

**Title:** *Beauty and the Beast*. From Fable to Film

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[(essay date 1989) *In the following essay, Pauly offers a comparison of Cocteau's film version of Beauty and the Beast with the original fairy tale ostensibly written by the Frenchwoman Jeanne-Marie le Prince de Beaumont.*]

The role of the artist is thus to create an organism having a life of its own drawn from life, and not destined to surprise, to please or displease, but to arouse secret feelings in reaction to certain signs which represent beauty for some, ugliness and deformity for others.--Cocteau, *Démarche d'un poète*

The 1946 Jean Cocteau film *Beauty and the Beast* is ostensibly an adaptation of a classic French fairy tale written in 1757. As the accompanying chart shows, Cocteau made numerous additions, deletions and transpositions in his rewriting and reworking of the eighteenth-century original text (changes often alluded to by critics). The addition of Avenant (which in French means attractive), played as well by Jean Marais, the Beast, squares the plot and especially the ending. There Avenant and the Beast exchange masks, reuniting internal and external beauty and ugliness and resolving the double tension of their two dichotomies. Avenant repeats the fate of the Beast, being turned from beauty to beast because he did not believe in the powers of magic. The creation of Avenant not only offsets the Prince-Beast but also establishes a masculine equivalent of the linguistic feminine polarity of the French title: *La Belle et la bête* [hereafter abbreviated as *LB*].

Just as Cocteau chose certain elements as agents of magic (the horse, the glove, the animated statues, the key), the original author of the tale chose the rose, the mirror, the powers of the good fairy, and the Beast as central functional symbols and characters. A comparison of the two works reveals in both cases a complex mythological thematic working through the artist that ultimately restructures the tale as primal myth.

The original fable of *Beauty and the Beast* was written in England in 1757 by a Frenchwoman, Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, who worked as a governess to the children of the Prince of Wales and published a controversial ladies's magazine in the 1750s. Born in 1711 in Rouen, Jeanne-Marie Le Prince, whose younger brother incidentally became a rather famous painter, came from a family of numerous children and had few financial resources of her own. Her decision to become a teacher was considered radical in her day, when most unendowed daughters wound up in a convent. A brief and unhappy marriage which produced one daughter was

annulled in 1745, and Madame de Beaumont left France for England in 1748, where she stayed until 1762. She had quite a following in her old age back in France, with the notable exception of her neighbor Voltaire, who detested her, and Frédéric Melchior Grimm (not the author of the fairy tales), who condemned her for her pompous morality and attitude toward children, saying her ideas were fit for parrots.<sup>1</sup>

Certain elements of the thematic structure of her famous tale can be tied to her own experiences: the merchant father who journeys to the seaport, the large number of children in her household (ironically her daughter would go on to have six children like the family in her tale), and her lesson too well learned of the dangers of bad marriages. In her 1982 article on Madame de Beaumont in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* [hereafter abbreviated as *SV*], Patricia Clancy quotes a bitter letter from Madame de Beaumont stating that she should be forgiven her divorce as her husband "could only produce victims for the most awful infirmities" (*SV*, 196). Considering that the French word for the beast, "la bête," is feminine, Madame de Beaumont could therefore even have been thinking of her own daughter or even of herself when she created the feminine dichotomy between beauty and bestiality, which is also incidentally recreated in the polarity between Beauty and her older vain ugly sister.

The familiar and familial origins of *Beauty and the Beast* are intermingled with a number of diverse folklore antecedents, both Continental and English. The 1963 Macmillan edition of *Beauty and the Beast* speculates on the influence of British legends on the genesis of the tale, wrongly however calling it "British in origin:"

Mme Leprince de Beaumont (1711-1780) lived in England for a while and must have heard ghost stories there, as well as rumors of those sons of certain great families who were hidden away because of some birthmark or blemish that might frighten society and dishonor a noble name. Possibly one of these monsters, shut up in some Scottish castle, gave her the idea of a human beast who bears a noble heart under a frightening appearance and suffers the pangs of hopeless love.<sup>2</sup>

