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Welcome Home Stranger: The Evolution & Assimilation of the Queer Monster

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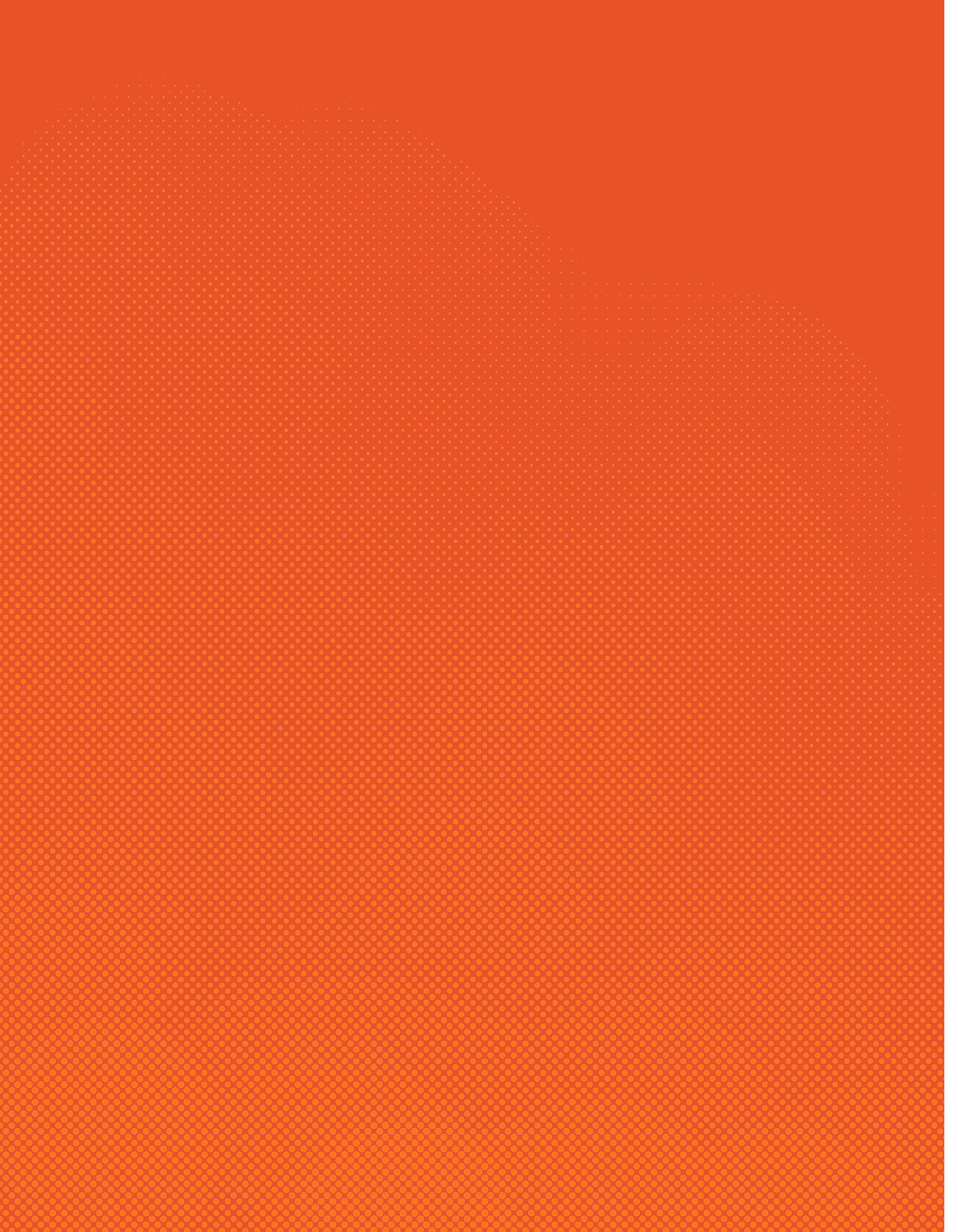
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WELCOME HOME STRANGER:

**The Evolution & Assimilation
of the Queer Monster**

Dee Cea



Welcome Home Stranger:

