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We are the Beast: On Toxic Masculinity and Social Responsibility in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*

Abstract

This essay reflects on how Disney's (1991) animated classic *Beauty and the Beast* and the (2017) live-action remake differentially treat social responsibility, with respect to the various side characters and communities represented, for the toxic masculinity exhibited by its most prominent male characters, Gaston and the Beast. Furthermore, this essay uses *Beauty and the Beast* as a heuristic to understand the relationship between social responsibility, toxic masculinity, contemporary capitalism, and radical political and economic change.

Keywords

Beauty and the Beast, Toxic Masculinity, Critical Film Review

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Cover Page Footnote

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(Source: Disney)

Males as Old as Time

This is not going to be a review where I try to show that *Beauty and the Beast* is secretly about capitalism; it isn't about capitalism. It has plenty of aspects, which in their production reflect the problems with capitalism (e.g., bourgeois [and in this case anachronistic] identity politics and a cathartic personalistic conclusion with no systemic change, just to name two), but putting those dimensions aside, the value of *Beauty and the Beast* that I want to highlight here is in showing how social conditions produce our villains and can produce our heroes. In the process, this essay will address the connection between social conditions and structures, toxic masculinity, and corporate capitalism in contemporary society.

In Disney's original animated *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the toxic masculinity of the Beast and Gaston are already evident. The beauty of the 1991 *Beauty and the Beast* is that it taught young boys that sometimes the sensitive, intellectual guy could "win" the heart of the beautiful woman (and that a woman who could and loved to read was worth desiring). I'm not sure this was a lesson that was still needed in the 1990s, but then again, I'm also not sure it isn't still needed. That said, the portrayals of toxic masculinity in the original animated feature and the more recent live-action remake are quite similar—with one categorical exception: the role of others in the (re)production of that toxic masculinity.

In the original animated film, we see a bit of the role that the villagers play in glorifying Gaston's grotesque and necrophilic existence, but this socially-cultivated necro-narcissism and megalomania has more prominence in the recent version. In fact, in the live-action remake we actually see Gaston's bumbling sidekick Le Fou (who plays a much more complex role in the 2017 version than in the earlier animated film, something akin to the chorus in Sophoclean tragedy) at one point paying the villagers to lavish Gaston with praise in the local pub. For a handful of treasure, the villagers happily comply, reinvigorating Gaston's momentarily-diminished hyper-ego.

The second major difference between the two portrayals of the story regarding the prominence given to social culpability and responsibility is in relation to the curse placed on the Beast and all those in his castle. In the animated film, it is unclear why all of the servants were punished for the Beast's superficiality (which led him to attempt to let an older woman freeze and starve to death because she

was ugly, in his view). In the 2017 iteration, the audience is given a much clearer picture as to why all of the people living in the castle were punished for the Beast's aristocratic toxic masculinity: they were complicit in his creation (though I think we could probably give the adolescent Chip a break here...). Mrs. Potts tells Belle, after Belle asks why they were all punished if they did nothing [wrong], that that is exactly what they did: nothing. They all did nothing as the Beast's father turned an innocent young boy into the cruel, superficial, toxic male that led them all to their collective punishment. They did nothing, but what could they have done?

Gaston: Martin Shkreli Mixed with Donald Trump

Deciding whether one should be employed and capable of supporting one's family and community or having integrity is not an easy choice for anyone to make. It is a completely obscene choice to have to make, a choice that millions—if not billions—of workers make every day, every week, every month, and every year, which merely reflects the complete obscenity of capitalism. This is why (good) unions are so crucial to moving beyond capitalism—or even simply making capitalism a bit more livable for workers in the short-term. If workers can organize and act together, one of the important outgrowths of that, relevant to the discussion here, is that individual retaliation against a single worker for speaking out against their employer becomes a lot more difficult for the employer. For the servants in this story, this would have meant coming together as a group and attempting to resist the acculturation that the young Beast was receiving from his father.



(Source: Disney)

We can say that there is an individual responsibility to engage in collective, community action—and there is a collective, community responsibility to help individuals engage and contribute effectively, humanely, and democratically. This is all easier said than done, and while there are those of us who are trying to do this with small victories and bigger failures against the seemingly unstoppable capitalist machine—it is worth saying again and again as well. The 2017 version of *Beauty and the Beast* helps us see this a lot better than the 1991 version.

So yes, I blame the servants. I blame the villagers. I blame the Beast. I blame Le Fou. I blame Gaston. They are all responsible for the violent, close-minded toxic masculinity that nearly destroyed their small community. In a similar sense, I blame the so-called “Pharma-bro” Martin Shkreli for his decision to raise the price of life-sustaining HIV/AIDS medication by 5,000%. I blame the CEO of the pharmaceutical company Mylan, Heather Bresch, for raising the price of the EpiPen by an extraordinary 400%. I blame our society for maintaining, reproducing, and too-often exacerbating the

norms that condone and even incentivize these behaviors. I blame all of those who reacted strongly against these behaviors, but not against the fundamental premise of privatized health care: that any and all medical care should serve the goal of profit-making.



