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Amanda Coffey
University of New Orleans

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AMANDA COFFEY

Le Beau et La Bête: Anne Plumptre's *Something New* as a "Beauty and the Beast" Retelling

Winner of the Catherine B. Mackin Prize

Anne Plumptre opens her novel *Something New* with a poem explaining to readers her intent to present them with an ugly heroine. Representing her choice as a revolt against "laws by Despotism form'd," she invokes the title of the novel, asking of the heroine we come to know as Olivia: "Is't not SOMETHING NEW?" (3-4). While the tone of the poem is jocular, Plumptre is drawing attention to a longstanding association in fiction of beauty with goodness, particularly in women. In the story of a handsome hero who comes to love the physically unattractive heroine, Plumptre has done something revolutionary, although the story is not an entirely unfamiliar one. *Something New* can be read as a gender-inverted retelling of the classic "Beauty and the Beast" fairytale. This new incarnation of the story questions gendered stereotypes and enhances a moral about perceiving beyond appearances.

One of the most popular and best-known versions of the "Beauty and the Beast" fairytale was written by Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont and published as *La Belle et la Bête* in 1756. Beaumont's version altered and abridged a previous printed incarnation of the story by her fellow French author Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve. In her analysis of female fairytale authors, Elizabeth Harries discusses some of the changes Beaumont made to her source material, which she never credited. Beaumont was unconcerned with class equivalence between Beauty and the Beast and more concerned with didacticism. As a result, she removed references to Beauty unknowingly being a princess and increased emphasis on the virtue of both Beauty and the Beast. Beaumont also removed many of the magical elements from Villeneuve's version, which included even more fairies and curses. Beaumont's primary intention for her fairytales was the education of young girls on the correct moral and social behavior rather than their entertainment, and although she understood the value of fiction in capturing and maintaining her audience's interest, she was suspicious of the more fanciful and magical elements of the fairytale genre (87-89). As Harries observes, "the fairy tale, with its links to the supernatural and the romance, was increasingly seen as an unstable, untrustworthy agent in the Enlightenment civilizing process" (90). Supernatural elements were seen as not only potentially disturbing to young female readers, but also as a threat to the rational worldview that the Enlightenment

encouraged.

In both Beaumont and Plumptre's stories, the Beauty-figure's father arranges the initial meeting with the Beast-figure. In the fairytale, Beauty's father has agreed to send one of his daughters, if any is willing, to stay at the Beast's palace. In *Something New*, the arrangement is more amicable; Lionel and Olivia's fathers were friends who wished to unite their families through their children's marriage. After resisting for years, Lionel eventually agrees to meet Olivia as part of a scheme to help his friend Harry gain financial security. In fact, both stories stress the theme of filial piety. Beauty is willing to sacrifice her life in order to show her affection and obedience to her father. In Plumptre's novel, Olivia is so determined to fulfill her father's wish for her to marry Lionel that she cannot even consider loving another man. Furthermore, the climax of the disruption of Harry and Lionel's identity-switching plan occurs when Lionel's father appears to upbraid his son for his shameful behavior.

Though both Lionel and Beauty are initially repulsed by their Beast-figure's appearances, they come to realize that the ugly exterior masks a sensible and likeable interior. Lionel is greatly impressed with Olivia's virtue, reason, and kindness to the less fortunate, and comes to regret his immoral plan. Meanwhile, Beauty feels sympathetic for the Beast, growing to enjoy his company and wishing she could satisfy his offers of marriage so as not to distress him. In addition, both stories feature multiple marriage proposals. The Beast asks Beauty to marry him each night, and each night she rejects him. In Plumptre's novel it is Lionel who does the proposing, because even her inversion of gendered traits will not make it socially acceptable for a woman to propose to a man. Lionel proposes twice to Olivia and is rejected both times. He reacts with far more shock and distress than does Beaumont's Beast, however. As a monster, the Beast expects to be rejected; as an attractive and titled man, Lionel cannot fathom it.