In Beaumont's tale, the Beast is lacking in beauty and also in wit (*esprit*), which could be read as a retarded, deformed animal child, who under a magic spell alternates between goodness, generosity and petlike devotion, and acts of violence and bestiality. The Beast suffers his fate from a curse upon his parents, who did not believe in the powers of magic. In counterbalancing opposition to the Beast's lack of the two dominant social values of the eighteenth-century upper class, beauty and wit, Beauty's two older sisters suffer their just deserts in their respective marriages to a handsome egotist and a cutting wit. This irony could have an onomastic connection in the connotations of the author's married name: Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont ("the prince of the beautiful mountain"), in the contrast between the elegant image and the ugly reality of her failed marriage to a man whom she characterized as a monster.

Obviously, Madame de Beaumont was influenced by numerous literary and folklore elements of her day, some of which have later echoes as well, such as the tales collected by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm and the gothic novels, including Victor Hugo's 1830 *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, another tale of a beauty and a beast. The most obvious source for *Beauty and the Beast* is Charles Perrault's *Tales of my mother the goose* published in 1697, which Madame de Beaumont would have read as a child. Beauty's mistreatment by her cruel older sisters, her impoverished appearance, her household chores, her simplicity and goodness, and her subsequent transformation into a princess are all drawn directly from *Cinderella*, as is the role of the good fairy. Even her return to the abuse and misery of her family home after her reception at the castle of the Beast (read prince) could be seen as a transformation of the *Cinderella* sequence. The magic screen-mirror which depicts absent scenes recalls both the talking mirror of the Grimms's *Snow White* and the hall of mirrors of *Sleeping Beauty*, which also contains the elements of the rose and the curse of the evil fairy. But it is *Riquet á la Houppe* which best embodies the double dichotomy of beauty and ugliness, brilliance and stupidity. Other earlier versions of *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Riquet*, those of Basile in particular, served as sources for Perrault, but it is unlikely that Madame de Beaumont would have gone beyond him for her sources. She may in fact have read Madame de Villeneuve's 1740 book-length version of the tale of *Riquet*.

There are so many elements from Perrault's tales in collage in Madame de Beaumont's text that their similarities led to several editions of his works that included *Beauty and the Beast*, which was even attributed to him in error on occasion. Cocteau refers to the "Bibliothèque Rose" edition and in fact includes a number of elements in his film which are drawn from Perrault's tales. He capitalizes on this intertextuality in the staircase scenes and in Beauty's magic embellishments and riches, and even refers to her as Cinderella at the beginning of his diary of the making of the film.

Cocteau himself participated indirectly in a reworking of the Cinderella tale. His first contribution to French film after the German occupation was the screenplay of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* for Robert Bresson, adapted from the hostess's framed tale in another eighteenth-century work, Denis Diderot's 1773 *Jacques le fataliste*, wherein a common strumpet masquerading as a princess earns the love and hand of a nobleman, thus foiling the vengeful intentions of two evil noblewomen. It is odd but logical that Cocteau did not like Diderot's story, since the same Frédéric Melchior Grimm who lambasted Madame de Beaumont was Diderot's best friend.

Cocteau's choice of *Beauty and the Beast* as subject for his own first film after the war, shot like Rossellini's *Rome Open City* under incredibly difficult circumstances, has obvious historical and political connotations. The prologue invites us to return to a child's vision of experience and the open Sesame magic of the literary cliché "Once upon a time," and marks the film with a double nostalgia: Cocteau's desire to recapture the mysteries, at once cruel and beautiful, of a child's creative imagination, and his wish to return to the world of creative freedom and vitality which had been so crushed by World War Two and the German occupation. One could stretch the fable to a parable of France during the war, with the Beast as Germany and the rose and Beauty as the flower of youth sacrificed, or regard Vichy France as the Beast under the evil spell covering its fundamental goodness. Cocteau makes several explicit references to the state of France in 1945 in his *Diary of a Film* [hereafter abbreviated as *DF*], such as the following:

