

Contemporary Beauty and the Classic Beast: the man, the woman, the animal, and the fairy tale in history and in the work of Angela Carter

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INTRODUCTION

Beauty and the Beast has become a part of the modern imagination. It is a story that resonates in the deep, socially grounded way that only a thousand-year-old-fairy-tale-turned-Disney-movie could. However, because of this, it does not find itself on the receiving end of the same sort of critical review that a more modern story might. Angela Carter, in her 1979 collection *The Bloody Chamber*, reworks the stories for a contemporary audience by layering the classic works with subtle references to the social preoccupations of today. This is particularly notable when we observe the role of Beauty in the stories “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger Bride.” Through her representations, Angela Carter questions how the traditional story presents the notion of female agency. This essay will examine how Carter complicates this tradition—what is she saying about the way womanhood in the popular imagination has evolved, and to what end?

To a certain extent, there is no one answer to this question—Carter’s more complete body of work is extensive and provides multiple perspectives on the new role of the woman in narrative. However, it is just this fact—namely that she gives so many portraits of women—that illustrates her capacity for providing opportunity for emancipation from the under-critiqued legacy of fairy tale women. She reclaims the narrative of the Beast, using metamorphosis and transformation to allow Beauty to evolve as well, ultimately bringing us to the conclusion that women are neither victims nor martyrs, but rather characters in their own right, flawed and powerful and, most importantly, capable of taking charge of their own autonomy.

CONTEXTUALIZING *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

In any version, *Beauty and the Beast* is a rare and remarkable creature of a story, interpretable and applicable across communities and time periods. This is due largely to the story's treatment of romance, which is strikingly more complex and more realistic than the soul-mate paradigm of so many other fairy tales (like *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White*, for example).

The publication history of *Beauty and the Beast* is generally traced back to Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* and his version of "Cupid and Psyche," a Roman story of the demi-god Cupid's love for a beautiful mortal girl, Psyche, and Psyche's tribulations (even going so far as to go toe-to-toe with Aphrodite and other gods) as the victim of his affections.¹ While it likely existed for centuries before this publication in some sort of nebulous oral form, Apuleius' copy is the first one that is accessible to a modern audience. One of the only Roman texts that has managed to be saved in a concrete form, *The Golden Ass* as a collection was also one of the first books to be printed on the fifteenth century iteration of the printing press, and important versions appeared across Europe over the course of the next several centuries. However, the only version that escaped the Inquisition was the 1496 Editio Princeps, by Andrew, Bishop of Aleria. This process resulted in a "single and uniform canonical source for modern monster-as-husband tales."²

From this one source, an enormous variety of European versions of *Beauty and the Beast* have emerged. In some, Beast is a cat, in some a bear, in some a wolf, in some a pig, and in some even an indescribable hairy monster. Strangely, considering the original Psyche's strong role (modern literary scholar Maria Tatar even describes her as a "paradigm of female heroism"), Beauty's level of agency and

¹ Apuleius, and Sarah Ruden. *The Golden Ass*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. Print. 66-92

² Bottigheimer, Ruth B. "Cupid and Psyche vs. Beauty and the Beast: The Milesian and the Modern." *Merveilles & Contes* 3.1, Special Issue on "Beauty and the Beast" (1989): 4-14. *JSTOR*. Web. 04 May 2015. 9.

virtue evolves just as the Beast does.³ Tatar argues, simply, that “gender becomes destiny” in most folklore, but in *Beauty and the Beast*, this dynamic is even more complicated.⁴ Beauty has been interpreted, as Psyche was before her, as a heroine in control of her own fate and in control of the men and monsters around her. However, she has also been construed as “nothing but a cover for telling the story of Beast,” a prop or instrument for the real task of exploring male transformation.⁵

Says Tatar, “what makes this story especially attractive is the way in which it is deeply entrenched in the myth of romantic love even as its representational energy is channeled into the tense moral, economic, and emotional negotiations that complicate courtship rituals.”⁶ There is a notable disconnect between the expected soul-mate paradigm and the reality of these moral, economic, and emotional considerations that fuel so much of the story’s energy, and within this disconnect we find the meat of the narrative. In no version do Beauty and Beast experience authentic love-at-first-sight or even something vaguely similar. Instead, the road to marital bliss is paved with personal and social complications, often representative of the very real contemporary concerns that mired contemporary relationships. It is within the portrayal of the characters’ negotiation of these concerns that we find the moral and ethical grounding of the story.

