

Beauty and the Beastly Bisexual: A Comparative Investigation of Queer Narratives and Human-Monster Relationships in Fiction

By: Janelle Mudry

Stories featuring human-monster relationships, whether they are explicitly or implied to be romantic, have been around for ages. However, so have people within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community, whether those labels were used to describe them or not. Despite the existence of both, explicitly romantic queer narratives have not existed in the same capacity as stories depicting monstrous or animalistic bridegrooms.

Often, the “monster” in monster-human romance narratives serves as an allegory for the “Other,” that is any marginalized group causing significant cultural anxieties within society. This paper does not intend to conflate queer individuals to monsters or that which is unnatural, but rather aims to examine monster-romances through the lens of this existing allegory—monsters as the Other, representing queer people. The primary question this project seeks to answer is: why does it appear to be more acceptable for fictional romantic human-monster relationship narratives to be portrayed rather than queer romance narratives, fictional or otherwise? I seek to answer this through a close analysis of three films, using established scholarly queer theory as a contextual starting point: Jean Cocteau’s 1946 film, *La Belle et la Bête*, Jamie Babbit’s 1999 film, *But I’m a Cheerleader*, and Guillermo del Toro’s 2017 film, *The Shape of Water*.

On the surface it can be inferred that the transformational aspect of most monster-romance narratives, like *Beauty and the Beast*, is what makes them more palatable to general audiences. However, monster-romance narratives that lack the transformational aspect, like *The Shape of Water*, also have a more positive audience reception than queer human narratives. General audiences are more receptive to monster-romance narratives because they do not have to directly address the fact that they perceive queer humans as monstrous and unnatural; thus, they are more inclined to suspend their disbelief, accepting that an inhuman beast can fall in love with a human. Ultimately, in the eyes of general audiences, a person can fall in love with who and what they want, so long as they are a member of the opposite sex.

In order to understand why marginalized groups have been aligned with monsters by the dominant culture, one must understand the origins of such characterization. The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, most recognizably known as the “Hays Code,” refers to a self-censoring declaration of production rules created by Hollywood film companies to ensure that only moral material is portrayed on screen. The first three principles outlined in the code portray its subjectivity:

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation. (Hayes)

In the eyes of the dominant culture at the time, homosexuality, or the expression of any other LGBTQ+ identity, would fall under the categories of “wrongdoing, evil, or sin” as well as being a violation of “natural or human” law (Hayes). However, an outright ban on queer representation in media did not mean that queer representation did not exist. Regardless of the intention behind their inclusion—that intention most often being to portray them negatively—queer characters



still made their way on to the silver screen. In order to bypass the obstacle that was set forth by the Hays Code, qualities deemed as undesirable to the dominant culture—usually those associated with LGBTQ+ people and people of color—were mapped on to antagonists, and, to comply with the Code, these antagonists had to be punished on screen. As scholars Unoma Azuah and Lindsey Green-Simms put it in their article, “The Video Closet,” “The characters considered to be poorly behaved and disruptive to society are those who step outside of acceptable gender norms or engage in any type of non-normative sexuality” (35). Most often such characterization in the context of queer characters is referred to as “queer coding,” where characters are implied, or coded, to be queer based on certain physical or behavioral qualities. Even following the abolishment of the Hays Code in the 1960s, queer coding, both intentional and unintentional continued to persist. As Vicki Eaklor puts it in “The Kids Are All Right But the Lesbians Aren't: The Illusion of Progress in Popular Film,” “The flipping of traditional gender roles has become equated with homosexuality, with a person’s actual sexuality becoming a moot point (Eaklor 156). Gender performance, either perceived as proper or improper, is then inherently tied to morality in the language of film, thus queer coding allowed for an easily recognizable manner with which to create such aforementioned allegories in monster-romance narratives.

In her piece, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Men, Women, and Masculinity,” Judith Halberstam creates a queer framework from which to analyze literature, more specifically, specifically film. Halberstam discusses masculinity, particularly its relationship to gender identity, sexuality, and cultural identity. Although she applies this framework to reality-based films from the mid-1990s, Halberstam nonetheless expresses the primary problem caused by queer censorship and subsequent characterization as monstrous Others, the problem being that “to keep pace with changes in the social and political recognition of queers, homophobic response has been ever more subtle and devious” (Halberstam 2638). However, in order to perpetuate homophobic heroism in film, the protagonist of such films needs to be explicitly diametrically opposed to whatever character is being allegorized as the queer Other. One of the most common manners in which to code an antagonist as queer, specifically if they are male, is to portray them as unmasculine in some capacity, with female antagonists, in turn, being masculine. On the most basic level, to be “good” or “moral” is to subscribe to the gender roles prescribed by society. As Halberstam puts it, “heterosexual white male masculinity appears as naturally attractive and desirable despite any socially repulsive behaviors that may accompany it. In fact, the presence of a gay masculine rival allows the heteromale to voice his host homophobic and misogynist sentiments without repercussions of any kind” (2641). Such portrayals of masculinity and implied sexuality are portrayed differently throughout the films discussed in this paper. Cocteau’s *La Belle et la Bête* epitomizes such queer coding; Babbit’s *But I’m a Cheerleader* outright rejects it by being explicitly queer and satirizing the existence of such gender roles; Del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* subverts the formula put in place by having the Other be the protagonist against the antagonistic societal majority.

