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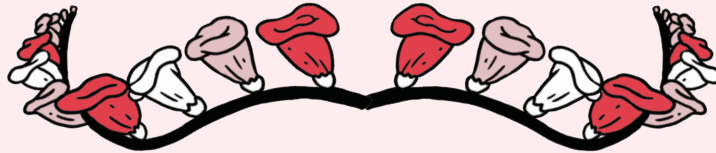
Female Beasts

Illustration by
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*And where not
to find them*

We trace the evolution of Guillermo del Toro's
favourite French fairytale, 'Beauty and the Beast'.

“It is alienating to be told you’re something that you’re not.”



A beautiful woman agrees to live as the captive of a beast. He falls in love. Eventually she does too. This transforms him. Guillermo del Toro is a major fan, and was a whisker away from adapting ‘Beauty and the Beast’ for the big screen. It didn’t happen, and so he made his own socially critical version and called it *The Shape of Water*. There is an immense erotic undertow to this primal story, and so it is no surprise that there are many pornographic versions, both cartoon and live-action in nature. This classic story of interspecies love has been retold too many times in too many forms to count since it first appeared in 1740 as Madame de Villeneuve’s ‘The Story of the Beauty and the Beast’. Although this was the original, it has been sidelined in favour of a 1758 version by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, particularly when it comes to the source text for the popular film adaptations from Disney and Jean Cocteau.

Among the reams of alternative versions of this classic story there are sci-fi beauties and beasts, regency ones and a graphic novel by Alan Moore. They exist in musical form, by composers as varied as Philip Glass, Stevie Nicks and Meatloaf, but never do the Beauty/Beast roles invert. Never does she get to be hideous with deep reserves of longing and melancholy. That is *his* terrain.

To me, a woman plagued by both a sense of melodrama in relation to romance, and a desire for pretty boys who are so clean and wholesome I call them slices of cake, it seems most mercilessly untrue that the female is always the beauty, and the male is always the beast.

This exploration of the tale has, at times, felt like a knife twisting in my shame at not embodying a classical feminine beauty, capable of entrancing with looks alone. Each time I consider the story I feel only for the beast. My goal here is to put a female stamp on beastly urges as I consider the core aspects of the story.

1. THE VIRTUE OF BEAUTY

“She was a perfectly beautiful young creature; her good temper rendered her adorable. A generous and tender heart was visible in all her words and actions.” This is how Beauty is introduced in Madame de Villeneuve’s novel. She is a pure archetype of someone who is as beautiful on the inside as she is on the outside. This unimpeachable virtue, which verges on blandness, stirs jealousy in her more craven and relatable sisters. They feel like Beauty is trying to show them up. When their father heads off looking for his lost fortune, they ask him to bring them “jewellery, attire and headdresses”. Asked what she wants, Beauty responds with: “My dear Papa, I wish for one thing more precious than all the ornaments my sisters have asked you for; I have limited my desire to it, and shall be only too happy if they can be fulfilled. It is the gratification of seeing you return in perfect health.”

Beauty/Belle doesn’t have much edge wherever you look. Her major indiscretion is, having charmed the Beast, she then stays visiting her father for too long and so nearly causes Beast to pine to death. In some versions, this is her sisters’ fault. In Angela Carter’s 1979 version, ‘The Courtship of Mr Lyon’, it is Beauty’s fault. At first described as if she was “carved out of a single pearl”, her appearance changes (Dorian Gray-style) as she lives the high life with her newly minted father: “Her face was acquiring, instead of beauty, a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterises certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats.”

Belle’s virtues are given a progressive spin in the 1991 Disney film via the addition of an interest in reading. Linda Woolverton was the first woman to write an animated Disney film and transposed her own childhood habit of running errands with her nose buried in a book. She successfully fought against a conservative producer who wanted Belle to be like previous Disney heroines, and changed a storyboard



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that had shown her sticking pins in a map to have her baking in a kitchen. Woolverton eventually triumphed in this battle of the wills (with help from lyricist Howard Ashman). This victory was replicated in Disney’s 2017 live-action version starring Emma Watson. However, Belle’s high-mindedness works against the humility of her origins. Instead of being contented her with her lot, “She literally walks through the streets singing about how unique she is,” wrote Glosswitch in 2017 for the *New Statesman*, “painfully conscious that there must be more to this provincial life”. “Papa, do you think I’m odd?” she humbly brags. “It’s just that I’m not sure I fit in here.”

In this context, falling in love with the Beast becomes less exactly what it is, and more a yearned for adventure. Glosswitch is right, but to me these imperfections of spirit, these selfish urges for personal fulfilment, make her a more interesting character.

2. TEMPERAMENT OF THE BEAST

The Beast is a gentleman burdened with melancholia in Jean Cocteau’s ravishing black and white gothic masterpiece, *La Belle et La Bête*, from 1946. Cocteau’s Beast (played by Jean Marais) is so weighted down in word and deed as to send shivers of moroseness into the atmosphere. When Angela Carter wrote of her beast, Mr Lyon, that, “his voice seemed to issue from a cave full of echoes,” she was channeling Marais’ performance, as she does for the majority of her characterisation.