While *Beauty and the Beast* has evolved, sometimes subtly and sometimes dramatically, for centuries if not longer, what each of its versions has in common is the fact that they capture the spirit of the moment in which they were written. Sometimes this capturing is incidental, the inevitable product its writer’s environment or community. However, in other moments, the story is actively used as a tool.

³ Tatar, Maria. *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 1999. Print. 25.

⁴ Ibid 31.

⁵ Ibid 30.

⁶ Ibid.

When we look closely at the publishing history surrounding the story's most popular rendition, the social nuances of the time period become a crucial piece of understanding the way it operates.

MADAME DE BEAUMONT: *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

The most familiar version of *Beauty and the Beast* is that which was put down by Madame de Beaumont in eighteenth century France. While, as mentioned above, it has its roots in an incredible legacy of myth, Beaumont situated her version of *Beauty and the Beast* firmly in a contemporary moral reality, one that has carried forward into the nineteenth, twentieth, and even twenty-first centuries. In quick summary, Beaumont's tale is the familiar version in which Beauty essentially sacrifices herself to the Beast after her loving and well-intentioned father accidentally steals a rose from the Beast's mansion's garden. Throughout her stay at the Beast's house, Beauty slowly but surely warms to the Beast, and each begins to recognize the virtues of the other. However, she leaves to spend time with her family, and determines via a magic mirror that her absence has caused Beast to grow ill and depressed. Upon her return, she promises never to leave again, and at these words, a magic spell breaks and Beast transforms into a handsome young prince, who immediately takes Beauty as his bride. The two live, as it were, "happily ever after."⁷

In this version, Beauty's virtue is constantly placed next to the vanity and spite of her two sisters, who both marry handsome, witty, wealthy men that ultimately do nothing to make them happy. Angela Carter, as Tatar mentions, sees this version as one focused largely upon "being good" rather than upon a goodness centered in action: "Beauty's happiness is founded on her abstract quality of virtue."⁸ While, particularly compared to the behavior of Psyche, this may seem odd, considering the social context of the story shed some light on the rationale behind this portrayal. Madame de Beaumont was a governess for

⁷ Ibid 32-42.

⁸ Ibid 26.

young French noblewomen who, in the eighteenth century, could expect to engage in an arranged marriage with a much-older man. Jerome Griswold points out that many feminists object to this version because the circumstances surrounding its creation necessitated a distinctly un-feminist portrayal of Beauty—she is the subject of the “objectionable” implication that a self-sacrificing, submissive woman has the best chance of achieving marital happiness.⁹ He cites literary critic Jack Zipes saying, “... ‘the mark of beauty for a female is to be found in her submission, obedience, humility, industry, and patience.’”¹⁰

This view is fervently discussed by feminists of many generations—earlier feminists, wrestling with the vestiges of these same expectations for women, took great issue with Beaumont’s portrayal. One conclusion, based primarily in the theory of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, is that the Beast represents a twisted and even coercive version of Beauty’s own sexuality. He is not even a man, but rather a dramatized reflection of the adolescent Beauty’s emerging sexual impulse, and until that sexual impulse can be tamed, her happiness in marriage is at risk.¹¹ This interpretation adds an element of passion to Beaumont’s story, a passion that is conspicuously absent from the veneer of decorum surrounding Beauty’s relationship with the Beast. Beaumont ignores the obvious sexual implications of 17th century arranged marriages of men to much-younger girls, and in doing so makes a spectacle of this fact. There is an implied distinction between passion or love-at-first-sight, and the virtuous love that grows from emotional intimacy. Particularly considering the story’s intended audience, this distinction makes sense—the dream of mutual love and mutual sexual desire in marriage was not a realistic for the girls Beaumont worked with. Therefore yes, Beaumont’s perspective may seem anti-feminist on its surface,

⁹ Griswold, Jerome. *The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast": A Handbook*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2004. Print. 63.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid 65-6.

but this view relies on one viewing the text as guiding law, rather than as an instructive instrument—it is a distinction analogous to the one between a map and a compass.

