

Gender norms have been perpetuated across every medium imaginable, from books, music, and most visually, film. As a visual medium, film can express these norms through a character's physical appearance, encapsulating the stereotypes of an entire gender. Not only in appearance but in dictating their roles within the story. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the "Beauty and Beast" trope. Stories of beautiful and caring women falling in love with typically unattractive and animalistic men—illustrated in movies such as Guillermo del Toro's 2019 film *Shape of Water*, Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005), and the namesake of the trope: Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). In all of these films, there are two vastly different depictions of males and females. The man is portrayed as primitive, powerful, and desire-obsessed, while the woman is pure, kind, and beautiful. The contrast between these genders is tied to the structure of the "marriage plot" which displays the active desire men must have in a relationship and the restrained desire that women must exhibit to create a relationship. Through the analysis of *Beauty and the Beast*, I will show that the "Beauty and Beast" trope is a physical representation of the role men and women are forced into through the "marriage plot," visualized through character designs, character actions, and story events, all the while using gender portrayals to normalize predator and prey "romance."

The marriage plot is a narrative structure that dates back to the 18th century. Mary-Catherine Harrison, author of "Reading the Marriage Plot" describes the narrative as "typically center[ing] on the courtship between a heroine and hero and emphasiz[ing] the perspective of the woman...ultimately the two characters correctly understand and express their love for each other; their marriage, projected to be a happy one, concludes the story" (Harrison 113). With the marriage plot putting the emphasis of the central relationship on love, and not

money or power, which are historically associated with a “kinship marriage,” a new outline for courtship emerged, with corresponding roles and traits for men and women. Men were responsible for being the ones to exhibit their desire in the story. They were “typically represented as older and more powerful, and they were virtually always the initiator of romantic relationships” (Harrison 118). This deviated from prior narratives, where women were the ones seen as “more concupiscent than men.” (Harrison 118). With the concupiscent role given to the male characters, a new role was given to women. In the marriage plot, women were modest and romanticized or “spiritually pure and economically disinterested alternative to marriage for economic or familial pressures” (Harrison 116). These strictly defined archetypes created a song and dance to follow for the lead man and woman. The man must be the one to outwardly show desire, and the active force in pursuing it, while the woman must remain pure and not show her desire, reinforcing the idea of innocence and purity. These two roles would survive through stories to the modern age, reaching their most exaggerated forms with the introduction of the “Beauty and Beast” trope.

The “Beauty and Beast” trope refers to a specific type of heteronormative relationship seen in literature and pop culture, following the relationship between a male creature and a human woman. In these relationships, the man is characterized as a “beast” through his monstrous appearance, anger, power, and active pursuit of the female lead. The “beauty” on the other hand is the woman in the relationship, depicted as intelligent, traditionally attractive, kind, and modest. However, despite its wide breadth of stories, the “Beauty and Beast” trope arguably reached its most famous usage in Disney’s 1991 film *Beauty and the Beast*. *Beauty and the Beast* follows the budding relationship between the beautiful and bookish Belle and the selfish Prince Adam. Cursed to be a monster until he learns to love, Prince Adam (the Beast) secludes himself

in his castle, while Belle lives on the village outskirts with her father. It is here where she catches the eye of the film's antagonist; Gaston— a muscular, and self-absorbed man who flirts with Belle before she rejects him. The story then transitions to the Beast character. We see the Beast's initial personality early on when Belle's father accidentally trespasses and steals from the Beast's castle grounds. In retaliation, the Beast attacks and takes Belle's father hostage. To rescue her father, Belle allows the Beast to take her captive, and live as a prisoner in his castle in exchange. At this point the Beast is closed off to Belle, hiding away from her, and in his few interactions, he acts aggressively. However, as the two spend more time together they begin to grow closer. Belle begins to civilize the Beast, helping him control his anger. Likewise, the Beast begins to care for Belle, saving her from a pack of wolves after scaring her into the woods. This relationship blooms; ending with Belle breaking through to the Beast's heart, changing him physically and emotionally.

Both Belle and the Beast not only fulfill their traditional marriage plot roles, they encapsulate them. It is the man that physically expresses his desire for the woman, being seen as more powerful yet less civilized, playing the role of the hunter. The Beast's body serves as the physical incarnation of the idyllic masculine power and authority. He is a towering creature, resembling a bear with fur and massive claws, but with a horned head, hooved feet, and superhuman strength. Not only is the Beast still granted the rank of prince throughout the story, compared to Belle's villager status, but he is also represented as her physical superior. The Beast stands at an enormous 6'8 feet and possesses the strength to fight off multiple wolves at once, compared to Belle's 5'5 feet and lack of physical strength, and needing the Beast to step in and save her from the wolves. Beyond physically representing power, this portrayal of an animal also represents the carnal desire that is associated with the male role. The marriage plot created the

““decarnalization of the public feminine role”” (Harrison 118) meaning that the natural desire for intercourse was set entirely for the man. While the portrayal of women became more civilized and pure, this focus on the portrayal of men exhibiting desire, by contrast, became more uncontrolled and animalistic.

Moreover, the Beast’s anger and violence even when protecting Belle, represents the stereotypical view of men as naturally more barbaric compared to their female counterparts. The Beast repeatedly lashes out in anger, most notably when Belle trespasses in the off-limits section of the castle. The Beast proceeds to destroy furniture and scream, scaring Belle away. While at first being viewed as negative or unattractive, the Beast’s anger becomes a point of fixation for Belle. After being saved from the wolves by the Beast, Belle exclaims, “you should learn to control your temper!” while tending to his wounds, leading to her teaching the Beast manners which includes controlling his anger. This dynamic roots itself in the marriage plot where men more outwardly express a need for sexual desire, before being tamed into monogamy by the woman. By having these more animalistic traits, it allows Belle to tame the Beast making him suitable for marriage, which is physically expressed by the Beast becoming human, and figuratively removing his animalistic traits.

