The Beauty of the Beast: The Seductive Role of Beast Characters in Contemporary Fairy Tales

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In various traditional fairy tales, furry, feathered, clawed, and even deadly characters maintain beast-like qualities in addition to human ones. While not all beasts may be ferocious and fearful, women usually characterized by delicate and stereotypically feminine forms, animalistic men tend to be grotesque and frightful. These male characters often exist as current or future husbands to the heroines of the stories, representing the fears and anxieties women might have felt before a marriage. However, in contemporary fairy tales, beasts are represented in a different way. Instead of symbolizing unsatisfactory husbands, they are being depicted in a more positive fashion. The traditional fear that heroines associate with beastly characters has transformed into a fascination with them, portraying them in a more idealized light, some women even acquiring animalistic characteristic themselves. Even though traditionally similar beastly husbands exist in contemporary stories, the representation and meaning of beasts has been altered.

In traditional tales, beasts were to be feared. Whether their beastly qualities were literal, such as in Madame de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast,” or figurative, as in Charles Perrault’s “Bluebeard,” they were not ideal traits for men, or husbands for that matter (Tatar, The Classic Fairy Tales 27-28). A suspected purpose of these stories was to convey the feelings and emotions a woman might have before marrying an unknown husband. Arranged marriages were common and often caused feelings of anxiety and fear. Stories that include animal-groom characters likely provided an outlet for women to express their emotions. As Maria Tatar states, “many an arranged marriage must have seemed like a marriage to a beast and the telling of stories...may have furnished women with a socially acceptable channel for providing therapeutic advice, comfort, and consolation” (27). Beast figures were meant to represent terror and fear, whether through their exterior appearance, interior character, or even both, such as in the case of Giovanni Francesco Straparola’s “The Pig King”, a sixteenth century Italian fairy tale. In “The Pig King”, the prince of a kingdom is born a pig and grows up in want of a wife. Not only is he described as “dirty and ill-savored” by his own mother, but he also ends up murdering the women that he marries (Straparola 44). A murderous pig-man is not a desirable husband. The use of this character therefore represents women’s anxieties about acquiring an equally unsatisfying husband. While not all traditional beasts are defined by horrifying personality traits, their exterior appearance still makes them fearful creatures. For example, in de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast”, even though Beast is described as being a “horrible figure” and a “monster”, a more tender and human side of him is shown through his actions around Beauty. These positive features of Beast can be exemplified through Beauty’s own thoughts of him: “each day Beauty discovered new good qualities in the monster...far from fearing his arrival, she often looked at her watch to see if it was nine o’clock yet” (Beaumont 39). Nevertheless, even though Beast does have kind qualities, they are humanistic traits, not animal ones. His beastly characteristics are unfavorable, even if he is not portrayed in a completely negative light as a whole.

Beast characters continue to be found in contemporary fairy tales; however the reaction that heroines have to them differs from original versions. The traditional fear of beasts is often replaced with fascination and curiosity. Instead of being repelled by the characters, the women, or girls, are drawn to them. Marina Warner further emphasizes this point through her statement, “the attraction of the wild, and of the wild brother in twentieth-century culture, cannot be overestimated” (Warner, qtd. in Tatar, The Classic Fairy Tales 29). The girls are not repelled by the savage and dangerous beasts, instead finding their wild ferocity appealing. Angela Carter’s “The Company of Wolves” demonstrates how typically terrifying characters can be found enticing. In the story, the were-wolf is unquestionably a beastly character, shown though his ability to take on the form of a wolf and his display of murderous tendencies. Carter illustrates his beastly qualities through the description, “his feral muzzle is sharp as a knife...his matted hair streams down his white shirt...with darkness tangled in his hair”, portraying intimidating and animal-like characteristics (Carter 116). However, despite this description, which would have likely caused terror in traditional fairy tale heroines, the girl in “The Company of Wolves” shows no fear. Even when she realizes that he has eaten her grandmother and that she is in danger, she is not repelled by the wolf (117). The girl’s indifference is also apparent when the wolf threatens to eat her, and she responds in the following way: “the girl burst out and laughed; she knew she was nobody’s meat. She laughed at him full in the face” (118). There is no fear triggered by the beast character, instead, she is attracted to the were-wolf, despite knowing what dangers he is capable of. She even ends up sleeping peacefully in her dead grandmother’s bed “between the paws of the tender wolf” (118), showing how, to the girl, the ferocious animalistic world is more appealing than the civilized human one.