The Evolution & Assimilation of the Queer Monster.

by Dee Cea

The queer monster has been a staple in fiction for ages. The “other” aspect that defines monstrosity is naturally paired with the ostracized queer figure. How better to accent a demon, than with the demonized? This essay explores why queerness clings to the monstrous, and how this dynamic has shifted over time. When does monstrosity feed into queerness, and when does queerness enhance the monstrous? Using the character Mystique from the long-standing X-Men franchise as a case study, I compare how her strange appearance and abilities have villainized her queer subtext, and yet how they have come to strengthen her identity as a queer woman. Furthermore, this essay takes a peak at how monstrosity has been reappropriated in the digital self-publishing age to celebrate queer power and speculate on future incarnations of monstrous queerness in comics visual culture.

We are living in the age of the redeemed monster and the anti-villain. Slowly it is becoming almost a customary audience expectation to see an overly othered or monstrous form on screen, and expect the narrative to show how the monstrous is truly the misunderstood. We are living in the age of Guillermo del Toro’s “The Shape of Water” (2017) in which the creature from the black lagoon can be a leading man and get the girl. What does this mean for queer audiences, who have historically sympathized with the monstrous villain?

How has the redemption of the monstrous changed its relationship with queer solidarity?

How has the redemption of queer visibility changed its relationship to the othered monster?

The Queer Monster

The monstrous form has been a thrilling tool to invoke disgust and fear within the hearts of audiences everywhere. The monstrous body contains the thrill of danger and the thrill of the forbidden—the thing which should not be. Monstrosity in all its icky, sticky, and revolting forms is not only defined by a finned or fanged body. Monstrosity is defined by how it contradicts the known status quo. The monstrous is defined by its otherness, and as such has been paired with queerness throughout visual culture. “Queer” in its original meaning is meant to denote that other, by which something is strange and antithetical to what is commonly accepted. Injecting a queer sensibility into the villain is an easy shorthand to invoke a sense of unease in an uninitiated audience. Consider the number of fictional horrific killers that are given that extra chilling edge for the fact they’re “men in dresses.” Consider the ways in which “unnatural desire” can be framed around a hand on a knife or a hand lingering on a hand. If the heteronormative eye does not recognize queerness as familiar to itself, it will view it just as antagonistic as a fanged mouth. If monsters are defined by their otherness, queerness sharpens that alien definition.

Queerness recognizes itself within the monstrous form regardless of written intent. Queer solidarity is felt in the way the monstrous is shunned by the protagonist’s narrative and therefore rejects the status quo. The difference however, is that oftentimes queer communities have not had recourse to return the abuse they’ve been given. Monsters have claws, and fangs, and a sense of danger attached to their otherness. Their otherness manifests as power. Monsters can scare and harm the protagonists of the story. Protagonists deemed good and moral are often pinnacles of heteronormative ideals. When a monster gets a good swipe in and has power over the morally righteous characters, it transforms into a queer power fantasy.¹ In the same way rape revenge stories such as “Jennifer’s Body” (2009) and “Bulbbul” (2020) give women a power fantasy in which they are able to take bloody revenge in ways unavailable in day to day life, the othered monster takes on the same role for queer audiences. The rejection of the norm, of the protagonist’s viewpoint, is often bloodier than daily queer rebellion, but in that excess of violence create a vector for intense emotional catharsis.

1 Waldron, “Catharsis as Revenge,” 2022.

Queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

– José Muñoz
“*Cruising Utopia*”



Left:

The drag performer Kizha Carr dressed as the mutant Mystique. In 2023, a record number of 510 anti-LGBT+ bills were introduced in state legislatures across the United States. These bills had a particular focus targeting gender affirming care and drag bans.

