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A Tale as Old as Time

The societal norms and expectations of eighteenth century Europe were by no means resemblant of the modernized standards seen today. Insurmountable economic and ancestral barriers separated and divided the rather diverse assortment of Europeans, leading to the entrenchment of harsh and inflexible rules. Though never transcribed as an explicit doctrine, such normalities dictated the entirety of an individual's life, bestowing upon one their career, their opportunities, and their marital future. Perhaps the sole factor in determining the success of an individual lay in their birth. Merit and hard work were allies to very few in such an era, one marked extensively by an unchangeable social stratification. Yet in the mire of this unyielding backwardness, imposing upon all their prewritten future, there were some who dared to dream, advocating for social reform and freedom. In the French city of Paris, widowed author Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve crafted her great classic *Beauty and the Beast* after experiencing firsthand the horrors of an unquestionable, predestined lifestyle. Published originally as *La Belle et la Bête* in 1740, Villeneuve's fairy tale centers around a cursed calamity stemming from what she and others regarded as the social and economic injustices of the time. Through its depiction of the mishaps and wrongdoings of a European family, Villeneuve's extended roman à clef criticizes the established European culture of the 18th century. The allegorical adventure of Beauty and her Beast portrays the growing thirst for reform within the

splintered nation of France, illustrating the shifting European view on both the individual and on marriage in the plights of its characters.

Villeneuve's tale centers around the repressive nature of marriage existing throughout pre-industrial Europe, heightened especially in rural areas. The societal norms encompassing marriage deprived women of a voice in the process of unison. Portrayed as an economic, sexual, and psychological necessity, marriage was regarded as an indispensable necessity for the survival of women past their childhood years (Kagan, 247). Unmarried and widowed women were often vulnerable and unprotected within nearly the Old Regime. Economic security was the chief of the problems faced by these individuals, only accentuated by the low wages earned by unskilled women (Kagan, 474). Faced with such hardship, marriage was treated as the panacea of a woman's inevitable plight. The sole purpose of the female was reduced to the securing of a partner - the occasion of marriage. Evident in facets ranging from Disney's *Mulan* (Bancroft) to the continued existence of dowries in nations such as India and Britain (indy100.com), many families, especially those in the lower social classes, would go to extreme lengths to get their daughters wed off. Little regard was paid to the quality of life after marriage, let alone regarding the consent of the to-be wives. The notion of divorce itself was unthought of in pre-revolutionary France, legalized only in 1792 at the hands of the National Assembly (Philips, 385). The majority of a woman's adulthood was governed by a simple childhood saying: you get what you get and you don't throw a fit (Gassman, 2012).

Yet the stirrings of marital reform within the French began long before the Revolution, evident within Villeneuve's outlook regarding marriage. Her fairy tale asserted the adage that one should not be judged by their cover, depicting that a chrysalis of monstrosity may contain within

the butterfly of a prince. The author's views, part of the counterculture during the 1740s, criticized the suppressive, emotionless standards of the time. In her eyes, neither men nor women were to be judged by their class. Such a stance was cultivated by Villeneuve's personal experience during the French Old Regime. Her fairy tale itself is an extended roman à clef (Encyclopedia Britannica), constituting a base of reality and several layers of fantasy. Among the non-fiction lies both biographical and autobiographical elements. Villeneuve herself married a noble in 1706 yet requested separation after merely six months. However, divorce was neither legal nor socially acceptable at the time. Soon, her husband, having squandered much of the family's wealth, left Villeneuve penniless and widowed at the age of twenty-six. Faced with a depleted family treasury, the once-aristocrat was forced to seek employment within Paris in order to sustain even an impoverished lifestyle (Windling). Such brutal misfortune prompted her grave depiction of the plights of repressive marriage. In her eyes, any individual should be able to control their future without the hindrance or influence of other's opinions, values, and beliefs. Regarding marriage as a matter independent of external influence, Villeneuve portrayed the grave repercussions of the rigid, coercive, and inflexible standards surrounding matrimony through her novel's conflict.

