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“The Beauty, the Beast, and the Subverted Fairy Godmother Figure”

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Abstract

There are several adaptations of *The Beauty and the Beast*, but three in particular are intriguing because of their use of a dark female force. The goddess Diana in the film *La Belle et la Bête* (Cocteau), Bertha Mason in the novel *Jane Eyre* (Brontë), and Mrs. Bates in the film *Psycho* (Hitchcock) all qualify as subverted fairy godmothers in their respective tales because of their role as “other,” their exertion of the female gaze, and their ability to undermine the Belle and Beast figures’ ability to love. Though traditional fairy godmothers utilize magic to aid the protagonists, these adaptations incorporate nontraditional, subverted fairy godmothers to revolutionize the role of fairy godmothers and fairy tales in society.

Keywords: Beauty, Beast, fairy godmother, fairy tale, *La Belle et la Bête*, *Jane Eyre*, *Psycho*, Gothic, adaptation
The story of *Beauty and the Beast* could not exist without the element of magic. From the enchanted castle to the Beast himself, magic gives this tale a sense of mystery, wonder, and charm. Because of the many retellings of *Beauty and the Beast*, the source of these enchantments often differs. However, in the original version by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, the text never reveals the source of the enchantment. As a result, Belle—without any magical assistance—independently restores the Beast to his natural form with her proclamation of love. She alone has the power to break the Beast’s spell. Interestingly enough, this is not the case in subsequent adaptations and related films. The goddess Diana from *La Belle et la Bête*, Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, and Mrs. Bates from *Psycho* all control the “enchantment” that enslaves the Beast figure in their respective tales.

These female figures’ roles in the *Beauty and the Beast* adaptations represent the “fairy godmother” in the fairy tale, the figure who is not entirely human and who influences others with a form of magic. Jeana Jorgensen explains that the fairy godmother role has traditionally been defined as a “helper [who is] an expression of the hero’s strength and ability in folktales.” But Jorgensen then comments on the evolution of this role: “As a reaction to canonical fairy godmothers, fairy godmothers appearing in recent pastiche texts continue to provide aid to (and sometimes challenge) the protagonists, but they also take on *new roles in new narratives*” (217, emphasis added). In the context of the *Beauty and the Beast* adaptations, the female forces embody new roles where they seek power over the Belle and Beast characters. Instead of assuming the traditional role of somehow benefiting the protagonist, these female forces seek the role of power for themselves, causing the stereotypical role of the fairy godmother to become subverted and twisted into a detrimental force that removes power from the protagonists.

These new roles create a paradigm between light and dark that draws from elements of the Gothic genre. Fairy godmothers, typically thought of as “beautiful, otherworldly and
transient creatures,” are instead depicted as being selfish, flawed, or—in the case of Mrs. Bates—physically dead and psychologically haunting (“Disenchanting”). What was once thought of as light and good is framed as being dark and evil. These female figures especially incorporate Gothic elements because “‘the female’ and ‘the Gothic’ have a pronounced affinity—not surprising, since ‘the female’ is the most powerful and persistent ‘other’ of Western culture” (Williams 19). The fairy godmother force embodies this powerful and persistent role as the “other,” even though the Gothic female role is typically portrayed as “the damsel in distress” or the object of the male gaze. Whereas females’ roles as “other” often forced them to relinquish power, the role of “other” empowers the fairy godmother figures. In addition to being “the other,” their power also comes from a “female gaze” that exerts power over the protagonists—especially the male protagonist. These two Gothic elements qualify the female forces as being dark, subverted fairy godmothers.

The first Gothic element, the female force as “other,” is evident in each of the hypertexts. The female forces possess “otherworldly” qualities, and these unique qualities help create the magical, fairy-godmother-like roles that these forces embody. In La Belle et la Bête, the non-human quality of the goddess Diana is most apparent because she is a goddess, and her powers have a magical quality associated with Roman mythology. But the non-human quality of Bertha Mason and Mrs. Bates is especially interesting because they are only human in the sense that they fit the biological definition of a human. Their appearances and their minds suggest otherwise; Bertha Mason’s foreign identity and her madness discount her human qualities, while Mrs. Bates, who is dead in reality, appears as either a preserved dead body or as her son, Norman. Her mind, which is also dead in reality, lives on within Norman, causing Mrs. Bates to have a supernatural, eerie presence in the real world. The non-human, other-worldly qualities of these feminine forces intimidate characters and audiences alike because they are not understood; it is difficult to comprehend how the goddess Diana
harnesses power as a statue, how the insane Bertha Mason is caged in an attic, and how the
deceased Mrs. Bates consumes the mind and life of her son. The power these females have,
along with their other-worldly characteristics, allows them to have control over the Belle and
Beast characters. Even though the Beast character may initially appear as “other” because of
his beast form, the Beast’s mind is still human—and humane. The essence and being of the
female forces, while appearing to be ordinary human beings, is not human, which deprives
them of any ability to connect with the protagonists in positive ways.

