no analysis of the similarities in his brief comment in the introduction:

The Scotch ‘Black Bull of Norroway,’ for example, must remind the very youngest reader of ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon,’ a tale from the Norse. Both, again, have manifest resemblances to ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ and every classical student has the fable of ‘Eros and Psyche’ brought back to his memory. (349)

Lang abstains from theoretical explanation, saying that his collection is “made for the pleasure of children, and without scientific purpose” (Blue 354). Grouping similar tales in the same anthology without analysis does not serve to support either polygenesis or monogenesis; rather, the “recurring themes…reinforce the thematic material for the sake of the authority and validity of the themes in their own right as elements of good stories worth retelling” (Bingham 339). This inconsistency between Lang’s scholarship and his refusal to speculate on the origins of the tales is attributable to another aspect of his personality: he was, at heart, a romantic, and he believed that the only function of literature was “one of release, of refreshment, of escape” (Langstaff 93). For this same reason, he edited out the didactic content of the story, detaching Beaumont’s heuristic
function from the tale. Lang did not want the *Blue Fairy Book* to be anything other than a collection of enjoyable stories that inspire wonder and pleasure in the reader.

**The Times**

Several of the plot devices of “Beauty and the Beast” resonate naturally with the culture of imperial Britain. The encounter with the other, the voluntary exile of Beauty, and the metamorphosis of the Beast would have been especially poignant in an age of contact with other peoples, colonization, and evolutionary theory.

The depiction of the Beast contains an implicit discourse on race. The Beast is usually represented as Beauty’s opposite: savage, uncivilized, and more animal than human. Barbara Fass Leavy observes that “black men in predominately white societies…are sometimes portrayed as if they were beasts” (102) in an effort of the members of dominant society to distance the other from themselves in order to maintain social distinctions and justify oppression. The racial allegory resolves the problem of the Beast’s otherness in a realistically impossible way, by his transformation into a human, specifically a white male. Before the transformation can occur, however, Beauty must learn to love and accept the Beast in all his hairy otherness. The resolution of the plot can be read in two ways: that other races can never be accepted because they cannot cast off their appearance as the Beast does, or that dominant society must change its perspective on other races and recognize that they share the same essential humanity. The two readings could coexist in this time period because society was not united in its views of race.
Another essential feature of “Beauty and the Beast” that struck a chord with Victorian society is Beauty’s voluntary exile and separation from her family. Beauty must leave her home and journey to a mysterious place where, although she is not the owner, she is granted the title and position of mistress. The anxiety of Beauty’s separation from her family and her delighted exploration of the strange wonders of the palace contribute to an interpretation of the story as a metaphor for colonization, the departure from a familiar world to an unknown place.

In an age that was still processing the implications of the most influential scientific proposal of all time, any discourse on the relationship between man and beast must have had powerful connotations of evolution. In “Beauty and the Beast,” the metamorphosis of beast to man occurs in an instant, effectively collapsing the multimillion-year process of evolution into the span of a second. Although the transformation happens in an impossibly short time, it must have reminded the Victorian reader of the scientific fact that men came from beasts. In a sense, the metamorphosis was more believable to the nineteenth-century audience than to any audience before.  

The allegories of race, colonization, and evolution correlate to the story’s features of encounter with other, separation from home, and metamorphosis, respectively; these are not themes which Andrew Lang invented or even emphasized, but they constitute a large part of the story’s appeal to the culture in which it was reproduced. In this case, the story was naturally suited to its host culture.

17 Or rather, any audience since the animistic societies responsible for creating the majority of the tales that feature transformations of people to animals and vice versa, including the set of Animal Bridegroom tales. See Andrew Lang’s *Custom and Myth* for discussion of animism and Animal Bridegroom tales.
Another factor that recommended the story to its times was the rise of popularity of literature for children. “It was from 1830 to 1900…that the fairy tale came into its own for children” (Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick 86). As Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm demonstrated, folktales could be marketed to children; in fact, Lang seems to have modeled his marketing strategies on those of the Grimms, publishing his anthologies around Christmastime and including some simple illustrations to make them more attractive to children. Lang’s expert manipulation of the burgeoning market of children’s literature assured the success of the Colour Fairy Books. The cultural environment was also a contributing factor to the commercial triumph of the collections, as Lang’s biographer notes: “Lang, besides being an author and a scholar of genius, came at the perfect moment to write such a book [as the Blue Fairy Book]. He was living at the peak of a golden age of children’s literature when children’s literary wants were best understood” (Green 56). The story, the collection, and the mission of the editor aligned perfectly with the wants, needs, and concerns of nineteenth-century Britain; Andrew Lang planted a seed in fertile soil, and it flourished.

Part 3: Canonization of a Tale

Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm and Andrew Lang are men that assume authorship and editorial rights over the tales of women (Dorothea Viehmann in the Grimms’ case, Villeneuve and Beaumont in Lang’s). Unlike the eighteenth century, fairy-tale tellers of the nineteenth century were predominately male. Lang and the Grimms show themselves to be somewhat uncomfortable with wholly appropriating a literary form associated with women; the Grimms by giving credit (and an image on the frontispiece of one collection)
to Frau Viehmann, and Lang by acknowledging the contributions of a group of women (including his wife, Leonora) who helped him to abridge and translate many of his tales. Although these tellers have no qualms about modifying the original narratives, they are conscious of the stories’ roots in a primarily female literary tradition.

In the course of their collecting and anthologizing of folktales, Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, and Andrew Lang engaged in scholarship and speculation on the origins of their subject matter and arrived at different conclusions. Jacob used linguistic methods to theorize that the tales of each type shared a point of origin, Andrew Lang used anthropological methods to conclude that certain folktale types were universal to mankind, and Wilhelm speculated on possible universal origins, but without much method or conviction. As far as “Beauty and the Beast” is concerned, there is some truth to both the theory of monogenesis (endorsed by Jacob Grimm) and the theory of polygenesis (espoused by Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Grimm). “Beauty and the Beast” itself traces back to a single definite text, Madame de Villeneuve’s story, but the Animal Bridegroom tale type is so widespread that oral or literary transmission cannot account for it. Wherever there are folktales, there is a story of a woman (or sometimes a man) who marries an animal and disenchants him by her love; these are the tales that Lang enumerates in Custom and Myth to support his theory of polygenesis. The motifs that different “Beauty and the Beast” variants have in common (a destitute father, a request for a rose, a monster in a castle) are so specific as to make it exceedingly unlikely that the same tale arose spontaneously in multiple places.

The nineteenth century was the age in which the fairy tale truly became a literary genre. Jack Zipes summarizes the necessary conditions for the formation of a genre:
To be fully developed a genre has to be instituted in a society; that is, it must be accepted and used by different groups as a specific mode of entertainment, communication, and socialization. It must also have effective modes of publicity, dissemination, and reception that will enable the genre to take root in society. (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 19)

Technology of mass production of books enabled collections of fairy tales to be disseminated easily, and cultural conditions created a market for children’s literature. Fairy tales become instituted in society through the process of reproduction and transmission that begins with publication and printing.

The Grimms and Lang showed themselves to be active agents in the transmission of fairy tales. As editors, their task was more than simple transcription: they revised the tales, piecing together different versions in order to make a single canonical narrative from a multiplicity of oral and literary variants. They took liberties with length, characterization, and style so that the fairy tales would fit the models that they designed. In Lang’s “Beauty and the Beast,” for instance, we see the formulaic phrases “once upon a time” (also present in Beaumont’s version) and “happily ever after” framing the tale for the first time. Elizabeth Wanning Harries summarizes Lang’s contribution to the development of the fairy tale: “Lang revised…the stories by the *conteuses* into chaste and compact shapes like the ones the Grimms had popularized…[These compact forms] had become the shape of what we now tend to think of as ‘the classic English fairy tale’” (Harries 97-98). The nineteenth-century anthologists gathered, refined, and preserved stories, remodeling them into the timeless literary forms that constitute the genre of the fairy tale.
Chapter 3
New Media: Twentieth-Century Film Versions

The technology of the twentieth century opened new possibilities for the exploration of the themes and meanings of “Beauty and the Beast” with the development of cinema. The change of medium from literature to film requires directors to express their understanding of the story visually, giving physical form to the products of their imagination. Film also encourages deeper probing at themes and highlighting of symbols, such as the rose and the magic mirror, adding dimension to their meaning.

The two film adaptations that I will study in this chapter, Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête* and Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, enjoyed very different receptions. Cocteau’s black-and-white 1946 film, produced in post-war France, was scorned by a public that did not approve of the light subject matter in such serious times, whereas Disney’s animated movie, released in 1991, received wide acclaim. Both films are now regarded as classics.

Part 1: Jean Cocteau

The Tale

In Cocteau’s 1946 *La Belle et la Bête*, Belle (Josette Day) is a hardworking farm girl who fills a Cinderella role for her two posturing sisters (Mila Parély, Nane Germon),
while her wastrel brother, Ludovic (Michel Auclair), squanders the family’s money at cards. She is courted aggressively by her brother’s handsome friend, Avenant (Jean Marais), but she refuses his offer of marriage in order to stay with her father (Marcel André).

Her father, a merchant, embarks on a journey to investigate the rumor that one of his ships has returned, and his two elder daughters ply him with requests for exotic gifts. Belle asks for just a rose, incurring her sisters’ mockery. When the merchant picks the rose from the garden of the enchanted castle where he dines and passes the night after losing his way, he is challenged by the Beast (Jean Marais), who resembles a bear or a lion with fangs and claws, but walks upright and dresses like a nobleman. In return for sparing the merchant’s life, the Beast demands one of his daughters. When Belle’s father returns with his story, the household is thrown into uproar, and in the midst of the quarreling, Belle slips away, mounts the Beast’s horse, and rides to the castle.

Not long after she arrives, Belle sees a vision of her ailing father in a magic mirror and starts to rush home. She is stopped by the Beast, and when she faints at the sight of him, he carries her to her room and lays her on the bed. He leaves when she regains consciousness, but joins her at her evening meal, tells her that she should consider herself the mistress of the castle, and asks her to marry him. Although Belle initially fears the Beast, she learns how to stand up to him, pity him, and eventually love him. She summons the courage to demand that he leave her room when he intrudes, hands smoking from a recent kill. Watching him lap water from the pond like an animal moves her to pity, and she offers to walk with him and lets him drink from her hands.
The one thing that troubles Belle is the thought of her sick father, and she falls longing to be home. The Beast reluctantly allows her to return for a week, giving her a glove that enables her to travel magically between the castle and her home and entrusting her with the key to his treasures. Belle’s return restores her father’s health and enflames her sisters with jealousy of her fine clothes. The sisters contrive to make her break her promise to the Beast by staying another day; they take the key from her while Ludovic schemes to steal the Beast’s treasure and Avenant, who realizes that the Beast has somehow won Belle’s affection, plots to kill him. When Belle lingers at home, the Beast’s horse arrives bearing the magic mirror. Avenant and Ludovic take the horse and ride to the castle, and the sisters take the mirror but return it to Belle when they see themselves reflected in it as an old hag and a costumed monkey. When Belle looks in the mirror, she sees the Beast pining for her and instantly returns to the castle by means of the glove.

