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# “The Guy with the Problem”: Reform Narrative in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

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**ABSTRACT:** When Disney's film *Beauty and the Beast* was first released in 1991, it was hailed by critics as a departure from the problematic portrayals of women that had plagued the company's previous efforts at converting fairy tales into animated features. Since then, feminist criticism has provided several different interpretations of the film, some of which seek to assign *Beauty and the Beast* to a specific literary genre. In looking at Disney's film as a literary text, critics such as June Cummins have argued that it most closely resembles a patriarchal classic romance, while others, such as Susan Swan, view it as a liberating Gothic novel. However, although the film borrows from the tropes and conventions of both of these genres, it most closely resembles a narrative of male reform through its plot, message, and visual signifiers. A reform narrative, such as Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*, features a male figure who is transformed through the presence of a virtuous female. Along with the similarity in plot, *Beauty and the Beast* adopts the reform narrative's exclusive focus on male change, its propagation of female innocence, and its idealization of domestic space and domestic virtue.

**KEYWORDS:** *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney, feminism, gothic, fairy tale

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## ESSAY

During the opening number of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, the heroine, Belle, becomes the owner of her favorite book whose plot she later describes: "It's my favorite part because, you'll see / Here's where she meets Prince Charming / But she won't discover that it's him, 'til chapter three." Unbeknownst to her, Belle is foreshadowing her eventual encounter with the Beast, as well as the film's overarching moral that appearances are deceiving: Belle's favorite book is really her own plot in literary form. The significance of literary texts to the film is not limited to this scene. Throughout *Beauty and the Beast*, the film incorporates the signifiers, as well as the messages, of literary fiction, and, more specifically, of the novel. Critical discussion of the film has been concerned with describing its structure through the assignment of literary genres: novelistic tropes, such as the film's courtship plot and gloomy, Gothic setting, have led critics to align the film with romances and Gothic novels. Yet *Beauty and the Beast* sits uneasily in a single genre's mold. Instead, a literary style such as the reform narrative, which incorporates the conventions of several genres, more accurately describes the film's structure, plot, and feminist stance.

In fact, the feminist implications of differing genres heavily inform past criticism of *Beauty and the Beast*. Upon its initial release, the film was lauded as forward thinking and feminist, but June Cummins sees only a rehash of past gender stereotypes: "a romance plot that robs female characters of self-determination and individuality" (22). Cummins claims that, behind its feminist façade, the film follows in the footsteps of previous Disney efforts, such as *The Little Mermaid*, by privileging love over values and courtship over adventure; in doing so, she argues, Disney styles its film as a modern fairy-tale romance in which marrying a prince is a woman's only road to happiness. Susan Swan disagrees with Cummins's assessment, arguing that the film most closely resembles a Gothic novel through its visual signifiers, its plot structure, and its exploration of the animal-human paradox. Gothic novels emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, near the time that Madame Leprince de Beaumont wrote her fairy tale version of *Beauty and the Beast*, upon which the Disney film is based; the Gothic genre became popular in the late eighteenth century due to authors such as Ann Radcliffe, whose novels are filled with mysteries, suspense, and fallen homes (as represented by the castle) (Ferguson Ellis ix). The parallel that Swan draws between Disney's

film and the Gothic novel distances *Beauty and the Beast* from Disney's past body of work, for, in her study of Gothic feminism, Diane Hoeveler notes that the genres' heroines are "anything but entrapped, passive, and docile" (6). She and other critics argue that these novels often portray male father figures as negative and dangerous characters, while Gothic heroines fight against and triumph over the oppression of patriarchy (Bienstock Anolik 90-91; Hoeveler 9; Punter and Byron 279)<sup>1</sup>. Because it portrays a mutually maturing couple within the Gothic model, Swan argues that *Beauty and the Beast* succeeds in presenting a feminist message while still focusing part of its energies on romantic love. Yet, although Disney's film is informed by multiple genres including romance and the Gothic, its plot and characters most closely follow a narrative of male reform, such as that of Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*. Rather than presenting a Gothic story of female liberation, or even focusing entirely on romantic love, *Beauty and the Beast* adopts the reform narrative's exclusive focus on male change, its propagation of female innocence, and its idealization of the domestic sphere and virtue.

