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Recommended Citation

DiPaolo, Marc, "Mass-Marketing "Beauty": How a Feminist Heroine Became an Insipid Disney Princess" (2010). *Faculty Books & Book Chapters*. 11.
https://dc.swosu.edu/cas_ll_books/11

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*Mass-Marketing "Beauty":
How a Feminist Heroine Became
an Insipid Disney Princess*

MARC DIPAOLO

When my three goddaughters turned four in 2004, they started showing signs of being able to understand and appreciate movies, so I decided it was as good a time as any to introduce them to the Walt Disney films I had grown up with. Naturally, I was leery of showing them any Disney films that seemed to glorify the idea of "being a princess," or that concluded with a manly prince "rescuing" the heroine simultaneously from the forces of evil and her own independence—so I avoided showing the triplets *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*. Instead, I chose *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), a film that I remembered as being enchanting as well as boasting a strong female lead in the figure of Belle. What I did not realize at the time was that Disney's Consumer Products division had spent the last four years developing a marketing campaign called the Disney Princess line and had included Belle as an integral part of its merchandising initiative, doing possibly irreparable harm to the character in the process.

In the various dolls, Halloween costumes, DVDs, and video games that comprise the multibillion-dollar Disney Princess industry, Belle is featured as the brunette princess, *The Little Mermaid's* Ariel is the redhead, Snow White is the black-haired White girl, and *Sleeping Beauty* (a.k.a. Princess Aurora) and *Cinderella* vie for position as the blonde princess. The grouping encourages Caucasian girls of every major hair color to pick their favorite

princess to identify with, thereby imagining themselves in the tiara and regal gown. For both marketing and multicultural reasons, these main five princesses are sometimes joined by the Native American Pocahontas, the Asian Mulan, and the Semitic Jasmine, but they are rarely positioned as centrally as the first five. By the time I had decided to show my goddaughters the film *Beauty and the Beast*, I discovered that they had already spent the past several months dressing as the Disney Princesses and declaring themselves royalty, often using their newfound titles as an excuse not to go to bed early or eat their greens at dinnertime.

The triplets had already known Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, not as a fictional character, but as a sort of totem or figure of mythical, upper-class privilege and idealized femininity. But it was not the Belle I had come to know and admire—the feminist Belle of the Disney film. That Belle was an avid reader with a sly sense of humor who was capable of great warmth and noble acts of selflessness. That Belle was a liberated woman who turned down a proposal of marriage from the handsomest, most controlling and self-involved man in town, Gaston the big game hunter, to maintain control of her own destiny. That Belle confronted a pack of wolves brandishing a torch and disobeyed the Beast's command not to enter the forbidden west wing of the castle. In contrast, the Belle of the Disney Princess line is an empty-headed, dewy-eyed cipher perpetually clutching a rose to her bosom, who sings songs like "The Perfect Princess Tea" and "The Princess Dance" in spin-off videos. I was disappointed to see the feminist heroine created by screenwriter Linda Woolverton so diminished, and I second-guessed my enthusiastic desire to introduce Belle to my goddaughters.

The Disney brand name has never been synonymous with feminism, so it should have occurred to me that the moderately liberal *Beauty and the Beast* film, which provided a long-overdue feminist Disney heroine, would be an exception, not the start of a trend toward progressive depictions of women by the studio. After all, many critics accept as a given that the Disney adaptations of fairy tales are bowdlerized, antifeminist versions of older fairy tales. Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, complains that Disney's Cinderella is more passive than any other incarnation of the character, even the "sugar-sweet and insipidly good" heroine of the Perrault story that inspired it (251). And Marina Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde*, argues that the demonic stepmother of Cinderella has convinced legions of children that all real-life stepmothers must be equally demonic. In addition, Warner notes that the self-centered Ariel and obese Sea Witch from *The Little Mermaid* are also far from solid female role models (207, 402). However, what is frustrating here is that Disney got Belle right in its wonderful film adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* and then

proceeded to undo its own good work by marketing the Beauty character as a Disney princess, transforming her into a merchandiser's dream but a feminist's nightmare.