Both Plumptre and Beaumont's Beast-figures are bound in a loneliness which only their Beauty-figure can free them from. In the fairytale, the Beast is under a magical spell which forces him "to remain under that shape till a beautiful virgin should consent to marry me" (Beaumont). In Plumptre's novel, there is not a literal curse, but Olivia's dedication to carrying out her father's wishes has made her unable to envision marrying anyone but Lionel, who she is ultimately forced to reject because he does not truly love her. As a result, she remains alone, and although there is potential for a future relationship with Ryder, their social classes, Olivia's love for Lionel, and her sense of filial duty may still keep them apart.

Another significant aspect that these stories have in common is a foil for their virtuous heroines, characters that offer instructions for readers on what behavior is not appropriate. In Beaumont's rendition of the fairytale, Beauty's two older sisters are presented as lazy, jealous, greedy, and cruel. They leave Beauty to do all the housework, marry for money and appearances, and speak and act maliciously against Beauty at every chance they get. When Beauty leaves the Beast's palace to visit the

family, they are jealous of her fine clothes and happiness, and so they feign affection for her, delaying her return to the Beast and nearly causing his death. At the end of the tale, the fairy who appears to congratulate Beauty on her virtue punishes the older sisters for their wickedness. She says to the sisters, "I know your hearts, and all the malice they contain: become two statues; but, under this transformation, still retain your reason. You shall stand before your sister's palace gate, and be it your punishment to behold her happiness; and it will not be in your power to return to your former state till you own your faults" (Beaumont). In comparison, Plumptre's novel features Peggy Perkins and Rebecca Harrison, whose use of the *Complete Letter Writer* to stir up rumors and arguments amongst Olivia's friends at Campbell-House is less intentionally malicious than Beauty's older sisters' diversion of her return to the Beast, but still creates much anger, offence, and confusion for their own amusement.

There is also the potential that Ryder and Lionel will actually duel as the letter of challenge that the women send demands, in which case the men's lives could have been in peril. Peggy Perkins and Rebecca Harrison may not be punished so severely as Beauty's sisters, but they are treated throughout the book as merely comic relief and none of their friends seem to truly take them seriously. Furthermore, in retaliation for their letter writing-escapades, they are embarrassed by having their secret plans revealed and teased in front of assembled company. The intensity of the moral failures varies between the works, but both sets of culprits are soundly punished, and the reader is clearly shown that their actions are not to be imitated.

"Beauty and the Beast" stories typically feature a woman who displays impressive reason and a deeply emotional man. Beauty, although also driven by a deep love for her father, makes intelligent choices based on the outcome she desires. She does not want to make her sisters feel bad about their requests for gifts and this can be prevented by asking for something as well, so she asks her father to bring her a rose. She does not want her father to die, and his death can be prevented by the sacrifice of one of his daughters, so she chooses to go to the Beast. In her introduction to the Broadview edition of *Something New*, Deborah McLeod compares the novel to fairytales, noting, "In 'Beauty and the Beast' the heroine is subject, rather than object; it is she who must learn to perceive what is real and what is mere appearance, who is the villain and who is the hero." Likewise, it is Lionel's job to "develop the perception to see and value the woman behind the face, to discover and love the real Olivia Campbell" (xvii-xviii). Meanwhile, the Beast is a literal animal whose actions are motivated by his emotions: his rage at the cutting of his roses, and his love for Beauty. As Harries points out, "...the prince is forced not only to live in beastly form but also to hide his sharp wits" (89). His curse thus prevents him from the exercise of traditionally masculine-coded intelligence. Furthermore, he asks Beauty to marry him after she has been in his palace for less than a single day, and reacts with great distress to her refusal. Beaumont describes the Beast's tone as "mournful" and writes that "Immediately the poor monster began to

sigh, and hissed so frightfully, that the whole palace echoed." Even though Beauty's daily talks with the Beast reveal that he has "plain good common sense," although not "what the world calls wit," what is more prominent is his daily marriage proposal and his great love for Beauty and desire for her happiness which prompts him to send her to see her father.