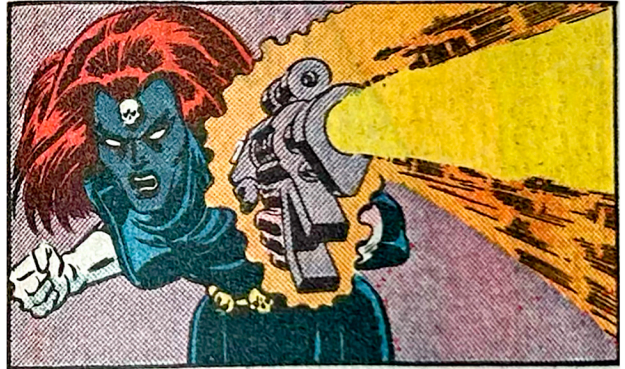


De-Fanged

The queer, villainous monster is becoming a rare breed. With the rising awareness of queer issues in societal awareness and representation of queer characters in popular media, the other is becoming more and more familiar every day. There are only diminishing returns when creating a queer monster now. The queer aspect has lost its mysterious edge. That is not to say that queerness has found itself transformed from a frog into a prince. Queerness has found itself depowered when removed from its monstrous shell. Queer characters have a habit of quietly existing alongside the protagonist, now at the sharp end of monstrous intent.² Whenever a monster is present, queer characters have a habit of becoming body fodder to the catharsis of violence, no longer benefitting from the power of the other but rather suffering under the mediocrity of assimilation.

This de-othering³ has shifted the relationship between the monstrous form and its queer corollary. Where once the queer as other was used as a tactic to further alienate the monstrous, the history

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- 2 Moore, "An End to Monstrosity: Horror, Queer Representation, and the Trump Kakistocracy," 2019.
 - 3 De-othering: Normalizing the unfamiliar. Queerness is being redefined as a natural occurrence within the human experience undeserving of pariah status.



of monstrous queerness is being re-appropriated⁴ in contemporary narratives as a symbol of power. The monstrous form as an othered visual icon now heightens the power queer narratives, bringing them forward into the spotlight instead of shrouding them in dread. The monstrous has been integrated into queer visual culture despite its origins in feeding the queer-monster demonization loop⁵, which has resulted in queer creators redeeming queer monsters of the past and creating queer monsters for the future.

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- 4 The queer community has a habit of celebrating the grotesque that has been used as a weapon against them. Consider how "queer" was largely considered a vile slur (and still is used as such), and now has become a standardized way of referring to LGBT+ people in both conversation and academic language.
 - 5 Queerness was used to amplify the otherness of the monstrous, but in doing so also amplified the otherness of the queer. By queerness being associated with monstrosity, audiences became likely to view queerness through an even more amplified lens of horror.

Above:

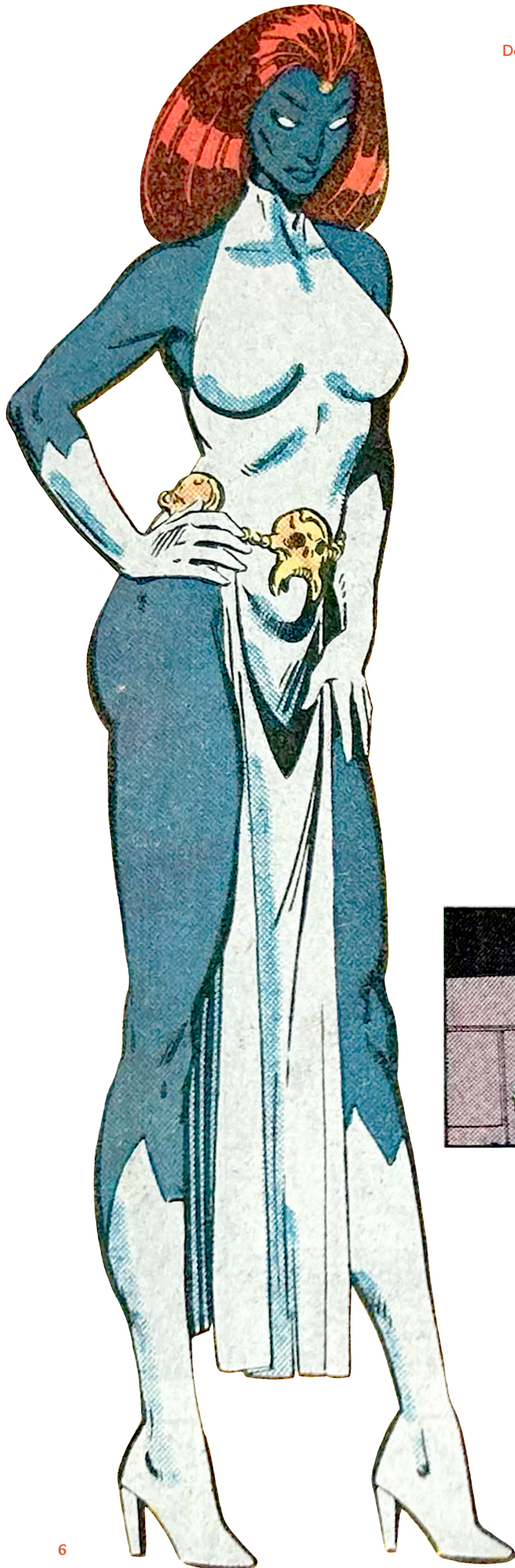
Mystique firing a gun. Her shapeshifting does not offer any readily available offensive advantages, and so she is often seen arming herself with firearms to advance her cause.

