



The Two Faces of the Beast

by Viola Rosario

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Something happens to young boys when they reach adolescence. They grow hair and pustules on their faces, become taller, begin to grunt in gruff tones and turn monstrous in their behaviour. They become 'The Beast'. But the traditional tale of 'Beauty and the Beast' promises hope. Most fairy tales are about princesses and are directed at girls, but the story of 'Beauty and the Beast' can be seen as a tale for boys. It tells of the recuperation of the wayward young man into society through the transforming power of love. The beast motif is common in fairy tales as a metaphor for the masculine, which makes it interesting to explore the social and psychological significance of two images of masculinity in two tales for girls: the rapacious wolf in the French tale of 'Little Red Riding Hood' by Perrault, and the vulnerable frog in 'The Frog King' by the brothers Grimm, and to compare them with Madame Leprince de Beaumont's eighteenth century story of 'Beauty and the Beast' and the Disney version of the tale.

Perrault's 'Little Red Riding Hood' (1697)

Blame the old misogynist Perrault for turning a celebration of rustic female self-sufficiency into a manual for victim-type. In his study of the Red Riding Hood story, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Jack Zipes suggests that the original wolf in 'Little Red Riding Hood' was probably a werewolf.¹ That is to say, a man-wolf with the

shamanistic power to integrate the cultural and wild elements of humans, and as such, a force for psychic healing. It may be that this story has always had sexual elements in it; after all, sex and the Fall of Man had been inextricably linked since the story of Adam and Eve. But it is probably the seventeenth century French writer Charles Perrault, whose stories are still read by French children, who exalted to the level of paranoia that dark suspicion that the sexual drive is the source of the evil that lurks in all men.

Perrault's story appeared in a collection entitled 'Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passe' first published in 1697. He turned the story into a cautionary tale for helpless young girls on the dangers of the beast in men. He portrays men, particularly suave, avuncular men, like 'god-father the Wolf' as seducers of the naive and gullible country maid. His 'little girl of the Village' ends up eaten; her end is final and the intended message of the moral at the end of this tale is an admonition designed to instil fear in the hearts of all wayward girls:

*'You can see here that young children,
Especially young girls, who are
Beautiful, well-made and good,
Do ill to listen to all sorts of
people;
And that it is not strange,
That the wolf should eat.*

*I say the wolf, for all wolves
are not of the same sort;*

*There are some of the suave and
courtly type,
Who, without sound or fury,
without gall,
Well-constrained, indulgent and
mild,
Follow young maidens
Into their homes, right down the
narrowest passages;
Alas! they do not know these
wolves so extra-sweet,
Are the most dangerous of all.'*²

So for Perrault, men are wolves. Even those that seem the most innocuous are not to be trusted. Sex, for young women, is something that should be feared - as repulsive and dangerous as a hairy old wolf. The message is that a young girl should not listen to 'all kinds of people' especially if they are strange men; obedience to parental dictates is the surest path. And a girl should certainly not allow herself to get into bed too easily. For there is, in Perrault's tale, no huntsman chancing by, as there is in the Grimms' version, to perform the duty of midwife, and effect delivery, cutting the 'Little Red Cap' and her grandmother out of the wolf's belly. It is in the wolf's nature to kill; its rapacity is uncontrollable, therefore it is the duty of women to avoid arousing his animal passions. For the fallen woman in this society there is no redemption. Her demise is final. Thus, fear insinuates itself and the repression of sexuality and of women begins.

The Grimms' 'The Frog King' (1812)

This is certainly not the only story

where animals are associated with male sexuality. The beast motif appears in the story known in most English versions as 'The Frog Prince'. Frogs have long been associated with rain and rivers, wells and water. They are symbols of fertility and fecundity; indeed in some cultures they are associated with creation myths.³ Heket, the frog-headed goddess of Ancient Egypt 'symbolised the embryonic state when the dead grain decomposed and began to germinate': Death and Rebirth. She was also 'one of the midwives who assisted every morning at the birth of the sun' and figured 'among the patrons of childbirth'.⁴ The frog in the Grimms' 'Brier Rose' and 'Sleeping Beauty' just happens to emerge from the water where the barren (dry) queen just happens to have been bathing and he just happens to have foreknowledge that the queen has conceived:

