



4-2020

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Lee, Erin (2020) "Curing Beauty's Stockholm Syndrome," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol13/iss1/13>

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Curing Beauty's Stockholm Syndrome

Erin Lee

While *Beauty and the Beast* is a well-known and well-loved fairy tale, popular culture often diagnoses the heroine with Stockholm syndrome. Beauty (or Belle) is frequently seen as a typical damsel in distress, a poor girl who falls for a cruel captor and has no independence or personality of her own—a depiction of the feminine that is horrifying to modern consumers of the tale. This accusation does hold some merit towards older versions of the story. However, in more modern versions (particularly the most popular adaptations, Disney's films), the relationship between Beauty and her beast is altered for a new audience, creating a space for the two to truly fall in love. The beast becomes a gentler soul trapped in his cursed form, and Beauty is given not only a greater support system but a vibrantly independent personality. Disney also adds the character of Gaston as the Beast's foil, showing through contrast the sincerity of Beauty's relationship with the Beast, Beauty's independence, and her ability to take control of her own life. Analyzing several adaptations of this tale over the centuries since it was first written, particularly the addition of Gaston as a foil for the beast, shows that *Beauty and the Beast* has been transformed into a tale of a woman finding and choosing love rather than that of a victim suffering from Stockholm syndrome.

In order to understand Beauty's diagnosis of Stockholm syndrome, one must understand the history of the term. It was coined in 1973 after a hostage

situation during a bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden. The situation resulted in a surprising bond between the hostages and their captors. One victim, Kristen, speaking to the police while being held captive, said:

I fully trust Clark and the robber [Olsson]. I am not desperate. They haven't done a thing to us. On the contrary, they have been very nice. But, you know, Olof, what I am scared of is that the police will attack us and cause us to die . . . [Olsson] is sitting in here and he is protecting us from the police.
(Graham 5)

The victims' perception of reality became twisted, and they bonded to their captors as a way to cope with their six-day imprisonment and as a means to ensure their own survival. In fact, this quote was recorded on the second day of their captivity, showing how quickly their symptoms developed. Kristen later is quoted saying, "If someone likes you, he won't kill you" (9). This emotional accommodation led to some sympathy and improved treatment from their captors. The positive feelings of the hostages towards the criminals persisted after the incident ended, though all four of them did testify against their captors in court six months later (however, their apparent recovery is complicated by the fact that years later "two of the woman hostages became engaged to the two captors" [11]). Stockholm syndrome, then, is the twisting of reality where the captors become the "good guys" and the rescuers are the threat. Such a mentally traumatized (and possibly physically abused) victim "needs nurturance and protection, and because the victim is isolated from others, he or she must turn to the abuser for nurturance and protection" (38). Thus, a victim of Stockholm syndrome must be deprived of every system of support beyond his or her abuser. Certain other conditions are also necessary, including an inability or lack of desire to escape (particularly if escaping would pose a threat to the captor), a knowledge of a threat to his or her life as well as the captor's ability to carry out said threat, and the captor showing small moments of kindness or restraint while abusing the victim (Graham 33). If a majority of these conditions are met, then the victim can safely be assumed to be suffering from Stockholm syndrome.

As for the history of *Beauty and the Beast*, it can be traced back to the Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche; however, the version most commonly known was first penned in 1740 by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. Her tale was then adapted by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont (1756) and Andrew Lang (1889), and their works became more well-known than

Villeneuve's writing. Since then, the tale has been remade many times, both directly and indirectly. Direct adaptations contain certain essential elements, as explored below. Indirect adaptations include titles such as *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), *Shrek* (2001), the webcomic *Lore Olympus* (ongoing), and *The Tiger's Bride* (1979). These twist the original story in various ways: in *Seven Brides*, the curse is not magical but rather the behaviour of the men is beastly and they must learn to be civilized; in *Shrek*, it is the princess who is cursed. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will set aside indirect adaptations in favor of more closely investigating a select number of direct adaptations of the tale.