Belle finds the Beast despairing and near death by a spring and tries to coax him back to life. Meanwhile, Avenant and Ludovic arrive, find the temple of Diana, where the Beast’s treasure is kept, and break in through the glass roof. As Avenant is lowered into the temple, the statue of Diana shoots him with her bow, and he transforms into the Beast and falls. At the same moment, the Beast by the spring rises up as Prince Ardent (Jean Marais) and claims that Belle saved him with her loving look. At first Belle is alarmed by the transformation: she asks where the Beast went, and she is disconcerted by the resemblance between the Prince and her suitor Avenant. However, the Prince reconciles her to the changes, and the two magically fly away to the Prince’s kingdom.
The Teller and the Times

Jean Cocteau chose to produce a fairy tale film during one of France’s darker hours, and this decision was not highly regarded by his contemporaries. Cocteau’s timing was not arbitrary, however; he believed that it was in this postwar period that his country most needed the dream of a fairy tale. “Whatever the cost, France must shine again,” he insisted (57). The cost was indeed high: Cocteau’s Diary of a Film chronicles the many difficulties of acquiring the necessary supplies, equipment, and even electrical power in the years immediately following World War II, but he did not give up on his mission. It was a dark and difficult time for France, and Cocteau hoped that his La Belle et la Bête, a fairy tale film that hints at the possibility of happiness, would help restore his country to her former luster.

The film adheres closely to the plot of Madame de Beaumont’s story, Cocteau’s explicitly acknowledged source, but the director does more than simply translate a literary work into a cinematic one: he gives life to the tale, accentuates certain themes, and weaves a subtext of homoeroticism into a tale of heterosexual love.

Although in literature it is possible to leave much to the imagination of the reader and write simply that there is a “hideous beast” in an “enchanted castle,” film must make those vague descriptions real by embodying them in actors, costumes, and sets. Cocteau portrays the Beast as rather leonine, with fur, fangs, and claws, in the dress of an aristocrat. His hoarse voice and stiff walk reveal that human behavior does not come naturally to him; he indulges his beast-like nature by hunting deer and drinking water from the fountain like an animal. The enchanted castle is populated by partially human servants: the candelabra are supported by human arms, which also point and pour wine
for Belle’s father; statues by the fire and in Belle’s room follow her movements with their eyes; and the statue of Diana comes to life and shoots the intruder with her bow.

Cocteau’s decisions about how to depict the hideous beast and enchanted castle raise thematic questions about the nature of humanity: neither the Beast nor the enchanted servants fully partake in humanity, though there is something human about each, and Belle puts her own humanity in question when she tells the Beast that she was the real monster for breaking her promise. If there is a conclusion to be reached about what constitutes humanity in the film, it is that being human is both a physical and a moral condition.¹⁸

Besides questioning the nature of humanity, Cocteau also explores the duality of dream and reality by using visual effects and cinematic techniques. His vision of his film, according to his Diary of a Film, was as “a mixture of realism and fantasy” (8), a dream “taking on a form and becoming fixed without losing its dream-like quality” (50). His technique for achieving this double effect of dream and reality was a bicameral set-up, parts of the film taking place in Belle’s humble country home and parts in the Beast’s magnificent enchanted castle. The scenes on the farm are stark and loud with conversation and the sounds of chickens, whereas the scenes in the castle are muted and smoky, often either silent or set to eerie music. Belle’s double life is reflected in her costumes: at home she dresses as a maid, her hair covered in a kerchief, and at the palace she dresses like a queen in fine dresses and elaborate headgear or a small crown.

Cocteau imbués Belle’s arrival at the palace with a sense of gothic mystery: she enters through the double doors, runs down the long hallway in slow motion as the

¹⁸ The double meaning of the term ‘humanity,’ both in English and in French, lends itself to this theme.
candelabra, supported by disembodied arms, light themselves along her way and spectral music plays; she ascends the grand staircase, watched by the human eyes of the statues, and seems to glide down a hallway of billowing curtains until she arrives at a door which speaks to her, informing her that it is the door to her room. Other special effects, like glowing roses, tears that change into diamonds, a pearl necklace that assembles itself from nothing and transforms into a rope when given to Belle’s sister, the Beast’s smoking hands, and Belle’s final flight with the Beast contribute to the sense of enchantment that pervades the film, giving it the dream-like quality that the director envisioned.

Cocteau’s use of ironic reversals creates tension in the narrative and makes the viewer doubt the sincerity of the “happily ever after” ending. The first scene, in which Avenant shoots an arrow into the window of the house, is ironically reversed in the ending, when he is shot by an arrow. Belle’s relationship with her sisters is reversed: at the beginning, she helps dress them, and at the end the Beast tells her that they will hold the train of her gown. The greatest irony of all, however, is in Cocteau’s doubling of characters, how he casts Jean Marais as the Beast, the suitor, and the Prince. By giving the same face to three different characters, Cocteau suggests that the trinity of Beast-Avenant-Prince is three expressions of the same savage masculine nature. Ultimately it does not matter which one Belle marries.

The ending of the film is strangely inconsistent with the serious gothic tone of the rest of the film, and Belle’s obvious distress at the resemblance between the Prince and Avenant makes the finale somewhat unsatisfying. Cocteau’s only comment is that “she seems to miss the kind Beast a little, and to be afraid of this unexpected Avenant. But the end of a fairy story is the end of a fairy story” (3). In fact, the ending of the film is so
ironic as to seem parodic, a mockery of the fairy tale’s resolution. The way the Prince rises,\textsuperscript{19} his costume, and Belle’s suddenly coy attitude caricature the relationship of mutual respect between the Beast and Belle. “In his over-the-top confection of a conclusion, Cocteau pillories heterosexuality with parody” (Griswold 238). Griswold’s suggestion that the director is making a critique of heterosexuality is supported by evidence from the film itself.

Cocteau’s other changes to Beaumont’s tale, the introduction of a rival male (Avenant) and a shift in the narrative focus, also work to create a homoerotic subtext. According to Cynthia Erb, \textit{La Belle et la Bête} “remodels the figure of the Beast and alters the narrative dynamics to promote homoerotic themes and tensions” (53). Cocteau, himself a homosexual, critiques male desire, as represented by Avenant, and recasts the plot to emphasize the Beast’s struggles.

The addition of Avenant, a forceful male determined to marry Belle, exposes the dark nature of desire. Avenant is willing to use violence, deceit, and even murder to win Belle as his wife; his lust for her impels him to cruelty. By casting the same actor, Jean Marais, in multiple roles, Cocteau implies that this destructive desire is common to many men, including the Beast and the Prince. According to the Prince’s succinct, almost aphoristic summary of the film, “Love can turn a man into a beast, but love can also make an ugly man handsome.”\textsuperscript{20} The second part of this statement is an integral part of the original story of a Beast being transformed by love and compassion, but the first part is Cocteau’s addition. The idea that love makes a beast out of a man, as it literally does

\textsuperscript{19} Cocteau achieved this effect of “otherworldly grace” by playing a clip of Marais falling backwards in slow motion and reversed to make him seem to “rise in a single bound” (Diary 117).

\textsuperscript{20} All quotations from this film are taken from the English translations in the subtitles.
to Avenant, is the director’s critique of the violence of male desire. By coupling
beastliness and masculinity, “Cocteau indicates the beastly nature of male heterosexual
desire” (Griswold 235). Through the character of Avenant, the embodiment of male
passion, Cocteau indicts masculine heterosexual desire as violent and destructive.

The addition of Avenant interrupts the pattern of the relationship between Belle
and the Beast, creating an “erotic triangle” (Sedgwick 478). As the two men compete for
Belle’s affection, they express jealousy towards each other: When Belle tells the Beast
about her handsome suitor, he becomes distressed and runs away, and when she talks of
the Beast to Avenant, he decides that he must kill the monster. The tension between the
two competitors suggests a homosocial bond between them, but Cocteau seems to be
relatively ambivalent about creating homosexual overtones, and so the “hunter/Beast
dynamic” remains nothing more than a “partial thwarting of what otherwise appears to be
a traditional heterosexual romance” (Erb 55). *La Belle et la Bête* criticizes but does not
reject the heterosexual relationship at its center.

The narrative focus of the film is on the Beast, both as a character with
psychological struggles and as an eroticized body. Like Avenant, the Beast is a victim of
desire; his passions and self-doubt torment him. As Belle keenly observes, “He suffers.
One half of him is in constant struggle with the other half.” On two occasions he
stumbles into Belle’s boudoir, shaking with passion and animal urges. His struggles to
control himself make him a sympathetic character, unlike Avenant. In Cocteau’s film, it
is the Beast that receives the narrative attention, the Beast that needs to be redeemed, the

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21 That “beastly” is a term that has been used to describe homosexual activity contributes to this
interpretation.
Beast that demonstrates his humanity through suffering. He is at least as much the protagonist of the story as Belle.

Cocteau eroticizes the body of the Beast with long camera shots that linger on his figure and clothing. Pleasure in looking, called “scopophilia” in psychoanalytic studies (Mulvey 434), is the special province of visual media, such as cinema. Although women are usually the object of this pleasure, Cocteau emphasizes the female gaze over the male, inverting the dynamics of desire. “[T]he male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification,” writes Mulvey (437), and the Beast confirms this statement when he hastily stumbles out of Belle’s room, covering his face and claiming that he cannot bear her burning gaze. At the end, however, he tells her that it is her “loving look” that saves him. It is the female gaze that has the power in Cocteau’s film, and the male body that is eroticized.

Besides the thematic revisions that produce faint homoerotic overtones, there are other changes that distance La Belle et la Bête from its literary predecessors. Madame de Villeneuve’s powerful fairy, whose role was drastically reduced by Andrew Lang, is absent. Supernatural involvement is suggested by the enchantment, which the Prince claims was caused by his parents’ lack of belief in fairies, and by the Temple of Diana, but the origins and nature of these powers remain vague. The drama of the narrative is less about the forces that shape the situation than about the characters and their psychological development. For this same reason, there is no clear moral to the film; meaning is preferred to moral, representing a “transition away from didacticism to thematic interpretation” (Hearne 89). Cocteau’s “overt preoccupation with meaning, balanced as it may be with a sense of aesthetic conventions, is a new stage in the
development of ‘Beauty and the Beast’” (Hearne 89). Rather than studying the moral implications of the tale, Cocteau examines the enchantment of the story itself, bringing the magic of the palace to life and emphasizing themes of humanity and reality. Most subsequent versions of “Beauty and the Beast” will follow Cocteau’s trend, abandoning Madame de Beaumont’s didactic form and exploring different interpretations of the tale instead.

With Cocteau’s film, we see a shift in audience from children to adults. Cocteau ostensibly targets children in his prologue to La Belle et la Bête when he writes, “Children believe what we tell them. They have complete faith in us. […] I ask of you a little of this childlike simplicity.” This passage recalls Lang’s introduction to The Blue Fairy Book, in which he designates children as the most appropriate audience for fairy tales because of their “unblunted edge of belief” and “fresh appetite for marvels” (349). Unlike Lang, however, Cocteau is not suggesting that the film is intended for children, but rather that the adults of the audience must suspend their incredulity and accept the non-causal plot of the fairy tale. “Happily, there is some remnant of childhood in this jaded public. It is this childhood we must reach. It is the incredulous reserve of the adults that we must overcome” (Cocteau, Diary 113). Cocteau seems to believe that people preserve a small amount of childlike wonder beneath the mask of adulthood, and he hopes to unlock that inner child by means of a fairy tale. Cocteau has created a fairy tale for adults, a simple and magical story that probes at deeper issues of sexuality and desire. “The search for and awareness of meaning,” writes Betsy Hearne, “unfortunately deepens the split between adult and child audiences” (89). The deepening division of the
audience is rendered obvious by comparing Cocteau’s 1946 adult fairy tale to Disney’s 1991 children’s story.

