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Beauty-ful Inferiority: Female Subservience in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

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Abstract

The ubiquity of Disney movies has certainly transformed the American cultural landscape. The Disney zeitgeist manifests itself as generations of children actively seek Prince Charmings, unrealistic fairy tale relationships and the omnipotent, happily-ever-after. One such Disney favorite, Beauty and the Beast (1991), reveals typical Disney themes such as the power of altruism, the transformation of the anthropomorphic, and the catharsis of true love. Yet, under these benevolent-seeming Disney themes lurk more sinister, subliminal messages. Beauty and the Beast promotes female subservience and subjugation in addition to the glorification of abusive relationships. Belle, the female protagonist, embodies these gendered disparities and remains objectified by the film's masculine characters. At first glance, Belle seems as if an assertive, valiant heroine; however, a closer examination belies this understanding of Belle. Thus, my analysis intends to unearth these unexamined messages and also reveals the effect of these messages as consumed by Disney's target audience: children. Ultimately, the animated Disney cartoon landscape conceals its more sobering, implicit messages. Unveiling these messages reveals the true nature of Disney films, and acknowledges the troubling damage inflicted by the pervasiveness of Disney and its ability to mold American culture.

The Walt Disney Corporation has monopolized the realm of cartoon fantasy for the greater part of the last eighty years. Classic children's films such as *Beauty and Beast* (1991) present poster children for a conglomeration that largely perpetuates negative stereotypes about gender, race, and creed. *Beauty and the Beast's* female protagonist, Belle, embodies one of Disney's foremost princesses, but what price does Belle pay for such a title? This argument suggests that as a princess, Belle's actions and relationships in the film solidify her as a victim of abuse. Belle's role as an emotionally and, at times, physically abused woman renders her a survivor of two domestically abusive relationships: Belle and Beast alongside Belle and Gaston. In addition, Belle's body language in the Disney film presents images of subservience, domestication, and inferiority as reflected against the superiority of the powerful males. While this portrait of Belle as victim is admittedly bleak and unsettling, it truly explores the meaning of princesshood as projected by Disney. For it is Disney that molds the current juvenile landscape, and an examination of this cheery environ reveals several underlying issues. One of the most important is the portrayal of negative female stereotypes, which suggests that Belle's victimization is just another "tale as old as time" (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991).

Gender stereotypes become integral components to understanding any film, and in *Beauty and the Beast* they take center stage. It is through these stereotypes of femininity and masculinity

that viewers acknowledge the power relationships between characters and also reflect upon what it means to be male or female. In “Damsels in Discourse: Girls Consuming and Producing Identity Texts through Disney Princess Play,” Karen Wholwend (2009) explains the importance of emphasized femininity, which *Beauty and the Beast* subliminally suggests: “Emphasized femininity is a subordinate discourse to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987) that stresses gender differences and legitimates the construction of girls as objects of display and boys as subjects with power (Butler, 1993)” (66). As a woman and a princess in a Disney film, from the start Belle seems destined to fall into the role of object, and she does. Throughout the entirety of the film, Belle remains at the mercy of the men in her life: Gaston, her aggressive suitor and the film’s antagonist; Maurice, her quirky, social pariah of a father; and Beast, her captor and destined true love. For Gaston, she is an object to be won. For Maurice, she is property, as any child belongs to a parent. For Beast, she is a prisoner, one in lieu of her father, and subjected to Beast’s hypermasculinity and overbearing appearance. While there is an alleged happy, fairy-tale ending, the message instilled in young viewers is one in which women are inferior things—pawns in a man’s world. As a result of the characters’ actions, emblematic of gender stereotypes, Belle epitomizes the role of abuse victim, not only as a woman but in her interactions with her male counterparts. Superficially, Belle appears happy—she becomes a princess, changes Beast from his anthropomorphic form, and manumits an entire castle of magical household objects—but this happiness is merely a cloak under which abusive relationships lurk.

