

5.09 Beauty and the Beast: In the Eye of the Beholder

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music fade in]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome to The Community Library: a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice, and today we're talking about everyone's favourite bookworm and her grizzly love interest! That's right, it's *Beauty and the Beast*.

[theme music fade out]

Intro

Angourie [host]

Once upon a time I discovered the world of Disney-Princess-themed BuzzFeed quizzes. BuzzFeed was one of the few fun websites not blocked by my high school's internet system, and so my friends and I would do quizzes at lunch time in the library, or between tasks in class. And every time I would cross my fingers and hope for Rapunzel from *Tangled*, and every time I would get Belle. Why? Because her defining trait was that she liked reading, which was also my defining trait. Bummer. If you haven't visited The Community Library before, hello, I'm Angourie. I'm an actor, and podcaster, and I make episodes about books, movies and pop culture. I love comparing classic literature with current media, and looking at how stories survive and are adapted over time. This episode is the latest in a series in which I look at Disney Princesses and compare them with their original fairy tales. So far, in chronological order of their Disney films, I have covered: *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Frozen*. If you'd like to listen to the episodes about the princess films that preceded *Beauty and the Beast*, you are most welcome to, I'll have them all linked in the show notes for you, but it's not required to understand this episode.

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History

Beauties and Beasts

Beauties and Beasts have been falling in love all throughout mythology and folklore. The Greek myth of Eros and Psyche – also known as Cupid and Psyche – is thought to be one of the earliest versions of *Beauty and the Beast*, though it doesn't include roses or magical

mirrors. It's a very long and beautiful story, which I don't have the time to recount here, but a few key elements stick out: we have an enchanted castle, a disguised master –that's Eros – and an unwitting girl – that's Psyche. It's hard to determine what qualifies as a version of *Beauty and the Beast* when looking at the history of folklore, because the enchanted animal spouse is quite a popular fairy tale trope. Folklorist and academic Betsy Hearne writes in *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale*: '*Beauty and the Beast* is a subtype which entered the folk tradition from the literary, with evidence of overlapping geographical distribution of oral and printed version.' So *Beauty and the Beast* is special because it isn't explicitly a written version of an oral tale, like the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White*, nor is it a completely original tale, like Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. *Beauty and the Beast* is a combination of both.

Villeneuve

But to discover the first written version of *Beauty and the Beast* as we know it today, we must travel to eighteenth-century France, and meet our first female fairy tale author: Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. Villeneuve was born into a rich family and married into a rich family, but requested a separation from her husband just six months into their marriage. Five years later, he died, Villeneuve's riches became rags, and she had to find a way to make money for herself. Sometime during the 1730s, Villeneuve made her way to Paris to become a writer, where she met famous playwright Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon, who agreed to publish her works. In 1734 her first novella was published, followed by a collection of fairy tales in 1740: *La Jeune Américaine et les contes marins*, or *The Young American Girl and Tales at Sea*. In this collection was *La Belle et La Bête*, or *The Beauty and the Beast*. As Betsy Hearne writes, Villeneuve's tale was written 'not for children but for the entertainment of court and salon friends.' And when you read it, you can tell. Villeneuve's version is 187 pages long in the original printing, and the unabridged version isn't widely circulated: in fact, it is not readily available for free online, I had to pay \$3 on iBooks to get a version, and ... was it worth it? I don't know ... Villeneuve's tale goes beyond the simple story of Beauty and Beast. The point at which you'd expect the 'they all lived happily ever after', the prince's mother arrives, as does the fairy who orchestrated the whole thing. [voice speeds up] The fairy tells the prince's backstory, it is revealed that Beauty's father is actually a king, and then the fairy tells Beauty's backstory, and then it is revealed that Beauty's mother is a fairy queen, who then arrives herself and tells her own backstory. [voice resumes normal speed] It's all very convoluted and kind of ... no offence ... but kind of dull. And I have to admit, I did not read it all. Though Villeneuve's languid prose is really beautiful, it's easy to see why this is not the version of *Beauty and the Beast* we all remember today.

Beaumont

Betsy Hearne writes: 'Folktales are not always profound or even coherent, much less moving. No telling is above modifications.' And this is exactly what happened with Villeneuve's *Beauty and the Beast*. Enter our next female fairy tale author: Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Born in France, Beaumont emigrated to London in 1745 after separating from her husband; the minor French aristocrat Grimard de Beaumont. Hearne writes 'she established herself as a tutor and writer of educational and moral books.' In 1756 she published *Le magazine des enfans*, translated as *The Young Misses Magazine*, which included a 17-page retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*. Beaumont's tale was directed at

young girls, as the title may suggest, with an aim to teach and advise. Fairy tale academic and disability activist Amanda Leduc writes:

‘We can speculate that the tale was meant primarily for young women who were being passed back and forth in arranged marriages; the you’ll-come-to-love-him moral of *Beauty and the Beast* was more likely intended as a balm to those who were facing their new lives with some degree of trepidation.’

And Beaumont streamlined the story by cutting the convoluted recounting of backstory and describing the settings, objects and characters only sparingly. The result? A simple and effective story that became the blueprint for all *Beauty and the Beast* retellings to come. And it goes like this ...

[twinkly fairy tale music fade in]

Once upon a time, there was a rich merchant who lost all his fortune at sea. With great despair, the merchant moved his three sons and three daughters to a cottage in the country. His two eldest daughters were unhappy with the move, but the youngest was so charming and sweet-tempered, that she did not mind. She was not only the kindest, but also the most beautiful, and went by the name of ‘Beauty’.