Part 2: Disney

The most definitive version of “Beauty and the Beast” in twenty-first-century America is Disney’s 1991 animated film. It is this movie that has become the touchstone for the modern American audience, becoming so popular as to render most other versions of the story obsolete. The Disney film establishes itself as the dominant version of the tale, taking over the canon and shaping viewers’ assumptions about the tale. Although Disney’s Beauty and the Beast reduces the popularity of previous and successive versions, it is itself a bricolage of its predecessors, incorporating elements from Beaumont, Cocteau, and others.

The Tale

The film opens with the story of the Beast’s curse, depicted in scenes of stained glass. Rich but arrogant, the young Prince refused hospitality to an ugly crone, who was an enchantress in disguise. The enchantress cast a spell on him, transforming him into a Beast, which could be broken only by the love of a woman. The narrative then passes to a provincial French village, where Belle sings of her longing to break free from her quotidian life and the townspeople sing of how different she is and how they fail to understand her. Meanwhile, the hunter Gaston schemes to make Belle, the most beautiful girl in town, his wife. After her eccentric father, Maurice, leaves to present his latest invention at a fair, Gaston forcefully makes his proposal, and Belle rejects him.
Belle’s father soon becomes lost in the dark forest, and he enters the enchanted castle to escape a pack of wolves. He is welcomed by the castle’s staff, a set of anthropomorphic furniture and objects including the charming candelabra Lumiere, the pompous clock Cogsworth, and the maternal teapot, Mrs. Potts. However, when the Beast, the master of the castle, discovers the trespasser, he locks him up in a tower prison. When Maurice’s horse returns without a rider, Belle immediately sets out after him and finds the castle. The Beast catches her in the prison tower with her father, and she begs in vain for her father’s freedom, finally gaining it by offering herself in his stead. The Beast releases Maurice and shows Belle to her room, but when she refuses to dine with him he loses his temper and orders her to be confined to her room.

Belle eventually sneaks out of her room, is entertained with a lavish meal and a performance by singing and dancing dishes, and steals away from her chaperones to see the prohibited West Wing. Apart from the mauld furniture in the room that bears witness to the Beast’s destructive rage and a painting of himself as a human, his private chamber contains only a single glowing rose under a glass, which signifies the limited amount of time he has to break the enchantment. His wrath when he finds Belle there frightens her so much that she flees the castle. Outside the gates she is attacked by wolves, but the Beast appears in time to fight them off with his own animal strength and rescue her. She returns to the castle bearing his unconscious body and tends his wounds.

The relationship between Beauty and the Beast blossoms after that scene. In a montage set to the song “Something There,” they become aware of their new feelings for each other as they read together, feed birds, play in the snow, and share meals. The romance culminates in the ballroom scene, when the groomed Beast dances with a
gowned Belle while the eager servants watch and sing the title song, “Beauty and the Beast.” The Beast, on the verge of confessing his love to Belle, discovers that she is unhappy because she misses her father. With his magic mirror, he allows her to see Maurice, lost in the snowy woods after being scorned by the villagers for his tales about a monster that imprisoned his daughter. Although he knows he has little time left to break the spell, the Beast releases Belle from her promise and allows her to return home to care for her father, giving her the magic mirror to take with her.

Meanwhile, Gaston has been conspiring with the owner of an insane asylum to have Maurice locked up in order to blackmail Belle into agreeing to marry him. Belle rushes to her father’s defense when the asylum warden comes for him, using the mirror to prove to Gaston that the Beast is real and her father is not crazy. Gaston imprisons Belle and her father in their own basement, takes the mirror, and uses the image of the Beast to convince the mob that their families are in danger and they must kill the Beast. While the servants valiantly defend the castle from the angry villagers, Belle and Maurice escape from the basement with the help of the enchanted teacup Chip, and Belle races to protect the Beast. She arrives just as he, despairing, is allowing himself to be attacked by a disheveled and beastly-looking Gaston. The sight of her galvanizes him to fight back and overcome Gaston, but not before being fatally stabbed in the side. Belle kneels beside him as he dies and whispers that she loves him as her tears fall on his face. At that moment, his body is lifted up and light shoots from his fingers and toes as he transforms into a man. Belle recognizes him by his eyes, they kiss, and the enchantment is completely broken: the gray stone gargoyles become white marble Cupids, and Lumiere, Cogsworth, and the rest of the servants are restored to their human forms.
The Tellers and the Times

Disney’s film represents the greatest departure from Villeneuve’s and Beaumont’s storyline. The creators took liberties with the film in order to make it appeal to their conception of an audience of children: they consciously reduced the oedipal structure of the story, they added humorous characters and subplots to engage children’s interest, and they tried to turn the passive protagonist into a feminist heroine.

Belle’s father, who was a merchant in every version of the tale thus far, is an eccentric inventor in the Disney movie. Because Belle is his only child, they have a close bond. Belle acts as a mother to her own father, encouraging him in his work, coming to his rescue when she discovers that he is missing, tending him when he is ill, and defending him from Gaston’s machinations. Reading sexual attachment in their relationship, as Bruno Bettelheim does for the classic tale, is an interpretation that is not substantiated by the story; the oedipal structure does not hold, proving that it is not an essential part of the tale.

In Disney’s Beauty and the Beast, there is a proliferation of subplots. The anthropomorphic furnishings that populate the castle eagerly anticipate their own freedom, which will come with the release of the enchantment; the teacup, Chip, longs for adventure; Lumiere and Cogsworth quarrel often but resolve their differences in order to fight off the villagers’ invasion; Gaston plots to marry Belle; Maurice tries to convince the villagers that a Beast is holding his daughter captive. These subplots, often humorous to the point of slapstick, are designed especially to entertain children, and their resolution is contingent upon the successful conclusion of the central plot, the romance.
Disney’s film emphasizes the romance of the story and remodels it into their signature form of musical comedy. Although the writer of the screenplay, Linda Woolverton, planned to give the story a feminist twist, and songwriter Howard Ashman hoped to incorporate a queer subtext, both discourses are ultimately subsumed into the structure of the romance. Indeed, the tagline of the film is “the greatest love story ever told.”

Woolverton’s feminist agenda centers on characterizing Belle as an independent and intelligent young woman. She draws on Beaumont’s depiction of her heroine as an educated reader, endows her with a sense of curiosity and a longing for adventure, and gives her a bold and feisty attitude. However, Disney’s Belle fails to break out of the patriarchal paradigm of the traditional story; her heroic act is self-sacrifice, and the plot is resolved by her marriage to the Beast. Belle is not even the focus of the film, the Beast is, just as in Cocteau’s La Belle et la Bête. “Beauty and the Beast is essentially a love story, and in many ways it is not even Belle’s love story as much as it is the Beast’s,” argues June Cummings (23). The movie opens with the Beast’s back-story, and for the most part his is the dominant perspective. The story of Beauty and the Beast is the story of the Beast’s redemption, how he reaches maturity and wins the heart of a beautiful young girl.

Although Belle’s love of reading is what marks her as different both from past Disney princesses and from the villagers in her hometown, the books that she reads, as the song “Belle” reveals, are romances. Cummings points out the irony: “The trait that makes Belle different, more intelligent, and more ‘liberated’ than previous Disney heroines is that she likes to read books about Disney heroines” (25). In the Beast’s castle,
despite the entire library at her disposal, the only time she is depicted as reading is with
the Beast during the song “Something There,” where her literacy functions more as an
advancement of the romance than as a sign of her intelligence and independence.

Belle’s supporting cast does not support a feminist agenda any more than she
herself does: the airheaded girls who swoon over Gaston, the flirtatious feather duster,
Belle’s armoire, and the motherly Mrs. Potts are the only females with speaking roles,
and they represent women as either coquettes or mothers, a patriarchal dichotomy. Belle
herself is characterized as maternal in her relationships with her father and the Beast. Her
nurturing concern for her father constitutes two of the major plot developments: it leads
her to sacrifice her freedom by becoming the Beast’s prisoner, and later it motivates her
to return home to care for him. Furthermore, it is Belle’s maternal instinct that impels her
to tend the Beast’s wounds and rebuke him for his temper in the scene that catalyzes their
romance. The Beast’s immaturity brings out Belle’s motherly nature.

The lyrics to the songs, Howard Ashman’s contribution, introduce a subtext of
tolerance of homosexuality. Both Belle and the Beast suffer from the villagers’ narrow-
minedness: Belle is regarded as “strange,” “funny,” “peculiar,” “a puzzle,” “odd,” and
“different,” all synonyms for “queer,” because she does not conform to the village’s
standards of femininity and she rebels against the norms and the ideal of conjugal bliss as
proposed by Gaston: “Picture this: a rustic hunting lodge, my latest kill roasting on the
fire, and my little wife massaging my feet, while the little ones play with the dogs. We’ll
have six or seven, of course…strapping boys, like me.” Belle’s refusal to accept this life
of domesticity makes the townsfolk regard her as queer, a judgment that she feels acutely.
Although the people tolerate Belle, they show no tolerance toward the Beast, whose
physical appearance horrifies them. “We don’t like what we don’t understand, in fact it scares us, and this monster is mysterious at least,” the village men sing in the “Mob Song” as they persecute the Beast. The townsfolk see the Beast’s very existence as harmful toward their way of life, toward their familial values. Their solution, proposed by Gaston, is to kill him. Jerry Griswold connects Gaston’s aggressive intolerance toward the Beast to societal intolerance of homosexuality: “There is in Disney’s movie a special link between hostility towards the Beast and hostility toward homosexuals” (243). Gaston’s persecution of the Beast, motivated by intolerance of otherness, reflects society’s reaction to homosexuality; as both chauvinistic and homophobic, Gaston marks the intersection between the feminist and queer discussions in the film.

Although not as much a critique of heterosexuality as Cocteau’s film, Disney’s nevertheless carries hints of a negative view of the heterosexual male. Gaston, like Avenant, is a portrait of hyper-masculinity, and his eponymous song is a parody of his heterosexual image as he boasts of his physique and his hunting prowess. As in Cocteau, male violence is associated with beastliness in Belle’s statement of the climactic reversal: “He’s not the beast, Gaston--you are!” The problem with the heterosexual male in this film is primarily his lack of tolerance of anyone that does not fit into his normative society; the main issue is homophobia, not heterosexuality.

Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* tale is not based on one authoritative text; it draws from several works in the traditional canon. For the first time since Villeneuve, the tale supplies a full explanation of the Beast’s curse, though in this case he is fully responsible for the punishment that he incurs on account of his selfish and vain refusal to give hospitality to an old woman; in this respect the film follows the trend of decreasing
emphasis on a didactic moral with increased emphasis on the psychological struggle of
the individuals. The French setting (including an anachronistic reference to the Eiffel
Tower) is a nod to the story’s origins, and Gaston is certainly inspired by Cocteau’s
Avenant. One of the villains, the asylum warden Monsieur d’Arque, is voiced by Tony
Jay, who was the chief antagonist in the 1987-1990 television series Beauty and the Beast
(not discussed in this thesis). Absent from the tale is the supervising fairy, and also
absent are the two sisters, though Gaston’s superficiality recalls their frivolity. “The
genius of the film,” according to Jerry Griswold, “lies in the fact that it is a wonderful
amalgam of prior versions of the story, a kind of summa that gathers together and echoes
and responds to the story tradition” (247). The film also sets up parallels between Beauty
and the Beast and other films: the dark and threatening forest scenes are inspired by
Disney’s own Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, as is a scene in which the villagers
march across a fallen log with their images reflected in the water below; the groomed and
beribboned Beast resembles the Cowardly Lion from the classic American film, The
Wizard of Oz; and the final ballroom scene is adapted from Disney’s Sleeping Beauty,
with the same angle and floor pattern.