Left:

Mystique and Destiny's wedding as seen on the cover of *X-Men: The Wedding Special #1*. (2024). The coopting of queer joy by corporations such as Marvel Comics is a double edged sword. On one hand the increased visibility provides mainstream representation never seen before. It is also a litmus test to gauge queer tolerance, if larger corporations (which tend to be conservative) feel comfortable displaying openly queer figures. On the other hand, queer liberation activists feel it is insulting that large corporations which have been a part of queer subjugation profit off of rising queer visibility. It can be seen as another form of queer assimilation into the institutions that were previously closed to the queer community.

Mystique

A longitudinal example of this shift is the long-standing Marvel X-Men character: Mystique. Mystique is a mutant within the X-Men universe, a type of human born with extraordinary abilities due to a X Gene. The physicality of mutants has a wide range from the grotesque to the perfectly average. Mystique falls in the center with her odd blue skin and pupilless yellow eyes. Otherwise she has the proportions of the typically oversexed female villainess. Indeed, since her introduction in 1978 Mystique has often been in the role of seductress—deception a key tool in her arsenal. Deception is core to Mystique's character, as her trademark ability is shapeshifting. Mystique infiltrates restricted areas and confuses her enemies by adopting the appearance and mannerisms of any she chooses. In fact, her original secret identity, Raven Darkholme, infiltrated the US Government as Deputy Director of the Defense Advanced Research Planning Agency (DARPA) in the United States Department of Defense in order to access secret materials. This fluidity of form and gender expression has welcomed Mystique into the hallowed halls of shape-shifters as transgender allegory.



Above:

Mystique shifting between her true form and her government persona: Raven Darkholme.

Left:

Mystique's true form.

Right:

Mystique changing back after impersonating fellow mutant Wolverine. Whenever she changes form it is always in order to deceive. Early on it is emphasized her transformations are entirely superficial, like putting on a mask. In her later iterations however it is revealed Mystique does experience gender on a personal spectrum, making it more intimate than simply removing a costume.

Indeed, it is precisely the fact that transpeople often do not have their self-identifications taken seriously that is so deeply bound up with the transphobic hostility and violence. How can we ignore the fact that often “transgender woman” simply means “man disguised as a woman” to many people – whether that is our own understanding or not?

– Talia Mae Bettcher

“Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion”

Mystique as deceiver embodies the fears projected onto transgender people. The violence of deception has led to conservative debates regarding bathroom laws and competitive sports disqualifications—ignoring that transgender people are more often on the receiving end of fear induced violence. The entirety of the trans panic⁶ defense, used to excuse the murder of transgender lives, is built on the perceived justice in striking back against a duplicitous offender.⁷ Mystique represents the fear that the queer monster may walk among you. You may think you