Belle’s role in the film solidifies her as one of the foremost Disney princesses. Belle’s physical appearance is meant to be waiflike, naïve, and elegantly small. Her large doe eyes, snow white complexion, and extremely petite waist are constant reminders that she is, indeed, a woman by princess proportions. In interacting with Gaston, she repeatedly flees from him or maneuvers away without protesting he desist his actions. However, it is even more evident in Belle’s communication with Beast that she is rendered truly inferior. For example, upon trading her life for her father’s, Belle is dealt a sentence of life imprisonment in the castle. After Maurice is escorted from the castle, Belle casts herself onto the floor in a manner that mirrors bowing. She is so overwrought with emotion that she can barely stand and converse with her sentencer. It is her physicality that makes Belle a princess, both in her attributes and her overwhelming weakness as demonstrated by her actions, and thereby an easy target for victimization. Suddenly, it appears as if, for Belle, the labeling of Disney princess is no more than a titular band-aid concealing her darker role as victim.

Body language in the film exemplifies a means by which to intimate gender stereotypes, and in turn, body language becomes a substantial component of said stereotypes. Throughout the film, Disney juxtaposes Belle’s princess-like size to those of her male counterparts. Belle’s body language is strictly feminine and insists upon the viewers’ understanding of her as a Disney princess. Moreover, it is Belle’s femininity that further amplifies her abuse status. In contrast to Belle’s femininity, the body language of both Beast and Gaston reminds viewers that they are, in fact, wholly masculine and capable of powerful control.

As a recognizable victim, Belle’s body language implies her subservience and inferiority to Gaston and Beast. Body language remains a largely unspoken interaction that utilizes one’s physical body as a means of communication. In “Nonverbal Behavior, Status, and Gender: How Do We Understand Their Relations?” Judith Hall explains that the majority of unspoken body language remains as powerful, if not more powerful, than the spoken word in expressing dominance or lowliness. According to Hall (2006), historically, females are more often than not recipients of a strong masculine body language; for example, a towering stance, a strategically

placed hand on the back, and intrusive leaning in are all avenues by which men can impose their superiority (388). As Hall (2006) notes, female body language commonly includes head-tilting, increased eye contact aversion, and leg crossing which instills ideals of inferiority and frailty (389). Unfortunately, many of these habits are learned but largely unrecognized, and Gaston, Beast, and Belle, through Disney's rendering, all use these minute actions as a means of solidifying maleness and femaleness and thereby expressing gender disparities. Belle's physicality only heightens an understanding of her that is subservient, weak, and rife with dependency.

Critically, Belle's body language jettisons her into the role of abuse victim. Carrie Hamilton's article "Political Violence and Body Language" offers a suggestion as to why Belle and other women do not counteract domestic violence. Hamilton (2007) suggests that violence is an integral component of life and is a historically accurate means of preserving hegemony and power structures (8). Typically, powerful positions in a hierarchy are reserved for men, and thus violence becomes ubiquitous as an outlet for obtaining and ceding power and control. Hamilton suggests that women are common recipients of violence, and this status reinforces inferiority. Moreover, Hamilton (2007) surmises why women do not defend themselves:

The production of violent women bodies is only in one respect a production of women bodies that are able to defend themselves. In another, it is a production of bodies that break a taboo and are as a result disobedient and transgressive because as implements of violence, they are skilled and competent in ways that are normally reserved for men. (Hamilton 2007, 18-19)

In other words, because self-defense manifests itself physically, it is thus reserved for men, as perpetrators of physical violence. A woman who defends herself, then, abdicates her position as a woman and is rendered unsexed and unidentifiable. Thus, Belle's self-defense against Gaston and Beast would imply that she is more masculine than feminine and, in turn, presents a female figure who is un-fairy-tale-like and thus a non-princess.

In actuality, Belle stands erectly for very few moments in the film, which furthers her inferior body language. When nursing Beast's wounds she genuflects and tends to the incisions left by the wolves while he sits above her in the grandfather chair. Even when coquettishly flirting with Beast during the song "Something There," Belle conceals herself behind a giant tree, shying away from Beast. And most notably, in the final climax of the plot after Beast has been mortally wounded, Belle cowers over his body, mourning his death, placing her head on his chest—a physical positioning of her inferiority. Simply, the message remains—as a woman, she is not emotionally strong enough to bear, let alone stand any great misfortune.

