

Entitled to a Happy Ending
Fairy-Tale Logic from “Beauty and the Beast” to the Incel Movement

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Fairy tales serve as a powerful narrative resource for US audiences in part because of their fragmented pervasiveness in popular culture. Cathy Lynn Preston notes, “[I]n postmodernity, the ‘stuff’ of fairy tales exists as ... free-floating cultural data that can be invoked conversationally, narratively, dramatically, or graphically” (210). Cristina Bacchilega has likewise noted the prevalence and power of fairy-tale fragments (2). Jeana Jorgensen calls texts where these fragments come together in a “schizophrenic instrumentalization of fairy tale matter”—a glass slipper here, a cursed princess there—fairy-tale pastiche, narratives “inspired by fairy tales but not quite fairy tales themselves” (218). I am interested in the continuum between fragments and pastiche, a critical space where the meanings found within or imposed upon fairy tales may be repurposed—may become, in the semiotic sense rather than the folkloric one, myth.

Jack Zipes argues that certain classical fairy tales have become mythified in Western culture. As myth, they “appear harmless, natural, eternal, ahistorical, therapeutic. We are to live and breathe the classical fairy tale as fresh, free air” (7). Among his interlocutors is semiotician Roland Barthes. According to Barthes’s paradigm (114–15), metalanguage subsumes the distinctions of form and detail critical to fairy tales as literary narratives and folklore texts, flattening them into language objects that it then consumes. In this way, historically situated texts occasionally and temporarily become unmarked by their context, becoming metalanguage, becoming what Barthes and Zipes call myth. Fairy tales’ mythic utility in popular culture depends upon some kind of prior knowledge of the tales without grounding that knowledge in particular texts. As individuals pick up fragments of content and incorporate those fragments into their personal mythologies (Jenkins 3–4), their social interactions enable them to make connections between theirs and others’ personal mythologies, forming contingent collective intelligences, a hallmark of meaning-making in cyberspace (Lèvy 16–17). Invocations of fairy-tale myth in popular and digital culture may thus be traced and analyzed for ideological insight.

In 2005, producers of the reality television program Beauty and the Geek (2005–08)¹ used the show’s title to associate it with the fairy tale “Beauty and the Beast” (ATU 425C). The story line of the television series hinges on individuals learning from one another as the key to internal transformation and material reward. Invocation of the fairy tale subtly naturalizes the sexism and misogyny that play hide and seek throughout the television series and makes the show, which was successfully franchised around the world, a noteworthy point of connection in a lineage leading from the monstrous bridegroom through the geek. This lineage is an important narrative heritage for the rhetoric of the contemporary incel movement and provides insight into

something else found in all three settings, fairy-tale logic, which is a concept I will develop momentarily.

Short for involuntary celibate, incel is the self-identificatory frame uniting a group of young, mostly white, mostly straight men who, along with a variety of otherwise distinct men's rights activists, theorize the root of their oppression is their status as so-called beta males. In this theory's twisted Darwinism, hypergamous women prefer alpha males for sexual partners and thus deny lesser males sexual access to their bodies (Ging 12). Incels' function within the world is to be rejected for the more princely males, the heroes. The resentment self-identified incels feel towards their perceived function has on multiple occasions manifested as violence. In this article, I examine fairy-tale logic as a framework for reading narratives grounded in sexist entitlement. I map similarities in implicit reasoning in "Beauty and the Beast," Beauty and the Geek, and the incel movement to theorize how certain narrative turns, in the context of reactions to shifting cultural norms, may signal the potential for violence.

Fairy-Tale Logic

Speaking to the future hero, A. E. Stallings' poem "Fairy-Tale Logic" draws attention to an important presupposition in fairy tales: "You have to believe / That you have something impossible up your sleeve." Beauty and the Geek positions the geeks similarly—unpromising heroes, but heroes nonetheless in the context of the show. Similarities between reality television setups and fairy-tale narratives have been noted since the contemporary appearance of the genre (Preston 205–06). Linda Lee locates and grounds the common use of fairy-tale motifs in reality television as a form of Jorgensen's aforementioned pastiche (276). There are also remarkable structural similarities between the two forms. The episodic format of most reality television calls to mind Vladimir Propp's thesis in the Morphology of the Folktale² that the functions of characters (rather than the characters themselves) are the constant elements in a fairy tale. Both fairy tales and gamedocs—a combination of game show and documentary genres—feature flat, frequently stereotyped characters leaving home and entering into a topsy-turvy liminal space where they encounter challenges on their way to achieving a goal. In reality TV, the functions played by the hero and the villain may shift among multiple members of the cast within an episode.

