

In Love With the Monster: Depictions of Physical Relations With the Monstrous in Medieval & Modern Texts

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A bear licks its cub into shape, England, c. 1230. British Library

Objective/Purpose

Stories as far back as the medieval period show that monsters are capable of love and being loved, yet they also skirt around societal taboos by having the monster take a human form for sexual intercourse, removing its monstrousness for a safer romantic depiction.

The purpose of this project is to examine medieval romantic relationships with the monstrous, primarily focusing on whether monsters become human for sexual interactions and what that implies.

The relationship between Bera and Bjorn of the Nordic 14th century saga of *King Hrolf Kraki* serves as the basis for this research, while also bringing into conversation more recent monster romance stories such as Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* (2017).

What Have Others Said?

Many scholars have tackled the monster and how it relates to romance or sexuality, with Joseph Crawford dedicating an entire book on romances with vampires and Maria Tatar collecting classic fairytales concerning animal brides and grooms from around the world. Specifically, Carl Phelpstead briefly notes the sexual relationship between Bera and Bjorn hints at bestiality despite Bjorn, though cursed to be a bear by day, taking on a human form at night.

Results

Metamorphosis

“Introduction” from

Metamorphosis and Identity by Caroline Walker Bynum

- Metamorphosis: man becomes wolf
 - World of flux and transformation encountered through story
 - Entity that goes from one thing to another; essentially narrative
 - Constant series of replacement-changes, or “little deaths”
 - One-ness left behind or approached (29–30)

On Body

“Bodies are not defined by their genus or species, by their organs and functions, but by what they can do, by the affects of which they are capable – in passion as well as action”

Giles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, 60 (Cohen 139)

“The Indecent Bodies of The *Wonders of The East*” from *Monsters, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval English Literature* by Dana M. Oswald



Cover art for *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* by Andy Orchard

- A man with a monstrous appearance (ears below his shoulders, no head but bears facial features in his chest) (see left), neither fully animal nor human, has his genitals covered (27)
- Desire for genital erasure reveals how human the monstrous body is and the danger of its sexed-up body (27)
- Any body that features genitals or secondary sex characteristics has potential to engage in sexual activity (27–28)
- Only the bodies of sexualized monstrous that suffer any kind of erasure (28)
- Erasure demonstrates permanence of monstrous identity (28)

“Introduction: The Intimate Stranger” and “The Body Hybrid: Giants, Dog-Men, and Becoming Inhuman” from *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen

- The monster’s enjoyment “can easily be sadistic, masochistic, and obscene as wholesome and delightful; and in the relation of enjoyment to the monster’s simultaneous presence both within and outside human identity” (xiii)
- “Incubi would temporarily reside in illusory male forms to work their sexual crimes, engendering monstrous offspring on unsuspecting women before reverting to their disembodied state” (123)

On Bestiality

“The Sexual Ideology of ‘*Hrólfs Saga Kraka*’” by Carl Phelpstead

- Bestiality suggested in the story, though contradicted by Bjorn’s transformation into a man at night
- Two of Bera’s triplets are animal hybrids, not through intercourse with a bear, but through being forced to eat Bjorn’s bear flesh
- “Bestiality appears to be unspeakable in the text; the narrative hints at its possibility while denying its occurrence”

“The monster embodies those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster. *She and Them!*: the monster enforces the cultural codes that regulate sexual desire” (*Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*, Cohen 14)

Modern Monster Romances

Beauty and the Beast and *The Shape of Water*



“Except for the beast turning into a prince in the Disney version of *Beauty and the Beast*... almost all newer versions of a tale with a monster bridegroom do not involve a bodily transformation” (Olle & Johansson 141).



“Since the beast of today is a softer monster than he was before, he would be ‘too good’ if he turned into a human... the audience already sympathizes with the Amphibian Man and loves him just as much as Elisa does. At first, he is slightly frightening because he is presented as different, but as the story unfolds he is revealed to be no more different from other humans than Elisa is” (Olle & Johansson 141).