Jean Cocteau’s 1946 film, *La Belle et la Bête* is an adaptation of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont’s version of the fairytale *Beauty and the Beast*, originally published in French in the woman’s magazine titled *The Young Misses Magazine, Containing Dialogues between a Governess and Several Young Ladies of Quality Her Scholars* in 1756. Both de Beaumont’s story and Cocteau’s film center around Belle, the youngest daughter of a merchant. Belle becomes imprisoned by a prince-turned-beast in exchange for her father’s freedom following his theft of a single rose from The Beast’s property. Throughout her time at the castle, Belle falls in

love with the Beast, eventually breaking his curse, which transforms him back into a handsome prince.

The queer coding of The Beast in Cocteau's film *La Belle et La Bête* is done mostly across the lines of gender in that he is an inherently androgynous figure, both in aspects of costuming and the manner in which The Beast is referred (Erb 55). An example of the latter is The Beast's adamant refusal to be referred to as a male of any power and importance; whenever Belle's father addresses The Beast as "Sir" while begging for his life, The Beast responds, "Don't address me as Sir. I'm called The Beast" (*La Belle et La Bête*). The Beast's refusal to be addressed as "Sir" is especially important in conjunction with the film's French dialogue, because in describing himself, The Beast uses the feminine form of "the"—*la Bête*—which violates the expected gendered language associated with a masculine figure. The Beast's use of both masculine and feminine words for himself places him outside of the expected norm, thus making him strange and monstrous.

The Beast's coding as a queer Other is inherently tied to the fact that he is an inhuman beast as he is only queer coded as The Beast, and not as The Prince. For example, The Beast only wears a combination of masculine and feminine clothing in form of The Beast; whenever he transforms into The Prince, he wears exclusively masculine clothing. The Beast—and even The Prince, to an extent—are further separated from the expected masculine gender roles in the way that he interacts with Belle. Other than imprisoning her in exchange for her father, The Beast places her in a role of dominance and respects the boundaries she puts in place. He asks her, "Will you permit me to watch you dine?" to which she answers, "You are the master," only for him to end the brief encounter by stating "There is no master here but you" (*La Belle et La Bête*). The Beast's social submission to Belle is in significant contrast to Avenant, the arrogant and brutish townsman vying for Belle's affections, who even when she denies his marriage proposal, tries to force himself upon her. Avenant epitomizes, and even expresses to an excessive degree, the prescribed social mores for a male at the time. This is further emphasized by the fact that The Beast—eventually The Prince—and Avenant are all played by the same actor, Jean Marais. This reinforces the implication that anybody has the capacity to be a monster, so long as they deviate from the accepted norm.

The queer coding in *La Belle et la Bête* does come with more nuance than many other monster-romance films, likely due to the fact that Cocteau himself was gay—his relationship with actor Jean Marais being an open secret in the filmmaking sphere ("The Gay Love Letters of Jean Cocteau to Jean Marais"). Such nuance can be seen in the way that Belle describes The Beast:

He suffers. One half of him is in constant struggle with the other half. He's more cruel to himself than he is to human beings...At first I was indeed afraid, father. Now sometimes I feel like bursting out laughing. But then I look into his eyes, and they're so sad that I have to turn away to keep from crying (*La Belle et La Bête*).

Such inner turmoil is something well known by LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those living a closeted life, one in which they are constantly struggling between what degree of self-expression is acceptable and what they truly feel.

Despite taking a significantly more sympathetic approach to queer coding and monstrous allegory, *La Belle et La Bête* was met with significantly positive critical acclaim, most of which praising the dreamlike cinematography. Within the first few years following the film's French release it was nominated for and received multiple awards, including the Grand Prize of the 1946 Cannes Film Festival, and the 1946 Prix Louis Delluc award ("Beauty and the Beast (1946):

Awards”). Following the advent of the internet and the release of the 1991 Disney adaptation of the fairytale, interest in Cocteau’s film increased, as did the number of reviews. For example, in 1999 Roger Ebert added the film to his “Great Films” list, awarding it a four-star rating, saying of the film:

Its devices penetrate the usual conventions of narrative, and appeal at a deeper psychic level. Cocteau wanted to make a poem, wanted to appeal through images rather than words, and although the story takes the form of the familiar fable, its surface seems to be masking deeper and more disturbing currents (“Beauty and the Beast”).

