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CUPID AND PSYCHE vs. BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: THE MILESIAN AND THE MODERN

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## 1. The Oral Tradition

### CUPID AND PSYCHE VS. BEAUTY AND THE BEAST THE MILESIAN AND THE MODERN <sup>1</sup>

Ruth B. Bottigheimer

#### *Cupid and Psyche – The Tale*

A king and his wife have three comely daughters, the youngest of whom, Psyche, is so extraordinarily beautiful that people forsake Venus in order to come from far and wide to see her. Ragingly jealous, Venus bids her son Cupid make Psyche fall desperately in love with the vilest creature possible. In the meantime, Psyche's father approaches Apollo of Miletus about a husband for his daughter, but Apollo's oracular reply indicates that the king should not hope for a mortal husband: she will marry a fierce serpent who flies through the skies and to whom even the gods are subject. Virtuously resigned, Psyche prepares for a funereal marriage, but receives, instead, a magnificent palace, where she enjoys the connubial delights of a husband whom she may know with her hands and ears, but not with her eyes.

Her husband, Cupid, warns her against her sisters, but Psyche begs for a visit to them. Married off to old and ugly kings who leave them sexually starved and materially deprived, they are inflamed with envy at Psyche's evident physical satisfaction and worldly wealth, and they conspire to displace Psyche to gain her demon lover for themselves.

When her sisters visit a second time, Psyche describes her husband in different terms, giving the sisters the opening they need to insinuate their false fears that she is actually married to a poisonous serpent, as Apollo had "predicted." Gaining Psyche's confidence, they urge her to kill her husband. Preparing to do so, Psyche lights a lamp, but in beholding Cupid's great beauty, she causes his disappearance when a drop of hot oil awakens him and he sees that she has transgressed his prohibition.

For their role in her bereavement, Psyche dispatches her wicked sisters murderously and undertakes a long quest for Cupid, enduring the torments of an angry Venus and performing impossible tasks, until Cupid finally searches for and finds her. He pleads his case before Jupiter, who in concert with the other

(male) gods, decrees matrimony for Cupid and immortality for Psyche. All ends happily in a marriage feast, after which in due time Psyche gives birth to a child named Pleasure.

\* \* \*

What is remarkable about this tale is the extent to which its heroine stands isolated. Among mortals her beauty makes her admired but leaves her unmarried; within her immediate family she is the object of greed and envy by her sisters; and among the gods she is persecuted as part of a larger divine drama which includes Venus, Juno, Ceres, and Jupiter.

The *locus classicus* for the tale of "Cupid and Psyche" is Apuleius' second century A.D. collection of tales, *The Golden Ass*, where it forms one sixth of the entire text.<sup>2</sup> Its original title, *Metamorphoses*, places the collection firmly within the tradition of tale collections about transformations, including Ovid's classic compendium, while its subsequent and better-known title, *The Golden Ass*, links it to the low comedy of farcical man-into-ass plots which began in antiquity and continued, in the English tradition, into Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and beyond.

This outline of the historical context of the collection is no fortuitous exercise, but an attempt to understand what differentiates Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche" as a tale from its narrative ancestors and descendants. In terms of its constituent elements, "Cupid and Psyche" is almost certainly related to the ancient *Panchatantra* tale, "The Girl Who Married a Snake" (177-81) with its motifs of serpent groom, broken enchantment, and handsome prince. Apuleius' tale provides a completely different frame tale, however, and ironizes the entire novel in which "Cupid and Psyche" appears by the psycho-religious interpretation interpolated at the conclusion.

