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**An Apologia for a Scholar's Life****Jerry Griswold**

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For nearly a decade now, I have been examining how meanings are discovered in or imposed upon fairy tales. In particular, I have been studying how the classic story of "Beauty and the Beast" has acquired different meanings when, for example, it has been analyzed by psychologists or illustrated in picture books or made into a film or retold by contemporary writers. In his short story "Pierre Menard," Borges indicates how entirely different versions of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* emerge when the novel is read by different readers at different times even though the text remains the same, word-for-word. In a similar way, over the years, I have encountered Bruno Bettelheim's "Beauty and the Beast" and Jean Cocteau's and Angela Carter's and dozens of others.

My friends have worried about me and what they take to be my narrow interest in a single story, and they have urged me to explore more comprehensive subjects if I wish to meet with success as a writer. But my critics seem to have forgotten the wealth that can be found in depth and that entire books have been written on *Hamlet*, *the Book of Job*, and even the Declaration of Independence. Indeed, certain readers seek this experience of depth and for them bookstores provide works devoted to, for example, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Othello*, and Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily"—books with titles that begin "The Companion to" or "The Annotated," or books with titles that end with "Casebook" or "Handbook." In any event, in the contest between breadth and depth, I have kept repeating to myself this maxim: "What is the use of many shallow wells if you don't reach water?"

What, then, has been the wealth opened up to me by my sole-minded study of a single story? By reading about the life of Madame LePrince de Beaumont, the author of the most well known version of "Beauty and the Beast," I discovered how this story about a difficult courtship between a beautiful virgin and her beastly

suitors probably reflect the problems of arranged marriages, a custom which led to Beaumont's own disastrous marriage and divorce. By reading about French history at the time the story was written, I began to see how the account of Beauty's merchant family and the aristocratic Beast might be seen against the backdrop of the Eighteenth Century clash between the rising mercantile class and the bluebloods of the *ancien regime*.

Turning to illustrated versions of the story, I encountered entirely different Beauties and Beasts. Walter Crane's pictures, in his *Toy Book* (1875), are full of sexual innuendoes as his boar-in-squire's-clothing meets a reserved (but later blushing) Beauty. Mercer Mayer's impressive *Beauty and the Beast* (1978) is full of visual allusions and takes on the difficult task of showing perceptual error or how people see things differently. Looking at dozens of other illustrated texts, I concluded that "Beauty and the Beast" must be the ideal topic for an artist since illustrating it is something like a rohrsach test in reverse: What does a woman named "Beauty" look like? How can a man be made into a beast, of what kind and to what degree?

Other treasures were opened when I looked at older versions of the story. "Cupid and Psyche" is generally regarded as the source for Beaumont's tale and that myth presents the problem of exogamy or "marrying out." Thinking of the two together, it became easier to understand how "Beauty and the Beast" reveals the difficulties of a maiden leaving her family or clan and entering into a new situation with her spouse and his family or clan. Madame de Villeneuve's "Beauty and the Beast" appeared fifteen years before Beaumont's and differs considerably: for example, in Beaumont's version the Beast nightly asks Beauty, "Will you marry me?" but in Villeneuve's version he asks, "Will you go to bed with me?" At first an erotic story told in the adult circles of the salon, in the hands of Beaumont the tale came to be rewritten and offered as one of the very first entries in what was then the new genre of children's literature.

Rewriting the tale in other ways, contemporary writers have given the story a different spin. In "The Tiger's Bride" (from *The Bloody Chamber*), feminist Angela Carter makes the story into a woman's walk on the wild side and an encounter with her own beastly self. In "Beauty" (from *Red as Blood*), sci-fi writer

Tanith Lee turns the story into a racial allegory: Beauty is undone by her encounter with a strikingly beautiful black male.

But perhaps the most interesting takes on the story have occurred in films where homosexual moviemakers have had their say. In the gothic atmosphere of his "Beauty and the Beast," Jean Cocteau essentially presents the Nightmare of Heterosexuality; and the title of the film may, in fact, refer to Cocteau's lover Jean Marais who played both the handsome Avenant and the Beast. Gay writers of the Disney film took a more positive approach: condemning homophobic machismo by means of the hyper-masculine character called Gaston and advocating more tolerant attitudes towards "difference" in the movie's story and songs.

This is only the beginning of an explanation of what can be yielded by a soleminded and in-depth study of a single story. Equally remarkable is the contagious effect this has on one's thinking, so that at one point it seemed to me that I was encountering incarnations of "Beauty and the Beast" everywhere. On MTV, there was Michael Jackson becoming a beast in "Thriller" or Snoop Doggy Dogg in "What's My Name" morphing into the same. At the movies, "Planet of the Apes," "Elephant Man," "Roxanne," "Phantom of the Opera," "Hunchback of Notre Dame," and more. Even encountering a couple at the store and wondering, "What does she see in him?"

This, then, is an apologia of a scholar to his friends for his soleminded obsession with a single story. To them I would say that in the scholar's life, the experience of depth, when it is thorough and genuine, does eventually give way to an awakened breadth.