

## **Beauty and Beastliness: Intertextuality, genre mutation, and utopian possibilities in paranormal romance**

Iona and Peter Opie claim that ‘Beauty and the Beast’ is ‘The most symbolic of the fairy tales after Cinderella, and the most intellectually satisfying’.<sup>1</sup> It has spawned so many variants that they almost constitute a genre in itself. It’s a subset of what folklorists consider a specific type, of Animal-Bridegroom stories (there are also related Animal-Bride tales).<sup>2</sup> The ur-text is that of Madame de Villeneuve’s epically digressive 1740 version (though a more general architext is Apuleius’ ‘Cupid and Psyche’ story, embedded in *The Golden Ass*).<sup>3</sup> This was followed in 1756 by Madame de Beaumont’s much-condensed version, which has been the principle model for translations into English.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the tale lends itself more easily to allegory than most, with the polarised qualities of hero and heroine; the heroine’s abstract name, the hero’s name also standing in for a type; and also the presence of Apuleius’ fable of desire and the soul behind it. There are hundreds of variations, adaptations, and reworkings of the basic story alone.<sup>5</sup> But the theme of human and monstrous lovers also lies behind the recently emerged genre of paranormal romance (most familiar through Stephenie Meyer’s best-selling *Twilight* (2005)).

And there are thousands of paranormal romances, where the underlying structure of the folktale takes the narrative form and mood of romantic fiction. This is also modulated by other genres—principally Gothic—and enriched by a different (or perhaps parallel) tradition that takes Milton’s Satan, recast as Samuel Richardson’s Lovelace in *Clarissa*, and, encountering Lord Byron on the way, works through the Brontës and Daphne du Maurier.

At the same time, there exists an overlapping miscellany of texts which involve reworking fairy tales more obviously, leaving the plot on show as it were; variations on ‘Cinderella’, ‘Red Riding Hood’, ‘Sleeping Beauty’, ‘Snow White’, ‘Hansel and Gretel’, and others.<sup>6</sup> There are many adaptations, reworkings, and parodies of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ among these; some of these can equally fall within the genre of paranormal romance. So there are lots of generic strands converging and intertwining here.

In adaptation, the fairy tale undergoes a change of scale, amplifying it, filling it out with the stuff of the novel—detail of place and of character.<sup>7</sup> But more than

amplification may be involved; it may take part in that other generic innovation that I've described and become assimilated to paranormal romance, which brings its own plot motifs, mood, character types, and settings.

### **Paranormal romance**

I'll just digress for a moment to discuss paranormal romance. This new genre has emerged recently; a collision or mating of genres has taken place, and this itself is of interest for those interested in literary form and how kinds of writing emerge and mutate. The typical Gothic text of darkness and evil now flirts with the much-maligned genre of romance fiction. The monster has become tamed, domesticated—feminised, if you like—and transformed into the lover. It's an encounter that may be seen as masculine with feminine; I would argue that it's also a restoration of humanism to the Gothic.

This new literary form has many of the trappings of Gothic, but the plot is subordinated to the movement towards amatory consummation of romantic fiction; the setting tends to be contemporary; it seems to assume a female readership; and, crucially, it centres on love affairs between humans and supernatural creatures.

You all know *Twilight*, I'm sure, but the genre of paranormal romance—where mortals have love affairs with supernatural creatures—is vastly prolific. The demon lover can be vampire, werewolf or other shapeshifter; there are affairs with demons and angels, zombies, ghosts. I have to include the merman—he's very popular. And even gargoyles. There are questions about how these affairs are consummated here, though I'd rather not know the answers.

Yet monstrous lovers do promise to unleash a utopian potential in the beloved. 'Utopian' in this sense means not simply a blueprint for a new society but imagining something beyond our present condition. For Bella Swan in *Twilight*, it is eternal life and ageless looks and an intensified sex life. For these female-centred narratives, eternal beauty is proffered. Utopian strands emerge in paranormal romance; new possibilities of love are discovered, even if this is simply Bella's fabulous sex-life, and triumphs over physical limitations or over death can be imagined. Of course, Bella also gets bundles of consumer goods off her wealthy husband and in-laws.

### **Beauty and the Beast**

Returning to the tale, there are certain motifs and themes which are crucial and may remain constant or be revised: books, the rose or roses, the sisters and brothers, the culpability of the father, dreams, the enchanted castle with shifting rooms and mazes; invisible servants; mirror(s); the garden(s). There is almost always a rose. Magic mirrors appear in some form or other. The theme of uncovering false appearances seems to be a constant, as the line in the Disney film ‘Beauty is found within’ reveals (and this is often related to the mirror motif). Importantly, from Villeneuve onwards, the Beauty figure is bookish.<sup>8</sup>

In reassembling, multiplying, removing motifs, the ideological effect varies significantly. For example, removing the jealous sisters or erasing their animosity may indicate a desire to express female solidarity or it may emphasise individualism, isolation, and so on.