Disney’s Beauty and the Beast represents a definitive installment of the tale in the
twentieth century, but it also breaks away from the tradition by consciously reducing the
oedipal struggle and the passivity of the heroine. The feminist reclamation of a
patriarchal tale and the postmodern technique of allusions to other stories also
characterize the literary versions of the late twentieth century.

Part 3: Symbolism and Sexuality in Cinema
Although it draws from many different sources, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* is principally inspired by Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête*. Both films consider the story from the male perspective, they triangulate the relationship between the two protagonists with the addition of a hunter/suitor who partakes in both beauty and beastliness, and they use a bicameral scheme to illustrate the differences between Belle’s world and the Beast’s. Furthermore, they both participate, to a limited extent, in a discourse of homosexuality.

Disney’s 1991 film diverges from Cocteau’s 1946 film in several significant ways. The two movies demonstrate the gap between audiences: Cocteau’s fairy tale is intended for adults, whereas Disney primarily targets children. Nevertheless, both producers are using a fairy tale to convey important truths about society; they use an ancient literary form to discuss contemporary and relevant social issues, such as homophobia.

The characterization of the Beast differs in the two films: both Beasts suffer from self-doubts and inner torments, but whereas Cocteau’s Beast is at war with his animal nature, Disney’s Beast must battle his own immaturity. Cocteau depicts the Beast as feral, killing deer and drinking from the spring like a wild animal; it is these animal urges that he must overcome with the help of Belle’s grace and manners. Disney’s initial depiction of the Beast seems to adhere to this: when he first threatens Belle’s father, he appears as a huge dark shape that prowls around the castle on all fours and emits terrifying roars. His real problem, however, is that he is still the spoiled, selfish, and immature prince that incurred the wrath of the enchantress, as Marina Warner observes: “In Disney’s animated version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the Minotaur-style Beast is a
captive of childishness…it is his immaturity and self-indulgence which represent the less than human” (“Women” 63). Griswold also notes the coming-of-age aspect to the Beast’s story: “The Beast--moody and given to explosions of temper, muscle-bound and horny--seems the picture of the adolescent male trapped in a new and hairy body” (245-46). It is this childishness that Belle, with her maternal qualities, must help the Beast to outgrow.

Another point of divergence between the two films is the significance of the two most potent symbols: the rose and the mirror. The rose in La Belle et la Bête, while given importance by the special effect of illumination, functions mainly as a plot device. After it serves to bring mysterious misfortune to the merchant and his family, it is never seen or mentioned again, except when the Beast lists it as one of his five magical secrets. The power and importance of this rose remains a secret to the audience, and its cause-and-effect connection to the plot must be accepted with the simple belief of a child. The rose in Beauty and the Beast fills an entirely different purpose: it represents the Beast’s curse, because he refused to shelter the crone that offered him that flower, and it serves an hourglass function, blooming until the Beast’s twenty-first birthday, after which point he is doomed to be a monster forever.

The purpose of the mirror differs in the two films as well. “Reflect in your heart for me, and I will reflect for you,” the magic mirror tells Belle in Cocteau’s film. The first time she looks in it, it shows her father; the Beast uses it to find her; when her sisters look in it, they see themselves as an old hag and a dressed monkey, respectively; the final time Belle looks in it, she sees the Beast. The function of this mirror, evidently, is to reveal what is in the gazer’s heart, and it is a sign of the development of Belle’s emotions
that she sees first her father, the man who is dearest to her, and then the Beast. In Disney’s film, the Beast uses the mirror to spy on Belle and discover the depth of her dislike of him, and after she uses it to see her father, he gives it to her as a keep sake to remind her of him when she leaves. The mirror’s final use is as Belle’s proof to the people that the Beast exists, but Gaston subverts her purpose by taking the mirror and using the image of the Beast to frighten and incite the mob. In Disney’s case, the mirror is the link between two separate worlds, Belle’s and the Beast’s. The mirror reflects not the self but the other, setting up implied parallels between Belle and the Beast and Gaston and the Beast; yet it is not what is seen that is important so much as how the viewer responds to what he or she sees, whether the reaction is of sympathy or of hostility.

Because a symbol is an object that represents something other than itself and the link between its physical form and that which it represents is arbitrary, the same object can denote any number of different things. In Saussurian terms, the *signifier* (rose, mirror) remains stable as it is carried from one text to another, but the *signified* mutates according to the context and the author’s intent. It is the plasticity of symbols, their ability to adapt, that enables them to endure, and similarly but on a larger scale it is the plasticity of fairy tales, their multivalency, that ensures their continuance.

According to Marina Warner, fairy tales are naturally suited to the cinema and film is the best medium for telling a fairy tale: “In these two respects—the interest in the imagination and the confrontation of private but universal terrors—film as a genre bears a close affinity with the most popular branch of literary romance…the ‘Wonder Tale’” (“Enchantment” 16). Jean Cocteau seems to agree with this assessment when he refers to film as a “giant dream machine” (*Diary* 122), capable of turning fantasy into a

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22 Warner’s term “Wonder Tale” can be treated as a synonym for “fairy tale” as I have defined it.
believable spectacle. Cinema, made possible by twentieth-century technology, introduces a new dimension to the interpretation of fairy tales, a new medium in which the tales thrive.
The end of the twentieth century bore witness to a proliferation of retellings of “Beauty and the Beast,” a veritable “fairy-tale renaissance” in popular culture (Joosen 4). One site lists seventy-eight contemporary versions of the tale in novel, graphic novel, picture book, short story, poetic, cinematic, and theatrical form (Heiner). A thorough analysis of all of these different versions is beyond the scope of this chapter, which will focus on four short stories and one novel. These five versions—Robin McKinley’s Beauty, Angela Carter’s “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride,” Tanith Lee’s “Beauty,” and Emma Donoghue’s “The Tale of the Rose”—have been selected not only as some of the most critically-acclaimed stories but also to represent how the tale has colonized different genres and adapted to the cultural tide of feminism and the literary movement of postmodernism.

Part 1: The Tales and Their Tellers

Robin McKinley

Robin McKinley’s 1978 Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty and the Beast casts the traditional tale as a young adult novel, emphasizing Beauty’s perspective and converting the development of the plot into a coming-of-age narrative. The gawky, insecure narrator appeals to the teenaged reader with the immediacy of her first person account and her wry humor. Although McKinley’s Beauty is a much stronger heroine
than her literary predecessors, the author’s refusal to alter the structure of the traditional fairy tale leaves her heroine trapped in a story shaped by patriarchal values.

The novel is divided into three parts, the first of which treats of Beauty’s early years, the family’s change in fortunes, and their life in the country up until the merchant returns from his fateful journey. Far from the archetypal embodiment of beauty and feminine virtue, McKinley’s Beauty is “thin, awkward, and undersized, with big long-fingered hands and huge feet” (4), and she expresses distaste for the irony of her nickname. In contrast, her sisters Grace and Hope are models of beauty and virtue; all three love one another dearly. After their father’s fall in fortune, the family moves out to a tiny house in a distant town called Blue Hill with Hope’s new husband, a blacksmith. They all take up country living without complaint, and Beauty finds herself especially suited for the rough labor. They live in this way for nearly two years, until the merchant receives news of a returned ship and returns to the city to attempt to reclaim his lost wealth. The elder sisters ask for nothing, but Beauty, moved by pity for her father, asks him to bring her rose seeds to plant in their garden.

The second part is the merchant’s account of his failed errand, the treacherous journey through the forest in a snowstorm that results in him finding shelter in an enchanted castle. At the castle, all of the merchant’s needs are tended to, though he sees not a soul, and “the silence [is] a listening one” (67). After eating, resting, and tending to his horse, he leaves, plucking a rose for Beauty on his way out. The Beast’s roar sounds when he takes the rose, and the lord of the castle appears, threatening the merchant for his dishonorable trespass. Upon hearing his story, the Beast grants the man his life in exchange for one of his daughters, whom he vows will not be harmed. The merchant
returns home, wretched, and tells his story, upon which Beauty insists upon taking the responsibility and going to the Beast’s castle.

The final section of the novel is devoted to Beauty’s developing relationship with the Beast, who is courteous and kind and, unlike the Beasts of Villeneuve, Beaumont, and Cocteau, intelligent and well-read. Beauty comes to love him as they share meals, walk together, and read to each other, but with increasing regret she declines his nightly proposals. As her feelings toward him soften, she experiences a literal change in perception that allows her to hear the voices of her invisible maidservants and to know when the Beast is near. Her dreams of home trouble her, however, and when the Beast shows her a vision that Grace’s long-lost fiancé, presumed dead, is alive, Beauty begs leave to return home and tell her sister the good news. The Beast grants her request on the condition that she return in a week. When she stays just one extra day, she dreams that the Beast has died and hastily tries to return, but her journey is difficult because the enchantment that previously allowed her to find the castle fails, and when she at last finds the Beast he is on the point of death from anguish at her loss. He recovers and she tells him that she loves him and will marry him. He transforms into the handsome prince from a portrait that she had seen and she recognizes him by his voice, but she feels that she is not worthy to marry anyone so handsome. The prince has her look at her own reflection, and she realizes that she has become beautiful. The prince briefly explains his curse, and Beauty’s family arrives for a triple wedding, with Grace marrying her fiancé, the father marrying the village innkeeper, and Beauty marrying the prince.

The essential storyline of “Beauty and the Beast” is preserved in Beauty, but the characterizations change: the sisters are good, not wicked; Beauty is a brave but awkward
sixteen year old who cares only for her family, her horse, and her books; and the Beast is wise and somewhat humorous in addition to being genteel and mild. Secondary characters, such as Grace's fiancé, Hope's husband and children, the townspeople, and Beauty's breeze-like maids, add dimension to the personalities of the main characters and a sense of realism to the story. Additionally, the primary motive for much of the action of the story is honor. Beauty's given name, she reveals in the first paragraph, is Honour (3), which is McKinley's hint to the reader that the theme is integral to the story. Beauty rejects her given name, saying that "it sounded sallow and angular to me, as if 'honourable' were the best that could be said of me" (5). It is honor that motivates the family to move to the country, where they hope to "make [their] own way, with honour" (16), and the Beast's accusation of the merchant is framed in these terms as well: "your misfortunes seem to have robbed you of your sense of honour" (72). Beauty is not afraid to go to the castle because she believes that "it is an honourable Beast" (79). It is honor that is at stake when Beauty stays home eight days after promising the Beast she would return in seven, and her return is an act of honor as well as courage.

McKinley's protagonist strains against the patriarchal limitations imposed on her character, but ultimately fails to break out of them. Beauty is active, taking her father's place because it is the honorable thing to do, asserting her own will over the invisible maids at the castle, determining the nature of her relationship with the Beast, and eventually breaking the enchantment. Nevertheless, her choices are circumscribed. "Though Beauty is strong in her ability to survive and even thrive in the events fate has in store for her, she remains limited in her achievements because she lacks choice" (Doughty 123). Although it is her decision to take her father's place and later to return to
the Beast, the situations are contrived by powers beyond her control. In the absence of a
fairy figure, these powers take the form of a predestined fate that ushers Beauty to her
destiny; just as the plot of the novel is determined by the tradition (founded on stories by
Madames de Villeneuve and de Beaumont) that created it, so Beauty’s fate is determined
by nebulous powers beyond her control.