Such tragedies affected more than just Villeneuve. Countless women throughout Europe were forced to marry individuals whom they had known for days at most. A journal article exemplifies such a widespread trend, explicitly recounting the explanation of a to-be-bride. When asked about her new husband, "Mlle de Bourbonne told her schoolmates that her fiance was 'very ugly and very old' but that she would marry him anyway because 'papa insists upon it'" (Darrow, 46). Such forced marriages were not only detrimental to an individual's sense of

liberty, but also led to a plethora of problems afterwards, ranging from indignities to outright physical abuse. Women were granted very few legal protections upon marriage. In the Old Regime, legislation such as the customary law of Normandy explicitly called for the deprivation of the rights of wives (Roderick, 198). Additionally, institutions such as the Catholic Church worked to prevent the legalization of divorce. Unsurprisingly, a report from Toulouse revealed that the number of separations granted to wives numbered a mere total of twenty-two in a span of three years. (Roderick, 199)

Another non-fictional element contributing to Villeneuve's liberal stance stems from the tale of Petrus Gonsalvus. Born in 1537 with a condition known as hypertrichosis, or Werewolf Syndrome, Gonsalvus was covered from head to toe in hair. Becoming known as "wild man" - a phenomenon of nature, the former slave was given to King Henri II of France as a gift. Instead of imprisoning and keeping the creature as an exotic specimen, Henri II regarded Gonsalvus as a foreign dignitary. The King transformed Gonsalvus into a nobleman, giving him an education and securing him a marriage with another aristocrat. Instead of being left regarded as monsters, Gonsalvus and his family were treated like nobility, studied by famous physicians and painted by famous artists (Spearman). The acceptance and toleration of a man who would otherwise been cast off as a filthy beast illustrated to Villeneuve the reality that cultural reform had and could once more grip the nation of France. Determined to propagate such liberal values further, the author added fairies, princes, and the supernatural to the tale of a hideous monster. Rendered extreme by the elements of mystery and drama, the underlying moral of Gonsalvus's tale was accentuated and underscored. Through the retelling of his narrative, incorporated within the

plight of the Beast, Villeneuve hoped to rekindle the sense of acceptance which had once characterized France.

Beauty and the Beast revolves around a triumvirate of social, cultural, and economic issues. The major conflicts of the novel stem wholly from restrictions regarding marriage. The curse of the Prince and the refusal of the Queen are both a result of the societal condemnation of interclass marriage. As described in a flashback, a caretaking Fairy once fell in love with the Prince while the Queen was away fighting a war. Her proposal to him, however, was left brutally unrequited. The Prince initially agreed to marriage, saying as long as he has had mother's blessing, he would proceed with the ceremony. Yet upon hearing of the caretaking Fairy's request, the Queen became enraged, screaming with defiance upon the absurdity of the proposition. Even though such actions were legal, affirmed by a different Fairy's statement of "we are free to form whatever we please," (Villeneuve, 70) interspecies marriage was still inherently restricted by social condemnation. The second Fairy herself admits this, recounting that "it is seldom that we avail ourselves of that right and never without scandal to our order." (Villeneuve, 70). A metaphor for the real world, such a description parallels almost perfectly the similarly condemned occasion within Europe. Throughout the mid-eighteenth century, interclass marriage was rare, disrespected, and often resulted in tragedy (Goodman, 2005). Women and men alike were forced into marriages of social stature rather than those of genuine affection. Each party wished to find someone of equal or higher class in society. As a result, almost always, marriages were held between individuals of the same class. Such regulations in the realm of marriage existed throughout the preindustrial world, continuing on in modernized nations well until the late 20th century (history.com). A similar plight occurs towards the ending of the novel, this time

concerning the marriage of the Prince and Beauty. As the Queen learns that Beauty is nothing but a commonplace girl from a family of merchants, she refuses to condone the marriage of the two. Once again, the harsh normalities of European marriage come in the way of what is just. Even though the Prince and kind Fairy attempt to widen her horizons on the issue of matrimony, telling the Queen that “her birth is not inferior to your own” (Villeneuve, 53), Beauty herself wishes to cancel the marriage, fearing social condemnation. It takes nearly thirty pages of reasoning and rationale to resolve the issue between the two parties, illuminating the author’s paramount argument that class should not matter in terms of love.

