

## Beauties in an Ugly World: The Evolution of Feminism in Adaptations of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast*

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**Abstract:** *Historically, fairytales have promoted passive heroines that exist within well-defined patriarchal societies, but the protofeminist themes present in Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's Beauty and the Beast make it an exceptional tale. It depicts a heroine with the power to rescue the masculine characters of the story, makes consent a central theme, and serves as an instructional device that provides as a model an increasingly independent young woman with the desire to learn. The Disney movie adaptations have contributed to the feminist discussion started by Beaumont and reflect society's transformation regarding gender equality, however, the unresolved issues within the films show the cultural barriers that are still in place for contemporary women in relation to the rights and liberties they possess in the private sphere. The 1991 Disney film adaptation expanded the protagonist's character and sphere of interests and explored her relationship with society by symbolically representing it through the village and the characters of the Beast and Gaston; however, the original moralistic purpose of the story was lost, the theme of consent got lost, and the story terminated in a romantic union. In response to Beaumont's tale and the criticism to their previous adaptation, Disney's 2017 live action version refined their feminist interpretation of the heroine's character, interests, and abilities, and recovered the moralistic tone of the tale; unfortunately, consent remained diluted in the film and the ending of the story was still a romantic union.*

In the twenty-first century, desiring to be a princess is almost obscene. In a world where fighting for women's rights and closing the prevailing gap between genders is a priority, princesses and what they represent have lost popularity among forward thinkers. Considering the fact that fairytales usually promote passive heroines and often emphasize the expected roles of women in patriarchal societies (Rowe 209), this lack of acceptance of the princess figure is understandable, especially when the role that fairytales play in early socialization is considered. As Jack Zipes points out, this type of story "enables the child

to discover his or her place in the world and to test hypotheses about the world" (xii), thus making a seemingly innocent genre a powerful tool to influence the young minds of children.

However, because of fairytales such as *Beauty and the Beast*, not all hope is lost for the literary genre that has been enjoyed by thousands of children across the centuries. The enduring tale has been an exception to the genre due to the empowering and progressive message it has conveyed to girls since it was adapted by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont from a novel written by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. Published in 1740 in two volumes of the French magazine *Contes marins* (Barchilon 81), Villeneuve's *Beauty and the Beast* is not particularly remarkable. However, it set the ground for Beaumont's adaptation of the fairytale, which only a few years later surpassed and threw Villeneuve's story into oblivion, becoming the most famous and significant version of the tale. Villeneuve's original novel was redundant and full of contradictory elements that together did not work in a harmonious way (Swain 197). But Beaumont managed to significantly abridge the story and according to Jacques Barchilon created a tale that shows a "mastery of style, remarkable handling of the miraculous in the supernatural adventure of the heroine, and a controlled ambiguity of tone" (82). These stylistic improvements, along with new protofeminist themes introduced by the author, help justify why the later version has prevailed and maintains its impact by pushing the boundaries of feminism.

Although Beaumont's tale was written over 250 years ago, it withstands the passing of time and remains relevant in modern society. Multiple adaptations and reinterpretations of the story have emerged, but among these, Disney's animated film *Beauty and the Beast* from 1991 and their live-action version from 2017, stand out due to the tremendous impact they have had and continue to have on mass culture. Less than two months after the release of the latter, the film had grossed over one billion dollars worldwide (Mendelson) and both movies remain present in pop culture. In big retail stores such as Target, J. C. Penney, and Walmart, products that range from clothing and accessories, to storybooks, toys, home decor and dinnerware, can be

easily found among their aisles and on their online stores.

Both Disney films contributed to a feminist conversation started by Beaumont when she reconceived *Beauty and the Beast*. Her educational story introduced an unconventional heroine in the fairytale genre who was active and held the power to rescue the masculine characters of the tale. It also started an important discussion surrounding marriage and consent. Disney's 1991 motion animated picture responded to Beaumont's contribution by expanding the character and sphere of interests of the heroine, and by introducing important representations of society's relationship with feminist ideals. Unfortunately, the original moralistic purpose of the story was lost and the theme of consent diluted. Finally, responding to Beaumont's tale and to their previous adaptation, Disney's 2017 live action version addressed some of the previous conflicts and further expanded certain feminist themes, but failed to resolve issues related to the liberty of women in the private sphere. This is only a testament to the prevailing gap between genders in contemporary society and demonstrates the need for the feminist movement to continue battling for equality. This essay will interrogate the representation of feminist ideals through Disney's adaptations of Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast* in an attempt to expose the way in which conflicts prevailing in both versions reflect the challenging reality that contemporary women still have to face in a society lacking equality.