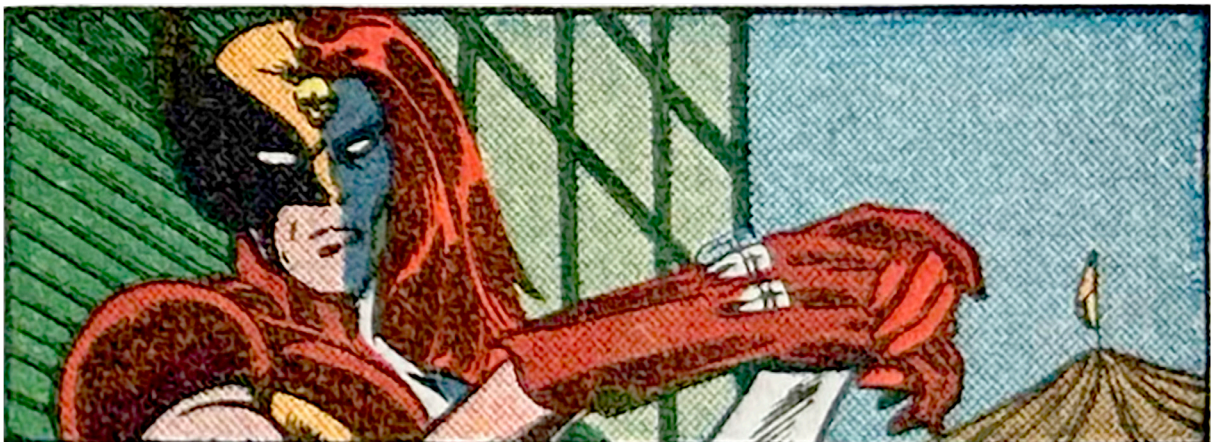
know someone, but perhaps there is a different person lurking underneath. Her infiltration into the US Government is especially prescient, considering Eisenhower’s 1953 Executive Order #10450—an order legitimizing “sexual perversion” as grounds for a government employee’s job termination under the guise of national security—was only formally dissolved in 2017.⁸ Mystique masquerading as an ordinary woman employee poses a personal as well as national threat. A shapeshifting villain uses genderfluidity to tap into the fear of infiltration and penetration.

The double bind of transparency, of “coming out,” provides a perilous dilemma for transpeople. On one hand transpeople can have their lived experiences dismissed and ridiculed as folly. On the other, being transparent in one’s genderqueer identity opens up avenues of physical violence and life-threatening persecution.

6 Separate from the legal trans panic defense is the rise of a contemporary wave of societal trans panic. This is referencing the trend of transgender populations being demonized and used as a political maneuvering point. Contemporary trans panic is often regarded as a direct backlash to the rising visibility of transgender populations and the advancement of LGBT+ rights.

7 Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion” 2007.

8 Blakemore, “How LGBT Civil Servants Became Public Enemy No. 1 in the 1950s,” 2018.





Mystique is not only the genderqueer deceiver, but the queer anti-Madonna.⁹ Mystique is the biological mother of Kurt Wagner, otherwise known as the moniker Nightcrawler. She is not a warm mother figure. Mystique abandoned Kurt as a child, his parentage only coming to light in his adulthood. Mystique betrays no interest in embracing her motherhood, instead choosing to maintain aloof as ever. Queer women have long been critiqued for their perceived incompatibility with motherhood. Transgender women lack a womb. Lesbian relationships do not naturally conceive children. Bisexual women are shamed for their perceived promiscuity

9 Anti-Madonna: The anti-Madonna is an archetypal shorthand created to sit in contrast with the Madonna role forced upon women. In order to be seen as morally sound and righteous, women are often confined to the self-sacrificing role of mother. Girls grow up to be wives who are expected to be unselfish in all respects for the sake of the husband and the family. Madonnas give up their bodies to their husbands and to their babies. Madonnas give up their lives to the service of their husbands and to the rearing of their babies. Anything that falls outside heteronormative subservience is deemed monstrous and disgraceful: the unmarried spinster, the hedonistic whore, the unnatural lesbian. The anti-Madonna rejects the call to motherhood and the call to self-sacrifice. If the Madonna is meant to be the proper good, the anti-Madonna is oftentimes relegated to the monstrous villain.