It is as important to grasp and understand the fact of a tale's absence from a tale collection as to investigate its presence in other collections. For example, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* includes many tales about Cupid, but none about Cupid and Psyche. Indeed, "Cupid and Psyche" in its present form appears to be Apuleius' own invention. An analysis of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a whole suggests that there may be good reason for the absence of "Cupid and Psyche" or any tale like it from his collection. In Ovid's fictional world, men pursued women (Apollo after Daphne), women fled from men (Daphne from Apollo), and a girl's family helped, not hindered her (Ceres sought Proserpina). Just the opposite is true in Apuleius' fictional milieu. There women pursue men (Psyche after Cupid), a girl's mother is largely absent, her sisters plot her fall, and her wildly jealous

mother-in-law (Venus) tries repeatedly to subvert the success of her search for her husband (Cupid).

Where did Psyche's peculiar persecutions come from? Cupid looms large in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>3</sup> which appeared about one hundred and fifty years before Apuleius' collection. In Ovid as in Apuleius Cupid causes fatal loves, for example, Apollo's insistently terrifying passion for Daphne and Pluto's indistractable desire for Proserpine. The latter tale shares a few plot elements with Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche," such as forced visits to the underworld. But Ovid's version of a woman's visit to the underworld separates it in profound ways from Apuleius' treatment of the same motif, for Proserpine is "a queen, the greatest in that world of shadows, the powerful consort of the tyrant of the underworld" (129), and in Ceres' search for her daughter, transformations are quite incidental to the narrator's evident sympathy for her maternal bereavement. In Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, on the other hand, Proserpina functions not as a beloved daughter but as yet another source of trouble for Psyche.

Just as "Cupid and Psyche" does not exist in Ovid's collection, it was also absent from both of two popular novels contemporary with Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, Lucius of Patras' *The Ass* and Lucian of Samosata's *Lucius the Ass*. The latter incorporates an animal bridegroom within the frame tale, but as an ass this bridegroom is only a source of fictional (and real) laughter. It is in Apuleius' collection that the roles reverse. His text chooses and distributes words that effectively load the guilt and responsibility for Psyche's misfortunes directly onto her own shoulders. It would appear to be Apuleius who directs the dialogue so that Cupid says their son will be born divine if Psyche keeps the secret of her husband's identity, but that the child will be mortal if she learns and then divulges the secret. In like manner, the plot is developed so that Venus first has Psyche flogged and tortured, and then herself sets impossible tasks.<sup>4</sup> Characteristic for the ethos of the tale, Psyche's final task is to *refuse* to help any of the supplicants she will encounter on her lengthy quest.

Among the hostile figures in "Cupid and Psyche" we must count Psyche herself, for like Basile's heroine, La Gatta Cenerentola, she is a figure who doesn't pull her punches. It is she herself who takes murderous revenge on her sisters, and she does so by tricking them into flinging themselves to their deaths from a sacrificial rock. Part of a long tradition of rowdy storytellers whose rough and tumble narratives are meant to raise gales of laughter, Apuleius counts vengefulness, curiosity, and speech as primary female faults.

Mortal discord simply mirrors strife on Olympus in Apuleius' fictional world. Ceres and Juno deny assistance to their relative Venus. Evenhanded in their neglect, they also refuse to help

Psyche. Nor does divine omniscience form part of Olympian daily life. The gods can be gulled, as Apuleius shows us when a seagull's gossip sets Venus against Cupid.

Questions of high and low culture—or perhaps “restricted” and “broad” culture—emerge in conjunction with “Cupid and Psyche” in its antique context. In contrast to Ovid’s restrained catalog of metamorphoses detailing the relationships of the gods to each other, to demigods, and to mortals, Apuleius’ “Cupid and Psyche” started its literary life as broad Milesian comedy, filled with bawdy thigh-slapping humor. His Latin was the language people spoke and understood. But when it was published in Italy in 1469, the fact of Apuleius’ Latin language restricted the tale to a classically educated readership, which represented only a small proportion of the entire population. One wonders if it made a difference to Renaissance comprehension of “Cupid and Psyche” to read it in the language of the church fathers and of classical scholarship.

