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The Journal of Gods and Monsters

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“Reality – Is it a Horror?”: Richard Shaver's Subterranean World and the Displaced Self

Gabriel Mckee

Abstract: This paper discusses the works of author Richard S. Shaver, who rose to prominence in the science fiction world in the 1940s with stories describing a vast underworld of caverns under the surface of the earth. These caverns were inhabited by evil beings called “dero” that used high-tech devices to torment the inhabitants of the surface world. Shaver, who had spent several years in mental institutions prior to his writing career, claimed his stories were true, and editor Raymond A. Palmer aggressively promoted the “Shaver Mystery” in his magazines, in particular *Amazing Stories*. This prompted a backlash from science fiction fandom against both Shaver and Palmer. This paper gives an overview of Shaver’s career and explores his theory of the world as a form of theodicy, drawing in particular on his novel *Mandark*, a retelling of portions of the Bible narrative. Shaver’s monsters and their devices are examples of an “influencing machine,” a commonly-occurring delusional phenomenon first described by psychologist Victor Tausk in 1919, an externalized force that a patient believes is the source of thoughts and sensations. This paper argues that, for Shaver, the dero provided a psychological framework for processing tragic and traumatic events, externalizing tormenting forces into monsters. His fiction then became a force for combatting those torments within a narrative context. Like other conspiracy theories, the Shaver Mystery seeks to impose order on a chaotic world.

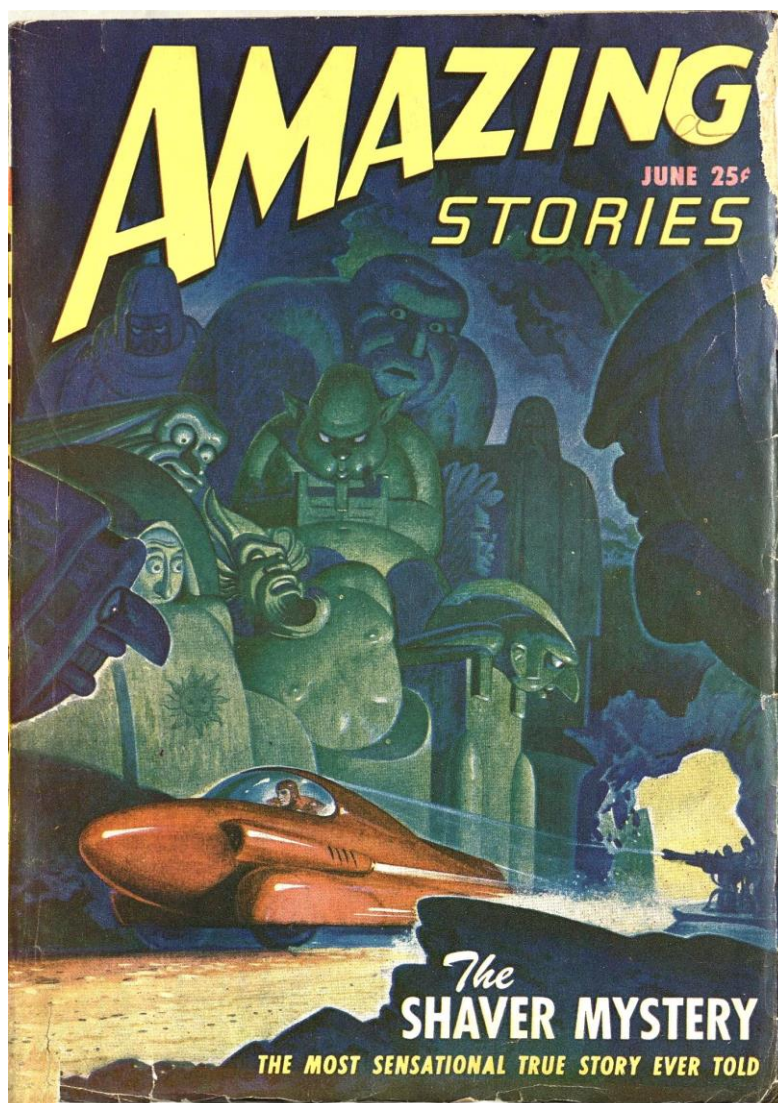
Keywords: Conspiracy theories, Monsters in popular culture, Schizophrenia and the arts, Science fiction, Shaver mystery, Theodicy

RICHARD S. SHAVER, RAY PALMER, AND THE “SHAVER MYSTERY”

In its January 1944 issue, the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* published a letter, signed “S. Shaver,” containing what its author claimed to be an ancient language. This alphabet assigned meanings to the 26 letters of the English alphabet, and claimed that the prehistoric etymology of all language could be traced to these secret meanings. For example, in Shaver’s language, called “Mantong,” the letter “d” stands for detrimental, while “t” stands for integration. Raymond A. Palmer, editor of *Amazing*, invited readers to experiment with this alphabet and send in their findings.¹

In the meantime, Palmer started a lengthy correspondence with the author of the letter: Richard Sharpe Shaver, an ironworker living in Barto, Pennsylvania. Palmer was intrigued by Shaver’s alphabet, and asked him to write more. Shaver responded with a 10,000-word manuscript entitled “A Warning to Future Man.” Palmer heavily edited Shaver’s manuscript, and

¹ Richard S. Shaver, “An Ancient Language?,” *Amazing Stories* 18, no. 1 (January 1944): 206–7, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v18n01_1944-01_cape1736.



published it as the cover story of the March 1945 issue of *Amazing*, under the title “I Remember Lemuria!”² The story describes events on Earth 12,000 years ago, when a race of godlike aliens abandoned the planet to escape poisonous radiation emanating from the sun. Palmer presented this story as factual, claiming that Shaver had tapped into “racial memory.” The following issue, Palmer offered a new explanation, more in keeping with Shaver’s own beliefs: his stories were “thought records,” recorded by Shaver through his contact with mysterious creatures living under the surface of the earth. For the next 5 years, Palmer promoted Shaver’s writings as “The Shaver Mystery,” and this sensationalistic topic came to dominate the pages of *Amazing Stories*. The magazine saw massive increases in its circulation figures, but it faced a harsh backlash in the small but vocal world of science fiction fandom, which stridently denounced both the author and the editor who brought his stories to the public.

Figure 1. *Amazing Stories* vol. 21, no. 6 (June 1947), a special issue devoted entirely to Shaver’s theories. Cover illustration by Robert Gibson Jones, showing “a scene in the caves.” Author’s collection.

² The extent to which Palmer rewrote Shaver’s fiction is not clear. Shaver claimed that Palmer’s additions were minimal, while detractors in the realm of science fiction fandom sometimes presumed that Palmer did the lion’s share of the writing himself, if not all of it. (See, for instance, Geoffrey Giles, “The Palmer Hoax,” *Science-Fantasy Review* 4, no. 17 [Winter 1949-1950]: 10–14, <https://efanzines.com/FR/fr17.pdf>; Tom P. Stewart, “Ray Palmer and the Inner World! 70 Years of the Shaver Hoax!,” *The Basement*, September 17, 2015, <http://www.tompstewart.com/blog/2015/9/17/ray-palmer-and-the-inner-world-65-years-of-the-shaver-hoax>). Moreover, Palmer sometimes claimed that he had written most of Shaver’s work himself (see Mike Ashley, *Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* [Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2000], 182). Correspondence between Palmer and Shaver reveals that this cannot have been the case, but Palmer certainly encouraged collaboration with more experienced storytellers. Under Palmer’s editorship Shaver shared authorship credits with other authors (notably Chester Geier and Bob McKenna), and Shaver also hired a typist to assist with preparing his manuscripts—which may also have included editing them. (See, for example, Richard S. Shaver, “The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File (Personal Letters From Shaver) [Part 3],” *The Hidden World*, no. A-15 [Fall 1964]: 2607).

Shaver's stories, to this day still known as the "Shaver Mystery," described a world full of monsters. Shaver believed that there exists below the surface of the earth a complex world of caverns, altogether larger than the surface world above. Thousands of years before the beginning of recorded history, our world was inhabited by powerful star-faring beings: the Nortans, the Titans, and the Atlans. To shield themselves from our sun's poisonous radiation, these godlike aliens built massive caverns under the planet's surface. But some 12,000 years ago, the solar poison had grown too strong, and they abandoned the planet. They left behind two types of beings in the subterranean world: the dero (short for "detrimental robots"), twisted and evil beings who had been driven insane by solar radiation; and the tero (or "integrative robots"), their benevolent cousins, who were physically mutated by the sun but remained sane. These two types of being have access to the machines left behind by the "Elder Race," and use them to effect events on the surface world. There are numerous types of ray devices: stim rays that cause pleasant sensations; needle rays that cause pain; ben rays that heal and can even resurrect the dead, telaugs that transmit voices into other beings' minds, epilepto rays that cause seizures. The dero use these ray devices to cause accidents, disease, pain, and insanity on the surface world; the tero communicate with friendly surface people but mostly use the ancient mech to fight against the dero and prevent them from destroying the surface world entirely.

Shaver's stories were controversial: the core of science fiction fans hated them, most of all because of Palmer's presentation of them as factual. But Shaver seems to have been popular among those outside of organized fandom, boosting circulation of *Amazing* to nearly a quarter of a million copies by 1946. The letter column of each issue became a forum for discussion of Shaver's theories, including reports from readers who claimed to have had experiences with the dero themselves. But science fiction fandom fought hard against *Amazing*, and attacks on Palmer became *de rigueur* in many of the most popular fanzines. The Queens Science Fiction League passed a resolution stating that Shaver's stories endangered the sanity of their readers, and planned to submit copies of *Amazing Stories* to the Society for the Suppression of Vice.³ At a 1946 convention in Philadelphia, one fan proposed circulating a petition seeking to have *Amazing* banned by the US Postal Office; the motion failed to pass by a two-vote margin.⁴ Many fans appealed directly to *Amazing*'s publishers, Ziff-Davis, and by the end of 1946 Palmer's employers ordered him to change tack: he could continue to publish work by Shaver, but no longer could he present it as anything other than fiction.⁵ Palmer began to divorce the Shaver Mystery from *Amazing*, encouraging Shaver and *Amazing* writer Chester Geier to start a "Shaver Mystery Club" to publish an independent magazine on Shaver's ideas. Soon thereafter, while still working for Ziff-Davis, Palmer launched the independent magazine *Fate*, a non-fiction periodical dedicated to exploring paranormal phenomena. The first issue contained a detailed account of pilot Kenneth Arnold's July 1947 sighting of what came to be known as flying saucers, and it was the first in a wave of paranormal publications that was to explode in the early 1950s. In 1949 Palmer resigned from Ziff-Davis and spent the remainder of his life as an independent publisher specializing in the paranormal. Some historians of ufology, including John

³ James V. Taurasi, Alvin R. Brown, and Sam Moskowitz, "William S. Baring-Gould at Queens SFL, QSFL Protests Shaver's Stories, 29 Present at October Meeting," *Fantasy-Times*, no. 22 (October 27, 1946): 2, http://fanac.org/fanzines/Fantasy_Times/Fantasy_Times46104-01.html.

⁴ Harry Warner, *All Our Yesterdays: An Informal History of Science Fiction Fandom in the Forties* (Chicago: Advent:Publishers, 1969), 226; James V. Taurasi, "The Philly Conference," *Fantasy-Times*, no. 23 (November 3, 1946): 2, http://fanac.org/fanzines/Fantasy_Times/Fantasy_Times46111-01.html.

⁵ Richard Toronto, *War over Lemuria: Richard Shaver, Ray Palmer and the Strangest Chapter of 1940s Science Fiction* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2013), 153.

Keel⁶ and Jack Womack,⁷ have seen the Shaver Mystery primarily as a prolegomenon to the initial flying saucer craze, with Palmer at the helm of both. However, though he was relatively prominent in the earliest days of the UFO phenomenon, after selling his stake in *Fate* in 1955 Palmer became increasingly marginal in that subculture. His audience gradually withered, from some 200,000 readers at the peak of *Amazing*'s circulation to about 2,200 subscribers to his publications in the mid 1960s.⁸ For his part, Shaver was interested in flying saucers solely as further evidence of his own theories.⁹

Following Palmer's departure from *Amazing*, the Shaver Mystery Club soon collapsed, and Shaver, left without a market for his writing, took up farming. He wrote occasional stories and nonfiction pieces for magazines (mostly those edited by Palmer), but his writing career was effectively over, despite efforts on Palmer's behalf to return to his ideas in the form of *The Hidden World*, a quarterly compendium of material related to the Shaver Mystery that Palmer published from 1961-1966. In the early 1960s, Shaver became convinced that rocks on his farm were in fact ancient books created by the Elder Race prior to a cataclysm that drove them off of the planet. He began taking close-up photographs of the images he saw, and occasionally making expressionistic paintings based on these images. Shaver had studied art in the 1930s, and used a number of innovative techniques in creating his paintings. He spent the last decade of his life attempting to interpret and communicate these messages from the prehistoric past to the world at large, with limited success. His final publication, issued a few months before his death in November 1975, was *The Secret World*, a hybrid book containing Palmer's memoir of his own early life alongside an essay and a compilation of photographs and paintings by Shaver. Within science fiction fandom, Shaver is remembered as a hoaxster, despite the apparent honesty with which he presented his experiences.¹⁰ Thanks in large part to the efforts of biographer Richard Toronto, appreciation of Shaver as an "outsider" visual artist has grown in recent years.¹¹

FRAMEWORKS FOR INTERPRETING SHAVER: THE INFLUENCING MACHINE, SPIRITUALISM, AND MYTHOLOGY

As explored by Toronto, Shaver's stories and the beliefs behind them had their origins in mental illness. Toronto identifies a possible turning point in Shaver's mental health in the sudden death of his older brother, Taylor Victor Shaver, a writer who had published a number of adventure stories in *Boys' Life*. In the winter of 1934, Taylor died from complications after a case of pneumonia, and Richard became convinced that his death was the result of a conspiracy. That spring he began hearing voices regularly—his story "Thought Records of Lemuria," the second of his stories to be published, features an account of receiving telepathic communications

⁶ John A. Keel, "The Man Who Invented Flying Saucers," *Fortean Times*, no. 41 (Winter 1983): 52–57.

