Fantasy and the Necessity of a Female Heroine: The Cultural Value of the Fairy Tale in Robin McKinley's Beauty

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***Abstract*—In traditional fairytales, women were often portrayed as helpless damsels in distress, waiting for their lovers or male patrons to save them from difficult situations or gothic villains. These stereotypes were deeply rooted in patriarchal cultures, where these tales were circulated. They did not change in the different versions of these stories as they passed from generation to generation. In post-modern times and with the emergence of the second-wave of feminism in the 1960s, women writers started to make use of these fairy tales as part of their feminist agendas to enlighten young females of the necessity to trust their potentials to be able to get equal rights in man-centered societies. These feminist writers altered the traditional tales to suit their purposes by changing the timid heroines into strong female characters, whose initiative and daring spirits are fundamental in helping them to survive in the face of hardships. American novelist, Robin McKinley, was one of the early feminists who rewrote fairy tales to help empower both adolescent and adult female readers. This research explores McKinley's use of the fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast in her fantasy of the same title published in 1978. It focuses on the way the author converts the classic tale to meet her expectations of the role of women in contemporary time.**

***Index Terms*—Beauty, Fairy tale, Fantasy, Feminism, Patriarchal.**

I. Introduction

Following the achievements, early feminists were able to fulfill in the United States and England at the beginning of the 20th century, including the right to vote and to attend universities, women continued to fight for wide strides in their lives. The Civil Rights times brought with them the hope for a drastic change in the position of women in society. The era, which is known in feminist history as the second-wave of feminism, witnessed the emergence of militant feminists who strived to achieve equal rights and who denounced the patriarchal societies and the marginal role women have in society. These feminists endeavored to redefine women's lives by breaking the established stereotypes of women as helpless, dependent damsels in distress in fairy tales and Gothic fiction.

Lynn Moss Sanders states that "fantasy fiction can serve a useful function in allowing young readers, particularly young female readers, to imagine themselves performing feats of physical strength" (1996, p. 38). Therefore, the feminization of these traditional stories was intended to enlighten and empower both young and adult female readers. It is a strategy that aims at encouraging women to overcome their passive and submissive existence in patriarchal societies and to take the heroines in these fantasies as role models to be idealized and imitated. Thus, women figure as courageous and self-possessed heroines who have the ability to act in difficult situations and make decisions that have positive consequences on their life and the well-being of their families and loved ones. These stories can additionally be essential in educating the male readers to change their traditional views toward women, through the experience and the role, the female protagonists play both inside and outside their domestic realms (Bettelheim, 1991).

II. Robin McKinley's Rewriting of the Fairy Tale

Robin McKinley's (1952) *Beauty: A Retelling of the Story of Beauty and the Beast* (1978) is, as indicated in the title, a modern rewriting of the classic French fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast. However, McKinley converts the traditional frame of the tale by making Beauty a strong woman, who unlike the original helpless heroine, willingly goes to live with a beast in his castle, which is set in a dark forest. Beauty's heroic deed is motivated by her wish to sacrifice her life to save her father.

McKinley's new version of an adventurous woman in her fantasy is the outcome of her feminist ideology that women,

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like men, should have their own adventures. She rejects the mainstream male-dominated world in fantasy, saying that the men "were the ones who got to have adventures, while we got to – well, not have adventures" (McKinley in Trachtenberg, 1982, p. 262). Her adaptations of the old fairy tales into feminist stories were praised by the readers when they were first published. McKinley was surprised to receive many complimentary letters from her readers, saying "At last! Girls who do things!" (McKinley, 1985, p. 405).

The world that McKinley presents in the novel is not the abusive patriarchal society, common in traditional feminist fiction. McKinley depicts an ideal community in which men and women live in harmony and in which women enjoy the freedom and strength that many women crave in real life. The role of women in the text is fundamental and it is suggested by the symbolic names given to the female characters. These names, Grace, Hope, Honour, and Beauty, are the ideal virtues that the society expected from women.