Although Ebert and other critics did not seek to perform an in-depth analysis of the film’s queer allegory and symbolism, they did see the film as a piece of art with deeper narrative meaning, rather than it simply being an exercise in aesthetics or an adaptation of a children’s story. *La Belle et La Bête* seeks to dually represent a human-monster romance and a queer romance at the same time, although not explicitly.

Following the abolishment of the Hays Code in the 1960s there was more opportunity for filmmakers to portray explicitly queer narratives, one such film being *But I’m a Cheerleader*. Jamie Babbit’s 1999 film, *But I’m a Cheerleader*, is a satirical romantic comedy that follows Megan Bloomfield, a popular cheerleader as she is sent away by her family to attend a highly dramatized representation of a gay-conversion camp. While at the camp Megan falls in love with another “troubled youth,” Graham Eaton, and the two girls carry out a forbidden romance while still trying to finish out their time in the conversion program. *But I’m a Cheerleader* is an explicitly queer narrative, as the plot itself and major character details revolve around the characters’ queer identities. However, other than the specifics of the plot being inherently queer, the movie is not significantly different from other teen romantic comedies from the era. For example, *But I’m a Cheerleader* shares many similar, basic story beats to the film *10 Things I Hate About You*, a heterosexual romantic comedy from the same year. It is important to note that there are confounding variables at play when comparing the two films: *10 Things I Hate About You* had the benefit of adapting an existing story—William Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*—as well as a PG-13 rating, in part due to it containing less profane language and its lack of homosexual relationships. Some plot similarities include the quirky protagonist falling for a “bad boy” archetype who drinks, smokes, and swears; the love interests meet under unideal circumstances; a misunderstanding or unfortunate event creates a rift, either physical or emotional, between the love interests; and finally, the couple makes up, usually through a grand public gesture of affection (*But I’m a Cheerleader*, *10 Things I Hate About You*).

Despite similar plot beats to *10 Things I Hate About You*, in the first few years following its 1999 release, *But I’m a Cheerleader* generally received relatively poor, if not middling reviews. Many bad-faith criticisms which echoed similar complaints, such as it being perceived as “poorly-made homosexual propaganda” (“Off the Mark”). Such reviews likely stemming from audience distaste for scenes that portray queer identities as natural, such as whenever the conversion campers sneak out to party with the assistance of a gay couple, named Larry and Lloyd, who live nearby. During the car ride to the gay club, Graham explains to Megan, “Larry and Lloyd are *ex-ex-gays*,” Lloyd elaborates, stating, “We’re just trying to provide you all with a balanced perspective to see that there are options. In the end, it’s up to you whether you...want to be who you are, or keep it hidden” (*But I’m a Cheerleader*). Being a satirization of homophobic institutions, *But I’m a Cheerleader* does have an inherent agenda in favor of LGBTQ+ rights and identities. Thus, many bad-faith criticisms of the film stem more from the viewer’s opinions regarding queer people in general, rather than the film’s merits and flaws.

Many good-faith criticisms bring into account the movie's stylization, suggesting that it could have been a better film with a different director, with John Waters being mentioned the most (Ebert). Whether or not many reviewers in the first few years following the movie's release understood the film as a satire can be called into question as some reviewers critiqued the film like a literal narrative, with others recognizing the movie's satirical qualities ("But I Only Like Good Movies"). However, within the past decade the film has achieved cult status in queer online circles, thus leading to more recent reviews of the movie skewing the cumulative review data more positively. Some of the reasons why the movie is gaining a more positive reception, specifically in queer online spaces, in recent years likely has to do with the aforementioned positive message about homosexuality being natural; additionally, the movie does not villainize or kill off any of the queer characters, but rather gives them a happy ending. For example, at the end of the movie it is revealed that Megan's parents, who sent her to the conversion camp in the first place, are shown attending a "Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays" meeting; thus, driving home the message that it is not queer people who need to change their identities, but rather those who do not accept them as they are (*But I'm a Cheerleader*).