⁷ Jack Womack, *Flying Saucers Are Real!: The UFO Library of Jack Womack*, ed. Michael P. Daley, Johan Kugelberg, and Gabriel McKee (New York: Anthology Editions, 2016), 21–30.

⁸ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 227.

⁹ See Richard S. Shaver, "Historical Aspect of the Saucers," *Amazing Stories* 31, no. 10 (October 1957): 96–101.

¹⁰ For one recent example, see Stewart, "Ray Palmer and the Inner World."

¹¹ Shaver's extant oeuvre of paintings and many of his photographs are collected in Richard Toronto, *Rokfogo: The Mysterious Pre-Deluge Art of Richard S. Shaver*, 2 vols. (San Francisco, Calif.: Shavertron Press, 2014). On recent exhibitions of Shaver's artwork, see Allison Meier, "The Sci-Fi Writer Who Used Photography to Search for Ancient Aliens," *Hyperallergic*, March 6, 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/112582/the-sci-fi-writer-who-used-photography-to-search-for-ancient-aliens/>.

via his welding equipment, and this is likely a factual account of his experiences.¹² In the summer of 1934 Shaver's wife, Sophie Gurvitch Shaver, had him committed to the Ypsilanti State Hospital, where he remained (with periodic visits home) for nearly two years. During Shaver's hospitalization, Sophie Shaver died, electrocuted when she touched the wire of an electric heater while in a bathtub. Shortly thereafter Shaver was released from Ypsilanti on an extended leave to his parents' farm in Pennsylvania, but fearing that the Gurvitch family would have him permanently institutionalized, he left Pennsylvania and traveled around the Northeastern United States and Canada. Based on Toronto's summaries of his correspondence, it seems likely that it was during this period of wandering in 1937-1938 that he developed most of his theories about the cavern world. Shaver was arrested in December 1937 for stowing away on a merchant vessel in Newfoundland. In early 1938 he was deported from Canada and sent to Grafton State Hospital in Massachusetts, and later that year was transferred to the Ionia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Michigan, where he remained for 5 years. He was discharged in May 1943, and that same year he began writing, sending his alphabet to *Amazing Stories* during the late summer or early fall.¹³

The ancient devices or "elder mech" that Shaver described fit the definition of an "influencing machine" described by psychologist Victor Tausk as a symptom of the mental disorder called at the time dementia praecox, now subsumed under the general diagnosis of schizophrenia. An influencing machine is a remote device operated by malignant beings or forces that causes a patient to see pictures and experience thoughts, movements, and sensations.¹⁴ (One of the best-publicized cases of an "influencing machine" is the "air loom" described by Bedlam patient James Tilly Matthews in the early 19th century).¹⁵ The belief that one is subject to an influencing machine is the result of an "outward projection of [a] stimulus and the attributing of this stimulus to a distant object, hence a stage of distancing and objectivation of the intellect."¹⁶ According to psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs, a psyche experiencing an influencing becomes reified: "schizophrenia results in living and mental processes losing their unity, acquiring instead a synthetic, mechanical character that itself suggests a 'mechanisation of the soul.' An influencing-machine is, in this respect, the expression of a self-objectification."¹⁷ Shaver's dero and their mech, which caused him to hear voices, feel pain, and experience thoughts and dreams, closely match Tausk's model. The dero represent Shaver's displacement from his own self-experience as a living being, his transformation into a thing controlled by malicious outside forces.¹⁸

¹² Richard S. Shaver, "Thought Records of Lemuria," *Amazing Stories* 19, no. 2 (June 1945): 16–52, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v19n02_1945-06_cape1736.

¹³ This account of Shaver's life before his publishing career is taken from Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 88–113.

¹⁴ Victor Tausk, "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," *Journal of Psychotherapy Practice and Research* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 186, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3330285/pdf/184.pdf>.

¹⁵ Mike Jay, *The Air Loom Gang: The Strange and True Story of James Tilly Matthews and His Visionary Madness* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2004).

¹⁶ Tausk, "On the Origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," 195.

¹⁷ Thomas Fuchs, "Being a Psycho-Machine: On the Phenomenology of the Influencing-Machine," in *Air Loom Der Luft-Webstuhl Und Andere Gefährliche Beeinflussungsapparate = the Air Loom and Other Dangerous Influencing Machines*, ed. Thomas Röske and Bettina Brand-Claussen (Heidelberg: Das Wunderhorn, 2006), 35.

¹⁸ Shaver's descriptions of the activity of the dero could be described as violent fantasies. However, he uniformly presents these scenes as repulsive. Because he pictures himself as a powerless witness to these acts, rather than their perpetrator, they cannot be considered as violent ideation as defined by the Schedule of Imagined Violence (SIV), a psychological tool used for measuring and evaluating violent fantasies. For details on the SIV, see Thomas Grisso et

Shaver's stories of dero and tero paint a dualistic portrait of a hidden world at war with our daily existence. For Shaver, this was literal and physical, but Palmer commonly presented Shaver's ideas as representing a metaphysical reality. Palmer attempted to wed Shaver's ideas to the 19th century spiritualist text *Oahspe*, a book received through automatic writing by dentist John Ballou Newbrough (1828-1891) in the late 19th century.¹⁹ According to a biography by a group of his present-day followers, Newbrough's mother was a spiritualist, and he claimed contact with spirits from an early age. His first spiritualist work was published in 1874, followed in 1882 by the large channeled text *Oahspe*.²⁰ Palmer put forth the idea that Shaver's subterranean caves were actually *Oahspe*'s Atmospherea, an intangible realm in the upper atmosphere where incorporeal spirits dwell; Palmer declared that Shaver's tero and dero were identical to the good and evil spirits described by *Oahspe*.²¹ In addition to *Oahspe*, Palmer's marketing of Shaver's writing drew on other streams of 19th-century esotericism, most notably in the use of "Lemuria." This legendary continent—a Pacific counterpart to Atlantis—originated in the biological theories of Ernst Haeckel and Philip L. Scalder, and was adopted by Spiritualists and Theosophists including Helena Blavatsky, Alice Bailey, and others.²² For Bailey, Lemuria was the home of the third "root race," in which "the physical aspect of man was carried to a high stage of perfection."²³

At first glance, it appears that Shaver's stories appeal to these esoteric roots in the 19th century. However, the toponym "Lemuria" receives only passing mention in Shaver's texts themselves. In the text of "I Remember Lemuria!", the word appears only a handful of times, often in footnotes and parenthetical additions that were likely added by Palmer. From his retitling of this initial story, Palmer thrust the continent of Lemuria to the fore. According to Chester Geier, who wrote for Palmer's magazines and co-authored several stories with Shaver, the use of "Lemuria" was a marketing tactic on Palmer's part, not a direct appeal to esotericism: "Ray once wrote he had noted that sales increased by a couple of thousand whenever a story-title with 'Atlantis' or 'Lemuria' appeared on the cover of *Amazing Stories*."²⁴ The apparent correspondence between the lost continents of esoteric movements and Shaver's cavern world is less clear than the toponyms used in titling his stories would suggest.

Despite Shaver's belief in telepathy, he considered himself a materialist and an atheist. There is little indication that he was directly influenced by spiritualism or Theosophy. "The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File," published in four installments in *The Hidden World*, gives a

al., "Violent Thoughts and Violent Behavior Following Hospitalization for Mental Disorder," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 68, no. 3 (June 2000): 388–98, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.68.3.388>.

¹⁹ See J. Gordon Melton, ed., "Universal Faithists of Kosmon, Inc.," in *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2017), Gale eBooks,

<http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3709001433/GVRL?u=new64731&xid=ab958ba4>.

²⁰ Seventh Era Faithists, "John Ballou Newbrough," *Oahspe Standard Edition*, 2015, http://oahspestandardedition.com/About_Oahspe/John_B_Newbrough.html.

²¹ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 127; Jim Wentworth, *Giants in the Earth: The Amazing Story of Ray Palmer, Oahspe and the Shaver Mystery* (Amherst, Wis.: Palmer Publications, 1973), 88.

²² Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, vol. 90, Numen Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 100–105.

²³ Alice A. Bailey, *The Consciousness of the Atom* (New York: Lucifer Publishing Co., 1922), 88, <https://archive.org/details/consciousnessofa00bail>.

²⁴ Chester S. Geier, "Gardner and Palmer," *Free Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 64, <https://secularhumanism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2018/05/Free-Inquiry-Vol-08-No-02.pdf>. There are two examples of Atlantis/Lemuria covers during Palmer's pre-Shaver editorship of *Amazing*: Stanton A. Coblentz's "Enchantress of Lemuria" (Oct. 1941) and William P. McGivern's "Convoy to Atlantis" (Nov. 1941).

detailed account of Shaver's reading and writing during the period when he completed the bulk of his writing for Palmer's magazines. Shaver shows himself familiar with weird fiction, mythology, and popular science, but references to occult writing are vanishingly few. In one letter, Shaver refers to British occultist James Churchward, but only in passing, and quite dismissively: "Got a book on The Continent of Mu by Churchward and nothing in it of value to me."²⁵ His reading of *Oahspe*—apparently at Palmer's urging—leads to the bemused response that "Just what use it would be to us I can't see – as he seems to believe in spirits – invisible souls etc."²⁶ One influential esotericist work is notable by its absence: Shaver refers several times to Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, but makes no reference to the same author's *The Coming Race*—a novel about an underground explorer who discovers a subterranean race of superpowered beings. *The Coming Race* was influential both as a work of science fiction and as a subject of speculation for Helena Blavatsky.²⁷ In his brief account of the Shaver Mystery, Michael Barkun presumes the influence of *The Coming Race* on Shaver's work.²⁸ If this influence was present in Shaver's early writings, it appears to have been secondhand, through its more direct influence on the work of weird fiction authors like Abraham Merritt (whose story "The Snake Mother" Shaver cites frequently). *The Coming Race*'s absence from Shaver's account of his influences and reading activity is surprising, but serves to underscore the extent to which he was unmoved by 19th century occultism. Shaver was insistent on the physical reality of the cavern world, and rejected Palmer's appeal to any kind of spiritual interpretation of his experiences. Ultimately, Shaver accused Palmer of misrepresenting him: "The whole slant of everything I had to say was switched from the factual to the misty umbrella of spiritualism and reincarnation—utter hokum to me."²⁹

Ultimately, Shaver's interests are very different from 19th century occultists like Blavatsky and later heirs like Churchward. They are distinct, too, from the approach of Maurice Doreal, a contemporary of Shaver's who founded the Brotherhood of the White Temple to promulgate ancient wisdom he received from subterranean inhabitants of Mt. Shasta.³⁰ For Blavatsky, Bailey, Doreal, and other occultists, Atlantis and Lemuria are ancient sources of recovered wisdom, which they often describing as having been kept alive in frontier regions like Tibet. As Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke explains, "The notion of advanced adepts in the Himalayas, the heirs of a tradition going back to Atlantis and earlier pristine civilizations, represented the Renaissance idea of *prisca theologia* passed on by a chain of initiates combined with the Romantic fascination with the Orient."³¹ Bailey's presentation of Lemurians as physically perfect is the opposite of Shaver's misshapen dero; even the tero, the "good" remnants of the planet's primordial inhabitants, are generally presented as weak and malformed. For Shaver, there is no wisdom accessible from the primordial era: all that has survived are degraded remnants of prehistory, accessible through malfunctioning technology in the hands of the merciless dero. A

²⁵ Richard S. Shaver, "The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File (Personal Letters From Shaver) [Part 2]," *The Hidden World*, no. A-14 (Summer 1964): 2483.

²⁶ Shaver, "Shaver-Palmer Letter File [3]," 2659.

²⁷ See Sten Bodvar Liljegren, *Bulwer-Lytton's Novels and Isis Unveiled*, Essays and Studies on English Language and Literature 18 (Upsala & Cambridge: Lundequistska Bokhandeln/Harvard University Press, 1957).

²⁸ Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Comparative Studies in Religion and Society 15 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 32.

²⁹ Richard S. Shaver, "The Mystery of Shaver," Shavertron, 2006, <http://www.shavertron.com/realshaver.html>.

³⁰ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 115.