Helen Oyeyemi also shows how female characters can find allure in beasts in her novel, Mr. Fox. The character of Mr. Fox, while not an entirely traditional one, is a beast character. The fact that he kills off all the women in his stories, coupled with his name, alluding to Joseph Jacob’s “Mr. Fox”, establishes him as a Bluebeard-like character. Additionally, while he may not take on
an animal appearance or actually portray murderous tendencies himself, he still displays a particular characteristic that was central to traditional beast characters: the inability to serve as a sufficient husband. Jack Zipes explains that “the instinctual desire to select a male who will be the best provider and caretaker of the female’s offspring” is crucial to women (Zipes Why Fairy Tales Stick 140). Traditional beast characters, through their animalistic qualities, served as male figures that did not fit this ideal. While most do not have to worry about arranged marriages, contemporary Western women do still have fears about their husbands. One of these concerns is the fear that a man will leave his wife for another woman, Mr. Fox evoking these worries in his wife, Daphne, through his questionable relationship with Mary Foxe. Oyeyemi’s Mr. Fox is, therefore, a culturally relevant beast character for modern women’s worries. However, even though Daphne is concerned about his relationship with Mary, she continues to be drawn to him. Instead of confronting him about Mary or being repelled by his behavior, she is unable to stop herself from rummaging through his office in seek of insight into his behavior (Oyeyemi 231). Despite his negative characteristics, both Mary and Daphne continue to be attracted to Mr. Fox.

The fascination with contemporary beast characters relates to the theme of pleasure being coupled with pain. While pain is usually associated with negative feelings, it can also be coupled with positive ones. It is possible “that one may be attracted to something while at the same time experiencing negative emotions, such as disgust and anxiety” (Goldstein 4). This theme is relevant to beasts of contemporary fairy tales as, though their characteristics do elicit negative feelings, they are coupled with excitement and satisfaction. Take, for example, Carter’s “The Erl-King”, where a female character is captivated by a forest dwelling being. Although it is stated that the Erl-King is dangerous, she is attracted to him. At one point, she is even physically harmed by him: “and now – ach! I feel your sharp teeth in the subaqueous depths of your kisses. The equinoctial gales seize the bare elms and make them whizz and whirl like dervishes; you sink your teeth into my throat and make me scream” (Carter 88). Even though the Erl-King is painfully sinking his teeth into the girl’s neck, there is still a sexual and pleasurable feel to the action. These emotions are also evoked shortly after when he strips her naked. Despite the pain he causes and the danger he presents, she still speaks of him in a positive way, daydreaming of them waltzing together or speaking of how she gets lost in his green eyes (89-90). While she eventually realizes what harm he intends to inflict upon her, for most of the story, despite what the Erl-king does, she describes her experience as a positive one.

There is a certain excitement that accompanies breaking rules and entering forbidden and dangerous situations, like having a relationship with a beast. In many fairy tales, contemporary and traditional, there are warnings given that, instead averting characters, entices them. While one would normally associate a murderous husband with fear and find a quiet, normal life more appealing, this typical view is not portrayed in Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”. The heroine of the story seems much more excited and appeased when she is married to the murderous marquis, versus the flat and dull description of her life after he is defeated. Tatar states that “the contents of the bloody chamber may have been buried or burned and its door may have been sealed, but its Gothic horrors stubbornly remain the real source of narrative pleasure” (Tatar, Secrets beyond the Door 118). Beasts offer a surreal excitement that contemporary heroines are aware of. Instead of finding dangerous and savage beasts fearful, they are almost more appealing than humans.