The young protagonist learns from her experience and newly acquired vision the difference between appearance and reality. She comes to the realization that the Beast is a good-natured man and is not the monstrous creature the people believe him to be. McKinley alters the traditional gothic atmosphere of the damsel in distress, by portraying a benign Beast, who stands in stark contrast with the traditional patriarchal villain/monster in Gothic fiction. As a heroine, Beauty must confront the fears or the phobia women experience when they are forced into loveless marriages to men when their marital unions are decided by the patriarchs. Women have no choice but to accept and to behave in accordance with the social expectations of obedient females. The men have to live with remain mysterious until these helpless women move to live with them. Whether McKinley's rewriting of the fairytale is intended to explore this aspect in women's life remains unclear. This is mainly due to the fact that Beauty's father does not force Beauty to move into the monster's castle in the forest. Nonetheless, Beauty's journey into the forest in search of the Beast's castle makes this feminist reading reliable. Beauty must confront this horrific atmosphere to gain maturity as a female.

The happy beginning of the story belies the trials and the hardships, the protagonist and her family will go through as the events progress. The title character, whose name is Honour before she renames herself Beauty, lives a carefree life with her father and two sisters, Grace and Hope, after the death of their mother in childbirth. The vacant emotional space that the mother leaves in the life of her family is filled by the loving care of the devoted father, Roderick Huston, who, as a well-to-do shipping merchant, is able to afford his daughters a luxurious life.

The first thing that McKinley alters in her adaptation of the original tale of Beauty and the Beast is the relationship among the sisters. In the original fairy tale, the sisters are malicious and envious of Beauty due to the riches she is able to have from the Beast and they even try to prevent their sister from going back into the Beast's castle. McKinley's version of the tale presents benevolent and loving sisters, who try to help each other and is anxious to see each one of them happy and comfortable (Hearne, 1988). Although Beauty proves herself to be the black sheep in the family due to her independent nature and intellectual pursuits, which are considered to be whimsical by her family, this does not develop into prejudice as it does not affect the love and identification among the motherless sisters.

All that matters to Beauty is her plain-looking physical appearance and her difference from her extremely beautiful sisters, a thing that is ironically the opposite of her nickname, Beauty. As she describes herself, she is "thin, awkward and undersized, with big long-fingered hands, and huge feet" (*Beauty* 10). Ellen R. Sackelman observes: "In a text lacking an obvious villain, Beauty's poor self-image makes her own worst enemy" (Sackelman, 2003, p. 33). She tries to compensate for her lack of physical beauty by indulging herself in intellectual activities. These preoccupations, for which she is mocked by her governesses, are weird viewing the fact that women are expected to be devoted to their domestic chores and not to manifest mannish tendencies. She even dreams of pursuing her education in a university, a strange desire of a woman according to the prescribed gender roles established in the text:

My intellectual abilities gave me a release and an excuse. I shunned company because I preferred books; the dreams I confided to my father were of becoming a scholar in good earnest and going to University. It was unheard of that a woman should do anything of the sort – as several shocked governesses were only too quick to tell me when I spoke a little too boldly – but my father nodded and smiled and said, "We'll see." Since I believed my father could do anything – except of course make me pretty – I worked and studied with passionate dedication, lived in hope, and avoided society and mirrors. (*Beauty* 12).

Yet, Beauty values her education above all and continues her self-education "despite social constraints" (Wilson and Moss, 1997, p. 30). Discouraged by the people around her, who view her ambition as an absurd whim, she reads to her horse, unable to find a person who can appreciate her wishes.

Beauty's dreams are also thwarted by the onset of the family misfortunes when her father's fleet of ships is lost in the sea. This marks the beginning of her journey into maturity. Beauty has to move with her now impoverished family to live in a town, Blue Hill, in the rural north with her sister's, Hope's, fiancé, Gervain Woodhouse, who has been a blacksmith in their father's shipyard. She has also to console her eldest sister, Grace, for the loss of her fiancé, Robert Tucker, a sea captain on one of her father's missing ships.

