

CHALLENGING HEGEMONIC GENDER NORMS IN EMMA DONOGHUE'S "THE TALE OF THE ROSE" AND DISNEY'S *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

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Abstract: While heteronormativity remained at the core of the classic fairy tale, a queer subtext existed in the form of subtle symbolic codes. By reflecting the changing socio- cultural discourses about sexuality and gender in time, the representation of queer sexuality in fairy tales has also developed. This paper attempts a queer reading of the revisioning of Madame Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" in Emma Donoghue's "The Tale of the Rose" and the 2017 Disney version. This paper demonstrates how Emma Donoghue's adaptation deconstructs the heteronormativity of Beaumont's tale by dismantling the binaries of Beauty/Beast and man/woman and represents queer sexuality and desire through multi-layered language. This paper also examines how in the Disney version the story takes a new dimension in close proximity to twenty-first century media culture and lends itself to queer interpretation.

Keywords: Beauty and the Beast, Disney, queer, revisioning, The Tale of the Rose

THE FOLK ORIGIN OF MADAME BEAUMONT'S "BEAUTY AND THE BEAST"

Unlike most other classic fairy tales, the tale "Beauty and the Beast" developed simultaneously in both written and oral forms. The oral folk tradition of the tale comprises stories about animal bridegrooms, such as Apulieus's "Cupid and

Psyche” and Straparola’s “The Pig King”, and the Grimm Brothers’ “The Frog King”. While the oral tradition had males as well as females as animals, tales with females as beasts fell out of favour while tales with animal bridegrooms continued to flourish. Maria Tatar has read this as an illustration of gender becoming destiny in fairy tales (Tatar 1987: 177). These folktales involving animal bridegrooms emphasized a heroically suffering female protagonist whose patience and empathy transforms the animal into a human. As the tales entered into print, the animal bridegrooms were transformed into enchanted humans who had been cursed by a fairy in order to avoid the representation of sodomy. This was part of the process of editing and sanitization of the oral folktales as they were documented and circulated through print and revised over the course of several editions. The motif of Beauty and the Beast proliferated in the popular culture of different countries in various forms, such as Jean Cocteau’s 1946 film *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), *Beauty and the Beast* TV series (1987), the 1991 *Beauty and the Beast* animated cartoon, and the more recent (2017) live action remake starring Emma Watson and Dan Stevens. Sergei Aksakov’s *The Scarlet Flower* (1858), a Russian literary variant of the tale type “Beauty and the Beast”, has also inspired adaptations in multiple media, such as the animated film *The Scarlet Flower* (1952) directed by Lev Atamanov, and the 1978 live action film *The Scarlet Flower* directed by Irina Povolotskaya.

As Maria Tatar and Jack Zipes have observed, when oral folktales were published as *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* by the Grimm Brothers from 1812 to 1857, they edited and censored the tales progressively (Tatar 1999: 367, Zipes 2006: 62–63). While heterosexual details were removed painstakingly, queer subtexts and non-normative alliances and desires were left intact (Turner & Greenhill 2012: 2). With the passage of time, the popularity of these classic tales has skyrocketed, and they have proliferated in multiple forms in contemporary times (Zipes 1995: 22–31). Many postmodern adaptations of fairy tales represent queer elements more explicitly or reinterpret the classic tale in ways that foreground queer elements like non-normative sexuality, gender, and desire or counter-hegemonic relationships. Anne Sexton’s “Rapunzel”¹ reimagines the classic tale by centring it around the relationship between Mother Gothel and Rapunzel. Cristina Bacchilega notes that when fairy tales are adapted in different forms, they may reach into a wide range of discourses and become social activism (Bacchilega 2013: 35). Social activism, in fact, was an important aim of the project of feminist revisioning of classic fairy tales, which was started in the 1980s by Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton, and others who questioned patriarchal and hetero-normative ways of expressing sexuality and gender roles. In an interview with Hillary Dziminski, Emma Donoghue has asserted that her book *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* is a part of

social activism. She has revisioned the classic tales in the unique format of interconnected short stories told by one female narrator to the next, thus reconstructing a female oral storytelling tradition. “The Tale of the Rose” is one of the tales which reinterprets Madame Beaumont’s classic “Beauty and the Beast”.

“Beauty and the Beast” is one such tale which has been adapted into multiple forms and mediums right from the written text, from television series (2012–2016) and animated films to a live action musical. This paper takes up three popular adaptations of the tale of “Beauty and the Beast”: Madame Leprince de Beaumont’s “Beauty and the Beast”, which became the foundational text for all later adaptations, Emma Donoghue’s short story “The Tale of the Rose”, and Disney’s live action musical *Beauty and the Beast*. It analyses the changing symbolism of Beauty and Beast corresponding to changing definitions of masculinity and femininity and examines the representation of non-normative desire in different media – print and the screen – and explores the factors responsible for such representation, be it the intended audience, audience expectation, or the socio-cultural milieu in which the particular adaptation was created. Further on an attempt is made to demonstrate how Emma Donoghue’s adaptation and the Disney live action musical engage in the process of questioning hegemonic culture through the representation of queer desire and changing gender roles.

