

## Comparing Versions of Beauty and the Beast

**By Jemimah Halbert**

This essay will examine and compare three variations of the Beauty and the Beast tale, and examine the ways in which each version has transformed the meaning of the tale.

Variations of the Beauty and the Beast tale can be found in many different cultures and oral story-telling traditions around the world. This essay will focus on three literature versions of the tale: that is, versions written by a single author and adapted from the oral tale. The first is titled 'Beauty and the Beast' and was written by Madame Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1757 (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 26). The second version to be examined is 'Walt Disney's Beauty and the Beast', a film version by Walt Disney studios released in 1991. The third version to be examined is Angela Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride', published in 1993, which is a reworking of the more widely accepted version.

### **'Beauty and the Beast', by Madame de Beaumont (1757)**

Madame de Beaumont's version of the Beauty and the Beast tale is written in the third person, and begins with a wealthy merchant who loses his fortune and must move his family to the country. He has three daughters and three sons, and the youngest daughter, known as Beauty, is 'not only more beautiful than her sisters, she [is] also better behaved.' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 32). Beauty makes the best of her situation, but her sisters dislike living in the country, and inflict their unhappiness on Beauty. One day the merchant is called back to town, and two of the daughters request various expensive things from him, while Beauty asks only for a rose. He becomes lost on his journey home, and finds himself at a beautiful castle with large grounds and gardens. There is food and a bed waiting for him and the merchant stays the night in the castle. The next morning he picks a rose to give to Beauty, and suddenly a terrible Beast appears, angry that the merchant has taken one of his precious roses. The Beast agrees to let the merchant go only if he, or one of his daughters, swears to return and die for taking the rose. The merchant returns home to farewell his children, but

Beauty refuses to let him return to the castle without her, intending to take his place. She says 'I feel fortunate to be able to sacrifice myself for him, since I will have the pleasure of saving my father and proving my feelings of tenderness for him' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 36). Beauty and her father return to the castle, where she convinces him to leave her there to the Beast. The Beast has a room prepared for her and delicious meals for her to eat, and it becomes clear that he does not intend to kill her. Every night he arrives while she eats dinner, and before they part he asks her if she will consent to be his wife, and every night she politely refuses him. Beauty lives in the castle this way for three months, when she sees through a magic mirror that her father misses her terribly, and that her sisters have married and moved away, and her brothers have joined the army and left their father all alone. So Beauty begs the Beast to let her visit her father, and the Beast makes her promise that she will return in a week, or he 'will die of grief' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 39). Beauty returns home for a week and is pleased to see her family. Her sisters are both unhappy in their marriages, and plot to make Beauty unhappy by keeping her away from the Beast for longer than a week, in the hope that he will eat her for breaking her promise. Beauty has a dream that the Beast is dying without her, and she returns to him immediately. When she finds him he says 'You forgot your promise. The thought of having lost you made me decide to starve myself.' To which Beauty replies 'No, my dear Beast, you will not die. You will live and become my husband.' At which point the Beast turns into a prince, telling her that an evil fairy condemned him to remain in that form 'until a beautiful girl would consent to marry me' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 41). They then go into the castle to find that Beauty's whole family is there, along with a grand fairy, who turns her evil sisters into stone for being 'full of malice and envy.' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 42), and Beauty and the Beast live for 'a long time in perfect happiness, for their marriage was founded on virtue.'

In the end it is Beauty's virtue and self-sacrifice that wins the Beast's redemption and return him to his original form. The contrast between the behaviour and consequent fates of Beauty, who is selfless, and that of her sisters, whose hearts are 'filled with malice and envy'

(*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 42), essentially sums up the lesson of the tale: that a girl can be selfish or self-sacrificing and her reward will be corresponding. In Beauty's own words 'It is neither good looks nor great wit that makes a woman happy with her husband, but character, virtue and kindness, and the Beast has all those good qualities. I may not be in love with him, but I feel respect, friendship, and gratitude toward him.' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 40)

### **'Walt Disney's Beauty and the Beast', by Walt Disney Studios (1991)**

This film version of the Beauty and the Beast tale begins with an arrogant young prince who refuses an ugly old woman a night's refuge in his castle in exchange for a rose. She turns into an enchantress and casts a spell on the prince and his entire castle, turning him into a Beast and everyone in the castle into manifestations of their purpose, for example the house-keeper becomes a teapot and maids become feather dusters.