### *Beauty and the Beast – The Tale*

An exceedingly rich merchant, the father of three sons and three daughters (the elder two pretty but arrogant, the youngest beautiful and good), suddenly loses his fortune. Trying to recover some of his goods, he becomes lost in a snowstorm and stumbles onto a magical palace. When he plucks a flower for his youngest daughter, a beast appears who first condemns him to death but later commutes the sentence should he offer up his daughter to die in his place. Beauty willingly takes on this sacrificial role.

Delivered to the Beast’s castle, Beauty begins to suspect that she will not have to die, and she has a series of mysterious dreams whose meaning she does not comprehend. Much later Beauty visits her family, promising the Beast that she’ll return in eight days. Her sisters, miserably married to vain and abusive husbands, become jealous of Beauty’s apparently good fortune and intentionally cause her to overstay her time allotted for her visit. A dream shows her the Beast sickening, and she returns to the palace where she finds him about to die. She declares that she will marry him and that she cannot live without him. Beauty’s tender sentiments restore the Beast to his princely shape, “more beautiful than Love himself” in a direct allusion to Cupid. The surroundings suddenly glitter and explode with fireworks and music, which Beauty does not notice, being lost in concern for “her dear Beast.” The tale ends with her wicked sisters turned to monitory statues as punishment.

Beauty’s tale is embedded within the family. It is the ruin of her father, not the jealousy of the gods, which precipitates the entire story, and it is her father whom Beauty, by her self-sacri-

ficing nature, attempts to redeem. Beauty is a heroine who embraces her fate: if impoverished, she works; if she believes that the Beast wishes to devour her, she eats to fatten herself up; and seeing that her sisters are unhappy in their marriages, she decides she would probably be happier with the Beast than they are with their husbands. "It is neither good looks nor brains in a husband that make a woman happy; it is beauty of character, virtue, kindness. All these qualities the Beast has," she muses. Despite the rhetoric of her declaration of devotion to the Beast, the word "love" never appears. Instead, the text denotes the virtues of patience and acceptance unshorn and unshornable by wealth. In a radical contradiction of its surface plot, the language of the text embeds the story in the language of the counting house and thus connotes the commercial nature of the marriage transaction throughout the tale.<sup>5</sup>

In "Beauty and the Beast" it is of great importance that the heroine's tale develops from her family's wretched and deeply felt need. After their father's financial fall, Beauty's eighteenth century sisters must do without gowns, jewelry, and suitors, and it is they and their father whom Beauty wishes to redeem. This she (or her author) intends to accomplish by sacrificing herself on the altar of matrimony, whose high priest, the beast, is transformed into a handsome prince in the penultimate scene. Marriage to an unattractive mate to secure a family's welfare is by no means restricted to the fairy tale world of "Beauty and the Beast." Jane Austen, among many others, used it as a novelistic device, though with a keenly expressed awareness of the potentially sacrificial nature of the transaction as far as the young woman was concerned. In the same manner numerous impoverished noble families have baited their dynastic hooks with presentable and titled sons as a real-world solution to their problems. Leprince de Beaumont's prose unites the intention of the brief fairy tale, the lengthy novel, and the convoluted family strategy, but substitutes an ethically mediated magical transformation to make it all palatable. And in terms of who must put up with the ugly mate, Leprince de Beaumont is well within the bounds of modern tradition which require that patient tolerance for ugliness is a feminine, not a masculine, virtue.<sup>6</sup>