Male body language, in juxtaposition of female body language, represents physical dominance and further instills feminine subservience within the heteronormative model. Importantly, *Beauty and the Beast* opposes two types of men: tall, dark and handsome men and those who are short and stout. In this polarizing depiction, there is very little competition between Gaston (ideally masculine) and his henchman, Le Fou (less than masculine). The melodious sing-along "Gaston" immortalizes Gaston's size and masculine ruggedness through his body language. In the song, Gaston readily and enthusiastically partakes in fighting scenes where he, of course, triumphs in lifting three grown women off the ground and other physically impressive feats that render Gaston as a Platonic Form of all things stereotypically masculine—including his abilities to grow body hair, spit, and quarrel. In his interactions with others, Gaston

continues in this bellicose manner. The scenes depicting the communication between Belle and Gaston superimpose Gaston's domineering body language over the meek, mawkish innocence of Belle's. By cornering her, chasing her, and invading her personal space, Gaston, surely and deliberately, reinforces his superiority. This superiority reminds viewers that men are first and foremost strong, domineering, and refuse to take no for an answer.

The film struggles to polarize wholly good characters like Belle with wholly bad characters like Gaston. Beast, as Belle's destined true love, is largely considered a good character, but Beast's actions throughout the film are problematic, and at times, less than good. In this way, Gaston and Beast are more similar than they are different. Beast, like Gaston, uses his body language as a means of preserving his hegemonic masculinity and reign. Beast is not only a behemoth in size, but his outright temper, which is frightening yet strangely understood by others, also engenders a masculine stronghold. Even when standing on all fours, Beast towers over Belle, and, at first sight, his appearance leaves her awestruck and mute. Moreover, when dancing in the palatial ballroom, the audience is aware of the sheer magnitude of Beast's hand to that of Belle's. While he leads, his stationary hands appear to shadow Belle's small stature. These visual representations remind viewers that one fell swoop with such giant, bestial hands could lay waste to svelte Belle. This shares a likeness with Gaston's human gargantuan size. For if it is size that implies evil, then both Gaston and Beast are evil. But by film's end, Beast is no longer a man of herculean proportions, and the viewer realizes that Beast is, indeed, good and destined for Belle despite his likeness to Gaston. Unlike Beast, Gaston is given no possibility to expiate, and his physical monstrosity is punished with death.

It is a result of the film's gendered body language that Belle's relationships with both Gaston and Beast fall under the realm of abusive ones. These two sets of relationships, Belle and Gaston and Belle and Beast, embody the poles of abusive relationships: those of physical abuse and those of mental/emotional abuse. Gaston's relationship with Belle exhibits physical domination and coercion. Gaston, thought an Adonis by the townspeople, very aggressively pursues Belle as a means of procuring a "little wife" who adheres to strict mentalities of domestication—cooking, cleaning, and rearing children and dogs (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991). When Belle occludes his countless sexual advances, Gaston is forced to try harder and in turn, comes to physically violate Belle's personal space. In a scene where Gaston plots an arranged marriage to Belle, Gaston makes a final attempt to woo this "strange girl" and does so through physical means (*Beauty and the Beast* 1991). Gaston, a gargantuan man by comparison to Belle, corners her and protrudes his chiseled face into Belle's personal space, rendering her not only trapped but also physically uncomfortable. These situations are all too common in abusive relationships; a 2012 pamphlet on Intimate Partner Violence disseminated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals that 3 in 10 women are the recipients of physical violence by a partner (CDC 2012, 1). The CDC's findings remind readers that domestic partnerships and relationships do not enable the right to physically coerce and accost one's partner as a means of garnering attention, love, and sex. Quite simply, Gaston sexually assaults Belle through his implicitly violent and intrusive body language, subjugating Belle to the role of victim.

