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Reimagining "Beauty": Young Adult Fairytale Retellings in Perpetuation of and Resistance to Patriarchy

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Abstract
This paper utilises an intersectional, feminist lens in order to analyse the narrative and characterisation choices made by the authors of several different iterations of the 18th century French fairytale 'Beauty and the Beast': the 1740 original, *The Beauty & the Beast* by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve; Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's *Beauty & the Beast*, published in 1756; Robin McKinley's acclaimed 1978 Young Adult retelling *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty & the Beast*; and my own 2016 Young Adult reimagining *Barefoot on the Wind*.
By examining the changing ideals of femininity, depictions of masculinity, and the evolving notion of a 'happily ever after' revealed in these distinct imaginings of the same story and main characters, and examining my own creative process during the writing of *Barefoot on the Wind*, I hope to convincingly argue that while fairytales and their retellings are inescapably reflective of the cultural context in which they are created (or re-created), they may also, through an author's choices, become a site of intentional resistance to the ingrained misogyny and classist prejudices which, through time, have been inscribed on the body of such narratives by patriarchy.

Keywords: *Feminism*, *Intersectionality*, *Fairy-tale retellings*, *Writing Craft*

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In her influential work *Once Upon a Time*, Marina Warner states, "Literature is always a resurrected body, or a body that is continuously being resurrected. Its continual survival depends on its transformations" (2014, p.xxii).

Of all literary forms, the humble fairytale is perhaps the one which most eloquently proves Warner correct. Evolving from fragmentary oral storytelling, through anthropological transcription, to fashionable moral guidance for aristocratic French ladies during the 18th century (Morera Lianez, 2012, p.4), sparking inspiration for the Romantics and Pre-Raphaelites in the 19th century, and finally dwindling into whimsical cautionary tales for children in the early 20th century, fairytales have been resurrected once again in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. They can now be enjoyed in a myriad of forms, from the transgressive feminist poetry of *The World's Wife* (Duffy, 2017) to raucous stage musicals like *Into the Woods* (Sondheim & Lapine, 2019) and bestselling Young Adult novels such as Malinda Lo's *Ash* (2009) and Marissa Meyer's *Scarlet* (2012).

But mere resurrection is not enough to breathe new life into a body which has been resuscitated so many times before. The writer must perform, as Warner suggests, a deeper creative magic of *transformation*, an alchemical process combining the writer's own ideology and preoccupations with the beloved archetypes of folklore. Since creators are inevitably influenced by their cultural context – Kristeva argues that all writing is "constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another," (1986, p.37) – these transformations may offer insight into the cultural moments in which they are created.

Fairytale retellings in novel form are a particularly popular niche in writing for young people, and most especially within books of the Young Adult category. This article will examine the subtextual attitudes revealed in the choices made by authors of four different iterations of one fairytale – *Beauty and the Beast* (B&B).

A wealth of tellings and retellings of this story exist; it has been the lifetime's work of such notable scholars and writers as Marina Warner and Jack Zipes to attempt to catalogue them all. However, this article has a more limited scope. I've chosen two literary versions of the fairytale which are significant to the history and evolution of B&B – the original story, and the first English-language adaption, both dating from the 18th Century, and two YA retellings which are significant to me personally and as a writer – 1978's *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty & the Beast* by Robin McKinley and *Barefoot on the Wind*, my own version, published in 2016. Throughout, I will consider how these changing portrayals of virtue and worth, transgression, and ideal femininity can be said to both perpetuate and resist patriarchal values.