The fairy godmother figures can also be seen as other-worldly because they are
largely unknown until the end of the work. The presence of the goddess Diana does not
appear until the end of the film, where she demonstrates her power over Avenant; the identity
and secrets of Bertha Mason are a mystery until the end of the book, when Rochester takes
Jane to her room in the attic; and the persona of Mrs. Bates is unknown until Lila discovers
her corpse in the basement cellar along with Norman, dressed up and wielding a knife. Before
the female forces are revealed in *Jane Eyre* and *Psycho*, they are perceived only as a
mysterious presence; Bertha appears as a demonic laugh or a scrape against a door, and Mrs.
Bates is seen as a silhouette in windows or as a figure cast in shadows. Thus, they are “never
seen until the climax yet everywhere present” (Greven 167). The suspense leading up to the
revealing of these fairy godmother figures suggests their power; they reveal their identities to
the other characters—and to audience members—when they choose. While the Beast and
Belle figures are familiar to the audiences and also to each other, the fairy godmother role is
mysterious, making her identity seem more like the “other.”

It is also significant that these forces are not male; they are female. Because of this, a
unique tension is created between the female force and the Belle and Beast figures. Whenever
the female force “sees” the Beast figure, his patriarchal role is threatened and he loses his
power. This penetrating gaze is commonly theorized and analyzed as “implicitly male [and]
implicitly patriarchal,” where “the possessor of the gaze, a man who sees a woman, is in the position of power” (Williams 108–09). However, in these hypertexts, the female force creates a system of power where she has the authority, making herself the “I” and the Belle and Beast figures the “other.”

This is evident in each hypertext. When Avenant smashes his way into Diana’s pavilion, a place that even the Beast cannot enter, Diana “sees” him and shoots him with an arrow that transforms him into a Beast. He is seen as a threat to Diana’s power, and consequently, she exerts her power over him in order to preserve the magic and power in her temple. In Jane Eyre, when Rochester takes Jane into the attic to view Bertha Mason, Jane recounts that upon entering the room, “the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet,” and in response, Grace exclaims, “‘Ah! sir, she sees you! . . . you’d better not stay’” (Brontë 559). Similar to Avenant entering Diana’s pavilion, Rochester invades the realm of Bertha Mason. As soon as she “sees” him, she demonstrates her dominance by rising up and standing tall, preparing to attack her husband. Her powerful gaze reaffirms her power over Rochester, especially because her existence prevents Rochester from marrying the woman he loves. In Psycho, while Norman Bates observes Marion through the secret hole in his wall, the mind of Mrs. Bates simultaneously “sees” him spying on a woman he is attracted to. Out of jealousy, she later kills Marion—the Belle figure—vicariously through Norman to suppress her son’s sexual attraction and to preserve the attachment she has with his mind and body. In this situation, Mrs. Bates’ gaze controls Norman’s life and his agency, which reinforces her matriarchal power.

The “female gaze” is apparent in the fairy godmother figures’ physical locations as well. They always reside in locations that are geographically higher or more important than the rest of their surroundings. The goddess Diana resides in a sacred temple that no one can enter, and her magic housed in the temple pervades everything throughout the castle grounds.
Because of this, her position of power is above Belle’s and the Beast’s. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is housed in the attic. The attic is positioned above Jane and Rochester, giving Bertha the vantage point to “see” what occurs in the house and to exert power over Jane and Rochester. Mrs. Bates assumes a similar position in *Psycho*. The secret of her and Norman’s identities is kept in the house that looms over the Bates Motel. Her vantage point also grants her the ability to “see” the events that occur below her within the hotel. These positions all harness the fairy godmother figures’ power and allow them to exert their female gaze. Robert Samuels explains the role of the gaze and the object of the gaze within this geographical setting: “As an ego of consciousness, I decide what I want to look at and what I want to see (I have only one point of view), but as an object of the look or gaze of the Other, I am looked at from all angles” (110). The Belle and Beast characters have only one point of view where they can see the location of the female force. However, the female force resides in a location that gives her hierarchy over her surroundings. She sees the Belle and Beast figures “from all angles” and consequentially knows how to undermine their power.