HETERONORMATIVITY IN MADAME LEPRINCE DE BEAUMONT’S “BEAUTY AND THE BEAST”

The most influential and authoritative version of the tale of Beauty and the Beast² is the one written by Madame Leprince de Beaumont, “La Belle et la Bête”, published in 1757 in *Magasin des Enfants*.³ She drew directly from Madame Villeneuve’s *La Belle et la Bête*⁴ (1740) and censored its representation of explicit sexuality so that Beauty does not have to sleep with the Beast in order to transform him into a human. Bruno Bettelheim and other psychologists have regarded beasts in folktales as concealed symbols of sexuality which children regard with disgust before discovering their beauty (Talairach-Vielmas 2010: 275). They have interpreted the beast as a symbol of male sexuality which the female protagonist must learn to accept (ibid.). The sexual symbolism of this tale has been explained in the context of arranged marriages common during the period by Maria Tatar (1987: 177). Noting that this tale has developed almost exclusively in a female setting, she comments: “That story and others like it may have been told by women to women in the context of covert reflections on maturity, marriage and sexuality” (ibid.). She has interpreted the

transformation of the prince into a beast by sorceresses for no apparent reason as a literalization of old wives' wisdom about masculine sexuality as beastly (ibid.). Moreover, the beast is symbolic of the anxieties of educated young women about entering arranged marriages. Tales about beasts or monsters often have a newly married woman or one about to marry as a central female figure, with the Beast or monster as the bridegroom (Tatar 1987: 170). In these tales the young women are coerced into marriage by their parents, due to which they may perceive their husbands as beasts who can mutilate or murder them (ibid.). But the animal bridegrooms in the literary fairy tales are decorous while the human bridegrooms are boorish (ibid.). This was a strategy to drive home the message that beauty lies within. It also highlighted that qualities like kindness and consideration for others are more desirable in a husband than wit and good looks. Donoghue's tale deconstructs this context of the heteronormative marriage in the narrative by replacing the male beast with a female one, a female first-person narrator, and the use of symbolically charged evocative language.

FROM NORMATIVE TO QUEER: DONOGHUE'S LESBIAN BEAST

In her interview at the Civic Theatre, Emma Donoghue commented on how the late Roisin Conroy of Attic Press, Ireland's feminist publishing house, had first suggested the idea of retelling classic fairy tales to her as part of the 1980s–1990s feminist project of revisionism (Dziminski 2018). Donoghue had finally published it with Virago Books in the USA under the Young Adult category although she had written it for adults (Donoghue 2017). The book was published in 1997 and was adapted into a play by Donoghue in 2001. She has also observed how the stories in this collection have resonated in different ways with new audiences over time as movements like Me Too gained momentum (Dziminski 2018). This has put the focus squarely on power struggles between men and women (ibid.). Similarly, LGBTQ activism too made great strides during the mid-twentieth century. Starting with rioting at Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village in New York, in 1969, the 1970s and 1980s saw demands for the rights of the LGBTQ community in the United States by the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Groups like Outrage! campaigned for social and legal reforms in the United Kingdom, and the International Lesbian and Gay Association was created in England in 1978. Debates about the rights of the LGBTQ community became part of the mainstream discourse and changed the socio-cultural landscape. These socio-cultural developments and greater

acceptance of non-normative ways of expressing sexuality and gender provided a fertile ground for Donoghue's project of queering classic fairy tales.

At the beginning of "The Tale of the Rose", the female narrator remains trapped within the androcentric framework of the classic tale. When her father tells her that she is beautiful, she consults a mirror and is disappointed by the result: "My oval mirror showed me a face with nothing written on it" (Donoghue 1997: 28). She rejects her suitors because she wants magic and "something improbable and perfect as a red rose just opening" (ibid.). When her father loses his money and her suitors reject her, she looks into the mirror: "I looked in my mirror, and saw, not myself, but every place I'd never been" (ibid.). Here the mirror functions like Laura Mulvey's male gaze which interpellates feminine subjectivity.