One day, the merchant received word that one of his ships had safely arrived in the harbour, a promise of a fraction of their wealth to be restored. As he was leaving to meet the ship at the docks, his two eldest daughters begged of him to buy them new gowns, headdresses and ribbons as gifts. But when the merchant asked little Beauty what she would like, she replied: ‘Only a rose.’

The merchant went on his journey, but when he arrived at the ship, there was trouble with allowing the goods to be claimed, and after a great deal of pains to no purpose, he set off home as poor as before. On his journey, it rained and snowed terribly, and as night fell, the merchant spotted a light in the distance. He ventured closer, and discovered it was a glorious palace. Relieved to have found a place to stay for the night, he went inside, and was surprised to find it entirely empty, though the fire was burning and the table was set for one. The merchant warmed himself up, dined, and then slept, and as he was getting ready to leave the next morning, he remembered Beauty’s request. In the garden, he took a rose, and suddenly heard a great noise, and saw such a frightful Beast coming towards him! ‘You are very ungrateful,’ said the Beast in a terrible voice. ‘I have saved your life by receiving you in my castle, and, in return, you steal my roses, which I value beyond anything in the universe, but you shall die for it.’

The merchant fell on his knees and begged the Beast to forgive him, explaining he only wanted the rose for his daughter. The Beast listened, and told the merchant he would let him go, on condition that one of his daughters would willingly come in her father’s place. The merchant agreed, and promised to return in three months with one of his daughters. The Beast told the merchant he shall not leave empty handed,

however, and instructed him to fill a chest with whatever treasures he may please, to bring home to his family.

So the merchant left the palace with a chest full of riches, with resolve to not let one of his daughters go in his stead, but rather to leave them with the fortune and go back himself to the Beast's palace in three months. But when he saw his family, he could not bear to keep the secret, and told them everything that had happened. Beauty felt it was her fault, and insisted that she should take her father's place as prisoner of the Beast. No one could persuade her otherwise, though her elder sisters did not try very hard, for they had always been jealous of her beauty.

And so Beauty went to the castle and became Beast's prisoner, and though she was sad, in her dreams on her first night a beautiful lady appeared, and said: 'This good action of yours in giving up your own life to save your father's shall not go unrewarded.' The next day, Beauty discovered a wing of the palace that was entirely her own; with a library, a harpsichord, several music books, and a magical looking glass, which showed her father arriving home to her brothers and sisters, looking dejected. At dinner the Beast was kind and cautious, offering Beauty anything she might desire, even if she wished for his absence. At the end of the meal, the Beast asked her: 'Beauty, will you be my wife?' To which Beauty replied: 'No, Beast.' She was afraid he would lash out, but the Beast only bid her goodnight, and left the room.

Beauty spent three months very contentedly in the palace. Every evening Beast paid her a visit, and far from dreading the time of his visit, Beauty would look forward to it. Though every night, Beast would ask her to marry him, and every night, Beauty would refuse. The Beast was unhappy, but comforted himself knowing that Beauty would stay with him forever. But when Beauty expressed desire to see her father, Beast consented. 'I had rather die myself than give you the least uneasiness,' he said. 'I will send you to your father, you shall remain with him, and poor Beast will die with grief.' Beauty loved the Beast too well to be the cause of his death, so she promised to return in a week. With the help of a magical ring, Beauty was transported back to her family.

Beauty spent a week so happily with her family, and told them all about her happiness in the palace with the Beast. Her sisters, who were unhappily married, were quite jealous, and so they conspired to convince Beauty to stay longer than a week, so that the Beast would get angry at her for breaking her word and eat her up. Beauty consented to staying a little longer, but on her tenth night away from home, she dreamt the Beast was dying in her absence. When she awoke, she admonished herself for being ungrateful to the Beast and causing him so much pain, and so Beauty used the magical ring to transport back to the palace.

There, she found Beast dying, just as she had seen in her dream. 'No, dear Beast,' said Beauty, 'you must not die. Live to be my husband. I thought I had only friendship for you, but the grief I now feel convinces me that I cannot live without you.' At that moment, the palace sparkled with light, there was fireworks and music, and Beast

disappeared, transformed into one of the loveliest princes that Beauty had ever beheld. She was so surprised, and could not help asking where Beast was. 'You see him here,' said the prince. 'A wicked fairy had condemned me to remain under that shape until a beautiful virgin would consent to marry me.' Beauty was surprised and pleased, and let the prince lead her to the castle, where her family was waiting to congratulate her, along with the beautiful fairy lady she had seen in her dreams, who praised Beauty for her goodness, and turned the jealous sisters into stone. The prince and Beauty were married, and lived together for many years, and their happiness – as it was founded on virtue – was complete.

The End.

[orchestral fairy tale music fade out]

There are a few things in here that we recognise: the rose, the magic mirror, even Beauty's love of reading. But the tone of this story is quite different from the Disney film, especially in the way that the Beast is represented. Today I'm going to take a more structured approach to my discussion. I'm going to introduce a few different fields of study through which to look at *Beauty and the Beast*: animal studies, disability studies, and women's studies. Through these theories, we can begin to unpack *Beauty and the Beast*, and what it might tell us about our culture and the way we represent certain ideas and people through story.