CONTEXTUALIZING *THE BLOODY CHAMBER*

Angela Carter, as one of the most notable British literary critics of the twentieth century, repurposes this guiding narrative, placing it firmly in her contemporary social climate. Her 1979 collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, has two stories providing a lens into the way *Beauty and the Beast* has changed with the times. Considering the enormous strides for gender equality over the course of the twentieth century, Carter uses a variety of techniques to refocus the reader's attention on the subtler challenges still facing women and the narrative of female agency in personal relationships. For context, Carter said in 1985, "My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent content from the traditional stories."¹² Carter had no intention of reworking the stories for an audience of a different age—for all intents and purposes, the stories are already adult stories, products of an enormous range of cultures and situations. However, her work does what she intends it to do, in "extracting" content from tradition for an application to the modern age. They are stories for an audience of a different era. While this could mean a number of things, from technology to politics to culture, in Carter's versions of *Beauty and the Beast*, what is most striking is the way she reworks the role of women. They are not inherently first-generation feminist stories, concerned only with focusing on the woman's role to the exclusion of all else. Rather, they repurpose the stories so that Beauty is an actual character, shifting and reacting as the Beast does. Rather than the virtuous, if naïve, Beauty that Beaumont gives us, Carter changes the expectations of the heroine. *Anima*, which forms the root of "animal" means "soul"—in Carter's work, as the heroine

¹² Haffenden, John. "Angela Carter", *Novelists in Interview*, New York: Methuen Press, 1985. Web. 80.

encounters the animal, the heroine also encounters the capacity for accessing herself on a different scale than the human world usually allows.

ANGELA CARTER: “THE COURTSHIP OF MR. LYON”

Of Carter’s two versions of *Beauty and the Beast*, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” is the one that more closely tracks Beaumont’s original version. Carter sets the story in twentieth century England, and paints a much less flattering picture of Beauty than the original story does—says Griswold, “Carter’s Beauty is not Beaumont’s virtuous virgin but a lacquered ingénue who forgets the Beast when she settles in London’s luxuries and is swaddled in furs.”¹³ It is not until she realizes that the Beast is dying that she reprioritizes, returning to his side and catalyzing the same transformation that we find in Beaumont’s tale.

Instead of looking past the Beast’s flaws, as Beaumont’s largely does, Carter’s story zeroes in on the narrative of difference. She introduces the meeting of Beauty and the Beast by highlighting Beauty’s understanding of this difference:

Although her father had told her of the nature of the one who waited for her, she could not control an instinctual shudder of fear when she saw him, for a lion is a lion and a man is a man and, though lions are more beautiful by far than we are, yet they belong to a different order of beauty and, besides, they have no respect for us: why should they?¹⁴

Considering the notion that “a lion is a lion and a man is a man” seems to be what causes her to “shudder,” how are we supposed to take this implied barrier between the human and natural world? And where do we place the woman within this dynamic? Strangely, the distinction of “man” rather than “human” seems important here—Carter is pulling away from the masculine rhetoric of humanity and placing Beauty, in her beauty, somewhere between “man” and “lion.” Immediately, Beauty is

¹³ Griswold, 182.

¹⁴ Carter, Angela. *The Bloody Chamber, and Other Stories*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print. 45.

preoccupied with beauty as a condition for respect—aesthetic appeal is the first way she orients herself within the world. She does not recognize Beast in terms of his power, or his ferocity, or any of the other ways we would regard a lion. Instead, she implicitly compares him to herself, implying that beauty is something that supersedes differences between species. She compares herself a few paragraphs later to a lamb, “spotless, sacrificial,” and incomparable to the Beast. However, Carter makes a note of the fact that this perspective of sacrifice is self-imposed: “she felt herself to be Miss Lamb.”¹⁵ This is distinct from Beaumont’s portrayal of Beauty in that the sacrifice is not a societal one—Beauty is no longer the product of an aristocratic tradition of gifting young girls to wealthy men, and rather sees her relationship to the Beast in terms of a sincere, if misunderstood, respect.

