

Chapter 6

“Learning You Were Wrong”: An Exploration of Feminist History and Historiography With Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*

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ABSTRACT

*This article demonstrates an exercise in historical placement and historiography utilizing the 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast* within the social studies classroom. The purpose is to identify the context in which the events of the film are placed using material culture. Once timing is established, the characters are analyzed using the social context of Western feminism both in contemporary and recent terms. This is a practice in identifying changes and continuities for interpreting this film and a continuation of feminist scholarly commentary that can be utilized for advanced high school and undergraduate study.*

Given their prominence in the construction of popular memory, Disney productions play an important but often overlooked role in the cultural battles over the present and the future. Behind ‘the happiest place on earth’ there is the institutional and ideological power of a multinational conglomerate that wields enormous social and political influence (Giroux, 1999, p. 124).

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INTRODUCTION

A short clip of Disney’s 1991 animated film *Beauty and the Beast* expresses a specific aspect concerning evolving class dynamics in relation to the development of feminism for nineteenth century France. The film’s protagonist, Belle, newly imprisoned victim of arbitrary elite justice, is embraced by the castle’s servants who empathize with her suffering. However, rather than commiserating with Belle on the common dynamic of powerlessness within a rigid hierarchy, they are exuberant at the opportunity to “show [their] skills”. They dazzle Belle with a “culinary cabaret” filled with gourmet cuisine and a musical celebration of cultural extravagance. All this luxury and opulence is expected because “afterall, this is France!”. The song features a silverware Eiffel Tower, showering champagne, and concludes with the unveiling of a glorious, electrified chandelier that takes Belle’s breath away. In this moment, Belle’s fears are allayed, and she submits to the comforts of wealth, preferential treatment, and a budding sense of validation for being the focus of such lavish attention. It is also in this moment that the self-described servants find a new purpose in life. Once again able to unleash their tightly honed specializations, they now, in the absence of a noble master, produce and perform for the consumption of the non-noble petty bourgeoisie. As a display of classical service matched with consistent reinforcement of how privileged they are to be French, “Be Our Guest” is a powerful commentary on the service industry as an archetype for shifts in French status. Noble titles and royal trappings are abandoned. They have been repurposed as a display of pride in the nation-state. Thus, this scene serves as a starting point for discussions on the breaking of the mystique of noble birthright as a result of the French Revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, and 1871), shifting class dynamics in the Industrial Era, and modernist French nationalism.

What also emerges from this scene is the first recognition that Belle may in fact find “something more than this provincial life”. Up to this point, she had gone from the figurative prison of the “little town filled with little people” to the literal prison of the Beast’s castle (*Beauty and the Beast*, 1991, Time stamp is 35:20 to 41:20). But now, with this display of hospitality, service, and showmanship, she is made to feel secure, welcomed, and closer to finding a home than ever before. This moment “communicates Belle’s inclusion. No longer isolated or disenfranchised, her perspective is valued at last for she is linked with and celebrated by others” (Downey, 1996, p. 202).

The instantly recognizable “Be Our Guest” scene is as prolific in the consciousness of modern American students as it was for their parents and likely their grandparents following the film’s first release in 1991. The common ground of a shared experience from the Disney Renaissance era allows for an easy “hook” to introduce complex issues of class and gender historically and historiographically (Marzano, 2017). This essay is a discussion of the 1991 adaptation of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* as a tool for comparative analysis of the multiple waves of American feminism. The purpose is to provide a framework by which this film, and to a lesser extent the live action remake (2017), is useful as a secondary source of first wave feminism and as a primary source of second wave, third wave, and current discourses on feminism. This is not meant to be an end to the ongoing discourse surrounding this film which has received and will continue to receive attention in feminist scholarship; rather, this is a demonstration of the discussion points made possible by this film and the debates it continues to inspire. The crux of this debate is the question of where this film has and should fit within modern American feminism.

More significantly, a film as accessible and memorable as the 1991 Disney classic serves to uncover the collective memory of feminism and what that term signifies in the American consciousness. The stakes for placing Belle - a fictional, fantastical creation centuries in development within Western culture - into late nineteenth century France is in identifying her with first wave feminism. The traditional classroom

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