### **Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast***

Beaumont's version of *Beauty and the Beast* was published in 1756 in *Le Magasin des Enfants*, a popular magazine in Europe that she authored and edited (Barchilon 81). An exceptional woman for her time, she received an extensive education in her childhood (Griswold 47) despite her limited financial resources and chose to become a governess and devote her life to the instruction of young women, a decision perceived as radical by many of her contemporaries (Pauly). The centrality that education had throughout her life probably influenced her decision to give her *Beauty and the Beast* a moralistic purpose. Besides entertainment, the tale was meant to provide guidance and in-

struction to the young girls that it was aimed at (Cummins 23). Furthermore, the ideas that it conveyed broke many of the stereotypes commonly seen in fairytales through time. It provided women new models that offered them novel possibilities of action.

According to literary critic Karen E. Rowe, traditionally, fairytales have emphasized "passivity, dependency, and self-sacrifice as a female's cardinal values" (209). This claim does not seem far from the truth when the protagonists of some of the most enduring and famous fairytales are closely examined. For example, in the story of "Rapunzel," she has to patiently wait in a tower for a prince to come to her rescue; in "Sleeping Beauty," the princess is cursed to an uninterrupted sleep for a hundred years until the kiss of a prince awakens her; and in "Cinderella," a marriage to a handsome prince is what saves her from the horrors and mistreatment she has to face by the hands of her stepmother and stepsisters. By contrast, Beaumont's Beauty is mostly a wonderful exception. Anything but passive, and not in need of being saved, she adopts the role of a rescuing hero: a role that is most often reserved for men and that she executes more than once.

Beauty first appears as a rescuer when she decides to take her father's place as a prisoner in the castle of the Beast. Due to her strong affection for him, she is determined to save him at all costs. Even though she will head into a perilous situation in which she will most likely face fear, and possibly death, nobody in her household can convince her against venturing to the palace. With an unbreakable resolution, she sheds no tears as she says goodbye to her sisters and brothers and then leaves for the Beast's domain accompanied by her heart broken father.

The idea of a loving parent consenting to leave his daughter in the hands of a dangerous Beast seems completely incomprehensible, but it further emphasizes Beauty's strength. Once in the castle, her father embraces her and says, "I am almost frightened to death; believe me, you had better go back, and let me stay here" (Beaumont 8), but Beauty decisively answers that he must leave her behind. Helpless and of weak character, he cannot fight against his daughter's determination. The

predominance of Beauty's character over his, and her adoption of the protective role that most usually belongs to fathers, suggests that in Beaumont's tale, the active and strong gender is no longer the masculine one. As Griswold puts it, "Beauty seems to inhabit a world where males ... are weak and where women have power" (65).

Beauty's role as the rescuing hero of the story is even more significant when it comes to the main male character of the fairytale: the Beast. Although with his tremendous force and position of power he could easily overcome her, she is the one who in reality is in control of both of their stories (Griswold 65). Beauty's consent to marry the Beast ultimately breaks the spell that was cast upon him and allows him to return to his human form. In Beaumont's fairytale, Beauty and the powerful enchantress who cursed the Beast are the strong female characters that help determine the fate of the male figures in their universe, not the other way around. Without Beauty's consent to unite with the Beast, his salvation would be unattainable.

This consent is also a crucial element in Beaumont's story. As the plot unfolds, different scenes show that Beauty's decisions to comply with something, or not, are always highly respected and of maximum importance. For instance, when the Beast catches Beauty's father stealing a rose from his garden and decides to take him prisoner, he tells him "you say you have got daughters; I will forgive you, on condition that one of them *come willingly*, and suffer for you" (Beaumont 5, italics mine). After that, the first thing that the Beast asks Beauty when she arrives to the castle, is if she in fact decided to go there voluntarily. The consent of Beauty is fundamental for the Beast because the curse cast upon him can only be lifted if a woman willingly agrees to marry him. By making Beauty's voluntary consent crucial to the salvation of the Beast, Beaumont transmits to its young female audience that their decisions hold value, are powerful, and should always be respected by the men that surround them.