In the narrative of male reform, a "beast," or immoral male, must be transformed into an ideal husband through the example of a virtuous heroine. In *Pamela*, Richardson's first novel, the title character works as a servant in the household of Mr. B, a squire. What begins as kind attention from Mr. B soon turns into a plot of seduction and attempted rape against Pamela, who virtuously resists her master's assaults. Determined to make Pamela his mistress, Mr. B kidnaps the heroine and detains her in one of his secluded residences. In the end, Pamela's dogged maintenance of her chastity wins over the heart of Mr. B, who is transformed from her seducer to her husband through their marriage. Nancy Armstrong argues that the heart of this transformation is the replacement of desire for the female body with desire for female virtue (109-10); Mr. B must learn to love Pamela, not for her sexual potential, but for her domesticity, piety, and chastity.

<sup>1</sup>Although Michelle Masse argues that the Gothic sensualizes women's oppression, she also acknowledges that Gothic heroines "sometimes manage to use culture's yoking of masochism and romance to assert identity and to influence those around them" (8).

Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* is similarly concerned with change in its male protagonist: in a *Newsweek* article on the film, producer Don Hahn describes how the filmmakers focused on the Beast's reform as the driving narrative within the plot when they realized that "The Beast was the guy with the problem" (qtd. in Ames and Ansen). At the film's beginning, Belle receives far more attention as the audience learns about her dreams for travel and adventure, her love for books, and her difficulty evading the amorous attentions of the hunky, but dim-witted, Gaston. After saving her father's life by volunteering to stay with the Beast, Belle's presence becomes more of a vehicle for exploring the Beast's dilemmas: his growing love for Belle, his need to break the spell, and the education he must endure as part of his changing character. When Belle confesses her love to the Beast at the end of the film, his physical transformation is a culmination of this gradual character change. Consistent with the male reform narrative, the Beast's inward change is partially manifested in his view and treatment of Belle. Just as Mr. B first desires Pamela's body, the Beast is initially concerned with Belle's instrumentality as a female: upon her entrance to the castle, the Beast sees her as a catalyst for his transformation, and even his initial attempts to encourage her love are a thinly masked means to this end. To be truly transformed, the Beast must desire the person Belle really is, rather than merely her feminine utility or physical presence.

Swan incorporates this aspect of the reform narrative in her definition of an Animal-Human binary in *Beauty and the Beast*, in which the Beast and Belle begin at opposing ends of the spectrum and grow towards each other into a mature union: "both partners must seek wholeness of Self before either can find wholeness in relationship" (350). Swan's emphasis on the mutual growth of the hero and heroine necessitates that Belle equally experience the kind of change performed in the Beast's character. In Gothic fiction, this change occurs when the heroine learns to correctly identify the good and bad males in her life, but, although Swan argues that Belle parallels this structure in her dealings with Gaston and the Beast, Belle discerns the core identity in various characters from the film's beginning. Before Gaston's true nature is revealed, Belle has already rejected him as an unsuitable mate—she tells her father, "He's not for me." She initially rejects the Beast as well, telling Wardrobe that she does not want anything to do with him. However, her rejection does not occur because she is unable to see the goodness underneath the Beast's

hideous form, but because the Beast, even while he is still a handsome prince, is "spoiled, selfish, and unkind." Although she must learn to love the Beast and recognize his good qualities, these qualities are not as much "uncovered" as they are developed by her presence in his home. Belle, like Pamela, is perfect the way she is—it is only the "beasts" of the stories who need to be reformed. Belle's reformation of the Beast limits her power to that of a civilizing force. The film begins with an emphasis on education (Belle's love of reading), travel, and women's desire for adventure, but the only skill that remains useful to Belle is her knowledge of what could be called "domestic etiquette." The Beast undergoes a cultivating education through Belle's presence: his physical appearance is tamed as he learns to wear proper clothes, bathe, and walk upright; he acquires polished manners by learning to dance, speak, appreciate books, and eat his soup without slurping. The Beast's outward signs and inward changes are parallel accomplishments: Belle sings that "he was mean, and he was coarse, and unrefined," as if being mean and being unrefined are the same problem. For the Beast to become worthy of love is not just a matter of acquiring good qualities, but of acquiring civilized accomplishments, and, since the Beast initiates these changes as a way of pleasing Belle, it is implied that the domesticated male is what she truly desires.