The Belle in the movie carries the first half of the film alone and, even when the impressive Beast shows up and threatens to overshadow Belle, she remains a central focus of audience interest and sympathy, especially in her bravery when defying Beast, who dwarfs her in size. Although the film ends with a marriage—and such romanticized endings are problematic for many feminists because of the implication that women can only be happy within the context of heterosexual marriage—the lovers develop a mutual respect by the end of the film, and they have strong enough personalities that the audience is reassured that their union will be happy and equitable.

The animated movie begins by presenting Belle as a beautiful young woman living in a provincial town in France. She is an avid reader and the daughter of a scientist; she is far more intelligent than everyone else in town and has neither close friends nor romantic prospects, least of all the egomaniacal big-game hunter, Gaston, whom she steadfastly refuses to marry. When her father disappears unexpectedly, Belle investigates and discovers that he has been captured by an enormous, bull-like figure that rules over an enchanted castle filled with subjects that have been transformed into living furniture. In an act of self-sacrifice, Belle wins her father's freedom by offering herself as a hostage instead. Once she is sure that her father is safe, however, Belle immediately begins to defy the terms of her own imprisonment, first by investigating the forbidden west wing of the castle to uncover the secret of the curse that has transformed the entire kingdom, and then by fleeing the castle. While her escape attempt fails, leading her into the clutches of a pack of wolves, it forces Beast into action, and he reveals his bravery and affection for her when he risks his life to chase the wolves away. Victorious but badly wounded, Beast collapses in the snow, near death. Here Belle gives up her chance to escape and rescues Beast in turn by dragging him back to the castle.

Following this dramatic event, both Belle and the Beast declare a truce and allow themselves to get acquainted on a deeper level. The middle of the film is replete with scenes in which the two show deference to each other, exchange gifts, and make significant sacrifices on the other's behalf. In the process, most audience members become convinced that they belong together, despite Beast's initial, unforgivable behavior, because he has become more humane while Gaston becomes more bestial. In the climactic segment, Gaston duplicates Beast's crime against Belle by placing her father in a mental institution in an effort to blackmail her into marrying him. Beast grants her leave to go free her father, even though he needs Belle's love in order to

break the enchantment that cursed him. Meanwhile, Gaston leads an angry mob of torch-bearing villagers to kill Beast in his castle. After freeing her father, Belle instantly races back to the castle, just in time to see Beast fighting Gaston atop the battlements. Gaston falls to his death and Beast nearly joins him, but Belle arrives in time to save his life by grabbing onto his shirt. It is only at this moment, when Belle joins Beast willingly instead of as his prisoner, that the spell is broken and Beast and his subjects regain their lost humanity.

Because Linda Woolverton and the Disney production team worked so hard to create a Belle who is as independent as she is self-sacrificing and a Beast who is ferocious yet kindly enough to deserve salvation, the Disney cartoon shows conclusively what few other versions of the tale manage to demonstrate—that Beauty and the Beast love each other, deserve one another, and will, indeed, live happily ever after. Admittedly, the opinion of informed feminist critics is against me here. While I am impressed by Woolverton's characterization of Belle and accept both the romance and the "happy ending" on the terms that the film offers them, most feminist and deconstructionist film and literature critics would argue that I am embracing a naïve reading. They would also observe that my affection for the character suggests that I am allowing my emotions to be manipulated in a manner that is little different from the pernicious effect I myself am warning about regarding the Disney Princesses.

To put it another way, I see a large distinction between the Belle of the film and the Belle of the Disney Princesses. Most feminist critics appear to see no such distinction, and would warn that the film Belle, like the mass-marketed Disney Princess Belle, is a bad influence on impressionable young women. For example, Lara Sumera cites Belle as a potentially dangerous character because her surface feminism is essentially the bait used to trap enlightened viewers into accepting the same reactionary Disney family values dressed up in more progressive clothing. As she observes, "At first, Belle is strong, independent and intellectual. But as the film progresses, she becomes dependent and attached to the Beast, and although well read and intellectually curious, her romantic inclinations ultimately revert back to the Disney heroines of old" (46). In addition, Allison Craven argues that the film emphasizes romance over the moral development of its characters. She further points out—and I agree with her completely here—that the plot descriptions of the film on the backs of DVD and VHS copies of the film compound the problem by suggesting that Belle is the only one with anything to "learn" during the course of the film, despite the fact that Beast is the one with a tendency to take hostages.

