CINEMATIC QUESTS FOR IDENTITY

THE HERO'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE BEAST

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Cinematic Quests for Identity

For Ron, who stalked and named my beasts,
and Pete, who let us all into his heart

The fact that we have no language or concept for darkness that gives it equal dignity with lightness is the root of our problem. I sit at a keyboard, incapable of giving beauty and nobility to the other half of creation.

—Robert A. Johnson, *Femininity Lost and Regained*

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Introduction

> Wherever we encounter the symbol of rebirth, we have to do with a matriarchal transformation mystery, and this is true even when its symbolism or interpretation bears a patriarchal disguise.
>
> —Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*[1]

My first effort as a writer was in second grade when, with the encouragement of an extraordinary teacher, I wrote a play based upon P. D. Eastman's *Are You My Mother?*,[2] adding dialogue and changing some of the barnyard animals. The book is about a chick (in my play a female) who hatches while its mother is away from the nest. Not knowing what she looks like, the chick walks around the farm, pausing to ask the title question to each of the animals he encounters. In the end, he is accidentally dropped back into the nest and reunited with the hen who is his mother. As my class set about the task of making sets and costumes, our teacher, Mrs. Weingarten, began to cast the play; she asked if I wanted the role of the chick. Just weeks before, I had been transplanted from the city to a suburban development eighty miles from my "nest," the home of my beloved Italian grandmother.

P. D. Eastman's book, which he also illustrated, springs from a rare, intuitive sensibility, and from what Carl Jung termed the *collective unconscious*, "made up essentially of *archetypes*" (as differentiated from the individual unconscious, consisting "for the most part of *complexes*").[3] Eastman is obviously drawing on the archetype of the Great Mother, which represents, in its most elemental aspect, identity and psychic wholeness. *Are You My Mother?*

has remained in print past the fifty-year mark of its first publication because it speaks to children's primal fear, that of being separated from their mother, the one person in a vast and puzzling world who knows how they came to *be*. In *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, the Jungian philosopher Erich Neumann wrote that the "original question about the origin of the world is at the same time the question about the origin of man, the origin of consciousness and of the ego; it is the fateful question 'Where did I come from?' that faces every human being as soon as he arrives upon the threshold of self-consciousness."[4]

The chick's journey around the barnyard is in fact emblematic of every search for identity and meaning. As the children's book implies, the quest can begin at a very young age, years before we leave the "nest." And it is a lifelong endeavor, not one centered on our birth mother, as it is, ostensibly, for the chick, but on what our mothers represent, which is the wholeness and completeness associated with childhood, or the unconditional affection we may have experienced from our mothers or grandmothers, who taught us to love ourselves. The quest is undertaken to reclaim this aspect of our personality after a profound loss. When heroes embark on these journeys, they are in the grip of the Great Mother archetype, the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Neumann calls that path of transformation the Great Round of the Mother, and in *Cinematic Quests for Identity*, I borrow from this idea to explain the conventions that mark each stage of the quest story.

Cinematic quests are too often clichéd, prompted by events in the life of an adolescent protagonist or a middle-aged one—and, more often than not, by the lives of boys and men. I wrote *Cinematic Quests for Identity* in the hope that I might broaden the definition of the quest movie beyond the "coming-of-age" genre, and the plethora of "romance quests" in which star-crossed lovers live happily ever after. While entertaining and comforting, these love stories are generally superficial treatments of the pathos involved in the psychological and spiritual search for meaning and being. In fact, my reasons for beginning this book with Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (chapter 1, "Framing the Beast of Individuation") is to reclaim just such a story, the best of its kind on film, which has since devolved into a Disney franchise. In Cocteau's hands, the love story is a primal quest for individuation, one inseparable from myth and therefore from psychology.

The quest generally begins with what I call a "blood ritual," an act of violence or bloodshed in which the hero is sometimes complicit. In myth, it is the slaying of the dragon. This convention can also be represented symbolically, as it is in *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), with the appearance of a bloodied stag, the prey of la Bête; in my discussion of the movie, I illustrate

how the animal presages Belle's fate in her first encounter with the Beast. Blood rituals mark the heroes' initial revisiting of earlier wounds, perhaps suffered in childhood, which have long been repressed and now compel them to embark on a search for meaning. For Belle, that wound may have been the loss of her mother. Like the chick, Belle's journey is to regain her. Just as the hero undertakes the quest, a figure appears, almost always a person, who is a manifestation of that wound. I call it the "Beast" or the "beast of individuation" because it leads the hero into the transfiguring, labyrinthine path to consciousness, as it does for Belle.