Important to examine as well is the way Carter treats the sexual components of romance in her story, especially considering Beaumont’s avoidance of the issue in even its most subtle forms. Of course, Carter’s story is hardly explicit, but it certainly does not fear sensual detail. The first mention of Beauty and the Beast touching is vague at first, leaving space for an erotic interpretation: “...he flung himself at her feet and buried his head in her lap. She stayed stock-still, transfixed; she felt his hot breath on her fingers, the stiff bristles on his muzzle grazing her skin, the rough lapping of his tongue, and then, with a flood of compassion, understood: all he is doing is kissing my hands.”¹⁶ While, as anyone with a cat can attest, there is nothing inherently pleasurable or sexual about a lion’s tongue, the ambiguity with which the moment is set up implies a sexual encounter. She, as a virginal figure, is “stock-still, transfixed” by the explicit foreignness of the sensation and so, in some ways, it *is* an inherently sexual act. In fact, in the next paragraph she sees herself in the Beast’s eyes, which is a moment of connection not just of the senses, but also of souls (being, as it were, accessible via the eyes): “she saw her face repeated twice, as

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid 47.

small as if it were in bud.”¹⁷ Particularly after the ambiguity expressed as Beast kisses Beauty’s hands, this passage brings to mind a deflowering, in which Beast has possession of a bud-like vestige of the encounter.

While the above passage may appear, at first blush, to be nonconsensual or even assaulting, this scene is turned on its head at the end of the story. At Beauty’s return, the Beast falls into her arms, much in the same way that he does at the beginning of the story. However, this time, it is he that is changed, Beauty that possesses a version of Beast: “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 all the beasts.”¹⁸ (Carter 51). It is important to note that, rather than the perfect prince, Beauty transforms her Beast into just a man—handsome still, but evolved in an understandable way. He loses much of his intimidating beauty in order to simply become Beauty’s companion.

Overall, “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” stands in sharp contrast to Beaumont’s *Beauty and the Beast* because of the nature of transformation in the two stories. While Beast’s transformation is ostensibly the most dramatic event of both stories, Carter’s story has an undercurrent of female metamorphosis as well. Beauty is *not* completely pure and virtuous, and it is this fact that illustrates the enormous change in society’s regard for female agency in the fairy tale. Women, as men, are flawed, and can each equally influence the other’s metamorphosis. So, when Beauty and the Beast end the story strolling in arm and arm throughout the grounds, it is a moment of meeting in the middle. This new kind of marital bliss not predicated upon the steadfastness of virtue alone, but rather upon a willingness to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid 51.

evolve.¹⁹ In this way, Carter places her story firmly in the fairy tale canon of metamorphosis, illustrating the way the classic trope can apply to the heroines as well, flawed, self-interested, and even occasionally beast-like themselves.

ANGELA CARTER: “THE TIGER’S BRIDE”

“The Tiger’s Bride” relies on a different conception of the relationship between men and women than “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon”—Carter uses the carnival-like space of Italy to contextualize an examination of women when women lose autonomy. The story’s first line sets this scene more effectively than many pages of description could: “My father lost me to The Beast at cards.”²⁰ Carter builds an environment in which women are playthings, belonging to family, to lovers, to Beasts, even, but not to themselves. Men are not changeable, the mutual growth of “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” is not on the horizon in this space. Beauty is little more than a poker chip, bought and sold with no regard for their humanity. The circumstances of Milord’s (the Beast’s) home are a testament to this reality—Beauty is the only human in the carnival-land of machines and toys. While she is ostensibly a prisoner, she is treated in the same way that one of these toys would be.

The most dramatic instance of this is Milord’s request to see her naked. Her reaction is one of strong resistance that also savors of derision: “Take off my clothes for you, like a ballet girl? Is that all you want of me?”²¹ She sees herself, in this castle of toys, as the ballet dancer within a music box, at the mercy of whoever wishes to open her up. However, her surprise that this is “all” Milord wants is evidence of something more sinister—this is a world where women are traded, married off, and likely raped, and she has an oddly confused that nothing more is expected of her. Rather than submit herself to this bargain with no thought but for her escape, she relates this meditation on her state in the world: “The tiger will

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid 61.

never lie down with the lamb; he acknowledges no pact that is not reciprocal. The lamb must learn to run with the tigers.”²² She recognizes a sense of respect present in the animal kingdom, one that is conspicuously in the world of men and women. Milord respects her, even in her human weakness, and as such wants nothing but that which is “reciprocal.” Until she “learns to run with the tigers,” or, less metaphorically, learns to engage in the same kind of power struggles that the men have, she will be both safe from the complications of that engagement and always unequal. This not-so-subtly references the relationship between the lion and the “lamb” in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” highlighting the dynamics between man, woman, and beast and the way each deals with power and equality.

