

White, Courtney, University of Southern California. “Now You Haven’t Got a Woman to Look At’: MGM’s Glamorous Gallant Bess”

In 1946, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer released an eight-minute “behind the scenes” film designed to promote its latest rising starlet. Traveling through the main studio gates and through to the backlot, a voiceover built anticipation for the actress’s reveal: “Of all the glamorous, talented ladies you’ll find here,” he promised, “there is only one Bess, the girl you’re about to meet.” The film displays Bess as a real glamour girl, providing lingering shots of her long and shapely legs—all four of them. Bess was no ordinary woman; she was a horse.

This paper explores the all-too-brief career of Bess, who starred in only one feature at MGM (1946’s *Gallant Bess*, directed by Andrew Marton) and who was, in reality, a gelding named Silvernip. Through examination of archival materials, including studio production files, script drafts, and press clippings, I illustrate MGM’s bizarre and contradictory strategy for promoting both horse and film. As demonstrated by the short, *The Horse with the Human Mind* (Harry W. Loud, 1946), one tactic was to construct Bess as a glamorous human actress. However, MGM simultaneously attempted to market Bess as the equine counterpart to Lassie (whose star text was equally complicated). These conflicting strategies are apparent in *Gallant Bess*. In a film that has no human females, Bess is alternately mother, love interest, and trick performer; she even enlists in the military. Drawing on theoretical works by Richard Dyer and Michael Peterson in conjunction with the archival materials, the paper uses Bess as a case study in theorizing what I call an “animal star apparatus,” a concept that could be used to examine the careers of other animal actors and stars.

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