Although the so-called Beauty and Beast are switched in Plumptre's novel, the inversion of the emotion and reason remains, subverting stereotype. Lionel is a man of feeling; he pours out his heart in long letters to his friends, throws himself down on the furniture when upset, and declares himself in love with multiple women over the course of the novel. He is motivated by his affection for his friend Harry, and certainly not by any rational thought, to undertake the identity-swapping scheme that begins the novel. It is Lionel who ultimately must choose between feeling and reason when he is faced with the choice between the beautiful Charlotte and the intelligent Olivia. In choosing Charlotte, whose attractive appearance will not cause him any social trouble and who appeals to his physical desires, he is choosing feeling. Olivia, meanwhile, is the more rational of the two. Her letters, when they appear, are brief and informative, lacking the outpouring of sentiment present in Lionel's epistolary efforts. Unlike Lionel, Olivia is able to control her feelings. She manages to hide her disappointment and anger with Lionel and Harry until the appropriate time to reveal her knowledge of their scheme, just as she is able to resign herself to rejecting her beloved Lionel's proposal because she knows he loves another woman more. She also functions as a teacher figure, schooling Lionel on the impropriety of his actions, helping him to understand his true desires, and forcing him to learn to look beyond appearances.

However, although there are many similarities between the classic fairytale and Plumptre's novel, not everything has remained the same. Central to the versions of the "Beauty and the Beast" fairytale that most people, including Plumptre herself, would be familiar with is a moral about the threat of male sexuality. Once Beauty agrees to marry the Beast, he is transformed from a monstrous creature into a handsome man. Within the safe confines of marriage, his sexuality is no longer a threat to her, thus he is no longer presented in a menacing form but instead becomes "one of the loveliest princes that eye ever beheld" (Beaumont). However, this moral is not applicable to Plumptre's retelling as her Beast is a woman and her Beauty a man. The use of a male subject, in addition to a morally superior female love interest, requires that the danger come from somewhere other than Olivia herself. Thus, instead of a sexual threat, Lionel is faced with the threat of social transgression, a taboo that does not rely on gender. Upon Olivia's arrival in London, Lionel begins to imagine introducing her to fashionable city society. He envisions introducing her to an acquaintance, who responds, "She may be very amiable, very accomplished, but curse me if I ever saw any thing in a female form half so ugly. But I beg pardon, I ought not to be so free in my remarks, for since every body gives her to you as a wife, we are to suppose she is handsome in your eyes"

(Plumptre 234). His anxiety about how his association with an unattractive woman will be perceived by his peers prevents him from pursuing a relationship with her once he leaves the isolation of her private home.

Deborah McLeod observes that “the question is whether he [Lionel] has the strength to stand against the common values of his society. In the fairy-tale version of this story Olivia would be magically transformed into a beauty, thus sidestepping the problem” (xxi). However, unlike a fairytale, this novel is thoroughly grounded in reality, augmented by its presentation in epistolary form. Furthermore, if Olivia’s ugliness were to be somehow alleviated, Plumptre’s critique of female beauty standards as well as novelistic conventions would be essentially defanged. Although both the courtship novel and the fairytale would have marriage to Olivia ultimately serve as a reward for Lionel learning to become a man of reason and virtue, her ugliness renders her an inadequate prize.

The solution to this predicament presented by the novel’s ending is not quite in line with the traditional ending of the fairytale. Rather than conquering his fear of social transgression and marrying Olivia, as is to be expected, Lionel instead realizes his feelings for the beautiful Charlotte O’Brien and marries her at Olivia’s urging. How, then, should this be understood in terms of the fairytale and Plumptre’s project? In one sense, this is a failed “Beauty and the Beast” narrative. Although Lionel comes to love Olivia for her virtue and intelligence, he cannot get past her beastly appearance, and so Olivia’s curse of loneliness is not broken and she remains alone. This failure to overcome the fear of social transgression that marrying an ugly woman causes allows Plumptre to cast light on the damaging effects of female beauty standards in both reality and fiction.