Over the course of a season of Beauty and the Geek, pairs compete in an episodic series of challenges testing how much they are learning from each other—"the hero is tested . . . which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper" (Propp 39). The winner of each challenge earns immunity from being sent home that week and, in early episodes, wins the power to select which of their competitors is in danger—"the hero acquires the use of a magical agent" (43). Immunity effectively blocks that particular cast member from fulfilling the role of hero in subsequent challenges within that episode; however, the hero's functions are effectively fulfilled by someone else.

At the end of each episode, two teams square off in the elimination room and answer questions having to do with that week's challenge—"the hero and the villain join in direct combat" (51). The team that answers the most questions correctly stays another week; the losing team goes home. Either pair could share the role of hero or villain in the final sequence of an episode. The elimination room clarifies which is which solely by the functions fulfilled—"the villain is

defeated” (55), “the hero is recognized,” “the false hero or villain is exposed” (62), or “the villain is punished” (63). The last team standing receives the show’s version of happily ever after in the form of the aforementioned grand prize: “The hero sometimes receives a monetary reward or some other form of compensation in place of the princess’ hand” (64). Though individual functions or loops may repeat within a tale or an episode, their overarching sequence is both logical and, with rare exceptions, identical. Their sequence, not the manner of its fulfillment, is the vital stable point. This stability creates the inevitability or inexorability of fairy-tale logic. In a fairy tale, argues Propp, one event must follow the other.

This article is part of a larger interdisciplinary project exploring the role of myth and mythos in online misogyny. Ultimately, I am interested in this question: How and why do people become invested in stories, symbols, and ideas that are not in their own best interests? Having identified the commonality of structure and function propelling the story in both fairy tale and reality television—indeed, across most genre storytelling at a base level—I began to see a similar mode of thinking applied in narratives of entitlement. Psychological entitlement is a narcissistic trait characterized by the belief that one is innately deserving of special treatment, even at others’ expense (Moeller et al. 448). I argue that privilege-based entitlement sources its authority in mythos. Mythos, in contemporary rhetorical parlance, denotes an appeal to a group or a culture’s prevailing beliefs³ (“Mythos”). It relies neither on rightness nor reason but on the elusive sense that things should be a certain way. Intriguingly for my purposes, Aristotle located mythos in plot—“the arrangement of the incidents” (25). Putting these pieces together—the stability of functions in a tale, a culture’s prevailing beliefs, and plot—I began to think more broadly about fairy-tale logic as a mode of magical thinking typified by the belief that certain functions, fulfilled correctly and in the right order, lead to predictable outcomes, similar to Propp’s morphology of the tale or the gamedoc’s premise, but bound by cultural systems that privilege some at the expense of others. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes that gendered scripts may be thought of as “happiness scripts”—“a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows from being natural or good” (59). In Beauty and the Geek, fairy-tale logic is imposed on the cast to reinforce gender norms. The incels, on the other hand, rely on fairy-tale logic to map their present problems backwards. Both methods for deploying fairy-tale logic rely on the ways people make meaning at the intersections of their individual personal mythologies.

Madonna Kolbenschlag argues people use myths to perform predictable interpretive acts of biography (25). Paul Veyne suggests a more complicated process whereby people relate to the myths of their own culture within continuums that include irony and distance, as well as belief (84). The field of narrative therapy presumes people story their experiences in order to make sense of them, to give them meaning (White and Epston 10). Rather than asking patients to tell their own stories, however, the therapist asks them to tell the story of the problem, thus externalizing it and creating a frame of reference in which the problem is not them. Therapist and patient then read the story, paying particular attention to unique outcomes—moments where the expected pattern of behaviors surrounding the problem do not occur. Every new “reading” is also, potentially, a rewriting (16). Beauty and the Geek proffers this kind of rewriting to its cast members, guiding them through ritual challenges with the promise of new outcomes at the end.