³¹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 212, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195320992.001.0001.

footnote in “I Remember Lemuria!” contains a statement on primordial wisdom in a description of an ancient book preceding the Bible, of which our Bible is a distortion:

Once there was a book called the ‘T’ book (‘T’ for integration, for growth force, energy, etc.) which was in rather widespread use up to the time of Christ. It contained the elemental frames of logic and simple what-to-dos like the age-poison elimination, beneficial generators, and so on. But some group feared its influence and it was destroyed, so completely that only the memory of that once infallible book remains, which memory was the father of the Bible and all its veneration, including the cross on the cover, the ‘T’ sign.³²

At first glance the “T” book is comparable to ancient or prehistoric wisdom literature recovered and presented by occultists like Blavatsky’s *Book of Dzyan*, Churchward’s Mu tablets, or Rudolph Steiner’s Fifth Gospel.³³ However, Shaver explicitly states that the “T” book “was destroyed... completely.” He does not claim to present the contents of this technical manual for us; indeed, he refers to its existence solely to communicate that its contents are unrecoverable. In stark contrast to esotericists, Shaver’s view is overwhelmingly pessimistic; whatever prehistoric wisdom once existed is lost forever. All we can hope to do is to fend off destruction in the present: “It is a known fact that the dero have killed us off before and will again. It behooves us to take what measures we can against them.”³⁴

Though Shaver rejected spiritualism, there is a fascination with religion and mythology running throughout his writing. In one late essay entitled “God is a Lie-Spider,” he proposes “that perhaps there IS some reality, simple and understandable reality, behind all the carping and everlasting preachments.”³⁵ For Shaver, the received wisdom of religious traditions is supernatural “hokum,” but he seems to have also been concerned that human religions may even have celebrated evil. In the afterword to his story “The Masked World,” he contends that Christian hymns referencing the crucifixion are in fact written by dero and given to human beings as “dupe’s hymn[s] to a deed they hold as one of their mightier stunts.”³⁶ These hymns and other religious rites were given to us by the subterranean devils in order to mock us.

Despite this critical view of modern religions, Shaver’s stories frequently use names, images, and stories from mythology, placing them in a new context as “thought records.” Viewed this way, they can be read as presenting the “simple and understandable” true story that had devolved into myth. He drew in particular on Norse mythology: “Thought Records of Lemuria” features the Midgard Serpent (here misidentified with Garm) and Thor; the dero are called “Jotuns” in “Invasion of the Micro-Men”; and “The Return of Sathanas” features an alien

³² Richard S. Shaver, “I Remember Lemuria!,” *Amazing Stories* 19, no. 1 (March 1945): 50, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v19n01_1945-03_cape1736.

³³ Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 90:157; Rudolph Steiner, “The Fifth Gospel,” trans. Frank Thomas Smith, Rudolf Steiner Archive & e.Lib, 2007, https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA148/English/SCR2006/FiGFTS_index.html.

³⁴ Richard S. Shaver and Ray Palmer, “The Truth about the Shaver Mystery: The Shaver-Palmer Debate,” in *The Subterreanean World*, ed. Timothy Green Beckley (Clarksburg, W.Va.: Saucerian Press, Inc., 1971), 13.

³⁵ Richard S. Shaver, “God Is a Lie-Spider,” in *Shavertron, Vol. 4: The MacPlus Years*, ed. Richard Toronto (San Francisco: Shavertron Press, 2014), 130.

³⁶ Richard S. Shaver, “The Masked World,” *Amazing Stories* 20, no. 2 (May 1946): 68, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v20n02_1946-05_cape1736.

being named Odin who rules a species called the Aesir.³⁷ In this sense, Shaver does present a form of recovery of ancient wisdom—but rather than primordial perfection, these myths merely present earlier stages in the progressive degradation of life on Earth. The gods of mythology were already at war with the dero, and they ultimately lost.

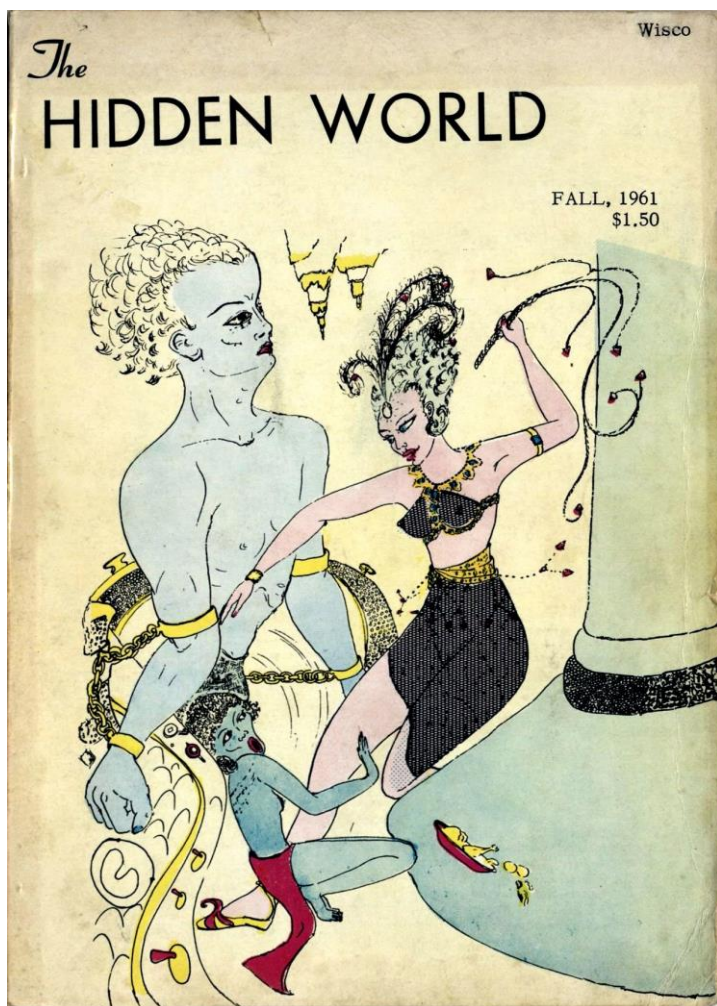


Figure 2. *The Hidden World* no. A-3 (Fall 1961). Cover illustration by Richard Shaver, possibly illustrating *Mandark*. Author's collection.

SHAVER'S BIBLE: *MANDARK*

Though he drew most frequently on Norse myth, Shaver's fascination with religion and mythology extended itself to the Bible as well. In late 1945, Shaver began work on his version of the Gospel. His novel *Mandark* presents itself as "The story of the Messiah as it is told in the caves." The story it presents is not quite a version of the gospel narrative, however. Rather, Shaver describes a secret truth—the story of the events that took place underneath Palestine during the life of Jesus. Jesus himself is barely even a character in the story; instead, *Mandark* contends that events in the surface world were mere reflections of a grand struggle occurring underneath the surface.

Unlike Shaver's other stories, *Mandark* was not published in a science fiction magazine. Instead, the story was serialized in the independently produced *The Shaver Mystery Magazine* and later reprinted in Palmer's all-Shaver compendium magazine *The Hidden World*. Science fiction historian Mike Ashley suggests that Palmer "considered [it] too taboo to publish."³⁸ Oddly, however, Shaver's correspondence with Palmer, a large portion of which was published in *The Hidden World*, makes it clear that *Mandark* was based on an outline by Palmer, and was

³⁷ Shaver, "Thought Records of Lemuria"; Richard S. Shaver, "Invasion of the Micro-Men," *Amazing Stories* 20, no. 1 (February 1946): 6–42, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v20n01_1946-02_cape1736; Richard S. Shaver and Bob McKenna, "The Return of Sathanas," *Amazing Stories* 20, no. 8 (November 1946): 8–62, https://archive.org/details/Amazing_Stories_v20n08_1946-11_cape1736.

³⁸ Ashley, *Time Machines*, 183.

written with his active encouragement.³⁹ Shaver suggests that it was Ziff-Davis who rejected the story, for fear that “it would be banned.”⁴⁰ More likely, Palmer saw *Mandark*, a full-length novel unavailable to readers of *Amazing*, as a selling point for potential subscribers to the *Shaver Mystery Magazine*. It is in this context that the novel was mentioned in the pages of *Amazing* and other Ziff-Davis magazines.

The plot of *Mandark* is complex, largely owing to Shaver’s improvisational approach to plotting; it begins with a series of nested framing sequences and a first-person introduction in the voice of a tero named Nydia,⁴¹ before moving into a first-person narrative in Shaver’s own voice. The Shaver of this narrative then experiences a “thought record” of the Old Gods escaping the earth thousands of years ago, abandoning it to the mutant predecessors of the dero. We then hear from Jehovah, the ruler of the planet Sabaoth, describing his creation of human beings as an experiment in the effects of solar radiation. Jehovah then creates a savior figure for this planet: a genetically engineered baby to be born 20,000 years in his future. The main plot of *Mandark* begins with the birth of this being, Yahveh, inside a shielded cavern. Born with pitch-black skin, he is raised by machines, trained to conquer the earth and “make these people well again.”⁴² After growing to adulthood, Yahveh creates the circumstances for Jesus to be born in the surface world, as well as other would be savior figures, whom he intends to be his followers when he emerges from his cavern. But Satantes Onderde, the ruler of the dero in the vicinity of Jerusalem, undermines this plan, using ray to control King Herod, who murders all but one of Yahveh’s children. Yahveh uses his machines to go into battle against Satantes, and their ongoing battles distract him from carrying out his plans for the surface world. Satantes’ daughter, Lila, joins forces with Yahveh, but she plots to undermine him and make him her slave. Eventually Lila betrays Yahveh and turns him over to Satantes, and during the period of his imprisonment Jesus is arrested and crucified on the surface. Yahveh, using the last of his strength, defeats Satantes and uses ray mechanisms to resurrect Jesus, but he then succumbs to Lila, who then keeps him prisoner for centuries. Lila uses ray to control both his body and mind, operating him like a puppet. The story ends on an ambiguous note: Yahveh defeats Lila, and then is either killed or escapes to battle evil on other planets. A “postscript” to the story involves a treasure hunter who uncovers the caverns under Jerusalem where the battles between Yahveh and Satantes unfolded, but this story was unfinished, and seems to be more of an aborted sequel than a true continuation of the main story of *Mandark*.⁴³

Though *Mandark* is in several respects a *sui generis* entry in Shaver’s oeuvre, we can nevertheless see in it many of the key elements of his ideas at play. From the outset, the dero had served as a reinterpretation of traditional demons and devils. (In the words of Jerome Clark, historian of the paranormal, “Shaver technologized hell.”)⁴⁴ Here, with their full identification

³⁹ [Raymond A. Palmer and Richard S. Shaver], “Giants in the Earth,” *The Hidden World*, no. A-15 (Fall 1964): 2511–17; Shaver, “Shaver-Palmer Letter File [3],” 2552–54.

⁴⁰ Shaver, “Shaver-Palmer Letter File [3],” 2553.

⁴¹ Nydia appears in several of Shaver’s stories; her name comes from the blind girl in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Shaver applied the name to the blind girl metonymically: In a letter to Palmer, Shaver stated that he and a blind tero girl had read Bulwer-Lytton’s novel together “with beneficial aug which made an immense and beautiful dream of the reading.” See Richard S. Shaver, “The Secret Shaver-Palmer Letter File (Personal Letters From Shaver) [Part 1],” *The Hidden World*, no. A-13 (Spring 1964): 2250.

⁴² Richard S. Shaver, “Mandark,” *The Hidden World*, no. A-3 (Fall 1961): 467.

⁴³ Richard S. Shaver, “Mandark-- Postscript, 1948,” *The Hidden World*, no. A-4 (Winter 1961): 588–632.

⁴⁴ Jerome Clark, *Unexplained!: Strange Sightings, Incredible Occurrences, and Puzzling Physical Phenomena*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 2013), 386.

with Satan, we see the resacralization of these monsters. This was not the first time Shaver had used devil imagery—for example, his story “The Return of Sathanas,” published in the November 1946 issue of *Amazing*, wrote a traditional devil figure (with red skin, horns, and a tail) into a space opera narrative.⁴⁵ As Peter Dendle points out, the modern, secular era has seen traditional monsters “infantilized, commoditized, and incorporated into the kitsch icons of leisure and entertainment”;⁴⁶ in declaring these monsters real, alive, and dangerous, Shaver seeks to re-enchant these images with the full power of their original role as *monstrum*.

“DRAGONS CAN BE BEATEN”: THE SHAVER MYSTERY AS FAIRY TALE

Shaver’s stories are populated with monsters, but they do not fit the mold of horror stories as defined by Noel Carroll, who draws a distinction between “the horror story from mere stories with monsters in them, such as fairy tales.”⁴⁷ Carroll explains:

What appears to demarcate the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as myths, is the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they encounter. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order. In fairy tales, on the other hand, monsters are part of the everyday furniture of the universe.⁴⁸

In *Mandark*, Yahveh may be repulsed by the dero, but he does not view them as a violation of the natural order—he has been raised from birth to be aware of them, to understand them, and to fight them. They are an obstacle to be overcome, but they are in some sense part of the “furniture of the universe.” Chimerical creatures are commonplace in Shaver’s work: Mutan Mion, the protagonist of “I Remember Lemuria!” and its sequels, grows to a height of 50 feet; his love interest Arl is described as a “variform” with the tail and legs of a deer. For Shaver, there is nothing inherently monstrous about hybridity. If there is a horror, it is in the nature of the world itself—a fact underscored by the question posed in the opening section of *Mandark*: “Reality—is it a horror?”⁴⁹

Mandark and Shaver’s stories in general better fit the mold of fairy tales than of horror or science fiction. Many of his stories deliberately adopt the tropes of fairy tales—especially early stories like “The Princess and Her Pig” and “The Tale of the Red Dwarf Who Writes With His Tail,” both published in Palmer’s *Fantastic Adventures*, and later work like “The Dog Princess,” a story based on the “rock books” he found on his farm that remained unpublished until decades after his death.⁵⁰ His short novel “The Dream Makers,” which is primarily autobiographical,

⁴⁵ Shaver and McKenna, “The Return of Sathanas.”

⁴⁶ Peter J. Dendle, “Monsters and the Twenty-First Century: The Preternatural in an Age of Scientific Consensus,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham, Surrey, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 438.

⁴⁷ Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (London: Routledge, 1990), 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Shaver, “Mandark,” Fall 1961, 425.

