Beastly Beauties and Beautiful Beasts

In Angela Carter’s lushly corrupted fairy-tales, her heroines struggle to form identities that they are truly able to call their own. Even as they are trapped by the limitations of a general patriarchal society which legitimize only male desires, no matter how perverse, and consistently denies the prospect of female sexuality, and are locked into specific damning and damaging relationships with repressive males, these heroines are able to accomplish their goals by both manipulating the rules of patriarchy and, also, by dismissing societal conventions and creating a new order that is not informed by such limiting traditions. Rather than illustrating men as metonymical examples of the patriarchal society at large, Carter allows many of her heroines to develop their identity through their relationships with these men, to the benefit of both parties.

In her rewritings of the classic Beauty and the Beast theme, “The Tiger’s Bride” and “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” Carter allows her damsels in distress to merely be play-acting, at both being a damsel and being in distress. Their very femininity is a performance. As Joanne Trevenna points out, Carter’s work often presents a distinct division between sex and gender, the former does not necessarily preclude the latter, as a person is able to acquire and perform gender as an actor is able to acquire and perform a character (Trevenna 269). Furthermore, such gender development is “overt and self-conscious,” relying heavily on both outward appearance and performed actions (Trevenna 269-70). In his analysis of Carter’s novel *Wise Children*, Michael Hardin likewise explains how the only signifiers for maleness and femaleness are necessarily “superficial” decorations when sexuality and sexual organs are so hidden (Hardin 79).

This trope of theatrically performed gender is further elaborated on in Soňa Šnircová’s analysis of the mask of femininity. Through the exaggerated use of make-up and decoration, Carter’s characters are able to literally mask themselves and assume an entirely different image,
an entirely new self. This mask of femininity most frequently appears in one of two guises, that of the “sexual passivity of a doll-woman” or that of the “active role of an irresistible temptress” (Šnircová 12). However, each of these disguises, Šnircová claims, objectifies the wearer, alienates her from her true self, and further traps her in the control of patriarchy, as it is nothing but the projection of male desire (10).

While this is certainly a valid argument, the most grotesquely made-up and doll-like character in Carter’s Beauty and the Beast reinterpretations, the automaton given to the Tiger’s Bride, is exactly that, a doll. The maid given to Beauty, a distorted duplicate of herself, holds “a looking glass in one hand and a powder puff in the other” (Tiger’s 162). Although her mechanic twin brandishes the instruments of the mask of femininity, Beauty herself rejects them. The rouge makes her cough and sneeze and the mirror reflects not her own image, but that of her debased father (Tiger’s 162). She refuses to allow herself to be objectified by her captor’s desires.

Even as she plays the victim, Beauty maintains a curious sort of autonomy. Even as the Beast’s requests to watch her disrobe, it is she who holds the power of the gaze, stating, “my eyes were level with those inside the mask that now evaded mine” (Tiger’s 161). Now with her authority over the Beast in place, she negotiates the terms of her rape. She demands for it to occur in “a windowless room” with no lights at all, for her face and upper body to be covered by a sheet, and for it to occur only once (161). Although she is the victim of the patriarchy that has thrown her into so compromising a position, she is not helpless. She is able to use her desirability and the perversion hiding beneath the respectable mask of the Beast to her advantage. By finding an active voice within her passive position, the heroine is able to transcend the mask of the feminine and comes one step closer to claiming her sexuality and individuality.
Indeed, “The Tiger’s Bride” interestingly inverts the traditional gender roles by aligning the Beast, rather than Beauty, within the masquerade. From the very first, we are acutely aware that he is acting a part that is far from natural to him. Beauty is suffocated by his overwhelming perfume, puzzled by his elegant, yet old-fashioned vestments, and cannot help but to notice his awkward, clumsy, choppy movements, yet it is his face which most identifies him within this tradition. His face is a grotesque “mask with a man’s face painted most beautifully on it…one with too much formal symmetry of feature to be entirely human” (Tiger’s 156). Through this description, we are able to see that, although Beauty is trapped by her otherness as a woman, the Beast is also trapped by his otherness, by the construction of masculinity, perhaps even more so, as he is not even human.

