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America's "Beauty and the Beast"

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Sometimes extraordinary events happen to people, even professors. One day, a few years ago (and shortly after Disney's film "Beauty and the Beast" won an Academy Award), I received a phone call from a program director at BBC4, the radio network in England. He was thinking about doing a show on fairy tales. "I wonder," he asked, "do you think fairy tales say anything to us today? I apologize for being so vague but what, for example, do you think about Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast?'"

An hour later, the phone rang again. This time it was a film producer in Hollywood. "We're trying to expand our list," she explained, "and we've realized we're weak in potential children's films. Can you recommend some stories we might consider? We're thinking about the incredible popularity of Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast.'"

Both phone calls began in the same introductory fashion: "I (or my secretary) took the class you teach in Children's Literature, and we're wondering whether we could" — both used the same phrase — "pick your brain." And with those two phone calls, it was as if a magic wand passed over me and I was suddenly changed from a teacher facing a pile of uncorrected essays into, well, not a Prince but a Resource Person.

Together, those phone calls got me thinking about an extraordinary question: *Do certain fairy tales speak to certain times?*

For example, in 1933, during the Depression, Disney Studios won an Academy Award for "The Three Little Pigs." When impoverished Americans were trying to "keep the wolf from the door," they were whistling the Disney tune "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf."

In the 1970's, we seemed to need Cinderella stories. "Rocky" was one version (with Sylvester Stallone climbing those stairs and going from rags to riches). Then there was "Saturday Night Fever" (with working-class John Travolta going to the ball). In fact, if we recall both Cinderella's godmother and the film "The Godfather," we might say that in some quarters during the 1970's there seemed to be a special hunger for the Italian-male Cinderella story.

But what about the 1980's, the 1990's, our own times? For the last few decades, it seems to me, the story we have hungered for has not been "Snow White" or "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Rapunzel" or any of a hundred other fairy tale possibilities. In our own times, let me suggest, we have been obsessed with "Beauty and the Beast."

I. Reincarnations of Beauty and the Beast

Movies are the shared dreams of our culture. What we see up on the Big Screen is our culture dreaming "out loud." Now imagine you were a psychiatrist sitting in a theater for the last few decades, watching our collective dreams up there on the Big Screen: what would you observe about us? I think a psychiatrist would find that we seem to be obsessed with "Beauty and the Beast."

Of course, there is the Disney film and their popular theatrical version. But I'm not just talking about those. Consider some other cinematic incarnations of the Beauty and the Beast story: "**Elephant Man**" (David Lynch's film about a severely deformed man in Victorian England), "**Mask**" (where Cher plays the mother of a boy afflicted with elephantitis), "**Man Without a Face**" (where the most handsome man in films, Mel Gibson, plays, incredibly, an ugly male who tutors a young boy), even "**Edward Scissorhands**" (where Johnny Depp plays a monstrously scarred and lovelorn boy). No doubt other examples come to mind.

Some of these reincarnations of "Beauty and the Beast" have been revivals of earlier stories. Some four years after their success with "Beauty and the Beast," for example, Disney Studios released "**The Hunchback of Notre Dame**" where Quasimodo has a love life that resembles King Kong's. Like this is "**Cyrano de Bergerac**," where Gerard Depardieu plays the famous long-nosed cavalier. Of course, the American version of this story is "**Roxanne**" where Steve Martin is a long-nosed fireman living in Colorado and courting a beautiful astronomer played by Daryl Hannah.

And having mentioned Daryl Hannah, we might trace her career back just a few years more to "**Splash**," where Hannah plays a mermaid who woos a human male (Tom Hanks) in a film which must be reckoned as a female version of "Beauty and the Beast." In fact, if the vision of the mermaid in "Splash" reminds us how the Beast is half human and half animal, then we might recall other appearances of his human/animal cousins in, say, Val Kilmer in his shiny black mammalian costume in "**Batman Forever**," Tom Cruise flashing his canines in "**Interview with a Vampire**," and Jack Nicholson letting out his low

growl in "Wolf."

But I have been only mentioning films. Consider television: for three seasons, there was a popular series called "Beauty and the Beast" where Linda Hamilton played Katherine (a Manhattan executive) who was in love with the beastly Vincent (played by Ron Perlman). Consider theater: in the 1990's, one of the most popular stories on stage was "Phantom of the Opera."

But the appearance of Beauty-and-the-Beast avatars has not been not limited to just films and television and theater. If you watched M-TV during the last decade, you would have seen music videos like Madonna's "Cherish" (where mermen are arcing in the water) and Snoop Doggy Dogg's "Who Am I (What's My Name)?" (where a father pounds on his daughter's bedroom door while her male visitor turns into a doberman pinscher). And in what may be the most famous music video of all time, Michael Jackson's "Thriller," we have the history of a bad date and its monstrous conclusion as a beastlike Michael tells the startled young woman who accompanied him to the theater, "I'm not like other guys."

We could continue along these lines all day long, and no doubt you can think of other examples. But perhaps this enough evidence to suggest that for the last few decades Americans have been obsessed with "Beauty and the Beast."