In addition to her innovations on the idea of consent, Beaumont encourages her young readers to be educated and have interests of their own. From the beginning of the fairytale, she

stresses that a core characteristic of Beauty is her love of music and reading good books. This is significant because the story was written at a time when “the general population was only just becoming a reading population and when literary heroines represented a new kind of female protagonist, one who thinks and learns” (Cummins 23). By making Beauty a merchant woman with intellectual interests, Beaumont offered to her contemporaries an empowering model with characteristics that were easily attainable and that provided girls real tools and advantages outside of the fantastic realm.

Beauty’s interest in music and literature, the respect shown for her decisions, her role as the rescuing figure, and her activeness, are some of the female-empowering elements that Beaumont introduced in her *Beauty and the Beast* and that go against the traditional depiction of women in fairytales. However, the story is not flawless since it does contain elements that contribute to the perpetration of patriarchal expectations. Although Beaumont devised a heroine who is determined and strong willed, one of the main driving forces behind Beauty’s rescuing power is a deep desire to please and serve others. Her interests always come second, and this is evident at different moments of the tale. For example, she refuses to marry several gentlemen because she wants to comfort and attend to her impoverished father whom she cannot imagine leaving by himself. Furthermore, later in the story she takes this selflessness to the extent that she is willing to sacrifice her own life by giving away her freedom to spare her father a destiny of confinement at the Beast’s castle. In these two instances, the underlying message seems to be that the guiding principle of an exemplary woman’s life is to prioritize the wellbeing and happiness of others above her own.

What makes matters even more precarious is that these selfless and obliging character traits that are emphasized throughout the story, as well as her virtuousness and sweet temper, are what cause her to be loved and cherished by all of the members of her village. Beauty is appreciated for her “humility, industry, and patience” (2), loved for being a “charming, sweet-tempered creature” with “an affable obliging disposition” (2), and

rewarded for being “judicious” (Beaumont 14). In contrast, the villagers criticize her proud and selfish sisters for being vain and of a bad nature. Therefore, Beauty is worthy of praise and recognition because she represents what her society deems to be the perfect model of what a woman *should* be. This is highly problematic because men are not held to the same unforgiving standards of humility and selflessness. Furthermore, as Griswold points out, “the catalog of her excellences is so long that some readers may find Beauty an unrealistic character and something of a goody goody” (41). Although she is a female character that breaks many stereotypes seen in other fairytales, her unending virtue creates unattainable standards.

Another important issue with the tale is its resolution in marriage. Rowe explains that fairytales “make marriage not simply one ideal, but the only estate toward which women should aspire. The idealizations, which reflect culture’s approval, make the female’s choice of marriage and maternity seem commendable, indeed predestined” (211). This could be said of Beaumont’s tale. Although at the beginning of the story, it is made clear that marriage is not the primary interest in Beauty’s life because she would much rather aid her father, her story does end with her getting married to “one of the loveliest Princes that eye ever beheld” (Beaumont 14). Furthermore, the enchantress invites Beauty to “come and receive the reward of your judicious choice; you have preferred virtue before either wit or beauty and deserve to find a person in whom all these qualifications are united,” making clear that the heroine’s reward is getting married to a wealthy prince (Beaumont 14). Unfortunately, the realization of Beauty’s ultimate happiness occurs through the relationship she establishes with a male figure.

Although the idea that a female’s fulfillment will occur through marriage nullifies other aspects of a woman’s life that can be as equally rewarding, there is a salvageable element in the marriage introduced by Beaumont. Griswold suggests that the story could be promoting romantic love and love within marriage (48). This is significant because the author lived at a time when arranged marriages were common and people sought unions based on money and wealth (Griswold 47). Even



though the conclusion of Beaumont's story does not represent all the possibilities that are available to women, it is a small advancement in the theme of marriage and towards the promotion of female autonomy and independence.