All of these motifs and themes may be played with in the creation of new works out of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, along with the plot itself, the actors, setting, and voice, and the examples I look at show much diversity in all these permutations.

### **Women and Beasts**

How does this work for women? Paranormal romances are popular and I think one can safely assume predominantly among a female readership. But they have come under attack for much the same reasons as the constituent genre of romantic fiction. *Twilight* is the obvious example, with the accusations that it fosters passivity towards male brutality. And a first look at the ‘Beauty and the Beast’ tale itself from its first incarnation on similarly suggests that it cultivates an ideal of female docility.

Rosamund Hodge’s *Cruel Beauty* (2014) opens with the line ‘I was raised to marry a monster’ (1)—a telling indication of the role female education plays in these stories (Beaumont’s version is explicitly pedagogical, inset into a series of educational dialogues for young ladies).<sup>9</sup> And the inevitability of the heroine’s fate—to submit to the will of a monster—seems to negate any emancipatory possibilities in the story, no matter how it is reworked or framed. I want to show how some of these rewritings may work against that fate.

From a feminist point of view, the basic plot, it hardly needs to be said, presents problems. Beauty is traded—however acquiescently—to save her father. (Different rewritings exonerate the father or render him culpable in varying degrees.

In Alex Flinn's 2007 *Beastly*, for instance, it is a father who barely deserves the name—a weak-willed addict.) The whole device serves to liberate the Beast from his enchantment. She is effectively imprisoned and coerced into recognition of something beyond or beneath the beastliness, or even to becoming reconciled with that animality in itself. Yet contemporary reworkings mostly acknowledge at least a liberal feminism and all attempt to work round the obstacles. Yet why pick *this* tale so often? And this is not unrelated to the question of why romancing the monstrous other generally is so popular. There are elements that appeal to women both as readers and writers, it seems; enough to persevere.

What stands out is the female perspective and the unusual presence of the woman as questor (though many folkloric fairy tales have this). This may be one reason for its appeal and centrality in a genre that is oriented to a female readership (and its appeal as material for many women writers.<sup>10</sup> The tale, in all its multifarious incarnations through history, reveals different prospects for women and their relationship to beastliness—as unchosen suitor, male sexuality, their own sexuality, even, and nature itself.

The privileged power of the Beast, his ability to endlessly satisfy Beauty's needs (including knowledge, in many of the versions) has a utopian dimension and it explains much of the allure, of course. Thus, in Villeneuve, when Beauty, 'trembling', says 'You're the master', he replies, 'No [. . .] You are the mistress here' (239). But there is no escaping that this *is* privilege and handed down, however graciously, from man to powerless woman.

### **Reading mutuality**

Despite the glaringly obvious element of coercion in the plot, I want to argue, counterintuitively, that there is the potential to explore ideas of mutuality between men and women.

One of the motifs that I mentioned is retained in almost all the versions. That is the presence of books and the importance of reading. And also, a regard for conversation, particularly conversation about reading. In some of the versions, the shared book reading serves as a model for mutual romantic and intellectual love.

In Villeneuve, Beauty comes across the library: 'Her great desire for learning could easily be satisfied in this place and would help her ward off the boredom of

always being alone' (171). This is crucial, I think. She wants intellectual stimulation *and* social interaction; this will be fulfilled in a marriage based on mutuality.

Beaumont's version is explicitly about what makes a good marriage, as the pedagogical frame suggests. Of course, Beauty gets it all in the end: the fairy tells her, 'You've preferred virtue over beauty and wit, and you deserve to find these qualities combined in one and the same person' (244).

Donna Jo Napoli's *Beast* (2000) is told in the Beast's voice.<sup>11</sup> Orasmyn (who is the Prince in Charles Lamb's orientalist poetic version of the tale<sup>12</sup>) becomes *fully* beast in this version rather than an animal-man hybrid; he turns into a lion. (The *kind* of beastliness is one of the possible permutations.) Orasmyn is a reader, the rose is his favourite flower (7); the beginning of the novel has him debate the merits of warrior epics and the literature of love with his mother (4-5). Ideas of masculinity and femininity coalesce around motherhood, the treatment of animals, and, in particular, epic heroism—in Persian poetry and in the *Aeneid*.

After several adventures in the wild, he flees to France. He finds an abandoned castle and manages, despite his beast form, to cultivate a rose garden (139). There is a magnificent library in the castle. He plans to entice a woman there, who will love the roses and the castle and 'the whole magical world within the parameter of brambles' (144). And she will love him and the *pari*'s curse will be undone (149) and he will 'return to the company of humans, to the community that is [his] birthright' (145)—solitude and sociability recur throughout the versions.