Both the negative and positive reviews of *But I'm a Cheerleader* reflect its explicit representation of a queer narrative. However, the movie being both a satire and a comedy is important in that it utilizes stereotypes in a way distinctly different from queer coding. In this context, rather than portray undesirable traits, stereotypes are utilized to mock the dominant culture for finding such traits undesirable. For example, like other members of the conversion program, Megan is suspected to be a lesbian due to her possessing stereotyped characteristics, such as being "a vegetarian... [and] hav[ing] pictures of women around;" however, she justifies these quirks by stating, "I'm not perverted...everyone reads [*Cosmopolitan*]. Everyone looks at other girls all the time," to which Dolph, a boy in the program responds, "But you only assume that they're thinking what you're thinking when they look, but they're not" (*But I'm a Cheerleader*). Although the others in the conversion program are telling Megan that she is gay and that that is inherently wrong, it does lead her to the revelation that she is, in fact, gay, eventually exclaiming, "I'm a homosexual" (*But I'm a Cheerleader*). The stereotypes and the explicit statement of homosexuality within the context in which they occur are as important on a diegetic level within the movie, as it is when considering the movie critically; the narrative is inherently, and unmistakably queer.

Queer coding in post-Hays Code film often takes on a new form—many stereotypes that code characters as queer as still used for villains, not to villainize queer people, but rather to provide the audience with the information that that character is, in fact, the villain. Perceived negative associations with LGBTQ+ individuals have been mapped onto villains for so long that such traits become shorthand for antagonists, rather than gay people. Nonetheless, queer coding without negative intent is still queer coding. However, despite this, there are filmmakers who queer code characters while also explicitly portraying queerness. One such film is Guillermo del Toro's 2017 movie, *The Shape of Water*. This film utilizes queer coding of the inhuman monster to punctuate the mistreatment of the Other, rather than justify it.

The Shape of Water follows Elisa Esposito, a mute housekeeper working at a top-secret United States government facility during the Cold War, where scientists and government officials are performing tests on an amphibian creature they had taken from a river in the Amazon Rainforest. When cleaning the facility one day, Elisa discovers the creature, referred to as The Asset, and over time forms a deep romantic bond with him. Once she learns that the

government plans to kill The Asset for both research and to keep him away from the Russians, she concocts a plan to free him.

The Shape of Water includes explicit representation of Othered identities: Elisa is disabled and thus treated differently in the workplace, only able to work as a housekeeper; Elisa's friend and coworker Zelda is a black woman who is also only able to work as a housekeeper; as well as Elisa's best friend and neighbor, a closeted gay man named Giles, who is shown on screen experiencing homophobia. The Asset is not only queer coded, but also coded as someone with disabilities, and as a person of color; he serves not just as a representation of the Queer other experiencing oppression, but a more generalized Other. For example, when Elisa witnesses the mistreatment that The Asset goes through, she implores Giles to help her free him from his imprisonment in the government facility:

What am I? I move my mouth, like [The Asset]. I make no sound, like him. What does that make me? All that I am all that I've ever been brought me here, to him...when he looks at me, the way he looks at me, he does not know what I lack or how I am incomplete. He sees me for what I am as I am. He's happy to see me, every time every day. And now I can either save him or let him die. (*The Shape of Water*)

Elisa tries to make an appeal for Giles' help, knowing that he will understand her, and by extension The Asset's plight as being seen, to some extent, as subhuman. Nonetheless, Giles protests, wishing to maintain the current status quo, as to not risk losing what little power they do hold, asking Elisa, "What are we? What are you and I? Do you know what we are? We're nothing! Nothing! We can do nothing! I'm sorry, but this—this is just...it's not even human," to which she responds, "If we do nothing, neither are we" (*The Shape of Water*). Del Toro subverts this concept of the monstrous Other by explicitly stating that the true monstrosity comes from helping, either directly or indirectly, the oppressive dominant culture continue to oppress the people, or humanoid creatures, like them. This is further emphasized by the fact that the film's antagonist, a government agent named Strickland, represents this dominant culture: he is a white, straight, able-bodied man in a position of power. Strickland is not a villain because of this identity, but rather because he weaponizes it in order to maintain his power and control.

The overwhelmingly positive audience, and critical, reception to the film is likely the result of it being made and released when it was. *The Shape of Water* was so well received that it won four Academy Awards: Best Director, Best Picture, Best Original Score, and Best Production design, being nominated for even more ("The Shape of Water (2017): Awards"). However, despite the inclusion of a gay character and a queer-coded monster, the film is not an explicitly queer narrative in the way that *But I'm a Cheerleader* is; Elisa is stated to be female, and The Asset is stated to be male. Although it provides positive representation of those that are Othered, its positive reception, on a narrative level, is likely due to the fact that The Asset's coding is as ambiguous as it is; The Asset can represent any Other the audience chooses to map onto him.