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Animal studies

One of my favourite podcasts, *Witch Please*, introduced me to the academic field of animal studies. Animal studies refers to the cultural representation of animals. It asks the question: how does our representation of animals tell us about how we construct the category of human? Because the category of 'human' is just that: it is constructed. Biologically, structurally, culturally, humans aren't exclusively different from animals. The distinction between human and animal is ideological. Ideology is, and I quote here from Hannah McGregor in the podcast: 'our imagined relationship to the real conditions of our existence.' In other words, it's how an individual or a group of people understands the world by creating connections, distinctions, or groups. So the animal-human boundary is not a biological one, it's an ideological one. It's a means by which to define 'us' by defining that which is not us: that which is 'animal'. And as with any imposed distinctions comes a network of power: who constructs these categories, and who determines who is included and who is excluded? The history of defining the animal and the human is deeply linked with white supremacy, colonisation, and violence against people of colour. Hannah McGregor says in the podcast:

'Within human relationships, rendering the other animalistic as a way of dehumanising them in order to justify violence against them, that works because of this whole ideological understanding that we have that to be human is to be not animal.'

She goes on to say:

‘Lots of scholars have also pointed out not only that the animal and human divide is a patriarchal divide and a settler colonial divide, but is also at the root of white supremacy and how white supremacy has been articulated.’

The insistence on separating the animal from the human is not politically neutral; throughout history (and still, to this day), the discourse has worked to further white supremacy in deciding who is included in the category of ‘human’, and who is treated as such, vs. those who are not. As Hannah McGregor puts it, this is a means of ‘generating and maintaining power.’

And so we see this animal-human divide at work in the fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast*. To begin with, there is a distinction in Beast’s animalistic appearance. Villeneuve is quite descriptive; she writes of ‘the terrible clank of his scales,’ ‘a trunk, resembling an elephant’s’, and ‘two horrible paws.’ Beaumont, meanwhile, is much more frugal, leaving her description at ‘frightful’ and ‘ugly’. Immediately, *Beauty and the Beast* establishes the animal as that which is dangerous, violent, and should be feared. But then ... Beauty comes to learn that she must not be misled by appearances. And in the end, she does learn; you know, she agrees to marry Beast despite his ‘bestly’ appearance. And, that’s a good moral, right? Surely by now you’ve learnt that these fairy tale morals are never what they seem. On the surface, *Beauty and the Beast* actually plays with the distinction between ‘animal’ and ‘human’. Our hero is a human enchanted to look like an animal. In contrast, Beauty’s evil sisters’ husbands are humans with beastly personalities. Over dinner in the palace, Beast laments: ‘my heart is good, but I am still a monster.’ Beauty replies:

‘Among mankind [...] there are many that deserve that name more than you, and I prefer you, just as you are, to those, who, under a human form, hide a treacherous, corrupt, and ungrateful heart.’

But the thing that makes the Beast redeemable, our romantic hero, is the qualities that distinguish the category of human: empathy, loyalty, love. While Beauty herself distinguishes what it means to be a monster / animal: it is to be treacherous, corrupt, ungrateful. The story still maintains the ideological differences between the human and the animal. And beyond that, the moral of not judging a book by its cover is completely undermined by the ending of the story – something which has been pointed out many a time. After Beauty consents to marry the Beast, he is released from his enchantment, and transforms back into his ‘true’ form: a beautiful prince. Beauty has learnt her lesson, now there is no need for her to endure the beast, now they can live happily ever after.

Disability studies

The transformation at the end of the fairy tale is crucial to how we understand the representation of the Beast. Beast is marked visually as ‘other’, and once Beauty learns to love the ‘other’, she is rewarded by his transformation into a body that is both beautiful and recognisable, and functions as ‘normal’. And so another way we can look at the Beast is

through the lens of disability studies. My main source for this section is the book *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability and Making Space* by Amanda Leduc, specifically her chapter on *Beauty and the Beast*. Disability studies aims to, as academic Lennard Davis puts it: 'question the idea of normalcy.' Fairy tales are filled with dichotomies: human/animal, good/bad, beautiful/ugly, normal/other. All of these dichotomies are ideological, like we've just explored with the human/animal divide. The idea of normalcy is ideological, too, constructed as a means to 'other' groups of people, and maintain the power of those who do the othering.

But how is Beast treated as an 'other'? Specifically, as someone whose difference manifests itself outwardly? Well, at first Beauty is frightened by his appearance, but then she gets to know the Beast, and her fear morphs into pity. Beaumont writes: 'When Beauty was alone, she felt a great deal of compassion for poor Beast. "Alas," said she, "'tis a thousand pities, anything so good natured should be so ugly.'" Beauty is able to see beyond Beast's exterior enough to acknowledge that there is more to him than meets the eye, but his physical difference is still a key factor that inhibits her from feeling anything towards him but pity. She feels sorry for him, and thus Beauty, and the story as a whole, paints Beast as a victim of his own difference. But she learns to love him completely, right? I mean, her pity turns into love in the end? Well, I mean ... not exactly. Here's what Beauty says right before she decides to leave home and go back to the Beast: 'It is true, I do not feel the tenderness of affection for him, but I find to have the highest gratitude, esteem and friendship.'

So, her motivation to go back to the Beast has this sense of duty and nobility around it. She's not going back because she loves him, but because she feels obligated. And as a result, she's giving up her life at home with her family. It's self-sacrificial. But *why* does this have to be a sacrifice? As Leduc points out: 'surely there is nothing innately noble about loving someone who looks different from those around them.' Well, it's a sacrifice because Beauty isn't only giving up life with her family, she's giving up a life of normalcy and happiness. Leduc writes:

'Hemmed in by expectations of what it means to look different and be different in the world, society is unable to see how happiness might be wrestled from a life like this. And so the focus shifts to curing: a world without wheelchairs, a world where beauty follows a predictable and prescribed pattern.'