In furtherance to Gaston's abusive nature, he infringes upon Belle's private space, her home, revealing yet another means by which he can violate and control her. Suellen Murray (2008) explains in her article "Why Doesn't She Just Leave?" that victims of domestic abuse seek sanctuary in the household: "The family home is not just a place of physical shelter, but it is also supposed to provide emotional security; it has symbolic importance for the relationship and

the family" (68). In the relationship between Gaston and Belle, Gaston personally beleaguers Belle's home—her private space. By doing so, he not only annihilates Belle's feelings of security but also violates her in this environment, rendering the home space, for Belle, intruded upon and tinged with memories of abuse and invasion. Gaston, thereby, egregiously imposes upon Belle's privacy. This imposition is undoubtedly an assault of a safe place and indicative of abuse.

Additionally, by diminishing Belle's safety at home, Gaston's hypermasculinized actions subject Belle to an abuse that is both mental and physical. Michele O'Flanagan in her review of "Supporting Women After Domestic Violence" discusses this form of abuse as directly oppositional to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, the "conditions of safety and acceptance encourage the growth of confidence, self-esteem and self-actualization" (quoted in O'Flanagan 2008, 476). In Belle's situation, her central image of safety, namely home, is damaged through Gaston's encroaching actions. Thus, she seeks refuge in the Beast's castle, where yet again, her safety is trivialized and her self-actualization is demoralized. Belle cannot escape abuse or duress, and thus her psyche represents that of a battered woman, and yet she remains, attempting to persevere, and attempting to effect change in her captor. Belle becomes a sacrificial lamb wherein her self-abnegation—read: exacerbation of her victimized role—is the conduit to freedom for the castle.

Contrary to the relationship between Belle and Gaston, Belle's relationship with Beast conforms to what Sarah Coyne and Emily Whitehead (2008) in "Indirect Aggression in Disney Animated Films" considers indirect aggression within romantic relationships. Through Coyne's and Whitehead's (2008) criterion, indirect aggression manifests in four pillars: social exclusion, indirect physicality, guilt induction, and malicious humor (385). Expectedly, Beast perpetrates all four pillars of indirect aggression. Firstly, upon exchanging Maurice's imprisonment for Belle's life imprisonment, Beast incarcerates Belle into solitary confinement (read: social exclusion). She is forced into this servitude through her own choosing, but is denied personal contact with her father, and even the Beast, as part and parcel of her punishment. Beast, like those who implement solitary confinement, becomes the jailer and arbiter of exclusion.

Secondly, while Beast never explicitly places his hands on Belle in a malevolent fashion, when Belle refuses to join Beast for dinner, he condemns her to starvation. This defines indirect physical abuse. In condemning Belle to starvation, worsening her originally frail state, Beast impresses upon Belle a strict form of punishment, which materializes itself as physical abuse.

Thirdly, guilt induction includes any means by which, intentionally or not, the perpetrator enforces emotional abuse upon the victim. Subtly done, Beast releases Belle of her imprisonment only after revealing Maurice's struggle to fend for himself against a pack of ferocious wolves. While Belle may be unaware of the castle's curse—one in which Beast is transformed into his animal form to mirror his original, ugly, selfish narcissism—the viewer is overtly cognizant of the fact that if Belle leaves Beast, depriving him of true love, he will be immured in his beast form for all eternity. Thus, while the gesture appears to be a selfless act, Beast's emphatic howl as Belle rides away indicates the guilt he impresses upon her. The guilt induction succeeds, and Belle returns to the castle to save Beast from the barbaric hoards. Strangely, this act exemplifies a statistic isolated by Murray (2008) in that nearly sixty percent of abuse victims either return to or remain where the abuse occurs (67). Given this statistic, Belle represents yet another victim, another number, one plagued by indirect aggression and one incapable of leaving her abuser.

The final pillar of indirect aggression, malicious humor, reinforces the ways in which a victim is meant to feel inferior or stupid at the hands of their demoralizer. In a particularly frightening scene, Belle meanders around the castle and into the forbidden West Wing. Upon

finding her there, the Beast bellows maniacally, scaring and emotionally scarring Belle while insulting her intelligence and common sense: "Please stop," Belle pleads. "Do you realize what you could have done!" Beast howls. This temper tantrum demonstrates Beast's inability to bridle his vituperative rage, and thus he abuses Belle verbally, adding yet another deafening blow to her ego and self esteem. For a Disney princess like Belle, it appears as though enduring these tumultuous rages is requisite for the job; all princesses should take note.

