

Romancing the plot: The real beast of Disney's
beauty and the beast.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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June Cummins (bio)

When Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* was released late in 1991, critics hailed the film for its apparently innovative portrayal of the heroine, Belle.¹ In *Newsweek*, David Arisen claimed that "from the start, the filmmakers knew they didn't want Belle to be the passive character of the original story or a carbon copy of Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, a creation some critics found cloyingly sexist" (75). In *MacLean's*, Brian Johnson praised Disney for "break[ing] the sexist mould of its fairy-tale heroines. . . . *Beauty and the Beast* spells out its enlightenment in no uncertain terms" (56). And in *The New York Times*, Janet Maslin asserted that Belle is "a smart, independent heroine . . . who makes a conspicuously better role model than the marriage-minded Disney heroines of the past" (1). But in spite of this insistence that Belle is a strong female character, that this fairy tale is "different," I saw the same old story, a romance plot that robs female characters of self-determination and individuality. Not at all a feminist movie, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* slips easily into the mold of almost all other popular versions of fairy tales; that is, it encourages young viewers to believe that true happiness for women exists only in the arms of a prince and that their most important quest is finding that prince.

Although it is clear that "Beauty and the Beast" has always been in part a love story, earlier printed versions of the tale offer valuable lessons in addition to emphasizing the love relationship. Disney, on the other hand, strips the traditional fairy tale of anything but the romantic trajectory, throws in a dose of violence, and woos its vast audience into believing it has been educated as well as entertained. Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, while initially presenting a more interesting and better developed heroine than those we find in other Disney animated features, undermines the gains it makes by focusing narrative attention on courtship as plot advancement and marriage as dénouement. Certainly, romantic love is an important part of people's lives. But if we want children to develop balanced views of relationships between men and women and of their own identities as active individuals with full access to society, we should question the messages sent by such films.

The deleterious effects of concluding fairy tales with marriage have been extensively examined by such critics as Marcia K. Lieberman and Karen Rowe. Lieberman points out that while **[End Page 22]** such stories end with marriage, the action of the story is concerned with courtship,

which is magnified into the most important and exciting part of a girl's life, brief though courtship is, because it is the part of her life in which she most counts as a person herself. After marriage she ceases to be wooed, her consent is no longer sought, she derives her status from her husband, and her personal identity is thus snuffed out. When fairy tales show courtship as exciting, and conclude with marriage, and the vague statement that "they lived happily ever after," children may develop a deep-seated desire always to be courted, since marriage is literally the end of the story.

(199-200)

Rowe argues that the marriages at the ends of these tales are more accessible to and thus more influential on the female reader/viewer than any other aspect of the stories:

Because it is a major social institution, marriage functions not merely as a comic ending, but also as a bridge between the worlds of fantasy and reality. Whereas "once upon a time" draws the reader into a timeless fantasy realm . . . the wedding ceremony catapults her back into contemporary reality. Precisely this close association of romantic fiction with the actuality of marriage as a social institution proves the most influential factor in shaping female expectations.

(221)

Undeniably, *Beauty and the Beast* is this kind of fairy tale.

Indeed, virtually all recent Disney animated fairy tales, including *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Aladdin*, privilege the romance

although a case could be made that it heightens the moral atmosphere of the work.

²Compare, for example, another Stratemeyer production, *Tom Swift and His Telephoto Detective*, a work in a series largely about exploiting technology for the ends of justice. Where the boys' series educates, the girls' series evades.

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- Eloise Knutson teaches humanities at Boston University. Most of her publications deal with the work of James Joyce and the question of quotation. Her first book, Bordering Joyce: Chacon, Modernity, and the Joycean, is forthcoming from the University Press of Florida.*

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by June Cummins

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