The function of the mirror in delimiting feminine subjectivity in fairy tales has a long tradition. Literary critics as diverse as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar as well as Luce Irigaray have interpreted the mirror as a patriarchal standard of judgement with which women evaluate their sense of self-worth (Schanoes 2009: 6). In "The Looking Glass from the Other Side", Luce Irigaray too has observed that the image of the woman on the other side of the looking glass remains trapped and frozen (Irigaray 1985: 14). In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), Irigaray has noted how in patriarchy women function as mirrors which validate men's sense of self-worth. So, they do not have positive subjectivity of their own: "[women] must liberate themselves from negative definitions and mirrors and start to assign a positive subjectivity to themselves" (Irigaray 1985: 54). When real characters in a fairy tale become reflections, they lose their agency and become characters in someone else's story (Schanoes 2009: 18). The protagonist in "The Tale of the Rose" remains similarly trapped in the story as she judges herself according to patriarchal and heteronormative standards by her reflection in the mirror. This changes when she goes to the Beast's castle where she is provided a luxuriously furnished room and other amenities among which is a big mirror: "The great mirror showed me whatever I wanted to see" (Donoghue 1997: 34). The protagonist develops the agency to construct her own story and the mirror reflects her fantasies:

I sat ... before the gold mirror. I looked deep into the pool of my face, and tried to imagine what the beast looked like. The more hideous my imaginings, the more my own face seemed to glow. Because I thought the beast must be everything I am not: dark to my light, rough to my smooth, hoarse to my sweet. (Donoghue 1997: 35)

Here the protagonist's construction of the beast is one predicated on difference from herself – the 'other'. This is symptomatic of the representation of femininity in Western discourse as the other of man. The discursive construction of non-masculine and non-normative sexualities is predicated on their difference as other from the heterosexual male. As Teresa de Lauretis has observed:

The construction and appropriation of femininity in Western discourse has had the effect of securing the heterosexual social contract by which all sexualities, all bodies, and all "others" are bonded to an ideal ideological hierarchy of males. (Lauretis 1984: 158)

Donoghue's female protagonist continues this tradition by referring to the beast as a shadow: "When I walked on the battlements under the waning moon, the beast was the shadow I threw behind me" (Donoghue 1997: 35). The imaging of the Beast as a shadow further reinforces that the Beast is a liminal figure who exists in the female protagonist's perception and in androcentric discourse as an inscrutable figure who cannot be defined in her own right in accordance with the normative standards. The trope of the lesbian as a shadow presence is symptomatic of the fact that the lesbian exists as a subversive figure that cannot be categorized neatly by normative discourses. Later the Beast is revealed to be a woman in disguise who chose not to marry male suitors, masked her face, and isolated herself from society.

The androcentric narrative point of view of the classic fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast is finally ruptured when the protagonist removes the mask of the Beast: "I saw that the Beast was a woman" (Donoghue 1997: 39). The sudden revelation of the beast as a woman deconstructs the universal masculine subject position and makes the readers question their assumptions about a masculine beast. Jennifer Orme has referred to this moment of discovery as a queer moment which "disrupts Beauty's reading of her own desires and leads her to continue to unmask other normative discourses she has never before questioned" (Orme 2010: 125). In Donoghue's story, the Beast becomes a symbol of feminine sexuality and lesbian desire instead of a metaphor of masculine and heteronormative sexuality of the classic tale.⁵

When the protagonist removes the many layers which cover the face of the beast, she observes: "...hair black as rocks under water. I saw a face white as old linen. I saw lips red as a rose just opening" (Donoghue 1997: 39). This description is reminiscent of the characterization of Snow White in the tale of the Grimm Brothers: "a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony" (Grimm, J. & Grimm, W. 1980). The representation of Snow White in the Grimm Brothers' tale has been defined by scholars such as Sandra Gilbert

and Susan Gubar as well as Cristina Bacchilega as a patriarchally constructed feminine ideal. In the words of Bacchilega: “Whether ‘written’ by the narrator’s words, author(iz)ed by masculine desire, or imaged by the mirror, Snow White is constructed child-woman whose snow-white features and attitude are assumed to conform to nature in a powerfully metaphoric way” (1997: 35). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have termed Snow White as “patriarchy’s angelic daughter” (1979: 36) – childlike, docile, and submissive. She is the polar opposite of her stepmother – a powerful adult figure represented as monstrous (Gilbert & Gubar 1979: 36–37, 39). In this schema, Snow White represents the ideal of patriarchally constructed femininity⁶ both by the heteronormative discourses of feminine beauty and as desired by her stepmother.