Direct adaptations, as defined here, are required to contain certain commonalities with Villeneuve's original story. These include a main character with the name of "Beauty" (or "Belle," which is simply French for "beauty") and a man who is cursed with a terrible, bestial form until he gains the love of a woman. In each telling, Beauty's father must stumble upon the Beast's domain, traditionally a castle, while lost in the woods. Beauty must then trade her life for her father's and promise to remain with the Beast forever. Eventually, Beauty must beg to return home (the reasons why vary) and the Beast, who is now in love with her, must let her go (the permanence of this release also varies). After seeing her family, Beauty must return to the Beast and find him near death, at which point she expresses her love for him and breaks the curse. The lovers marry and—presumably—live happily ever after. These elements from Villeneuve's original are also found in Beaumont and Lang's versions of the tale. Other direct adaptations that fit these qualifications include Robin McKinley's two retellings, *Beauty* (1978) and *Rose Daughter* (1997), the animated Disney film *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) on which the Broadway musical was based, a French film *La Belle et la Bête* (2014), and Disney's live-action adaptation of its 1991 film, also titled *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). Though there are certainly more adaptations that would qualify, these illustrate the most important steps in the story's evolution. Each of these adaptations will be analyzed for Stockholm syndrome in what is more or less chronological order, showing how the symptoms of Stockholm syndrome have gradually vanished from the tale as it has been adapted for modern audiences. The new versions of Beauty instead display feminine independence, determination, and, of course, a healthy romantic relationship based on trust and friendship.

Beauty's first incarnations are almost textbook examples of Stockholm syndrome. Villeneuve's original shows Beauty as terrified of the monster holding her captive. His physical appearance is particularly horrifying—he possesses scales, fur, and a "kind of trunk" (Villeneuve), nothing like the furry humanoid of modern adaptations. Though he is outwardly kind, he is slow and a bit gruff. He still holds her captive in his domain, and after dinner each evening, which he demands she eat with him, he asks her, "May I sleep with you to-night?" (Villeneuve). Beauty refuses each night and fears each night that his calm facade will break and his wrath will be the end of her. Despite her efforts to remain independent, the lack of outside support leaves her especially vulnerable, and those who she thought would support her only encourage her to give in to the Beast. These include a handsome prince in her dreams (who she claims to love, though she has never met him and knows nothing about him), a fairy that also appears in her dreams, and her father, all of whom urge her to "love who loves you" (Villeneuve), to not focus on appearances, and to repay the Beast's kindness by accepting his proposal. Beauty is told, essentially, that her feelings do not matter; she must sacrifice her own personhood to repay the Beast's "kindness."

This is what leads to her development of Stockholm syndrome. She is, from her point of view, left with no other choice but to give into the Beast. Though he has not been outwardly cruel, that does not change the fact that Beauty is his captive—even if her father and the individuals in her dreams do not seem to think so. Bereft of strength, she has no recourse but to turn to her captor for comfort, feeling bound to what she sees as her duty, though her heart belongs to the prince in her dreams. Of course, it turns out prince and beast are one and the same, and Beauty is a long-lost princess of an idyllic nation. In the end, the two are wed. This picturesque ending does not change that Beauty, stuck with a terrifying and physically monstrous captor, alone and bereft of support, is forced into affection for the Beast through both necessity and pressure from those who ought to have protected her. She is denied her own humanity and right of choice in favor of satisfying the Beast. Martin Symonds said this of the mental state of hostages who develop Stockholm syndrome:

Frozen fright develops as the hostage comes out of shock and begins to perceive the reality of the situation. In frozen fright, hostages are affectively paralyzed, enabling them to focus their cognitive and motor functions solely on survival, with concentration centered on the terrorist. In this state

the hostage responds to the captor with cooperative, friendly behavior. As this state continues and the hostages are still not rescued, they will feel overwhelmed and develop traumatic psychological infantilism wherein they respond to the captor with appeasement, submission, ingratiation, cooperation, and empathy. As captivity continues and the hostages are still alive, they will begin to perceive the captor as giving their lives back to them. (Graham 27)

Were it not for Beauty's development of Stockholm syndrome, the sheer horror of the situation may have driven her mad. Stockholm syndrome in this adaptation is not only Beauty's way of staying alive, but of staying sane.