'In time of old there lived a king and queen, and every day they said, "Oh, if only we had a child!" Yet, they never had one. Then one day, as the queen went out bathing, a frog happened to crawl ashore and say to her, "Your wish shall be fulfilled. Before the year is out, you shall give birth to a daughter."' ⁵

We might expect the frog in the Grimms' version, 'The Frog King', to display more of these female, life-engendering qualities, but in their ability to puff themselves up, and indeed in their

vulnerability, frogs also suggest the male, the phallus. The Grimms' stories modified the traditional stories in order to bring them in line with Christian values, in keeping with a child audience and their didactic purpose. According to Zipes, the brothers carefully emphasised 'specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time'⁶ and made their frog in 'The Frog King' manifestly male and rather reminiscent of the seductive wolf. He lies in wait for his princess to make a slip that will put her into his power. He offers to retrieve for his princess the precious, perfect golden ball - as much symbol of the womb as of virginity - that she so carelessly loses. The well into which the ball falls is clearly symbolic of her own sexuality: 'the well was deep, so very deep that she could not see the bottom.' But it also gives her a vision of the metaphysical void; of the unknown godless dark. Here is a sublimation of both the erotic and the metaphysical. 'She began to cry, and she cried louder and louder, for there was nothing that could comfort her.' And it is then, as she grieves for the loss of her innocence and fearful of the depths of her own sensuality, that the frog seizes his advantage: 'As she sat there grieving over her loss a voice called out to her'. He asks what she is willing to give in exchange for her golden ball: 'My clothes, my pearls and jewels, even the golden crown I'm wearing on my head.' is her reply. But he is not

content with this dowry. He does not want the possessions given to her by her father, but 'true adult love' which alone, says Bettelheim, 'can dissipate the fear of death' and free one from the separation anxiety which haunts every child.⁷

' "I don't want your clothes, your pearls and jewels, or your golden crown," the frog replied. "But if you will love me and let me be your companion and playmate, and let me sit beside you at the table, eat from your little golden plate, drink out of your little cup, and sleep in your little bed - if you promise me all that, I'll dive down and retrieve your golden ball." ⁸

This is, of course, a story about honour and the cardinal importance of keeping a promise; of nothing less than the sanctity of the marriage vows. Once the princess has her ball back she tries to forget her duty to the repulsive frog. But her kingly father binds her to her word:

'then the king said, "If you've made a promise, you must keep it. Go and let him in." ⁹

Faced with the idea of allowing this slimy symbol of the male sex into her virginal ordered world, she is overcome with fear:

'The princess began to cry because the cold frog frightened her. She did not even have enough courage to touch him, and yet, now she was supposed to let him sleep in her

beautiful, clean bed. But the king gave her an angry look and said, "It's not proper to scorn someone who helped you when you were in trouble!"¹⁰

How many weeping frightened women have been sent back to their husbands and told that they must keep their promise? In practical social terms it makes sense to teach timorous young brides that it is worth their while to have patience, to tolerate their beastly husbands, to obey the dictates of the law, and their fathers, and that if they persevere they will win their prize of a beautiful prince. And that is part of the message of the story of the original *Beauty and the Beast*. But what is the key to the unveiling of the evil enchantment in this Grimms' fairytale? It is not, as in later versions of the story, mere patience, and waiting out the three nights, nor as in the eighteenth century French fairytale '*Beauty and the Beast*', the power of love, or as in '*Sleeping Beauty*', a magic kiss that breaks the spell. Here it is the young girl's empowering act of anger.

'Soon after she had got into bed, he came crawling over to her and said, "I'm tired and want to sleep as much as you do. Lift me up, or I'll tell your father!" This made the princess extremely angry, and after she picked him up, she threw him against the wall with all her might.'

This is the secret of disenchantment. She does not, this time,

submit to the authority of her father but, showing her mettle, dashes a delicate frog against the wall.