Social worker Laura Béres, writing about how her female patients use “Beauty and the Beast” and other stories to narrate their relationships with abusive partners, distinguishes narrative

therapy from psychoanalysis, which positions childhood experiences as a filter for adult interpretations. In narrative therapy, “images start in the present and reach backwards, finding other elements with which to resonate. These texts ... may contribute to people’s meaning-making in current situations, and these images may then move backwards in time, finding memories with which to resonate, which then consolidate the meanings” (194). This process of mapping backwards aligns most closely with how fragments of fairy-tale myth get incorporated into fairy-tale logic.

The incels use fairy-tale logic to tell the story of their problem within the context of a gendered unhappiness script. Drawing on evolutionary psychology, incels construct a world of innocent young lads oppressed by monstrous women. There are natural princes—the alpha males—and there are beta males who use manipulation or the lure of wealth to get women into bed. And then there are the incels, men whose physiognomy precludes alpha-male status and relegates them to the status of beasts without the hope of a Beauty.

From “Beauty and the Beast” to Beauty and the Geek

Tracing the diffusion of fairy-tale myth into fairy-tale logic as I seek to do through Beauty and the Geek and the incels requires attention to the tales’ previous incarnations while simultaneously understanding their invocation as unmarked metalanguage. As far as fairy-tale myth is concerned, “Beauty and the Beast” tales are interchangeable with one another, as well as with other similarly themed tales, such as “Riquet with the Tuft” (1697; ATU 711). Beauty and the Geek thus draws from what Preston earlier called the “stuff of fairy tales” and Jorgensen called “fairy tale matter.” The series’ primary point of fairy-tale reference, “Beauty and the Beast,” first enters the literary tradition under its current title or, rather, under the French translation, “La Belle et la Bête,” in a collection authored by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve in 1740 (Hearne 21). Villeneuve’s tale is followed in 1756 by a shorter and ultimately more popular version authored by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Jerry Griswold identifies Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy’s “The Ram” (1698) among additional key influences on Leprince de Beaumont’s tale (70). A majority of the “Beauty and the Beast” variants familiar to Western audiences take Leprince de Beaumont’s version as their source.

In Leprince de Beaumont’s tale, the Beast is a charming prince who long ago fell victim to a wicked fairy who condemned him to live in a monstrous shape until “a beautiful girl would consent to marry [him]” (815). Many years later, Beauty volunteers to become the Beast’s captive in his enchanted palace in place of her father. Eventually, Beauty learns her father has grown sick, and she begs the Beast to let her go to her father’s side. The Beast agrees, but tells her he will die of grief when she leaves him. They agree that she will go for only a week, but her sisters conspire to delay her. On the tenth day, Beauty returns and finds the Beast near death. Her declaration of love and acceptance of his proposal break the Beast’s curse and transform him into a handsome, intelligent Prince.

Beauty and the Geek’s premise superficially mirrors Leprince de Beaumont’s fairy tale—beautiful women and socially isolated men cohabit in a mansion set apart from the rest of the world—but, whereas the couple in the fairy tale falls in love and marries, the pairs on the show compete to win a \$250,000 grand prize. The term geek is often used interchangeably with nerd, though this taxonomical slippage may be disputed by those who self-identify with only one of

the two. The shared characteristic of both identities is an obsessive dedication to an unfashionable interest that renders the geek monstrous, or so the title Beauty and the Geek suggests (“Geek”; “Nerd”). That monstrosity, embodied in the geek’s social ineptitude, is what the show promises to change. Though the show’s narrative explicitly equates the men and women’s transformations, the wordplay in the title subtly cues viewers to expect the geek’s transformation to be more noteworthy. The structure of the challenges that follow reinforces that impression.

Nominally, the geeks are supposed to learn confidence in their social skills from the beauties, and the beauties are supposed to learn confidence in their intellect from the geeks. However, when the geeks are challenged to choose clothing for the women, massage them, or escort them on dates, the show implicitly equates the men’s social confidence with performances of masculine entitlement. In contrast, the beauties’ official challenges revolve around spelling, constructing toy rockets, and car maintenance, topics about which their male counterparts are often clueless. At best, the men help them study or read them the instructions. The beauties’ unofficial challenge is to incorporate their geek partners into hegemonic masculine roles with relation to themselves and other women and, in effect, to restore functional misogyny. How much of this switcheroo has thematic resonance with the fairy tale? Can it be mapped backwards?