As Judith Butler has noted, we perceive the physical body through the epistemic regime of sex (Butler 1990: 115). The fragmentation and sexing of the female body through the fetishization of some particular attributes is part of the processes of coding of bodies that construct them as sexual. The graphic symbolism of white as snow, red as rose, and black as ebony has been interpreted by Cristina Bacchilega as “beauty and purity of white, the transformative powers of red or gold, the ritual and sexual death of black” (2013: 33). Donoghue’s deconstruction of an established sexual signifying economy with a new one defamiliarizes the symbols and divulges the regime of control over the representation of female bodies as well as lesbian ones. Donoghue humanizes the body by associating it with rocks under water signifying a body whose identity is fluid and constructed through many reifications by oral folktales, Disney’s animated films, the language of classic print fairy tales and popular culture in terms of what constitutes a beautiful female body. The simile of old linen associated with clothes further emphasizes the difference between representations of the lesbian body and the body as a subject. The description of the lips as a red rose just opening serves to preserve the sexual undertone while defamiliarizing it at the same time.

When Madame Villeneuve adapted the tale of Beauty and the Beast from the oral tradition, she introduced the rose in the framework. The rose has been variously interpreted as a declaration of the Beast’s love for Beauty, ephemeral youth and virginity, even Christ or love (Hamburger 2018: 53). In Jean Cocteau’s film,⁷ the rose has been interpreted as connecting the manliness of the Beast symbolized by the thorns with the femininity of Beauty as a rose in terms of menstruation and deflowering (ibid.). It is also a symbol of regeneration in Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*, in which the narrator transforms from a donkey to human form after eating a crown of vermilion roses (Knapp 2003: 319). When Madame Beaumont revised the tale, she retained the symbol of the rose. Later adaptations, such as the Disney animated film *Beauty and the*

Beast (1991), have made the rose even more prominent as the Beast preserves the rose covered with a glass jar given to him by the sorceress. With the passage of time, the rose keeps shedding petals, signalling the passage of time. Here the rose is a symbol of the temporality of youth and the longing for love. In “The Tale of the Rose”, Donoghue defamiliarizes the popular symbol by changing it subtly and using it in a different context. In Donoghue’s tale the female protagonist asks for “something improbable and perfect as a red rose just opening” (Donoghue 1997: 27) from her male suitors at the beginning of the tale and also later, when her father offers her to choose a gift. Her father brings her a blood-red rose from the Beast’s castle, which she keeps against the mirror. When she overstays her visit to her father, the rose dries up and is destroyed. She returns to the Beast’s castle swiftly and finds the Beast in the rose garden. After removing many veils from the Beast’s face, she finds “lips red as a rose just opening” (Donoghue 1997: 39). In Donoghue’s tale the rose is a symbol of feminine sexuality and longing for love, but it is also a symbol of lesbian desire. The description of the rose as magical, improbable yet perfect for the protagonist invests it with a new symbolic significance which deconstructs Beaumont’s symbolism of the rose. In Donoghue’s tale the rose becomes a powerful positive symbol of same-sex desire which deconstructs the representation of lesbian desire and relationship as monstrous.

In *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, Teresa de Lauretis has discussed the presentation of desire in patriarchal and heterosexual signifying economy:

In all the culturally dominant forms of representation that surround us, from television to museum art ... desire is predicated on sexual difference as gender, the difference of the woman from man or femininity from masculinity... and not as difference between heterosexual and homosexual, or straight and gay sexuality. (Lauretis1994: 110–111)

The tale of Beauty and the Beast is especially invested in this signifying economy and used as a common trope in romance narratives in both print and visual culture. Donoghue’s attempt to rewrite the romance narrative of two female subjects in “Beauty and the Beast” from the point of view of a female protagonist deconstructs the traditional format. Referring to this, the protagonist comments: “This was a strange story, one I would have to learn a new language to read, ... I struggled to make sense of our story, and before I knew it was summer come again, and the red roses just opening” (Donoghue 1997: 39–40). The change of seasons from winter to summer associated with rebirth and the opening of red roses symbolizes their flourishing love.

In her interview with Abigail Palko, while responding to a question about her contribution to public conversation about LGBTQ activism, such as coming out or the May Marriage Referendum of 2015 in Ireland, she has said:

ED: *I do like to think that my Irish-set fiction (and my own outness in interviews, especially about having children in a two-mother family) may have contributed to that Irish conversation in some small way, but to be honest, fiction is a pretty subtle and indirect way of changing the world, so I can't claim to be a great activist.*

AP: *Subtle and indirect, yes – but a very important part of change, I think. Social scientists point to the impact of getting to know people who are different as a key part of overcoming differences in contact theory, and I see that happening through novels as well. There's a safe space in reading about a character for experiencing difference.*

ED: *No, it does contribute, of course, but sometimes I envy people who make the world a better place in a more undeniable, hands-on way! (Donoghue & Palko 2017)*

When probed further about the reception of lesbian fiction in the mainstream, she has observed that there is growing acceptance of lesbian themes in literature among readers, publishers, and librarians. Even then, the pressure to write universally appealing stories is considerable, especially in contemporary fiction (Donoghue 2017). Emma Donoghue believes that literature is a potent medium to mainstream discourses about queer sexuality: “this is where I see the subversive potential of literature: the more novels there are out there that matter-of-factly feature a lesbian couple, the more mainstream it becomes” (ibid.). Donoghue’s novels *Stir-Fry*, *Hood*, and *Landing* deal with issues of coming out and the possibility of gay marriage more explicitly. *Kissing the Witch* being a collection of fairy tales, a very formulaic genre, deals with these issues more subtly. As Donoghue has stated on her website, she revisioned the fairy tales metaphorically. Her revisioning of classic fairy tales and nuanced exploration of relationships between women may be considered activist as it brings about a dialogue about non-normative desires in the mainstream.