outside the heteronormative marriage.¹⁰ Mystique's queer coding extends into her indifferent attitude towards her son. Women who do not express the "innate" affinity for motherhood are villainized differently from absent fathers. The prescribed feminine is nurturing and gentle. The prescribed feminine sacrifices her body to incubate her child and sacrifices her life afterwards. The prescribed masculine is independent and aggressive. The prescribed masculine braves the outside world for the betterment of the angel in the parlor who croons over the babes. When the prescribed masculine leaves and does not return, it is a lesser violation than when the prescribed feminine abandons the babies in the parlor in favor of discordant freedom. This is why the anti-Madonna blends so well with the queer woman who forsakes heteronormativity in favor of pursuing unnatural desires. Mystique's abandonment of her son feeds into her queer otherness, which in turn feeds into her villainous persona.

Mystique's villainy has taken some nebulous turns since 1978. She has since alternated between a villainess and heroine, tentatively settling into the role of anti-hero in her current iterations. As queer visibility has grown, so has Mystique's textual

10 Jack Halberstam, "The Queer Art of Failure," 2011.

Left:

Mystique returning to her true form after imitating Nightcrawler. (*The Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe Vol. 1 No. 9* (1985))

This is one of the first instances the two interact. Nightcrawler remarks on the similarities in their appearances, which Mystique curtly dismisses. She is only interested in the foiling of her current scheme. The expectation of women to self-sacrifice for the family is inverted in the anti-Madonna. Just as career-focused women are often critiqued for their unnatural prioritization, queer women are shunned for their pursuit of fulfillment outside the hetero-restrictive home.

Below:

Mystique and Destiny holding a newborn Nightcrawler. Mystique's genderfluidity is further cemented as she describes how she has "lived" across the gender spectrum—not only pretended via her shapeshifting. The themes of persecution and denial of human rights in X-Men series have often been seen as analogous to LGBT+ struggles. Mystique directly connects these themes with her statement: "The only true binary division lies not between genders or sexes or sexualities. It lies between those who are allowed to be who they wish and those denied that right."

queerness. Mystique's long-hinted bisexuality was made realized in recent years. One of the few regular allies she has had is fellow mutant Irene Adler, otherwise known as Destiny. Their close relationship remained a friendship through the legacy of the Comics Code Authority—since having blossomed into a mainstay romantic partnership. With the trend of queer villainy fading, her coming out of the comic's gutter has only provided more room for her to explore grey morality rather than black and white antagonism. Her previously conniving exterior was revealed to show a more complicated underworking, aided by the softer side she shows to Destiny. This turn from Mystique as antagonist to Mystique as ally has in turn, in contrast to past trends, opened up her character for further decoding of her queerness.

There have been multiple retcons and versions of Nightcrawler's parentage throughout X-Men canon. While Mystique has long been assigned as his mother, his biological father has changed from a Bavarian Baron Wagner to a demonic Azazel. 2023's *X-Men Blue: Origins #1* blows apart this family tree. The issue removes Mystique from her role as mother, and instead assigns her as Nightcrawler's father. Mystique assumed the form of a man in order to conceive a child with Destiny.





Below: Mystique discusses her experience with gender with Nightcrawler after revealing she is his father. *X-Men Blue: Origins* #1. (2023).

This shift from Mystique's shapeshifting transness as a signifier of deception to a signifier of validation exemplifies the ways in which queerness is no longer being used to enforce the monstrous other, but the other is used to enforce queerness.