Although Beauty initially resists conforming to the standards of physical beauty
that usually characterize the protagonist, the story does ultimately capitulate to the power
of the beauty myth. Despite the irony with which she regards her nickname, Beauty does
valorize physical attractiveness, and she even judges her own worth according to her
looks: when she volunteers to go to the Beast’s castle, her argument is that “I’m the
youngest--and the ugliest. The world isn’t losing much in me” (78). When the
Beast/prince finally forces her to confront a mirror, she realizes that she has become
beautiful. Because Beauty is strongly influenced by the beauty ideal, she cannot accept
herself as beautiful even on the Beast’s assurance; she must have evidence of it for
herself. The value she places on physical beauty shows her to be a product of patriarchal
notions of feminine worth.

One way in which McKinley does successfully move “Beauty and the Beast”
away from the restrictions of its past is by characterizing Beauty’s sisters as good and
describing their relationships as positive. Negative relationships among women are a tool
of patriarchal texts\textsuperscript{23} for convincing women that their only beneficial (human)
relationship is with a male of the same age. Madame de Villeneuve and, to an even
greater extent, Madame de Beaumont subscribe to the norms of their female-repressive

\textsuperscript{23} Negative female relationships are especially common in fairy tales. Cinderella’s stepfamily,
Snow White’s (step)mother, and other depictions of evil witches or stepmothers are examples of
negative portrayals of women’s interactions.
society when they portray Beauty’s sisters as being detrimental to her happiness. The solidarity between McKinley’s Beauty and her sisters, Grace and Hope, represents a shift away from patriarchal limitations, a shift that is not completed by the rest of the novel.

Robin McKinley makes her Beauty an intelligent and highly literate character, which enables the author to draw explicit parallels between Beauty’s situation and certain Greek myths. Beauty talks of translating Sophocles (9) and being in love with Euripides (18), and one of her favorite diversions in the enchanted palace is reading literature. She reads the Greek epics, Cicero, Arthurian legends by Thomas Malory and T. H. White, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, and *The Screwtape Letters* (147, 157-158). Her story is rife with allusions to literature, especially Greek myths. The name of her bird, Orpheus, recalls a musician’s journey to Hades to recover his lost bride (a mission which he, like Psyche, fails by taking a forbidden glance), and the name of the merchant’s horse, Odysseus, appropriately suggests a long and difficult journey home. Beauty repeatedly compares the Beast to mythological figures: when she first hears the legend of the monster in the woods, she thinks of the half-human Minotaur (44-45); at another point she decides that he resembles the Norse world-tree, Yggdrasil, but in animal form (116); later she draws a parallel between the Beast and Aeolus, the god of winds (141), and Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards of the gates of Hell (146); and at one point she runs from the Beast “as if Charon himself had left his river to fetch [her] away” (169). Her final and most illuminating analogy likens her imprisonment to that of Persephone in Hades: “I thought I knew what Persephone must have felt after she ate those pomegranate seeds; and was then surprised by a sudden rush of sympathy for the

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*24* Part of the magic of the Beast’s library is that it contains many books that have not yet been published at the time of the story’s action, which is probably the early eighteenth century.
dour King of Hell” (170). The one allusion that she does not make, and the most appropriate comparison, is to “Cupid and Psyche.”

The striking thing about Beauty’s literary allusions is that many of them contain images of Hell. Orpheus, Cerberus, Charon, and Persephone are all bound, in some way, to Hades. Although everything about the castle is described as beautiful and perfect, Beauty’s sense of imprisonment and her misgivings about the Beast are reflected in her choice of analogies. Beauty’s allusions also limit her actions: she always considers herself in parallel to these stories with predetermined endings, and she never considers the possibility of taking control of her own story.\(^{25}\) In her final reference to Hades, she resists complete identification with Persephone when she finds herself feeling sympathetic towards the antagonist, but she never successfully breaks out of the paradigms that circumscribe her life and her choices.

**Angela Carter**

Angela Carter, whose retellings of fairy tales are among the most famous, features two new versions of “Beauty and the Beast” in her 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber*: “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride.” Jerry Griswold outlines Carter’s “two-part methodology” to retelling fairy tales:

> The first [step] is to take a familiar fairy tale and link it to its folk antecedents and related old wives’ tales... Having restored the tale’s roots, Carter then turns to playing a variation upon the tradition, giving the tale a new spin in a feminist and erotic direction--creating, as it were, a new ‘old wives’ tale’. (181)

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\(^{25}\) In McKinley’s second retelling of the story of “Beauty and the Beast,” *Rose Daughter*, Beauty does decide the end of her own story when she is given the power to choose whether the Beast remains a Beast or transforms into a handsome prince. She opts for the former, saying, “I love my Beast, and I would miss him very much if he went away from me and left me with some handsome stranger” (287).
Carter’s technique effectively situates a fairy tale in its historical context and then subverts the traditional story. Her postmodern feminist approach reinvents each tale through repetition, reversal, and reference.

The first of Carter’s retellings of “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” seems at first glance to adhere closely to the classic story. Although the setting is modernized by the addition of cars, trains, and telephones to replace the magical devices of the fairy story, the sequence of events is familiar: the father becomes lost in the woods and seeks shelter in a seemingly deserted mansion; he steals a rose and encounters a Beast, who demands that he bring his daughter to the mansion. Beauty stays with the Beast willingly, but when she returns home she forgets about him until she suddenly learns that he is ill, at which point she immediately returns to profess her love. The Beast transforms and they settle into a life of matrimonial bliss.

A closer examination of the tale reveals an ironic tone that subverts its message. “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” is packed with subtle references to other fairy tales in Carter’s descriptions and in the furnishings of the mansion. The opening description of the Beauty character as “this lovely girl, whose skin possesses that same, inner light so you would have thought she, too, was made all of snow” (41) recalls “Snow White,” as does a later description of her “marvelous glass bed” (46), while her occupation of doing chores in the “mean kitchen” (41) is reminiscent of “Cinderella.” Labels that read “eat me” and “drink me” bring Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland to mind, and Beauty’s choice to read “a collection of courtly and elegant French fairy tales about white cats who were transformed princesses and fairies who were birds” (46) is a nod to Madame d’Aulnoy and the French origins of the fairy tale. Furthermore, the “little cupid
in the gilt clock” (47) reminds the reader of the myth that gave rise to the “Beauty and the Beast” tale, and the Beast’s little spaniel links the story to its ancestor in English folklore, “The Small-Tooth Dog.”

The density of intertextual references in so short a story suggests that Carter is trying to make a point about the contrived nature of the fairy tale: “The proliferation of intertexts throughout The Bloody Chamber can be read as a deliberately excessive strategy that serves both to heighten the implicit constructedness of the fairy tale as a literary genre and to draw attention to the particularity of each retelling as requiring inspection on its own terms” (Benson 45). As Benson argues, not only do Carter’s references highlight the artifice of the fairy tale, but they also distinguish her versions from the classics. By framing her retelling of “Beauty and the Beast” in the context of “Snow White,” “Cinderella,” Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, and its other literary cousins, Carter asserts that her story is influenced by them, but also emphasizes her divergences from the traditional tale; she effectively puts the tales in conversation with one another by giving them moments of converging or overlapping discourse.

Angela Carter’s main divergence is in terms of characterization, especially of Beauty. Far from the paragon of virtue lauded by Beaumont, Lang, and others, Carter’s Beauty is vain, superficial, and narcissistic. With lines such as “such a one she felt herself to be, Miss Lamb, spotless, sacrificial” (45), Beauty shows herself to be self-conscious but not self-critical, dramatizing her position as a victim. “Her gaze falls uncritically upon herself, resolutely leaving her own surface unpierced, intact, virginal”

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26 In this story, also classified as AT 425C, the unnamed heroine is bargained away by her father to a dog, who carries her away to his mansion. When she wishes to return home, he refuses to let her go until she ceases to call him “a great, foul, small-tooth dog” and refers to him instead as “Sweet-as-a-Honeycomb.” When she arrives safely at home and voluntarily calls him that, he transforms into a handsome young man.
Beauty flaunts her purity and innocence, and she is defensive of her body even though the Beast shows no signs of aggression toward her, his only physical contact being when he kisses her hands. When Beauty returns home, she immediately succumbs to the glamour of her new life as a wealthy debutante, and it changes her: “She was learning, at the end of her adolescence, how to be a spoiled child and that pearly skin of hers was plumping out, a little, with high living and compliments…Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterizes certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats” (48-49). This episode of Beauty’s narcissistic trance in front of the mirror significantly occurs when she returns from the theatre; her vanity, Carter suggests, is her gender performance. That Beauty’s appearance is described as feline, connecting her to the leonine Beast, is another instance of irony, which Carter uses to probe at issues of gender identity: “Carter’s revision opens up ironic space that draws the reader’s attention to the self-conscious articulation of femininity” (Brooke 73). Angela Carter follows the postmodern tendency to question gender constructs, framing gender as performed rather than innate. The gender performances suggested in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” are developed further in “The Tiger’s Bride.”

Angela Carter’s use of exaggerated descriptions, such as a road that resembles “a spilled bolt of bridal satin” (41), excessive references to other fairy tales, and ironic characterization of Beauty are postmodern techniques that destabilize the classic fairy tale by giving her rendition of “Beauty and the Beast” a parodic tone. “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” is a mockery of the traditional courtship plot, and the vision at the end of the civilized couple strolling in their garden is as unsatisfactory as the extravagant ending of
Cocteau’s film. This “happy ending” is revoked by Carter’s sequel tale, “The Tiger’s Bride.” “Carter does not reject the folk narrative,” writes Patricia Brooke, “but through an ironic rewriting that draws parallels to the domestic marriage plot, she lays the groundwork for the desirability for beastly passion over domestication fulfilled by ‘The Tiger’s Bride’” (76).

“The Tiger’s Bride” essentially negates the previous tale by reversing every aspect of it, leaving the reader with two seemingly contradictory stories. In this story, which takes place in Italy, the Beauty character’s father gambles her away to the Beast, a strangely masked, inarticulate lord. When the girl arrives at the Beast’s palazzo, the only request that he makes of her is that she show him her naked body. Being a proud girl, she refuses. When he shows her his own unmasked, unclothed feline form, however, she capitulates. In the end, she chooses to remain with the Beast instead of going home to her wastrel father, and under the Beast’s tongue she transforms into a wild creature herself: “[E]ach stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs…my beautiful fur” (67).

“The Tiger’s Bride,” as much as or more than “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” makes reference to other stories, especially to other “Beauty and the Beast” tales. In the first scene, Beauty mentions that “the candles dropped hot, acrid gouts of wax on [her] bare shoulders,” an image which recalls “East o’ the Sun and West o’ the Moon” and the moment of the heroine’s revelation, when she holds a candle over her mysterious lover

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27 For the purpose of this argument, I am only discussing the references to the other “Beauty and the Beast” tales, but other intertexts include old wives’ tales about tiger-men and bear-children, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Carter’s own retold legend, “The Erl-King,” “Kublai Khan,” and Biblical stories.
and accidentally wakes him with a drop of hot wax. The situation is reversed, however, since the wax drips onto her shoulders instead of his. When Beauty departs, she gives her groveling father a rose, whereas in the traditional tale it is he that procures the rose for her. In the course of the story, the Beast sheds two tears, which change into diamonds that he gives to Beauty. This transformation is an inversion of Cocteau’s scene in which Belle’s tears change to diamonds. The final transformation is the greatest reversal of all: rather than the Beast becoming a handsome young man, Beauty becomes a lovely beast.

Patricia Brooke interprets the irony of the story as a reaction to the traditional tale: “In the textual discrepancy created through a reversal of the inscribed symbols and gestures of the preceding tales, ‘The Tiger’s Bride’ confronts its tradition, dismantling its restrictive implications” (79). Angela Carter revisits the “Beauty and the Beast” tale in order to question not only the classic tale, but also the sincerity of her own story, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon.”