⁵⁰ Richard S. Shaver, “The Tale of the Red Dwarf Who Writes with His Tail, by the Red Dwarf Himself,” *Fantastic Adventures* 9, no. 3 (March 1947): 8–45, https://archive.org/details/Fantastic_Adventures_v09n03_1947-05_unz.org; Richard S. Shaver, “The Princess and Her Pig,” *Fantastic Adventures* 9, no. 2 (March 1947): 158–69, https://archive.org/details/Fantastic_Adventures_v09n02_1947-03; Richard S. Shaver, “The Dog Princess,” in

makes repeated reference to “fairy books,” “fairy magic,” and “Fairyland.”⁵¹ *Mandark* itself argues that “the old legends and fairy tales, so long discredited as mere childish entertainment by historians and similar writers, have more truth in them than most of the serious writings of the same writers.”⁵² Shaver’s stories depict a world shot through with monsters and magic both good and evil: a world of fairy tales.

The purpose of a fairy tale, as G.K. Chesterton put it, is to set limits to terror: “Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies, that these infinite enemies of man have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.”⁵³ In Neil Gaiman’s paraphrase of Chesterton, “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”⁵⁴ Dietmar Kamper, speaking in particular of the creation of visual art by the mentally ill, suggests a therapeutic purpose for creative productions, which form “protective screens set up against the traumatising violence of a naked reality. The phantasm covers over a trauma of fear and horror, and to a certain degree, takes its place. Reality is coded via the imagination.”⁵⁵ This is the personal function of Shaver’s storytelling and painting: having displaced his tormenting thoughts into external demons, his fiction and his art helped to enclose and control them within a narrative framework in which the world’s evils are comprehensible and conquerable.

CONSPIRACY AS THEODICY IN THE SHAVER MYSTERY

In Shaver’s system, the dero are not only responsible for invisible, subterranean tortures. They can also affect events on the surface of the earth as well as underneath it, and every disaster, tragedy, unexplained disappearance, mysterious voice, and any number of mental and physical disorders can be directly attributed to “dero tamper.” And the ur-tragedy that he sought to explain was the death of his brother, Taylor, in 1934. The dero conspiracy provided an explanation for the deaths of his brother, and later, his wife. These incidents led to Shaver’s hospitalization and started the series of events that led to his hospitalization.

The deaths of first Taylor Shaver and then Sophie Gurvitch represent crisis points in Shaver’s life. Organization theorist Karl Weick refers to crises of this sort as “cosmology episodes”: “A cosmology episode occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the

Rokfogo: The Mysterious Pre-Deluge Art of Richard S. Shaver, by Richard Toronto, vol. 2 (San Francisco, Calif.: Shavertron Press, 2014), 54–68. Toronto gives the title of “The Dog Princess” as “The Princess and the Pig,” but the content of the story is completely different to the published story of that title, and the title “The Dog Princess” appears on the typescript itself.

⁵¹ Richard S. Shaver, “The Dream Makers,” *Fantastic 7*, no. 7 (July 1958): passim.

⁵² Shaver, “Mandark,” Fall 1961, 423.

⁵³ G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen, 1909), 102–3, <http://archive.org/details/tremendous00chesuoft>.

⁵⁴ Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), vii.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Thomas Röske and Bettina Brand-Claussen, “Illustrations of Madness: Delusions, Machines and Art,” in *Air Loom Der Luft-Webstuhl Und Andere Gefährliche Beeinflussungsapparate = the Air Loom and Other Dangerous Influencing Machines*, ed. Thomas Röske and Bettina Brand-Claussen (Heidelberg: Das Wunderhorn, 2006), 19.

sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together.”⁵⁶ Left without the support and structure that his brother had provided, and displaced from the home life he had begun building with his wife, Shaver was left to reconstruct a worldview on his own. The structural gap of meaning-making was filled with voices, signals, messages, and feelings that he believed originated outside of his own body. The underground machines Shaver envisioned encode the traumas he experienced during his imprisonment and hospitalization, in particular the electroshock therapy to which he was likely subjected at Ionia.⁵⁷ For Shaver, conspiracy became theodicy: an explanation for the inexplicable pain he had experienced. But this conspiracy is infinitely expandable, and virtually any misfortune can be explained by “dero ray.” Shaver enthusiast Jim Wentworth’s book *Giants in the Earth*, which Palmer published in 1973, catalogs stories of inexplicable accidents, murderers who report hearing voices, and other grim phenomena; and early issues of Richard Toronto’s Shaver fanzine *Shavertron* carry numerous newspaper clippings about the same sort of thing, all with the implication that the dero are to blame.⁵⁸ Influential conspiracy author Bruce A. Walton, better known by his pseudonym Branton, got his start as a Shaver fan, publishing a bibliography of material on secret caverns that he began compiling while still a teenager.⁵⁹ Branton’s Shaverian stories of an underground alien base at Dulce, New Mexico have circulated in ufological and conspiracists circles online since the 1990s.⁶⁰ Ray Palmer’s biographer Fred Nadis draws a direct line from Shaver through Branton to the “reptilian” conspiracy of David Icke.⁶¹

Michael Barkun suggests that all conspiracy theories strive to impose a sense of order and meaning on the universe: “A conspiracist worldview implies a universe governed by design rather than randomness... Nothing happens by accident.”⁶² In some respects, conspiracist meaning-making is a religious exercise: William James summarized “the life of religion” as “the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.”⁶³ But Shaver’s conspiracy inverts the positive order envisioned by James: the hidden order is not good but evil, and must be resisted. Nevertheless, conspiracy gives purpose, and Shaver’s dero conspiracy gave him both an explanation for the inexplicable and a creative well from which to draw.

Shaver’s writing represented an attempt to reconnect with the world from which he had been displaced. In a 1946 article for the fanzine *Vampire*, which had been critical of his work, Shaver identified himself as having been “an stf [scientifiction] fan, much like yourself,” related his stories to those of H.P. Lovecraft (a highly respected author in 1940s fandom), and

⁵⁶ Karl E. Weick, “The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1993): 633, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2393339>. Weick speaks primarily of events that impact organizations, but applications of his theory, such as Naidu’s use of Weick to explore meaning-making amongst displaced persons in Zimbabwe, make it clear that cosmological episodes can affect both organizations and individuals. See Maheshvari Naidu, “Displaced Sense: Displacement, Religion and Sense-Making,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (2016): 104–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24805709>.

⁵⁷ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 103.

⁵⁸ Wentworth, *Giants in the Earth*; Richard Toronto, ed., *Shavertron: The Mimeograph Years, Issues 1-11* (San Francisco: Shavertron Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Bruce A. Walton, *A Guide to the Inner Earth* (Jane Lew, W.Va.: New Age Books, 1983).

⁶⁰ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 122–23.

⁶¹ Fred Nadis, *The Man from Mars: Ray Palmer’s Amazing Pulp Journey* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2013), 258–60.

⁶² Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 3.

⁶³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 61.

commented: “All this active fan opposition hurts like hell.”⁶⁴ But following Palmer’s departure from *Amazing*, his outlet for publishing vanished, and his displacement from science fiction fandom was complete. But this was not the end of his efforts to connect with the greater community, and his subsequent turn from writing to visual art constitutes a continued attempt at reconnection. He continued to seek interaction and community through his writing and art; in Toronto’s words, “He tried to interest everyone who wrote to him.”⁶⁵

From the depths of Shaver’s personal pain, he created stories, and later paintings. In this sense, he is not a mere conspiracy theorist, but rather a conspiracy artist. In *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane*, John MacGregor explores what we can learn from the artistic creations of the mentally ill. Like psychoanalysis, contemporary art seeks:

to enrich the worlds of the surface with the dark gold of humanity's inner depths... Having abandoned the strenuous attempt to reconcile himself to the demands and sacrifices of day-to-day existence in the world, the psychotic withdraws into the utter isolation of the self. Within that altered state of consciousness, for reasons that we understand no better than we understand any creativity, the psychotic begins to form images that, paradoxically, may be aimed, in part, at reestablishing contact with the outer world. The artist and the madman seem intent on building a bridge, each from his own standpoint, in the world or out of it, erecting a structure between the self and other, between the world and the mind, between the surface and the depth.⁶⁶

In his writing and his art, Richard S. Shaver explored those depths, and sought to communicate what he found there, and through that communication to reconnect with the world outside his own torments.

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⁶⁴ Richard S. Shaver, “Lovecraft and the Deros,” *Vampire*, no. 6 (June 1946): 14–15, <http://fanac.org/fanzines/Vampire/Vampire06-14.html?>

⁶⁵ Toronto, *War over Lemuria*, 228.

⁶⁶ John M. MacGregor, *The Discovery of the Art of the Insane* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 270.

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Quilting Monsters With Lacan

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Abstract: This article considers the way in which human beings are displaced into the category of the monster. Specifically, I apply psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's quilt of the human subject to two humans who were connected overtly to monstrosity (one to demons, the other to mythical monsters), in order to "monstrify" them. Lacan's depiction of a subject stitched into a three-layered structure of an ultimately unknowable reality (the Real), images (the Imaginary), and signification (the Symbolic), offers a psychoanalytic structure that explains the role of the monster in the creation of self and Other. Lacan's framework provides a way to compare three aspects that individuals who are displaced into the category of the monster share: the disturbance the body causes to the mind of the observer (the Real), the use of images to produce a sense of self aligned with order and normalcy (the Imaginary), and the use of symbols and binaries to designate the categories of human and monster (the Symbolic). By viewing these bodies through Lacan's registers, the viewer sees a body that 1) disturbs normalcy and violates the boundaries of the self, 2) is placed within the binaries that produce self and Other, human and monster, and 3) is subjected to methods whereby the monstrous element of the figure is excised, through violence of either a punitive or surgical nature, which has the dual feature of restoring the figure to the "proper" position in the human/monster binary as well as the male/female binary.

Keywords: Lacan, intersex, ambiguous genitalia, monster, taxonomy

The category of human designates a constellation of rights, duties, and prerogatives that attach to those who recognize one another as worthy of carrying them.

-Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*

In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's influential essay "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," he puts forward seven arguments regarding the monster. In Thesis I, he states that "the Monster's Body is a Cultural Body," that monsters are "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, a place."¹ Given this, how do we understand the monster when what is classified as monstrous differs within each culture? What is left to compare if the category itself is entirely contextual? Furthermore, in Thesis III Cohen contends that "the Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis" whose very existence challenges boundaries and definitions of identity.² How then does the category of the monstrous apply to the monster itself? To answer these questions, I turn to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's quilt of the human subject to provide a framework for Cohen's theses. Lacan's depiction of a subject stitched into a three-layered structure of an ultimately unknowable reality (the Real), images (the Imaginary), and signification (the Symbolic), offers a psychoanalytic structure that explains the role of the monster in the creation

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

of self and Other. Lacan's quilt will be used to examine how two humans, separated by 500 years, are nonetheless connected to what their society deemed monstrous in each of Lacan's registers.

The first, Antide Collas, was a 16th century French woman whose physical abnormality was used as evidence of witchcraft. Consorting with the Devil was thought to produce physical changes in one's body as well as power that could be used to bring death to fields and families. In addition, incest, infanticide, and cannibalism were thought to be practiced as part of the Witches' Sabbath. For these crimes that violated laws of nature and society, suspected witches such as Collas were put to death. The second case concerns a minor child (M.C.) born in Greenwich, South Carolina in 2010 with a rare disorder known as True Hermaphroditism (TH). The names connected to M.C.'s disorders of sexual development (DSD) are derived from Greek mythology (the multi-gendered Hermaphroditus and the multi-bodied Chimera) while M.C.'s treatment was based on the biblical assumption of sexual dimorphism, an approach that deems children born outside of male and female to be a monstrous aberration in need of correction.

Because these two bodies are separated in time and place, they provide the ground for a comparison of how bodies are stitched to each register of Lacan's quilt. The Real helps explain why Collas and M.C. caused distress to the physicians. In each case the observers experienced a breakdown in their preconceived form of bodies. I will use the Real to examine how boundaries of the body were crossed in the mind of the viewer: physical boundaries of the body and its orifices in the case of Collas; the boundary between male and female in the case of M.C. By using the Imaginary register, the two bodies expose the cultural worldview: a 16th century world dominated by God and the Devil and exemplified in the forces of order and disorder; the modern medical worldview that pathologizes diversity through classification of what is normal, and by implication, what is abnormal. Lacan's register of the Symbolic and his mechanism of the quilting point will be used to uncover how the oppositions of male and female, wife and woman, and human and inhuman, stitch these bodies to the category of the monster. Lacan's psychoanalytic framework provides a way to compare three aspects of the category of the monster: the disturbance the body causes to mind of the observer, the use of images and narratives to produce a sense of order and normalcy, and the use of symbols and binaries to designate the categories of human and monster.

ENCOUNTERING THE REAL

She had a hole beneath her navel, quite contrary to nature.

--Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches*

The bodies of Collas and M.C. troubled the authorities who investigated their abnormalities in different ways. M.C.'s inner and outer appearance failed to fit neatly into a male or female category while Collas' body was shaped in a way that implied, to the experts of her time, sex with demonic forces. Lacan's register of the Real sheds light on why these bodies disturbed their examiners.

Collas and M.C. had bodies that caused anxiety and a violent response. As such, each is an example of what Lacan would call an "encounter with the real."³ Lacan describes

³ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XI: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1973] 1981), 53.

experiencing the Real as being “something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*.”⁴ Julia Kristeva equates the Real with what she terms abjection: it is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”⁵ Collas’ and M.C.’s bodies were seen as ambiguous, failing to “respect borders” in different ways in the eyes of their examiners.