'However, when he fell to the ground, he was no longer a frog, but a prince with kind and beautiful eyes. So, in keeping with her father's wishes, she accepted him as her dear companion and husband...'¹¹

Action, as it so often is in fairy tales, is externalised into this singularly masculine act of violence. Paradoxically this is what her father wishes after all; no longer a little girl, but an autonomous individual in her own right, she is able to take her hard-won place beside her husband as an equal. Heroically she has faced a test, undergone her own 'rite of passage' and emerged triumphant. True proof of her success is the breaking of the iron bands around the heart of the young king's servant, Faithful Heinrich, 'for he knew that his master was safe and happy'.¹² He has achieved what Bettelheim calls a 'true interpersonal relationship', the kind which resolves 'separation anxiety and death anxiety'.¹³

This sociological reading may be the most cogent interpretation of the Grimms' version of the story but does it throw much light on the significance of that otherwise incomprehensible act of throwing the frog against the wall? It has often been said that the Grimms' purpose was didactic; their aim to instruct children in socially

appropriate behaviour and that they 'eliminated erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality'.¹⁴ Their version of the tale is no doubt socially instructive. However, unlike later, more sanitised versions which have the frog turning into a prince after merely sleeping on the princess's pillow for three nights, or three weeks, it may be that the Grimms, in their respect for the cultural significance of their material, have preserved in this oddly violent act, a sense of the deeper mythic origins of this tale. Iona and Peter Opie refer to more ancient British variants such as '*Prince Paddock*' and '*The Well of the World's End*' in which the frog sings:

*'Now fetch me an aix, my hinnie,
my heart,
Now fetch me an aix, my ain true
love;
Remember the promise that you
and I made,
Down i' the meadow where we twa
met.'*

And when the 'lassie' takes the axe and chops off the frog's head as instructed 'nae sooner was that done that he startit up the bonniest young prince that ever was seen'.¹⁵ We have here a clear echo of the '*Green Man*' story; the re-enactment of the act of conception which is the quintessential ritual of death and rebirth. As in Egyptian mythology, the frog is death and new life. It must die for renewal to take place. In killing the frog the girl comes to terms with her own

womanliness and this is the very act which liberates the prince.

Madame Leprince de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' (1783).

The sublimated but still earthy sexuality of 'The Frog King' contrasts with Mme Leprince de Beaumont's obviously didactic 'Beauty and the Beast', an example of the contrived, delicately-fashioned literary fairy tales of the France of Marie-Antoinette. According to Zipes:

'The French fairy tales written from 1690 to 1789 formed part of a serious debate about the manners, politics, and values of that time. They were not intended for children at first, though some of the tales were later adapted for young people...In this sense, the French literary fairy tales were among the first in history to bring together the interests of the upper and lower classes in tales that are often stunning because of their extravagant ideas, incredible violence, and utopian longing.'¹⁶

The didacticism vein which runs through these stories is particularly evident in the translation of the story that appeared in Britain in 'The Young Misses Magazine' in 1783. 'The Frog King' and 'Beauty and the Beast' both express the same two messages with differing emphasis. According to Bettelheim, the message of 'The Frog King' is 'that sex may seem disgustingly animal-like at first, but that once the right way is

found to approach it, beauty will emerge from behind this repulsive appearance.'¹⁷ This is certainly one of the themes of 'Beauty and the Beast'. But the story of 'Beauty and the Beast' puts even more emphasis on the second idea - that by doing one's duty, as Father dictates, true happiness will be won.

Madame de Beaumont's story has many of the elements of 'Cinderella' - the cruel sisters, the motherless but devoted little girl, the beautiful lady who turns out to be a grand fairy, so we know we can expect a happy ending. Beauty's father is a rich merchant and 'a man of sense'¹⁸ who spares no cost in educating his three boys and three girls 'but gave them all kinds of masters.'¹⁹ And Beauty spends most of her time reading books, while her sisters spend their time frivolously going to 'parties of pleasure, balls, plays, &c. and laughed at their youngest sister, because she spent the greatest part of her time in reading good books'.²⁰