Within the literary subgenre of folktales, texts may generally be divided into two categories: that of genuine or authentic folktales which are "customarily

anonymous and undateable" and "'arty' fairy tales" which are "signed and dated" (Warner, 2014, p.xvii). While its archetypes can be discovered in various incarnations throughout world mythology reaching back to the classical tale of Cupid and Psyche – proving Warner's assertion that both categories of fairy tale show evidence of "inextricable and fruitful entanglement" (2014, p.xvii) – *The Beauty and the Beast* (TBB) falls decidedly into the latter category. TBB was authored by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and first published in French in 1740 (2019). Abridged versions of TBB have since become a mainstay within collections of European fairy tales, and the story was reimagined in 1991 as a successful Disney children's movie. It was the first animated film ever to be nominated for the Best Picture Oscar (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1992), and was subsequently adapted twice more by Disney into a Broadway musical in 1994, and a live-action film in 2017.

B&B is generally considered to be a story about the transformative power of true love and the importance of inner beauty, but a brief scan of the events of TBB is enough to give a modern reader some pause at this assertion; on the surface, the tale's overarching themes are of female subjugation and obedience, and of the primacy of male desire. The rageful and truly monstrous Beast is indifferent to Beauty's feelings when he demands that she be given to him as payment for her father's trespass – he merely requires that she be a willing "sacrifice" (de Villeneuve, 2017, pp.14-15). And a sacrifice it truly is. The narrative offers the Beast redemption based on his ability to bed the frightened sixteen-year-old. De Villeneuve and her readers clearly did not register this as coercion, but to contemporary readers the conflation of non-consensual sexual activity with 'true love' is striking and uncomfortable. The Prince, in his turn, is cursed because he refuses to sleep with a wicked female fairy, painting female agency and sexuality as villainous.

TBB's Beauty is named in direct contrast to her sisters, who are not only less physically attractive, but portrayed as bitter, unkind and lazy, and so jealous of Beauty that they are nearly ecstatic when they learn of the terrible fate to which her father's actions have condemned her. Beauty, on the other hand, "bore her lot cheerfully [...] She concealed her sorrow," (2017, p.9). Beauty plays and sings charmingly, but employs her talents not for her own enjoyment, but to comfort her brothers and father, both after their fall from fortune, and after it is decided that Beauty's own sacrifice to the Beast is a lesser evil than that of losing their father to him. Beauty even chides her sisters for thinking of their own sorrows, instead of following her example in this extreme self-abnegation.

Beauty's sisters exist within the text as negatives of the female traits de Villeneuve wishes to portray as positive – a further example of wickedness like that displayed by the fairy who curses the Prince – but in doing so they reveal the shadow of femininity which 18th century society feared: femininity which makes demands, questions male authority, and refuses to abnegate its own best interest. In TBB, Beauty's sisters display what Gilbert and Gubar name "'monstrous' autonomy [...] the

power to create themselves as characters" (2000, p.16). It is a power that Beauty herself utterly lacks.

The story's ideal of womanhood, then, is beautiful, well-educated in the traditional female accomplishments and, above all, willing to suppress her own feelings, desires and interests in deference to those of her male relations. De Villeneuve's Beauty embodies Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House" (1891), later defined by an acerbic Virginia Woolf in her paper *Professions for Women* as:

> ... intensely sympathetic [...] immensely charming [...] utterly unselfish [...] She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily [...] she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others (Woolf, 2020, loc 2697).

In other words, the story's main character is less a character and more a catalogue of the traits considered essential for women to cultivate – entirely in line with the fairy tale's 18th century role as "...a manual that defined the norms of female behaviour within society" (Morera Lianez, 2012, p.4). Indeed, as Woolf's paper laments, the manual, with its admonishments on 'correct' female behaviour, continued to be pressed upon women throughout the next two centuries, and beyond.

TBB's heroine possesses one more aspirational trait: she is of royal blood, a fact only revealed at the end of the story, when the Beast/Prince's mother protests at the "degrading" nature of the match between her noble son and "the daughter of a merchant, nothing more" (2017, pp.50-52). In response, the tale's good fairy reveals that Beauty is not truly the merchant's daughter, but instead, the Queen's own long-lost niece. Given the venomous portrayal of the heroine's adopted sisters, and the fact that the wicked fairy who cursed the Prince was originally tasked to take care of him while his parents were at war – a menial role which would clearly never have been offered to the aristocratic good fairy – it's easy to divine a thread of contempt for and suspicion of women of the lower classes. In marrying the Prince, TBB's Beauty is elevated to her proper position in the world, and divorced from her vulgar merchant roots.