We are paying now for five terrible years. "To make bad blood" isn't a mere figure of speech. For that is precisely what we all made, and it's this bad blood which now disintegrates us. Five years of hate, fear, a waking nightmare. Five years of shame and slime. We were spattered and smeared with it even to our very souls. We had to survive. Wait. It is this nervous waiting that we are paying for dearly. In spite of all difficulties, we must catch up. Whatever the cost, France must shine again.<sup>3</sup>

Cocteau primarily chose to film *Beauty and the Beast* because it responded to his lifelong generic attraction to fable and myth. As he says in his *Journal d'un inconnu*, "It is with the fable that the lie takes on its nobility. ... There is greatness in its illusions. Without fables. ... a child wouldn't have said to me, before telling me a story about animals: 'It was the time when animals still talked to each other'."<sup>4</sup>

However, Cocteau affirms elsewhere that he also chose to film *Beauty and the Beast* for profound personal reasons: "I chose that particular fable because it corresponds to my personal mythology."<sup>5</sup> This admission compares with a second revealing statement that "the legend of Psyche is *word for word* that of *Beauty and the Beast*."<sup>6</sup> Thus through the eighteenth-century tale, Cocteau returns to classic mythology once again (Psyche is the woman of great beauty loved by Cupid who as a fallen soul is united in divine love after many trials and tribulations. It is ironic that Cocteau overlooks two other Greek myths with thematic precedents for *Beauty and the Beast*: that of Venus in love with the deformed Vulcan and that of Cephalus, the son of Hermes, whose face is metamorphosed.) The reference to Psyche may dominate his imagination by association with the narcissism of the mirror, as the French call a full-length mirror a *psyché*. In his 1928 work *Le Livre blanc (The White Paper)*, Cocteau offers anonymously a confessional fantasy of his homosexuality similar to André Gide's 1920 *Sile grain ne meurt* and 1924 *Corydon*. In Cocteau's bold work are two scenes which reveal deeply enracinated personal mythemes expressed in *Beauty and the Beast*: the first is the narrator's reaction to the revelation that his homosexual lover had a mistress: "This certainty pierced my breast like the claw of some wild animal."<sup>7</sup> The other is its counterpart, the reaction of the narrator's homosexual lover to his engagement to his lover's sister: he shoots

himself before his *psyché*, leaving on the mirror the mark of a fatal narcissistic kiss (*LB* 73). These sequences are possibly a projected reworking of Cocteau's obsession with the idea that his father, a talented painter who committed suicide when Cocteau was ten years old, was an unavowed homosexual.

As noted earlier, the feminine duality of the French title *La Belle et la bête* contains intriguing possibilities of identification with its female author and her daughter. It surely attracted Cocteau as well by providing an emblem of sexual, moral, and artistic ambiguity for him, the Beauty and the Beast (with its double meaning in French of stupid and bestial) resumed together in the person of the artist, as he explains in *Entretiens avec Roger Stéphane*:

Art is born of the coitus between the male and female elements in all of us, elements more nearly balanced in the artist than in other men. Art is the child of a kind of incest, the lovemaking of self and self, a parthenogenesis. That is why marriage is so dangerous for an artist: it represents a pleonasm, the monster's effort toward normality.<sup>8</sup>

Multiple implications of the beauty-beast duality are at work in Cocteau's psyche: the beauty of the young men who attracted him versus the bestiality of his lust, the beauty of artistic creation emanating from the bestial and sometimes stupid being he felt himself to be, even his relationship to the beautiful Jean Marais, who first suggested *Beauty and the Beast* to Cocteau as an idea for a film.

The mention of incest in the above quote brings up one of the major thematic elements of Cocteau's work, the oedipal myth. *Beauty and the Beast* stands in fact between two other works which are open reworkings of the classical myth: *The Infernal Machine* of 1934 and *Oedipus the King* of 1949. Like the numerous reworkings of the Orpheus myth, including the play *Orpheus* of 1926 and the film trilogy of *Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Orpheus* (1950), and *The Testament of Orpheus* (1960), the theme of incest returns again and again throughout Cocteau's work. It is found in slightly different form as early as 1929 in *The Holy Terrors* (*Les Enfants Terribles*), which was to be filmed in 1950, directed by Jean-Pierre Melville.