The criticism of gender roles begun in Carter’s first tale is extended in “The Tiger’s Bride.” In contrast with the self-absorbed and oblivious Beauty of the first tale, the Beauty of the second tale is cynical and highly self-aware. The sentimental tone that suffused the first story is gone, replaced by the bitter outlook of a protagonist who recognizes that her body is nothing more than a commodity, her “sole capital in the world” (56), “the cold, white meat of contract” (66). Rather than cowering from the Beast, she confronts him, even intimidating him. In sharp contrast to her stands the mechanical doll, a replica of herself, that serves as her maid, just as the Beast’s natural form is disguised by outmoded clothing, excessive perfume, and the mask of a man’s face.

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28 A similar scene occurs in the myth “Cupid and Psyche,” except that Psyche holds a lamp and drips oil on her sleeping husband.
that is “too perfect, uncanny” (53). Beauty’s mechanical replica and the Beast’s costume represent the images to which an androcentric society would have them conform. Beauty rejects that image and sends the doll home to her father to perform the part of dutiful daughter, just as the Beast ultimately casts off his human clothing and perfume to prowl in his true form. “All the best religions in the world state categorically that not beasts nor women were equipped with [souls],” reflects Beauty (63), indicating that she and the Beast have in common their status as marginalized creatures in a world dominated by men. Their rejection of the gender roles they are supposed to play problematizes the happy ending of the classic tale and the patriarchal tradition behind it by positing a more desirable alternative.

Questioning gender identities to expose them as socially-conditioned performances is a postmodern technique with feminist implications. According to Cristina Bacchilega, “postmodern studies have advocated anti-humanistic conceptualizations of the subject, played with multiplicity and performance in narrative, and struggled with the sexual and gender ramifications of problematizing identities and differences” (19). Postmodernism and feminism have a common goal of questioning and subverting fixed categories, such as gender; both maintain that gender is a tool used by a patriarchy to limit opportunities for women. Feminist criticism “present[s] literature as a product of culture and gender as a social construction, not a biological given” (Benstock, et al. 155). Because of its constructed (as opposed to innate) nature, gender is performed by individuals according to socially-defined principles. Carter explores gender performance in her tales, undermining the patriarchal frame of the original versions.
Carter’s two consecutive retellings use techniques of repetition, reversal, and reference to question the tradition of the “Beauty and the Beast” story. By retelling a familiar story, Carter raises certain expectations because the story dictates a certain plot which the reader anticipates. Although she superficially fulfills these expectations with “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” leaving the reader with only a slight sense of dissatisfaction at the end, she overturns all expectations with “The Tiger’s Bride,” forcing the reader to reexamine his or her understanding of the story and the patriarchal ideology that frames that understanding. The heavily intertextual nature of the stories is an acknowledgement of their origins as well as an affirmation of their novelty. “Carter’s parodic revisions imply a continuity with and disruption of earlier models,” writes Brooke (85); by situating her stories within a given tradition but revising them to reveal the gender inequalities inherent in that tradition, Carter’s retellings question and destabilize the classic fairy tales.

Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee’s “Beauty” in her 1983 collection *Red as Blood (or Tales from the Sisters Grimmer)* converts the fairy tale to a science fiction story and combines the plot of “Beauty and the Beast” with suggestions of “Cupid and Psyche.” The protagonist, Estàr Levina, has never quite felt that she belongs in her society, and so when her father returns from one of his journeys with a rose, a summons from the alien people that cohabit their world, she knows that it is she who must go to live with the alien. At the alien’s dwelling on a mountain, Estàr finds that all her needs are fulfilled by an intuitive technology, she begins to discover her creative spirit through writing and music, and
when she finally dares to encounter the alien himself, she meets an intelligent being that is careful to avoid frightening her, even to the extent of covering every inch of his unusual body.

Although she has begun to feel at home on the alien’s estate and has developed romantic feelings toward him, Estàr returns to her father’s house to visit her family. Her father and sisters recognize that she has changed over the past several months, and they question her as to whether she is in love with the alien, specifically whether she is willing to become his lover. Seeing Estàr’s distress at the idea, her sister Joya suggests that she ask the alien to reveal his true form to her in order to see if it will repulse her. Estàr follows Joya’s advice and the alien complies with her request, but after she sees him naked she immediately flees for home. When she finally returns to the mountain, it is revealed that the reason for her flight was that she was intimidated by the otherworldly beauty of the alien and felt herself to be unworthy. The alien tells her the story of his people, and she learns that she herself is of his race, implanted in the womb of a human woman due to fertility problems in their own species. The rose which she was sent was a summons to return to her own kind and meet her intended mate. The two are able to appreciate each other’s physical differences and find one another beautiful.

The setting for this science fiction rendition of “Beauty and the Beast” is a futuristic Earth in which men (like Estàr’s father) are free to have children by different women, and women (like Estàr’s sisters) are permitted to have sexual relations with people of different races and genders; it is a society that accepts all kinds of sexuality. The story, then, like Disney’s later film, becomes a discourse on tolerance. Estàr’s personal and psychological development demands that she overcome her fears of the
alien’s otherness and come to terms with her own sexuality. Speculating about her father’s special affection for her, she summarizes one of the themes of her own story: “She wondered if one always loved, then, what was unlike, incompatible” (170).

Although it turns out that she and the alien are more similar than she could guess, they can only be compatible as lovers when they can perceive each other as “strangely, alienly lovely” (185). An implied discussion of xenophobia underpins the story; Estàr initially fears the alien for his otherness, but eventually comes to accept and even embrace it.

Lee’s most significant innovation in “Beauty” is to merge “Beauty and the Beast” with its literary ancestor “Cupid and Psyche.” Lee discloses to the reader that Estàr is named after “a distant planet, meaning the same as the Greek word psyche” (149), which confirms a connection to the myth. Her journey to the mountain where the alien lives is reminiscent of Psyche’s journey, supposedly to be sacrificed, to Cupid’s mountain. Her sisters, especially Joya, plant the idea in her head that she must unmask her shadowy lover, and Joya’s wry comment, “what would you like me to do…throw myself from a great height into the river?” (177) recalls the fate of Psyche’s selfish sisters, who throw themselves from the mountain in the vain hope that Cupid will rescue them. Finally, by making the otherness of the Beast’s alien body something that Estàr finds unbearably beautiful, Lee effectively resolves the contradiction between the animal groom of the “Beauty and the Beast” story and the divine lover of “Cupid and Psyche.” “By collapsing these two [that is, the Beast and Cupid] into each other, Lee indicates that aversion and attraction, beastliness and beauty…are two sides of the very same coin” (Griswold 228).

Although the alien bears some resemblance to a lion in form and Estàr initially fears him, she is able to change her perspective and see him first as a supernatural being, then as her
equal and complement. The Beast transforms into a god-like prince when the heroine learns to perceive him as such.

**Emma Donoghue**

With “The Tale of the Rose” in her work *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997), Emma Donoghue reconfigures the “Beauty and the Beast” tale from a lesbian feminist angle, undermining the heterosexual romance and bringing questions of gender and sexuality to the forefront. When the Beauty character is sold by her destitute father to a mysterious hooded Beast in exchange for a rose, she goes to the castle willingly and stays there until she sees in a mirror that her father is ill. Just before she leaves, the Beast tells her “I am not a man,” and Beauty wonders what horrifying monster the mask conceals, but the Beast simply says, “you do not understand” (37). Beauty returns home and tries to forget about her stay in the castle, until one day a mirror shows her the Beast’s prone form on the ground. She returns in haste and pulls off the Beast’s hood and mask to reveal a woman, the lost queen of the castle. She struggles with her revelation, but “after months of looking, [she] discovered that beauty was infinitely various, and found it behind her white face” (40). The story ends powerfully with the divergent perspectives of outside observers: “Some villagers told travelers of a beast and a beauty who lived in the castle and could be seen walking on the battlements, and others told of two beauties, and others, of two beasts” (40).

Emma Donoghue’s queer twist on “Beauty and the Beast” is more of an interrogation than a critique. The reader follows the protagonist’s journey of discovery, witnesses her struggles with a shocking revelation, and is invited to decipher the “riddles”
of a “new language” (40, 39) and decide whether to see the two women as beauties or beasts. Donoghue leaves the ending of this story (as well as the rest of the stories in the collection) open to different interpretations: “This cooperative storytelling situation creates the opportunity for multiple possible readings of the tales” (Orme 118). Unlike traditional fairy tales, Donoghue’s retellings do not end with the definitive declaration that the protagonists live happily ever after; rather, “the stories are open-ended and the narrators are aware of the uncertainty of their futures and the unlikelihood of unending happiness” (Orme 128). Like Angela Carter’s two retellings of “Beauty and the Beast,” one of which ends with a sugary scene of domestic bliss and the other of which unites the two protagonists as social outcasts, Donoghue’s “Tale of the Rose” destabilizes the idealistic ending of the fairy tale.

The lesbian twist that Emma Donoghue gives to the story is part of a larger literary and cultural movement known as “third-wave feminism.” The feminist movement divided in the 1980s when some critics objected to the way in which mainstream feminism represented women as primarily white and heterosexual. According to A Handbook of Literary Feminisms, “critics attentive to race and sexuality introduced a necessary corrective by pointing out the dangers of taking gender alone as a lens for critical investigation and reminding feminists to take differences among women into account” (Benstock, et al. 163). Seeking to affirm the individuality of women, feminist writers of the third wave, such as Donoghue, depicted women of different races and sexualities in order to break up the monolithic construction of womanhood. In Kissing the Witch, some of the protagonists enter into satisfying heterosexual
relationships, some find lesbian love to be more fulfilling, and others remain independent; the author does not generalize about female sexuality.

Donoghue’s story exhibits postmodern qualities when it alludes to other fairy tales, including several other “Beauty and the Beast” tales. The idea of the father, Jephthah-like, losing his youngest daughter because of a rash vow in which he sacrifices the first thing he sees when he returns home, comes from a branch of the 425C tale type which includes Grimms’ “The Singing, Soaring Lark.” While at the castle, the protagonist entertains herself by reading “tales of wonder” (36), another term for fairy tales, and she is given the key to every room in the castle except the Beast’s, like Bluebeard’s wives. Other allusions are made metaphorically: the “onion eyed” sisters (32) are drawn from the duplicitous girls who fake a display of emotion at Beauty’s departure in Beaumont, Lang, and Cocteau, and her father’s fright, compared to a lamb’s when surrounded by wolves (32), could be a reference to the Disney scene in which the father is attacked by wolves.

Besides the allusions within the individual stories, the structure of the book *Kissing the Witch* is highly intertextual. The stories are embedded in an internal frame narrative: the story passes from one narrator to the next when one of the characters asks another, “Who were you before” the events of the story, and the other replies, “Will I tell you my own story? It is the tale of __.” The title of each successive story derives from that imagined exchange. “The Tale of the Rose” is situated between “The Tale of the Bird,” a retelling of “Thumbelina,” and “The Tale of the Apple,” a “Snow White” story; the bird from the former tale becomes the narrator of “The Tale of the Rose,” and the hooded ‘beast’ narrates the next story. The motifs of flight and freedom from
“Thumbelina” and imagery of black, white, and red from “Snow White” intersect in the “Beauty and the Beast” retelling.