Many years later, an eccentric old inventor, Maurice, and his beautiful daughter, Belle, are living in a 'small provincial town' near the Beast's castle (Disney, 1991). Neither character quite fits into the small town, but both are generally happy. One day Maurice leaves for a fair to exhibit an invention, and on the way becomes lost and finds himself at Beast's castle. Beast is angry when Maurice trespasses in his castle, and holds him prisoner. Belle finds her way to the castle and finds her father in a prison cell. She offers to stay in her father's place because he is sick and she does not want him to die in prison. Beast lets Maurice go and holds Belle to her promise, but the enchanted servants of the castle give her a nice room and food to eat and show her around the castle. Gradually she and Beast fall in love and the servants are hopeful that she will soon break the spell on them all. However, through a magic mirror Belle sees that her father has been trying to rescue her and is still sick, and she begs Beast to let her go and take care of him. He lets her leave because he loves her, even though the time limit for breaking the spell is nearly up. Belle rescues her father, but they are set upon by Gaston, an attractive but brutish man who has previously tried to force Belle to marry him. When he

learns of the Beast he incites the townspeople to amass and kill him. Belle and her father are locked in their cellar, and the townspeople, led by Gaston, march upon the castle to kill the Beast, but are overcome by the enchanted servants. Gaston climbs the castle and tries to kill Belle, but falls from a tower in his attempt to finish her off. Belle arrives at the last second to kiss the Beast and tell him that she loves him, seconds before the time limit is up for breaking the spell. The Beast then turns into a handsome prince, the servants return to their original forms, and Belle and the Beast are married and live happily ever after.

Disney's version of this tale is about the transformative power of love, or, more specifically, the power of the individual to overcome obstacles and achieve a goal; the Beast is turned back into a prince by achieving Belle's love and learning to love her in return. The corresponding theme is that beauty is not an indication of character, not only in the Beast's ugliness but also in Gaston's attractiveness: Gaston is the real beast of the story. In the end the Beast proves his love for Belle by giving her the freedom to leave him, whereas Gaston proves his beastliness by trying to force Belle to marry him because she is beautiful, and thus disregarding her freedom in favour of his selfish desires.

### **'The Tiger's Bride', by Angela Carter (1993)**

This version of the Beauty and the Beast tale is written in the first person, and as such the reader immediately empathises with Beauty and her fate. The story begins with Beauty's father gambling her away in a game of cards with the Beast. She is taken to the Beast's palace, which she describes as 'dismantled, as if its owner were about to move house or had never properly moved in; the Beast had chosen to live in an uninhabited place' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 57). The Beast's valet takes her to the Beast's room, where he requests that she remove her clothes so that the Beast may see her skin. She refuses him, and he cries a single tear. She is taken to her room, where she is attended upon by a mechanical doll that holds a magic mirror, in which Beauty can see her father drinking and crying that he has lost her and his fortune to the Beast. Beauty identifies herself with the doll: 'That clockwork

girl who powdered my cheeks for me; had I not been allotted only the same kind of imitative life amongst men that the doll-maker had given her?' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 62).

The next day she is taken to the Beast again, and again refuses to remove her clothes, and he cries another tear. Afterwards, the Beast's valet gives her the Beast's two tears as earrings, and requests that Beauty come horseback riding with them, and as she loves horse riding she agrees. They ride through the frozen, wintery grounds to a river, where the Beast removes his mask and costume and is revealed as a tiger. The valet again requests that Beauty remove her clothes, and she does, and she feels '...at liberty for the first time in my life' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 63). They soon return to the palace, where Beauty is put into a more comfortable room. She sees, through the magic mirror, that her father's fortune has been restored to him because of her willingness to reveal herself by the river, and the valet informs her that she is free to leave and return to her father whenever she wishes. She refuses, and says she will '...dress her [the doll] in my own clothes, wind her up, and send her back to perform the part of my father's daughter' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 64). Then she takes off all her clothes, puts on the tear-earrings, and goes to the Beast. The valet also undresses and is revealed in his animal state. The Beast has abandoned 'the empty house of his appearance' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 65) and advances on Beauty, and his purring shakes the palace and it begins to disintegrate. He licks Beauty,

'each 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 earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 66)

Carter's version of this tale is an extended metaphor for sexual awakening, in which Beauty shrugs off the repressive society that has always infuriated and rejected her. The palace, the valet, and Beauty and the Beast all return to a state of nature rather than

continuing with the man-made façade they inhabit at the beginning of the story. Thus, in the end Beauty is turned into a beast, rather than the Beast turning into a prince.