Beauty is conscious of the gothic and uncanny nature of the surroundings of her new residence through her readings. She believes that the "the north was a land rather overpopulated by goblins and magicians, who went striding about the countryside muttering wild charms" (*Beauty* 17). Thus, unlike the traditional gothic and fairy tales in which the innocent heroines find themselves entrap in labyrinthine settings, Beauty already has the knowledge that would enable her to think of the proper act in difficult situations. She is warned by her now brother-in-law, Gervain, not to go near the dark forest, near their new modest home. Gervain

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tells Beauty that this forest is believed to be enchanted and inhabited by a hideous monster that lives there in his castle. However, she does not take his warnings seriously and even refuse to believe him, due to her independent nature and the rational thinking she develops from the books she reads. She defiantly argues: "I've never heard anything about this.… Are you sure you're not making it all up to scare me into obedience? It won't work, you know; it'll only make me mad" (*Beauty* 52).

The news that one of the father's ships arrives in the port does not restore the family's wealth or improve its fortunes. It only adds to their troubles as the father in his journey back home unwittingly breaks in the Beast's castle and plucks a flower from his enchanted garden, to keep his promise to Beauty to bring her some flower seeds as a gift from their hometown. When the father informs his daughters about his confrontation with the Beast in the forest and that he is either to lose his life or to send one of his daughters to the Beast's castle, it is Beauty who volunteers to go, despite her youth and fears. She takes the blame on herself since she asks her father to bring her some flower seeds. She insists and even defies her father's will when he tries to prevent her from going: "What will you do then, tie me up?… I will go, and what's more…I will run off tonight while you're asleep. I need only get lost in the woods, you said, to find the castle" (*Beauty* 89).

Beauty's courage manifests when she insists on penetrating the castle's gate alone and when she searches the Beast in the castle, inspecting the rooms one by one until she finds him:

I did not hesitate as I turned corners, went upstairs, down stairs, opened doors…I found myself in the castle again, walking through dozens of handsome, magnificently furnished rooms, looking for something. I had a stronger sense of sorrow and of urgency this time; and also a sense of some other – presence; I could describe it no more clearly…I walked, flinging doors open and looking inside eagerly, then hurrying on as they were each empty of what I sought (*Beauty* 93).

Although she is initially frightened by the Beast's monstrous appearance, with his massive furry body, claws, and fearful human eyes, she does not attempt to flee the castle and decides to accommodate herself with her new surroundings. Still, she initially avoids his company:

I had avoided touching him or letting him touch me. At first, I had eluded him from fear; but when fear departed, elusiveness remained, and developed into habit. Habit bulwarked by something else; I could not say what. The obvious answer because he was a Beast, did not seem to be the right one (*Beauty* 102).

The first sign of her strength in her new gothic environment is her ability to reject the Beast's proposals of marriage each and every night. Ellen R. Sackelman opines: "Indeed, Beauty's…nightly rejections of the Beast's marriage proposals distinguish her as a heroine not often encountered by young readers: A female voice negating male desires" (2003, p. 32).

As a heroic figure, Beauty even helps the Beast overcome his unbearable loneliness. She realizes that he is timid and in need of companionship. She shares with him many common things like her love of reading and they discuss intellectual problems together, a thing which she fails to find in her home. Besides, the Beast provides her with the books she likes in his magical library which even contains books which are to be written in the future. It is this very wish that endears the Beast to Beauty and urges her to help him break the curse (Sanders, 1996).