Belle initially voices a desire for broader knowledge of the world; instead of focusing her intelligence on challenging or original subjects, however, Belle's knowledge, like her desire, is limited to domestic minutiae. The significance of female knowledge varies in literary genres, with the Gothic novel positing that heroines must be educated and informed in order to succeed: "Too much innocence is hazardous...to a heroine's health. She needs knowledge, not protection from the truth" (Ferguson Ellis xiii). In contrast, a novel of reform maintains its heroine's innocence at all cost. Thus, Belle comes closest to becoming a Gothic heroine when she pursues the Beast's secret by entering the forbidden West Wing—a moment that invokes the horror of the Gothic fairy tale *Bluebeard*. The space's decay and the obvious signs of violence intrigue her, but more specifically she is drawn to the shredded portrait and the magical rose—by extension, to the secret of the castle itself. Although Belle shows initiative and curiosity by breaking the rules and examining the mysterious objects, she is quickly scared away by the Beast's presence, and never offers to return. Instead of allowing its heroine to uncover the Beast's past, the film insists that she remains innocent of this knowledge.



In the same way, Belle's knowledge of etiquette is narratively significant, while her initial desire to pursue more challenging knowledge is increasingly ignored as the story develops—not because Belle's character or her desire for knowledge shifts, but because the film devotes less time to her adventurous interests after her character has been established. For example, Belle is a book-lover—so much so, in fact, that she is willing to be slightly ostracized from her community because of this passion. Throughout the film's opening number, Belle is absorbed by her book as she wanders around the village; after she meets the Beast, however, depictions of Belle's reading and, by extension, of her pursuit of her education, are limited to a matter of seconds. Belle originally learns about people through books, and reading becomes a measurement of character as the distinction is made between readers (good) and non-readers (bad). When Gaston declares that it is “dangerous for a woman to read” and later rests his muddy boots upon Belle's book, his ignorance alerts both her and the audience to his status as a “bad guy.” Later, when the Beast sits down to read with Belle, reading is part of the romance. Belle and the Beast become framed as a couple while they read, and the magical objects make comments on their developing love. The Beast's gift of the library is part of his attempt at courtship, rather than an indication of his sudden interest in books. In the same way, traveling, or Belle's longing for “adventure in the great wide somewhere,” is gradually abandoned as part of the heroine's motivation. Cummins notes that even the road to the Beast's castle, which takes Belle's father Maurice several shots' worth of steady traveling to cover, is skipped over when Belle undertakes the same journey. She suddenly arrives at the castle's gates a single shot after leaving her home with Philippe: “Belle's desire to see far-off lands is visually as well as narratively squelched” (25). Although Belle begins the film with the potential for learning and growing as a Gothic heroine, the plot lapses into a pattern in which Belle must always be the teacher and her subject must always be confined to the domestic.

This narrative indifference to Belle's original goals also strengthens the viewer's understanding of her implied desire for domesticity. After voicing her desire for adventure, Belle claims that, “for once it might be grand / to have someone understand / I want so much more than they've got planned.” Since Belle has successfully avoided a proposal of marriage from Gaston, it can be implied that the “plans” she finds unfulfilling are those of matrimony; the story nonetheless climaxes and ends with Belle's confession of love and then marriage to the

Beast. Instead of experiencing either travel or adventure when she leaves home, Belle becomes more imprisoned and more confined than she already is. Rather than honoring its heroine's independent spirit, *Beauty and the Beast* idealizes marriage and the domestic role; in doing so, it insists that this role is equally, if not more, self-actualizing than travel or adventure would be.