One of the reasons it is difficult to find a literary or cultural critic who

would act as an apologist for this film, as I do, is that many of them approach the subject matter with a knowledge of both art and literature that "the average American" in the mass media age does not have. I agree that, next to the books and films of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Jane Smiley, and Gillian Armstrong, the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast* does not seem even remotely feminist. However, even critics who approach the material from this vantage point have granted that Belle is an appealing character with a noticeable feminist streak at her core. And as a point of comparison, if one begins with how women are portrayed in popular culture rather than with how women are portrayed in literature or by academics, then *Beauty and the Beast* quickly emerges as a breath of fresh air. Compare the Belle of the film to the Lolitas featured in the average MTV music-video harem; the marriage-obsessed daddy's girls of reality television and films such as *27 Dresses* and *Bride Wars*; and the damsels in distress in need of rescuing by the superhero of the day. If Belle comes up short of a more ideal feminist character (such as the heroine of *My Brilliant Career*), she still stands head and shoulders above the nightmarish role models available for young women today. As rock singer Pink laments in her song "Stupid Girls," the girl who dreamed of becoming president is likely to settle for dancing in a rapper video. Ironically, even as cultural critics write that Linda Woolverton's Belle isn't feminist enough, the executives at Disney prove that their reputation as reactionaries is well-deserved as they strive, through their merchandising campaign, to strip her of the feminism that she *does* have—the feminism that I see in her and have long celebrated.

Now, one might suggest that I overreacted to my first glimpse of the commodification of my favorite Disney heroine and that my dislike of the merchandise is a bit silly. After all, the mastermind of the marketing campaign, Andy Mooney, said in an interview with Peggy Orenstein that the marketing initiative merely "gave girls what they wanted," and he cited the massive financial success of the line as proof of little girls' preexisting desire to imagine themselves as princesses. His argument nevertheless seems self-serving and too dismissive of the legitimate complaints that feminists have against his merchandise. He has also maintained that the princess fixation represents a normal phase of girlhood that is essentially harmless and soon outgrown, much like little boys' love of cowboys, cosmonauts, and gangsters. Orenstein is skeptical of Mooney's claims, and I share her skepticism. After all, it is one thing to provide products that cater to the interests of young boys and girls who love guns and gowns in the name of making a profit. It is another thing to bombard children with products that reinforce a narrowly defined definition of masculinity and femininity in our commodity culture, which sees the same mass-media marketed products for sale in the same aisles in the same chain stores all across the country.

As Orenstein writes, the pervasiveness of the Disney Princesses seems to amount to a cultural mandate for girls to dress in pink and be passive. In an article published in 2006, "What's Wrong with Cinderella?" Orenstein argues that "young women who hold the most conventionally feminine beliefs—who avoid conflict and think they should be perpetually nice and pretty—are more likely to be depressed than others and less likely to use contraception." They tend to shy away from sports because of fears that women shouldn't be athletes, and they often feel a "paralyzing pressure to be 'perfect'"—that is to get perfect grades, be thin, gorgeous, fashionable, and be liked by everyone they meet. As Orenstein concludes, "Give those girls a pumpkin and a glass slipper and they'd be in business."

Since the omnipresence of the Disney Princess advertising initiative suggests that it would be nigh impossible to avoid contact with these princess characters, or ignore them, it behooves parents to help their daughters develop a wider understanding of what they may represent, outside of being figures of glamour. Ideally, the best way for parents to undo some of the possibly pernicious influence of the Disney Princess campaign is to encourage their daughters to read and think about the older versions of the story, to consider the narratives in light of the times and cultures that produced them, and to ponder the possible relevance the tales have today.