Collas’ body possessed an additional opening that was not only confusing to the medical men of her time, but also continues to be somewhat enigmatic.⁶ Two possibilities have been suggested. In Ernest Martin’s *Histoire des monstres* from 1879, he proposes that Collas had hermaphroditic genitals that were understood to be caused by sex with demons. Foucault’s account summarizes Martin’s version:

Toward the end of 1599 . . . a woman of Dôle, named Antide Collas, was accused of having a physical characteristic that, judging from the details contained in the trial documents, must have been similar to that of Marie le Marcis [a suspected homosexual who was later ruled to be a male hermaphrodite and thus allowed to have sex with women]. Doctors were called to undertake an examination. They established that the malformation of her sexual organs was the result of vile commerce with demons. . . . She was put to question and tortured. She resisted for some time but, overcome by her horrible suffering, eventually confessed.”⁷

Foucault, following Martin, assumes that Collas was killed for being a hermaphrodite. This seems unusual given that the leading medical experts of the time believed in natural causes for hermaphroditism. For example, in 1575 Ambroise Paré had published a popular text that put forward the theory that hermaphrodites were caused by the mother and father putting forward the exact same amount of seed during conception.⁸

An earlier account from Henry Boguet’s 16th century book *An Examen of Witches* suggests another possibility. Boguet reports that when examined, a hole was found below Collas’ navel. In the presence of witnesses, medical examiner Master Nicolas Milliere “thrust his probe deeply into it” whereupon Collas confessed that she permitted her demon, a creature named Lizabet, to have “sexual connexion with her through this hole, and her husband through the

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [1978] 1991), 164.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

⁶ Part of the confusion is due to the fact that one record refers to “Antide Colas” (Boguet) while the other to “Antide Collas” (Martin). Both accounts refer to a woman from Dôle who had a physical abnormality and was burned at the stake in the year 1599. Besides the spelling of her last name, the accounts differ in terms of the time of year (spring or fall) she was killed. It seems reasonable to me, as it does Sophie Duong-Iseler, to assume that Boguet’s report, written in the early 1600s, is closer to the truth than Ernest Martin’s 19th century version (see Duong-Iseler’s article “Lumières sur le prétendu ‘hermaphrodite’ Antide Collas (ou Colas) de Michel Foucault” in *Dix-septième siècle*, 2012/3 (No. 256), 545-556. doi : 10.3917/dss.123.0545). Given the similarities in the records, it seems reasonable to accept that Antide Colas is Antide Collas. However, since she is primarily known through Foucault’s lectures, I am using that misspelling.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 77.

⁸ Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L Pallister (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 26.

natural hole.”⁹ One contemporary scholar speculates that Collas had the rare condition of an umbilical fistula,¹⁰ which would no doubt cause great pain if one was to “probe deeply” into it, as Master Milliere was said to do.

The existence and use of Collas’ “second hole” for demonic sex made sense given the medieval understanding of the sexuality of witches. Witches, who were usually women, were lustful women that had turned to the Devil to gain new lovers. To gain this power, the pleasure-seeking witch was thought to engage in orgiastic, non-reproductive sex at the Witches’ Sabbath. The Devil himself was thought to be a shape-shifting being that could transform into a goat, ram, dog, cat, or even fowl, in order to have sex. The Devil’s penis was polymorphous: some said it was covered in barbed scales while others declared it was half flesh and half iron. Some said it was like a horn while others claimed it had two or three prongs, depending on how many orifices the Devil wanted to penetrate. Kristeva relates the abject not only to the mouth and anus, bodily sites of ambiguity, but also to pus and vomit, feces and menses, blood and the “sickly acrid smell of sweat.”¹¹ The abject nature of these fluids is echoed in the witches’ confession that the Devil’s semen was not only “ice-cold and painful,” but also “spoiled and rancid.”¹² The Devil’s multi-pronged phallus ravaged the body by polluting the boundaries of inside and outside with abject emissions.

Sex with the devil not only disobeyed the sanctioned sexual boundaries of the body by its use of non-reproductive orifices but also by violating the incest taboo. Incest was thought to be encouraged by Satan, who was said to have spread the rumor that “there was never a perfect sorcerer or enchanter who was not born from father and daughter, or mother and son.”¹³ These acts of bestiality, incest, anal, and oral sex, violated religious, societal, and sexual taboos. To her examiners, Collas’ body with its unnatural hole was an encounter with a body that had been made monstrous by the Devil in his perversity. Witch hunters not only searched for the mark of the Devil in forms such as a third nipple but also used instruments to prick a suspected witch’s body to find a numb spot, which was thought to provide physical proof of a contract with the Devil.

Collas’ body likewise demonstrated to her inquisitors an alliance with the Devil. In Cohen’s Thesis IV, “The Monster Dwells at the Gate of Difference,” he suggests that sexual difference is marked by making monstrous any woman outside the norm: “woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird Sister, Lilith.”¹⁴ Witches, a demonic form of the lustful woman, demonized the permeability of women’s bodies and sex outside of sanctioned heterosexuality. By its femaleness and physical form, Collas’ body disrupted these boundaries and signaled the presence of the monstrous.

⁹ Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches Drawn from Various Trials* (New York: Barnes & Noble, [1929] 1971), 32-33.

¹⁰ Sophie Duong-Iseler, “Lumières sur le prétendu ‘hermaphrodite’ Antide Collas (ou Colas) de Michel Foucault.”

¹¹ Kristeva, *Powers*, 3.

¹² Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 19.

¹³ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 206.

¹⁴ Cohen, “Monster,” 9.

Like Collas, M.C.'s body was perplexing to medical examiners.¹⁵ At birth, he displayed external signs of maleness and femaleness,¹⁶ so much so that in his records M.C. was sometimes referred to as male and sometimes as female. Born prematurely weighing less than two pounds, he had a "rather large" phallus, a vaginal opening, and scrotalized labia. Internal exploratory surgery revealed one testis and one ovotestis, a rare type of gonad that contains ovarian and testicular tissues, and while there was a vagina, there was no uterus. One doctor described the case as "confusing." Despite the fact that M.C. was thriving with "no specific concerns or problems," the doctor recommended "surgical correction"¹⁷ to remove ambiguity and create a male or female identity.

Kristeva argues that the anxiety produced by "what disturbs identity, system, order," by "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," give rise to fears and phobias, which in turn produce ideas of defilement and pollution, and culminate in religious taboos. Kristeva declares that these developments are based first and foremost on a sense of disgust. It is thus noteworthy to mention that in Suzanne Kessler's interviews with pediatric surgeons and endocrinologist of children with DSD, she sensed disgust. When they spoke about the genitalia of their patients, doctors used words such as "unsightly, offending, challenging, troublesome, offensive, disfiguring, embarrassing, deformed, derangements."¹⁸ These children were viewed as being "so grotesque, so pathetic, any medical procedure aimed at normalizing them would be morally justified."¹⁹ While there is no evidence M.C.'s doctors displayed signs of disgust, it is evident that they did view M.C.'s ambiguity as a problem that must be solved. This opinion is not unique to M.C.'s doctors and indeed in 2015, M.C.'s case was dismissed on the principle of immunity. In order for an official to violate M.C.'s rights, the individual must understand that what he or she is doing is in violation of those rights. Judge Dias explains this in the ruling: "Because we find that the alleged rights at issue in this case were not clearly established at the time of M.C.'s 2006 sex assignment surgery, we need not reach the question of whether alleged sufficient facts to show that the surgery violated his constitutional rights."²⁰

Charles Shepherdson's analysis of Lacan's concept of the Real is helpful in understanding why the affective dimension of the encounter with the Real is upsetting:

The disruptive character of the real, regarded as a dimension of experience that disturbs the order of representation, is not due to the real itself, as a prediscursive domain, but is due to the fact that it is unfamiliar. The real is traumatic because there has been no sufficient symbolic or imaginary network in place for representing it. It is traumatic, not in itself, but only in relation to the established order of representation.²¹

¹⁵ While M.C. was assigned a female identity, he identifies as male and he uses masculine pronouns.

¹⁶ *M.C. v. Aaronson et al.*, No. 2:13-cv-01303, D.S.C. filed May 14, 2013, 1-15. https://archive.org/stream/700989-crawfords-sue-doctors-and-state-social-workers/700989-crawfords-sue-doctors-and-state-social-workers_djvu.txt. Details provided here are from 12-13.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁸ Suzanne Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 36.

¹⁹ Alice D. Dreger, "Intersex and Human Rights: The Long View" in *Ethics and Intersex*, vol. 29 (Springer, 2006), 75.

²⁰ *M.C. v. Aaronson et al.* Appeal No. 13-2178. United States Court of Appeal. 13-2183 (Jan. 2015), 1-16. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCOURTS-ca4-13-02183/pdf/USCOURTS-ca4-13-02183-0.pdf>. See page 9 for Dias's ruling.

²¹ Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 34.

M.C.'s body, like other children's bodies with DSD, exceeds the symbolic categories of male and female that disturbs the observer's framework of duality of sexes while Collas' body ruptured the boundaries of inside and outside. Lacan described the Real as "what resists symbolization absolutely."²² In this way, the bodies of Collas and M.C. are a manifestation of Lacan's Real. Each cannot be fully represented within the limited symbolic network that fails to contain them. For Collas, female bodies with any aberration, were found to be disordered. To their examiners, these disordered bodies offered physical proof not only of the witches' societal disorder but also of a universe filled with spiritual agents of disorder. Collas' trial is sadly one of many in the history of witch trials. M.C.'s trial is a landmark case and as such shows the changing worldview of our times. Voices, from activists to academics, have challenged what and who defines what is "normal," and have criticized the medical world for its paternalism. These challenges in turn expand the symbolic framework of our times.

IMAGINARY MONSTERS

Unlike the Real, which can never be fully represented, the Imaginary and the Symbolic provide ways for reality to be experienced. In the following section, I describe the register of the Imaginary and its role in how examiners understood these two bodies as monstrous. I will show how the Imaginary functions in each culture to produce difference. Collas' case takes place within a medieval mindset that understood the world as a place ordered by God and disordered by the Devil. In M.C.'s case, sexual dimorphism is seen to be not only normal but the only acceptable state as a human. Sexual ambiguity has been treated as an unlivable condition in mythology and in medicine.

The Imaginary refers to the entire realm of images that structure a creature's relationship to itself and to its world. It is "that order of the subject's experience which is dominated by identification and duality."²³ Imaginary aspects of the self, and what is not one's self, work to separate self from the Other. Lacan's human subject as one who "come[s] into being only by way of the Other"²⁴ is based on an intersubjective aspect of identity: Lacan's subject understands its own self by way of other beings. This is evident in Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage which posits that the ego is formed because of the Socius, the internalized Other or "an intermediary," that provides "the ego's fundamental and hidden access route to other people."²⁵

Lacan expands the meaning of the Socius to include not just other people, but cultural discourse itself. Tim Dean's *Beyond Sexuality* opens with the role of Lacan's Other in the formation of the self: "it makes fully evident how the private, individual realm of subjectivity ultimately cannot be separated from the public realm of social life. ...Lacan theorizes the subject as coming into being only by way of the Other, a term he uses to designate not other persons or disenfranchised groups, but cultural systems of meaning."²⁶ It is the Imaginary that makes it

²² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, translated by John Forrester, edited by Jacques Alain-Miller (New York: W.W. Norton & Company [1975] 1991), 66.

²³ Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 157.

²⁴ Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.

²⁵ Henri Wallon, "The Role of the Other in the Consciousness of the Ego" in *The World of Henri Wallon*, ed. Gilbert Voyat, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Jason Aronson, 1984), 103.

²⁶ Dean, *Beyond*, 1.

“possible to discover correspondences and homologies”²⁷ thus unlocking the patterns that make up cultural discourse. By distinguishing oneself from others, order from disorder, male from female, one understands patterns of meaning and one’s place within them.

To understand how Collas’ examiners saw her body one must first grasp the cultural discourses surrounding monsters and female bodies. A change in the natural order of things was thought to be a sign from God or the Devil. This was not unusual since as far back as Saint Augustine people had interpreted the Latin root *monstro* in terms of its relation to the word *monstrum*, Latin for sign or omen. A monster foretold impending doom, God’s glory or his wrath, or God allowing demons to do their mischief. Jean Bodin, a French philosopher of the 16th century, expresses the popular view when he writes, “there is nothing done, either by demons or by witches, which is not done by a just judgment of God who permits it.”²⁸ This view accounted for “celestial monsters” such as comets, which scholars believed were signs from God. Similar reasoning is evident in Paré’s understanding of the monster of Ravenna. The child, born with a rare condition where one’s legs are fused together (sirenomelia or mermaid syndrome), was understood to be a sign of God’s displeasure:

From the time when Pope Julius II kindled so many misfortunes in Italy and when he waged war against King Louis XII (1512), which was followed by a bloody battle fought near Ravenna; just a little while afterwards, a monster was seen to be born having a horn in its head, two wings, and a single foot similar to that of a bird of prey.²⁹

In addition to having supernatural causes, Paré thought natural causes, such as a pregnant woman’s sight, touch, taste, or even imagination, could give rise to monsters. Monsters could be produced by the “foul and filthy food” mothers eat, or what they want to eat, or what a pregnant woman has looked at after she has conceived, or because “someone may have tossed something between their teats, such as a cherry, plum, frog, mouse, or other thing that can render infants monstrous.”³⁰ This view is evident in the opening to Paré’s *Monsters and marvels* where he responds to worries his readers have concerning the illustrations of monsters in his book. Paré, presuming his readers, fellow medical men, were worried that his work would be seen by pregnant women, writes to reassure them: “we will note in passing how dangerous it is to disturb a pregnant woman . . . and [...] show them [images of the] deformed and monstrous. For which I’m expecting someone to object to me that I therefore shouldn’t have inserted anything like this into my book on reproduction. But I will answer him in a word, that I do not write for women at all.”³¹

Paré’s audience was right to worry given that women were thought to be impressionable, credulous creatures whose weak bodily boundaries allowed ideas and images to deeply affect them. It made sense to Collas’ examiners that her “second hole” was a natural extension of her femaleness, a state that was naturally prone to physical penetration.³² Heinrich Kramer, author of

²⁷ Silverman, *The Subject*, 157.