These terms derive from a desire not to characterize the relationship between the hero and the Beast in a facile way, but also from a wish to pay homage to the French filmmaker and his conception of la Bête, which has long been the inspiration for this book. The Beast as transformative figure is in opposition to *logos* and therefore to the part of the hero's consciousness that has been shaped and wounded by patriarchy. For instance, Cocteau's Belle has suppressed the instinctual part of her nature in order to maintain some aspects of the lifestyle she and her sisters enjoyed when their mother was alive and their father was happy. That impulse in Belle is born not of necessity as much as it is by the demands of a patriarchal society in which the soul and its desires are sacrificed for an abstract and oppressive ethos.

To explain that circumstance, and my use of the terms *patriarchal* and *patriarchy*, I turn to Gerda Lerner and her analysis in *The Creation of Patriarchy*. The historian reaches back to hunter-gatherer societies to explain the underlying structure of patriarchy and to overturn an often-cited reason for the belief in male superiority: although refuted by anthropological evidence, the myth persists that male hunters, rather than female gatherers and their children, provided a consistent food supply. Quite the opposite is the case, and such societies actually constituted rare instances of equality of the sexes. Lerner goes on to describe the 2,500-year development of androcentrism and patriarchy, especially the related establishment of private property and monogamy.[5] But it is one line in her book, about the celebrated nineteenth-century scientist Charles Darwin, which I have reread many times and that succinctly describes my use of "patriarchy": "Darwinian theories reinforced beliefs that species survival was more important than individual self-fulfillment."[6]

The heroic quest is always undertaken for "self-fulfillment." In her simple declarative sentence, Lerner alludes to the reason for embarking on it: heroes may act on the behalf of others, but their singularity, moral convictions, or plain intransigence means they continually reject conventional wisdom. Rather than answering to the need for "species survival," they seek a meaningful life, which

is why their quests often expand human consciousness. Lerner explains that Freud's theories augmented Darwin's and further reinforced patriarchy's androcentrism, especially in his "dictum that for the female 'anatomy is destiny.'"[7] To describe heroes or the nature of their quests in Freudian terms is to frame the search for identity in a circumscribed and finite manner, as an undertaking aimed at adjusting to the demands of civilization rather than a lifelong effort to *be*. Regardless of the circumstances of the quest, it is a journey of the soul, and some wounded part of the soul is manifest in the hero's Beast.

The facile use of Freudian terminology is so ubiquitous in film criticism and in the literature concerning the quest that it sometimes obliterates the entire meaning of the journey to individuation, especially in the case of feminine heroes. For instance, in critiques of cinematic quests for identity, young female protagonists are often described as forming alliances with a "father figure" if they encounter an older, male Beast. Similarly, male heroes in any relationship with female beasts of individuation are described as men in the grip of a *femme fatale*, or as embarked on a quest to resolve their "Oedipal complex," as though women, and not the constructs of patriarchy, were responsible for every wound in the development of the male psyche. These conclusions reflect what Neumann calls the "patriarchal disguise," the myths as layered by 2,500 years of androcentrism. I find all of these terms and the concepts they represent rebarbative and antiquated, as they arise from a psychological perspective "based on biological-deterministic reasoning," which, as Lerner writes, has "proven remarkably adaptive and resilient,"[8] precisely because it reinforces the Darwinian ideas that form the foundation of modern patriarchal societies. Suffice it to say that in my discussion of quest films in this book, I am primarily concerned with what happens when Belle and her female and male counterparts heroically relinquish their roles in "species survival" and embark upon the journey to *be*.

There are many more quest films about men than there are about women, and the ones about women often reflect what Laura Mulvey calls the "determining male gaze,"[9] in which women are essentially objectified or fetishized. This circumstance is the result of the dominance of men in the art form, although a greater number of women screenwriters and directors does not guarantee that the feminine cinematic quest will be free of that gaze. Lerner dispenses with this deception through the use of a metaphor from the theater. She writes that for women, "'equal' parts will not make them equal, as long as the script, the props, the stage setting, and the direction are firmly held by men."[10] Access to money and power is still concentrated in the white male establishment, in film and in film journalism—and that is why some women opt for "parts." "As long as androcentric assumptions dominated our

interpretations," Lerner remarks about historical research, "we read the sex/gender arrangements prevailing in the present backward into the past."[11] Patriarchy encourages that backward glance, and, like Lerner, I try everywhere in this book to avoid it.