Note that the Beast is made involuntarily celibate by the wicked fairy’s actions.⁴ Prior to Beauty’s arrival and the main events of the tale, it seems no woman will have him. By the end of the tale, Beauty’s care and sacrifice for the men in her life are shown to be key to those men’s very survival. This high-stakes dynamic exemplifies what philosopher Kate Manne calls the logic of misogyny, whereby men require and are owed women’s care, nurturing, and general sexual receptivity as a matter of moral support. In a patriarchal social order, these moral support relations are asymmetrical, as women are not to expect the same from men in turn (xiii). What women can expect, provided they are “good,” is that their place in the story will unfold in predictable ways that will lead to, if not happiness, per se, then at least the “relative proximity to a social ideal” that is supposed to make women happy (Ahmed 53).

Before delving deeper into Beauty and the Geek, I want to examine briefly how entitlement plays out in another version of “Beauty and the Beast.” In keeping with Manne’s account of a patriarchal social order, entitled women believe they deserve special treatment, a hallmark of benevolent sexism—women are made to nurture, not rule—while entitled men are usually prejudiced against women, prone to believing negative stereotypes about women’s demanding and conniving natures (Grubbs et al. 214–15). Elizabeth Harries notes that not all fairy tales turn out well, referencing d’Aulnoy’s “The Ram” as evidence. Coincidentally, “The Ram,” provides an excellent example of how entitlement correlates with different forms of sexism.

In the story, the heroine’s father becomes upset when he returns from war and does not find his favorite daughter sufficiently adoring. He reacts by ordering her violent death, an act of hostile sexism. When combined with exploitativeness, another narcissistic trait, entitlement predicts physical aggression in men.⁵ The heroine herself, exhibiting entitlement stemming from class and racial privilege, offers only token resistance when her three closest companions give their lives for hers.⁶ She later forgets to return to her monstrous lover in time. His death is the unhappy

ending that Harries warns of and that Villeneuve and those who came after her reject in favor of a more successful gendered script whereby the heroine puts her hero's needs first.

While neither form of sexism is desirable, hostile sexism combined with entitlement as a factor in predicting aggression suggests that understanding the narrative underpinnings of entitled beliefs may yield insight into gender-based violence. Within Leprince de Beaumont's tale, misogyny lies dormant, rarely activated, because Beauty behaves as a good woman should, devoted to both father and benevolent captor. In "The Ram," the heroine's own father is the one who orders her death. Her crime? First, she does not immediately flatter him, as her older sisters do, when he returns home; then she recounts a strange dream in which he played the role of her servant. To her father, these perceived insults warrant her death.

Returning to my earlier questions, yes, the prioritization of men's needs over women's, the misogyny, and the masculine entitlement that permeate Beauty and the Geek can be mapped backwards onto the fairy tale. However, they are not what tale or television series is explicitly about. The first episode begins with a voiceover explaining the show's premise. While scenes from future episodes play out on screen, the narrator asks, "Can people with nothing in common⁷ learn from each other?" One of the geeks tells an unseen interviewer, "The more time I get to spend here the more I'm going to be able to approach somebody that I wouldn't necessarily have the guts to talk to." A crying Beauty relates, "I just realized ... how superficial girls that look like us can treat guys who look like some of them, and that all these guys are ... some of the greatest guys I've ever met."

Whereas Leprince de Beaumont's tale centralizes Beauty's spiritual transformation and recognition of love and support for the Beast, Disney's 1991 animated film and its 2017 remake add a story line whereby the Beast's curse is a result of his own arrogance and temper, putting the spiritual transformation on him instead of her. The structure of the season 1 preview suggests that over the course of the season the geeks will develop social confidence, in keeping with the series' premise, but instead of then making a parallel claim about the beauties' increasing intellectual confidence, the preview focuses on the aforementioned Beauty's condemnation of her and her peers' superficiality. This disparity between the series' premise and execution blurs transformations that occur in different adaptations of the fairy tale—the geeks/beasts must learn the proper way to treat women, and the beauties must overcome their prejudices based on looks and recognize a person's true value.

The neglected promise of intellectual growth for the beauties would have had more in common with the lesser-known "Riquet with the Tuft" tales. The Riquet character is hideous but intelligent and has the ability to impart the same amount of intelligence to another. He inevitably chooses a beautiful but stupid woman to be his bride, bartering his gift of intelligence for her hand in marriage with mixed results. In Catherine Bernard's version, the woman chooses to keep her newfound intelligence and marry Riquet at the cost of true love, but, eventually, she sneaks her lover into the city and cuckolds her husband. In Charles Perrault's version, the woman has her own parallel ability to beautify the person of her choice, and she and Riquet get on well enough with each other after their mutual transformation. In Leprince de Beaumont's version, "Spiritual and Astre," the now-intelligent woman chooses the ugly man because of his character and mind, just as Beauty does with the Beast. Beauty and the Geek promises mutual

transformation akin to Perrault's version while substituting the asymmetrical moral support of Leprince de Beaumont's.