QUEERING THE CATEGORIES BEAUTY/BEAST IN DISNEY'S *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* (2017)

Jean Cocteau's Queer Legacy

The earliest cinematic adaptation of Madame Beaumont's tale is Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), which has significantly influenced most of the later adaptations of the tale. As Cynthia Erb has observed, Cocteau's film has a subtle and symbolic homoerotic dimension which has been carried forward in the Disney animated film (Erb 1995: 53). When Cocteau appropriated Madame Beaumont's text, he changed the focus from Belle's story to male perspective and male desire which take the centre stage. He triangulated the romance between Belle and the Beast by introducing Avenant, Belle's village suitor and the Beast's rival. The actor Jean Marais played the key roles of the Beast/prince and Avenant, thus creating a strong doubling pattern. The issue of beauty becomes a male issue centred around displaying the body of Jean Marais or hiding it with a bestial mask. This emphasis on the male body becomes most prominent near the end of the film when the Beast is transformed into the human prince looking exactly like Avenant (both Jean Marais), while Avenant simultaneously changes into the Beast before dying when he is shot with an arrow by Diana. According to Cynthia Erb, "this visual technique guarantees that the real drama lies in the exchange of bestial masks between the two male principals: the Beast becomes the Prince, and Avenant becomes the Beast, just before plunging to his death" (1995: 54). This was a deliberate step taken by Jean Cocteau for both Belle and the audience to associate the transformed Beast with Avenant. This made the audience regret the transformation as Cocteau created the illusion that the hideous-looking but courteous Beast had been replaced with the handsome but boorish Avenant. The relationship between the Beast and the hunter Avenant is one of rivalry, which depends on the exchange of women – corresponding to Eve Sedgwick's pattern of homosocial bonding (ibid.). This relationship dynamics is carried forward in the 1991 Disney animated film and the later 2017 musical.

Unlike Cocteau's film, Disney portrayed sharply polarized and distinct kinds of masculinity through the different male characters, such as the Beast, Gaston, Gaston's sidekick Le Fou, and Beauty's father. Differing from Beaumont's tale and Cocteau's film, Beauty's father in the Disney animated film (1991) is a blundering, eccentric, and somewhat ineffective comic figure. Beauty's village suitor Gaston is a stereotypical blustering muscular alpha male caricature without any cultural refinement. The Beast is his polarized opposite – externally an animal but well-read and culturally refined. His only shortcoming appears to

be his quick temper and unpolished manners. These two characters are also poles apart in terms of social classes: while Gaston is a village bumpkin from the middle class, the Beast is a wealthy aristocrat with many servants. Jean Cocteau's film plays into Madame Beaumont's theme of not being deceived by appearances as it attempts to trick the audience by creating the illusion that Belle finally chooses to settle for Avenant and the Beast is left dead. Diverting from this, the Disney animated film represents changing ideals of masculinity through the different male characters. In her analysis of masculinity in the Disney animated film of 1971, Susan Jeffords has commented that Gaston is the "hypermasculine muscle-bound male" (1995: 170) who intimidates others, while the Beast is a progressive self-sacrificing male. But this transformation depends on the young women and the audience who must look beyond appearances.

The 2017 Disney version

When the Disney animated film was recreated as a live action musical in 2017, the plot was left intact, with only minor changes. In their article "King of Swingers: Queering Disney", Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have analysed the subtleties of the representation of queer desire in Disney films. They have stated that the LGBTQ characters in Disney films are passive voyeurs and remain peripheral in the cinematic narrative like the gargoyles in *The Wizard of Oz* (Byrne & McQuillan 1999:136). In other Disney films like *Aladdin* (1992) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), there is a potentially erotic dynamic between male characters Aladdin and Jafar and Gaston and the Beast. But they are obscured by the centrality of the heroine in the narrative and the male characters' pursuit of these heroines. The relationship between the male characters is portrayed as a homosocial one, consisting of male friendship, entitlement, and rivalry. This homosocial desire structures Disney's representation of heteropatriarchal normativity (Byrne & McQuillan 1999: 137). Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have interpreted this relationship model as a phallogocentric one, wherein explicit homosexuality and women are excluded (1999: 136–137). This pattern of male homosocial bonding acts as a smokescreen which also sidetracks the deeper exploration of the relationship between the male characters in the Disney live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* (2017).