Terri Windling, in her piece *Beauty and the Beast, Old and New*, posits a more subversive, feminist reading of this story, suggesting that the ordeals of de Villeneuve's Beauty and the inarguable savagery of her Beast may embody criticism of the lack of legal recourse available to women of her time, and a plea for sympathy for young girls offered no right of choice – or even refusal – over whom they would marry. Windling emphasises the story's focus on the Beast's need to transform, to find his way back to human values of "love, fidelity, and civilité between the sexes," (2007) which were the concern of many writers of literary fairy tales for adults during de Villeneuve's period.

Windling also notes the shift in the Beast's characterisation in the first English language version of B&B, *Beauty & the Beast* (BTB) which was published by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont in 1756. Rather than directly translating de

Villeneuve's adult novella, de Beaumont reimagined it as work for younger readers, creating a vastly simplified and pared-down work, less than one quarter of the length of the original. While many elements of the tale are nearly identical (the jealous, lazy and unvirtuous sisters, the hard-working and self-sacrificing Beauty), de Beaumont's Beast is a less overtly monstrous, if more manipulative, creature. Although his initial threats of violence to Beauty's father and his coerced acquisition of Beauty follow de Villeneuve's template, this Beast vows to Beauty once she arrives that: "…you alone are mistress here; you need only bid me gone, if my presence is troublesome, and I will immediately withdraw" (de Beaumont, 2017, p.95). He apologises for his own lack of wits and accomplishments, and their nightly dinners are punctuated by professions of affection, and requests for Beauty to marry him, rather than share his bed.

When BTB's Beauty refuses to promise to stay with the Beast forever on the grounds that if she never saw her father again she might die of sorrow, the Beast responds: "I had rather die myself […] than give you the least uneasiness. I will send you to your father, you shall remain with him, and poor Beast will die with grief" (2017, p.96). Beauty of course vows that she will return, and does – if three days late – but castigates herself for wickedness and ungratefulness for upsetting the Beast, especially after discovering that he had decided to hurry his death from grief along by starving himself after she left. When she agrees to marry him and the curse is lifted, it's revealed that the Beast had concealed his true intelligence and personality from her, acting the part of a buffoon in order to incite her pity. The story's 'good fairy' praises Beauty thus: "… you have preferred virtue before either wit or beauty, and deserve to find a person in whom all these qualifications are united. You are going to be a great queen" (2017, p.99). But with his manipulations and deceptive performance of good-nature and devotion combined with the earlier threats and coercion, it's difficult to parse what true, underlying virtue of the former Beast's the fairy might be referring to here – except, of course, the virtue of wealth and royal heritage that the breaking of the curse has revealed. Once again, it is the innocent Beauty who must learn to love and forgive despite ill-treatment, and once again her reward is elevation in rank, twinned with marriage to the one who has wronged her.

Robin McKinley's acclaimed Young Adult reimaging of B&B, *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty & the Beast* (BAR), was first published in 1978, and made a Notable Book by the American Library Association that year (ALAIR 2015). The debut novel of a self-proclaimed feminist writer (McKinley, 2018), BAR is a lyrical and affecting read, widely considered a classic within YA, and offers a narrative which remains mostly faithful to the plot sketched out by de Villeneuve and de Beaumont while subverting the original in a variety of ways.