Belle, and the *Beauty and the Beast* film she came from, is a 1990s attempt to distill and enhance the feminist elements of a story that is thousands of years old and that has appeared in a multitude of forms in a variety of cultures. The theme of the reluctant bride who gradually comes to love what is human and beautiful at the core of her hideous husband has appeared frequently enough to have been catalogued as Aarne-Thompson fairy-tale type 425.¹ These stories feature early literary examples of women in the role of adventurer, investigator, and messiah. Many of the heroines featured in these versions are praised as much for their intelligence as for their looks, and a number of them are sculptors and painters. Other versions of the heroine dare to try to escape their captors, disobey their parents, and strive to shape their own destinies. These versions of the Beauty character, and those particular plot developments, are those that most inspired Woolverton's reinvention of the tale. Other less feminist story elements, including an intrusive narrator's voice that occasionally chides Beauty for being too strong-willed, or exaggerated female villains who make the sometimes reprehensible Beast look good in comparison, are understandably absent given Woolverton's desire to update the narrative.

The multiplicity of versions of the Beauty and Beast fairy tale complicates discussion of what the character of Belle (or Beauty) means to the modern American female, not only because the Disney Princess Belle is a

revamping of Linda Woolverton's Belle, but because Woolverton's Belle is a reaction to Beauty in her many previous incarnations.² On the one hand, the Beauty and the Beast story, at its most basic and as presented in many permutations, would seem to be an unlikely feminist parable, for it is in many ways about the limits of a woman's power in a male-dominated world. A complicit father surrenders his daughter to an ugly beast, often sacrificing her to atone for a crime that *he has committed* (such as stealing a rose from a garden), and the daughter acquiesces, either out of a misplaced sense of guilt (because the rose was for her) or because she does not want to be disobedient to her father. The heroine is horrified by her intended husband's bestial appearance—which varies from being bear-like to serpentine—and the Beast often does little to earn her trust and respect. In fact, sometimes his deeds are as monstrous as his appearance, but the heroine is still supposed to fall for him. Over time, Beauty learns to love the Beast despite his appearance, and her affection for him ultimately transforms him into a handsome husband she might have chosen for herself, had she been granted the power to choose a mate.

Many of the most traditional ways of interpreting the fairy tale would not speak to the sensibilities of the modern female reader. For example, Bettelheim argues that the Beauty and the Beast story dramatizes the moment when a woman of marriageable age has to learn to overcome her dread of sex in time for her wedding night. The ghastly appearance of her husband on the honeymoon symbolically represents that fear of sex, and the climactic transformation of the beast into a handsome prince demonstrates that sex will ultimately prove beautiful and rewarding once the woman has lost her virginity (283). Considering that the earliest versions of the story came to prominence in civilizations in which women's choices in marriage were limited at best and marriages were frequently arranged by parents, the tale's historical significance may be that female readers were encouraged to follow Beauty's example and make the best of an arranged marriage, usually to an older man, as Marina Warner argues (278). However, the Beauty and the Beast tale is unusual because it grants subjectivity and centrality to a female protagonist who thinks, feels, and is capable of growth and change. After all, western literature is replete with "othered" female figures who are represented stereotypically as either virgins or whores and who demonstrate little tendency toward intellectual growth or complexity of personality. In this tale-type, it is the male who is the frightening "other" figure and the woman who is the central character.

While not the most radical version of the story, Woolverton's *Beauty and the Beast* was part of a 1990s corrective to the reactionary 1980s, the Reagan-Bush years during which time the women's movement lost ground

in the realm of public opinion and public policy. Beginning in the early 1990s, Hillary Clinton heralded an era of Lilith Fair musicians and films such as *Thelma & Louise*, which returned strong, intelligent women to the screen after a decade of teen-sex comedies, slasher films, and Arnold Schwarzenegger action vehicles. In this uncharacteristically progressive Disney film, Woolverton's screenplay stresses Belle's depth of character from the outset by making her physical beauty less important than her intelligence and integrity, and her two most admirable traits, her love of reading and her love for her father. The Disney *Beauty and the Beast* does what it can to grant Beauty more freedom of choice than in previous versions, by having Beauty choose to live with Beast as an act of self-sacrifice when her father would prefer she flee from Beast. In most of the older versions of the tale the father hands the daughter over as ransom and she has no choice in the matter. Beast himself treats his captive with respect, even making a gift of his enormous library when he discovers how much of a bookworm she is.³ Thus the modern Beast treats Belle with greater respect than previous beasts, making him a more worthy object of love.