Marked by “a strength of mind which was not common in her sex”, Beauty acts as the main protagonist of the novel (Villeneuve, 9). Representing the ideal lady of Villeneuve’s times, the sixteen-year-old exhibits a kind and understanding nature far ahead of her era. Her asking of merely a rose in concern of her father’s health, her proposal to become a prisoner in place of any of her four older sisters, and her commitment to the Beast, refusing to kill him in honor of their promise, manifest the generous and tender heart of Beauty (Villeneuve, 18). Yet it is crucial to note that Villeneuve’s conception of Beauty, the ideal woman, is not too radical either. Despite her inquisitive and curious nature, Beauty respects the long-standing tradition that royalty must only marry royalty (Villeneuve, 49). In fact, she initially even refuses the Prince’s proposal, exclaiming, “do not expose me to the misery of being told all my life that I am unworthy of the rank to which your bounty would elevate me.” (Villeneuve, 52) This denunciation of morganatic marriage was conducted by the author on purpose (Velde, 2003). Although a stance against royal intermarriage may seem commonplace today, evident in events such as the Royal Wedding of last year (Jefferson, 2018), it was truly radical during eighteenth-century Europe - ruled almost

exclusively by an extended web of incestuous familial relationships (Dobbs, 2010). A historian must realize that standards are relative. The position for more autonomous matrimony taken by Villeneuve was already far ahead of her time. Too extreme and the message within her novel would have resonated with next to no one.

Conversely, the antagonist of the fairy tale is represented within the inflexible, conservative nature of traditional societal values. Although there exists no one individual within which such repressive beliefs are embodied, the true conflict emerges from those wronged by such repressive convictions. The malignant fairy (her name in the novel), infuriated by the Queen's refusal of her proposal, curses the Prince to remain a Beast until he finds someone who will love him (Villeneuve, 59). The premise of the entire novel stems from such a rash action, driven by the societal condemnation of interclass marriage. It is vital to note that, once again, the interspecies-nature of the conflict is meant to be a metaphor for eighteenth-century Europe's interclass dilemma. By extremizing the subject of her tale, Villeneuve is able to impart her condemnation of repressive marriages with greater effectiveness - the function of allegory.

The staunch standards surrounding marriage were by no means the only conservative regime present in eighteenth-century France. Evident especially among the poor and the lower classes, the laws governing voting, taxation, and property-owning were likewise biased and unjust. The system of feudalism continued to pervade throughout France more than a hundred years after its legal termination in England (Tenures Abolition Act). A slew of taxes, ranging from direct taxes such as the *taille* to indirect ones such as the *gabelle* plagued the finances of the peasantry (Llewellyn, 2018). Left voiceless and without economic security, these conservative

regimes fueled calls for change among the lower social classes of France, soon to be manifested within the radical French Revolution.

In a likewise manner, the entrenchment of the inflexible, societal norms regarding marriage exact their toll on the Prince, the chief victim of the novel. Cursed by his mother's refusal of the malignant Fairy's proposal, the Prince represents the lives ruined by the the taboo on the unison of fairy and human, a parallel to interclass marriage. Such repressive standards of marriage gripped a large majority of Europeans in the eighteenth century, especially those of the lower classes. Laws such as Article 3 of a 1639 ordonnance states that "the children to be born of those marriages whose participants held secret during their lifetime, who feel rather the shame of concubinage than the dignity of marriage, shall be incapable of any inheritance, as well as their issue." (Velde, 2003) Though not explicit in denouncing interclass marriage, legal statements like these worked in conjunction with the force of societal condemnation and expectation to prevent individuals from marrying whomever they wanted. Facets such as dowries, rising to values as big as tracts of lands, crippled the independence of young women, now forced to marry whomever their parents chose (Morddel, 2011). In a similar fashion, left downtrodden and without a say in his fate, until the climax of the novel, the Prince's marital future had been decided by everyone but himself. Such a fate grips his future as well, after his transformation back into human form. Determined to marry Beauty, the Prince requests his mother to bless their wedding. Yet once again, horrified that Beauty's birth is not of royalty, the Queen rebukes him, creating a strife that takes the return of a King, a second Fairy, and nearly thirty pages of flashback to resolve.

A crucial clarification is to be made here regarding Villeneuve's analogy. Her depiction of an interspecies taboo serves predominantly as a parallel for interclass and interracial marriage, not explicitly marriage between common folk and royalty. Despite providing a situation, in which a member of royalty attempts to marry a common individual of unequal social rank, Villeneuve simply enlists a morganatic marriage to accentuate her denunciation of staunch marital restrictions (Velde, 2003). Such a decision stems from the author's overarching theme to soften some of her extreme positions.