He is 'famished for spoken language'—that and his yearning for community remove him from bestiality (203). He encourages Belle to read aloud from the *Aeneid*; she comments briskly on the masculine ethos of war (210). This tale is an education in masculinity, from his initial confusion over values, his dislike of hunting, attachment to his mother, his curiosity and ignorance about women.

In the 2017 Disney film, Bella will not passively accept the fate allotted to women of a dull marriage and a boorish husband (however masculine and muscular).<sup>13</sup> This much is feminist. And this utopian yearning to transcend the mundane is inspired by and effected through her reading.

Belle and the Beast woo each other in a literary fashion, reading to each other (she is impressed by his huge library). The film treats this as therapeutic anger

management and an inculcation of the feminine virtues of a particular kind of reading—romance itself—taming a rogue masculinity. That this is still under duress compromises that mutuality greatly, of course. In the earlier film, he has forgotten how to read and she teaches him, reading from *Romeo and Juliet*; here, he mocks her for *Romeo and Juliet* being her favourite play. But she finds him reading the story of Guinevere and Lancelot, or, as he puts it, the tales of Arthur and his knights; ‘It’s a romance’, she retorts. So her bookishness may be slightly ambiguous from a feminist perspective; it is specifically the feminised genre of romantic fiction that she is absorbed in (the genre, of course, to which the story itself may belong). In Villeneuve, we get the sense that her reading is more ‘serious’.

### **Cultivating wildness**

The image of the rose is one of those motifs that endure through all the reworkings. It’s associated with images of gardens and a wild forest that also stay pretty constant. In Beaumont, the Beast says he values his roses ‘beyond anything in the universe’.<sup>14</sup> It is somewhat mysterious; it is never explained why. There is an idea of value, then, just as Beauty and Beast evaluate each other, with Beauty replacing the roses as the Beast’s most valuable possession (and, formerly, her father’s). There is commodity exchange of a sort, and between men, but it is a curious kind of commodity whose use value is aesthetic rather than utilitarian in the more prosaic sense. This cluster of images around roses, gardens, and forests is closely associated with the almost inescapable temptation to allegorise the figures of Beauty and Beastliness. That coupling of wildness and the aesthetic enables writers to talk about such things as instinct and animality, cultivation and sociality, and a whole range of similar concepts, and can inspire other kinds of utopian possibilities alongside the idea of mutuality I’ve been talking about.

Villeneuve herself was aware of those instinctual undercurrents, with her splitting of the hero into the Beast who takes part in the social world of pleasurable conversation and the object of desire, the handsome Prince who appears in her dreams. ‘Unrestrained by the rigid customs of society, for slumber left her free to act naturally, she admitted her love to him with a frankness from which she would have shrunk when in full possession of her reason’ (182). Dream and utopianism meet. There’s a social critique, too, of the restraints placed on acknowledging female desire

that's quite remarkable in pre-Freudian times. The struggle in her dreamlife over the pull of desire and the dictates of virtue render this version radical. Her dreams are a 'promise of happiness' (193); phantasy has a utopian content that can be made flesh.

Robin McKinley adapted the tale in 1978 as *Beauty* (1978), then returned to it nineteen years later in *Rose Daughter* (1997).<sup>15</sup> Here, Beauty represents nature more than does the Beast. She is an unwitting fertility goddess who revives the barren gardens of the Beast's palace, making his dying roses bloom again.

The oppositions between beauty and utility, reality and dream suffuse the novel, and it is an argument, in its way, for the redemption of the traditionally feminine without it leading to passivity or a merely decorative purposelessness. Instead, it is the Kantian 'purposiveness without purpose' that is suggested. If that seems too much, I think calling a heroine 'Beauty' might well invite stories that speculate on aesthetics, and this novel does just that. In her earlier version, she even has Beauty have 'philosophical questions on the nature of Beauty' (126).

The Beast is revealed to have committed the Faustian error of seeking perfection and 'the first and last secrets of the universe' (276). Modern versions, taking up on the always implicit dialectic of nature and civilisation and ideas of cultivation in the tale, do tend to look at technology and contemporary ideas of nature.

Stacey Jay's 2013 reworking, *Of Beast and Beauty* is told through alternating voices, and beauty and beast's roles are confounded.<sup>16</sup> On a planet that we gather was once settled by humans, those living there are divided between city-dwellers—the 'Smooth-Skins'—and the Monstrous of the desert. A prologue in the form of a visionary origins myth accounts for this in terms of the natural forces of the planet—magical or evolutionary—operating benignly but then becoming corrupt and divided through fear. It is an allegory of the hostility towards nature and misuse of technology, recalling Adorno on how reason turns against the passions it was supposed to serve.

The Monstrous are nomadic desert people. The city dwellers dread the mutation that has created the Monstrous and their own people have suffered some changes; these become social outcasts. But, it seems, Isra, the princess who is destined to succeed her father as ruler is succumbing to the change. Thus she is as Beastly as the beasts of the desert.