Beauty is a dutiful daughter, and refuses all offers to marry because she 'chose to stay with her father a few years longer'.²¹ As in 'The Frog King', it is out of devotion to her father that this girl agrees to the demands of the loathsome Beast. 'I will deliver myself up to all his fury, and I am very happy in thinking that my death will save my father's life, and be a proof of my tender love for him.'²² she declares. When offered fulfilment

of all her wishes she replies that 'there is nothing I desire so much as to see my poor father, and know what he is doing.'²³ After three months she begs to be allowed to return, principally to visit her father because he has 'pined himself sick for the loss of her, and she longed to see him again.'²⁴ 'Only let me stay a week with my father since he is alone.'²⁵ she begs. The relationship recalls the incestuous love of the father in Perrault's 'Peau d'ane', except that in this case the affection is reciprocated. Beauty finds herself back in her bed in her father's house and her father 'thought he should have died with joy to see his dear daughter again. He held her fast locked in his arms above a quarter of an hour. As soon as the first transports were over, Beauty began to think on rising, and was afraid she had not clothes to put on.'²⁶ In fact, it has been suggested that beast marriage stories may have their roots 'in a stage of civilisation when marriage between a widowed father and his orphaned daughter was not necessarily taboo.'²⁷ and in this context it could be said that the central message of obedience in 'The Frog King', de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' and even in 'Red Riding Hood' takes on uncomfortable overtones. In that it is directed at 'Young Misses', this story teaches the virtue of perceiving goodness in the horrible beast. He contrasts most favourably with the husbands of Beauty's sisters: the first, handsome but vain; the other,

intelligent but selfish. This loathly lover has learnt what Sir Gawain took a year to discover, in that monster-bride story 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell'. That what women do not want is eternal obedience to their father, to men; what women truly do want is sovereignty. And he is wise enough to promise it to her. He tells her in their first intimate interchange: 'You alone are mistress here'²⁸ echoing the message written in letters of gold in the books he has placed in her room:

'Welcome Beauty, banish fear,
You are queen and Mistress here:
Speak your wishes, speak your will,
Swift obedience meets them still.'²⁹

The doting Beast definitely comes up looking like a much better option than the husbands of her sisters and Beauty reproaches herself for her treatment of him:

'Am I not very wicked, said she, to act so unkindly to Beast, that has studied so much to please me in everything? Is it his fault that he is so ugly, and has so little sense? He is kind and good, and that is sufficient. Why did I refuse to marry him? I should be happier with the monster than my sisters are with their husbands; it is neither wit, nor a fine person, in a husband, that makes a woman happy, but virtue, sweetness of temper, and complaisance, and Beast has all these valuable qualifications. It is true, I do not feel the tenderness of

affection for him, but I find I have the highest gratitude, esteem and friendship; and I will not make him miserable; were I to be so ungrateful I should never forgive myself.'³⁰

The closing sentence describes the ideal marriage as defined by the 'wise Governess', Mme de Beaumont. Notice that the central character has become the Beast, the husband, rather than Beauty for it tell us that '... he married Beauty, and lived with her many years, and their happiness, as it was founded on virtue was complete.'³¹

Disney's animated feature film of 'Beauty and the Beast (1991)

The 1991 Disney animated movie, winner of two Academy Awards places the story in France, an obvious tribute to the origins of the tale, but the embedded social values of the Disney production become clearer when it is compared with Mme de Beaumont's story. For example, the father in the older version is a merchant. In the Disney version, he is a mad inventor with the wild white hair of Einstein. There is an implied respect for European values, culture and, above all, learning. The heroine, with the French name Belle, loves books and dresses in simple classic style, unlike the bosomy blonde 'Bimbettes' in the film who are an unmistakable parody of the brainless blondes on American television today. The merchant in de Beaumont's story loses his wealth; Belle's father in the Disney version is considered by the townsfolk to have lost his mind.

So where the courtly French story valued money as a symbol of power, the modern American version equates Frenchness with learning and high culture. This American adulation of the French, could date back to the eighteenth century; their scientist and statesman Benjamin Franklin who spent many years in France and convinced the French to provide aid for the American Revolution. But perhaps this is the impact of the cultural values of the new head of Disney, Michael Eisner. There is another subtle criticism of American culture implied in that the villain of the story, the broad-shouldered, musket-toting Gaston is depicted much like a minuteman, the soldiers of the American Revolution.