However, as kind as Beast is in his heart, especially in contrast to Gaston, he still has much to learn when he first meets Belle. Her love, and noble example, transforms him during the course of the film, awakening a goodness he never knew he had. And so Beast learns how to control his anger, shoulders his responsibility to his subjects, and learns to be less self-absorbed. Because Woolverton places the onus on Beast, not just Belle, to grow, the message of the film cannot be simplified to "women need to learn to see past ugly appearances." Instead, the film is about the dangers of self-absorption, fear, and prejudice, all of which can be defeated through a love of learning, a desire to ask difficult questions and solve mysteries, and the power of a kind heart. While Beast is asked to change more here than in previous versions, he is also a less problematic figure from the outset than previous beasts, as he is neither a rapist nor a fool, as some earlier versions of Beast are. Belle does become less self-absorbed and bitter during the course of the film, but she does not have to change as much as Beast does, nor are her faults overly critiqued. For example, no fairy shows up at the end to lecture her about the proper role of a woman, as happens in Madame Gabrielle de Villeneuve's version of the story.

In fact, as much as the two lead characters grow, the film hints that the largest problems with their lives come from external evil and not internal flaws, for the society they live in is as oppressive as it is pretty. Woolverton's story acknowledges that the tiny French town Belle grew up in is male-dominated and stifling, and Belle is angrily aware of the limits of her "provincial life." To dramatize the societal constraints placed on Belle, evil patriarchal

traits that had once been associated with both Beast and Belle's father—a fear of women's subjectivity, a desire to dominate and own powerful women—is displaced onto the villainous Gaston, who is ugly on the inside and handsome on the outside and is therefore Beast's opposite.⁴

Gaston represents a dangerous sexuality (he is muscular and covered with hair), and a threat to female agency with his repeated attempts to blackmail and coerce Belle into a marriage that, in an earlier version of the tale, might have been forced upon her by her father. In light of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's 1756 version of the story, which was meant to reassure young women entering into marriage with older men, and which shows beastly men redeemed by the love of a virtuous woman, Gaston is an unredeemed double of the beast both because, as Warner observes, he is genuinely evil and because Belle does not love him (316–17). However, Gaston's presence is vitally important to the film as both a brilliant satire of patriarchal evil and as a much-needed location for all the more sinister and imperial personality traits that Woolverton shaved off the film's two other central male figures—Beast and Beauty's father.⁵ Gaston is one of the most grandly evil males in the story's history. In previous versions, the most blatantly evil characters are nearly all female, such as Beauty's vain sisters in Beaumont's version and the operatically evil Venus from Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, and Woolverton was wise to eliminate the presence of grand female evil from her script. A few ugly women villagers and a trio of bubble-headed blonde Gaston groupies are the limit of feminine baseness here.

Of course, while the climactic transformation of the beast into a handsome man was traditionally a moment of comfort for women worried that they would not love the husbands they were forced to marry, by the twentieth century the transformation took on a different, more problematic overtone. Many viewers who, like Belle, have grown to love the Beast as he was, express disappointment when he returns to human form at the end of Woolverton's film. Apparently they feel that the transformation undermines the message that it is important to accept and love people who look different. This was also a problem for viewers of the Jean Cocteau film *La Belle et la bête* (1946). Actress Marlene Dietrich reportedly said, "Give me back my beast," when she saw the beast turn human at the end of that film (Kael 58). The jarring, dissatisfied feeling some viewers experience at the end of the Disney film may have inspired DreamWorks' spoof film *Shrek*. Made ten years after *Beauty and the Beast*, *Shrek* has in some ways eclipsed the Disney film in popularity.