Beaumont and Lang tell much the same story, though simpler, cutting out the revelations of Beauty's royal origins and the detailed account of how the curse came to pass (which takes up nearly half of Villeneuve's original). The moments which most vividly display Beauty's Stockholm syndrome in these three adaptations come in the final seconds of the curse, when the Beast is close to death. "You must not die; live to be my husband," she begs. "For I thought I had only a friendship for you, but the grief I feel now convinces me that I cannot live without you" (Beaumont). Though the event itself is necessary for a retelling to qualify as a direct adaptation, the way it is handled along with the other aspects of the story show the Stockholm syndrome present in the Beauty of this particular version. Note that she claims to have had no romantic feelings for the Beast, only friendship. She is no longer scared of him, nor does she love him. Rather, her feelings and her admission of them are motivated by pity and fear of harm befalling her captor, as the original Stockholm victims feared for the bank robbers who held them hostage—Symonds' traumatic psychological infantilism in action (Graham 27). Beauty has come to perceive the Beast as a force for good, as "giving [her life] back to [her]" (27), and so her Stockholm syndrome causes her to believe she loves the beast who held her captive.

In the adaptations by Beaumont and Lang, Beauty's affection for the Beast comes from the same source as the Stockholm victims' affection for their captors: the need to survive. Her own will and her own humanity are subordinated, both by the Beast and by her own mind, in order to ensure that she can live through her captivity and that she can conform to what she has been taught is her duty. Graham describes these mental developments:

Because the victim's very survival is at stake, she or he becomes hypervigilant to the abuser's needs, feelings, and perspectives. Thus, not only is the victim

compliant, but actively working to anticipate the needs of the abuser. Her or his own needs (other than survival), feelings, and perspectives must take second place to those of the abuser. In addition, the victim's needs (other than survival), feelings, and perspectives only seem to get in the way of the victim's doing what is necessary for survival (they are, after all, feelings of terror). (Graham 38)

Belle puts the Beast's needs and desires ahead of her own as a means of survival in a society where her freedom to choose has been taken. This is both a very sexist view of romance and marriage and an extreme case of Stockholm syndrome. A victimized Beauty, subjected to a romance she does not want, is a remnant from a past where marriages were arranged without the will of the woman involved—where matrimony was a negotiation between men over, essentially, property. Women were not allowed their own voices. Twenty-first century American society in particular looks on this remnant of the past with horror. Imagine if a father forced his teenage daughter to live with a gangster who regularly propositioned her until she agreed to marry him. Many people would correctly see that as sexual harassment bordering on slavery and sex trafficking. Not only is it extremely unhealthy for Beauty, it also dehumanizes her. The original tale, then, is no longer entirely suitable for modern audiences, because of its subjugation of females and its refusal to depict Beauty as a human being rather than a commodity for marriage.

Robin McKinley wrote the next two notable direct adaptations, about twenty years apart: one in 1978 titled *Beauty* and another in 1997 titled *Rose Daughter*. Interestingly, while *Beauty* contains elements of Stockholm syndrome, *Rose Daughter* does not. In *Beauty*, the heroine comes to the castle terrified. Though luxuries surround her, she is heartbroken by the fact that she may never see her family again and terrified by the Beast's nightly proposals. She attempts to find solace in magical pastimes but cannot. Furthermore, the Beast occasionally uses his magic to command the invisible servants that wait upon Beauty's every need, which terrifies her most of all. This magic is a reminder of the power the Beast has over Beauty, whether or not he intends it to be so. Despite all of this, Beauty begins to spend time with him, seeking "nurturance and protection" (Graham 38) from her captor because there is no other solace to be found. In this way, *Beauty* follows the tradition of its fellow older adaptations.