This pattern is made explicit in the story of *Beauty and the Beast*. One could argue that Beauty and the Beast would find happiness in their true love, no matter what the wider world's attitudes to difference were, but if that were the case, the tale wouldn't place so much emphasis on Beauty's sacrifice. And anyway, we do not live in that fairy tale ending for long, because the Beast must always become a prince. Which is so stupid. It's so stupid! The ending of this fairy tale simply does not make sense. I've said it before, I'm gonna say it again. The Beast's transformation completely undercuts the moral of the story – not that it's even a great moral to begin with. 'Look past appearances,' the tale tells us, 'Beauty is found within!' But once Beauty learns her lesson, she's rewarded with a handsome prince. No need for the ugly beast, anymore. He's not welcome here.

Of course this fairy tale follows the pattern of so many others, in that it concerns itself with the transformation of the individual, rather than the transformation of the world. Leduc writes: 'Beauty is the thing that is lacking and is fulfilled at the end, further underscoring the idea that in the stories, beauty comes to those who deserve it.' The fairy tale also underscores the idea that 'beauty' – or at least, society's understanding of what visual beauty is – is the only thing that will guarantee you a happy ending. There is no happy ending for the Ugly Duckling who never grows up into a beautiful swan, just as there is no happy ending for the untransformed Beast. The individual must change to fit the world, rather than the world changing to fit the individual. And the implication of these stories cuts deep; it suggests that there is no happiness, dignity, or light to be found within difference, only in conformity.

Women's studies

So we've been talking a lot about the 'and the Beast' half, but let's talk about Beauty for a moment, through the lens of women's studies, or feminist critique. Reading a text through a feminist lens means looking at the way the text explores gender. But it's important to keep in mind that feminist theory and feminist literary criticism is a huge field of study that intersects with many other fields of study, including but not limited to animal studies, disability studies, postcolonialism, queer theory, critical race theory – in fact, all these fields of study are connected in more ways than one. So, something I find very interesting about *Beauty and the Beast* is that its most famous variants are all written by women: Villeneuve in 1748, Beaumont in 1756, and Disney's 1991 film adaptation is the first Disney Princess film to be written by a woman: Linda Woolverton. Can we see the effects of this in the fairy tale? Is it more 'feminist' because it was written by two women?

Well ... hmm. Interesting question! First we must understand the context in which Beaumont wrote her tale. As I mentioned before, the aim of Beaumont's writing was to teach and advise young girls about many things they would have to face in the world: marriage, family, perhaps even 'beastly' men. It was not a radical collection of tales promoting rebellion – if it were, it probably would not have become the sensation that it did. Beaumont's Beauty is very recognisable as a mid-18th Century fairy tale heroine. 'She was such a charming, sweet-tempered creature, spoke so kindly to poor people, and was of such an affable, obliging behaviour.' She is kind, self-sacrificing and whistles while she works. And Beaumont isn't subtle about her message to young girls. She writes:

'Beauty sat down in the great hall, and fell a crying [...] but as she was a mistress of a great deal of resolution, she recommended herself to God, and resolved not to be uneasy in the little time she had to live; for she firmly believed Beast would eat her up that night.'

Even in the face of death, she puts on a pretty smile. I've spoken before about why this trope of the ever-smiling princess is a harmful one. It never shows women resisting what's dealt to them – take every hit without making a fuss. But the interesting thing about Beauty is that she actually does offer up some resistance in her relationship dynamic with Beast. It happens at supper, when Beast asks: 'Beauty, will you be my wife?' Here, Beauty says one word we almost never hear come out of a princess's mouth: 'No'. It's a word that

contradicts everything a good fairy tale princess should be: passive, agreeable, and obliging. And it's quite remarkable, because at this point in the story, Beauty stays true to what she wants and believes in, even if it means ruffling some feathers, or ... fur. Haha. Get it? Anyway. But this doesn't make Beauty a feminist hero in Beaumont's text. The power of Beauty's 'No' is undermined twofold: one, because the Beast eventually persuades her to say yes – not that that's a bad thing, women are allowed to change their minds of course, but two, because the text frames this 'no' as the wrong thing to do. Beaumont makes it very clear to us: the Beast is 'kind and good, and that is sufficient' reason for Beauty to marry him. The 'no' is symbolic of Beauty's moral inferiority: she can't see past his exterior. Looking at the structure of the story and Beauty's character arc, she says 'no' until she learns to say 'yes'. There is no happily ever after for a woman who says 'no'. It goes without saying that this is a harmful message to promote to young girls, and we can see the effects of it today – not just from this story, of course, but from centuries of stories that conform to this structure. Beauty says: 'I shall always esteem you as a friend, endeavour to be satisfied with this,' which we would now just call 'friendzoning'. And the motto of the story? Well, with enough persistence and coercion, you can get out of the friendzone – a narrative that has endured today.

But there is one clue in Beaumont's text – that is also present in Villeneuve's – that I believe hints that the story was written from a uniquely female perspective. It's when Beauty hesitates to answer Beast's proposal 'for she was afraid of making him angry, if she refused.' A similar line is also present in Villeneuve's version of the tale: 'This love made her apprehensive of some violence.' I think this is a very poignant detail that points to an overarching power dynamic between Beauty and Beast, and a gender dynamic, too. It shows that women's reluctance to refuse a man isn't because she's weak, or that she doesn't want to refuse, but because of the expectation of violence in response to rejection. It's an menacing undertone, especially because of how true it rings today.