If one ignores the evident tension between prose and plot in Leprince de Beaumont's tale, it is certainly possible to understand "Beauty and the Beast" as a fable about coming to terms with the institution of marriage and with the person of a husband. The reader senses differing narrative motors in the two tales: Psyche is at the mercy of the petulant and capricious gods and goddesses of Olympus. It is their jealousy and their sympathy which direct her steps and enforce her quest for her dearly beloved and splendidly appealing husband. In contrast, *Beauty's* "quest" is an internalized search for willing and even loving

acceptance of a beastly suitor. In other words, their search is directed towards polar opposites. In both cases the heroine of these tales can be regarded as victimized by her circumstances, but Psyche is an active heroine, while Beauty appears curiously inert in terms of her world and of the people who inhabit it. Even the two names suggest very different degrees of real existence. In the Roman as in the contemporary world, "Psyche" connoted the soul, the essential personality; "Beauty" (La Belle), on the other hand, represents a corporeal attribute defined and conferred by others. Leprince de Beaumont herself recognized the otherness of Beauty's name in her introductory paragraph: "... but the youngest especially was admired by everybody. When she was small she was known simply as 'the little beauty', and this name stuck to her ..." (115)

### *Publishing History and the Tales*

Patterns of diffusion and publishing history intrude themselves inevitably into a discussion of "Beauty and the Beast": Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, and with it "Cupid and Psyche." was one of the first books to roll off the press in the fifteenth century. In succeeding decades it was printed in Latin and in the vernacular in England, Holland, France, Spain and Germany. Important editions of the text appeared in Bologna (1500), Venice (1501, 1521), Paris (1512, 1862), Leiden (1786-1823), London (1566, 1822, 1825, 1866, 1893, 1910), Leipzig (1842, 1907), Spain (1525), and Sweden (1877-1902). It is the peculiarities of the publishing history of Apuleius' collection which suggest certain relationships between the modern "Beauty and the Beast" and the antique "Cupid and Psyche."<sup>7</sup>

All versions based on a text other than the 1469 Editio Princeps published by Andrew (Jo. Andreas de Buxis), Bishop of Aleria, were mutilated by the Inquisition, and their destruction effectively produced a single and uniform canonical source for modern monster-as-husband tales. Because this dramatic narrowing of narrative ancestry took place in the Early Modern period, that is, relatively recently, and because it involved a source which was widely available, there have been important consequences for the subsequent history of the tale type. For one thing, new versions of the tale are based on an identifiably recent source, i.e., 1469 and subsequent printings (see above). In addition, the nearly universal theme of a young woman's coming to terms with the sudden and certain change in her life occasioned by marriage has in this case been normed against a single, widely distributed, story

The significance of the special circumstances of "Beauty and the Beast"'s publishing history are particularly clear when it is contrasted to that of another fairy tale. "Cinderella," which

also addresses conditions which would seem to be universal. Every society has situations which verify the bare plot elements of "Cinderella"—grinding poverty, familial discord, social mortification—and thus the "Cinderella" tale can be passed on from teller to teller with reference to locally familiar circumstances. The fairy godmother slot can be occupied by creatures as diverse as birds and red calves. A tale like "Cinderella" with its hundreds of analogues incorporates far more variety, precisely because of the absence of a single text which is available to norm subsequent tellings of the tale.

Those who wish to sidestep the publishing history of "Cupid and Psyche" in favor of its oral transmission may argue that the tale incorporates a transcendent truth, the daily transformation of a daytime beast-husband into a nocturnally handsome fellow by means of the undeniable power of sexual attraction. However, this line of thought assumes two additional propositions: 1) all sex is good sex and 2) sex is a purely nighttime activity. Most critics would view the first of these assumptions as romanticized, the second as unfounded, and both as unprovable for the population as a whole.

Psychoanalytic interpreters would like to cast this tale as a universal representation of a girl's reaction to her first sexual encounter.<sup>8</sup> If this is true, then there should be indigenous "Beauty and the Beast" tales all over the world, including Polynesia and Central Africa and South America, but that is not the case. It is highly unlikely that it is simply an artifact of contemporary scholarship that "Beauty and the Beast" tales are limited to those countries which participate in a common tale-telling tradition (from India to Ireland) or to those countries with a publishing tradition of Apuleius' "Cupid and Psyche."<sup>9</sup> But "Cupid and Psyche" does not demonstrate an unbroken chain of transmission from Roman antiquity to the present. Indeed, during the high and late Middle Ages, Apuleius was known chiefly for his neo-Platonic thought. His novel, *The Golden Ass*, only re-emerged in the later Middle Ages, circulating in MS<sup>10</sup> until it was printed in 1469.<sup>11</sup>

