

Beauty and the Beast (+ Pride & Prejudice)

updated Jun 24

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* could be considered a male fantasy where a woman is tamed in submission to her husband's will. Female fantasies, mainly given outlet through literature compared to a male's pre-occupation with visual media, reverse this fantasy such that it is the female who dreams of taming the male beast. This fantasy generally involves a powerful but unrefined male (a pirate, vampire, duke, billionaire et cetera) who is tamed and civilized through the influence and love of a woman. A fantasy because of the dichotomy of this alpha male remaining as such to everyone else but acting gentle and responsive to her, even obedient to her wishes.

Beauty and the Beast is a classic reverse fantasy. The first printed version of *Beauty and the Beast (La Belle et La Bête)* was published in 1740 by Gabrielle-Suzanna Barbot de Villeneuve but the version we are most familiar with is by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont and published in 1756. This is a much-shortened version that pared down the characters and simplified the fairytale making it suitable for children. The tale has many variants around the world, but the moral of the fairytale is always the same: "*Don't judge a person by their appearance*".

The Australian premiere of David Nixon's 2011 interpretation of this tale created for Northern Ballet in Leeds, UK, showcased in Perth at the newly refurbished His Majesty's Theatre in May 2016. This was a second version of the ballet, revisiting the way the Beast was created and including a more contemporary design. Nixon's ballet restored many of the original story elements that had been lost in the Disney version such as Beauty being the daughter of a merchant who loses everything. It is Beauty's spendthrift socialite sisters who bankrupt the family and after the bailiffs take everything reduce the family to living in a broken-down bus in the forest and dressed in second-hand clothing.

Designed for contemporary audiences and children, this two-act ballet included elements of humour and pantomime but still retained classical technique with several magical dream sequences. The ballet highlights include a beautiful duet when Beauty falls asleep and dreams about the prince and a duet between the Beast and his human self that becomes a *pas de trois* when Beauty wakes and joins in.

The story is about a familiar trope of fairytales - an obnoxious and vain prince is placed under a spell by a fairy, disguised as an old lady, when he refuses her request for food and mocks her. A second fairy enters and tells the prince, now a beast, that the spell can be broken if he can learn to love and be loved in return. Thereafter the story follows the original tale. The father leaves the girls to search for food and finding himself in an enchanted garden cannot resist plucking a rose as a gift for Beauty. Confronted by the Beast, he agrees to send one of his daughters to live with him. When everyone is asleep, Beauty sets out to the castle where after the usual trials and tribulations she falls in love with the Beast thus breaking the spell and transforming the Beast back into a Prince. The ballet concludes with Beauty's father and sisters, along with the nobles, arriving to celebrate the marriage of Beauty to Prince Orian.

Nixon designed the costumes himself as the costumes play a key role for him in creating the dances by allowing him to visualize the characters' movements. He did not choose a period in which to set the ballet but rather focused on the extreme haute couture clothing of the catwalk. He chose lots of bright colours for the ladies' costumes, as children relate to bright colour and he wanted this to be a family ballet. Duncan Hayler described the costumes as containing "*textures of reptile skin, semi-transparent featherweight chiffons and shiny flowing metallic fabrics....*" which inspired him in his set design.

The music orchestrated by John Longstaff and utilizing a tapestry of pieces from French composers (Saint-Saëns, Bizet, Debussy, Poulenc – with Russian Glazunov's "*The Seasons*" the exception in Act II) weaved together to create a cohesive score and designed to create a range of emotions on stage was played by WASO, with only the organ pieces recorded due to logistical difficulties.

Fairytales are stories designed to educate children, sometimes by scaring them, and to provide them with guidance for life. They have the advantage of being able to address taboo subjects through symbolism. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the underlying reality is that the story was meant as advice to young girls entering arranged marriages with much older men. Despite initial appearances and the likely dashing of dreams, a girl should retain hope. However, while in this fairytale Beauty eventually does fall in love with the Beast she does so while living totally under his control and while essentially being his prisoner. Such controlling behavior still plagues relationships today. Many a girl has found a protective boyfriend to be endearing during their courtship only to later discover that there is a slippery slope that runs from "protective" through "possessive" to "controlling".

Pride & Prejudice

In literature, the dangers of judging a person by their appearance are well illustrated by Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in the classic Jane Austen novel *Pride & Prejudice*. Mr. Bennet had been "*captivated by her youth and beauty*" when he married Mrs. Bennet but her "*weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her*". Perhaps by reason of her having five daughters and the oldest aged 22, Mrs. Bennet is cast in every movie or TV series as a woman in her mid-fifties and well past her youthful beauty. This is far from Jane Austen's novel. She was a beauty when Mr. Bennet married her and was still a beauty at the start of the story, evidenced by Mr. Bennet himself when he advises Mrs. Bennet to send her daughters to visit Netherfield by themselves "*for as you are as handsome as any of them, Mr. Bingley might like you the best of the party*". Now, while it is true that Mr. Bennet is merely teasing her as the saying goes: *many a true word said in jest*.

So how old is Mrs. Bennet? We are not told directly but by close reading we can estimate her age in two different ways. As noted above we are told Mrs. Bennet was youthful when married, so probably 18 or 19 years old. We are further told in respect to Mr. Bennet "*that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand*

his character". Courtships were very short at that time, usually only a month or so, thus we can estimate that Mrs. Bennet is 41 or 42 years of age. When the officers leave Meryton and Lydia ("*just 16*" – she was 15 when the novel starts) and Kitty ("*two years older*" – thus 18) are lamenting their loss, Mrs. Bennet shares their grief and "*remembered what she had herself endured on a similar occasion, five and twenty years ago*". Assuming she was about the same age as Lydia and Kitty at that time, she is now between 41 and 43 years old, an alternative estimate in good agreement with the first estimate.