The role of the fairy godmother figure is also subverted because each female force conflicts with the Belle figure, undermining her ability to break the Beast’s enchantment. The female figure also threatens the Beast figure’s ability to truly love, thus creating a triangle of tension that reinforces the power of the female force. In the first example of *La Belle et la Bête*, the goddess Diana harnesses powerful magic in a pavilion on the Beast’s castle grounds. The Beast describes it to Belle as “the only place in my domain where no one may enter—not you, not I” (Cocteau). All the Beast possesses comes from magic, and no one can safely enter Diana’s pavilion until the Beast is dead. Because Diana is the goddess of the hunt, beasts, and virginity, it is understandable when she shoots Avenant as he violates her sanctuary. However, her act is detrimental to Belle.
In the original story, it is the power of Belle’s speech—her confession of desperate love—that transforms the Beast. But Cocteau’s version effectively interrupts the words of Belle (Josette Day) with a visual crosscutting pattern that alternates between the Beast’s dying soliloquy and Avenant’s invasion of Diana’s temple. (Erb 54)

Here, Erb describes how the focus is not on Belle and the Beast; it is on the Beast and Avenant. Avenant’s act of violating Diana’s temple is crucial because without it, the Beast may have died and never transformed into a prince. Though Belle confesses her love to the Beast, her words are useless in saving him. Instead, the Beast’s transformation results from the interaction between Diana and Avenant. While Belle may have had power over magic in the original story, it is not the case in Cocteau’s version. The goddess Diana clearly controls the enchantment on the Beast and Avenant, and causes it to reverse according to her own terms. Though Belle receives her Prince Charming, she does so from coincidence. She is merely the bystander, not the instigator.

Diana also negatively impacts the Beast. When she transforms him, he takes on the appearance of Avenant, a change that he cannot control. Though the Beast’s new image is clean, noble, and good-natured, the previous memories of a reckless and irresponsible Avenant taint the Beast’s new image. Belle also seems conflicted; the man she once rejected is now her beloved Beast. Charles Altman conveys the conflict when he says, “At the very point when we have come to appreciate Beast’s beastliness, we are asked to transfer our affections to a rather colorless Prince Charming” (658). Throughout the film, the audience becomes acquainted with the Beast and then falls in love with him, just as Belle does. But when he transforms into Avenant, the Beast becomes unfamiliar to the audience and to Belle; both parties are unsure whether they still love him. Because of this, Diana prevents the Beast and Belle’s love from reaching its full potential. Although “Prince Charming has completed the transformation necessary to win Beauty’s love . . . we can’t help but wonder whether the
price was not too high. Diana the huntress has killed the very aspect of Beast which made him so attractive” (Altman 659). Again, Diana demonstrates total power over the fate of the Beast and Belle. Instead of the two having power over their own love, Diana ultimately creates a conflict between them by determining the human appearance of the Beast.

Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre similarly undermines Jane’s power and influence at Thornfield. Although Bertha does not use magic like the goddess Diana, she does have a madness and mysteriousness that makes her power unpredictable. When Jane begins to fall in love with Rochester, she is unaware of the secret that burdens him. When she finally learns of the secret on the day of their wedding, she realizes that she is in a form of bondage; she and Rochester love each other, but there is no moral way for them to be together while the female force is present. In this way, the Belle figure’s proclamation of love is again “effectively interrupted” by the fairy godmother figure. Even though her love for Rochester softens his heart and causes him to be less beastlike, her words fail to release him from Bertha, the “enchantment” that binds him to a beastlike form. Because of this, Jane’s conscience demands that she “Leave Thornfield at once,” even though the idea that she “must leave him decidedly, instantly, entirely, is intolerable” (Brontë 567). Jane comes to realize that she cannot live at Thornfield because the female force possesses the ultimate power and influence. Even though Jane is a strong character that knows how to speak her mind and assert her opinion, her power does not match Bertha’s. Ultimately, Bertha is the one to release the Beast from his form once she dies. Although Jane can have a moral relationship with Rochester after Bertha’s death, her proclamations of love have done nothing to release the Beast from his “enchantment”; the enchantment is contingent on Bertha.

Bertha Mason also undermines Rochester’s life and ability to love, even more so than she does for Jane. Rochester is bound to his wife, not only legally through marriage, but also by his taking care of her, keeping her a secret, and being unable to have a successful
relationship with Jane. His wife’s presence constantly haunts him. However, he is also
imprisoned in other ways that restrict his ability to love Jane.