Rose Daughter, on the other hand, portrays Beauty at peace in her captivity. Although Beauty misses her family, she creates her own solace in gardening,

particularly in nursing a greenhouse of roses back to health. Though she has no outer support system, she builds an inner one, and in doing so, opens a space to develop a healthy relationship with the Beast based on mutual interests. McKinley also offers a twist on the story's end in *Rose Daughter*—rather than the Beast becoming a handsome man and the two living in his castle, the Beast remains a Beast and goes to live with Beauty in the small town where her family resides. Notably, Beauty chose this simple life over a life of luxury and magic—chosen for both her and the Beast. Beauty is the catalyst in this retelling, rather than a subordinate to the Beast's desires. In *Beauty*, the heroine's fate and her story are in the Beast's control, but in *Rose Daughter*, Beauty takes the reins and makes her own happiness, thus avoiding the Stockholm syndrome of her predecessor. By leaving out the elements of the story that created Stockholm syndrome and offering Beauty an outside source of impartial support, Beauty is given a voice and made into an active force in her own story rather than someone to be acted upon by the men around her. The Beauty of *Rose Daughter* does not respond to the Beast with “cooperative . . . behavior” (Graham 27), though she is still courteous. She goes her own way rather than giving in to the trauma of being imprisoned. It is no accident that McKinley's newer telling contains less Stockholm syndrome and that her second Beauty is a woman of more modern sensibilities.

There exists, however, at least one exception to the idea that newer adaptations do not contain Stockholm syndrome as the original does. The 2014 French film *La Belle et la Bête* contains the heroine that quite possibly suffers the most from Stockholm syndrome. In this retelling, it is made very clear to the viewer that Belle is a captive. During her three-day sojourn in the castle, the Beast threatens and terrifies her on multiple occasions. In the most notable of these confrontations, he leaps across their dinner table, gets in her face, and tells her that she will eventually be his no matter how she resists. The overtones of sexual violence are obvious, and although Belle maintains an outward show of strength, she is clearly scared. This scene shows that the Beast does not see her as fully human but as an object to be forced to submit to his desires. His bestial nature also horrifies her, particularly in the scene when she stumbles upon his room as he eats, tearing into a raw carcass with claws and teeth—the implied threat is that she could be next.

Yet Belle is still drawn to the Beast since she has no other support, for no one else lives in the castle. Each night she dreams of the handsome king

who became the Beast. Through these dreams, she learns how the curse came to be and that her love could break it. Belle bears a striking resemblance to this king's former queen, and this resemblance, combined with the way the dreams depict the king, seem to instill a sort of debt into Belle—either to the Beast or to this unknown woman that could have been her sister. Even Belle's dreams are pressuring her to love the Beast. She receives no rest and no support, only this pressure and the fear of her captor. One characteristic of sufferers of Stockholm syndrome is that "the victim . . . works to keep the abuser happy, becoming hypersensitive to the abuser's moods and needs" (Graham 38). Thus her dreams can be seen as a manifestation of her development of Stockholm Syndrome, despite their magical nature. These dreams also contain sexual overtones. One depicts a ball, at which the king announces the queen's pregnancy, and the two dance. The following day, Belle offers the Beast a dance in exchange for a few hours with her family—a semi-sexual favor, given to her abuser, in a final attempt to seek outside support. Yet, upon arriving home, she finds that her eldest brother is pursued by a band of thieves, and those thieves raid the Beast's castle. Enraged, the Beast fights back with giant stone soldiers. Belle arrives just in time to stop one such soldier from crushing her eldest brother. This creates another sort of debt between them; she owes him for her brother's life now, which adds to what she feels she owes him already in honor of the woman in her dreams. The Beast is wounded by the thieves during the battle. Belle and her brothers carry him to a fountain of healing water within the castle, a task made infinitely more difficult by the fact that every plant on the grounds has sprung to life and is trying to kill them. It is only Belle's confession of love for the Beast that stops the assault.

As a confession drawn out by fear of death (mutually Belle's, her family's, and the Beast's), it cannot be a confession of true feeling. First of all, words drawn out under duress are extremely suspect: one of the main indicators of Stockholm syndrome is a "perceived threat to survival" (Graham 33). Belle's fear and horror of the Beast are completely ignored and shoved aside, as if such things do not matter in the face of "true love." In reality, love comes without fear and terror. If the Beast loved her truly, he would not threaten her or keep her captive. He would not demand that she marry him. And if Belle did grow to love the Beast, it would have to be in an environment where she would feel safe refusing him. One of the vital elements of consent is "having the option of saying no" as well as not being "under duress, threat,

coercion, or force" ("What is Consent?"). Instead, Belle has followed the path of Villeneuve's beauty, and, under coercion, fear, and a need to survive, has convinced herself that the Beast is "giving [her life] back to [her]" (27). Though the film uses a similar ending to McKinley's *Rose Daughter* (different in that the Beast does transform back into a man), that does not change the fact that Belle's affection for the Beast sprung from the wrong source—terror, abuse, and threat of death.