As he married her for her youthful looks, Mr. Bennet must be older, and if we assume 10 years older as a reasonable guess, he is in his early 50's. In the early 1800's, male life expectancy at birth was only 40 years, rising to 47 at age one year, a consequence of the high infant mortality rate but once you had survived childhood then you could expect to live into your early 70s. If we remember that Darcy who was aged 28 when he proposed to Elizabeth for the second time had lost his father 5 years earlier, Wickham, "*nearly the same age*" as Darcy had also lost his father shortly after Darcy had, Bingley had come into his majority (i.e. age 21) two years earlier with his father already deceased and Mr. Collins (aged 25) had also inherited from his father it is evident that the father of every male character in the book died at a young age. If *Pride & Prejudice* was a detective and not a romance novel one would consider the death of all the fathers so soon after their sons had reached the age of majority, and thus could inherit their father's estate, as something suspiciously more than just a coincidence. Perhaps Mr. Bennet is lucky that he did not have a son! That aside, is it any wonder then that Mrs. Bennet's "*business in life was to get her daughters married*". The indolent Mr. Bennet had made no provision for his daughters and with the estate entailed away she and her daughters would be totally dependent on Mr. Collins's charity not to be evicted from their home on Mr. Bennet's, shortly to be expected, death. Clearly Mrs. Bennet had a right to be worried and was not the hysterical drama queen of common perception.

Mrs. Bennet is not the only one to be cast as an older character nowadays than in Austin's novel: Mr. Collins we are told is 25 and not in his late 30's or early 40's as he is normally portrayed; and Caroline Bingley was not significantly older than Elizabeth Bennet. As she is described as the **youngest** sister of Bingley (who was 23) and not the **younger** sister, she must have been older than him but likely not by more than a few years as she sees Mr. Darcy (aged 28) to be a suitable catch as a husband. However, there are two readings in the novel that suggest Caroline was younger than Lizzy, although neither reading is convincing. First, we learn that she is great friends with Darcy's sister Georgiana, who was only 16 when Lizzy first met her at Pemberley, implying that Caroline may be not much older than Georgiana, and second, when Caroline speaks to Lizzy about Wickham at the Netherfield ball, Lizzy in her anger thought to herself "*insolent girl*", the term "*girl*" not "*woman*" again indicating that Caroline was younger than Lizzy. (It must be conceded that the term "*girl*" is more likely to have been used by Jane Austin to reflect Miss Bingley's marital status and not her age). The evidence that Caroline is younger than Lizzy is thus very weak and can be dismissed.

Setting the discussion of ages aside, let us now turn to a discussion of the main characters, particularly that of Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Bennet relates that at the Meryton assembly Mr. Bingley "*seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance. So he enquired who she*

was, and got introduced, and asked her for the two next". He then publicly showed his intentions to Jane by dancing with her twice. The "lively and unreserved" Bingley was instantly attracted to Jane's beauty, but he was luckier than Mr. Bennet because Jane turned out to be more than just a pretty face. But that was just luck. Darcy in contrast was "clever" and "reserved" and would never behave in such a reckless manner. But note that Darcy was not "painfully shy" as Charlotte overheard Bingley telling Mrs. Gibson in the Emmy Award winning 21st century version of this classic: "*The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*".

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lizzie+bennet+diaries

Mr. Darcy was, to put it in modern terminology, an introvert. When Lizzy visited the sick Jane at Netherfield he admired the "*brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion*" and by the time she was due to leave "*had never been bewitched by any woman as he was by her*". But what as an introvert was his response to these feelings? – he "*resolved to be particularly careful that no sign of admiration should now escape him*".

This response may puzzle a normal person but is typical of an introvert. They, like any other person, may be attracted to a pretty or handsome face, but they would never openly show that attraction – for what if the object of their interest on closer acquaintance turned out to be not worthy of their attention? Having rashly displayed an interest, how could they now extract themselves without serious embarrassment or hurt feelings? No, far better to watch and listen to determine their interest's character before revealing their own feelings. Thus, it was only after four dinners and at Sir William Lucas' where a large party was assembled that Mr. Darcy made his first tentative moves.

"Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend He began to wish to know more of her, and as a step towards conversing with her himself, he attended to her conversation with others In doing so he drew her notice: What does Mr. Darcy mean, said she to Charlotte, by listening to my conversation with Colonel Forster?"

Not yet "*one and twenty*", brought up at home without a governess, moving in the "*very confined and unvarying society*" of a country neighbourhood and educated mainly by being "*always encouraged to read*" it is no wonder that Lizzy when trying to make out Mr. Darcy's character "*did not get on at all*". As for Mr. Darcy, by hiding his feelings until satisfied Lizzy was worthy of his attention and forgetting in typical introvert fashion that such determinations had occurred only in his own head, he was shocked to discover, when first confessing his feelings towards Lizzy, that she did not expect them nor share them.

Introvert is a term popularized by Carl Jung in the early 20th century. So how did Jane Austin manage to describe so accurately the behavior of an introvert? Is this attributable solely to her powerful powers of social observation; or could it be that she herself was an introvert? Now if this was an English literature exam question such speculation would be followed by that single word most dreaded by all students: **Discuss**.