### Disney's 1991 Adaptation

Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast* became incredibly popular throughout the years and in 1991 Walt Disney Studios decided to release their version of the enduring tale as an animated movie. Disney has been criticized for their depiction of women in their films and *Beauty and the Beast* is not exempt from this; however, the film showed a nascent awareness of feminist issues and of their responsibility to depict better role models. Sharon D. Downey says that even though it could seem like the story is focused on a male's conflict and the resolution of it, Belle, Disney's name for Beauty, initiates actions that "drive the film's tension, inform other character's behaviors, and resolve conflict" (199). As a result, she argues that the movie creates a good balance between masculine and feminine forces, and this is important because it places Belle in an equal position with her male counterparts. In addition to Downey, Cynthia Erb claims that the animated movie produces "an overall destabilization of traditional genders roles" (51) through liberal traces of feminist and gay discourses, and this suggests that the Disney version of the story may not after all be as conservative as many of their other films.

One of Disney's major contributions to the story of *Beauty and the Beast* was an expansion to Beauty's character. Belle maintains some of the traits first given to her by Beaumont, such as her kindness, determination and cheerfulness, but she is very different from the original Beauty because she is significantly more complex. Cummins argues that Disney "de-emphasizes most of the earlier version's concern with virtue" (26), but this is not a bad thing because most of Beauty's virtues in the original story, even her determination and activeness, are directly linked to pleasing or saving others. In the movie we see her smile, be generous, and show concern towards those she loves; in addition, we see her convey anger, desperation, scorn, fear,



sadness, and disgust. She has a broader spectrum of emotions and characteristics that give a more realistic portrayal of a complete woman. Despite this, not all critics liked Belle's new qualities. Craven says that her feistiness reduces her power and status, and that it simplifies her character (127). Nevertheless, her qualities contribute to make Belle more real, more complex, and less tamable. In fact, the very feistiness that Craven criticizes makes Belle more relatable to small girls who are full of wit, spirit, and desire to challenge the world that surrounds them.

Besides expanding Belle's character, Disney chose to broaden her sphere of interests. In Beaumont's story, Beauty's love for books is briefly mentioned, but Disney decided to make this love for literature one of Belle's core characteristics and a recurring theme throughout the movie. The first time she is introduced, she is cruising her village with a book in hand. Oblivious to everything that surrounds her, absorbed in her stories and dreams, she has the sole purpose of getting to the small village bookshop to get her next reading material. Later in the story, Belle marvels at the enormous library in the Beast's castle, and it is her passion for reading that brings her closer to the Beast as she starts sharing her favorite books with him.

In addition to her passion for reading, Belle's capacity to understand and work with machines was also a novelty introduced by Disney to expand her sphere of interests. In Beaumont's version Beauty's father is a merchant, but in the animated movie he is a jolly absentminded inventor. Belle has a clear understanding of his work and when one of her father's machines starts breaking down, she is ready, tools in hand, to help him fix it. The sets of skills required to work with machinery are usually associated with the masculine gender, but the film gives Belle a series of abilities that make her more than a domestic beauty. Unfortunately, this capacity is not explored in depth throughout the movie, and she is her father's helper rather than being an inventor herself despite being equally skilled. This detail of the narrative reflects the lack of recognition for women in the workplace and how they are often forced to have a secondary role in it rather than a central one.

While in Beaumont's version Beauty is praised and recognized by her village, in the motion animated movie Belle's natural inventiveness and love for books isolate her from the people of her town. The village's response to Belle's figure is one of the major changes introduced by Disney. Contrary to Beaumont's version in which Beauty draws everybody's attention for being a perfect young woman, in the Disney film Belle is noticed and criticized for being uncommon and "peculiar" (Disney 1991). From the beginning of the film, Belle's interests and aspirations are not shared, nor understood, by anybody else in the village and this sets her from the rest. The townsfolk are not deliberately mean to her, some perhaps even recognize that she is special, but this does not prevent them from creating a clear separation line between them and Belle. Disney's modification of Belle's reception by the village stresses her distinctiveness and transmits to its young audience the idea that someone who is different and not necessarily praised by everyone who surrounds her is still special and worthy of being a princess. Young girls struggling to fit in can find in Belle a comforting figure and feel encouraged to remain unique.

Perhaps even more relevant is that the village's response to Belle can also be seen as a representation of the way traditional society responds to feminism and the changes brought upon by it. Belle is noticed and discussed by all the members of the town, but she is rejected because her characteristics make her threatening to the well established order of her provincial town. In the opening scene, as Belle walks through the village, all the other women are either seen executing domestic roles that have traditionally been reserved for females or flirting with the men in town. A young literate woman who seems to be completely absorbed by her own interests and whose dreams and aspirations are the main focus of her thoughts, breaks with her town's well-constructed model of what the appropriate female role should be.