As the show begins, the teams' first task is to choose which room in the mansion they will share for their time there. The shared rooms lay the groundwork for an unspoken but foundational premise of the show—that the geeks must learn to embrace access to the beauties' bodies and space as their right, and that the beauties must learn how best to bolster their partners' sense of masculine entitlement, restoring functional, if again often dormant, misogyny. The challenges that follow are weighted to place attention on the male leads as both they and their partners learn this lesson repeatedly. For example, in episode 2, the beauties are told to don bikinis and eye masks and lie on tables so the geeks can practice their massage skills on them. The beauties are then asked to rate each massage anonymously in order to select the winner. The beauties are thus asked not only to proffer their bodies for their partner's practice attempts, but also to strip down and submit to physical contact with all of the other men in the house, as well. Interview footage of the women's discomfort is framed to highlight their disgust with these particular unattractive men touching them. The implication is that if the men were attractive, none of the women would mind.

This juxtaposition primes the audience to read the challenge as another way to further the women's transformation away from superficiality, instead of as the show's co-optation of their right to say who touches them and how. Note that wearing a bikini and accepting a massage have very little to do with increasing intellectual confidence, again suggesting that the women's true transformation is supposed to focus on their depth of character, as measured by their sexual receptivity to geeky men. This is only one of several challenges in which the beauties are asked to play a role in the geeks' transformation, not as partners but as objects.

In episode 3, the geeks must guess at sizes while selecting and purchasing outfits for their partners. The beauties then have to strut down a runway in each outfit, regardless of fit, in front of the men in the house and a panel of random judges. Again, the beauties' bodies are displayed in order to judge the geeks' transformation. In contrast, when the beauties purchase clothing for their male partners in episode 4, their challenge is framed around not going over budget when they shop. The beauties' equally important job is to help the geeks look good as the men attempt their own challenge. There is no runway highlighting the men's discomfort with ill-fitting and revealing clothing as they parade on display. Instead, each man receives a professional cut and style and shows off his new well-fitting clothing to the other contestants in the house by taking turns walking into the room.

The geeks' challenge in episode 4 is to approach strange women in a public setting, collecting as many phone numbers as possible while their partners advise them over an earpiece. In the same episode, the geeks are told to ask out one of the women in the house. Though these dates are framed as practice for the men, the requirement that the geeks ask out women other than their teammates again reduces the beauties to objects instead of partners. In a fairy tale, Propp notes, "living things, objects, and qualities, from the morphological point of view, founded upon the functions of the dramatis personae, must be examined as equivalent quantities" (82). In the show, the beauties are made effectively interchangeable, there only to fulfill the function of woman.

In contrast, the geeks' role in the beauties' challenges is more often that of study guide and intermittently effective tutor. Though this balance changes in the final two episodes of the competition when the focus finally shifts to teamwork, the dynamic of the competition to that point has already shaped the unofficial challenge for both beauties and geeks to focus on the reincorporation of the geeks into a successful performance of misogynistic heterosexual gender norms. Both of the women who make it to the final round demonstrate intelligence and communication skills, though both initially lack confidence. However, the show structures the escalating dramatic arc around the conflict between the two geeks, subtly attributing their respective teams' chances more to the men than to the women even though both partners win an equal number of challenges within their respective teams.

Two quasi-romantic pairings emerge during the season. Brad, a tall, confident Mensa member who never seems fully committed to the show's project, almost immediately becomes physically involved with Erika, whose title card in episode 1 labels her a "life size Barbie model." Erika's partner, Joe, watches from the sidelines as this occurs. Fellow competitor Chuck, the geek-half of the team that ultimately wins, subsequently sends Brad and his female partner to the elimination room in episode 2, noting, "Of the experiences that this show has to offer, the majority are geared towards, maybe, teaching us things that the two of you have already found in life." Chuck goes on to try to master each challenge and becomes part of the second semiromantic pairing on the show. Meanwhile, Richard, Chuck's chief rival, gleefully inhabits the role of troll, resigned to his involuntary celibacy and unabashed in seeking access to female attention any way he can get it, whether stealing kisses from his female castmates as they are eliminated from the show or not taking the final challenge seriously until his fed-up partner promises a willing kiss if he buckles down and plays to win. Rather than potential hero, Joe and Richard's role is more akin to that of the brothers and sisters in fairy-tale lore who attempt the same challenge as the hero, only to fail.