Of course, some would argue that Belle's excursion to the castle is, itself, a kind of adventure that she pursues—yet, instead of offering “adventure in the great wide somewhere,” Belle's time in the castle confines her movements within a domestic space. Belle is continually locked up, and even when she returns to her own home, Gaston squeezes her and Maurice into an abandoned shed. This image of the “imprisoned heroine” is not restricted to a single genre of literature, but how the image is used distinguishes each genre's view of women's independence and freedom of movement. A Gothic novel not only features, but is often characterized by, its trapped women; however, these heroines represent cultural anxiety over women's confinement to the private space, as opposed to men's autonomy in the public sphere (Ferguson Ellis ix). A Gothic home (or castle) is not desirable or idealized; instead, it is “a place of danger and imprisonment” (x). In the fairy-tale romance, a genre that Disney exemplifies in films such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, enclosed spaces often confine a “damsel in distress.” The imprisoned romance heroine—waiting for her prince to come—may not carry the feminist message of her Gothic counterpart, but the two genres are similar in their negative portrayal of female entrapment. The act of imprisoning a heroine is evil, only accomplished by the likes of Lady Tremaine or Maleficent, and the narrative hinges on the need to remove the heroine from her locked tower, or to help her escape some other confinement. The reform narrative, on the other hand, while it initially portrays confinement as dangerous, also insists that remaining in confinement is the key to a heroine's success. Because Pamela cannot escape Mr. B's home, she must reform its master—and this reform is only possible through her physical presence, more specifically, through her physical presence in the home. Male rescuers, attempts at escape, or even successfully escaping is counterproductive for the heroine of a reform narrative. Instead of exploring the inequity of female confinement and male freedom, domestic space in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Pamela* is portrayed as a positive, even natural, place for women.

First, female power is confined to the home: Pamela and Belle exert influence over the beasts in their castles, but, once outside of the home, their power wanes. When Pamela attempts to escape her prison, she is halted in her flight by the sight of a bull grazing in the pasture: "I looked, and saw the horrid bull, as I thought, making to get between me and the door...Well, thought I, here seems to be the spirit of my master" (192). Although the bull and her master have the "same spirit," Pamela is capable of exerting influence over the latter while the former becomes an insurmountable obstacle. Similarly, Belle is halted in her attempt to flee by a pack of wolves that mimic the Beast's appearance with their long snouts, projecting canine teeth, and similar head and facial structure. Instead of taming these beasts, Belle not only is forced to turn back, but she also has to be saved by the Beast.

Second, although Pamela and Belle eventually succeed in being released from their captivity, they emerge only to become, once again, part of the original domestic space of their families. Belle, in particular, is only allowed to leave in order to fulfill a specific role as the nurturer and healer of her father. Some critics may point out that in this departure her feminine power is most present, for both Mr. B and the Beast physically deteriorate and are even fatally ill when the heroines leave, as if the female possesses the power of life and death through her presence. It is telling, however, that life can only return along with the heroine's return to domestic space—as if a woman's foray into the public sphere is so jolting, so unnatural, that, if it is even attempted, the men will literally die. It is only when things return to a "natural" order that the male figures complete their transformation from beast to man; rather than expressing anxiety over Belle's confinement, the film promotes her role within the home.

While *Beauty and the Beast* follows the reform narrative in its one-sided character development and its positive emphasis of domestic space, it does not contain the narrative element of sexual assault that permeates *Pamela*. In fact, *Beauty and the Beast* is stripped of sexual tension: Mr. B holds Pamela in his home as a kind of mistress, but Belle gives up her liberty in a selfless act. Pamela and Belle both attempt to escape their respective prisons because of physical endangerment, but Pamela is more precisely motivated by the preservation of her chastity. These changes are part of a larger trend in Disney adaptations in which references to sex in source materials

are expunged from the company's final product: in *The Princess and the Frog*, the frog prince is transformed after his marriage to Tiana, rather than after a violent act in the heroine's bedroom; in *Tangled*, the principal characters leave Rapunzel's tower the same afternoon that they meet, as opposed to the repeated clandestine visits and accidental pregnancy that occur in the Grimm Brothers' or Basile's versions. In *Beauty and the Beast*, Disney's Beast is transformed by a magic spell because of his bad behavior: his outward appearance reflects his inner selfishness. In Beaumont's version, no reason is given for the Beast's imprisonment—instead, it is implied that his beastly exterior represents male sexuality from the perspective of a new bride. Consumers of Disney films are so accustomed to such changes that, even when viewers of *Beauty and the Beast* are presented with potentially sexual actions or episodes, they do not anticipate sexual violation. When an angry Beast demands that Beauty come down to dinner or he will "break down the door," viewers know that he is not going to rape her and that he is not even threatening to do so—despite the fact that such a scene would suggest sexual assault in both reform narratives and Gothic fiction.