[Rochester] is imprisoned not only by his marriage to Bertha, but by his passions—the
same passions which led him into the marriage in the first place, drove him into his
subsequent dissipations, and now, however tempered, sinfully lead him to tempt Jane
into bigamy, and, when that fails, to propose that she become his mistress. (Hagan
357)

Because of his imprisonment to his passions, Rochester fails to give Jane the love she
requires: one that is not in violation with the law of God. Bertha embodies those passions,
appearing as Rochester’s “grotesque alter ego—a hideous mirror of his own licentiousness”
(Hagan 357, emphasis in original). Bertha represents the consequences of Rochester’s past
actions and continually reminds Rochester of his enslavement to her, the equivalent of those
passions. This prevents him from being able to genuinely love Jane within a healthy, moral
marriage.

The final example, Psycho, is an extreme example of the dark fairy godmother figure
having power over the Belle and Beast figures. Within the movie, the Belle figure, Marion,
meets Norman Bates at the Bates motel. Although she is not in love with Norman, their
dinner exchange in his office conveys friendliness and vulnerability. Norman learns that
Marion is running away from something, and Marion learns about Norman’s stressed
relationship with his mother. Norman explains that he sometimes feels trapped but doesn’t
mind it anymore, after which Marion tells him, “Oh, but you should. You should mind it”
(Hitchcock). Even this small exchange, a proclamation of friendliness and vulnerability, is
interrupted by the female force. Despite Marion’s attempts to free Norman from his bondage
with some advice, Mrs. Bates silences her forever by murdering her in the shower. Because
Marion (and later Lila) threatens Norman’s relationship with Mrs. Bates, she undercuts her
power by murdering her. This uncommon action of killing the female protagonist exemplifies Mrs. Bates full control and influence over the “enchantment” binding the Beast.

More importantly, Mrs. Bates overpowers the Beast character, Norman, and controls his sexuality along with how others love him. This is apparent when Mrs. Bates is both alive and dead. While she is still alive, Norman is unable to love because he is constantly jealous of his mother’s attention; he does not truly love his clinging mother, but desires her, especially once she finds a lover. After Norman murders Mrs. Bates and keeps her body, her presence in turn becomes jealous whenever he is attracted to other women, and she desires him. Her power over Norman’s conscience is what ultimately turns Norman into a beast.

Norman embodies two personalities: his own and his mother’s. When Norman is himself, he is pleasant and friendly. Because he is both attractive and considerate when Marion comes to the hotel, characters and audiences alike don’t suspect him to be internally beastlike. But the female force overwhelms what sense he does have. In the film, the psychiatrist explains, “You see, when the mind houses two personalities, there’s always a conflict, a battle. In Norman’s case, the battle is over . . . and the dominant personality has won” (Hitchcock). Just like the goddess Diana in La Belle et la Bête kills the characteristics that makes the Beast attractive, Mrs. Bates kills the Beast figure’s attractiveness by suppressing his freedom and sexuality. Though his physical demeanor may seem pleasant, Mrs. Bates influence forces his mind to become beastlike, which eventually undoes him.

The adaptations La Belle et la Bête, Jane Eyre, and Psycho all introduce the idea of a dark fairy godmother figure that controls the Beast’s enchantment and conflicts with the Belle and Beast figures. But why make the choice to include this figure, especially when the original text doesn’t include any such female figure? Though these examined hypertexts differ in several ways from the original Beauty and the Beast text, the common theme of the dark fairy godmother force offers unique insights on the change in fairy tale culture.
Adaptations, though often created for economic gain, are also used to “engage in a larger social or cultural critique” (Hutcheon 94). In a culture where the fairy godmother has always been good, kind, and uplifting, these adaptations force audiences to consider the influence of dark fairy godmother forces who do not bring about good. More modern fairy tales, not always just adaptations of Beauty and the Beast, are increasingly implementing this new idea of twisting plots and forcing audiences to think. Modern works like Gail Carson Levin’s Ella Enchanted “[rework] the traditional Cinderella tale in a way that subverts the traditional dependence on fairy godmothers and the magic they wield” (“Disenchanting”). Other works, like the ones from Angela Carter’s The Bloody Chamber, have subverted traditional fairy tales in other ways, adding elements of the Gothic.

These new ideas did not just occur on their own. Ultimately, the adaptations La Belle et la Bête, Jane Eyre, and Psycho, all filmed and circulated in the 1940s and 1960s, experimented with the fairy godmother role in a way that anticipated an evolution of fairy godmother figures and the dark, subverted side of femininity and virtue. When compared, these hypertexts show a drastic increase in power from the goddess Diana, to Bertha Mason, and finally to the disturbing Mrs. Bates, opening up a door for even more unique and subverted ideas for other adaptations of influential and powerful female roles in the future.
Works Cited


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