In discussion of queer-coded films surrounding humanoid-fish creatures, it would be remiss of me not to mention Disney and Pixar's 2021 animated film, *Luca*. *Luca*, much like *La Belle et La Bête* is not an exclusively queer film, however, upon the film's release many queer adults found that they resonated with a childhood experience like that represented in the film. *Luca* has a lot of similar story beats to *But I'm a Cheerleader*, but with more universal and child-friendly themes and dialogue. A scene most notably read as queer is at the film's climax, where Alberto, jealous that Luca has developed a friendship with Giulia, outs himself—and by extension, Luca, to be a sea monster; however, Luca, seeking to protect himself, insists that he is

not one and even goes as far as to call for help from the townspeople, known for attacking sea monsters (*Luca*). Of course, being a children's film, no harm actually does come to Alberto and the two boys make up. However, such interactions between the two boys throughout the movie has led to the question of the importance of LGBTQ+ representation within childhood: if queer teenagers and adults can see themselves represented in film, why are children excluded? Especially, whenever similarly relationships are portrayed between male and female children, like Carl and Ellie in the Disney movie *Up*.

Both queer coding and queer people themselves are more prevalent than general audiences may be aware of—or want to be aware of—and thus queer characters have been banished to the roles of monsters. The monstrous Other has been present in film for so long that general audiences, and by extension society as a whole, are more comfortable seeing the Other, specifically the queer Other, in that role. Ultimately, despite decades of social and artistic improvement, general audiences are still more comfortable watching a human fall in love with an inhuman monster, than they are watching two humans of the same sex fall in love.

Janelle Mudry '23 is an English and Secondary Education major from Pittsburgh, PA.

Works Cited

- Azuah, Unoma and Lindsey Green-Simms. "The Video Closet." *Transition*, no. 107, 2012, pp. 32-49, *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/transition.107.32>.
- "Beauty and the Beast (1946): Awards." *IMDB*, https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0038348/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.
- But I'm a Cheerleader*. Directed by Jamie Babbit, screenplay Brian Wayne Peterson. Ignite Entertainment and The Kushner-Locke Company, 12 September 1999. *Amazon Prime*.
- "But I Only Like Good Movies." Review of *But I'm a Cheerleader*. *IMDB*, 25 May 2001. https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0609176/?ref_=tt_urv.
- Eaklor, Vicki L. "The Kids Are All Right But the Lesbians Aren't: The Illusion of Progress in Popular Film." *Historical Reflections*, vol. 38, no. 3, Winter 2012, pp. 153-170. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42703741>.
- Ebert, Robert. "But I'm a Cheerleader." Review of *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *EbertDigitalLLC*, 14 July 2000, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/but-im-a-cheerleader-2000>.
- . "Beauty and the Beast." Review of *Beauty and the Beast*, *EbertDigitalLLC*, 26 December 1999, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-beauty-and-the-beast-1946>.
- Erb, Cynthia. "Another World or the World of an Other? The Space of Romance in Recent Versions of "Beauty and the Beast." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 34, no. 4, Summer 1995, pp. 50-70. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1225577>.
- Halberstam, Judith. "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Men, Women, and Masculinity." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Leitch et al., NY: W.W. Norton and Co., 2010. 2nd ed. pp. 2638-2653.
- Hayes, David P. "The Production Code of the Motion Picture Industry (1930-1967)." *The Motion Picture Production Code*, 2009, https://productioncode.dhwritings.com/multipleframes_productioncode.php.
- La Belle et la Bête*. Directed by Jean Cocteau, screenplay by Jean Cocteau. DisCina, 29 October 1946. *Amazon Prime*.
- Luca*. Directed by Enrico Casarosa, screenplay by Jesse Andrews and Mike Jones. Walt Disney Pictures and Pixar Animation Studios, 13 June 2021. *Disney+*.

10 Things I Hate About You. Directed by Gil Junger, screenplay by Karen McCullah and Kirsten

Smith. Touchstone Pictures, 31 March 1999. *Amazon Prime*.

“The Gay Love Letters of Jean Cocteau to Jean Marais.” *My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries*, edited by Rictor Norton, 1998, <https://rictornorton.co.uk/cocteau2.htm>.

“Off the Mark.” Review of *But I’m a Cheerleader*. *IMDB*, 19 May 2001.

https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0609175/?ref_=tt_urv.

The Shape of Water. Directed by Guillermo del Toro, screenplay by Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor. Fox Searchlight Pictures, TSG Entertainment, and Double Dare You Productions, 31 August 2017. *Amazon Prime*.

“The Shape of Water (2017): Awards.” *IMDB*, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5580390/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.