Shrek is a groundbreaking computer-animated parody of the traditional Disney animated film that consistently mocks Disney character-types and themes, such as romance, royalty, and the mandatory musical number.⁶ Its

satire is at its most effective when it portrays the main villain, the diminutive tyrant Farquaad, as a double for Disney head Michael Eisner and when it depicts Farquaad's "magic kingdom" as a deceptively clean-cut theme park for neo-Nazis. The Fascist imagery savages Disney's financial and creative dominion over the animated film industry, children's entertainment, merchandising, and even, to a degree, childhood itself. Because Disney's far-reaching influence is stifling and limiting on so many levels, the segments set in Farquaad's domain are particularly refreshing and amusing and do not, despite the Fascist imagery, seem "out-of-line" or overstated.

Of course, when a film sets out to target Disney and its respective projects, it makes sense that such a film would take aim at one of Disney's greatest successes. The anti-heroic title character (voiced by Mike Myers), is a green ogre who falls in love with the beautiful Princess Fiona, but worries that he is too ugly to attract her. For her part, Fiona is cursed to change every night, werewolf-style, from a human into a green ogre who looks like Shrek, so the match is not as farfetched as Shrek initially thinks it is. After several scenes of misrecognition, bickering, and comedic plot twists, *Shrek* concludes by turning the audience expectation of the end of the Beauty and the Beast tale on its head: instead of both Shrek and Fiona being "cured" of OGREHOOD, the two are fixed permanently in ugly/cute green bodies and live happily ever after. In the age of multiculturalism and civil rights, the traditional endings of Beauty and the Beast tale seem racist: the unique-looking beast, who is often handsomely bestial, is expected to turn into a "handsome" white man who is bland in comparison to the charismatic beast. *Shrek* challenges this reading of the fairy tale very effectively, by refusing to end in the expected way. Fortunately, the sequels do not undo this ending, and both Shrek and Fiona remain their normal green selves as they fight the Gaston-like Prince Charming and team up with the silly and annoying Disney Princesses. It is particularly refreshing, in light of the petite-blonde-Lolita standard of female beauty that Britney Spears' debut revived in the mass media, to see a plump, green heroine like Fiona on screen as the hero's main love interest and looking nothing like Cameron Diaz, the blonde bombshell who voices her.

However, as progressive as the idea of the Fiona character is, the reality is that she is not as compelling a character as Belle from the Disney version. Shrek is the viewpoint character, and Fiona is kept largely in the background. Significantly, she does not share the title of the film with her true love, as Belle does in the Disney version. Indeed the *Shrek* films seem modeled on classic male buddy films (like the *Odd Couple* or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*) in which the female love interest is a secondary concern and primary dramatic weight is granted to the friendship the hero has

with his slightly annoying friend. In the *Shrek* films there are two annoying friends, Eddie Murphy's Donkey and Antonio Banderas' Puss-in-Boots. Fiona simply cannot compete with Donkey's one-liners or Puss-in-Boots' cuteness, and she is nowhere near as strong a feminist role model as other recent Beautys, despite her occasional moment in the sun, as when she leads a Princess rebellion against the villains at the end of *Shrek the Third*. Even minor background characters, like the hilarious Gingerbread Man, manage to steal Fiona's thunder. In contrast, Belle of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* has much more dialogue and screen time, and she is not sidelined so that the film can explore the blossoming buddy relationship between Beast and, say, Lumiere the singing candlestick. Belle's actions directly shape the plot, and her thoughts and feelings are the chief concern of her film. She has a magnetic screen presence, even when she is sharing the stage with an enormous Beast and an array of singing dinnerware. Admittedly, Belle is not given a flashy pop song when she comes on screen as Fiona often is, and Fiona seems to know more kung fu than Belle does. Still, Belle doesn't need such rock fanfare or comic-book feminist traits like kickboxing skills to outshine Fiona. For all her girl-power trappings, Fiona is nowhere near as central to the *Shrek* story as she should be and often amounts to little more than a plot device, while Belle is at least the co-star, if not the star, of her story.