At the outset there is a scene in the film where Gaston and LeFou are hunting, and LeFou says that he and Gaston are content in their present state. He does not understand why Gaston wants to court Belle who is very different from him in terms of temperament, accomplishment, and interests:

Gaston: *Look at her, LeFou – my future wife. Belle is the most beautiful girl in the village. That makes her the best.*

LeFou: *But she's so well-read. And you're so athletically inclined.*

Gaston: *I know. Belle can be as argumentative as she is beautiful.*

LeFou: *Exactly. Who needs her when you've got us?*

Gaston: *Yes. Ever since the war, I've felt like I've been missing something. She's the only girl who gives me the sense of...*

LeFou: *Mmm, je ne sais quoi?*

(Beauty and the Beast 2017)

Throughout the film LeFou faithfully devotes himself to Gaston as the latter stalks Belle. Gaston pursues the ideal of the heteronormative marriage with Belle as the stereotypical wife. He envisions Belle as a homespun conventional wife restricted to cooking, cleaning, bearing his children and serving him. His single-minded pursuit of this ideal continues from the beginning of the film till the end in spite of being rejected and humiliated by Belle multiple times, until he is finally killed by the Beast. At the same time, LeFou continues to function as Gaston's faithful sidekick, building up and supporting him through the entire length of the film, until Gaston abandons him. Mirroring the predatory nature of this relationship, LeFou enacts the role of Gaston's prey during a song and dance sequence at the pub. He displays how he has been bitten by Gaston, exclaiming: "In a wrestling match nobody bites like Gaston!" He dances with Gaston, taking up a feminine posture. Gaston asks him: "LeFou, you're the best. How is it that no girl has snatched you up yet?", and LeFou answers, "I've been told that I am clingy, but I really don't get it." The interaction has been interpreted as "subtle flirtation" by reviewer Nick Romano. In an interview to *Attitude* magazine, the film director Bill Condon claimed that LeFou would be coming out of the closet. In interviews he said, "LeFou is somebody who on one day wants to be Gaston and on another day wants to kiss Gaston. He's confused about what he wants. It's somebody who's just realizing that he has these feelings" (Romano 2017). Contrary to this interpretation, in an interview to *USA Today*, actor Josh Gad who enacted the role of LeFou, said: "There was nothing in the script that said 'LeFou is gay'." Actor Luke Evans, playing Gaston, has construed the relationship between the characters as friendship: "I think LeFou looks up to Gaston in that way – as a hero. I certainly don't think there was anything more outside that relationship. They're just good friends" (Ivie 2017). The publicity about a gay character in a Disney movie was enough to convince some theatres like Alabama-based Henagar Drive-in to decide not to screen it (Brown 2017). Similarly, the film has faced hurdles in Russia and Indonesia because of its supposed "gay" moment (The Telegraph 2017). Perhaps

this kind of controversy has caused the director to comment that too much has been made about the gay moment and the other actors have also chosen to be subtle about it. The marketing and publicity of the film focussed on the love story of Beauty and the Beast through posters, interviews, etc., in order to project it as a family film. Correspondingly, the plot arch of Beauty, the Beast, and Gaston has been foregrounded in the cinematic narrative. The story arc about LeFou's relationship with Gaston remains a subplot of male homosocial bonding. It serves to highlight the primacy of the heteronormative courtship as Gaston and LeFou bond over romantic pursuit of women. This continues the pattern of relegating potentially queer characters and relationships to the margin like in the previous Disney films.

In their analysis of queer elements in the Disney animated film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have categorized Belle as a gay diva (1999: 141). She is a misfit in the local culture and referred to as "different from us all", a "different but a funny girl". They have observed that Belle breaks taboos for women by reading fairy tales, "narratives in which coded explorations of sexual taboos and desires are embedded" (ibid.: 141–142). Taking the Freudian paradigm of desire based on the schema of heterosexual monogamous family, they have interpreted Belle as a lesbian (ibid.: 142). Like Freud's prototypical 'lesbian' who is a beautiful and clever girl who does not have an interest in men, Belle spurns the attention showered on her by her village suitor Gaston. Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have reasoned that Belle substitutes herself in her father's position as the Beast's prisoner like Freud's lesbian who substitutes herself for her father and loves her mother. In their scheme, this demonstrates the threatening potential of lesbian desire to undermine the institution of heterosexual family as Gaston tries to incarcerate Belle's father in a mental asylum. It also threatens Gaston's privileged position in the town (ibid.). This interpretation of Belle as a lesbian or gay diva could be a farfetched one. However, Belle is definitely a queer icon in the film, who questions and transgresses a conventional feminine gender role in society by advocating education for women. This is emphasized even more in the Disney live action musical in which Belle helps her father to make scientific instruments and builds and uses mechanical contraptions to wash clothes.