The Beast figure, Gem, appears as one of the Monstrous, captured in a raid attempting to steal the roses which have preserved the city and that he believes will save his ailing people. Isra saves him from execution and keeps him as her personal prisoner, inverting the captivity motif. The roses here are malevolent, and one aspect of the unmasking of appearances is acknowledging this: 'They aren't what they seem. Nothing is what it seems' (318).

The Beastly Others stand in for all the angry dispossessed and wretched of the earth (e.g. 329). There are clear echoes of the rhetoric of the War on Terror; it is claimed they 'want to destroy us, and our way of life, forever' (290). The Monstrous are open sexually and women have far more standing (the chief of Gem's tribe is a woman); the people of the cities are puritanical.

The cure for the curse through love is generalised here beyond the individual protagonists so that 'life will return to the desert, and every creature dwelling on the planet will be made whole and strong' (342). Political and natural utopian transformations conjoin as the desert comes to life. Isra and Gem are transformed into new beings that share qualities of both populations, physically transcending the antinomies of Beauty and Beastliness (381-82).

### **Conclusion**

In these reworkings, we begin with the original fairy tale, as a bare structure; familiar, with certain recognisable motifs that can be permuted for different effects. Then, in the reworking, we see the amplification of detail through the conventions of realism, enabling a concrete exploration of, for example, the gender issues that the plot inevitably outlines, including one aspect of utopianism in the form of mutuality. In addition, the fantastic elements around gardens, roses, and Beasts can enable the exploration of the human/nature opposition and also the utopianism of the transformation of world and self.

There is a conjugation here between the Gothicised, fantastically modulated story of romantic love that is paranormal romance and that reworking of fairy tales that has a longer pedigree. Different genres encountering one another open up different possibilities; form embodies content. The fairytale armature that lies beneath suggests symbolic, almost allegorical, interpretations. The novelistic amplification lends psychological verisimilitude.



The encounter between female beauty and monstrous masculinity is an obvious arena for exploring the interplay between the sexes and offers a spectrum of relations from feminine passivity to utopian ideas of mutuality. But the tale is also flexible enough to allow various such oppositions as culture and nature, cultivation and simplicity, sociability and instinct to be explored. The diverse contemporary manifestations of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ exhibit a range of perspectives, offering intriguing insights into women’s desires and potentialities.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 137.
- <sup>2</sup> Maria Tatar’s new collection is an excellent introduction to the variety of these tales: *Beauty and the Beast: Classic Tales About Animal Brides and Grooms from Around the World* (New York: Penguin, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, ‘The Beauty and the Beast’, in Jack Zipes, ed., *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales*, 2nd edn (Maidstone: Crescent Moon Publishing, 2013), pp. 151-229; Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. by P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> Jean-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, ‘Beauty and the Beast’, in Zipes, ed., *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment*, pp. 231-50.
- <sup>5</sup> Betsy Hearne charts the progress of the tale in her excellent *Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- <sup>6</sup> For example: Malinda Lo, *Ash* (London: Hodder Children’s Books, 2010); Jackson Pearce, *Sisters Red* (London: Hodder Children’s Books, 2011); Holly Black, *The Darkest Part of the Forest* (London: Orion Children’s Books, 2016); Helen Oyeyemi, *Boy, Snow, Bird* (London: Picador, 2015); Eliza Granville, *Gretel and the Dark* (London: Penguin, 2014). There are, of course, many more.
- <sup>7</sup> For amplification, see Alisdair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 172. See also Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Dubinsky (Lincoln, Nand London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 262-68.
- <sup>8</sup> See Beth O’Brian, ‘Best Bookish Moments in the New Beauty and the Beast’, *BookRiot*, 20 March 2017 <<https://bookriot.com/2017/03/20/best-bookish-moments-in-the-new-beauty-and-the-beast/>> [accessed 24 March 2017].
- <sup>9</sup> Rosamund Hodge, *Cruel Beauty*, Reprint edition (New York: Balzer & Bray, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 277. See also Warner, pp. 274-75.
- <sup>11</sup> Donna Jo Napoli, *Beast* (New York: Simon Pulse, 2004).
- <sup>12</sup> As Napoli acknowledges, p. 256.
- <sup>13</sup> *Beauty and the Beast*, dir. by Bill Condon (Disney, 2017).
- <sup>14</sup> Madame le Prince de Beaumont, ‘Beauty and the Beast’, in *The Young Misses Magazine* (1783), facsimile in Hearne, p. 195.
- <sup>15</sup> Robin McKinley, *Beauty* (Oxford: David Fickling Books, 2011); *The Rose Daughter* (New York: Avon Books, 2002).
- <sup>16</sup> Stacey Jay, *Of Beast and Beauty* (New York: Ember, 2014).