McKinley's novel, a first-person account from Beauty's point of view, might be considered to align more closely with the 'classic' B&B ideals of transformative love and inner beauty. BAR's protagonist is officially named Honor [sic] and approaches her father as a child for an explanation of the meaning of this epithet: "I heard him out, but with an expression of deepening disgust; and when he was finished I said: 'Huh! I'd

rather be Beauty!'" (McKinley, 1993, p.3). This family joke becomes a permanent nickname, but BAR's heroine does not lay claim to physical attractiveness, describing herself as thin and gawky, with huge hands and feet, and bad skin (1993, p.4). The reader understands that it is Beauty's honourable character which makes her beautiful to this story's Beast. After an initial explosion of rage at Beauty's father, BAR's Beast proves to be honourable himself, seeking Beauty's hand in marriage not only to break his curse but, importantly, to deliver his people from enchantment.

But BAR is not able to fully free itself from the patriarchal and classist trappings of B&B. The narrative places repeated emphasis on the fact that Beauty's sisters are: "innocently and ravishingly lovely" as well as being accomplished in feminine arts such as music, art and embroidery, while Beauty is: "the clever one [...] I shunned company because I preferred books" (1993, p.5). She is a fan of the mannish pursuits of training and riding horses, a hobby of which we are told her governesses disapprove even more strongly than they do her love of reading. This continues the trend of unfavourable comparison between female characters within the B&B story; other women only seem to exist to prove that Beauty is "not like the other girls" (Crosby 2018). She is not and never can be an exceptional *person*, only an exceptional *woman*; that is, one who proves the inherent weakness and frivolity of the majority of her sex by managing to rise above them.

Like TBB and BTB's heroines, McKinley's Beauty is the daughter of a wealthy merchant whose family are forced to abandon the city after a loss of fortune. McKinley portrays these working origins as generally positive, with Beauty's father and her brother-in-law displaying a variety of practical skills which make the family's new life in the country more comfortable. Yet once again there is an underlying assumption that regardless of her honourable character, in order for Beauty to be worthy of the Beast, she must possess noble heritage, and the text duly establishes that Beauty's deceased mother came from a "fine old family" and was "real society" (McKinley1993, pp.6-10).

Perhaps inevitably, by the end of the novel Beauty is also revealed to be mistaken about her own plainness; she is beautiful after all, more beautiful than either of her sisters; the very image of her dead, noble mother (McKinley, 1993, pp.242-243). Thus the character is forced firmly back into the role of the "aesthetic ideal", the mirror image "mythic mask" which patriarchal literature uses to obscure real women's faces, thoughts, and ambitions (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p.17, p.16). Despite McKinley's avowed feminism, her heroine still conforms to 18th century tenets on suitable qualities for the bride of a prince. And by the end of the story, Beauty – along with her family this time – has once again been elevated from her unfortunate, working class existence to a life of privilege and luxury.

McKinley may well have been aware of some of these issues herself; in 1997 she retold B&B again in the novel *Rose Daughter*. Although I don't have the room here to analyse *Rose Daughter* in full, it should be noted that it does subvert many of the contentious points I've mentioned in BAR above, most especially those related to class,

while – as is perhaps to be expected – introducing some new elements which could be considered problematic in their own right.

The final version of B&B to be explored here is my own: *Barefoot on the Wind* (BOW) which transfers the story from its European context to a fairy-tale version of Japan, and draws upon Japanese mythology of the Yuki-onna or Snow Maiden. Published in 2016, BOW was conceived, like BAR, as a feminist work – and more specifically as a way of working out my own response to the sexist and classist themes which I felt existed at the heart of the earliest versions of B&B.

One of the first decisions which felt important in creating a story that would seek to disrupt the 18th century ideals of femininity I had often seen replicated in retellings of B&B was to give my central character a name of her own. BOW's central female character is called Hana (a Japanese name meaning 'flower'). I hoped to divorce her from Gilbert & Gubar's "aesthetic ideal" and allow the character to develop beyond what they name the "coercive power [...] of cultural constraints" (2000 p.17, p.10). But in order to make this more than a symbolic decision, I realised, Hana's physical appearance must be treated as irrelevant. In the entire novel, Hana only offers one non-specific description of herself, as a topic of little importance: "I was not pretty, or delicate or fine [...] I was a hard worker" (2016, p.32). No other character refers to her level of physical attractiveness at any point; she is neither named 'Beauty' nor termed 'beautiful'.