When Gaston refers to the Beast as a monster, Beauty counters him by replying that Gaston is the monster. Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan have interpreted this to imply that "there might be something queer about being straight" (1999: 142). Both have also observed how the Beast remains an undecidable sexual object although he has been introduced to the audience as the prince and the master of the castle (ibid.: 142–143). This raises the possibility of a queer friendly narrative. The transformation of the Beast into human

form at the end of the film restores order through unambiguous heterosexual closure. Barbara Mennel has recounted that film scholar Harry Benshoff has traced the development of the monster as a queer figure through his analysis of the vampire:

... Benshoff emphasises the 'subtextual and connotative avenues' created by implicit and explicit prohibitions to portray homosexuality as a 'love that dare not speak its name', which thus becomes the 'shadowy Other' of 'normative heterosexuality' (1997: 14, 15). ... To those who do not feel they have a place in wholesome heterosexuality, the film [Nosferatu] offers a belonging to an undefined queerness. (Mennel 2012: 24–25)

Disney's live action musical *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) continues this tradition of the queer as monstrous through the portrayal of the Beast.

Before the emergence of New Queer Cinema,⁸ mainstream post-World-War-II Hollywood films relied on camp⁹ and veiled subtexts to represent queer aesthetic practices (Mennel 2012: 1). This was before positive gay and lesbian characters became more common in films. This strategy was adapted due to prohibition on the words 'gay' and 'lesbian' explicitly in mainstream films. As Barbara Mennel has observed, "Outrageous performances broke bourgeoisie taboos, tested boundaries of taste and constituted a queer aesthetic" (2012: 48). Similarly, cross-dressing, camp, and implicit subtexts have been used for representing the queer in films meant for children. The portrayal of Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* is an example of camp in Disney films. Based on the real-life drag queen Divine, she represents queer aesthetic through a theatrical performance of hyper femininity through elaborate grooming and exaggerated makeup. Camp has been perceived as a queer practice that enables the subversion of definite gender norms through performance (Butler 1990: 233–234). However, as Kerry Malla and Roderick McGillis remark (2005: 6), when camp is used for comedic purposes in children's culture, it loses its subversive potential. It becomes a strategy used by filmmakers for marketing purposes. The process of commodification and appropriation by the mainstream destroys the political and subversive potential of camp (ibid.).

In Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, when LeFou dances with Gaston, his exaggerated mannerisms, submissive stance and parading of bite marks draws attention to his masculinity through the performance of stereotypical femininity. This sequence subtly suggests homoerotic dynamic between Gaston and LeFou. During the storming of the Beast's castle, Stanley and his cohorts are dressed up by the animated closet. Stanley is dressed in feminine clothes and appears to be pleased rather than embarrassed. This differs from the earlier

animated film version of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, in which the cross-dressed characters are so embarrassed that they scream and run out. Near the end of the film, when many couples are dancing, LeFou is seen dancing with Stanley for a few seconds. The cross-dressing sequence only lasts for a few minutes, but it is a significant departure from the earlier animated film version. The performance of feminine gender norms by the masculine characters is representative of greater openness about the non-normative sexuality and gender. At the same time these elements function on the level of innuendo and veiled symbolism, producing distinctive meanings for different sections of the audience like contemporary new queer cartoons.¹⁰ While this is a reflection of greater openness about non-normative forms of desire during contemporary times, it serves to recreate the binary of the heteronormative mainstream and the peripheral queer narrative typical of Disney films. This has been labelled as the "queer closet" of Disney and other children's films which serve to reproduce the societal dynamics of the "closet" in the cinematic representation.

The Drag Ball subculture in the 1980s' New York was a form of asserting one's queer identity (Paris is Burning 1991). It provided the queer community with an alternative family which was non-judgemental and would accept their sexual orientation. To them, entering the ball circuit was like "crossing into the looking glass, entering wonderland – you enter and you feel 100 percent right being gay" (ibid.). These balls also provided the opportunity for youngsters to find established mentors to fill the void left by broken families, absent parents, and parents who did not accept that they were gay (ibid.). During the few minutes in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), when Stanley dances with LeFou at the ball, the cross-dressing gives a glimpse of the intrusion of queer subculture in the dominant heteropatriarchal narrative. This sequence has multiple layers of meanings which speak to different sections of the audience. Those familiar with the gay subculture and the ball circuit will recognize the activist stance of the scene in challenging the mainstream heteronormative culture. To others it will be a sequence of drag, cross-dressing, and gender role reversal. The exaggerated makeup and elaborate costume of drag direct the attention of the audience towards artificiality of gender roles and question masculine and feminine gender norms. Thus, the Disney adaptation questions hegemonic heteropatriarchal narratives and performs the function of adaptation as a form of activism even as it marginalizes the queer elements in the narrative.