Beauty and the Geek manifests the misogynistic tendencies so easy to overlook in most versions of "Beauty and the Beast," but continues to play them out via subtle behavioral policing and normalization of the sexual objectification of women. The show plays out the same high-stakes dynamic as the fairy tale, whereby the choice to offer an unattractive man her emotional support denotes a woman's character, or lack thereof, and receiving an attractive woman's emotional support and romantic interest converts a geek into a man. More recently, the incel movement draws heavily on fairy-tale logic to justify its continued and virulent misogyny in the face of shifting social norms about women's rights and agency. The incels' rhetoric makes these same threads of sexism and misogyny explicit and extreme.

From Geeks to Incels

The incel movement has strong ties to the gamer/geek subset of the manosphere, which is a confederation of misogynistic blogs, Web sites, and online forums, most of which accept some version of red-pill philosophy (Ging 2–3). Referencing a scene in the 1999 film The Matrix, swallowing the red pill leads to an understanding of the so-called reality of men's social oppression at the hands of out-of-control feminists (Schmitz and Kazyak 6; Van Valkenburgh 2). One might narrate the young incel's journey to enlightenment thusly: he desires sex but does not know how to go about finding a partner—"one member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something" (Propp 35). He ventures into the topsy-turvy world of the Internet—"the hero is allowed to depart from home" (37). He finds his way to the manosphere and takes

the magical red pill—“the hero acquires the use of a magical agent” (43)—which exposes women, particularly feminist women, as monsters—“the false hero or villain is exposed” (62).

A key source often cited as required reading for new denizens of the manosphere is F. Roger Devlin’s essay “Sexual Utopia in Power.” Devlin invokes pseudoscientific rhetoric and reifies traditional sex roles in order to argue that women, biologically driven to desire and mate above their stations, pursue the most sexually attractive men available, the alphas, whereas men, naturally driven towards sexual variety, strive to become as sexually attractive as possible in order to attract women. Mate choice and sexual power, in Devlin’s view, belong entirely to women. *Beauty and the Geek* and, to an extent, the mythified “Beauty and the Beast” are structured with this power dynamic implicit at their core.

Devlin warns repeatedly that lower-status men’s anger at their mistreatment is building and will come to a head, at which point women should beware (21, 30). While the pervasiveness of his claims varies across the manosphere, they are particularly relevant to the incel community. As previously noted, incels frame themselves within the lowest tier of sexual desirability. They argue that their own thinner bodies and larger heads evolutionarily predispose them to lose out in females’ mate selection. To them, the Joes and Richards of the world, shorter and more slightly built, will inevitably lose out so long as the Brads and Chucks exist.⁸ It does not matter that Brad and Chuck would both be considered beta. Alpha males have it easy as women pursue them. Beta males may still be able to leverage economic power or learn seduction techniques to gain sexual access. Many incels go a step further, saying they have taken the black pill and identifying themselves as omegas.

The term incel originated in the 1990s on a Web site founded by a queer woman. “Alana’s Involuntary Celibacy Project” was a pre-Web 2.0 forum for men and women to discuss their loneliness and difficulty forming romantic connections (Alana). In 1998, a member of an “on-line discussion group for involuntary celibates” e-mailed sociologist Denise Donnelly “to ask about current research on involuntary celibacy” (Donnelly et al. 161). Finding little on the topic, members of the discussion group volunteered to be part of a research sample. The resulting study, developed after discussion with the initial volunteers, notes that respondents expressed their unhappiness with their celibacy in language that suggested they were “off time in making normative sexual transitions” (159): “As a group, all involuntary celibates appear to have difficulty with the timing and maintenance of culturally sanctioned age-based norms of sexuality” (167). In other words, their stories were not progressing apace.