The village is not the only element in the Disney film to reflect modern day society. Both main male characters in the movie can be seen as contrasting representations of contemporary culture. Gaston, a chauvinistic figure introduced by Disney, personifies

a society characterized by patriarchal domination. He also embodies an exaggeration of what are considered typical masculine traits. He is an egocentric hunter who is the alpha male of the village and is basically the “quintessential caricature of machismo” (Downey 196). Gaston appears to be the only member of the village to value and accept Belle, but his obsession with her is rooted in the reproductive and domestic potential he sees in her figure. Belle is valuable to Gaston because she is a beautiful woman that can fulfill a good wife’s role. Traditionally, this is the sort of worth that society has given to women. However, Belle considers him to be “positively primeval” (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991) and rejects him, as well as the role that her village is trying to impose upon her. In Beaumont’s original story, other suitors ask for Beauty’s hand but she rejects them because she would rather take care of her father. In the Disney version of the story, Belle’s rejection of Gaston has to do with herself and her system of values. She simply does not like Gaston and desires something much better for herself that originally has nothing to do with marriage. By rejecting Gaston, Belle rejects a conservative patriarchal model that will dominate and nullify her.

In contrast to Gaston, the Beast is a transitional figure who represents a society in transformation. When Belle first meets him, he is aggressive, imposing, violent, and authoritarian. In many ways, he is not very different from what Gaston embodies. However, through his contact with Belle, the Beast transforms into a refined being who is able to fully understand, value, and respect the power that Belle exhibits. Once the Beast’s transformation takes place, Belle falls in love with him and decides to give him the honor she refused to give to Gaston by marrying him. The change that the Beast undergoes throughout the film reflects Belle’s transformational power as a woman, her ability to change both others and herself, and the existing transformative potential that society possesses as it comes in contact with feminism and its agents of change.

With the expansion of Belle’s character and interests, the new relationship between her and her village, and Gaston’s and the Beast’s representation of society, Disney enhanced some feminist themes in their 1991 *Beauty and the Beast*. How-

ever, some of these attempts were faulty and insufficient and there was a regression on some of the advancements originally made by Beaumont almost two hundred and fifty years prior to the movie. For example, the movie lacks the moralistic purpose that characterized the original tale. While Beaumont had a clear intention of educating young girls through her story, Disney's primary goal was to entertain. The core messages of the tale were obscured by the emphasis and introduction of additional fantastic elements, such as magical castle objects, and the numerous musical numbers spread throughout the film. The way the story was reimagined reflects the company's desire to meet the expectations of the mass target and their concern of creating something that would be popular, profitable, and relatable to male audiences as well.

The dilution of the theme of consent in the Disney movie is even more concerning than the loss of the moralistic purpose. In Beaumont's tale, Beauty's compliance with the events unfolding in the story is constantly sought, but this is not the case for the Disney film. Contrary to the original story in which the Beast clearly states that it is fundamental that Beauty consents to stay with him in the castle, in the movie, when Belle reaches the palace to find her father, she does not know that it will eventually cost her her freedom. She decides to take her father's place as a prisoner to save his life, but she desires to escape and is kept in the castle against her will by the Beast. The refined gentle and considerate character of the Beast that remains consistent throughout Beaumont's version, initially gets transformed by Disney into an aggressive and scary being that is willing to impose his will over Belle's to obtain a benefit: getting saved by her. Eventually the Beast transforms and Belle develops feelings for him; nevertheless, the story transmits the message that if a man imposes his interests and feelings long and strongly enough, a woman will eventually give in and share them as well.

Besides the loss of consent, another crucial difference between Beaumont's fairytale and the film is the way in which the Beast attains redemption in each one of the versions. In Beaumont's story, the enchantress determines that the Beast will re-

turn to his human form if a woman consents to marry him. In the Disney movie, although the Beast's salvation is still dependent on Belle, it is no longer achieved by her conscious choice. Instead, the Beast is saved when Belle falls in love with him, something that she cannot really control. In Disney's version, consent gets obscured by romance. The underlying idea is that love is powerful enough to relegate a woman's right to consent to a secondary level. The Beast's initial actions against Belle and her freedom get forgiven and forgotten because she falls in love.