II. Missing Wildness

What accounts for this obsession? Why have American been retelling, over and over again, the story of "Beauty and the Beast?" We

can begin to frame an answer by noticing how Americans have been revising that traditional story in a particular way. Consider three examples.

The traditional story of Beauty and the Beast is evolutionary or progressive: it tells of a beast who changes into a man. Compare this to the movie "Wolf." There, Jack Nicholson plays Will Randall, a polite book editor who is described as the last civilized man. After a car accident where he is bitten by a wolf, Nicholson's character begins to change so that by the end of the film he has fully become a werewolf who runs away with Michelle Pfeiffer who has become a she wolf. This film is not evolutionary or progressive. Instead, it is atavistic and regressive. The movie "Wolf," in fact, might be viewed as the story of "Beauty and the Beast" on rewind.

Consider the movie "Splash." The traditional story of the mermaid is evolutionary; in Hans Christian Andersen's famous tale, for example, the mermaid eventually changes into a human. But that is not what happens in "Splash." If you remember the conclusion of that film, Daryl Hannah does not change from a mermaid into a human. Instead, the film concludes with her lover (Tom Hanks) diving into the water and becoming a merman. The movie "Splash" is regressive.

For a final example of how America has been rewriting "Beauty and the Beast," consider what has happened to the story of Tarzan. Edgar Rice Burroughs' famous novel Tarzan of the Apes is unabashedly inspired by the work of Darwin and it is a paean to evolution; in the conclusion, Tarzan has left the jungle and entered society, become a gentleman wearing clothes and using utensils and driving a Citroen. That is not how the film version ends in "Greystoke." Instead, in the film's conclusion, Tarzan abandons society, sheds his clothes, and

returns to the jungle. Again, in its revisions, “Greystoke” is regressive.

How can we understand, then, this regressiveness, this neo-primitivism so apparent in our revisions of these traditionally evolutionary stories? I think an answer can be found through a closer examination of the television series “**Beauty and the Beast.**”

That popular television program revolves around the character named Katherine, who is a woman with two lives. Above ground, Katherine is a successful business woman who lives in Manhattan and work for a prestigious law firm; she wears a business suit, puts her hair up into a bun, and carries a briefcase. After hours, however, Katherine travels to the underground wilderness beneath the city streets; there, she lets her hair down, abandons her briefcase, and consorts with her beastly lover, Vincent.

Let me suggest that this television program speaks to the situation in which liberated women find themselves today. On the one hand, it presents the wish of women to be empowered in the workplace and in society. On the other hand, it suggests that the price of success is a certain loss of, and nostalgia for, wildness.

The need for women to get in touch with a missing wildness is, in fact, the subject of the best-selling feminist book: Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ Women Who Run With Wolves. But this not just the case with women. In another best-selling and masculinist book, Iron John, Robert Bly argues that contemporary men also need to get in touch with the Wild Man.

We can understand, then, this desire for a missing wildness — as well as the contemporary obsession with “Beauty and the Beast” stories — in terms of Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents. According to Freud, the more we become civilized, the more we have to repress and

surrender an essential wildness. The more we become civilized, the more we miss an essential wildness.

As a result, in a hyper-civilized society like our own, it is not surprising that theme of "Missing Wildness" is everywhere we look. "**City Slickers**" (where Billy Crystal and pals head out to cowboy country), "**Thelma and Louise**" (where Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis go on a rampage), "**American Beauty**" (where Kevin Spacey tries to recapture a youthful abandon) — the list is endless.

Related to these is America's fascination with creatures like Bigfoot ("**Harry and the Hendersons**"), with stories where the scientist ends up acting like the animals he observes ("**Never Cry Wolf**"), and stories that feature feral children: "**Nell**" (where Jodie Foster plays a wild child growing up alone in the backwoods), "**The Emerald Forest**" (where a white boy is kidnaped and grows up in the jungle with an Amazonian tribe), or "**Jungle Book**" and "**Pecos Bill**" (where youths are raised, respectively, by wolves and coyotes). Again, this list is endless.

By way of conclusion, then, let me revert to the question with which we began: "Do certain fairy tales speak to certain times?" In answer, let me say: Consider "Beauty and the Beast."

Contributor Note: Jerry Griswold is a specialist in Children's Literature, and American Literature and Culture Studies. He is the author of several books, including The Children's Books of Randall Jarrell, the prize-winning Audacious Kids (in paperback, The Classic American Children's Story), and The Meanings of "Beauty and the Beast," as well as new editions of Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper and Hugh Lofting's The Voyages of Dr. Dolittle. Griswold has also published more than 100 essays (in Paris Review, The Nation,

New Republic, the New York Times Book Review, and elsewhere); he is a regular contributor to the Los Angeles Times. A professor of literature at San Diego State University, Griswold has also held visiting positions at UCLA and UCSD (the University of California, Los Angeles and San Diego) and was Senior Fulbright Fellow at the National University of Ireland in Galway. He has won a number of awards (including research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the American Philosophical Society) and lectured all over the globe.