So, we've looked at this story through three different lenses. And listen ... I've really struggled to find a good message in here. Have I, for the first time, come up against a fairy tale that is ... unsalvageable? Maybe we'll find something redeemable in the next famous retelling of the story, which attempted to turn the feeble Beauty into a feminist icon and the roaring Beast into a romantic hero ... Let's talk about Disney's 1991 *Beauty and the Beast*.

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Disney: 1991

We began our journey in the golden age of Disney with *Snow White* in 1937, through the silver age with *Cinderella*, and its downfall with *Sleeping Beauty*. But here we enter a new age of Disney: the Renaissance, hot off the heels of their comeback Disney Princess film: *The Little Mermaid*. So Disney was faced with a problem: how to follow up the roaring success that was *The Little Mermaid*? And how to do it in three years? Previously, the shortest time between the release of two Disney Princess films had been nine years, and the longest had been twenty.

Beauty and the Beast was been a fairy tale Walt Disney had always wanted to adapt. According to Ollie Johnston, who worked at Disney 1934 to 1978, Walt had asked the team to brainstorm ideas for the movie in the 40s, ‘probably before Cinderella’ – but any work that had been done on it was lost. Come the late 80s, CEO of Disney Michael Eisner was determined to save Disney Animations, and in the later stages of *The Little Mermaid’s* production, he got to work on adapting *Beauty and the Beast* as the next feature. He decided to hire a screenwriter, which was a first for a Disney animated pictures, Bob Thomas writes in *Disney’s Art of Animation*: ‘Until the late Eighties, Disney animated features had always been conceived on storyboards, then went directly into production.’ Not only was Linda Woolverton Disney’s first screenwriter, but she was also a woman! She had previously published two YA novels and written a few short animations for Disney, and was brought on board to write a non-musical screenplay of *Beauty and the Beast* in around 1987. She continued to work with the directors, story men, animators, and eventually Howard Ashman and Alan Menken when they were added to write the music and lyrics. The combination of Woolverton’s carefully plotted script and Ashman and Menken’s vibrant music slated *Beauty and the Beast* to be a success. And that it was.

After its premiere in LA on the 13th of November 1991, the reviews rolled in. Janet Maslin writing for the New York Times said ‘the new film is so fresh and altogether triumphant,’ and even went so far as to say of Belle and Beast’s ballroom dance: ‘the viewer would be well advised to bring a hanky.’ Roger Ebert gave it 4 out of 4 stars, expressing his surprise at his joyful experience in the theatre: ‘I wasn’t reviewing an “animated film.” I was being told a story, I was hearing terrific music, and I was having fun.’ And it only went up from there. It won two Oscars, three Golden Globes and a Grammy – the first animated feature to be nominated and win in many of its categories. There’s no doubt that critically and commercially, *Beauty and the Beast* was a huge success. But ... how did I feel about it when I sat down to re-watch it? After all, this is my podcast.

Well, I should probably begin by saying that *Beauty and the Beast* was never a favourite of mine growing up. And I honestly don’t remember why, cause the songs were really fun, Belle was sweet, I remember even listening to the bonus track *Human Again* on my iPod shuffle. But I preferred other Disney Princess films for some reason. And re-watching *Beauty and the Beast* as an adult, I’m actually surprised that I didn’t like it as a child. Cause I was bookish, dreamed of beautiful libraries like the one in Beast’s castle, and I often felt like I was destined for ‘so much more than they’ve got planned,’ as Belle sings. But I think all kids feel that way. But as I watched the entire 1 hour and 24 minutes of *Beauty and the Beast*, and enjoyed the catchy songs, Belle’s cleverness and Lumière’s outrageous French accent, I discovered that the one thing I really could not get past was Beast himself. He was more than ‘coarse’ and ‘unrefined’, as Belle describes him, he was mean and scary. As a child, perhaps I found him annoying, as an adult, I found him abusive. So although I usually begin my discussion of the Disney film with the Princess, today I’m actually going to start with the Prince.

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The Beast

In previous Disney Princess episodes, I've spoken about how we can identify storytelling conventions to help us understand the protagonists, antagonists and main themes. One story convention is to begin the film with the main character. *Beauty and the Beast* does begin the film by introducing an important character, but it's not the beautiful Belle, it's the Beast. The film opens like most Disney Princess movies do, with a narrator setting up the fairy tale, accompanied by images in the stained glass windows of the castle. The deep-voiced narrator tells of a 'spoiled, selfish, and unkind' young prince, who turned away an old woman who asked for shelter from the storm, offering only a rose as payment. The old woman warned the prince not to be deceived by appearances, and turned into a beautiful enchantress, cursing the prince to transform into a hideous beast! She vanished, leaving the rose as a ticking time bomb. 'If he could learn to love another, and earn her love in return by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time.'

In most of the original fairy tale variants, including Villeneuve and Beaumont's, the story begins with Beauty, and Beast's backstory isn't revealed until the end. Beginning the tale with Beauty is really important, because it places the audience in Beauty's position. We see the story through her eyes, know no more than she does when she meets the Beast, and therefore we sympathise with her and understand her. She is our point of contact to the story; a representation of the reader.