The attraction for Cocteau of the Beaumont *Beauty and the Beast* as an oedipal myth must have been considerable. Numerous elements of the story mark it as a covert tale of incest. First of all, there is no mother present in Beauty's family. She refuses proposals of marriage, stating that she prefers to stay with her father. The request of the rose, symbol of love, perfection, and feminine sexuality, among others, traps her father in a fatal gesture in the realm of the Beast. In the original fable, the father accompanies Beauty to the Beast's castle and spends the night in the same bed with her before returning home. In a later sequence, Beauty returns home to her ailing father and they spend a quarter of an hour in transports of rapture in bed in each other's arms. Even discounting the eighteenth-century tradition of receiving people socially in the bedroom and ruling out any possible libertine overtones, the implication of these two scenes as workings of a thematic of incest is undeniable. Moreover, the pairing of the father and daughter reverses the oedipal attraction of the son to the mother, thus offering an incestual mirror of Cocteau's own situation.

What seems strange is the fact that given these two explicit oedipal sequences, Cocteau should have chosen to suppress them in the film. Perhaps the fact that the Vicomtesse de Noailles, his benefactress, used to receive him lying on a Louis XV bed defused the incest image at the same time that it made one of many connections between his personal imagery and Beaumont's fable. The numerous sequences in the film featuring beds include that of the sheets hanging out on the line, a vertical metaphoric maze symbolizing the entrapments of sexual and marital relationships.

A description of one of Cocteau's childhood memories reveals an interesting connection between the mirror, the mother, and the beauty, when "the wardrobe mirror showed me my mother, or indeed that madonna encased in velvet, choked by diamonds, beplumed with a dusky aigrette, standing tall and bristling with brilliance, like a glittering horse chesnut, distracted, torn between last-minute instructions to be good and a final glance in the mirror."<sup>9</sup> Cocteau's obsession with his childhood, with remaining a child, with returning to childhood, extended to

his mother, whom he described as having died while still a child, thus recapturing her from time and her role as wife and mother.

The underlying tensions of consuming and ferocious bestiality in the figure of the Beast, the constant threat of rape and murder, echo a passage in *Journal d'un inconnu* [hereafter abbreviated as *JJ*] where Cocteau affirms that "every man harbors a night in himself, that the work of the artist is to bring out this night into broad daylight" (*JJ*, 15). Cocteau goes on to say that this night is not a Freudian unidimensional id. He explains rather:

The night which concerns me is different. It is a cavern of treasures, opened by daring and a *Sesame*. Not a doctor or a neurosis. A dangerous cavern, if the treasures make us forget the *Sesame*. It is from this cavern, this luxurious wreckage, this living room at the bottom of a lake, that all great souls enrich themselves. (*JJ* 33-34).

Without stretching too hard, one could find in the above comments the origins of the ending sequences of the film: the Beast drinking from the reflecting pool (a Narcissus image as well), the death of Avenant in his transgression of the sacred pavilion of treasure, the union of Beauty and the Prince in their heavenward flight.

There is in fact in that regard a second interesting symbol behind the ending, a statue group by Gustave Doré (who also illustrated a famous edition of Perrault which influenced the costumes that Christian Bérard designed for the film). Cocteau affirms:

It's this object which is at the bottom of this film. It summarizes and explains it. It's incredible how much a work of art can influence you subconsciously. This group of Perseus, Andromeda, and the dragon wouldn't be out of place in Beauty's room at the Beast's castle. (*DF* 117)

In a sense, Perseus could be seen to be the masculine equivalent of Psyche, triumphing over trials and labors, to marry Andromeda and found Mycenae. And of course he rides a magic white horse. The horse of the film, "Magnifique," which was actually a circus horse, becomes one of the magic modes of transportation between the "real" world of Beauty's family and the "fantasy" world of the castle, which eventually merge.