This fascination with beasts and the way that characters are drawn to them places the animalistic figures in a more positive light than in traditional stories. There are less negative traits associated with them and, in many cases, being a beast is idealized over being human. Often times, the civilized world is less glorified than the savage one, characters preferring to break free from domestic constraints and join in with wild freedom. This is shown in Carter’s “Tiger’s Bride” where, rather than the beast turning into a human, the human turns into a beast (Carter 67). This transformation is a stark contrast to traditional beast stories where, if anyone takes on a different form, it is the beast turning into a human. As “The Tiger’s Bride” demonstrates, this is not always the case in contemporary tales and, instead, “Beauty stands in need of the Beast rather than vice versa” (Warner, qtd. in Tatar, The Classic Fairy Tales 29). There is a positive emphasis placed on uncivilized beasts as human characters give into the savage world. Carter provides another story where this is demonstrated: “The Company of Wolves”. After the girl strips naked and throws her clothes into the fire, it is stated that she “will lay his [the wolf’s] fearful head on her lap and she will pick out the lice from his pelt and perhaps she will put the lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony” (Carter 118). By removing her clothes and committing animalistic acts, she not only accepts the wolf’s wild ferocity but takes on beast-like characteristics herself. As Tatar explains, “while eighteenth- and nineteenth-century versions of the tale celebrated the civilizing power of feminine virtue and its triumph over crude animal desire, our own culture hails Beast’s heroic defiance of civilization, with all its discontents” (Tatar, The Classic Fairy Tales 29). Beasts are no longer something to be feared but something to aspire to be.

In contemporary fairy tales, female characters are not only fascinated and attracted to beasts but also exist as these characters themselves. Female beasts are not only portrayed in a soft and delicate manner like in traditional tales. Instead, they adopt many typically masculine beast-like characteristics. For example, in Margaret Atwood’s
The Robber Bride, the character of Zenia represents a very ferocious female beast character. While she may not have supernatural beast-characteristics, she does cause great fear and anxiety in Tony, Roz, and Charis’ lives. Her ruthless qualities are evident in the following quote: “it’s the mix of domestic image and mass-bloodshed...that would have been appreciated by Zenia, who enjoyed such turbulence, such violent contradictions. More than enjoyed: created” (Atwood 3). The use of words like “mass-bloodshed,” “turbulence,” and “violent,” as well as her enjoyment of creating turmoil, establish her as a beast character from the very beginning pages. It does not matter that Zenia is a woman, she goes against traditional fairy tale convention and assumes the role of a beast. This can also be shown in another modern Bluebeard story, John Updike’s “Bluebeard in Ireland”. Even though the Bluebeard character is male, dreaming up ways of how to kill his wife, his spouse almost seems to be more of a beast than he is (Updike 405). She is portrayed in a negative fashion, being over reactive, controlling, and even unattractive to him. Although he does harbor negative traits of his own, her personality is more unpleasant than his. Women do not only serve as beasts of stories, but also offer ferocious qualities of their own to match male beast characters. For instance, in Carter’s “The Bloody Chamber”, the girl’s mother does not take on a stereotypically feminine docile and gentle role, but instead saves her daughter from death in a description that makes her seem just as fearful as Bluebeard himself: “you never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was a white mane, her black lisle legs exposed to the thigh, her skirts tucked round her waist, one hand on the reins of the rearing horse while the other clasped my father’s service revolver” (Carter 40). While she may not be a beast character, she does present equally ferocious characteristics. By embracing beast-like traits of their own, female characters in contemporary fairy tales are able to maintain more dominant roles than ones traditionally given to women. Zipes specifies that, “one of the qualitatively distinguishing features of the fairy tale in America during the past twenty-five years has been the manner in which it has questioned gender roles and critiqued the patriarchal code that has been so dominant in both folk and fairy tales” (Zipes, “Recent Trends in the Contemporary American Fairy Tale” 3). Women are no longer always portrayed as being stereotypically feminine, delicate, and even submissive characters, instead taking on stronger, ferocious, and even terrifying roles. In some sense, the beast-like characteristics they represent serve as an example of strength for other women to adopt and to be able to match the beasts in their lives with their own ferocious qualities.

Furthermore, women themselves encompass beast-like traits as well, serving as female forms of monsters and ferocious animals that are not typical of original tales. Fairy tales are reflective of their cultures and therefore expected to change and transform to fit new ideas and perspectives. While the beast characters in contemporary fairy tales may not express women’s worry of arranged marriages, like in traditional ones, they do serve the same core purpose: to express feelings and ideas that are culturally relevant of the time.

Works Cited