As Beauty decides to give in to Milord’s bargain, she immediately loses the humanity that was the barrier between them:

I was unaccustomed to nakedness. I was so unused to my own skin that to take off all my clothes involved a kind of flaying...I felt as much atrocious pain as if I was stripping off my own underpelt and the smiling girl stood poised in the oblivion of her balked simulation of life, watching me peel down to the cold, white meat of contract and, if she did not see me, then so much more like the market place, where the eyes that watch you take no account of your existence.²³

Here, Beauty compares herself simultaneously to a piece of meat and to a carnivorous animal, illustrating the differing ways that humanity tends to view the animal world. Her “underpelt” implies a connection to Milord, in all his mammalian glory. Of course, Beauty experiences pain, even atrocious pain, at the separation of her human and animal self, but she also recognizes that she is reclaiming agency over the “balked simulation of life” she has experienced as a woman. Here, again, we see the connection of the animal to the soul, or *anima*—there is something physical being left behind, or sold at the market, but she seems to feel a disconnect from the physicality of this female form.

²² Ibid 64.

²³ Ibid 66.

On the next page, we see culmination of this process. Beauty decides to stay with Milord, despite being given her freedom, and in this way she and Milord are finally on equal footing, and able to “run together” as lamb and tiger. In electing to stay, she exercises her control over the situation, which is not something she has been able to do since the first line of the story, in which she was sold as a poker chip. She extricates herself from the bounds of a human society so steeped in gender inequality, and instead submits herself to the “peaceable [animal] kingdom in which [Milord’s] appetite need not be [Beauty’s] extinction.”²⁴ The story’s final passage reads,

He will lick the skin off me!’ And 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.²⁵

In three sentences, Carter manages to turn the fairy tale metamorphosis on its head—instead of Beauty changing the Beast, she takes control of her own destiny, using her agency as a woman, as a human, and ultimately as an animal to self-emancipate even in circumstances where emancipation seems impossible.²⁶ In a world where human order results in the selling of one’s daughters, she elects instead to run wild in the “saturnalian orgy of animals.”²⁷ Carter is saying something very specific about the contemporary role of women—by the twentieth century things had progressed to a point where girls were no longer sold to the highest bidder, as in Beaumont’s France or even in the Tiger Bride’s Italy. However, it was still a man’s world, in which norms dictated a certain sexual and gendered inequality. Carter creates a “new old wives’ tale” in which women must actively possess their own agency in order to

²⁴ Ibid 67.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Cavallaro, Dani. *The World of Angela Carter: A Critical Investigation*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011. Print. 133.

²⁷ Griswold 184.

take hold of their slowly emerging right to equality. As Carter writes in another text, *Company of Wolves*, “If there’s a beast in men, it meets its match in women too.”²⁸

CONCLUSION

Carter writes for a world that did not yet exist in 1979 (and even one that does not yet exist in 2015), one where women and men are individuals, rather than stand-ins for their entire gender or even an entire gendered power structure. Her version of *Beauty and the Beast* is conscious of the fact that it is in communication with an entire history that spans many centuries, and therefore it retains so many of the important characteristics of the story. However, it is also conscious of the ridiculousness of representation on this scale—characters are possessed by the times and places in which they are written and read, and a story like *Beauty and the Beast* cannot go unedited and uncritiqued. In 1983, Carter wrote that this is precisely “why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction *as* women—it is part of the slow process of decolonizing our language and our basic habits of thought, [and ultimately] to say things for which no language previously existed” (Carter, 1983: 75).²⁹ Beasts are, in the world of Angela Carter, a metric by which human capacity for evolution is measured. They are separate from the human, but in being treated on the same moral spectrum that men and women are, they introduce an opportunity for agency outside of human society. Because Beast’s disguise is just that, a disguise, he walks the fine line between humanity and otherness. In fact, as Tatar points out in the introduction to her fairy tale collection, “human beings, as it turns out, are the real beasts”: both stubborn and malleable, and with a capacity for change that situates them in the same animalian world as beasts.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Makinen, Merja. "Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality." *Feminist Review* No. 42. *Feminist Fictions* (1992): 2-15. *JSTOR*. Web. 14.

³⁰ Tatar, Maria. *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 1999. Print. 30.

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