The Beast not only encapsulates the male role with his design, he exaggerates them through his actions. The typical act of seducing the girl in the marriage plot becomes kidnapping as seen when the Beast takes Belle hostage in his castle. Similar events can be found in other “Beauty and Beast” narratives, with King Kong climbing the empire state building with Ann Darrow being the most famous. This exaggeration stems from the fact that “initiating sexual contact is a masculine activity.” (Harrison 118). In other words, trying to get the girl becomes grabbing the girl, overemphasizing the masculine role. The man’s role of pursuit and initiation

has been brought to the extreme. These films portray their male “beast” using physical force to obtain their corresponding “beauty” and rewarding that action with a relationship. It is this concept of hunting that brings out the male role to exaggerated heights while rooting itself in the origins of the marriage plot.

If the Beast has been exaggerated to the role of a hunter, Belle’s character has taken the pure and civilized role of women in the marriage plot to the extreme of becoming the hunted. Thin and dainty, Belle’s design follows the traditional norms of feminine beauty, without crossing the line into promiscuity. She has fair skin, long brunette hair, and a name translating to beautiful. Through these choices, it is clear that Belle is designed to be perceived as winsome. However, the line of promiscuity can be seen most symbolically, in Belle’s outfits. Throughout the entirety of the film, Belle sports two main outfits that share feminized iconography. One is a moderate blue and white dress, while the other is a more extravagant gold ballroom dress. Despite being on completely different sides of the financial scale, these dresses both serve the purpose of moderation and femininity. These outfits are long covering the majority of Belle’s body, yet communicate womanhood with dresses being a continual representation of femininity in pop culture. This embodies the role of women in the marriage plot, reinforcing the idea that the character is modest and pure, yet still remains a feminine object of desire.

By reinforcing the presentation of gender, *Beauty and the Beast* frames women as pure objects of desire to be hunted. Throughout the film, Belle’s purity is established, first by her rejection of the film’s antagonist, Gaston. Despite Gaston’s flirtation and outwardly shown attractiveness through emphasized musculature, Belle cannot stomach the idea of being with him, outright rejecting his attempted kiss. By denying a relationship with Gaston, Belle establishes herself as a character who believes in romantic monogamous relationships, as she

rejects him not based on appearance but his character. She is withholding sexual and intimate actions for her future romantic partner, and as Gaston does not fulfill this romantic quality she rejects him. Belle's resistance to Gaston cannot be separated from the idea of feminine purity, as this type of resistance "becomes synonymous with female "virtue"" (Harrison 118). Belle's relationship with the Beast further pushes the marriage plot, as their dynamic serves as an exaggeration of the marriage plot's limitation on sexuality. The Beast is trapped as a monster, from a magical curse, with the only way to revert being "to learn to love another, and earn their love in return." This curse restricts the relationship between Belle and the Beast, only being to physically exhibit their desires after mutual love is gained. This parallels the idea between love and marriage in the marriage plot, as it "served to contain sexuality, at least in theory, within heterosexual marriage." (Harrison 118). Belle and the Beast cannot physically express their feelings until they love each other, exaggerating the idea that true intimacy comes after love, often represented through marriage.

By exaggerating gender roles of how a man must chase desire, and a woman must remain desirable, "Beauty and Beast" expands on the marriage plot to suggest the idea that men and women should be hunters and hunted in relationships. This framework creates a clear power dynamic: Men are the ones actively pursuing a sexual relationship, while women are the hunted meant to resist sexual advances. This reinforces the harmful double standard of men being celebrated for promiscuity, while women are degraded for it, as one is seen as men doing their role well, while women are seen as failing in theirs. As a children's film, this promotes the idea to young boys that it is encouraged to pursue a sexual relationship with a woman who doesn't desire one. For women, this dynamic can also decrease the power of a "no". Instead of being an active decision, it is viewed as the default response that can be overcome. The dynamic becomes

normalized by these tropes as one of predator and prey. Returning to the transformation of the Beast back into a prince, this iconic moment comes burdened with issues. The act of Belle working to civilize the Beast, calming his anger and showing him love, is rewarded in the film, by giving her a handsome prince. This reinforces the idea that women are naturally pure, thus it is their job to civilize the man, making them suitable to marry. This idea harmfully promotes a shield for bad relationships, especially for the young girls watching the film. Any acts of aggression or force by the man are viewed as within the nature of their gender, and it's the girl's job to deal with those acts and try to fix the man, where they will be rewarded with a man up to their standard. This creates a passivity for women while excusing the aggression of men, a power dynamic that is historically destructive and degrading.

Whether the creators were aware of it, *Beauty and the Beast* goes beyond an encapsulation of the gender roles created by the marriage plot, it magnifies them, through the visual storytelling in the "Beauty and Beast" trope. The aggressive Beast represents the animalistic portrayal of men created through centuries of stories, while the beautiful and modest Belle is the ideal for women to follow. On their own these characters are harmless, they have brought entertainment and joy to millions. But given their message of the predator and prey relationship with their young audience, it is important to recognize the effects that this story has, and the context it lies in. As I have argued, while *Beauty and the Beast* is a beloved children's tale, it still promotes an outdated view of love, gender, and standards.

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