²⁸ Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, 135.

²⁹ Paré, *Monsters*, 6.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

³¹ *Ibid*, 54.

³² According to Kramer, male witches were thought to engage in sacrilegious behavior but not in sexual congress with the Devil. See Hans Peter Broedel, *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 31.

the *Malleus Maleficarum*, informs his readers that the Devil attacks women not only because they are more credulous than men but also because they are “naturally prone to leak.” This leaky nature makes it “easier for individual spirits to make an impression upon them by giving them revelations.”³³ Like the embryo, which is described in Paré’s account as being “ready like soft wax to receive any form,” women’s child-like minds and leaky bodies are open to the Devil.³⁴

In the examination of M.C., the physical differences between male and female are also related to sight. The role of seeing plays a key role in DSD because the diagnosis is based on the *viewing* of genitalia. Endocrinologist Gönül Öçal, for example, defines a case of DSD as when the “genital appearance is abnormal and it is not possible to decide at first glance the sex of the infant.”³⁵ This “first glance” indicates the link between genitalia and the observer. Milton Diamond and Keith Sigmundson state that the treatment of children with DSD is based on two assumptions: 1) that individuals are “psychologically neutral at birth” and thus can be raised either male or female and 2) that healthy psychosexual development is dependent on the appearance of the genitals.³⁶ The second factor, the appearance of genitals, once again connects being seen as a monster to the root of the word *monstro*, “to show.”

The concern over one’s appearance to others is a key factor in the surgical policy of the American Academy of Pediatrics. In the “Consensus Statement on Management of Intersex Disorders” by *Pediatrics*, the authors of the statement report that “[i]t is generally felt that surgery is performed for cosmetics reason in the first year of life to relieve parental distress and improve attachment between child and the parents” despite the fact that “systemic evidence of this belief is lacking.”³⁷ Ian Aaronson, M.C.’s surgeon, agrees with this prevalent view: “It is the experience of most pediatric urologists and endocrinologists dealing with intersex problems at birth that most parents are disturbed by the appearance of genitalia and request that something be done as soon as possible so that their baby ‘looks normal.’”³⁸

³³ Maxwell Stuart, ed., *Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 75.

³⁴ Paré, *Monsters*, 54.

³⁵ Gönül Öçal, “Current Concepts in Disorders of Sexual Development,” *Journal of Clinical Research in Pediatric Endocrinology* 3, (Sept. 2011): 105. doi: 10.4274/jcrpe.v3i3.22

³⁶ Milton Diamond and Keith Sigmundson, “Sex Reassignment at Birth: Long-term Review and Clinical Implications” *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, vol. 151, (March 1997): 298-304.

³⁷ Peter A. Lee, Christopher P. Houk, S. Faisal Ahmed, Ieuan A. Hughes, “Consensus Statement on the Management of Intersex Disorders,” *Pediatrics* 118, no. 2 (Aug. 2006): e488-e500. doi: 10.1542/peds.2006-0738

³⁸ Ian A. Aaronson, “The Investigation and Management of the Infant with Ambiguous Genitalia: A Surgeon’s Perspective,” *Current Problems in Pediatrics* (July 2001): 168-194. 189. The view that the American Academy of Pediatrics reports and Aaronson endorses is not universally accepted. Contrary to the American Academy of Pediatrics who continue to endorse genital surgeries in “extreme cases,” meaning Prader IV or V. The Prader Scale, conceived by endocrinologist Andrea Prader, is a way to measure the amount of virilization present in the genitals. A Prader Scale of 1 is a “normal” female while 5 is a “normal” male. Through use of this scale, along with inspection of the genitals, classification of the organ occurs: “clinicians often describe an ambiguous penis/clitoris as an hypertrophied (enlarged clitoris or a micropenis), and use scientific instruments to measure and classify the anatomy in question” (Sharon E. Preves’s *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self*. [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005, 45.]). However, this view is not universally accepted. The authors of the Swiss Commission on Biomedical Ethics simply state “the parents should accept the child as it is” without exception (see “On the management of differences of sex development: Ethical issues relating to ‘intersexuality’” by Susanne Brauer, ed., Swiss National Advisory Commission on Biomedical Ethics, *Opinion No. 20/2012*, 9). While the authors of the Swiss statement acknowledge that parents do request surgery, they state that this is simply out of “initial feelings of helplessness” which one must help them to overcome (*Opinion*, 9). Neither can one assume that the parents are acting in the child’s best interest given that “it is the mark of this particular exceptional situation that it is not immediately clear, and often a matter of dispute, what will actually promote the child’s welfare” (*Opinion*, 9). The only thing that promotes the child’s welfare is no action at all: “all (non-trivial) sex assignment treatment decisions

Aaronson favors genital surgery, arguing that current surgical techniques “result in genital appearance that in both boys and girls is barely distinguishable from normal.”³⁹ A desire for a normal appearance, despite potential damage to nerves and pleasures of the flesh, is, for Aaronson, an obvious choice given the alternative. In an editorial entitled “When and How to Screen?,” Aaronson states what that alternative is: “We live in an age of increasing respect for minority rights. However, to advocate nonintervention in intersex infants until they are old enough to make up their own minds about what gender they want to be signifies a return to the ‘dark ages’ of intersex management, which has given rise to a host of psychological cripples.”⁴⁰ In her report entitled “Report to the UN Committee Against Torture,” Anne Tamar-Martin lists “depression, poor body image, dissociation, social anxiety, suicidal ideation, shame, self-loathing, difficulty with trust and intimacy, and post-traumatic stress disorder” as possible side effects from these surgeries. Despite this, surgery has been advocated on the basis of the theory that having a small penis or a large clitoris will cripple people psychologically because of visual aspects. Seeing oneself and being seen by others led influential sexologist John Money to assert that without an adequate penis, the child will not only suffer from envy or low morale but also, more fundamentally, a crisis of identity: “Money’s case-management philosophy assumes that while it may be difficult for an adult male to have a much smaller than average penis, it is very detrimental to the moral of the young boy to have a micropenis. In the former case, the male’s manliness might be at stake, but in the latter case, his essential maleness might be.”⁴¹

In the Imaginary, the division between self and others depends on seeing and being seen by others. The examiners of Collas and M.C. saw their bodies through lenses of difference: a difference that separated God-given order from the Devil’s disorder in the 16th century, and one that sees the difference between sexual dimorphism and sexual ambiguity as the line between a life that is livable or unlivable.

ADAM AND EVE, WOMAN AND WITCH, AND OTHER MYTHICAL CREATURES

I turn to the register of the Symbolic, the most important register for understanding human reality. According to Lacan, there is no other human reality, no “real world” that humans experience outside of the Symbolic: “One can only think of language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic.”⁴² There is only the “humanized, symbolized world” captured in the net that we can experience.⁴³ The Symbolic provides linguistic access to image and reality while making the registers of the Real and the Imaginary impossible to know without representational thought: “language isolates the subject from the Real, confining it forever to the realm of signification.”⁴⁴ Like a quilt hanging on a wall, the topmost layer, the Symbolic, is the only layer we experience.

which have irreversible consequences but can be deferred should not be taken until the person to be treated can decide for him/herself” (*Opinion*, 18).

³⁹ Ian A. Aaronson, “Editorial Comment: How and When to Screen?” *Infections in Urology* (July/August 1999): 117.

⁴⁰ Aaronson, “Editorial,” 117.

⁴¹ Dreger, “Intersex,” 75.

⁴² Lacan, *Book I*, 262.

⁴³ Lacan, *Book I*, 87.

⁴⁴ Silverman, *The Subject*, 166.

It is within the Symbolic that the human becomes a subject by understanding the world around it and finding its place therein. Lacan's "symbols" are not icons or figures but signifiers in the sense meant by Ferdinand de Saussure. That is, symbols are like chess pieces in that they are "differential elements, in themselves without meaning, which acquire value only in their mutual relations, and forming a closed order."⁴⁵ Lacan states, "the position of the subject is essentially characterized by its place in the symbolic world, in other words, in the world of speech."⁴⁶ The human subject comes to know itself by realizing patterns and connections in the symbolic world.

In 1485, just over a century before Collas' trial, Kramer conducted his first witch trial. Of the fifty people arrested, 48 were women. Part of the purpose of Kramer's book is to explain why so many witches are women. Kramer explains that the answer is in the nature of women themselves, a character inherited from Eve:

A woman is more given to fleshly lusts than a man, as is clear from her many acts of carnal filthiness. One notices this weakness in the way the first woman was moulded, because she was formed from a curved rib, that is, from a chest-rib, which is bent and [curves] as it were in the opposite direction from [that in] a man; and from this weakness one concludes that, since she is an unfinished animal, she is always being deceptive. All this is shown by the etymology of the word ["woman"] because *femina* is derived from *fe* [faith] and *minus* [less], since she always has less faith and keeps it [less].⁴⁷

The binary code that opposes male to female is evident in the author's description of Eve. Paired qualities such as lust and chastity, weak and strong, filthy and clean, finished and unfinished, and faithful and faithless, work to create an ideal male self that finds identity through the negative connotations of the female Other.

The female symbol is further divided in the duality of Eve and Mary: one woman is responsible not only for the fall of Man but also for the origin of death, while the other gives birth to the way to everlasting life. Stephen Greenblatt summarizes how medieval Christians understood this contrast:

Eve was pulled from the flesh of the old Adam: the New Adam was born from the flesh of Mary. Encountering the virgin Eve, the serpent's word crept into her ear; encountering the Virgin Mary, the Word of God had crept into her ear. Through Eve, the serpent's word built the edifice of death; through Mary, the Word of God built the fabric of life. The knot of disobedience that Eve had tied by her unbelief Mary opened by her belief and her obedience. Eve gave birth to sin: Mary gave birth to grace. *Eva* became *Ave*.⁴⁸

The link between Eve, death, and witches, is clear in Pope Innocent VIII's papal bull, the *Summis desiderantes*, where he explains the ways witches cause loss of life: witches "ruin and cause to perish the offspring of women, the foal of animals, the products of the earth, the grapes

⁴⁵ Lacan, *Book XI*, 279.

⁴⁶ Lacan, *Book I*, 80.

⁴⁷ Stuart, *Malleus*, 75.

⁴⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 128.

of vines, and the fruits of trees.”⁴⁹ The papal bull warns of the power witches have to hinder men from begetting by inhibiting ejaculation in men and causing impotence.

It is not only the forces of life and death that stand in contrast. It is also the physical actions of the Devil’s mass that were thought to be the inverse of the Christian mass. The Christian ritual produced *benefecium*, or benefit, while the Witches’s Sabbath produced *maleficium*, or harm. Whereas God’s power produced ever-lasting life, the Devil’s power produced death. In a church, people approached the altar by facing forward while at the Sabbath, witches were thought to walk backwards. Christians prayed with their hands pressed together facing up; witches were thought to hold their hands together while pointing downwards. From inverting crosses to riding on broomsticks backwards, witches’s actions were thought to negatively mirror the actions of good Christians.

The complex dualistic nature of the wife and witch, life and death, Eve and Mary, are most stark in the key event of religious and counter-religious Christian and Satanic rituals: the eating of flesh and drinking of blood. The witches’ imagined rites of infanticide and cannibalism mirror the sacrifice of Jesus and the Eucharistic ritual. In the following confession, a suspected witch explains how and why they obtain the blood of infants:

We entered the houses of our enemies at night, by doors and entranceways that were opened for us [by demons], and, while their fathers and mothers were sleeping, we picked up the tiny children and took them over the fire. There we pierced them under their nails with the needle, and then, putting our lips to the wounds, we sucked out as much blood as our mouths would hold. And I always swallowed part of it – sent it right into my stomach – and part of it I put aside in a little bottle or jar. From it I later made that unguent that we use for anointing our shameful parts when we want to be carried to the Sabbat.⁵⁰

It was thought that witches returned each night to prick the infants and suck blood from their prey. Like vampires who sucked life, witches were thought to perform acts that brought about death rather than mothers who suckled to give life. Once the victim was bled dry, witches would make grisly use of the corpse, as another confessed: “we secretly steal them from their graves and cook them in a cauldron until the whole flesh comes away from the bones and becomes a soup that can easily be drunk ... And with the liquid we fill a flask or skin. Whoever drinks from this, with the addition of a few other rituals, immediately acquires much knowledge.”⁵¹ The sanctity and power of Christ’s blood is demonstrated by its counter form in the blood of unbaptized babies. The power of blood that ran with original sin, shows the power of a body that had been redeemed by Christ’s blood. From their unproductive sexuality, to their destruction of crops and newborns, witches were aligned with death and its creators: Eve and the Devil. Conversely Christianity was associated with supernatural aspects of miraculous life such as the blood and body of the eucharist, the Virgin Mary, and God.