La Belle et la Bete is a confusing adaptation to analyze. This film, though recent, is not American as the other adaptations are; it is French, the same as Villeneuve's work. Though the two adaptations share a country of origin, enough details are altered from the original that tradition was obviously not a major concern. Additionally, for 2014, a film depicting Stockholm syndrome seems rather odd. Belle is literally terrified into agreeing to marry the Beast. Yet this Belle is not as passive as Villeneuve's heroine, still maintaining her outward confidence even when she is scared. She actively explores the Beast's domain, coming upon him eating his own bestial meal, and defends her family in the face of the Beast's magical defenses. These are positive changes from the original; however, they do not change the Stockholm-esque relationship between Belle and the Beast.

Fortunately, this is not the most well-known adaptation of the fairy tale—that accolade goes to the 1991 Disney animated film (later adapted into a Broadway musical) and the subsequent 2017 live-action remake. Although the two films are much the same (and will be treated equally in most instances), there are a few key differences between them that will be addressed when relevant. Disney, out of all the direct adaptations, changes the story the most. First, the rose serves as the instrument of the enchantment rather than the cause of Belle's captivity (in the 2017 film it is both); second, Belle's father, rather than a wealthy merchant, is a kooky inventor; third, Belle is an only child; and fourth, the Beast's servants are neither invisible nor speechless but rather living household objects, once human, but changed by the curse. The servants play a vital role in the elimination of Stockholm syndrome from the story and have a much bigger role than in any previous adaptations. In fact, the movie is as much about their redemption as it is about Belle and the Beast, particularly in Disney's 2017 film, where they even receive their own song. These servants offer Belle the company and support system that is lacking in Villeneuve's original tale. They give her a nice room, feed her a luxurious dinner (complete with one of the movie's most

well-known musical numbers), and then lead her on a tour of the castle. The most important aspect of these kindnesses is that they are done outside of the Beast's authority and against his wishes—the servants act solely to comfort Belle as she grieves her freedom. That is what makes their support system valid and not just an extension of the original Stockholm syndrome. "The victim's isolation from persons other than the captor/abuser is ideological and usually also physical in nature" (Graham 35). Though Belle is physically isolated from her family in the Beast's castle, she is not ideologically isolated thanks to the support of these magically-transformed servants. Belle, too, is different than her original incarnation—she is somewhat of an outcast and an oddity in the village where she and her father live. She is a bookworm in a society where educated women are frowned upon. In the 2017 version, the villagers actually harm her by throwing her laundry in the dirt because she dares to start teaching a girl to read. This aspect of her character helps her relate to the Beast and also to the enchanted servants—it is the "adventure in the great wide somewhere" that she's always wanted (1991).

However, there is more to Disney's adaptation than dancing candlesticks and talking teapots. Disney makes one vital addition to the story—Gaston. This character, not present in the original story, serves as a foil for the modernized Beast. As a typical "tall, dark, strong, and handsome brute" (1991), he sees himself as the manliest of men and would never stoop to admitting a fault. The other villagers nearly worship him, and local girls fawn for his attention. Yet, he only desires Belle—not for who she is, but because she is the prettiest. And, as he says to his lackey, "That makes her the best! And don't I deserve the best?" (1991). He pays no attention to Belle's interests except to disrespect them (like using her book as a footrest). When Belle turns down his proposal, Gaston exploits her love for her father: he pays a man to lock Belle's father in an asylum unless she marries him. Even the man he pays agrees this is despicable (in the 2017 film, this action is a coverup for some of Gaston's more despicable choices; nevertheless, he does try to use the situation to win Belle over and eventually throws her in the cart with her father). Belle's only reason to consider marrying Gaston is to gain reputation in their village and (in the 2017 film) to avoid becoming an old maid (women without men in their homes, in the 2017 version, are shown as beggars). Gaston is the man that dehumanizes Belle in this version of the story and if, within that marriage—a form of captivity—she convinced herself that she loved Gaston, that could be a type of Stockholm syndrome.