### *Conclusions*

Any accomplished tale-teller can take a set of motifs and turn them into a tale. The story that emerges from the telling along with the message the teller purveys to the audience grow out of the manner in which the tale is told, the way the motifs are related to each other, and the value placed on individual characters and their actions by the language in which they and their deeds are portrayed. Ovid offers numerous examples of positively portrayed women, whereas his men are scamps and rascals in priapic pursuit. Among these tales there is no "Cupid



and Psyche” or anything faintly resembling it in gender terms. Apuleius’ *Golden Ass* shows us a different world and different characters: it is the world of low comedy, of Zero Mostel mixed with fairy tales, of the gods reduced to the gutter, with self-interest, greed, and inflamed passions the common coin. But it is paradoxically also a world in which passionate union produces Pleasure, symbolized in the name of Cupid and Psyche’s child. Apuleius’ world contrasts as sharply with Ovid’s as it does with that of Leprince de Beaumont’s feminine virtue and the institutionalization of commercially-based marriage.

Wherever a published tale exists, we are drawn inexorably to questions of public taste and saleability. The *real* narrator of these tales, the voice behind the words on the page, was somebody who had a financial stake in the success of his—or her—telling of the tale. It costs money to publish a book, something which differentiates the publishing enterprise from the oral presentation. The potential audience is also far larger. That means that the common denominator for a published tale in the Early Modern period was 500-1000 initial buyers rather than the 10-50 or 100 listeners for an oral performance. The publisher has to get the story told right the first time, that is, “right” for the audience addressed, whereas the oral storyteller, addressing smaller audiences, retains the flexibility of altering a tale for successive listenerships. One can well imagine that when Edgar Taylor translated Basile’s tales into English as part of the “Children’s Library” in the nineteenth century, he removed both their earthy sex and their colorful scatology in order to address—and sell to—a broader public.<sup>12</sup> More important for our purpose is Madame Leprince de Beaumont, whose *Magasin des enfants, ou dialogues entre une sage Gouvernante et plusieurs de ses Élèves* was repeatedly published for a century in French, English, German, and Italian.

In relating a published tale to its readership—and Roman tales were published, although not on printing presses—questions which are unanswerable often emerge. How many copies were published? How much did they cost? Who could afford to buy them and who *did* buy them? For the modern period, there are additional questions, many of which are answerable. How long did it take before Leprince de Beaumont’s tales were translated into German, bowdlerized and reprinted in English, French or German chapbooks, and carried by colporteurs to isolated villages? And how did the answers to each of these questions affect the way the story was “told” in subsequent occasions? It was not my intention to try to answer such questions in this article, but they are questions which inevitably intrude themselves into a discussion of values and readerships.

The barebones plots of the two tales. “Cupid and Psyche” and “Beauty and the Beast.” mask radically different worldviews.

The "story" of "Cupid and Psyche" communicates unbridled passion leading to ultimate pleasure, while "Beauty and the Beast" 's language and plot tell of ethicalized hypocrisy resulting in queenship and wealth. The tales are about as similar as the togas and the embroidered bodices of their tellers.

What oral transmission could not accomplish, the printing press did, for it is that clanking machinery which brought "Cupid and Psyche" into the modern world. When it sallied forth into the Early Modern European world of tales, it quickly nativized itself in successive translations from Latin into various vernaculars. Within those vernaculars subsequent translations incorporated into the newly emerged narrative the views of love and marriage, beautiful women and beastly men which made sense in that time and in that place.