The predominance of romance in Disney's motion animated film has been sternly criticized. June Cummins claims that not only does the 1991 Disney version of the story transmit "that true happiness for women exists only in the arms of a prince and that their most important quest is finding that prince" (22), but that it eliminates the major constituent elements of the original story by overly emphasizing the romantic aspect of the original tale. Similarly, Allison Craven claims that the movie is a "kitsch adaptation" that alters the core of the story by making the process of falling in love more significant than the actual process of learning and understanding (124). Although romantic love can be an important component of the human experience, it is not as defining of a woman's story as Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* makes it seem. Additionally, its centrality in the movie prevents other important themes, such as personal development and personal fulfillment, from being developed.

Along with an excessive emphasis of romance comes the fact that the motion animated movie was once again terminated in a romantic union. Although Beaumont's story finished with a marital agreement, she did make an important advancement in the theme of marriage by introducing the idea that a woman could choose to wed for love, an uncommon concept at her time. Even though marriage is not explicitly shown, it is implied and the problem with Disney's film is that, more than two centuries later, it is incapable of offering an alternative ending to a young female's story. Belle turns the Beast into a handsome prince and the movie ends as they dance together in their pompous castle surrounded by the magical objects of the palace that have been returned to their human form. The audience is left to assume

that she lived happily ever after because she found love. Disney's intention of expanding Belle's sphere of interests to make her a complex, driven woman, is a failed attempt when her passion for books, her capacity to work with machines, and her desire to explore the world, get forgotten and dismissed once she decides upon union with the Beast. After Beaumont's tale, the story's resolution remains stagnant and without evolution because Disney stresses the idea that the role that a woman acquires as she becomes the romantic partner of a man, overrides any other interests of the individual. The culmination in romance does not offer any new possibilities to women.

### **Disney's 2017 Adaptation**

Despite the major drawbacks in Disney's 1991 *Beauty and the Beast*, the film was so successful that in 2017, twenty-six years after the cartoon came out, Disney released a live action version of the fairytale. The new film showed a deeper understanding of feministic themes and a clear intention to further expand these motifs throughout the narrative. It was a response to Beaumont's original story and to their previous movie, that attempted to advance the tale and resolve many of the issues that arose in their first rendering of the fairytale. Disney was more aware of the requirements of an increasingly feminized society that demands complex feminine role models that possess strength, power and liberty of action.

One of the most notable feminist advances in Disney's motion animated picture was the expansion of Belle's sphere of interests. The live action film refines and develops even further this broadened sphere to improve the messages that the tale conveys. For example, in the 1991 film, Disney gave Belle the capacity to understand and work with machines. It was a valuable modification to Belle's character; but, as her father's helper she is relegated to a secondary position. Recognizing the issues associated with this portrayal, Disney promotes Belle in the 2017 movie from an inventor's helper to an inventor herself. This ability becomes one of her defining characteristics in the film and sets her apart from the rest of the villagers. In a scene where Belle walks through her town to get a new book,

she passes by a fountain where many old women and little girls are gathered doing laundry. Later, we see Belle by that exact same place with the difference that she is reading as her clothes get washed automatically by a machine she built herself. Her skills as an inventor are extremely unusual at her village, and their means of expression show that her aspirations stretch far beyond the domestic role that is usually imposed upon the women in her society.

Belle is so skilled as an inventor that she even surpasses her father, the other inventor of the village. She is always one step ahead of him whenever they are working together on a project, anticipating the tools that need to be used and the steps that should be taken. By doing this, Disney symbolically grants Belle the recognition in the workplace that they failed to give her in the 1991 movie. The film not only transmits the idea that women can contend in fields often dominated by men, it also demonstrates that they can excel within them and surpass their male counterparts. By making Belle an inventor, Disney alludes to modern-day, female engineers or scientists who daily fight their way into fields that have been historically almost exclusively reserved for men.