At the beginning of each story Beauty's family is explained: de Beaumont's Beauty has two sisters, three brothers and a father, whereas Disney and Carter's versions both cast their Beauty as an only child cared for by a father. De Beaumont gives Beauty a larger family so that she can be compared with her sisters, and she is praised as the most beautiful and virtuous of the merchant's daughters. De Beaumont's version is an instructional tale for children, and she uses comparisons within the family as examples of how little girls should and should not behave. Disney and Carter, however, have focussed their stories on the development of the Beauty and the Beast characters, rather than placing them as examples for good behaviour.

In Disney's version of the tale the evil character is not a family member, but Gaston, a sort of counterpart to the Beast. Gaston is destructive, vain, shallow and violent, all of the things that Beast has been charged with changing about himself. In the end, Gaston is destroyed through his own violence and arrogance, and Beast is redeemed by overcoming his violence and arrogance. This detail again shifts the overall meaning of the story from de Beaumont's instructional to Disney's power of the individual. In Carter's version of the tale, Beauty's father is the main evil, along with the society which he is a part of. Beauty, in this story, ultimately lets go of any attachment she has to her father and to society by embracing her beastly, sexual nature and becoming a tiger, therefore shrugging off the man-made world and accepting her natural, animal self.

The Beast's castle in de Beaumont's tale is described as beautiful, with extensive grounds and gardens, and the only inhabitant is the Beast. Disney's version has the castle and all its inhabitants enchanted along with the Beast as part of his punishment, and Carter's tale

describes the Beast's palace as 'dismantled' and 'uninhabited', and in the end the palace disintegrates with the purring of the Beast and Beauty's transformation. This detail fits with the overall meanings of each story: both de Beaumont's and Disney's Beauty and Beast characters become human, are married, and live in the Beast's castle happily ever after. However, in Carter's version the overall meaning of the tale is that Beauty embraces her animal nature along with the Beast, and the palace, which was not whole or beautiful or warm to begin with, falls away along Beauty's material, human self.

In de Beaumont's story the prince was turned into a Beast by an evil fairy who 'condemned me to remain in that form until a beautiful girl would consent to marry me. She barred me from revealing my intelligence. You were the only person in the world kind enough to be touched by the goodness of my character' (*The Classic Fairy Tales*, 1999, page 41). In other words, the prince was turned into a Beast not as a punishment, but as an exercise in finding a particular kind of wife. This small detail focusses the tale on Beauty and her power of redeeming a Beast back into a man through her kindness, goodness and virtue. Disney's version of the tale has an enchantress turn the prince into a Beast as punishment for his arrogance and shallowness, and is therefore more about Beast learning to love and be loved, and therefore redeeming himself through his efforts. It is not made clear how or why Carter's Beast tries to take on the form of a man, but it is implied that he must find an innocent companion to counteract and accompany his beastliness, which fits with the overall meaning of sexual awakening.

In conclusion, the Beauty and the Beast tale can be found in many different forms with many different meanings. This essay examines three versions of the tale adapted by individuals: de Beaumont's instructional tale 'Beauty and the Beast', Disney's film 'Walt Disney's Beauty and the Beast', which endorses the power of the individual to overcome obstacles and achieve goals, and finally Angela Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride', in which a young

woman discovers and embraces her sexual, beastly nature and herself becomes a beast.

These three tales are similar in their plot, characters and events, but the meanings of each story are remarkably different due to the author's inclusion, exclusion and transformation of details in each version.



## References

Tatar, M. (Ed.). (1999). *The Classic Fairy Tales*. (1999). New York, U.S.A.: W.W.

Norton and Company, Inc.

De Beaumont, Madame. (1757). *The Classic Fairy Tales. Beauty and the Beast*.

Norton Critical Edition Disney, W. (1991). *Walt Disney's Beauty and the*

*Beast*. California, U.S.A.: Walt Disney studios.