Another of my original aims was to avoid the trend of unfavourable comparison between B&B's protagonist and other female characters. However, as a sister myself, I know that the mere existence of siblings, especially those of the same gender, will nearly always encourage some form of comparison, no matter how benign, within family dynamics. This is why the "ugly stepsisters", the group of princesses "each more beautiful than the last", and the competition between the three sons of a king or woodcutter are such a mainstay of fairy and folk tales; there's a deep-seated, if uncomfortable truth to it. In my first draft I tried giving Hana only one sister – older and protective – so that I could focus on creating a strong relationship between them. But I felt badly at the erasure of one of the sisters, since one of the undeniable strengths of de Villeneuve's story is that it does offer a wealth of differing portrayals of women, even if many of these are problematic. So I gave Hana a baby sister, and nearly immediately took her out again when it was clear there was no real room for her to have a personality other than 'small' and 'cute'. I redoubled my efforts with the original sister, changing her from an older to a younger sibling whom Hana would seek to protect. The draft stalled. In attempting to evade comparisons between them, I seemed unable to avoid making Hana's sister into a bland copy of her, walking always in her shadow. Whether older or younger, she didn't add anything to the story. The only way I could see to give her something vital to do was to make her an antagonist, like the original sisters. Yet the story already had one female antagonist, the 'wicked fairy', and besides, wasn't this the very trope I had been seeking to avoid?

Eventually I found myself questioning why Hana needed sisters at all, if there was no way to explore the tangled sisterly relationship without playing into the trap of comparison or exceptionalism. I was still convinced that it was vital to offer a depth of varied portrayals of femininity in the work, but perhaps these portrayals could take other forms. Eventually I began to consider the traditional missing mother of most B&B retellings; I had made it a point in several other fairy-tale retellings to reinstate mothers who were usually killed off before the story began, and I decided to do it again. To my relief, it worked: Hana's living mother immediately filled the story with a grounded sense of family, and the rather anxious relationship between them allowed both to develop as rounded individuals without the need to contrast or compare them within the narrative. I also added in a female mentor, the irascible but wise village healer, whom Hana respects and admires. This allowed the story another model of varied, powerful femininity in addition to Hana – and to the female antagonist. The originator of the Beast's 'curse' in BOW is a Yuki-onna, a female spirit of snow and vengeance. She represents my effort to subvert TBB's traditional villain, the 'wicked fairy', the cipher of rapacious female power, by creating a fully realised character whose actions are shown to be at least partially justified within the narrative. BOW's Yuki-onna evokes compassion, not disgust, in Hana – and it is through their connection and eventual understanding that the Beast is freed and the curse ended. In creating these characters, I wanted to offer a version of B&B where the heroine was emphatically not an "exception among the female gender" (Kawan, 2002, p.36) but a fully integrated part of it. I hope that BOW's female characters each portray a plurality of positive and negative traits, resisting attempts to define any one as either angelic or monstrous through competition.

The next major challenge in BOW was to try to unpick the classist assumptions threaded through TBB and many of its successive retellings: that the Beast has some innate virtue or nobility because of his royal birth, and that Beauty must be able to offer some evidence of equivalent high or at least wealthy descent in order to be worthy of him. I decided to remove the element of royalty and lineage from the equation completely. BOW's Beast is not a prince, and far from mourning a former life of cosmopolitan luxury, "Beauty" was born in the rural setting of the "Dark Woods" and is a skilled, pragmatic hunter and jack-of-all-trades (2016, p.12). Reimagining Hana's origins as working class was a decision made in hopes of subverting what Diane Reay calls "subtextual assertion of middle-class female experience as normative" (Reay, 1997, p.226); an effort to destroy the traditional B&B dynamic equating nobility of character with nobility of birth. I included several scenes – including the opening scene of the novel, where Hana hunts and kills a deer on the outskirts of the Dark Woods – which were designed to acknowledge the hard work of a pre-industrial rural existence while celebrating the skills which this background has allowed Hana to develop: "I was still the best hunter in the village. I knew the woods as no one had in a hundred years [...] If anyone alive had a chance of tracking the beast and killing it, surely it was me"