Disney's perpetual cleansing of its films threatens the reform narrative's storyline, which builds and turns on sexual crisis. It is sexual violence—attacks and attempted rapes—that drives Pamela's plot, and it is the characters' perceptions of sexuality that define their motivations and actions: Mr. B is a "beast" because he wants to participate in "beastly" activities. When *Beauty and the Beast* purges sexual tension from its reform narrative structure, it must construct a new way to present danger to Belle without threatening her virginity: the Gothic and its signifiers, then, come to represent this danger while simultaneously replacing the story's need for sexual threat. This is not to say that the Gothic has no sexual tension of its own—on the contrary, Gothic novels abound with clandestine liaisons, rape, incest, and even necrophilia. Rather, Gothic elements are capable of creating terror without overtly sexualizing such terror. The film can threaten Beauty through darkness, the supernatural, and physical danger without invoking sexual danger or even sexual tension.

The Gothic, then, creates fear and tension in *Beauty and the Beast*, whereas the reform narrative invokes sexual threats. *Pamela* maintains a suspenseful tension through the constant possibility of Mr. B's presence: at one point, after Pamela goes to bed, Mr. B emerges unexpectedly from her closet; at another, he is disguised as a serving

maid sitting in the corner of her bedroom. *Beauty and the Beast*, on the other hand, promotes this same tension through Gothic elements—a solitary castle, haunted woods, layers of fog, twisted gargoyles, winding passageways, a damp dungeon, and stormy weather—that contribute to a similarly dangerous and frightening atmosphere. Instead of the physical assault that Pamela experiences, danger in *Beauty and the Beast* stems from a tightly guarded secret. The forbidden West Wing is dusty, broken, and decaying—it is the most Gothic part of the castle, and also a physical representation of the Beast’s psyche. If the claw-marked portrait and broken chairs are indicators of the Beast’s animal nature, the magic rose signifies his ultimate humanness, and thus becomes a concrete symbol of his secret. When Belle enters the West Wing and nearly “puts her finger” on this secret, literally and figuratively, the Beast’s violent reaction preserves the knowledge of his true identity. Belle is frightened and immediately tries to leave the castle, but her flight does not stem so much from fear for her physical safety—she had ample evidence of the Beast’s temper prior to this event—but from the menace of a secret that she does not and cannot understand. The Beast himself is terrifying, but Belle stands up to him several times without fear—it is the unknown that frightens her away. As the Beast learns to be civilized, the Gothic elements begin to dissipate. Once he is transformed back into a prince, these elements disappear entirely because the sense of danger that they create is no longer necessary.

Thus, Gothic elements in *Beauty and the Beast* maintain the terror required for a reform narrative’s plot even while the film’s overarching plot structure and its characterizations adhere to the reform narrative’s model. Though *Beauty and the Beast* has been described as a departure from the “cloyingly sexist” Disney films of the past (Ames and Ansen 2), this reform narrative model is problematic from a feminist perspective due to its idealization of the home and marriage, as well as its portrayal of change as an exclusively male experience. Depictions of male transformation perpetuate a female fantasy in which a man will become a better person for the woman he loves. Although this fantasy acknowledges a kind of feminine power, it also insists that the woman must be perfect before transformation can occur. Male transformation in both *Beauty and the Beast* and *Pamela* is accomplished through the heroine’s constant virtue: the Beast becomes a better person by becoming more like Belle; Mr. B is awed into marriage by Pamela’s consistent, unassailable morals. From the moment that

Belle steps out of her father’s cottage in the film’s opening scene, she is the ideal, virtuous heroine—yet, without being able to make mistakes, to choose the wrong path, or even to learn and grow, Belle models a rigid code of female behavior. She, along with Disney heroines such as Cinderella and Aurora, perpetuates the idea that being a princess equals being perfect. Ostensibly, the moral of Disney’s movie encourages viewers to look at the inside of a person and to value character over beauty, but, admittedly, accepting Belle for who she is—beautiful, intelligent, and kind—is not a difficult message with which to tax the film’s audience. Thus, male characters enjoy both a freedom of space and a freedom to adapt and change, while the females must be confined to a mold of flawless behavior for the reform narrative to succeed.

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