Alana’s group shortened involuntary celibate to invcel and then to incel (Taylor) before she disengaged and handed her content over to a stranger in the early 2000s. Tracing the evolution of the community from there becomes complicated, but the code of conduct on the site that succeeded Alana’s makes no mention of her inclusive queer-feminist lens (“The Incel List, Forum, Chat and Meet”). The only advice article on the new site addressed specifically to women unproblematically narrates a male incel’s first experience receiving a lap dance in a gentlemen’s club. The author advises female incels who want to approach men to model their attitudes on the dancers who “genuinely seemed to be enjoying themselves” (“Attitude”). However, another article on the site explicitly addresses and deconstructs some of the misogynist claims that would later come to dominate incel culture (“Nice Guys v Jerks”). Alana’s inclusive definitions of who may be an incel remain on the site, and of the twelve personal stories

referenced as representative of incel identity, one is by a gay man and three are by women (“Am I Incel?”). Overall, the site portrays a community wrestling with the line between unintended social awkwardness and offensive behavior. Though the site is nominally still queer-inclusive, explicitly feminist perspectives appear not to have made the transition.

In 2019, presumably, a similar range of people to those who identified with Alana’s original project may still be drawn to the concept at the core of incel identity—connecting with others around a common struggle with unfulfilled desire for sexual and romantic connection; however, in the intervening fifteen years, incel rhetoric has become dominated by virulently antifeminist misogyny. The (male) incel who is not turned off by this misogyny takes the journey outlined at the beginning of this section, using fairy-tale logic to tell the story of the problem that is involuntary celibacy. As previously noted, some in today’s incel community go beyond red-pill philosophy to theorize a black pill. The sidebar on the 3.7-k subscriber subreddit BlackPillScience proffers the following definition:

[M]ate preferences in [Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD)] societies are primarily guided by lookism, tribalism and, for heterosexual women, heightism.... For some individuals, the relationship between the amount of goal-directed effort expended in order to attract and court preferred mates ... and one’s success rate may be so poorly correlated that, for these individuals, such narrowly targeted effort is naive at best.

Incels who have taken the black pill are thus those who have resigned themselves to a reality in which they will never be able to attract a willing mate of the conventionally attractive type they desire, no matter what they do, and in which trying to change this ineluctable fact makes them fools. Black-pill incels would read Bernard’s version of “Riquet with the Tuft” unironically as confirmation, arguing that of course a beautiful, intelligent woman will choose a beautiful man over an ugly one, no matter what promises she might have made or what value her unattractive husband provides her. While there is no way to know how often the threats of violence prefigured in Devlin’s essay have been manifested by denizens of the manosphere, at least three mass murders have been connected to these communities (Nagle; Tolentino). The addition of nihilist claims that lifelong rejection is inevitable and unavoidable does nothing to de-escalate the rhetoric.

The incel who remains committed to the revelations of the red pill may loop back, repeating certain functions as he engages in pickup artistry,⁹ attempting to trick women into bed as if it were a step in his hero’s quest, or he may choose this time to take the black pill and advance along a darker path. The canary in the coal mine for violence is the moment when the would-be hero finally believes that, counter to the concept in Stallings’ poem, he has nothing impossible up his sleeve. The only avenue left for the incel who has taken the black pill to advance his story as a hero is to expose the villainy of the woman, any woman, all women—this is not about individual women, after all, but about the function of women—and to punish her (Propp 63).

Conclusion

At the core of all the incels’ elaborate narratives for why women will not have sex with them—and to be clear, this rejection is most often presupposed and reacted to in the absence of any

actual reported interactions with women—is frustrated misogyny, which is a deeply personal reaction to women walking through the world as if they are autonomous agents, out of sync with their function (Manne 57–58). Referencing the ubiquity of Propp’s morphology in Western storytelling, Dorothy Noyes writes, “[T]he fairy tale is our touchstone for articulating the normative life course of the individual” (4). Donnelly’s study concludes that involuntary celibates consider their life courses off time, out of sync. As Manne has theorized, in a patriarchal social order, women owe their care to men. When a woman walks through the world as an autonomous being, careless of her function, she becomes a living, breathing offense to those still bound by the strictures of that order. Sexism judges her. Misogyny demands she be punished.