Disney takes a different approach by beginning the film with Beast and framing him as the protagonist. The prologue introduces the narrative building blocks that make up a story: desire, problem, and stakes, all of which are Beast's. He wants freedom, but he can't get it without first learning to love, and if he doesn't solve this problem, he's doomed to a cursed eternity. And so the audience is immediately asked to sympathise with Beast and invest in his story. And when does Belle come in? The last line of narration asks the question: 'Who could ever love a beast?' At which point, dawn breaks on this poor provincial town, and the beautiful Belle steps out of her little cottage to begin her day. Beast has the problem, and Belle is introduced as the answer. Sure, she has a desire: she wants 'more' than the life expected of her – though what that 'more' is, is never really made clear. She doesn't appear to have a clear obstacle, though, other than the town's disapproval, and the stakes are non-existent.

So the opening narration changes the audience's relationship to Beast, and the story as a whole. We don't see him through Belle's eyes because we know more than her, and we are on his side. Even when he's mean and cruel to Belle, we want Belle and Beast to be together – if not for the sake of Beast, then for the sake of the poor servants, otherwise cursed to remain teapots and candlesticks forever. The quest of the film becomes: how can we coax this young woman into falling in love with this man to solve all his problems? This arc is no better or worse than that of the original fairy tale, just different. Beaumont's version didn't really have a quest, or stakes. It's a lesson in virtue and submission, held together by not much plot. So, I really do understand Disney's decision to introduce Beast as the protagonist: his desire and conflict is directly lifted from the original tale. I don't mind these changes at all, but there is one crucial difference in Disney's Beast which makes all of these narrative changes very problematic, and that is: the Beast is truly beastly.

The moral of ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’ is made redundant twofold in this film. One, because of the transformative ending – which we’ve already unpacked – and Two, because Beast’s mean exterior actually perfectly matches his behaviour. He doesn’t just look mean and scary, he is mean towards Belle, and he intentionally scares her. How can the moral be ‘do not be deceived by appearances’, if Beast’s appearance is not deceiving at all, and in fact a true reflection of his insides? Furthermore, the film actually shows us that Belle doesn’t need to learn to look beyond appearances. She is not deceived by Gaston’s good looks, she knows he’s rotten to the core. So perhaps this film isn’t actually about looking beyond appearances at all, but rather about a woman learning how to coax the inner beauty out of a man. Belle becomes Beast’s teacher, and she is the one who solves all his problems and helps him transform into a better person. Is this moral any better than the original?

Well, this change in Beauty and Beast’s relationship dynamic highlights the disparity of responsibility, and I think that’s a big problem. A text that really guided my understanding of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* was an essay by Susan Jeffords entitled: *The Curse of Masculinity: Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*, published in the 1995 essay collection *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells. That’s a mouthful. Jeffords points out that the key problem in Disney’s adaptation is Beast’s victimisation. Though the opening narration may suggest the prince deserved his curse as punishment, the film tends to place the blame elsewhere. He was ‘spoiled’, suggesting that it wasn’t his fault he was unkind – the next adjective to describe him – but rather the fault of those who indulged him. And of course we get that age old adage from the Wardrobe, encouraging Belle to go to dinner with Beast. She says: ‘The master’s really not so bad once you get to know him. Why don’t you give him a chance?’ This particular phrase suggests that men are allowed to behave badly, so long as they’re really good on the inside – an inside that they only show to a select few who put in the time and emotional labour to discover it. Sound familiar? As Susan Jeffords puts it:

‘[I]n contrast to the commanding, sophisticated, and intelligent Beasts that frequent the other tales and that finally make him so deserving of Beauty’s love, this Beast seems childish, blustering, “clumsy”, petulant, and untutored. As with his upbringing and his initial acquisition of his selfish personality, the Beast does not have to take responsibility for his behavior. It is the work of other people, especially women, to turn this childish Beast into a loving man. The message is clear: if the Beast has not changed before, it is not his fault, but that of those around him who failed to show him otherwise.’

Now I think it is true that groups of people have to take responsibility for enabling toxic people to continue their bad behaviour, but in the cast of *Beauty and the Beast*, it absolves the Beast of any responsibility for his – not just bad behaviour, but abusive behaviour. Imprisonment, manipulation, intimidation and verbal abuse, just to name a few. One could argue this is Beast’s response to the traumatic circumstances of living in a dark castle with only objects to talk to, but the prologue told us he was like this before the curse, too.

So, Belle tames the Beast, but this moral of unlearning violent behaviours is also contradicted at the end of the film. When Gaston comes to kill Beast, he initially doesn’t fight back. He’s lost the will to live because Belle has left him for good. But when he sees

Belle has come back to be with him, he finds the strength to fight back against Gaston. It of course becomes a physical fight between these two men; it's a showdown of masculinities. And as I was watching this fight, I wondered how different Beast and Gaston actually are. The film presents them both as violent and domineering men. Both command Belle to do things, and both are outraged when she rejects them. The difference between them appears to be that Beast owns a library, while Gaston scorns Belle's reading. Though I would like to point out that it's made clear that Gaston can't read books without pictures, but nothing is said about Beast's reading ability, or that he even likes books, all we know is that he owns a lot of them! But the other difference between them is that Belle spends all her time avoiding one, and is forced to spend time with the other, to whom she eventually comes around. I can't help but wonder if, you know, following Disney logic, Belle had been forced to live in a castle with Gaston, would she have transformed him, too? I mean, Gaston is, one could argue, a Beast who remains untransformed by the end of the film, though by contrast he is held responsible for his actions by accidentally falling to his death. Classic Disney. But I wonder if this discrepancy in responsibility is reflective of Beast and Gaston's difference as characters, or more that Disney just labelled one 'hero' and the other 'villain.' Either way, the hero of this film is made through a woman's emotional labour – a woman who is, let's not forget, held captive and threatened with violence and starvation if she does not do the Beast's bidding. There you have it, right: that's Belle's solid objective, to change Beast? Hmm ... I think we should unpack that a bit more. Let's talk about:

The Beauty

Linda Woolverton was clearly set on writing a distinctly different Disney Princess in Belle. In *Disney's Art of Animation*, which was published in 1991 as a companion behind-the-scenes look at the making of *Beauty and the Beast*, Woolverton said in her interview:

'It's very difficult to take the originals and convert them into a story that works for the Nineties. [...] You have to make sure that your themes are strong, that people can relate to the characters, that the story isn't sexist. Belle is a strong, smart, courageous woman. [...] She's a Disney heroine who reads books. It excites me. We've never seen that before.'

In fact, everyone interviewed in this book – the animators, producers, creatives – everyone seemed to be excited about Belle being a new and improved heroine. Disney seemed proud they were creating a strong and modern role model for young women. But the story that Linda Woolverton tells now is a very different one. In an interview with *EW!* in 2016, Linda spoke about the difficulty of trying to create a different type of Disney Princess:

'You have to understand that the whole idea of the heroine-victim was baked into the cake, especially at Disney. [...] every day was a battle of making it happen. Every single line of her dialogue was a battle.'

Watching the Disney film, I could see the makings of a great feminist heroine in Belle. While Ariel was open and unabashed about what she wanted – sometimes to her detriment – she was also naïve, and needed protecting. Belle, on the other hand, is a much more mature

heroine, both in age and temperament. She keeps her cards close to her chest, and is clever about getting what she wants. She misdirects, tells half-truths, and appeases the right people, while never revealing her true motivations. She's cleverer than those around her, and she knows it. And it is quite remarkable that she has an actual hobby! Belle is also resistant to the familiar Disney Princess trappings of taking everything on the chin with a smile. She resists Beast – at least at the beginning – stands by her convictions, and allows herself to cry when she's upset, unlike Snow White and Cinderella. Belle herself, I believe, is a wonderful heroine. The problem isn't her, but more the way she is used in the story.

Belle, for all her beauty, smarts and dignity, is marked as the outsider in the town. Belle is the only valid woman, and her exceptionality is highlighted visually, lyrically and tonally. In a town of orange and brown, she wears blue. She sings of adventure, while the three Bimbettes – no, I did not make that up, that's literally what they're called in the script – sing only of the 'dreamy' and 'cute' Gaston. Belle's voice is deeper and more mature, while the Bimbettes are characterised by their high-pitched, shrill voices. Painting Belle as the female exception doesn't do much for *Beauty and the Beast* as a feminist text. It promotes a clichéd dichotomy of women: that most of us are stupid and shallow, and women like Belle are a rare find.

And like I mentioned before, Belle's function in the narrative is to solve Beast's dilemma. Her 'I Want' song is lyrically very similar to Ariel's *Part of Your World* – both of them yearn for adventure beyond the life expected of them. But while Ariel's dream is clear and specific, Belle's dream is vague: 'I want adventure in the great wide somewhere', and 'I want so much more than they've got planned', she sings. But like ... like, what? And, as if to further push the point that Belle is not the protagonist of this story, she actually doesn't get what she wants. I'd hardly call Beast's castle, which is just on the edge of town, an 'adventure in the great wide somewhere.' Beast's castle is yet another microcosmic society with kooky characters enclosed in a small space, just like her provincial town. I mean, sure, he's got a bigger library, but a golden cage is still a cage. But the thing about Belle is that she might not have a distinctive idea of what she wants, which is fine, but she knows what she doesn't want, and that's a domestic, married life with Gaston. And yet ... this is kind of what Belle gets in the end. She finds happiness and fulfillment not in her dreams of adventure, but in the domestic life of marriage she adamantly didn't want. And this is perfectly fine in itself. The thing that bugs me is the inconsistency! And I think this is my overarching problem with Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*: it is filled with character contradictions and conflicting messages. The character's desires, key themes and arcs don't really make sense. And, look, I didn't pick up on any of this when I was younger, I was probably just scared of the Beast. And you may think I'm analysing this way too much for a kids' movie, but I promise you, I am giving this the same scrutiny as all the other Disney Princess films!

The Mob Song

When I got to this point in writing this episode, I was like: what am I missing? How does this film have the highest audience-score on Rotten Tomatoes of all the Disney Princess movies – only tied with *Aladdin*? Like, am I just a grinch for a good love story? Like, what is wrong with me? So I asked around, and I read some more reviews, and I noticed two words that kept popping up when I talked to people about why they loved the movie: magic and music.

Of course, this film is magical. I feel like all Disney Princess movies are a little bit magical, and if I hadn't been watching with a critical eye, or if it was a nostalgic childhood favourite, I think I would have been swept up in it more, so that's on me. But one thing I really could appreciate about this movie was the music. With music by Alan Menken and lyrics by Howard Ashman, the songs in *Beauty in the Beast* are whimsical, catchy and clever. *Belle* is a Broadway musical opener, *Be Our Guest* is a feast for the eyes and ears. Ha, get it, a feast? Anyway. And the title song is just precious, no wonder it won a Grammy. But there's another song in this film that I'd forgotten about, which stood out to me as one of the best parts of Disney's adaptation, and that's *The Mob Song*. Now if you, like me, have forgotten about it, *The Mob Song* occurs when Belle shows the townspeople Beast's image through the magic mirror, in order to prove that Beast is real and her father isn't crazy and making it all up. Her plan succeeds in proving Beast isn't made up, but it backfires because Gaston realises Belle loves Beast, and he decides to generate fear among the townspeople as justification to kill the beast. The main hook of the song is, in fact 'Kill the Beast!'