In the case of M.C.’s sex assignment, we see the way the Symbolic creates subject positions of male and female, rendering positions between these two poles impossible. In

⁴⁹ Pope Innocent VIII, Bull *Summis desiderantes* (1484), in Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/witches1.asp>

⁵⁰ Stephens, *Demon*, 278.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 200.

Cohen's Thesis V, "The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible," he writes, "the monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot – *must* not – be crossed."⁵² This aptly applies to the medical protocol that works to eliminate ambiguous bodies, allowing them to exist only after medical correction and subsequent conformity to the two-gender system. Judith Butler has argued that bodies are only allowed to "live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" while bodies that fall outside of this norm are considered "unthinkable, abject, unlivable."⁵³

The specific disorders that are associated with M.C.'s DSD, TH and chimerism, "place these patients outside the mainstream of society, relegating them to the realm of mythology," as Aaronson himself notes.⁵⁴ In the following paragraphs I examine the mythical and medical history of the names associated with M.C.'s condition, hermaphroditism and chimerism. The myths of the Hermaphroditus and the Chimera reflect the medical protocol that insists upon clear bodily boundaries that exist within either a male or female subject position.

The world that M.C. was born into in the early 2000s had very clear classifications for his body based on Theodore Albrecht Edwin Klebs' classification system. In 1876 Klebs published *Handbuch der Pathologischen Anatomie* which laid out a system that continues to be used today. Klebs divided hermaphrodites into "true" and "pseudo" hermaphrodites. True hermaphrodites had bodies that contained both ovaries and testes whereas bodies with only one kind of sexual gland, combined with ambiguous genitalia, were labeled female or male pseudo-hermaphroditism, depending on the gonad.

Hugh Hampson Young work on Klebs's taxonomy indicates the importance, and impossibility, of a true hermaphrodite's gonads: "In the classical sense a hermaphrodite is an individual who has the gonads and external genitalia of both sexes, and is capable of living as either a man or a woman. Such a person should be able to impregnate a female or be impregnated by a male, and indeed to impregnate itself. Modern writers are in accord that no such perfect hermaphrodite has been scientifically proven to have existed."⁵⁵ It is not surprising then that M.C., whose diagnosis is True Hermaphroditism, fails to meet Klebs's criteria of the hermaphrodite, given that no uterus is present in his body and thus he could not become pregnant.

Klebs's classification system of rare "true" hermaphrodites, and the more common "pseudo-hermaphrodite," has had profound effects, as Sharon Preves points out: "Klebs's classification system served to drastically decrease the number of people who were defined as hermaphrodites, and thus reinforced the newly popular thought that there were only two and only two sexes: female and male, with a very rare and unusual exception in the case of true hermaphroditism."⁵⁶ Later terminology used the umbrella term intersex, despite its negative connotation of being between states. Changing the term from intersex to someone who has a particular DSD reframes the difference of these bodies from a term that indicates an identity to a term that refers to a particular medical condition that a man or woman has. This works to subdivide people into smaller specific disorders and enforce a dualistic sex model.

⁵² Cohen, "Monster," 13.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi.

⁵⁴ I. A. Aaronson and A. J. Aaronson, "How Should we classify Intersex Disorders?," *Journal of Pediatric Urology* 5 (Oct. 2010): 443-6. 443. doi: 10.1016/j.jpuro.2010.04.008.

⁵⁵ Hugh Hampson Young, "Genital Abnormalities, Hermaphroditism and Related Adrenal Diseases" *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 38, no. 5 (1938): 524.

⁵⁶ Preves, "Intersex," 35.

Ovid's story of Hermaphroditus depicts living being the sexes as an abject state. Its characters are a masculine nymph, a feminine boy, and a hybrid body made of the two. The boy, Hermaphroditus, is the beautiful child of Hermes and Aphrodite. He possessed features of his mother and father, his name further signifying this even combination. The feminine aspects of the male youth are brought out by its contrast to an unconventional nymph, Salmacis. She is "not skilled for the chase, or used to flexing the bow, or effort of running."⁵⁷ Indeed, she is "the only Naiad not known by swift-footed Diana." Lazy and lustful, she is decidedly un-nymph-like.

Ovid begins his tale with Salmacis seeing Hermaphroditus, a beautiful, virginal 15-year-old. Salmacis presents herself, boldly suggesting marriage, or, if that is not possible, an afternoon of "stolen pleasure." Hermaphroditus, young and embarrassed, refuses her. She retreats, pretending to leave him alone while secretly watching him bathe. While observing the youth strip and swim, Salmacis is overcome with desire. Tearing off her clothes, she enters the water and captures him, snake-like, coiling around his struggling body. Unable to overcome him because they are evenly matched, Salmacis turns to the gods:

Grant this, you gods, that no day comes to part me from him, or him from me." Her prayer reached the gods. Now the entwined bodies of the two were joined together, and one form covered both. Just as when someone grafts a twig into the bark, they see both grow joined together, and develop as one, so when they were mated together in a close embrace, they were not two, but a two-fold form, so that they could not be called male or female.

Horried at what he has become, Hermaphroditus cries out his own plea to the gods: "Father and mother, grant this gift to your son, who bears both your names: whoever comes to these fountains as a man, let him leave them half a man, and weaken suddenly at the touch of these waters!" His parents, moved by this, contaminate the pool with a damaging drug.

In the myth of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, the blending of masculine and feminine, both in the bodies of the characters and in the hybrid creature that is produced, produces a narrative where only male and female positions are viable. The nymph is aggressive and lustful while the male god is feminine and chaste. Their battle is even-handed, too balanced. Even both of their cries, one offering a curse while the other offers a prayer, are answered. The dangers of the pool, where the two literally intertwine, becomes a place where the "enervating waters weaken, and soften the limbs they touch." The pool of Salmacis warns of what happens when there is an even mix of male and female. The myth presents a catastrophic situation that enforces a fear of gender ambiguity.

The second kind of DSD associated with TH is chimerism, a rare kind of DSD where a person has both XY and XX present. People with TH have a variety of possible chromosomal make-ups. TH individuals have the karyotype 46 XY ovotesticular DSD, 46 XX ovotesticular DSD or chromosomal ovotesticular DSD that is either 46XX/46XY (chimerism) or 45X/46XY (mosaic type).

The Chimera was a fire-breathing monster of Greek mythology. She was a child of monsters, whose parents exemplify Kristeva's understanding of the Real as a place where boundaries fail. The Chimera's father was a hybrid creature named Typhoeus, a giant with 100 serpent heads, while her mother, Echidna was half-woman and half-serpent. The couple had

⁵⁷ All quotes are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV, 317-345. Trans. A. S. Kline (Ann Arbor, MI: Border's Classes, 2004).

other children with monstrous bodies and too many heads: the flesh-eating, fifty-headed hound of hell, Cerberus, the two-headed hound Orthus, and the multi-headed hydra. Like her siblings, the monstrosity of Chimera's body is the result of too many heads, and too many bodies, in one.

Like the cursed Hermaphroditus, the Chimera was outside the realm of usual forms. Hesiod describes the Chimera as a three-part creature: "in her forepart she was a lion; in her hinderpart, a dragon; and in her middle, a goat, breathing forth a fearful blast of blazing fire."⁵⁸ She violated the boundaries of the land by terrorizing the countryside by ravaging herds and setting fire to fields, before the hero Bellerophon, mounted on the winged horse Pegasus, ended her life with his rain of arrows."⁵⁹ The Chimera was a creature whose body and actions did not respect the boundaries of species or form. Like Hermaphroditus, her body serves as a warning, a threat that "polices the borders of the possible."⁶⁰

Lacan's register of the Symbolic helps uncover the binary oppositions operating in the worlds that Collas and M.C. were born. In Collas' time, women were divided mythically into Mary and Eve, and thereby spiritually connected to the models of wife and witch and the powers of life and death. In M.C.'s time, sexual dimorphism is mythically and medically treated as fundamental to human life, while sexual ambiguity is aligned with the monstrous and the cursed.

THE QUILTING POINT

According to Lacan, there is no natural meaning to any aspect of the world. Instead, language gives meaning to the world by linking words (signifiers) to objects (signified). Lacan terms the mechanism for tying a given signifier to a signified a quilting point (*point de capiton*). He uses the term in order to conjure up the image of a button on a piece of furniture. In *The Psychoses*, he elaborates on why he uses this image: "The quilting point is the word *fear*, with all these trans-significant connotations. Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material."⁶¹ The quilting point is an exercise of power that keeps given signifiers stitched to corresponding signifieds through the power of fear.

The points connect the signifier to the signified in the subject's mind, quilting together this arbitrary reality. To be considered "normal," and indeed in order to be understood, a person must be able to join together the right signifier and signified out of a range of possible meanings. The connections between the stitches, the signifying chains that create patterns and meaning in one's world, form one's identity. Juliet Mitchell explains this intersubjective aspect of identity in the following way: "When the human baby learns to say 'me' and 'I' it is only acquiring these designations from someone and somewhere else, from the world which perceives and names it."⁶² In the cases of Collas and M.C., their bodies are stitched to points that designate monstrosity. This means that each is sutured to signifiers that denote disorder in bodies and

⁵⁸ Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*. Trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), line 304.

⁵⁹ Apollodorus, *Apollodorus, The Library, with an English Translation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 71.

⁶⁰ Cohen, "Monster," 12.

⁶¹ Lacan, *Book III*, 268.

⁶² Juliet Mitchell, "Introduction – I" in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, Trans. Jacqueline Rose. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 5.

society. Collas and M.C.'s bodies encounter the power, exerted by medical and/or religious authorities, that enforce these perceived laws of nature and society.

M.C.'s ambiguous body breaks the dualistic sexual system that pervades the Symbolic. Following protocol and popular practice that allow for only male or female bodies and subject position, M.C.'s doctors "cured" M.C. by eliminating the unacceptable aspect of his body. Male and female. Sally Gross, a theologian and self-described intersexed person, relates how the biblical verse "male and female He created them" has been used to argue for her inhumanity: "Gen. 1.27 states that from the beginning of creation, God made each given member of the human species either male or female, and not both or neither. Thus, determinate maleness or determinate femaleness is the mark, above all else, of what it is to be created human. [These verses] have been used to argue that an intersexed person such as me does not satisfy the biblical criterion of humanity."⁶³

The assertion that someone who is not male or female is somehow not human is underlined by the names associated with M.C. and the reasoning behind M.C.'s surgical team. The duality of sexes, a reality created not only by biblical understanding, but also by medical taxonomies and protocol, works to create a quilting point of human and inhuman that is based on sexual dimorphism.

In 1599 the cure for human monsters, at least for the society that contained them, was banishment. Paré tells the story of a 25-year-old conjoined twin who was driven out of town "because they said she could spoil the fruit of the pregnant women."⁶⁴ Because of this, Paré concludes, "It is not good that monsters should live among us."⁶⁵ Unlike monsters who must be banished, there is no cure for witches. There is only a cure for society. Kramer explains that witches "should not be committed to perpetual imprisonment as other heretics are, but must suffer the ultimate penalty, because of the temporal damages they inflict in various ways on human beings and beasts of burden."⁶⁶ Citing the biblical decree, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," Paré argued that witches must be killed for the safety of the community: "God has threatened by His law to exterminate peoples who permitted sorcerers and enchanterers to live."⁶⁷ Some thought that torture and death by burning would cause them to repent and thus be cured before their execution while others thought that if that didn't work, then it at least have the benefit of reducing their numbers.⁶⁸

Cohen suggests, like Lacan, that abjection is constitutional for the self. That is, we create a border between inside and outside by separating self from Other, thus forming an identity: "the monster is the abjected fragment that enables the formation of all kinds of identities."⁶⁹ In being designated as monsters, Collas and M.C. were stitched to the quilting points that separate the Devil from God, order from disorder, witch from wife, male from female. Medieval taxonomy connected deformity to the Devil while today it is connected to abnormality. In both cases, the taxonomy of the monster works to dehumanize the subject who is stitched to this category. These divisions create not only meaning and power but enforce social order and deprive people of their

⁶³ Sally Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture" *Theology & Sexuality* 11. (1999):, 70.
doi: 10.1177/135583589900601105

⁶⁴ Paré, *Monsters*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁶⁶ Kramer, *Malleus*, 102-3.

⁶⁷ Paré, *Monsters*, 89.

⁶⁸ Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of witches*, 174.

⁶⁹ Cohen, "Monster," 20.

humanity. These borders make subjectivity possible. Cohen asks, “Do monsters really exist?” and answers, “they must, for if they did not, how could we?”⁷⁰ Similarly in Cohen’s Thesis VII “The Monster Stands at the Threshold . . . of Becoming,” he states that monsters “ask us why we have created them.”⁷¹ M.C.’s body is made monstrous by the surgeries that not only that life outside of male and female is unthinkable, but also by the stitches that sutured him into an unwanted female position. Collas’ execution demonstrates not only the power of the quilting point, but also the pain of the stitches that bound her to the stake. Lacan’s quilt shows that we create monsters to establish difference, to construct boundaries between self and Other, inside and outside. We create monsters to create ourselves.

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⁷⁰ Cohen, “Monster,” 20.

⁷¹ Cohen, “Monster,” 20.

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Domestication in the Theater of the Monstrous: Reexamining Monster Theory

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Abstract: Scholarship on monstrosity has often focused on those beings that produce fear, terror, anxiety, and other forms of unease. However, it is clear from the semantic range of the term “monster” that the category encompasses beings who evoke a wide range of emotions. I suggest that scholars have largely displaced first-person accounts of the monstrous and those accounts which do not rely upon horror or anxiety, and I propose a three-category system to correct this displacement. These categories draw from Derrida’s notion of the domestication of the monster and Žižek’s notion of a “fantasy screen” for the monstrous. These categories encourage further research, both between categories of the monstrous and categories that would not typically fit within this descriptor.