The animated film is plainly didactic and has even more to say to a male audience than the de Beaumont version on which it is so clearly based. The message to the young man is that the way to win the girl is by developing the feminine side of his nature and sublimating his aggressive tendencies. He must turn himself into a frog and submit to the girl, to make himself anew in order to win her, while still remaining wolf enough to attract and protect her. The confusing nature of the message is highlighted in the reactions of the bemused Beast in the delightful scene, where the teapot and the candelabra in his enchanted castle teach the despairing Beast how to help the Beauty see past his ugliness:

'Mrs Potts: Well you can start by making yourself more presentable. Straighten up. Try to act like a gentleman.

Lumiere: When she comes in give her a dashing debonair smile... Come, come, show me the smile.

Mrs Potts: But don't frighten the poor girl

Lumiere: Impress her with your rapier wit.

Mrs Potts: But be gentle.

Lumiere: Shower her with compliments.

Mrs. Potts: But be sincere.

Lumiere: And above all.

All: You must control your temper.'³²

The poor Beast puffs his chest out and stands to attention, grimaces and frowns and hides his head in his hands in confusion. But he will not take their advice. When he finds the girl in his room, looking at the dying rose, he destroys the furniture in a fit of temper which sends her running out into the snow. 'Promise or no promise' she says, as she leaves. This is not a woman who will allow herself to be bound by the rule of her father. This allows the Beast to indulge in a typical male adolescent fantasy. Unable to relate to the girl personally, he is still able to save her by brute force when he finds her out in the snow, surrounded by a pack of vicious wolves. More wolflike than they, he fights them off with his bare hands, and in gratitude

when he falls in the snow exhausted, she takes him back to the castle. Then comes the frog-bashing scene. When he rebukes her with the admonition: 'If you hadn't run away, this wouldn't have happened', she turns around and answers him back, much to the consternation and then the cautious delight of the household. And it is this empowering act of anger which allows the wolf and the frog to come together in the Beast that marks the point of liberation of both girl and boy, and makes the final magical scene of the physical transformation and rebirth of the Beast in a shower of magic dust and life-giving rain, finally possible.

Notes

1. Zipes, Jack (ed.) 1983, *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood*, Bergin and Garvey, South Hadley, p.2.
2. This somewhat unrestrained translation is my own. Acknowledgements to Soriano's glossary in Perrault, Charles, *Contes: Textes établis at presentes par Marc Soriano*, Flammarion, 1989, and Zipes' two translations in *The Trials and Tribulations of Little Red Riding Hood and Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment*.
3. Cavendish, Richard (ed.) 1985, *Man, Myth and Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion and the Unknown*, Vol 4, Marshall Cavendish, New York, pp.1053-4.
4. Guirand, F (ed.) *New Larousse*

- Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Hamlyn, London, p.38.
5. Zipes, Jack (ed. & trans.) 1987 *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Bantam Books, Toronto, p.186.
 6. Zipes, p.xxviii.
 7. Bettelheim, Bruno 1991, *The Uses of Enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, Penguin, London, p.11.
 8. Zipes, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, p.2.
 9. Zipes, p.3.
 10. Zipes, p.4.
 11. Zipes, p.4.
 12. Zipes, p.5.
 13. Bettelheim, p.11.
 14. Zipes, p.xxviii.
 15. Opie, Iona and Opie, Peter 1974, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p.183.
 16. Zipes, Jack (ed. & trans.) 1989, *Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales*, New American Library, p.14.
 17. Bettelheim, p.291.
 18. Madame Leprince de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast' (1783) from Hearne, *Beauty and the Beast: visions and revisions of an old tale*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1989, pp.190-203.
 19. Hearne, p.45.
 20. Hearne, p.46.
 21. Hearne, p.46.
 22. Hearne, p.54.
 23. Hearne, p.58.
 24. Hearne, p.61.
 25. Hearne, p.61.
 26. Hearne, p.62.
 27. Tatar, Maria 1987, *The Hard Facts of the Grimm's Fairy Tales*,

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- Princeton U.P., Princeton, p.156.
28. Madame Leprince de
Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast
(1783), p.58.
29. Madame Leprince de
Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast
(1783), p.57.
30. Madame Leprince de
Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast
(1783), p.64.
31. Madame Leprince de
Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast
(1783). p.67.
32. Disney video, *Beauty and the
Beast*, 1991.



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