La Bête does everything he can to mask his animal tendencies, but he is not in denial, and will not let others gloss over his condition with flattery. When Belle’s father gives him a noble address, he responds: “Do not call me ‘My Lord’. I am ‘The Beast’.” I – also a beast – will always take an engaged observation over hollow praise. An ex-boyfriend thought he was doing me a great service when he referred to me as his “porcelain doll” but, quite apart

from any inherent creepiness, it is alienating to be told that you’re something that you’re not – be it a lord or a doll. Better to call us beasts.

In Madame de Villeneuve’s original, the fairy who transformed a handsome prince into a beast imprisoned not just his body, but his mind. Temperamentally he still possesses gentleness, self-awareness and pride and is deeply humiliated by diminished wit and conversational skills. Indeed Beauty, who forebears his monstrous appearance, allows herself to be more mentally condescending about his speech. “It was not very eloquent,” she thinks to herself after he says something in the throes of passion.

Only in the Disney film versions, which have co-opted the public imagination of his character, do the Beast’s passions manifest in violent tantrums and destroying of rooms. It’s a generic addition in the name of creating drama and it erodes his more beguiling qualities.

3. REPRESSED CARNALITY

Outside of porn, no one has hinted at the carnality of the Beast as well as Jean Cocteau. The French auteur has made more explicitly sexual work than this; here the (blood) lust and the shame it causes mainly flow beneath the sophistication of the Beast’s palace and his attire. The elaborate gothic setting and the hypnotic spell it casts is spiked with displays of appetite and its messy consequences, as evidenced when Belle happens upon the *Bête* bloodied from a night’s hunting.

The physicality of Cocteau’s leads are intensely complementary: Jean Marais, with his square-jaw and hulking handsomeness, plays opposite Josette Day with her refined, almost haughty prettiness. He is lumbering, she is fleet. He is dark and furry, she is flaxen and creamy. Their names almost rhyme.

In one scene Belle and La Bête are walking around his palace grounds with smoke billowing in the background. She wears white, he wears black. Both shimmer with jewels. He has just curbed an impulse to chase and slay a deer. He is drained from the restraint. Music swells. He staggers and slumps against a tree for support.

"What's the matter?"

"I am thirsty, Beauty," he says, eyes closed.

Taking her voluminous skirts in hand, Belle heads towards a fountain.

"Drink from my hands," she says, bringing cupped water down to the Beast who kneels before her.

There is a close-up of him lapping with his tongue and the sound of snuffling liquid. Once it is drained, he raises his piercing and tormented eyes upwards.

"Does it not disgust you, letting me drink like this?"

"No, Beast. I am glad to do it."

This dialogue is literal, while it also works as a call and response for a personal kink dignified by a lover. To push the lines further, they show an identity thought by its owner to be grotesquely shameful, finding dignity in another's acceptance.

4. A MAGICAL SETTING

Magic is part of the DNA of this story. Angela Carter's 'The Courtship of Mr Lyon' is the most realistic retelling because she has Belle take a taxi to visit her father, whereas in other versions she travels by turning a magic ring, or donning a magic glove, or mounting a bewitched horse. Still, even this version – in which we have not a fantastical beast but a recognisable animal (a lion) – contains an otherworldly transformation at its close: "And then it was no longer a lion in her arms but a man, a man with an unkempt mane of hair and, how strange, a broken nose, such as the noses of retired boxers, that gave him a distant, heroic resemblance to the handsomest of beasts."

Madame de Villeneuve's original version is so steeped in magic that it is *almost* as much about dynamics in the fairy realm as it is the central couple. Beauty is visited every night in her dreams by a charming woman (who is a fairy)

and "a young man, beautiful as Cupid is painted" (the Beast in his true form). Once he does turn back into a Prince, the book stretches on for an additional 30 pages providing an exhaustively detailed backstory on good fairies, bad fairies and the whole damn fairy soap opera. The Disney versions replace fairies with ornaments – such as Cogsworth the clock, Lumière the candlestick and Mrs Potts the teapot – largely so there are mouthpieces for Howard Ashman's songs, but also as a nod to the Cocteau version, in which household objects have gleaming eyes.

5. TRANSFORMATION

The transgressive appeal of this love story is neutered by an ending in which – hey presto – the Beast turns back into a handsome prince. This is a monumental frittering of the hot fact that Beauty fell in love with a Beast. If you really want to be a killjoy you could say this twist turns what came before into a sham.

The moral that shapeshifting is no great shakes once a certain level of love is attained offers a sweeping get-out. There are nods to Beauty's lack of preference for any form her man takes in Madame Villeneuve's original all the way to the 2017 Disney remake. At the end of this recent version Beauty asks her prince, who now appears as a clean-shaven Dan Stevens, if he would consider growing facial hair. It's nice to imagine them folding his previous incarnation as a Beast into their marriage, perhaps even cosplaying when things get dull.

If Beauty is happy with her man however he looks, or whatever his species, why are all storytellers determined to restore him to a conventional babe? It would be dense to ignore that it's a big deal to change an ending when creating an adaptation. It would be denser still to ignore that this particular ending functions as a symbol for the transformative power of love. Still, the idea that happiness is only possible once we all attain physical beauty is pretty fascistic. If love has to mean physical transformation, how about one that signals sexual awakening: how about *she* changes into a beast? ©

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