CONCLUSION

“Beauty and the Beast” has proved to be a resilient and popular tale which evolved with time while proliferating through multiple media. Both Donoghue’s adaptation of this tale and the Disney musical engage in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses about cultural constructions of gender. When Donoghue adapted the classic story of “Beauty and the Beast” in the form of a literary tale, she was conscious of being a part of the tradition of feminist revisioning of fairy tales by woman writers of the 1980s and 1990s. The uncertainty about the demography of the target audience, the role of the publishing house which decided to market the book under the YA category, and the beginnings of discourse about LGBTQ rights have influenced her subtle representation of lesbian relationships. In the case of the Disney musical released twenty years later, greater acceptance of gender diversity, mainstreaming of discourses about LGBTQ activism, and the musical as a genre were instrumental in the representation of queer elements in the film. At the same time, controversies about the alleged ‘gay moment’, obstacles in distribution, and screening of the film due to this controversy, its influence on the marketing and publicity, and expectations of a stereotypically conventional family film have had a hand in the marginalization of the queer elements in the film. Nevertheless, both the adaptations have proved to be popular and have generated debates about non-normative gender, sexuality, and desire.¹¹

NOTES

- ¹ In the Grimm Brothers’ “Rapunzel”, an ogress keeps the eponymous heroine captive in a tower and banishes her to a deserted land after coming to know that she has been meeting a prince. Later when the prince climbs into the tower and finds that Rapunzel is not there, he jumps off and ruins his sight but reunites with her later. She has given birth to twins by that time (Brothers Grimm 2003). In Anne Sexton’s revisionist version, the heroine and Mother Gothel engage in sexual relations until Rapunzel meets the prince after which the tale follows the same trajectory. Here Rapunzel “outgrows” same-sex relations and embraces a normative heterosexual relation (Sexton 2001: 35–42).
- ² The tale of Beauty and the Beast was shaped by both the oral tradition of folktales about animal bridegrooms and written versions.
- ³ This was translated into German and published in 1758 under the title *Der Frau Maria le Prince de Beaumont Lehren der Tugend und Weisheit für die Jugend: Aus dem französischen übersetzt. Mit einer Vorrede des Herrn Consistorialrath Rambachs*. Three years later the English version was published in the *Young Misses Magazine* in 1761 (Zipes 2006). From then on, it became the key model for most of the “Beauty and the Beast” adaptations in the Western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Jean Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) and Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* (1990).

- ⁴ When Madame Beaumont adapted Madame Villeneuve's tale, she removed elements not directly related to the main plot like Beauty's entertainments in the Beast's castle and the ancestry of both the Beast and Beauty. She simplified the structure by eliminating the frame narrative of Beauty's dream and abridged Madame Villeneuve's tale of 341 pages to twenty-five pages (Barchilon 1959: 19–29).
- ⁵ Donoghue has noted how same-sex desire between women has a long history of being represented as monstrous (Donoghue 2010: 115). When reimagined by Donoghue in terms of the fairy tale of "Beauty and the Beast", the negative representation is supplanted with the happy ending of popular romance narratives.
- ⁶ Angela Carter's retelling of the tale of Snow White in "The Snow Child" develops this further by representing the female protagonist as a passive pornographic object created only for sexual exploitation by the male protagonist (Carter 2006: 105).
- ⁷ Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946) is the earliest cinematic adaptation of Madame Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast".
- ⁸ The term New Queer Cinema was coined by B. Ruby Rich in the *Sight and Sound* magazine in 1992. The chief characteristics of New Queer Cinema are "a flagrant disregard for and defiance of norms, conventions and rules and an unapologetic attitude towards representing the complexity of queer lives" (Giffney & O'Rourke 2016: 366).
- ⁹ Camp is a distinct aesthetic sensibility characterized by the love of the unnatural, exaggeration, and artifice. It converts the serious into the frivolous (Sontag 2018 [1964]: 1).
- ¹⁰ In her article "The New Queer Cartoon", Noreen Giffney has observed how the cartoon as a popular cultural medium has been used to propagate heteronormativity (Giffney & O'Rourke 2016: 368). She has noted how New Queer Cartoons challenge this in subtle ways: "New Queer Cartoons expose cultural scripts for the constructions they are, subverting them by directly referencing norms governing sexuality and gender, and are littered with sexual innuendo and jokes about gender. They are often aimed more at adults than children so that there are multiple narratives operating simultaneously and in layers" (Giffney & O'Rourke 2016: 367).

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