Besides giving Belle the capacity to work with machines, the 1991 film made her passion for books another fundamental element of her identity. With this, Disney created a role model that possessed aspirations that went beyond the traditional feminine sphere, even though, as Cummins notes, she chose simple romantic stories as the focus of her readings (24) and this lessened the impact of the message conveyed by her character expansion. In the 2017 film, Disney broadened the scope of Belle's literary interests by showing multiple instances where she is seen reading or referencing renowned literary works. For example, Belle alludes to *Romeo and Juliet* when she tells a villager that she is going to return a book "about two lovers in fair Verona." Later on, she again refers to the tragedy by the Beast's bedside. At another scene, she walks with him through the castle's gardens and recites a fragment from the poem "A Crystal Forest" by William Sharp, and, still later, she discusses with him literary works about King Arthur and the Round Table. In this film,



Belle is not reading shallow romance novels; instead, she is a knowledgeable well-versed woman acquainted with literary masterpieces. This subtle but essential modification to the 1991 version suggests that Disney has higher ambitions for Belle in their 2017 movie. The literary references to great classical works re-contextualize her character and story, situating them within a line of great romances. This transforms Belle from a kitsch fairytale character to a heroine worthy of comparison to figures such as Juliet or Guinevere, which gives her character new strength as it transcends mere entertainment purposes.

Even more significant than this deepening of Belle's intellectual concerns and the possible implications it may have is that she does not reserve these interests only to herself. In the 2017 film, Disney turns Belle into a progressive agent of change who seeks to educate other young girls and share with them the pleasure of reading and attaining knowledge. By doing this, Disney managed to recover part of the moralistic purpose of the tale that was present in Beaumont's original narrative, but that was lost in the 1991 cartoon. In the scene where Belle reads by the fountain as she waits for her laundry to be ready, a curious girl inquires about her reading and washing method. Belle warmly invites her to come close and eagerly starts teaching her how to read. In a social environment that is restrictive and controlling towards women, literacy becomes a door to new ideas that can promote and facilitate change. By teaching other women how to read, Belle's power to transform expands tremendously and has a tangible effect on her society. Just like important feminist figures throughout history, Belle paves the way for other women to reach the much-sought equality between genders. The movie educates and promotes this collaborative relationship between women through literacy.

Progress towards a society in which men and women are completely equal has been difficult. The comfort of maintaining well established patriarchal values is easier than producing an exhaustive change. Although in 2017 Belle is trying to improve literacy and the quality of the available knowledge within her community, the majority of the villagers condemn her actions. They are not ready for the change she wants to bring, which

prompts them to react negatively to try to maintain the established system of which they have always been a part. As in the 1991 movie, the village can be seen as a representation of traditional society and how it responds to feminism. However, Belle's relationship to her village is subtly transformed in the 2017 version, reflecting important advances in how present-day society reacts to the feminist movement. In the first Disney film, Belle is ostracized and rejected by the villagers all throughout the movie. She eventually reaches the castle and transforms the Beast into a more advanced being that is able to fully comprehend her value, but he represents a minority because he is confined to the castle, which is a secluded universe. Until the conclusion of the story, Belle remains with the Beast in isolation from the rest of the village and is only able to develop and thrive this way. By contrast, at the end of the 2017 movie there is a reconciliation between Belle and the rest of the village. When the spell set by the enchantress is broken and the Beast and all the magical inhabitants from the palace return to their human form, the villagers also get woken up from a dream. The fierce men and women that had left the castle after a strenuous battle against its inhabitants, return to the palace with confused gazes to embrace those whom they had originally rejected and fought against. Later, in the last scene, all of villagers are part of the palace's ball and they dance and celebrate along with the castle's inhabitants. Unlike the 1991 film, in the 2017 movie the villagers evolve and become part of Belle's new universe. Her values and ideals no longer exist in isolation and this small difference represents mainstream society's slow progression towards the acceptance of feminist ideals.

Disney's live action movie gave a significant leap forward in the portrayal of feminist themes in the *Beauty and the Beast* tale. However, the 2017 film is still far from being perfect and is a testament to the need to maintain the ongoing discussion surrounding gender equality. By improving the characterization of Belle making her an inventor, educator, and well-versed reader, as well as by modifying how the village relates to her, Disney grants Belle more power and freedom of action in the public sphere of her life. Unfortunately, this progression is not

extended into her private sphere. The improvements made by the film are directly linked to Belle's opportunities of development within her community, as well as to the influencing power she might have in it. However, issues in the 1991 movie that were more closely related to what could be considered Belle's private life, remain unresolved.