Beauty's love of the Beast increases as she discovers his true goodness. Beauty later learns from the Beast that he does not intend to hurt her father when he picks a rose from his enchanted garden. His intention is later revealed to be an attempt to bring one of the Huston daughters to help him lift the curse and restore his original being as a handsome prince. This he cannot do without finding a woman who can love and accept to marry him despite his hideous figure as a monster. Besides, he tells her that even if she chooses not to come and to stay in her father's home, he does not think to harm her and her father. With the Beast, Beauty realizes the significance of her sacrifice because, as he tells her, she would have been guilty and ashamed of herself, had she sent her father to the castle even if he survives:

He would have returned to you, and you would have been glad, but you also would have been ashamed because you had sent him, as you thought, to his death. Your shame would have grown until you came to hate the sight of your father because he reminded you of a deed you hated and hated yourself for. In time, it would have ruined your peace and happiness and at last your mind and heart (*Beauty* 130).

She appreciates the way he helps her see her family through his magical table and in her dreams. He also helps her to know about the fate of her sister's missing fiancé, Robert Tucker, who is not dead as all believe. The Beast does not prevent her from visiting her family to tell her sister, Grace, about the near return of her long waited for lover, and thus stop her loveless marriage from a new suitor. He knows that Beauty's departure will lead to his death if she does not return to the castle within a week, due to the curse, but he is willing to let her go to see her happy.

Beauty's reunion with her family offers her a chance to see her real beauty. She finds out that after the time she spends in the Beast's castle, she is now more beautiful than her sisters and is no longer ashamed of her outward appearance. She also realizes that she no longer belongs to her family's home and she misses the Beast's company. What McKinley seems to suggest in her retelling of this classic fairytale is that women's experience is the same anywhere and at any time. Even those females who suffer from the restrictions in a phallocentric world can make their life easy and can search for and find happiness in the very restrictive environment they are forced to live in. This is implicitly indicated in the timelessness of the events and the unspecific setting of the text, which adds a sense of universality to the events. Ultimately, she departs to the Beast's castle willingly, after her self-realization that love preserves above all. Only then she repays the Beast's affections and finally accepts one of his recurrent proposals of marriage.

As a heroine, Beauty is able, through her sacrifice and adventurous spirit, to save both her father and the Beast,

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who is transformed into a handsome man when Beauty accepts his proposal of marriage, which is the key to end the enchantment. She also helps her sister, Grace, to make her mind by telling her that her fiancé, Tucker, is still alive, and thus she evades a loveless marriage with another man.

Both Beauty and the Beast transform into the beautiful image they desire through their mutual love and respect. Beauty is not only given the chance to name herself according to her own desire but also the Beast gives her the privilege of giving him a name, as he forgets his name after two centuries under the curse. After acknowledging her role in lifting the curse placed on his family by a wizard 200 years ago, the Beast takes her to a mirror and helps her to see her true beauty. Only at the end does her name fits her physical appearance, a thing which she is able to achieve through her courage and selflessness. When the curse is lifted, the heroine realizes her ability to see beyond the outward appearance to see the inner beauty that lurks hidden inside the Beast, besides her own inner beauty. It is the 1st time, she sees herself differently and has the self-confidence as if it were suddenly done by a supernatural power that transforms both characters. This can be a reward for Beauty for her altruistic and heroic deeds. Her sacrifice is the source of the final happy family reunion. Whereas she marries the Beast, her sister Grace and her fiancé Tucker also celebrate their marriage after waiting for many years.

III. Conclusion

As a feminist, McKinley uses fairy tales as part of her agenda to assert the strength of female heroines in fiction, especially in fantasy. In *Beauty*, the author portrays a strong-willed female character who is able to act on her own, especially in difficult circumstances. Her role is significant in the life of her family. McKinley's rewriting of this fairy tale can be read as an allegory of traditional marital unions in which the partners, especially the brides, have no will in choosing their future husbands. They are forced into loveless matches with men whom they do not know, and whom they fear to see and live with as it is in the case of Beauty, who finds herself in a difficult situation that makes her obliged to meet the Beast and accept to live with him. If McKinley's rewriting of this fairy tale is intended to stand for the relationship between the sexes, it implies that for women to be happy, they should tolerate and see through the real nature of their partners.

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