The gist of Villeneuve's conflict, although dramatized, revolves around the catastrophic calamities which may burgeon from the repressive nature of marriage. The continental concerns regarding matrimony, throughout many nations of pre-industrial Europe, encapsulated class and race (Aiyagari). Money and social status were the two most important factors in determining potential spouses during eighteenth century Europe. Throughout French culture, "marriage was often represented as distinct from love" (Roulston, 4) Marriage was regarded as a tool of social mobility, allowing individuals to move up on the social ladder. Such a misconstrued definition of marriage led to the passage of laws preventing interclass and interracial marriage in order to preserve the traditional social hierarchy. Even into the early 20th century, nearly forty nations across the globe had criminalized the marriage of whites and blacks. (Coontz, 2009) Such restrictions only came around as a result of the treatment of marriage as a social tool.

In terms of Villeneuve's fairy tale, unison between Fairy and human was forbidden due to differences in race. Marriage between Beauty and her Prince was forbidden due to differences in class. Employing her fairy tale as a means of illustrating the afflictions brought about by the

repressive nature of marriage, Villeneuve sets up the stage to remedy the plight of Beauty and her Beast through what she believes to be the solution to such madness.

Faced with the Queen's adamant refusal of Beauty and the Prince's marriage, the resolution of Villeneuve's novel culminates in the only fitting end for any fantasy: a happily-ever-after. The brother of the Queen, the King of a neighboring kingdom, returns to his nephew's palace and diagrams his stance regarding the issue of the Prince's marriage to Beauty. In a surprising turn of events, it is revealed that the King rules over the nation of "Fortunate Island," married happily to a Fairy. The portrayal of his kingdom reveals Villeneuve's conception of the ideal world. Described as a place where "the inhabitants of that island, and even the King himself, are allowed perfect liberty to marry according to their inclinations, in order that there may be no obstacle whatever to their happiness," this idolized world represents matrimony devoid of societal influence (Villeneuve, 68). There exists no rigid, unyielding set of preconceived standards regarding marriage, only the yearning of one's heart. It is through such a portrayal and the descriptions of its ensuing joy that the Queen is convinced to bless the union of Beauty and the Prince. Yet within her call for reform, Villeneuve refrains from exceeding the fringe of extremism. Similar to how she toned down the progressive nature of Beauty, the author once again tempers the radical nature of her solution. Beauty herself does not actively seek to resolve any of the issues presented in front of her. She merely responds to the scenarios she is faced with, evidenced in her unquestioned acceptance of being imprisoned by the Beast and in her immediate rejection of marriage after the Queen's disapproval (Villeneuve, 52). The marriage between her and the Prince is also pacified near the ending of the novel, where it is uncovered that the Prince and Beauty are cousins (Villeneuve, 84). In such a revelation, Beauty's social status

becomes elevated to one of royalty and the radical nature of her marriage begins to wane. As asserted before, Villeneuve's decision to assuage the extremism of her fairy tale was conducted in an attempt to increase the receptivity of its message. The standards of pre-industrial Europe could only be bent so far without breaking.

The tale of *Beauty and the Beast* has resonated within the hearts of its readers, rising to prominence within other global cultures as well (Deutsch, 2017). Its overarching plot was later translated, rewritten, and preserved with the invention of film (Hanson-Firestone, 2018). Yet despite having such long-term influences on the world, Villeneuve's fairy tale additionally bore one considerable implication for the nation of France. Bolstered by a republication at the hands of Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont (Deutsch, 2017), the underlying calls for reform within Villeneuve's fairy tale indirectly led to the legalization of divorce within France. Passed in September, 1792, the reform bill of the National Assembly provided all individuals, regardless of class, access to rather liberal grounds for separation (Chastain, 1999). On the same note, the similarly conservative regimes of voting, taxation, and property-owning were made significantly more liberal through the French Revolution. Feudalism lay abolished, enfranchisement increased, and the Napoleonic Code provided for the equitable application of the laws on both the upper and the lower classes (Laws and the French Revolution) .

In such a regard, the purpose of the novel was ultimately realized. Conceived as a critique upon the repressive nature of marriage, affecting Villeneuve firsthand, her fairy tale's publication resulted in the creation of liberal, protective policy determined to make matrimony a matter independent of societal standards. Its progressive nature illustrated to the world the hope carried within reform, the promise of change for the better. The message woven within its words,

despite being expanded upon, has spread around the globe. Many editorials even describe *Beauty and the Beast* as the number one fairy tale in the world (Gardner, 2013). Its calls for marital freedom and independence reverberated across the French countryside in the eighteenth century, continuing to do so today. As preserved in Disney's rendition, the voice of Angela Lansbury simply consoles: "Bittersweet and strange / Finding you can change / Learning you were wrong." (Lansbury, 1991)

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