Men's status in patriarchal societies does not make them immune to psychic injury. Their quests for identity deserve to be differentiated from those of women and girls, and they are, in myth and legend. In movies about the Beast, these archetypal dimensions are apparent, as they are in the films that comprise my discussion in chapter 3, "The Male Quest: When the Hero Doesn't Get 'The Girl.'" A man's youthful injuries or humiliation and their effect on his psyche is considered in Albert Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) through the quests of the ancient Greek hero Perseus and Chrétien de Troyes's Sir Perceval, in the medieval epic poem *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*. The male quest in comedy, in which men confront the feminine beast of their individuation, is the subject of chapter 4, "Love Affairs with the Beast: Two Women of Screwball Comedy." It begins with the "fall" from paradise and discusses *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *The Lady Eve* (1941). Male quests are also the subject of chapter 5, "The Beast of the Diamond," which is about the search for identity among baseball heroes. It is primarily centered on *The Natural* (1984) and *Moneyball* (2011), but it discusses other baseball movies in which the beast of individuation is the diamond itself.

Protagonists who set out to undo injustices committed against innocent victims and by patriarchal institutions, like Martin Ritt's eponymous hero (Sally Field) in *Norma Rae* (1979) and Larysa Kondracki's Kathryn Bolkovac (Rachel Weisz) in *The Whistleblower* (2010), are often engaged in quests for individuation. Clarice Starling is, too, in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the subject of chapter 2, "A Woman's Beast: *The Silence of the Lambs*." Chapter 8, "Robert Bresson and the Feminine Face of God," also considers women's quest stories, and it centers on Robert Bresson's female characters in *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962), *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), *Mouchette* (1967), and *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), who grapple with male Beasts in a world bereft of divinity. Young protagonists of both genders battle adults whose skepticism or neglect initiate their journeys in chapter 6, "The Child's Quest: A First Glimpse of Mortality." Primarily, it considers *The Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), *Into the West* (1992), *Whale Rider* (2002), and *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* (2005), differentiating the quests of adolescents and very young children. In chapter 7, "Catherine Breillat and the Fairy Tale Quest as 'Passage,'" three of Catherine Breillat's girl heroes engage in quests to *be* in *Fat Girl* (2001), *Bluebeard* (2009), and *The Sleeping Beauty* (2011).

We recount stories about the heroic quest for the same reasons Cocteau made *La Belle et la Bête*—in order to illustrate the collective loss of identity and meaning in patriarchal societies where the Beast is confined to the shadows. Through depictions of the quest in the cinema, we are creating and recreating a language with which to discuss it, reinvigorating the most long-standing narrative tradition on earth. In *Cinematic Quests for Identity*, the heroic journey is not defined by deeds but by the pursuit of consciousness and meaning. In the end, the hero undermines patriarchy rather than upholds its values. I am not speaking here of the antihero, but of the hero as emblematic of the sacrifices made in order to hold onto one's being, of P. D. Eastman's chick who asked the "fateful" question and braved the beasts of the barnyard to find an answer.

Notes

1. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 59.
2. P. D. Eastman, *Are You My Mother?* (New York: Random House, 1998). Eastman's book, which the author also illustrated, was first published in 1960.
3. C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 42.
4. Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 7.
5. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 17.
6. Ibid., 18.
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Ibid., 18.
9. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Houndmills, Basingstroke, Hampshire, and London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1989), 19.
10. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 13.
11. Ibid., 15.

CHAPTER ONE

Framing the Beast of Individuation

> Not to shoot a film in order to illustrate a thesis, or to display men and women as confined to their external aspect, but to discover the matter they are made of. To attain that "heart of heart" which does not let itself be caught either by poetry, or by philosophy or by drama.[1]
>
> —Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*

Like the beloved fairy tales of my childhood, read to me again and again until I had memorized them, until the pictures in the storybook became fixtures of my imagination, I remember the glowing images of Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête*. In this splendid film, Cocteau expresses our deeply felt longing for completeness and meaning. The love story of a girl and a beast, it is also, in the director's hands, a heroic quest for identity. Its leitmotifs derive from the unchanging and universal features of the human condition, the eternal pattern of birth, death, and rebirth that allows us to perceive the world through a paradigm of renewal.

A fairy tale for adults, *La Belle et La Bête* begins with a preamble, which asks us to reenter the realm of possibility, the "once upon a time" of childhood. There, as we all remember, beasts speak, and they possess magical powers. Princes marry girls of unremarkable birth. If in this cocoon of enchantment Cocteau fashions we glimpse the larger dimensions of myth and even classical tragedy, it is because Belle and la Bête descend from a long line of star-crossed lovers, including Pyramus and Thisbe, Tristan and Iseult, and Romeo and Juliet. Belle's (Josette Day) relationship with la Bête (Jean

Marais) is an archetypal encounter with the Other,[2] often explored in literature and drama through the lovers' tryst. But these ruminations spring from our adult minds.