#### NOTES

1. How one classifies and categorizes "Cupid and Psyche" and "Beauty and the Beast" raises central and concrete methodological questions. For example, Aarne and Thompson were principally interested in establishing categories within which they and others could locate individual tales. They first set the general category, "Husband" (AT 425-449) and within that broad category then located AT 425 as "The Search for the Lost Husband." And within *that* category they included "The Monster as Husband" (AT 425, I-V), with its sub-types "The Monster (Animal) as Bridegroom (Cupid and Psyche)" (AT 425A) and "Beauty and the Beast" (AT 425C). Accepting the Aarne-Thompson categories, Bolte and Polivka used the manner of disenchantment to differentiate one tale from another, as do Aarne and Thompson in 425, V. This is a convenient measure, for such narrative differences can be noted briefly, even tabularly, but they tell the contemporary reader little about the socio-cultural differences between "Cupid and Psyche" and "Beauty and the Beast."

2. References are to the Loeb Classical Library Edition of *Apuleius: The Gold Ass*, trans. W. Adlington and revised by S. Gaseles (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965).

3. References are to *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955).

4. The tasks are separating wheat, vetch, barley and poppy seeds into neat piles; gathering golden wool, fetching water from the Styx, and collecting some of Proserpina's beauty in a box, tasks which are familiar to modern readers of fairy tales. Her magical helpers are one which recur century after century, ants, plants, an eagle, and a magic tower, i.e. the animal, vegetable, and architectural worlds.

5. See Bottigheimer, "Beauty and the Beast: Marriage and Disenchantment—Motif and Motivation" for a full discussion of this point.

6. One remembers various men who must marry ugly women in late medieval tale collections, for instance, in the Wife of Bath's tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The gender-skewed nature of the motif is evident from the number of listings within the two categories of monstrous wife vs. monstrous husband, perhaps better understood from the complementary categories, "husband who puts up with ugly wife" and "wife who puts up with ugly husband." AT 711, "The Wife as Monster," i.e. suffering husband, is a model of brevity, whereas "The Husband as Monster," i.e. suffering wife, goes from 425-229 and includes bear, wolf, ass, fish, bird, serpent, frog, hedgehog, tree, and dog.

7. I do not mean to imply the non-existence of other versions of this tale between 1469 appearance of "Cupid and Psyche" and the eighteenth century "Beauty and the Beast." The seventeenth century in particular saw the publication

of numerous "Cupid and Psyche" creations in many forms: musical drama, cantata, comedy, ballet, lyric tragedy, fable. See Haight 120-27.

8. See Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 283-84, 295-99, 303-09. Far worse, from my point of view, is the sexist orientation of Erich Neumann e.g.: "What for the masculine is aggression, victory, rape, and the satisfaction of desire . . . is for the feminine destiny, transformation, and the profoundest mystery of life." (161)

Jack Zipes discusses "Beauty and the Beast" tales as narratives intended to harness female sexuality. See "Klassische Märchen im Zivilisationsprozeß: Die Schattenseite von 'La Belle et la Bête'" in Klaus Doderer, ed. *Über Märchen für Kinder von heute: Essays zu ihrem Wandel und ihrer Funktion* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1983) 57-77.

9. See Georgios A. Megas, "Amor und Psyche" in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* 1:464-72; see also the exhaustive listing in Prato. It is particularly interesting to note the distribution of "Beauty and the Beast" tales in Africa: French West Africa and Tunisia.

10. Haight, 107.

11. Detlev Fehling considers this question at length in his classic Quellenforschung monograph, *Amor und Psyche: Die Schöpfung des Apuleius und ihre Einwirkung auf das Märchen. Eine Kritik der romantischen Märchentheorie*. Fehling dismisses Wilhelm Grimm's belief in what he calls the "monströse Konzeption der belohnten Liebe zum Tier als das Ursprüngliche" (102). See also the discussion 60-65.

12. See N. M. Penzer, *The Pentamerone of Giambattista Basile* 2:236.

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