In contrast, the Beast pays attention to Belle's hobbies and interests; he doesn't ignore her beauty, but it is not all he cares about. The Beast shows Belle his library, and, upon seeing how much she loves it, he offers it to her with no strings attached. He also is able to admit imperfection. In a particularly illuminating scene in the animated film, Belle teaches the Beast to feed birds from his hands (or paws). The Beast, overeager, requires some correction and Belle's example before he is able to succeed, but he shows no sign of being embarrassed by his need for help. Eventually, a whole flock of birds settles on his shoulders. Two important aspects of this Beast are on display here: first, that he is not humiliated when Belle knows more than he even though she is a woman; and second, that animals trust him (despite the fact that he is a predator). The latter is a common indicator of purity of heart in Disney movies. In the 2017 version, this scene is replaced with Belle helping the Beast approach and befriend her horse. In a slightly comical, extremely vulnerable, and quite endearing moment, the Beast imitates the horse's nicker—something Gaston would never be caught dead doing. The Beast, then, is far more human than Gaston despite his outward appearance, and genuinely cares for Belle, whereas Gaston has a bestial character and cares only about himself.

The final battle between Gaston and the Beast puts the contrast between them on full display. Where Gaston is aggressive, attacking and taunting and threatening, the Beast only moves defensively—barely even that—until Belle arrives, sees Gaston about to kill the Beast, and cries out in fear. The Beast fights back then, but not for his own sake—for Belle's. Notably in the 2017 film, the Beast puts only enough effort into fighting Gaston to allow the Beast to continue making his way to where Belle waits, indicating he cares nothing for the battle. Gaston, on the other hand, has his worth as a man riding on the fight. He persists until the Beast is forced to defeat him completely. The Beast holds Gaston's life in his hands, literally, dangling him over an abyss, but rather than kill him, the Beast simply demands that he leave before returning him to sturdy ground. He then turns his back on Gaston, trusting in honor. But Gaston, unlike the Beast, has no honor. He stabs (or shoots, in the 2017 film) the Beast in the back. It is this action that causes Gaston to fall to his death—ironically, if he had kept his word, he would have survived. It was his need to be the best that caused his fall. The Beast's honorable nature is what causes his injuries, but it is also what wins him Belle's heart. The Beast's last words are to Belle: "At least I got to see you one last time" (1991). In that

moment, Belle admits her love for him, the curse is broken, and his wounds are magically healed—because of his honor and his love for Belle as much as because of her genuine love for him. Importantly, Belle recognizes that this newly human man is her Beast by looking deep into his eyes—the windows to the soul. Thus, through the entire storyline, the character of Gaston shows by contrast that the Beast has a good heart beneath his rough exterior. Where Gaston has social power, money, and peers on his side, the Beast has nothing. Where Gaston attempts to pressure Belle into loving him, the Beast simply tries to be her friend. This Beauty and Beast fall in love without Stockholm syndrome, through common interests and their shared status as outcasts from society.

The original Beauty of *Beauty and the Beast* did suffer from Stockholm syndrome. She developed feelings for the Beast under duress, alone and unsupported, rather than through genuine connection. However, as the story has been altered for modern audiences, elements of Stockholm syndrome have all but vanished. Importantly, the versions of *Beauty and the Beast* that are most widely known—the two Disney films—change the original story to create a genuine relationship between Belle and the Beast. They give Belle a support system and create a foil for the Beast’s goodness in the form of Gaston. They provide Belle with history, personality, and a friend in the form of the Beast—both of them outcasts, the Beast for his cursed form and Belle for her love for books. Disney’s 2017 live-action film only improved what their 1991 animated feature began—a story where Belle, or Beauty, is more than just a pretty face.

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