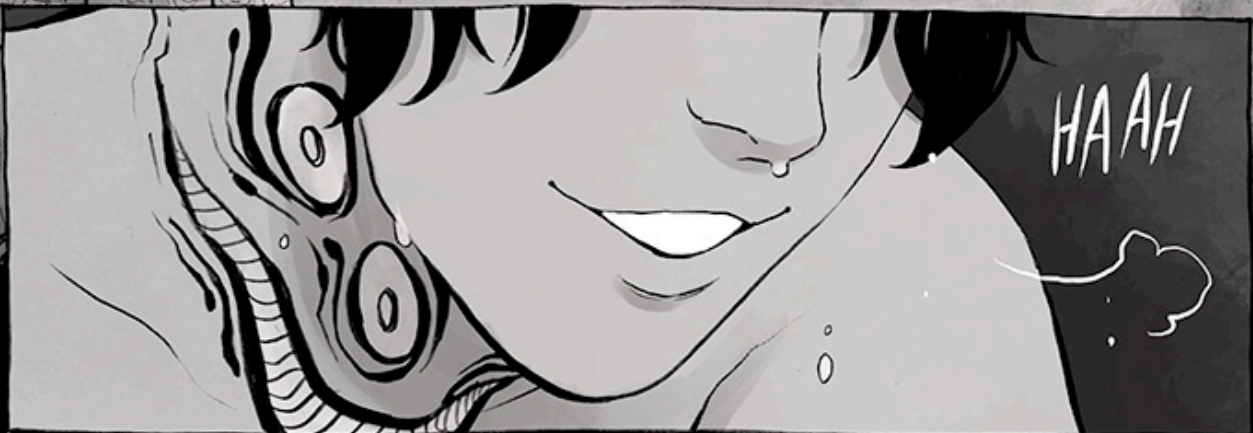
The revelation of her role as father results in a moment of reconciliation between her and her son. While this is an example of queerness as a path to healing, it also reflects the ways in which queer healing is portrayed as a re-assimilation into structured society. In order for the queer monster to be welcomed back into the fold, they must in some ways conform to the fold. Mystique's textual queerness being a positive force on her personal relationships is certainly a step forward in her portrayal, but it should not be overlooked that in doing so her newfound queerness has reassembled the nuclear family: mother, father,

and baby. Queer activism has struggled between the dilemma between freedom as acceptance versus freedom as liberation.¹ The rejection of the nuclear family was not only a result of being excluded from marital status, but a political stance against repressive social structures. The question stands:

Would Mystique's redemption be as successful if she were not re-assimilated into the role of Madonna?

1 Miller, "Assimilation and the Queer Monster," 2011.







Above:

A portrait of the character Luck from the webcomic *Tiger, Tiger*.

Left:

Luck transforms from one of their beastly forms into a human form. Luck is a genderfluid character, not only embodying an ancient unknowable consciousness but also being distinctly fluid across human gender expressions. Luck is carefree, violent, and narcissistic. Luck revels in their form and in their body, showing off terrible feats of strength while in their beastly forms. Luck leans into the fluid, the queer, as a hedonistic vagabond intent on satisfying their own desires. If *Mystique's* re-integration into a nuclear fascimile is an example of queer assimilation, Luck is the antithesis. Luck defies any and all societal convention, truly thriving outside the binary of nuclear expectation. Nortlund, the author of *Tiger, Tiger*, defies reader expectations for answer as well, being deliberately evasive when readers have inquired about Luck's gender identity. There are no labels, only the law of the sea.

Digital Creatures

Universal access to digital image hosting has lowered the barrier of entry significantly for comics artists to directly reach a large audience. Historically the process of publication meant there were several screening processes in place before a physical item would be made manifest. This screening process was largely responsible for the censoring of overtly queer stories, consider again the Comics Code Authority, and carefully controlled how and when textual queerness would peer through the cracks. Queercoding¹² exists because if queer stories were not allowed to be spoken out loud, then its audience would have to translate whispers through a publishing mesh screen. Similar to the queer audiofiction boom, with its analogous low barrier of entry, webcomics became a tool for queer creators to explore niche stories which otherwise would not have made it to open market. Webcomics became a vital mainstay for underrepresented people to get their voices heard, and to see their experiences reflected back upon them.¹³ Webcomics through their hyper-fluidity are able to blend the barrier between genre, creator, and audience in previously unprecedented ways, making them a mainstay not only in the evolution of the comics form but as a tool in rapidly shifting queer theory.

12 Queercoding: The narrative technique of implying the sexual or gender otherness of a character without providing canonical confirmation. This can be done through overt stereotypes visible to most audiences, as well as pairing characters with subtler themes queer audiences are able to resonate with.