The riderless white horse carrying a mirror on his saddle is also an old Breton legend which served Alain Robbe-Grillet recently as the central theme and title of his 1985 autobiographical novel, *Le Miroir qui revient*. Thus Cocteau is weaving together a number of ancient myths which are working through him in this oniric medium which he renders with such surreal precision.

Although *Beauty and the Beast* was much maligned by the New Wave filmmakers, Cocteau reveals in his *Diary of a Film* the lyric nature of the experience and his instincts as an *auteur* filmmaker:

The rhythm of the film is one of narrative. I am telling the story. ... The characters don't seem to be living a life of their own, but a life that is being narrated. Perhaps that's how it should be in a fairy tale. (*DF* 38)

Thus *Beauty and the Beast* becomes Cocteau's own tale, in the narrative tradition of retelling and reworking the classic thematic of folklore. He reaffirms near the end his inner compulsion to make this film, against all odds: "But this *had* to be attempted once: a poet telling a story through the medium of the camera" (*DF* 109).

Numerous critics, including David Galef, Michael Popkin, Raymond McGowan, and Dennis DeNitto have commented on the transpositions from the fable to the film, the "sauce" that Cocteau added to the original story.<sup>10</sup> Certain of these, particularly the special effects of the mirror and the statues, relate to Cocteau's work on a broader scale and emphasize the role of *Beauty and the Beast* in the larger context of the poet's lifelong reworking of his own personal myth, this dreamer whose dreams seemed more real than reality. Cocteau reveals the intensely personal, almost therapeutic nature of the experience in *Diary of a Film*.

Gradually I am coaxing my myths and childhood memories back again. If only I have managed to fix them onto the screen. (DF 60)

The endless statues in the film, animate and inanimate, would seem to be a reworking of the ending of the Beaumont tale, where the two wicked sisters are condemned to be statued alive, on either side of the door of Beauty's new castle, eternal witnesses to her happiness. The first statues we see in the film are animal statues ornamenting the formal garden; the first animated statues are the special effects of the live arms holding candelabra and pouring wine, as well as the smoking faces of the caryatids on either side of the Beast's hearth. There is a kind of surrealistic dismemberment in these faces and arms emerging from pedestals and walls, emanating from nothingness. This surreal world is carried back to Beauty's house when she materializes through the wall wearing the magic glove and where the gorgons on either side of the fireplace suddenly come to life, directly after Avenant's remark to Ludovic, "I can't wait to see how your sisters will look."

The statue sequences culminate of course in the revenge of the goddess of chastity when Diana returns Avenant's opening arrow to him. His symbolic invasion of the sisters' room with his arrow at the beginning of the film prefigures his bodily invasion of the sacred pavilion, an architectural metaphoric rape, signaled by the stolen key and luminous keyhole, which is resisted by the power of chastity, by Diana the huntress, female counterpart of *la bête*.

In the May, 1988 issue of *French Review*, Naomi Greene offers an intriguing psychoanalytic critique of Cocteau's work, based on work by Gilles Deleuze, characterizing it as a homosexual masochistic discourse which enhances the role of the mother and annihilates the father, elements which certainly fit Cocteau's biography. But as I stated earlier, *Beauty and the Beast* is rather an incestual mirror of Cocteau's own oedipal compulsions. For this reason, perhaps, Greene mentions this film only briefly, as an illustration of the dangerous yet necessary sexual journey into the realm of the surreal. Obviously this is an oversight, as the film contains endless examples of the "Deadly Statues" she analyzes in other films, of the female figure in the mirror, of the static camera fixing and fixating on a series of privileged images, of the realistic embodiment of the dreamworld, of the objectification of being.<sup>11</sup>