If we answer Cocteau's call and return to our childhood sensibilities, *La Belle et La Bête* is a fairy tale adapted for the screen in which events unfold from Belle's point of view rather than through the legend's third-person narrator. It is also a love story in which Belle discovers her sexuality and la Bête finally feels loved for his underlying innocence. If Cocteau hoped his adult audience would be entranced by his exquisite images and by the splendid la Bête, he also knew they would be unable to ignore the subtext of the fairy tale in which a beautiful young woman sacrifices herself to answer for her father's crime. When heroic personalities encounter the Other, they may feel fear or revulsion, but then, like Belle, they accept the presence of the Beast, at first unconsciously, and perhaps as a psychological obstacle. Soon, uneasiness and disorientation set in, as it does for Belle when she first visits that primordial creature. On the Beast's estate, time is suspended, and she has the leisure to reflect upon her life.

While lesser souls may flee or vanquish the Other, heroes embark on dangerous quests to integrate it. These are encounters with the beast of their individuation. The subsequent journey transforms the hero and sometimes alters the consciousness of their contemporaries. Belle is attracted to what at first will imperil her, and then to the journey with la Bête that leads to her self-actualization. I use the term *beast of individuation* in *Cinematic Quests for Identity* to indicate the figures that appear to heroes, as la Bête appears to Belle when they are about to embark on the quest. This phrase honors la Bête, and it recalls Cocteau's enduring celebration of living courageously. The Beast arises from the depths of the hero's psyche and represents a wound suffered in childhood that remains unresolved.

Beasts compel heroes to embark on quests in order to revisit these injuries so that they may live authentically, closer to the dictates of their souls. It is a "beast" because it thrusts the hero into a terrifying journey, which can end in madness or death yet can also lead to individuation. In myth, male heroes confront the Beast at least twice in their lives, at maturity and in midlife. Feminine heroes generally confront the Beast as young women, often because their families have sacrificed them, as Belle's does in Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*. Unlike male quests for identity, women's journeys are largely interior battles. If the hero's individuation in quest films sometimes appears tenuous, it is because living consciously means never turning away from the Beast, and maybe loving the

Beast, as Belle does. Loving the Beast is a profound acceptance of self, of the integration of what terrifies us but, ironically, what completes us.

At the end of Cocteau's movie, when Belle kisses the dying Beast and he is transformed into a handsome prince, she accepts the part of herself that is corporeal and sensual, which she has up to that point denied in order to remain with her aging father. Cocteau's romantic and much-maligned denouement seems to negate the modern psychological interpretation of the movie as leading to that moment of individuation, but actually it simply keeps us honest—the filmmaker gently nudges us back to childhood or adolescence when we imagined that romantic love alone would make us whole. At the U.S. premier of the film, Cocteau said he wished to make the Beast "so human, so sympathetic, so superior to men that his transformation into Prince Charming would come as a terrible blow to Beauty."[3] The writer-director's remarkable spirit shines through that disappointing transfiguration that robs us of the noble Beast yet asks of us: "What if you could live in this evanescent moment when you believed all things were possible?" The retort is that we would live more fully, knowing that death portends rebirth. Only the Beast allows us to revel in that moment.

La Belle et La Bête was an allegory for Cocteau: in the fairy tale, in Belle's encounter with the Beast, the "poet"—Cocteau's preferred appellation for his work as a film director—perceived the struggle of the artist for psychic wholeness. "A work of art which devours its author isn't a joke," Cocteau wrote, reflecting upon his own psychological process, and perhaps the skin eruptions that plagued him throughout production. "It is a truth. The work of art hates us and contrives by any foul means to get rid of us."[4] While it appears to us now that any literary or cinematic interpretation of a myth presupposes a psychological dimension, Cocteau may have been the first to assume such an approach in the cinema. As an adaptation of de Beaumont's fairy tale, *La Belle et La Bête* required narrative integrity, as well as subtexual elements that would communicate Cocteau's raison d'être for making the film. Of course, all good fairy tale adaptations possess each of these dimensions, but Cocteau's literary source did not hint at any other interpretation beyond the story of a girl who marries a beast. As a guide for illustrating the myth on film, he naturally turned to paintings and drawings.

In *Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film*, Cocteau speaks of striving for a Johannes Vermeer painting,[5] the "Rubens's engravings of sheep,"[6] and to arranging actors and extras in *Anatomy Lesson* fashion," referring to the famous Rembrandt painting,[7] but perhaps most significant is the influence of Gustave Doré. His detailed illustrations accompanied early publications of many other girl-beast fairy tales, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and Bluebeard