13 Hatfield, "TRANSforming Spaces: Transgender Webcomics as a Model for Transgender Empowerment and Representation within Library and Archive Spaces." 2015.



Right:

Luck transforms into a draconic beast. Luck is a manifestation of queer power fantasy through monstrosity. This time, instead of queer audiences resonating with the monstrous villain, they are freely invited to feel the vicarious freedom of power beyond societal control. Luck lands more along the lines of anti-hero rather than a strictly "good" protagonist, another way their character lives in the spaces beyond binary.



The proliferation of self-published web-comics removes the filter of publishing politics, and allows for comics creators to distribute stories exactly as they intend them to be. Webcomics have not forgotten the queer monster, and continued contributing to its de-othering.¹⁴ The monstrous form has transformed from a tool to obscure or demonize the queer persona to a visualization of liberation and joy. From the mouth of a fearmonger the queer monster inverts what should be a righteous institution. From the mouth of a queer comics creator the queer monster gnashes its teeth at a system which has long tried to restrict its wonderful otherness. The revenge fantasy of the queer monster is transformed through unfiltered queer optimism. Queer monsters no longer lash out from dark corners, but instead walk in the light. The queer villain is slowly but surely going out of style, however the queer monster has not nearly met its end. Instead, it has evolved across the exchanging of hands, and has gone from a scaremongering fiend to a creature of nuance and sympathy.

¹⁴ Young, "Pixel Fantasies and Futures: Narrative 'De-Othering' in Queer Webcomics," 2022.

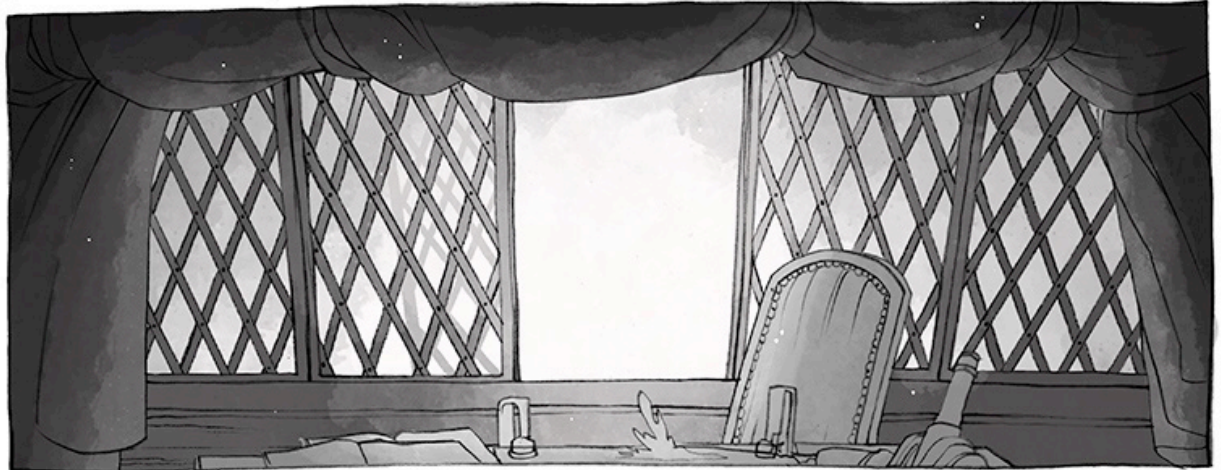


Above:

The Comics Code Authority Stamp, added to the cover of nearly every comic produced by major publishers throughout the 1900s. The Comics Code Authority was responsible for censoring any content deemed too vulgar or obscene for younger audiences. Similar to the Hayes Code in Hollywood films, The Comics Code Authority was responsible for mass queer censorship, and the reason by queercoding became such a widespread way for queer audiences to find themselves within the stories they loved.

Right

Luck climbs out a window to freedom after transforming out of a beastly shape. They harbor no great love for human society, ready to tear apart the limiting system that envelopes them.



Dee Cea

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