(2016, 74). Only because she has the knowledge and experience of woodcraft to navigate the enchanted forests of the story is Hana able to find the Beast's lair.

Finally and perhaps most meaningfully for me as a working-class writer, at the close of BOW, Hana and her family are not plucked from the assumed degradation of a working-class life and assimilated into the upper classes. Instead, the restored Beast rejects his personal legacy of privilege and wealth, and the culture of toxic masculinity which led to his cursed transformation, and embraces Hana's family and their wider, working-class community. The 'happy ending' is coded as a moment of redemption and change for the male character, not elevation for the female one: "'Will you take me back to your village?' he asked, endearingly eager. 'Shall I meet your family, and learn how to... to plough fields and tend pigs and mend roofs, like a proper villager?'" (2016, 308).

While this paper does dwell on the ways in which the four versions of the B&B story diverge from each other – particularly with regard to the central character – it is important to acknowledge that they are all still unmistakably iterations of the B&B story type, possessing the same basic components and structure. A female protagonist enters a lair hidden in an enchanted wilderness, perceives the true beauty within a beast, and thus transforms him into a man. It is in this very similarity that the dark traces of misogyny and classism are thrown into their clearest relief: in a tale that supposedly concerns itself with principles of honourable character and true love, why should there be any need to compare and denigrate women, or to disdain the working classes? The Beauty of the 1700s wins the day by rejecting her sisters and working-class roots, along with any notion of self-interest, and showing herself, as Christine Shojaei Kawan puts it: "ready for martyrdom, and to sacrifice dreams of personal happiness" (2002, 33). The heroine of the 1970s wins by rejecting the trappings of traditional femininity and class awareness – for instance, by choosing books and horses over parties, and forcibly demurring at attempts to "make over" her physical appearance – while still ultimately possessing both natural beauty and noble blood.

Fairytales, like all living bodies, have an existence which is more than skin deep; yet it is apparent that generations of patriarchal, misogynistic and classist assumptions are inscribed upon the skin of the fairy tale, and that in resurrecting it, creators may find it nearly impossible to avoid resurrecting those problematic themes too. If they even wish to: consumers sometimes appear to crave and reward the appearance of such traditional tracings, as the billion-dollar success of the recent live-action Disney version of *Beauty & the Beast* – in which the Beast physically assaults and seeks to starve Beauty – seems to suggest (Desta, 2017). Indeed, I faced some unexpected feedback from my publisher during the revision process of *Barefoot on the Wind*, when my editor suggested that my extremely gentle, shy Beast could be made more interesting if he lost his temper, lost control, and frightened Hana. Although I did make changes to the characterisation of my Beast – who was dubbed 'Itsuki', a name meaning 'tree' – to create more conflict and darkness within the novel, I stuck to my refusal to

follow the de Villeneuve and de Beaumont template in representing threats and intimidation as acceptable within a relationship. It is impossible to say if this affected my retelling's commercial success either adversely or otherwise.

The ideals of true compassion, nobility of spirit, and transformative love which Beauty & the Beast's archetype promises are as relevant and moving to us now as they were in the 1700s or even during the time of the writing of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. If the creative alchemy of the retelling is fierce enough – or perhaps brave enough – to truly transform such a familiar narrative, then it might be possible to prove that patriarchy, misogyny and classism are not, in fact, inherent to the anatomy of the fairy tale, but instead, only fading surface-level traces of our cultural hegemony.

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