Donoghue’s innovative framing technique not only links the fairy tales to one another through shared themes, but also reminds the reader of the oral origins of the tales. Apuleius, Madame de Villeneuve, and Madame de Beaumont all use frame narratives to present their renditions of “Beauty and the Beast,” but later folklorists like Andrew Lang and the Brothers Grimm do not. The frame narrative, which often puts the story in the mouth of another teller (an old woman in Apuleius’s case, a governess in Villeneuve’s, and a chambermaid in Beaumont’s), is adapted from the oral tradition that gave rise to the tales. Donoghue invokes oral tradition in order to implicate the reader in the storytelling process. The construction of meaning is a collaborative effort between the teller and the audience, Donoghue suggests, just as the construction and evolution of a fairy tale is determined both by its author and its reception.

Part 2: The Tellers and Their Times

In the twentieth century, the tale of “Beauty and the Beast” breaks out of the canon of fairy tales and begins to colonize other genres: McKinley’s Beauty is a work of fantasy, Angela Carter’s two stories hover on the dividing line between fiction and fantasy, Tanith Lee’s “Beauty” is science-fiction, and Emma Donoghue’s stories are still fairy tales, but subversive ones. Vanessa Joosen observes the effect of contemporary revisions on the definition of the fairy tale as a genre: “On the one hand, the concept of

It has been argued, most recently by the scholar Ruth Bottigheimer, that fairy tales are essentially literary in origin because of their similarity across time and cultures, but this theory fails to account for the illiteracy of the majority of the population and does not, in my opinion, give enough credit to the tenacity and stability of memes. See Bottigheimer, Fairy Tales: A New History.
‘the fairy tale’ seems to have become so stretched that it threatens to lose all meaning. On the other hand, this elasticity has made it possible for the fairy tale to remain relevant to date” (303). In addition to shifts in genre, the stories also target a range of audiences, from young adult to more mature. One thing they all do have in common is their authors’ use of the cultural tools at their disposal, such as postmodernism and feminism.

The five stories I have selected to represent contemporary retellings of “Beauty and the Beast” illustrate the versatility of the story as well as the trends that it follows. Despite their differences in genre and audience, these stories share many significant qualities: they all take a feminist perspective, they make sexuality and perception the main issues of the story, and they employ intertextuality. The Disney film discussed in the previous chapter also attempts to redeem the character of Beauty as a feminist heroine, and it uses allusion to create parallels between the story, its literary and cinematic precursors, and other films, such as Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Not all late twentieth-century retellings are postmodern and feminist, but there is strong cultural and literary pressure to follow these trends.

All of the female protagonists of these stories (after McKinley’s Beauty) are independent, actively controlling their destiny, and even when that destiny is standard heterosexual marriage, the authors take pains to make it clear that the relationship is one of equals. Gone is the meek and submissive Beauty of the early versions; her type cannot exist in literature without being subject to feminist criticism. The feminist authors reclaim the “old wives’ tale” and use it to subvert the deep-rooted patriarchal values that have long structured and censored the tales.

30 Children’s books and picture books of “Beauty and the Beast” continue to be popular (for example, Marianna and Mercer Mayer’s illustrated version, 1987), but these versions will not be discussed in this thesis.
The issue of sexuality, first implicated in Villeneuve’s story with the Beast’s fear-inducing question, “Will you go to bed with me?” but edited out in subsequent versions, returns with a vengeance in many of these modern versions. The nameless heroine of “The Tiger’s Bride” discovers her true animal nature when the Beast licks her human skin off her; Estàr continues to fear the alien in spite of his kindness because of the perceived threat to her virginity; and the protagonist of “The Tale of the Rose” must confront her own desires when she realizes that she is in love with a woman. In all these cases, the burden of transformation rests on the Beauty figure’s shoulders, not the Beast’s: in McKinley’s Beauty it is the heroine who undergoes a change in perception; in “The Tiger’s Bride” it is the woman who is transformed into a Beast; in Lee’s “Beauty” it is Estàr who must overcome her own fears and sexual anxieties in order to recognize the beauty of the other; and in Donoghue’s story it is the protagonist who must accept her own non-normative desires.

The return of themes of sexuality to the story can be attributed to a number of cultural factors, one of which is the influence of Bruno Bettelheim. So great was the impact of The Uses of Enchantment that any reviser versed in the history and criticism of fairy tales (as Carter, Lee, and Donoghue have shown themselves to be) would be familiar with Bettelheim’s Freudian analysis. The relationship between literature and literary criticism is reciprocal; writers are conscious of the types of interpretation that will affect their work, which makes them operate under certain assumptions. “Just as every rewriting of a tale is an interpretation, so every interpretation is a rewriting,” claims Maria Tatar (Heads xxvi). Bettelheim’s Freudian interpretation of fairy tales frames them in terms of sexuality, and subsequent revisions of the tale respond to that
interpretation by either trying to eliminate hints of oedipal struggle from the story (Disney) or by emphasizing sexual anxiety (Carter, Lee, Donoghue). In a sense, revisers are rewriting not only the tale itself, but also the criticism of the tale.

The most striking similarity among these modern tales is their heavy reliance on intertextuality. From McKinley’s allusions to Greek myths to Lee’s integration of aspects of “Cupid and Psyche,” from Carter’s repetitions and reversals to Donoghue’s metaphorical mention of other fairy tales, all the stories in some way evoke their own history. In an essay on the individual author’s relationship to literary tradition, T. S. Eliot writes about the “historical sense” that all good writers must possess:

> The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence…This historical sense…is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer more acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. (37)

McKinley, Carter, Lee, and Donoghue all exhibit this historical sense, positioning their work in relation to the myths and fairy tales that founded “Beauty and the Beast” and thus affirming their continuance of the existing tradition, but also asserting their differences by making self-sacrificing Beauty into a feminist heroine and problematizing the happy ending of the original texts.

These authors recognize that their retellings do not exist independently of their sources, but within the framework of a specific genre that has been established, fortified, and altered over the course of centuries. One critic goes so far as to say that “intertextuality was embedded in the history of the fairy tale” due to its origins in oral tradition, and that contemporary authors’ use or exaggeration of intertextuality “moves the tales from the mythic timelessness of the fairy tale to specific cultural moments”
In other words, these authors reveal the culturally contrived nature of the fairy tale with their references, and then they add their own retelling to the canon, giving the tale a sense both of timelessness and of immediate cultural relevance as they tackle pertinent issues of sexuality and gender roles.

An aspect of intertextuality in revisions of fairy tales is an implicit dialogue with fairy-tale criticism. In light of Marcia Lieberman’s influential 1972 article, which criticized fairy tales as “serv[ing] to acculturate women to traditional social roles” (383) of passivity and helplessness, revisers have to be conscious of the psycho-social image of women that they present. After Bettelheim’s Freudian interpretation, exploration of sexuality becomes a common theme of retellings, as stated above. Literature can be either a creative instantiation of criticism or a reaction to it, but in both cases the two enter into dialogue. Vanessa Joosen argues that revisions and interpretations are linked by a shared goal: “What fairy-tale retellings and fairy-tale criticism have in common…is in a broad sense that both contain reflections on the fairy tale” (26). Literary revisions and critical interpretations of a fairy tale both aim to explore and perhaps reconsider the meaning of the tale, reevaluating it with new insights.

Postmodern and feminist discourses overlap in contemporary retellings of “Beauty and the Beast.” Both schools of thought are skeptical of the culturally defined categories of gender and question the binary construction of sexual identity. Literature instantiates this skepticism by depicting gender as performance and exploring the psychology of individuals conflicted about sexual identity. Third-wave feminism seems to be especially influenced by postmodernism: “Postmodernism challenged feminist
critics to avoid generalizing statements about ‘women’” (Benstock, et al. 177), which led to lesbian and racially-oriented subdivisions.

These contemporary versions have in common female authorship, as do most modern retellings of “Beauty and the Beast.” The tale was first penned by a woman, appropriated by men in the nineteenth century, and then reclaimed by women in the twentieth. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that women authors suffer from “anxiety of authorship,” the counterpart to the male author’s “anxiety of influence” as defined by Harold Bloom (Gilbert and Gubar 48-49): “The female writer’s battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process…she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who…proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible” (49). According to Gilbert and Gubar’s theory, women writers consciously look to the past to recover female role models; for Robin McKinley, Angela Carter, Tanith Lee, and Emma Donoghue, those role models are Madame de Villeneuve and Madame de Beaumont, the original authors of “Beauty and the Beast.”

“Beauty and the Beast” has proven to have a very stable plot, undergoing remarkably few changes from Madame de Villeneuve’s 1740 romance to Robin McKinley’s 1978 novel. Beginning with Angela Carter, however, authors begin to take liberties with the plot structure, changing the tale substantially by reversing the ending or recasting the Beast as a woman. Twentieth-century revisers view tradition from an independent ideological standpoint and force it to conform to their ideals. Jack Zipes praises the power of modern rewriters:

What distinguishes the great writers and storytellers is that they write and tell with a conscious effort to grab hold of tradition as if it were a piece of clay and to mold
it and remold it to see what they can make out of it for the present. They don’t view tradition as iron-clad, static, or settled, but as supple and changeable…They don’t worship the past and tradition, but demand that past and tradition justify themselves in the present. (Why Fairy Tales Stick 241)

Paradoxically, these retellings both affirm the tradition of the story by becoming part of it and critique it by radical transformation; the authors maintain the “historical sense” that T. S. Eliot describes, but they also assert their independence from tradition by making fundamental changes to adapt a tale to survive in a new cultural environment.

**Other Contemporary Versions**

For the most part, “Beauty and the Beast” revisions (and especially those that have received critical acclaim) follow the trends of feminism detailed above. Barbara Walker has a short story entitled “Ugly and the Beast” in her collection Feminist Fairy Tales which aims to critique the cultural valorization of beauty, and Greg Bear’s “Sleepside Story” switches the sex of every character to question the gender assumptions of the tale. In Francesca Lia Block’s retelling, Beauty discovers her animal nature through her relationship with the Beast, and she is deeply dissatisfied with his transformation into a man; in other versions, such as McKinley’s Rose Daughter, the Beast does not transform at all. Chris Anne Wolfe’s Roses and Thorns is an expanded take on Donoghue’s lesbian interpretation of the story.

The story of “Beauty and the Beast” is also popular material for Harlequin romances, which usually do not try to dismantle the patriarchal framework of the story, and it continues to be reproduced in fairy-tale anthologies, which often do not take liberties with the plot in the interest of “authentic” reproduction. With the exception of strands of literature like these, which are more concerned with retelling a story than
revising it, contemporary versions of “Beauty and the Beast” do aim to interrogate the tradition of the tale and expose it to critical reinterpretation.

Conclusion:
Disenchanting the Fairy Tale
The evolution of “Beauty and the Beast” over time has also involved geographic movement: the myth that inspired the story originated in Greece and was recovered by Italian storytellers, the tale by the name of “Beauty and the Beast” was born in France and soon passed to England, and many of the contemporary retellings, including the popular Disney film, are American productions. Mapping the course of the tale’s development, a trend of westward movement appears. This westward movement mirrors the shift of cultural dominance from ancient Greece to Renaissance Italy, from the court of the Sun King to the seat of the British Empire, and finally across the Atlantic to the capitalist power of the United States. Peaks of literature, which we call “classics,” often correlate with peaks of cultural power, and this correspondence is not coincidental. Civilizations on the rise to dominance frequently look to formerly dominant civilizations for models: the Roman Empire was strongly influenced by Greek culture, Imperial Britain modeled itself on Rome, and America has strong roots in British culture. One way in which a civilization asserts both its connection to and superiority over another is by appropriating the great literary works of that civilization through imitation and adaptation. Fairy tales like “Beauty and the Beast” are not always numbered among the great literary works of a civilization, but they are cultural artifacts that are passed from one society to another along with other traditions and literature.