(Source: Bloomberg via Facebook)

Now to say I blame the servants (or the villagers) in *Beauty and the Beast* or that I blame all of those who do not actively resist the exploitative injustice of global capitalism in the health care market or wherever else, is not to say that all the blame is equally-shared or that there should be any particular ethical or legal consequence for us “villagers” and “servants.” I’m saying they—we—all bear responsibility for the evils of a system that produces such noteworthy villains. This isn’t a math equation. Responsibility in this case cannot be quantified in any meaningful way. Villains like Gaston and Shkreli played their role in their own creation, but we all play a role in the reproduction of our society. We play differentially (dis)empowered roles, without question, but we all play a role—often multiple roles.

Anti-capitalist and socialist politics do need to maintain some kind of space for “individual responsibility.” And though it surely cannot be the same version that we see unequally and irrationally dominate the discourses (and injustice system) of late capitalism, it is premature to specify precisely what an egalitarian post-capitalistic or socialistic “individual responsibility” might look like. While such theoretical speculations have their place, and possibly an important place, in the debates of the near and distant future, for now we are not unjustified in simply pointing out where there is a collective, social responsibility for the actions of our villains—without implying that there is not also an individual responsibility that is borne by the villains themselves.

Toxic Masculine Capitalism

We are taught by our society that to be a man is to embrace competition. To be a man is to never be weak or naïve. To be a man is to be in control. To be a man is to be violent (whether virtual or real), especially when it isn’t really necessary. To be a man is to never have to ask for permission. To be a man is to never have to say, “No, I can’t really afford that.” Absent the kind of irrational wealth that makes the last position actually tenable, guns, cruelty, misogyny, bullying, and all kinds of social sadism that don’t require great wealth take over—and even with wealth, they often take over in some form. This is the toxicity of contemporary masculinity.

Toxic masculinity is not some alt-Right aberration, though its most extreme manifestations have fueled the alt-Right's, and de facto Grand Wizard Donald Trump's, rise.¹ Toxic masculinity merely reflects the toxicity of masculinity in general. And while not all of these abovementioned aspects of the discourses and practices of masculinity hold in all or most cases, most hold in many cases. The more we fuel a society that demands a capitalistic mentality that privileges the commodification of life and life-sustaining goods and services, masculinity will continue to be a toxic manifestation of the same. Toxic masculinity is toxic because of its causes and effects; that is, its overall social context. It is a social virus, and it is highly contagious. In neoliberal identity politics and corporate feminism, we see that even women and non-gender conforming people are infected by its causes and effects. Neoliberal capitalism is perhaps the ideal system for a gender-neutral toxic masculinity.

Transformational Love as Social Action

The social circumstances that created the Beast, also turned him back into a (hu)man. The love of Belle and his servants and friends broke the symbolic curse—the curse that lived inside his heart well-before the enchantress justifiably made his physical appearance reflect the barbarity of his character. We are all potential Beasts. We are also all potential Gastons. More likely, we are all potential servants. We are all villagers. What kind of villager are you?

We need more Beasts and fewer toxic “men.” Fewer Gastons. Fewer Le Fous. Fewer villagers that glorify these real beasts. We need more of the Beast's servants (though let's obviously go for the gold and say no servants at all, but I'm working on a parallel metaphor here...). People who colluded, perhaps with little perception of an alternative choice at the time, but then aimed for a redemption that perhaps would never come. We cannot change the fact that there are far far too many un-transformed Beasts in our world—far too many are already Gastons. Gastons will die as misogynists and take others down with them. Beasts are sexists and chauvinists who can change under the right circumstances; they need not die beasts.

Belle is our protagonist. She is our hero. She was an exception though, and that is her lesson for us—beyond her loving compassion and understanding (and her rank disgust with Gaston). The villagers treated her and her father with disdain. She was an outsider in her own community, and her resilience is an object lesson in how not to make a hero. She is a fantastical exception to most realistic situations. We need not plan for the heroes who come out of terrible conditions, but rather we must plan to create more heroes through better circumstances. As a role model for what kind of people we need, better than even the transformable Beast, Belle is the catalyst for change. We have a world of Gastons. We have a world with Beasts. We have a world with Belles, and we need more of them. It is only in a world of Belles that the Gastons fail and the Beasts are transformed.

We need people who can transform and people to help them. From the beasts created and cultivated by racist, patriarchal capitalism to humane, literate, sensitive, community-defending, cooperative, loving, self-sacrificing people. We need “men” to become human, perhaps not again but for the first time in history on a mass scale. It is not masculinity that needs to be purged of its toxicity, but rather it is humanity that needs to be purged of the toxicity of corporate-barbaric masculinity.

¹ See Angela Nagle's *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars From 4Chan And Tumblr To Trump And The Alt-Right* (Zero Books, 2017).