

## Cocteau anti-semitic by editing

By Robert Hammond

I am the world's most undiscovered dramatist. This is a fact. Therefore, I feel free to fulminate against mutilation of an author's text. That is, I would be furious if one of my plays, having been discovered, were to have a portion cut from it, like by someone exacting a pound of flesh. My image there is not gratuitous. This essay will describe my perception of the deleterious effect of a cut in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. It exposes Cocteau to the suspicion of an anti-semitic posture.

As I have stated, I am in the position of objectivity regarding editing. Editing means cutting, in the final analysis. Maxwell Perkins was hired as an editor by Scribner's. If he did not demonstrate changes in an author's submitted text, he would lose his job. So, according to legend, when Hemingway's manuscript was accepted by Scribner's and handed to Perkins, Perkins happily chopped away. He reduced the text probably by at least 10%. More likely, around 20%. Good editor. Pat on the head. Try Thomas Wolfe. 25%? Melville's editor probably lost his job. All he had to do would have been to cut out the whales. And the public applauds. A good editor might well receive a Pulitzer prize for reducing *Hamlet* to a haiku! In short, the processors scorn the writer's product. The writer has written what he wanted to write. The producers or publishers treat all writing as necessarily imperfect. Nobody's perfect, after all. I have a child. He is a fine specimen. He's left-handed. So he doesn't need his right arm. Cut it off. That's what Jesus said to do in the *Sermon on the Mount*. « If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off. » (Matt. 5, 29)

In films, scorn for the text prevails with a vengeance. Even writers treat that dramatic form as inferior. Fortunately, the scorn is not universal. René Clair, for one, was proud to publish the texts of his films long before « Avant-Scène du Cinéma » or « Evergreen ». Even Jean Cocteau did not protest when a major cut was made in *Beauty and the Beast*, as we shall see. Many writers say that other writers write at too great a length. It is easy to say that you dislike a certain book, play or film « because it's too long. » In truth, you don't know why you like or dislike. The reaction comes first. Then you try to assign a reason. There is none. Let the writer's statement remain as written. Some will like it and some will not. Let the publishers, producers and reporters judge the writing of a work on the basis of the number of books or tickets sold. Their interest is based on the profits received. I am proud of my undiscovered works. They stand, undefiled vestal virgins. The works of others are sullied to some

extent. I am free to fume, fuss and fulminate. I enjoy trying to brush the dirt off the successful works of others whenever possible, and I remain objective.

When I acquired a copy of Cocteau's script of *La Belle et la Bête* in 1958, I read at first with great interest. Then I was shocked to realize that a whole sequence, an entire episode had not been in the film. A decision of the author, perhaps. Too bad. Then I was appalled to learn that it had been filmed but cut out AFTER THE PREMIERE SHOWING! I searched for a reason. Gossip had it that Mme Paulvé, the wife of the producer, had protested, supposedly having said that the audience would laugh at the farce scene for the wrong reason. In the scene, Jean Marais spoke with a falsetto voice, imitating one of the wicked sisters. Since the public of the day was well aware that he was a homosexual in love with Cocteau, everyone would be sniggering behind their hands. Now, no documentation of that statement exists. Mme Paulvé may well never have said any such thing. She is also reported to have said many complimentary things about the film, after all. Therefore, I must conclude that the reason remains unknown. Moreover, not only Jean Marais, but also Michel Auclair spoke in a falsetto, representing the other bad sister. I have asked many of those concerned with the production why the cut was made. None seems to know, but what is worse, none seems to care. Jean Marais, Michel Auclair, even Henri Alekan. Alekan had told me how complicated, difficult and time-consuming the scene had been to shoot. Then, when I asked why the cut might have been ordered, he shrugged his shoulders and said simply, « It's typical of what happens in this business. » When we worked together on the 1993 publication of the text, I asked him if he wouldn't call attention to the cut in his commentary. He shrugged again and said it just wasn't worth it. Finally Cocteau himself fails to mention the fact that the cut had been made. I am indignant. About 12% of the film was arbitrarily excised. Arbitrarily, and I must say even criminally.

I tried to find the missing footage. I went to Bois d'Arcy outside of Paris, to the archives of all films produced in France. The attendant put the negative on the editing table. Five reels. Twenty minutes each. Except the third reel had only ten minutes on it! The attendant was surprised, but he explained that all films remained the property of the producers. I reflected that I could have cut out a portion for myself. Security was lax. I went to see Paulvé. He had generously given me the right to the « photos de plateau. » When I asked about the missing footage, however, he became irritated and denied that any such footage had been shot at all. I have been fulminating and searching ever since, but unearthed nothing. I have failed to excite any broader interest.

But the plot thickens. In 1966, I was in Cambridge, preparing to publish the text of the film, and so I viewed several prints. It was while I was giving a course at Harvard that my fifteen year old daughter, keener of eye than I, exclaimed at a certain point : « Who's that guy ? » The scene was of a man who interrupts a card game in a tavern and shouts : « You dogs ! Give me back my money ! » The boys knock him out and there is a link to the next scene with the Beast in his castle.