In 2014, the Isla Vista killer, a self-described incel, attempted to break into a sorority to slaughter the women there as representatives of all who were denying him sex. He recorded a video explaining how he had been “forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection, and unfulfilled desires, all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection and sex and love to other men but never to me . . . I will punish you for it. . . . You will finally see that I am, in truth, the superior one—the true alpha male” (qtd. in Manne 35). Foiled, he still murdered six and wounded fourteen before killing himself. In 2015, another involuntarily celibate man, known to valorize the Isla Vista killer, murdered nine and injured six in Oregon (Nagle; Tolentino). In 2017, British reporter Amelia Tait warned that the Isla Vista killer continued to be venerated online by other involuntary celibates (“Why We Should Stop Using the Phrase ‘Lone Wolf’”). That same year, Reddit shut down the 40,000-member incels forum, banning it due to a “violation of our content policy, specifically, our sitewide rules regarding violent content” (“Incels”). In 2018, another admirer of the Isla Vista killer drove a van into a crowd and killed ten people in Toronto (Tait, “Digital Native”).

Both “Beauty and the Beast” and Beauty and the Geek presuppose that men are owed women’s moral support as a right and that the ability to claim that right is what transforms them into desirable mates and gives them their happily-ever-afters, whether that manifests as marriage or money. That is the normative happiness script around gender in a patriarchal social order. The incels want that same ending to their story but believe they are barred from achieving it by women’s autonomy—that is, women’s refusal to enable the rest of the story by playing their proper role.

And so, we return to this idea of fairy-tale logic and consider what it offers as a framework for understanding entitlement and as a warning sign for violence. Entitlement may be conceptualized as a belief in one’s inherent right to have one’s story turn out the way it is supposed to for people like you. Notably, this prescription is desirable only when one operates from a vantage point of privilege. Lurking in the background of Beauty and the Geek are all the geeks for whom performing hegemonic masculinity changes nothing. According to black-pill reasoning, these men will never triumph by following the traditional gendered happiness script. It is useless for them to try. Women will not allow them to succeed. The potential for violence crystallizes in fairy-tale logic when the only way to move one’s story forward is to punish the villain. Unable to conceptualize happiness outside of how privilege tells them their story should go, and unable to prioritize their actual interests above their frustrated entitlement, some incels will continue to turn to violence. On April 12 2019, days prior to this writing, a man who was “angry over being rejected by women he attempted to talk to at the mall” approached a stranger and threw her five-

year-old over the side of the balcony (“Man Accused of Throwing Boy”). The criminal complaint filed against him states he told police “he had been coming to the Mall for several years and had made efforts to talk to women in the Mall, but had been rejected, and the rejection caused him to lash out and be aggressive” (4th Judicial District Court 2). Though this man does not identify as an incel, he came to the mall with the intention of killing someone because of a violent frustration with women who had not behaved as they should, who had not fulfilled their function in his story. There is a common justificatory narrative thread of revenge against or because of women in his case and in the incel cases that cannot be explained by individual mental health issues. The commonalities in these stories suggest the potential for a wider applicability of fairy-tale logic.

Notes

1. Previous scholarly attention to the Beauty and the Geek series includes an indepth discussion of season 3 in terms of the hip/square dialectic (Quail 474-8), mentions in deeper explorations of similar programs (Lee 276; Downey 86) and nods to the show’s “misogynistic expectations” (Salter and Blodgett 46) or portrayal of gender and computing (Hayes and King 62). In an opinion piece, Sarah Seltzer notes that later seasons of the show demonstrate a double standard for male and female geeks.
2. Though the title of Propp’s book refers to the folktale, his argument is specific to fairy tales (ix).
3. I owe insight into the contemporary rhetorical use of mythos to a conversation with my research assistant, Celnisha Dangerfield.
4. Upon hearing me describe an earlier version of this article, Linda Lee noted involuntary celibacy’s relevance to monstrous bridegroom tales.
5. For research demonstrating these linkages, see Campbell et al., Moeller et al., and Reidy et al.
6. There is a deep racialized entitlement in “The Ram” as well—too much to do justice to here. For a discussion of race in d’Aulnoy’s fairy tales more broadly, see Lau.
7. The claim that the cast members have nothing in common belies the fact that, with the exception of one Latinx woman, all present as white, American, cisgender, and heterosexual. Rather, the number of things the cast has in common is what allows normative gender performance to become so central in analysis of the show.
8. These inferences are based on incel reasoning directed at the characters and story lines portrayed on the show. They have no basis in reality or in my personal opinion of the characters or the cast members who portray them.
9. See O’Neill’s ethnographic study of the London seduction community.

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