Belle's abuse within her relationships further identifies her as a victim. Belle's social isolation amplifies this victimization. Most domestic abuse victims seek out a friend or family member who can assist in redressing the situation. Unfortunately for Belle, her friends are fairy-tale books and inanimate objects. In a process called second victimization, Belle is further abused by the townspeople and chastised for her own abuse. Ellie Young, Melissa Allen, and Betty Ashbaker (2004) in "Responding to Sexual Harassment" notice second victimization most evident in sexual harassment situations. Thereby, victims of sexual harassment are further condemned for wearing a particular item or acting a certain way (Young, Allen, and Ashbaker 2004, 64). This is true of Belle. The townspeople in the opening song, "Belle," identify Belle as strange and odd, not only because she reads, but also because she fends off Gaston's advances. Thus, when Belle wards off Gaston's matrimonial attempts, the townspeople deem her foolish, even though moments before they witness a sexual assault against her. Belle's abuse is inescapable and worsened by the likes of the townspeople who blame her for refusing to bow to patriarchal norms. Insomuch that Belle lacks friends, besides books, she remains alone in the throes of this abuse, with no place and no one to console her. This Disney princess's loneliness and abuse is unavoidable, and so she returns to an abusive environment, the only environment with which she is familiar, for consolation.

As a product of the leviathan Disney corporation, *Beauty and the Beast* and its messages are easily conflated with those messages of its parent-company and rightfully so. With billions of dollars of revenue each year and ownership of companies like ABC and ESPN, Disney's immense influence is nothing at which to scoff. Wohlwend (2009) explains the omnipotence of the Disney corporation:

The entire [Disney] franchise produced \$4 billion in global retail sales for 2007, offering a bedazzling collection of pastel products that includes animated films, DVDs, toys, fast-food meals, music CDs, books, interactive webpages, video games, costumes, clothing, bed linens, school supplies, makeup kits, and even Cinderella cleaning supplies. (Wohlwend 2009, 58)

The marketability of Disney products includes an endless supply of film-referenced objects that target a juvenile audience and prey on the purse-strings of parents. More disturbing is that the mass purchasing of Disney items immortalizes specific plot lines and characters, all of which idolize engrained gender mores. For example, Coyne and Whitehead (2008) suggest that young children in their imaginative play adhere to the strict plot of the film (384). *Beauty and the Beast* dolls are reproduced as a means of glorifying the tumultuous relationship between Belle and Beast. This relationship not only exemplifies strict heteronormative situations but also constantly reminds viewers that until the final moments of the film, Beast and Belle have a tenuous and at times indirectly abusive relationship. In short, the vast-reaching Disney market subsidiaries retain complete authority over which products are mass reproduced and therefore which products are available to young consumers. By doing so, not only are the Disney icons exalted, but such

icons also ensure that children are familiarized with and deeply rooted in abusive relationships and heterosexism from the moment of imaginative play. To no surprise, this is where engrained mentalities of gender stereotypes originate and domestic violence becomes quotidian.

Ultimately, Disney films resonate with symbols of juvenility and innocence. Ironically enough, much of the symbolic material in Disney films like *Beauty and the Beast* reveals social injustices and gender discrepancies. Although Belle is considered one of the foremost Disney princesses, her relationships with Gaston and Beast demonstrate that she is no more than a victim of masculine hegemony. Belle's inferiority as a character and as a woman is amplified by her body language, which subtly suggests subservience and debility. In observation and awakening of these contemptuous underpinnings, viewers may reflect upon the true merit of Disney films: what are women's roles in relationships? What does it mean to be a princess? What does it mean to be truly male? What types of relationships are sanctioned? Perhaps, in understanding of these considerable injustices, Disney should seek to overturn these negative stereotypes given their prevalence, rather than glamorize such caricatures. For while a happily-ever-after is presaged for Belle—albeit a bleak one—young women and girls who aspire toward her same situation will find little resemblance to a fairy tale ending.

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