I explained patiently to my daughter that it was the old money-lender from the beginning of the film. She retorted somewhat less patiently that it was in no way the same person ! Whereas the old money-lender was not only old, but had a small grey beard and a skull-cap, this scene was of a beardless, corpulent man in his forties, sporting a broad-brimmed hat. I had been looking at the film periodically for twenty years. So had the film-loving public. None of us had noticed the discrepancy. It is also true that the money-lender had already « repossessed », reclaiming the debt of the brothers by removing all the furniture in the father's house. It would have been senseless to have him asking for even more.

It finally penetrated my memory that this was a person from the cut portion of the film. Fortunately, in order to study it carefully, I made an audio tape of the scene. « Fortunately, » because six months later, when I ordered the 16mm print again, I found that this short three-minute scene had been removed from the distributor's copy ! I never went back to Bois d'Arcy. I have kept my audio tape, jealously guarded.

My quest continues. My fulminations persist. Recently, at a colloquium at Hofstra University, called « A pen of light : Cocteau as filmmaker, » my role was to give a talk on *Orphée*, but after a late showing of *La Belle et la Bête*, a small woman approached me to ask, with great discretion, whether I hadn't noticed that there was a hint of anti-semitism in the film. I was instinctively irritated at being put on the defensive. « Here we go again ! » I thought. I am not Jewish, so I am not so sensitized. She smiled as if she knew what I was thinking. She confided almost waggishly to me, « Not only am I Jewish, but I'm a member of a local committee devoted to finding and exposing expressions of anti-semitism ! » For a moment, I thought I might explain to her that the money-lender was dressed in that costume because that is the way it was in the 18th century. Then I realized that would never wash. I thought, I'll tell her Cocteau was in no way anti-Jewish. I realized that was akin to saying « Some of my best friends... »

So I decided to change the subject and tell her about the cut in the film. I was explaining to her how the episode was about two boys, always out of cash, who knew that a rich bourgeois cloth merchant was in love with Félicie, one of the two wicked sisters. His love was unrequited. The boys tried to convince her to marry him, and thus bring money into the family. To no avail. So they turned to the merchant and told him they thought Félicie was too timid to say yes because she didn't have the proper wardrobe. In order to prove this, they put the merchant in a closet so he could over-hear them trying to persuade Félicie. That was why Jean Marais and Michel Auclair were speaking falsetto: they were impersonating the sisters while the clothier in the closet could hear but not see what was going on. The merchant, convinced, heaps money on them to buy clothes for Félicie. He appears eagerly before Félicie, but gets a wet sheet in his face for his trouble. Disenchanted, he wants his money back.

As I was telling the story it dawned on me that this scene might have been a sort of counterpoise to the money-lender's previous story. I asked my mild-mannered interlocutress if she thought there was anything to my feeling. She brightened up and declared « That (the counter-image) would have made all the difference ! »

She was only one voice, of course. I checked with « one of my best friends, » and she observed that most of the cloth merchants at the time were also Jewish. If she were right, that could make the case for anti-semitism all the stronger. In fact, the merchant father of Beauty might also be Jewish. Money is a constant sub-theme of the story !

On the other hand, the old money-lender is dressed almost in caricature ; that is, obviously the « typical Jewish usurer, » whereas the merchant is equally caricatured, but not as Jewish at all, but rather the « typical 18th century bourgeois. » Moreover, he is seeking the hand of a Catholic beauty. (The girls are Catholic whether the father was or not.) In those days, would a respectable Jew be courting a goy girl ?

The question may remain open in the minds of many of the readers of this essay. No matter how it might be settled, it is still clear that the cutting of this scene has made a material difference in the character of the film. In its present form it will continue to be a film tainted by at least the suspicion of the charge of anti-semitism.

The cut in the film, then, is more than just a cut. It is not simply the question of a querulous amateur author's complaint of rampant text tampering. Cocteau shows no evidence of having had racist leanings of any

**kind. We do not know the reason for this cut. No matter. We do know that it thrusts his impartiality into question.**

**If only the missing footage could somehow be discovered ! Requirement of reinsertion into the film could result. Someone somewhere surely has it in his possession, perhaps unwittingly, without realizing its importance. I myself have tried every conceivable avenue but I have failed to find the slightest lead. My imagination is limited. It would fall to someone more resourceful and intelligent to accomplish this mission. In the meantime, we at least have the published text<sup>1</sup>. Why not give it a good, careful « read ? »**

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<sup>1</sup> There are four versions of the text : (1) New York University Press bilingual text [1972] out of print since 1987, (2) Avant-Scène du Cinéma edition [nos. 138-139 1973], in French only, (3) Belfond [1990] in French only and out of print since 1992, and (4) the deluxe Editions du Collectionneur, [1993] in French only.