However, this ending can also be interpreted in a more positive light. Rather than claiming a reward of Olivia’s virtue and intelligence through marriage, Lionel claims it through friendship. Plumptre’s tale presents women as more than just the objects of desire and romance. In learning to see value in Olivia despite her being both unattractive and unavailable to him, Lionel is able to acquire a bride who is both virtuous and beautiful without compromising his relationship with Olivia. In Beaumont’s tale, after the Beast’s transformation into an attractive prince, a fairy appears to Beauty and tells her to, “come and receive the reward of your judicious choice; you have preferred virtue before either wit or beauty, and deserve to find a person in whom all these qualifications are united.” Due to the lack of a magical transformation to beauty, this description does not fit Olivia, but it *does* describe Lionel’s eventual bride, Charlotte O’Brien. Attractive, likeable, well-bred, and skilled at writing poetry, Charlotte presents Lionel a safe and socially acceptable marriage option. She possesses the virtue, wit, and beauty that, according to the fairytale formula, Lionel has earned. In his study of the ways in which fairy tales have been used to shape

behavior, Jack Zipes notes a common pattern to be found among the various “Beauty and the Beast” stories:

...the female character could assume her ‘civil’ form only if she were willing to sacrifice herself for a beastlike male. By denying herself, she could obtain what all women supposedly wanted and want—namely, marriage in the form of male domination. The male character could assume his ‘civil’ form only when socially deviant forces were tamed and when the female was not a threat but actually charmed or tranquilized by his rationality (56).

Zipes quite rightly uses genders rather than character names here; this analysis relies on the socially-stratified gender roles and traits which the story was encouraging. Olivia does not sacrifice herself by marrying a beast, but she certainly makes a sacrifice of another kind. Knowing that Lionel is in love with Charlotte, she stubbornly refuses his proposals and attentions despite her own affection for him. In a letter to her friend Harriot Belgrave, Olivia writes, in an uncharacteristic display of emotion, “I trust I shall have the sufficient fortitude to put my feelings, whether founded on my partiality for him, or on the anxiety of my heart to comply with the wishes of my father, entirely out of the question, and to be guided by the dictates of reason alone” (Plumptre 270). For Lionel’s sake, she must deny not only her love but also her desire to fulfill her father’s wishes of uniting the Campbell and Stanhope families. This is quite a sacrifice for the dutiful young woman, particularly since her father’s wish for her to marry Lionel has made her unable to consider marriage to anyone else.

In Lionel’s case, achieving a “civil form” is more complicated. Unlike the stereotypical and socially-approved picture of rational masculinity which both Zipes and Beaumont were referencing, Lionel is a very emotional creature. Although in trying to win Olivia’s hand he becomes a more rational and moral man, she still refuses to marry him. Olivia is a threat to Lionel precisely because she will not concede to either his emotion or his reason. She is desirable despite being unattractive and thus a socially unacceptable bride. In the fairytale it is male sexuality that must be “tamed,” but in Plumptre’s novel it is Lionel’s desire to commit a social taboo by marrying Olivia. Once again, marriage provides a solution, but here it is not marriage to Beauty that tames the Beast, but marriage to another, more socially acceptable choice of woman that tames Lionel’s relationship with Olivia and renders it into the unthreatening form of friendship.

By presenting her readers with an ugly heroine and a hero who comes to love her despite her physical appearance—a female Beast and a male Beauty—Plumptre has drawn attention to the limitations that society’s obsession with beauty creates in both fiction and reality. With a virtuous Beast and a Beauty whose very introduction is a manipulative scheme, *Something New* forces its audience to question the common

association of inner goodness and physical beauty. In addition to the deconstruction of the "Beauty and the Beast" tale, Deborah McLeod notes additional narrative types which Plumptre touches on throughout the novel: the Cinderella story that the courtship novel relies upon, the *Bildungsroman* contained in Lionel's development and maturity (xxi). However, the refusal to allow Olivia to magically become attractive calls the conventions and tropes which Plumptre borrows from these genres into question. What is the place of a woman, in a narrative and in society, if she is not pretty? Plumptre may not have a definite answer, but she is determined to make her readers consider the question.

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