The Mob Song is Gaston's second song, which is strange considering Beast doesn't get a song at all – he only sings one verse on *Something There*. But *The Mob Song* was my favourite, because in the space of three and a half minutes, it demonstrates how a power-hungry leader uses fear-mongering techniques to not only gain followers and further his own agenda. Right after Belle says of the Beast: 'I know he looks vicious, but he's really kind and gentle,' Gaston spins a better narrative, and a more convincing one, because it plays into the townsfolk's already ingrained fear of difference – as demonstrated towards Belle in the opening number. Gaston says: 'The beast will make off with your children, he'll come after them in the night. We're not safe 'til his head is mounted on my wall. I say we kill the beast!' His story is then immediately reflected in the opening lines of the song, retold by various townsfolk. They sing:

'We're not safe until he's dead. / He'll come stalking us at night. / Set to sacrifice our children to his monstrous appetite. / He'll wreak havoc on our village if we let him wander free!'

Listen to the song, it's way better. The song also includes spoken dialogue, such as Gaston's calls to action that sound an awful lot like political slogans: 'It's time to take some action, boys!' he says, and 'If you're not with us, you're against us.' A few of the mob's lines also ring uncomfortably true: 'We don't like what we don't understand, in fact it scares us,' and another: 'Here we come, we're fifty strong, and fifty Frenchmen can't be wrong.' I like this last one a lot, because it accurately displays the echo-chamber they've created for themselves. It shows the self-assuredness and comfort in numbers: because so many others believe the same, they can't be wrong. It's a cycle of validation.

Of course all these issues of misinformation, echo-chambers and divisive schools of thought are particularly relevant to today during the coronavirus pandemic. And originally, I had written a paragraph about how misinformation has spread very dangerously over the past year, especially when it comes to vaccines, but I decided against it, because it has been said before, and it has been said better. I will link to some short videos and articles in the description on this topic, and one I recommend in particular is by Hank Green from vlogbrothers. And I'd also like to say that I am very grateful to everyone who has gotten

vaccinated, and to all the nurses, doctors, scientists, leaders, volunteers, first-responders who have worked so hard to get people vaccinated and keep people safe. I am very grateful to have gotten the vaccine myself, and that everyone in my family is vaccinated.

But moving right along. Another thing I like about *The Mob Song* is that Gaston is the leader of the mob. I mean, of course he is, he's the villain of the film. But I like this in particular because it's a turning point for his character. In the first half of the film, Gaston is just that annoying person we all know who won't take the hint that you're just not into them. But Gaston doesn't stop, his behaviour keeps getting worse and worse the more he realises he won't get what he wants. And when he's finally rejected by Belle, in front of the whole town no less, that's when his violence and aggression escalates. And then audience realises: it's not about Gaston wanting Belle, it's him wanting power and control. And I think that's what makes Gaston a really interesting villain. In showing this behaviour taken to the extreme, the film highlights the sinister undertones of that seemingly harmless persistence. Because the villains of the world aren't always magical sea witches or scorned half-brothers, but often just the ordinary guy who gets angry when doesn't get what he thinks he's entitled to – whether that's money, sex, or even more power than he already has.

That seems like a pretty grim note to end the episode on. Like, from all the tellings and retellings of *Beauty and the Beast*, that was the one thing I liked? Like, how depressingly realistic the Disney villain is, and how these fear-mongering tactics are particularly relevant to today? I mean, yeah, that was my favourite thing. I think, of all the fairy tales I've covered in this series, *Beauty and the Beast* was the trickiest to find something that I really loved about it, but it definitely made for a very interesting discussion – at least, I hope it did. I guess the one thing I can seek solace in is that Gaston is still the villain of the story, and Beast is still the hero – however much I may despise him, haha. And at the end of the day, Belle is the voice of reason who asks for depth, compassion and critical thinking when confronted with things we don't understand, rather than resorting to fear, aggression and violence. Belle demonstrates the delicate yet important balance of keeping an open mind, while also staying true in her convictions. As Mrs. Potts sings in the title song, it can be 'bittersweet and strange, finding you can change, learning you were wrong.' And though she doesn't sing this in the song, she implies that it's all worthwhile.

[theme music fade in]

Thank you very much for listening to this episode, I know it was a long one! If you'd like to catch up on the other episodes in the Disney Fairy Tale series, I'll have them all linked for you. I have covered *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and now *Beauty and the Beast*. I also did an episode on *Frozen* with my sister, which was very fun. As always, I consulted many books, journals and articles to help with this episode, all of which will be listed on my website, angourieslibrary.com. You will also find citations for all of the quotes I used, because I love bibliographies, and you should too. On my website is also a full transcription of this episode [Hi, transcription readers!]. As we are approaching the end of the year, I'll be taking a break from creating Disney Fairy Tale episodes – they take a lot of time and a lot of effort to make! – but in the new year you can look forward to *Aladdin*. And then after that I believe it's *Pocahontas*, and then *Mulan*, a great trilogy of movies there. So

Angourie Rice – The Community Library

I will talk to you in two weeks' time, and until then, stay smart and stay safe out there, kids.
Bye.

[theme music fade out]