My problems with the first *Shrek* film aside, its sensibilities are decidedly more feminist than those represented by the Disney Princesses, but not more so than the Disney film *Beauty and the Beast*. Just as the 1980s saw a backlash against the feminism of the 1970s, the feminism of the 1990s took a back seat to patriotism and family values in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Liberal values in general and feminist and pacifist sensibilities in particular were seen as unpatriotic in light of these attacks, and American women were asked to be thankful that they were not living in Afghanistan and thus should not complain about the inequalities that remain in American society. Suddenly, feminism was out of season. Thanks to this more conservative worldview, and the perception that those in the Millennial Generation are more Republican than the members of Generation X who preceded them, the executives at Disney seem to have felt it was better to market a more passive, domestic American Belle to the women of the twenty-first century. While Woolverton's feminist Belle was profitable for Disney in the 1990s, in the early twenty-first century she represented a financial risk akin to the uppity, anti-Bush *Dixie Chicks*, so Disney mothballed her. She was translated into a new Belle, who looked like the old one but was reduced to a two-dimensional image adorning nightgowns and hand-held mirrors, or a doll to be dressed up in a variety of regal gowns. That was how, and why, Disney destroyed its own feminist hero. So, while I initially

resented the first *Shrek* film for what I perceived to be a mocking of Woolverton's excellent story, in the end, I find myself inclined to agree with its central satirical thesis: the executives at Disney Studios are evil capitalists who don't care what corrupting influence they have on the youth of America in their quest to make a profit.

Despite the influence of the Disney Princesses, the original film remains available for viewing on DVD. Woolverton's screenplay remains unique in the canon of Beauty and the Beast stories and Disney films in its efforts to be simultaneously a traditional heterosexual romance film while positing the feminist notion that the relationship between Beauty and the Beast is a partnership of equals. While different readers will, understandably, prefer different versions of the classic fairy tale (and most modern students are likely to prefer *Shrek* because its overtures to feminism are more obvious), any of these is more interesting and more rewarding to consider than the self-absorbed, gaping face of Belle that is emblazoned on Disney Princess merchandise in stores across the country. Any Beauty is preferable to her, and anything that parents, educators, or young women themselves can do to become familiar with the more substantial Beauty of books and films will be doing themselves a service.

Notes

1. Examples of this type include the earliest known version, the Cupid and Psyche myth from Apuleius's book *The Golden Ass* (c. 160), as well as "The Bear Prince" (1873), "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" (1888), "The Singing, Springing Lark" (1857), and "Zelinda and the Monster" (1885). These tales and a description of this tale-type can be found at the "Beauty and the Beast" page of the *SurLaLune Fairy Tales* website, surlalunefairytales.com.

2. Plot and character elements that appear unique to Disney's rendition of *Beauty and the Beast*—most notably the handsome beast Gaston, the singing candlestick Lumiere, the beautiful enchantress, and the bookworm Beauty—can be found in earlier versions by writers such as Apuleius, Madame Gabrielle de Villeneuve, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, Jean-Paul Bignon, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jean Cocteau, and Angela Carter.

3. In addition, this gift of Beast's library places him in direct contrast with the handsome-but-evil Gaston. The first time we see Gaston and Belle together in the film, he pulls a fairy-tale book out of her hand and tosses it into the mud as he proclaims his love for her. He objects to women reading because he sees it leading to their thinking and getting ideas of their own when they should be busy cooking and bearing large, strapping male children like him.

4. Gaston has the distinction of being one of the few operatic Disney villains who does not undergo a hideous physical metamorphosis before he is killed. The witches from *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Little Mermaid* are transformed shortly before being dispatched by the knightly heroes—the first turns into a crone, the second into a dragon, and the third into a giant. Gaston's transformation is not physical and is therefore subtler, but he also becomes more demonic as the film progresses, and the loss of humanity he suffers justifies his death. As obnoxious as Gaston is from the film's outset, few viewers predict that the comic boor of the opening segment will finish the film snarling like an animal and cowardly stabbing Beast in the back with a dagger before falling to his death. Looking at Gaston's "beastliness" from a slightly different angle, he does not need to magically turn into a beast at the end because, as a male, he is already "beastly."

5. Had Gaston's character not been incorporated, the film might have been populated by far too many amiable and accessible male characters. After all, a certain degree of ominousness should surround "maleness" or masculine virility in order for any Beauty and the Beast tale to satisfy an audience dramatically.

6. Based on William Steig's children's book, *Shrek* was written by *Pirates of the Caribbean* scribes Ted Elliott and Terry Rossio (with an assist from five other screenwriters).

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