The characterization of the Beast in “The Tiger’s Bride” initially appears to be in complete opposition to that of the Beast in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon.” In this re-telling of the classic story, the Beast-figure does nothing to hide his formidable appearance, his monstrous otherness, from others. He proudly shows off his lion’s mane and paws, growling at Beauty’s father, “I am the Beast, and you must call me Beast” (Courtship 147). However, he also is ashamed of his uniqueness, as evidenced by the fact that Mr. Lyon, too, does not allow human servants, as “a constant human presence would remind him too bitterly of his otherness” (Courtship 147).

Unlike the Tiger’s Bride, Beauty in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon” truly is initially a pawn of the patriarchy. She is immediately illustrated in the domestic landscape of the kitchen, performing mundane chores, watching from her window the outside world that she is unable to participate in, and thinking only of the safety of her precious father. As her mother died when Beauty was very young, she is equipped with only a patriarch to follow, who cannot even
recognize in her a developing young woman, seeing in her only his ‘girl-child’ and ‘pet.’

Perhaps, however, as Hardin suggests, the lack of a mother was more helpful than detrimental to Beauty’s search for identity, making her more eager to establish her own identity around that of the Beast’s. Without a mother, he argues, the child misses the first bonding relationship, the first opportunity to define oneself through another, and thus must establish identity through some other means (Hardin 81).

When it is arranged for her to stay with the Beast as her father attends to his business in London, the narrator urges the reader:

Do not think she had no will of her own; only, she was possessed by a sense of obligation to an unusual degree, and, besides, she would gladly have gone to the ends of the earth for her father, whom she loved dearly. (Courtship 148)

Despite such an appeal, it is difficult, at this point in the tale, to read this character as having a will of her own, as such intense obligation places her in the control of her beloved father.

It is only once she has been taken away from her father, placed into the hands of the Beast, that she is able to rid herself of her obligation to her father and develop any semblance of free will. When she finally leaves the Beast, she feels “a sudden sense of perfect freedom” (Courtship 150), an opportunity to establish her self. Unfortunately, the opportunity is brief, as she just as soon feels grateful for breaking away from “an unknown danger” and not having to follow through with the change that would have occurred. She returns to her father, anxious and excited for their “delicious expedition to buy her furs” (Courtship 151). Unable to break away from his influence, she remains in the costumes of femininity, performing her charade.

By taking these women out of the traditional context of patriarchal society and placing them under the guidance of the Beasts in the foreign environment of the other, they are able to
explore their own identity, the other, the beast within themselves. Such a realization “is integral for the individual to have an active identity apart from … the dominant culture” (Hardin 80). Merja Makinen realizes that, in these ‘beast marriage’ stories, the beasts represent the latent desires of women in a society that does not allow such sexuality to exist, as women are merely seen as products of trade (Makinen 9). “In all of these tales,” Carter establishes a world in which not only is femininity constructed as active, sensual, desiring, and unruly – but successful sexual transactions are founded on an equality and the transforming powers of recognizing the reciprocal claims of the other. (Makinen 9)

By embracing the sexuality they are taught to fear, Carter’s heroines gain “power, strength, and a new awareness of both self and other” (Makinen 10), an idea that culminates in the reveal of Beauty’s underlying pelt in “The Tiger’s Bride” and the transformation of Mr. Lyon’s Beauty into Mrs. Lyon, casting aside her beauty for “a lacquer of the invincible prettiness that characterises certain pampered, exquisite, expensive cats” (Courtship 151). The acceptance of the beastly within themselves and the Beasts, allows for the protagonists synthesis with their antagonists, creating an individual identity within a harmonious partnership.
Works Cited