Variability and Stability

31 I emphasize again that my selections represent only a sampling of the vast body of “Beauty and the Beast” literature and film. I have chosen my sources because they are canonical, and the process of canon formation is intrinsically bound to cultural dominance, which was a likely influence on the preservation and prestige of my chosen tales. Nevertheless, I believe that if an exhaustive study of “Beauty and the Beast” variants were made, this pattern of westward movement would remain intact.
Another pattern that emerges from study of “Beauty and the Beast” is that the aspect of the story most susceptible to change is characterization. The essential trinity of characters--Beauty, her father, and the Beast--is present in every one of the versions in this study, but Beauty can be depicted as submissive (Villeneuve) or defiant (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride”), educated (Beaumont) or frivolous (Lang), self-conscious (McKinley) or vain (Carter, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”); her father can be greedy (Villeneuve) or meek (Beaumont), selfish (Carter, “The Tiger’s Bride”) or selfless (Cocteau); and the Beast can be witless (Villeneuve, Beaumont) or wise (McKinley, Lee), incapable of controlling his temper (Disney) or his sexual urges (Cocteau). Different and even contradictory characteristics can be assigned to the same character because of the symbolic nature of the fairy tale. Just as the value and significance of symbols can change without any modification of the object itself (see discussion in Chapter 3), so the personality of the characters can change without any modification of their names or roles in the story; the signifier is multivalent, producing any number of signifieds. Each author redefines “Beauty” and “Beast” according to his or her interpretation of beauty and beastliness.

Shifting characterizations are one manifestation of the infinite variability of fairy tales. Variability is only one aspect of the fairy tale, however; it also has a stable center by which we recognize the similarities among an elaborate French romance, an animated film with dancing furniture, and a story of lesbian love. According to Betsy Hearne, “the core of motifs, images, characters, and conflicts remains constant. Yet the changes of form, detail, and tone show the tale’s elasticity” (1). Because of this core of similar
features, we can say that Villeneuve’s “La Belle et la bête” and Angela Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride” are, in some sense, the same story.

Some of the enduring motifs that Hearne identifies are the journey, the changing seasons, and the garden as a place of revelation. Although Hearne believes that these motifs are essential to the story, the story is still recognizable without them. The journey is often effected by magic, as in Lang’s version, where a magic ring transports Beauty from one place to another without any actual travel, or implied, as in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast when Belle mounts her horse and a second later is shown arriving at the Beast’s castle. In Carter’s revisions there is no mention of the changing seasons, though an indeterminate amount of time does pass. The scene of revelation does not always take place in a garden, though it does in Villeneuve’s, Beaumont’s, Lang’s, Carter’s “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” and Donoghue’s versions. In Cocteau’s film it takes place by a pond in the forest; in McKinley’s story it is in the Beast’s room; in Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride” it takes place in two parts, the first by a stream, where Beauty shows her naked body to the tiger, and the second in his room, where she transforms into a beast; and Disney’s takes place on the castle roof for dramatic effect. The motifs are not, then, essential to the story, but they are remarkably tenacious.

The reason that these particular motifs endure is that they are linked to one another and to the themes of the story. “Beauty and the Beast” is often cast as a story about maturation, which is metaphorically represented by a journey away from home and the discovery of a new home. The changing seasons reflect the passage of time as well as the characters’ psychological growth as they pass from bleak winter to spring, a season that bursts with the promise of new life. The garden is the incarnation of spring, and as
such it is the appropriate place for the characters to experience a sort of awakening, a
revelation about themselves and each other. In Richard Dawkins’ terms, these linked
motifs have formed “a co-adapted stable set of mutually-assisting memes” that “reinforce
each other, and assist each other’s survival in the meme pool” (197-98). The separate
memes join by virtue of their thematic similarities to form an evolutionarily stable
“meme-complex” that is the core of the story.

Pared down to its most essential features, “Beauty and the Beast” is a story about
a beauty, a beast, and a rose. The fundamental conflict is an encounter with the other,
which is resolved by unexpected love. How the “other” is portrayed--as an aristocratic
male, an immature monster with a temper, an alien, or a lesbian--determines how the
story should be interpreted, whether as an allegory for arranged marriage or a discourse
on maturity, xenophobia, or homosexuality. The story attracts themes that are relevant to
its social conditions.

Marina Warner provides a useful distinction between the universal significance of
a tale and its social conditions: “[T]he thrust towards universal significance has obscured
the genre’s equal powers to illuminate experiences embedded in social and material
conditions. These are subject to change over time” (Beast xxii). Warner recognizes that
there is both a universal, transcendent quality to fairy tales, for which they are often
considered ‘timeless tales,’ and a mutable, culturally-specific quality that comes from the
socio-historical conditions of their production. Betsy Hearne also reminds the reader of
the double nature of the fairy tale: “We must remember that the story is fundamental and
irrepressible, the meaning secondary and chameleon in that it shifts with time and
culture” (xiv, emphasis added). Unlike Warner, Hearne asserts that the universal aspect
of the tale, the “story,” is superior to its ideological conditions. Warner and Hearne would agree that both the transcendent and the material are essential to the fairy tale, the former to give it stability and familiarity and the latter to provide endless possibilities for variation.

**Applying Evolution**

The reason that I have used the scientific theory of evolution as a framework for a study of literature is that stories, like living organisms, need to be preserved and reproduced. They mutate in order to adapt to their environment, acquiring relevance specific to their society so that the society will remember, record, and reproduce them. Also analogous to biological species is the competition among literary works for limited resources, in this case a place on the bookshelf as well as a portion of memory space in the human brain. Cultural selection replaces the mechanism of natural selection in this scenario. Fairy tales are especially ‘fit’ literary forms both because of their adaptability (discussed above) and because of their compact and symbolic form: a glass shoe suffices to recall the story of “Cinderella,” an apple for “Snow White,” and a blooming rose for “Beauty and the Beast.” The entire story coalesces around a single object (a meme) packed with metaphorical power, making it more memorable than a complex and lengthy plot.

Richard Dawkins cites “longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity” as three attributes of memes, and of these he claims that fecundity is the most important because it is responsible for their reproduction (194). The longevity of an individual meme is less significant than the survival of its type, which is accomplished by the properties of
fecundity and copying-fidelity. Copying-fidelity, which can be defined as accuracy of imitation, is difficult to preserve, especially on a large scale. Because human beings are the hosts and agents of meme replication, every time a meme is copied it passes through the interpretive lens of the individual person, where it is reshaped (both consciously and unconsciously) by contact with other memes and meme-complexes in the brain. In terms of the evolution of a fairy tale, a teller reads or hears a tale (meme-complex), which replicates itself in his or her brain. The tale is filtered through the teller’s interpretation processes, where some memes are lost and new ones are added, producing a new version of the tale. The teller then propagates the modified tale in literary form, and subsequent readers replicate it in their brains; that is how literary traditions arise.

Memes are to literature as genes are to human beings. They are “unconscious, blind replicators” with no agency of their own (Dawkins 200) that reproduce themselves in different hosts in order to ensure their own survival. There are limits to the efficacy of the comparison between literature and biology: genes, for instance, have material substance, whereas “memes” are “structures of information” that must be “instantiated in material forms” such as songs, texts, practices, images, and brains (Drout 16). Overall, however, the comparison is fruitful.

The Magic of Fairy Tales

The fairy tale, though often disparaged as fanciful escapism worthy only of children’s interest, is a genre that has displayed both remarkable endurance and incredible plasticity. We have seen how these seemingly contradictory traits manifest themselves in the specific tale, “Beauty and the Beast,” but what it is about fairy tales as
a genre that gives them these powers has not yet been addressed. Returning to the
definition that I posited in the introduction to this thesis, I will search for the essential
qualities of fairy tales that make them so durable.

If a fairy tale is a “short, imaginative story in which a sympathetic protagonist
overcomes obstacles and achieves (material) happiness by means of a magical
transformation” (see Introduction), then its brevity, its imaginative quality, its plot, the
resolution, and the means of achieving that resolution (namely, by magic) must contribute
to its enduring success. The brevity of the story makes it easier to remember in its
entirety, while the imaginative aspect allows it to encode truth symbolically so that it can
be easily recalled by that symbol through the process of metonymy.

The plot, which seems generic in its treatment of a protagonist overcoming
obstacles, appeals to a universal human condition. The main character is sympathetic,
which means that readers can relate to him or her and identify with the character’s
situation and dilemma. Because the story deals with basic human problems (albeit
dramatized problems), readers often recognize a parallel between the events of the tale
and events in their lives and find the tale relevant to them personally. The resolution of
the plot, the promise of a happy ending, is a utopian ideal of happiness. “Fairy tales hint
of happiness,” writes Jack Zipes. “[They] map out possible ways to attain happiness, to
expose and resolve moral conflicts that have deep roots in our species” (Why Fairy Tales
Stick 152). Zipes imagines fairy tales as guidebooks to life that present an ideal goal and
provide instructions on how to attain that goal. Bruno Bettelheim’s understanding of
fairy tales accords with Zipes’s in this respect, except that Bettelheim theorizes that the

32 To elucidate with an example: although not everyone has been sent to an enchanted castle to
live with a beast, most people have experienced the discomfort of an unfamiliar social situation or
the anxiety of alienation.
relevance of fairy tales is in their symbolic depiction of psychological dilemmas. The possibility of actually realizing this ideal of happiness in the eucatastrophic ending constitutes a large part of the relevance and appeal of fairy tales.

The role of magic in the fairy tale has a special function. Tales of magic necessitate a suspension of disbelief on the reader’s part, a willingness to accept wholeheartedly whatever the story says. In fairy tales magic is made to seem natural, never extraordinary. Because the story is predicated on the absolute trust and credulity of the audience, anything the author writes is supposed to be accepted without resistance. The tellers can thus use their power over the reader to promote their own ideologies. This authority, combined with the allure of the happy ending, enables the teller to make ideological statements that will be interpreted as absolute truth. Madame de Beaumont wields this power when she endows “Beauty and the Beast” with a moral, exploiting the power of magic and the desire for happiness to encourage good behavior in children.

Fairy tales are good vehicles for ideological messages, which is one reason why they have been co-opted by so many revisers with different perspectives. Cristina Bacchilega identifies the relationship that fairy tales have with ideology when she defines them as “ideologically variable desire machines” (7). Magic disguises the artifice and contrivance behind the tale.

“Fairy tales survive because we love them” (Jones xiii), and we love them because they speak to our fundamental human struggles while also offering the tantalizing possibility of a joyous resolution. Although they supposedly take place once upon an indeterminate time in a distant land, fairy tales resonate with us, often on a

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33 Though a resisting reading is always possible.
subconscious level, because they are, in a sense, about us--about ordinary people in difficult situations, struggling to survive and find happiness.

**Conclusion**

Literary traditions exist to lend society a sense of stability and continuity; retelling stories that our parents, grandparents, or ancestors passed down to us gives us a sense of connection, of being part of a chain of transmission that links us to something older and greater than ourselves. Fairy tales, one of the most enduring forms of literature, seem to transcend linguistic, geographic, and temporal boundaries with their simple plots and magical transformations. “Ever just the same, ever a surprise,” sings Mrs. Potts in the animated Disney film, capturing the essence of the tale in a single phrase. The story that we read in the privacy of our homes or watch projected on a screen in a darkened theater has been enjoyed by courtly French aristocrats, Victorian children, and lesbian feminists over the course of hundreds of years. The magic of the fairy tale is its enduring power of appeal; it is a magic that is grounded in socio-historical circumstances, that combines the stability of literary tradition with the variability of a tale that is always familiar, but always new.

**Works Cited**


