

THE BEAST'S EMBRACE

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It's the end of "Beauty and the Beast," any version you like, and the Beast, saved from the evil spell that has kept him in this hideous form, turns back into the handsome prince he rightfully is; and in the audience, we sigh, we are sorry, we are sad -- we liked the Beast better. Christine Daae refuses the deformed but brilliant Phantom and runs away with her Raoul, a younger son of the nobility -- a happy ending, so why are our eyes wet, why are we full of regret for the road she has *not* taken, the suitor she has *not* chosen? What is it about the lover who is a monster that we find so appealing?

For starters, he's a *successful* monster, he has qualities. Despite his enemies, those who hate him just for being unlike them, he survives, he even flourishes. So he must be very clever, and he's certainly strong enough to whip any antagonist, alert enough to outmaneuver any enemy, powerful enough to protect those he loves from any danger, and in the service of his love he is braver than lions. He must be brave anyway, or he wouldn't be able to resist the easy out, of suicide or surrender. The ogre who loves us is a guardian angel whom no one could slip past or tempt from his self-chosen duty of protecting us; and because he loves us, that strength could never be turned against us.

With this fearsome creature, we alone are safe. But when it comes to anybody who insults or injures us, they will assuredly get theirs at the hands of our loving monster. Though afterwards we may deplore his violence on our behalf, we'll be secretly glad, and secure in the knowledge that nobody can spit in our eye and get away with it; Erik will drop a chandelier on them, the Beast will rend them limb from limb!

All that strength is at our command. We don't have to slave in the gym to have muscles of our own, or take self-defense courses so we can fight off attackers ourselves. We have a secret weapon, we can unleash matchless power with a word -- or restrain it, gentle it, make it kneel at our feet. Great physical power is awesome, but power *over* that power -- power by a word, a look, no more than that -- that is power indeed, more power than most people, male or female, ever get to exercise in the real world. There's something of the adolescent girl's love of horses in this, that sense of mastery over something mighty that can be made to submit, that can be won to our service and held there by the force of our character and virtue, that can be lured into loving us.

And what love! What is the boyish enthusiasm of a poor simp like Christine's Raoul next to the unwavering passion for her of the Phantom of the Opera? The love of Erik for his Christine, or the Beast for his Beauty, is totally focused, constant, and exclusive. He has eyes for no one but us, his every thought is bent on us, his one wish is to please us. He isn't worried about paying the bills (the Beast has none, and the Phantom extorts money from the Opera management to discharge his), or losing his hair (the Beast has too much, and for the Phantom, under that wig it's way too late). He is only worried about how *we* feel, whether we still love him, and how to please us and keep us happy.

Moreover, our Beast is noble. He's a prince under a curse, or a genius suffering from terminal ugliness, no bum but a man of means (however well or ill-gotten), and the ordeal of his

loneliness has exalted and refined his spirit. He doesn't worry about his job, he doesn't flirt with other girls, he doesn't fuss about his food or talk politics or football games. He thinks of love, and of deep matters concerning the nature of man and beast and beauty and art.

Better yet, he is in pain. How he suffers from the slings and arrows of truly outrageous fortune -- a cruelly distorted outward appearance, the isolation of being different, feared, unloved! Whatever our own sorrows, they pale before his, they make us privileged by comparison. And we know that for his pain we are the precise prescription: we can give him the love he craves and needs, we can soothe the thousand hurts the world has dealt him, we can make him feel so much better that he almost forgets his hideousness and outcast status -- but, and this is very important, we can't actually *cure* him.

That is, if we do break the spell and Beast becomes prince, the Beast has been banished, not accepted by the world as he is, which was what he longed for. No, he's merely been replaced, fang and hide and claw, by a nice-looking young fellow with a title; and the audience sighs . . . missing their Beast. We haven't cured the Beast, we've obliterated him. With Erik, the Phantom, it's more obvious: nothing can change his ugliness, and no matter how much Christine loves him, she can't make the world look at him and not cringe in disgust. This is crucial, because if he can't be cured, our monster will always need us. He will always need the only one who can bring herself to kiss his terrible mouth.

Having once tasted the joy of being loved by us, he will be constant forever, because he needs us; and if we stay with him and love him despite his ugliness, he will be grateful, he will love us all the more. He's humble, our beloved Beast, he knows he's not worthy, he knows what a stretch it is for us to love him despite his hairy puss, his horrible deformity. He knows that our being able to do that shows how wonderful *we* are, how totally worthy of his undying devotion. And if we went away, where would he ever find another?

But we would never go, we would never abandon him, because who could we find who would ever need us as much?

Besides, he's great in the sack. How could he not be? Our loving monster will do whatever we ask him to, and with our guidance and all his pent-up longing, his long deprivation, how could he fail to be a magnificent, a perfect, a most devoted lover?

For our part, he brings out the best in us, he calls us to our highest exercise of love, he vindicates our judgment and rewards our kindness, he makes heroines of us. No wonder he loves us, who wouldn't? And then there is the seductiveness of the Other, the stranger, the mate who is almost of another species, adding the thrill of the forbidden. Better yet, he has known hardly anyone but us (no invidious comparisons to other loves will cloud his love for us). He is forever in our debt for allowing him to taste the delights of sex and love at last, and being basically an honorable creature (noble, after all), he means to honor his debt. He is ours for good, and if for some reason we should cease to be his -- why, he will let us go, out of his great love for us, and he will crawl away and die rather than live without us, leaving us in melancholy awe of our own great power -- to cause another creature to die for lack of our love!

What ordinary man could measure up to this concentration of attractions? For that matter, what extra-ordinary man could? He's a dream, our loving monster, no relation to the realities of what deprivation, loneliness and cruelty do to the real men (and women) who have to endure them, the embittering effects of ostracism, the tendency of those who have suffered greatly to pass on pain to others in turn. God help us if we think we've found him in the real world; he doesn't exist there, he can't.

Our monster, our Beast, lives only in the imagination, where life is stronger, runs deeper, is more richly colored than our daily lives on the street, in the kitchen, and at the office. He has the power of angels, of demons, of longing and of dreams -- the power we have given him.

Poor Raoul, poor handsome prince: they don't stand a chance.