Once again, in 2017 Disney chooses to prioritize love and end the story with a romantic union. The concluding scene is a ball in which Belle dances with her prince implying that "they lived happily ever after." Similar to the 1991 movie, what occurs after is unknown because all of the qualities and interests that initially defined Belle become irrelevant as soon as she falls in love and decides to remain in the castle. What were Belle's achievements as an inventor? Was she able to travel and adventure as she desired? Did she expand her library and continue to educate? Did she develop other interests? These questions remain unanswered as the elements that previously contributed to her identity are forgotten.

There is nothing wrong with marriage or with establishing a romantic partner *per se*. After all, one of the major principles of feminism is that women possess the absolute freedom to be the ultimate architects of their life. Yet, still in 2017 Disney cannot provide a space in which a woman's private life coexists with her public and individual interests. The rights given to Belle in one sphere, stop where the other one begins. Marcia R. Lieberman states that fairytales have had a tremendous role in suggesting to children "the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person's chances of success in various endeavors" (384) and it is highly problematic that fairytale representations in the 21st century still suggest in their depictions vast limitations for women within the private ambit.

The resolution of the tale in the 2017 movie reflects the common patriarchal idea that women are incapable of coordinating things such as being a wife or a mother with having a career. And if something needs to be chosen between the two, the movie reflects that society still prefers relegating women to an enclosed universe within the household. Furthermore, what is ironic is that although women are forced to be in charge of mat-

ters in the private sphere, many times men are still in control of it due to the economic power they derive from their job and role in the public sphere. In the film, this can symbolically be seen in Belle staying in the castle with the Beast. When they unite they do not start a life together somewhere else. Instead, Belle remains in the palace, a realm of which the Beast is literally prince and master.

The resolution of the story in a romantic union was not the only problematic element that carried over from the 1991 movie to the 2017 movie. Belle's salvation of the Beast through the involuntary action of falling in love, remains unchanged. With her fairytale, Beaumont had been able to advance the theme of consent on a public and legal level because her story stressed that the key to the Beast's salvation was that Beauty agreed to form part of a social institution, marriage. However, in both Disney movies, the theme of consent remains diluted and stagnant because Disney could not further advance it from the legal and public scope in which Beaumont was able to place it, into a more private one. The saving power that love was granted sent the idea that it was more powerful than consent itself. Additionally, the 2017 film again reinforces the idea that despite all the Beast's initial aggressiveness and severe wrongdoings against Belle, change and love are enough to make her forget these. Disney's subtle message is concerning because it suggests that affection can condone abuse, and unfortunately, in cases of domestic violence and emotionally abusive relationships, love is often used as a powerful and coercive tool against the victim.

## Conclusion

Disney does make a few great advancements of feminist themes in their live action version. Belle is overall a better role model for children and suggests a better relationship between feminism and mainstream society. However, it is disturbing that after almost thirty years, significant issues concerning serious matters such as consent and the freedom of women in the private sphere are still reflected in the narrative of their version of *Beauty and the Beast*. These things were already problematic in the 1991 film, but the lack of evolution after many years has

increased the magnitude of their severity.

Through time, Disney has been sternly criticized for the way it portrays stories about women on film. Nonetheless, a company that seeks to entertain, please, and appeal to the vast majority of the population should not be blamed for the content of its productions. Instead, Disney's movies should be seen as evidence of an uncomfortable ugly truth: they are only a reflection of the society they have been produced in. Perhaps, after all the years that have passed since Beaumont reconceived the tale, and since the story was adapted to a motion animated picture, the live action movie is not able to completely resolve underlying patriarchal issues because in the twenty first century, our society has not been able to do so either.

Who wants to be a princess when a woman's world is still far from being a fairytale? Despite all the advances made by the feminist movement throughout time, we have yet to close a huge existing gap between men and women. In the United States this gap is not legal in nature because, overall, the existing laws grant equal rights to both genders and strive to reinforce this equality. Instead, much like racism and classism, the gap is cultural and deeply rooted in society's collective subconscious. We yet have to grant women the same intrinsic value that is automatically given to men. Hopefully, this will be achieved sooner rather than later and it will promptly be reflected in future adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast* and in all the other stories and tales that we transmit to our children. Till then, the crowns and scepters will have to remain in the drawer.

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