Both the mirror and the statues *copy* organic life, framing it and freezing it, objectifying it. It is significant as well that one of the older sisters sees not her reflection in the magic mirror but a monkey, a creature associated with man's bestial origins and also a mimic, a living parodic mirror. The connections between the complex symbolism of the mirror and that of the statues in *Beauty and the Beast* is clarified in Cocteau's quote in *Diary of a Film* of a line from his earlier *Blood of a Poet*, when the statue says: "You have written that you walked through a mirror and you didn't believe it" (DF 69). It is also elucidated by his musings before the mirror in the *Diary of a Film*, where he contrasts the hideousness of his infected face, the mask of the Beast, with the Beauty of the work he is creating: "The movie screen is the true mirror reflecting the flesh and blood of my dreams (DF 69). When the magic mirror in the film serves as a screen, depicting non-present scenes, it becomes a *mise-en-abyme* of the transparent function of film itself. With the last image of the dying Beast, the mirror cracks, signaling the end of the film and of the separation and the alterity of beauty and beast. The cracked mirror figures as well in the Breton legend of the riderless white horse which returns.

Cocteau's film is filled with tricks and camera angles which constitute his attempts to express poetry through cinema. One of the most striking sequences in the film is when the Beast carries the fainted Beauty in his arms up the stairs, conjuring multiple intertextual images for the initiated moviegoer. The expressionistic lighting of the cage next to the staircase is a lasting symbol of the film, the ray of hope in his prison as Beauty enters the world of the Beast.

A comparison of elements of the Beaumont *Beauty and the Beast* and the Cocteau film reveals the extent of restructuring done by Cocteau, who could be said to have rewritten the fable from within himself.

Beaumont  
three daughters, three sons

Cocteau  
three daughters, one son

no suitor present for Beauty	Avenant always present
father lost in snowstorm	wind and blowing leaves
father takes treasure chest	Beauty takes treasure chest
father accompanies Beauty to castle	father stays behind
father ruined by speculation	ruined by son's gambling
Beauty dines at nine p.m.	dines at seven p.m.
Beauty transported by ring	by white horse, glove
Beauty sees scenes in dreams and mirror	in mirror only
magic book serves Beauty	invisible servants
treasure chest disappears	necklace turns to rope
Beauty's sisters marry unhappily	do not marry
Beast is stupid	Beast is ferocious
Beauty waits all day for Beast	Beauty rushes to garden
sisters become statues at end	statues throughout film
no one exchanged for Beast	Avenant dies in pavilion
castle transformed along with Beast	Beast becomes prince
Beauty's family brought to castle	Beauty flies off with Prince
all transported to magic kingdom	disappear into clouds

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Patricia Clancy, "A French writer and educator in England: mme Le Prince de Beaumont," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (1982:201) 195. Further references to this article are in parentheses with SV.

<sup>2</sup>Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, *Beauty and the Beast* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) 35. There is also a Norse legend of three gods who kill a deer and then must bring a beautiful woman to the house of an evil giant disguised as a rapacious eagle before they can consume the deer.

<sup>3</sup>Cocteau, *Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film* (New York: Dover Pub., 1972) 57. Subsequent references to this text are in the article in parentheses with DF.

<sup>4</sup>Cocteau, *Journal d'un inconnu* (Paris: Grasset, 1953), 141-142. Subsequent references to this work are in the article in parentheses with JL.

<sup>5</sup>George Amberg, *Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film*, introduction: viii.

<sup>6</sup>Cocteau, *Past Tense* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1987) 175.

<sup>7</sup>Cocteau, *Le Livre Blanc* (London: Peter Owen, 1969) 59.

<sup>8</sup>Cocteau, *Entretiens avec Roger Stéphane 59*, quoted in translation in Robert Phelps, *Professional Secrets* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970).

<sup>9</sup>Cocteau, *Portraits-Souvenir* (Paris: Grasset, 1935) 39-40.

<sup>10</sup>David Galef, "A Sense of Magic: Reality and Illusion in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 12.2 (1984): 96-106; Michael Poplin, "Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*: the Poet as Monster," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 10 (1982): 100-109; Raymond McGowan, "Jean Cocteau and *Beauty and the Beast*," *New Orleans Review* (Winter, 1981): 106-108; Dennis DeNitto, "Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*," *American Imago* 33.2 (1976): 123-154.

<sup>11</sup>Naomi Greene, "Deadly Statues," *French Review* (May 1988): 890-898.

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