Keywords: monster theory, Derrida, Žižek, comparison, Mothman

There are an enormous number of creatures that fit under the umbrella of the term “monster”: vampires, Slender Man, Cookie Monster, sightings of strange creatures in the sea,¹ Godzilla, and unicorns all fit within the category. However, in Monster Studies, the focus of analysis has primarily been those creatures that induce fear or disgust, and most often on those that rest comfortably within the pages of narratives and the frames of films. Yet this narrows the category to a rather small range of beings and obscures the various ways in which people interact with monstrosity.

One such exempted being is Tōfu-kozō, the Japanese *yokai* who offers tofu to passerby in the night. While the meaning of this monster is unclear – he could be an advertising mascot from the 18th century, a parody of a smallpox god, or a lost reference to a topical event² – he is never depicted as inducing fear or invoking disgust, “rather there is something a little lonely about him; he is often show walking behind people who don’t seem to want to talk with him.”³ Yet if there is no fear or disgust, much of our theory about monsters is of little use when applied to poor Tōfu-kozō. Rather, we need a more holistic approach to understand these creatures. Moreover, without such a holistic approach, we run the risk of assuming that fear and horror undergird every monster that we encounter.

This holistic approach is especially important when applying Monster Studies to a discipline in which monstrosity is as recurrent a topic as Religious Studies. What some consider angels in the service of God, Esther Hamori has addressed in her lectures and forthcoming book

¹ I am being deliberately vague here for reasons that will become apparent.

² Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 213.

³ *Ibid.*

as God's "entourage of monsters,"⁴ an entourage not unlike those that accompanied many Near Eastern divinities. While there could be objections to such an approach, it is far from unlikely that a discussion of monstrosity could illuminate beings such as the cherubim, which Ezekiel describes as having four faces, four wings, feet like a calf's, and "the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides."⁵ A similar problem is encountered when the boundaries of monstrosity "shift" under our feet: while Leviathan is quite clearly one of the most famous Biblical monsters, in Job "the first-person divine subject ('I,' 'me') merges with its third-person monstrous object ('it')."⁶ More simply, God and Leviathan blend together. The distinction between the divine and the monstrous becomes more problematic with lay comparative activities: when Mark Twain addressed the religious iconography of Benares in his *Following the Equator* as "a wild mob of nightmares" he was continuing a problematic tradition of characterizing religious art in India as filled with monsters.⁷ At the same time, one wonders if there might not be a more responsible and productive way of deploying the notion of monstrosity to evaluate "monster-gods,"⁸ such as Kali or the wrathful deities of Buddhism. Moreover, though Twain traveled thousands of miles to discover monstrous sacrality, scholars of the Middle Ages know he went too far: the Christian tradition is full of beings both sacred and monstrous. St. Christopher, both as giant Canaanite and dog-headed cynocephalus, springs to mind as a being who is both saint and monster, as do the Christian werewolves that Gerald of Wales writes of in his *Topographia Hibernica*.⁹ Even Jesus has been evaluated for his monstrous character.¹⁰ Thus, while this article might not seem particularly focused on religious issues, I believe that the theoretical construct detailed here might be especially suited for handling the complexity of monstrosity in the discipline.

To start this theoretical construction, I offer three categories of the monstrous/monster: "the Monster as Awe-ful," "the Monster as Dirt," and "the Monster as Self." In all of these categories, I take seriously the problematic notion of categorizing the monstrous around a set of phantom boxes that must be checked. Far more qualified predecessors in the field than I have pointed out that this is futile.¹¹ Rather, my thought in all three categories is informed by Žižek's

⁴ The language here is taken from an announcement of Hamori's lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary ("God's Monsters - Lecture by Dr. Esther Hamori at Fuller Theological Seminary," *Union Theological Seminary* (blog), accessed March 3, 2020, <https://utsnyc.edu/event/gods-monsters-lecture-by-dr-esther-hamori-at-fuller-theological-seminary/>), but similar language was also used at the two AAR panels I had the pleasure of attending at the 2018 and 2019 national meetings.

⁵ Ezekiel 1:6-8 (KJV)

⁶ "See Any expectation of *it* will be disappointed./One is overwhelmed even at the sight of *it*./There is no one fierce enough to rouse *it*./Who can take a stand before *me*?/Who can confront *me*? *I* will repay him!/Under all the heavens, *it* is *mine*." (Timothy Kandler Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* [New York; London: Routledge, 2002], 51; italics original).

⁷ See for instance Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁸ David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 118-119.

⁹ Leslie A. Sconduto, *Metamorphoses of the Werewolf: A Literary Study from Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (Jefferson, N.C.; London: McFarland & Company, 2008), 26-38.

¹⁰ Robert Mills, "Jesus as Monster," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

¹¹ Cohen points to the slippery nature of the monster's body, a body that is an "uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness: like the ghost of Hamlet, it introjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of 'pre-' into the sensory moment of 'post-,' binding one irrevocably to the other. The monster commands, 'Remember me': restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal

discussion of the monstrous, particularly how the monster should be conceived as a “a kind of fantasy screen where the multiplicity of meanings can appear and fight for hegemony.”¹² This approach foregrounds the space in which the monster appears rather than the signification of the monstrous figure. As a result, I pay careful attention to the “theater of the monstrous,” the environment in which monstrosity in each category seems to emerge and the different types of grotesque fruit that they bear.

All three of these categories are likewise informed by Derrida’s notion of monstrosity as domestication.¹³ While Derrida does not speak of monsters at length as compared to the other theorists treated here, he does propose that a monster is “that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized.... As soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it... to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster.”¹⁴

As suggested by the title, the notion of the domestication of the monstrous is an important one in this article, and I perceive each category of monstrosity as a mounting degree of domestication. This domestication is neither good nor bad, it simply places the monster within a different phantom screen (changing the viewing space, if you will). Likewise, this does not mean that these are necessarily sequential stages (i.e., that all monsters begin in the 1st and progress to the 3rd). While this may occur at times (e.g., I will be using the Mothman of Point Pleasant in my discussion of all the categories as it moves quite nicely through all three stages), there is ample evidence to suggest that new monsters can appear in each category without recourse to the others.

1ST- CATEGORY: THE MONSTER AS AWE-FUL

In contemporary culture, we are often told that monsters do not exist. This is frequently followed up with some variation of “but they do, and we are them.” This colloquialism is built on a two-fold assumption: 1) while people *used* to believe that creepy-crawly, oozy, winged, non-Euclidian, predatory things red-in-tooth-and-claw walked the world, we now know better. Instead, 2) humans beings were behind these creatures all along: they were – as the word implies – “created things” and we were the creators.¹⁵ However, if this were the case, I have to expect that we would stop *seeing* monsters. Contrary to this, enormous animals, strange fish, so-called “wild men,” and a host of stranger things yet that the average person would qualify as impossible continue to be seen with remarkable frequency for creatures that supposedly do not exist.

return” (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Preface,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996], ix). Foster similarly points out the essential “mutability” of *yokai* in his work (Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008]).

¹² Slavoj Žižek, “Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears,” *October* 58 (1991): 63.

¹³ While the word “domestication” could be interpreted in either a positive or negative light, in this case I intend it in a neutral register: it is simply a useful term to mark the movement of the monster from the fringes into the home. Neither “more” nor “less” domestication is desirable.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Points Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 386.

¹⁵ E.g., “Peel back the fur, the scales, the spikes, the slime, and beneath the monstrous hide, there *we* are, always and inevitably. This is because all monsters are human creations. They exist because we create or define them as such. We therefore owe them our care and attention” (Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel, “Introduction: ‘A Marvel of Monsters,’” in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory: Demonstrare, Volume One*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Marcus Hensel [Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018], x).

I am ultimately not interested in ruling one way or the other on the veridical content of these sightings. Instead, I am intrigued by the ways in which such sightings often appear to be “pre-monstrous.”¹⁶ That is, observers fail to ascribe the term “monster” to the being that they have sighted. These sightings appear to follow Derrida’s notion of monstrosity quite well, being both “not yet recognized” and “a composition or hybridization of already known species.”¹⁷

However, if these sightings are, at first, unrecognized as monstrous, then they can have no previous cultural formations around their appearance. Given this, the majority of our theory of monstrosity must be abandoned in such cases. These are not the “uncertain cultural bodies”¹⁸ or the “harbingers of category crisis”¹⁹ to which Cohen points, nor the ethnocentric bodies of Friedman’s Plinian races;²⁰ they cannot be constructs of “art-horror” because they have no cultural context to be registered as “impure” by a viewer²¹ nor can these monsters be “meaning machines”²² because their appearance has yet to be interpreted. There must be an irruption of the undefined to necessitate a later eruption of meaning.

I look towards the newspaper clippings of the 19th and 20th centuries for evidence of this sort of encounter.²³ Once more, I am not particularly interested in whether such creatures exist, but rather in what appear to be significant commonalities between observers’ descriptions.

These commonalities appear to be four-fold. First, following Derrida, there is a tendency among observers to describe their encounters in terms of hybridizations of already-known creatures. For example, one “G. Bachelor” describes his encounter with a creature that has “bulging blue eyes that were mild and liquid. Then there was a neck – no end of a neck – and it swayed with the wash of the waves... I’ve never seen anything like this *sea giraffe*.”²⁴ At the same time, this creature disappears below the surface of the ocean with “an odd little wail like a baby’s cry.”²⁵ Mr. Ershom, leading a party of four intrepid spelunkers, describes an encounter with a creature that roared “like an enraged bull,” was of “immense size” with a “long neck and the head of a horse without ears,” “jaws armed with long teeth,” and “a sort of flipper on each

¹⁶ See my fourth point below for a further elaboration of this trend.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Points* ..., 386.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Preface,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), ix.

¹⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6-7.

²⁰ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 26.

²¹ “I am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X, say Dracula, if and only if 1) I am in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming, etc.) which 2) has been caused by a) the thought: that Dracula is a possible being; and by the evaluative thoughts: that b) said Dracula has the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction and that c) said Dracula has the property of being impure, where 3) such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid the touch of things like Dracula” (Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 27).

²² Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

²³ More specifically, I favor articles in this analysis which quote the observations of those who had the encounter or that were first-person accounts reproduced in articles. These clippings needed to contain an attribution by the author of the monstrosity of the observed (e.g., the title includes an allusion to a monster) or the observed must later have been identified as a monster.

²⁴ “Makes Drawing of a Marine Monster,” *Upland Monitor*, November 20, 1913, p. 2. Italics mine.

²⁵ *Ibid*.

side like those of a seal or the wings of a bat.”²⁶ Matthew Strong in his letter to the *Bombay Gazette* similarly describes the sea creature that he encounters as having a head “not unlike that of a monstrous toad.”²⁷ Despite this amphibian appearance, it also has mammalian characteristics in its “coarse reddish hair [that] hung over the mouth, quite concealing it” and possible insectoid elements in the “eyeballs [that]... scintillated constantly” and were “covered with small alternate squares” of “burningly bright, copper hue.”²⁸ Despite both the captain of the ship and the newspaper declaring it a “sea-serpent,” the author instead notes that “the thing could not possibly have been a serpent; for, to raise so prodigious a length of neck above the surface a huge body below the surface was of course required.”²⁹ Or consider an encounter an English hunter had in Africa³⁰: his guides described the creature as “some sort of cross between a sea-serpent, a leopard, and a whale” while, upon seeing it, the hunter described it as “fourteen or fifteen feet long, head as big as that of a lioness but shaped or marked like a leopard, two long white fangs sticking down straight out of his upper jaw, back broad as a hippo, scaled like an armadillo, but colored and marked like a leopard, [with] a broad fin tail.”³¹ Hybridity, indeed!

Second, counter to Derrida, the responses to these encounters are not ubiquitously terrified. Rather there appears to be a strong mix of the kind of repulsion and attraction which Stephen Asma has written on.³² Viewers appear to feel fear and/or wonder at their encounter, such that I feel it necessary to label the emotion of this encounter as “awe.” For example, while the spelunkers seem to react with fear, “G. Bachelor” displays no fear of the creature and instead chooses to muse upon how it might have come to be.³³ Matthew Strong instead reports a confusing sense of both fear and wonder at the same time: “At first, I turned to call out to others to look on with me; but, before a cry could pass my lips, a second feeling of *selfish pleasure* that I alone saw that *fearful* thing seized me, and I turned my eyes again to the sea and kept them fixed there... I had been so absorbed in the *pleasing pain* of looking at the thing that I had quite forgotten the other people on board.”³⁴

Third, all of these encounters occur in spaces to which humankind is non-native. The deep jungle, open waters, the pitch dark of a cave – those “dark corners of the Earth” that Increase Mather claimed demons frequented. While for many these may be intuitively fearful situations, this cannot necessarily be said to be the common denominator: after all, there are groups of people who occupy all of these spaces to such an extent that suggesting humankind

²⁶ “Thrilling Time in a Dark Cave,” *The Bastrop Advertiser*, January 16, 1909, p. 5.

²⁷ Presumably, the use of the term “monstrous” here has to do with the size of the head rather than the head of a “monster toad.” “The Great Sea-Serpent,” *New York Times*, May 21, 1876, sec. p. 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Given the time frame, there is most certainly an imperial or colonial context that frames an English hunter encountering a monster in Africa. However, given the similarity of description between native guides and hunter (though, no doubt, coming from the hunter’s account overall) and the similarity of description between the hunter’s use of hybridity and the other texts surveyed, this colonial context does not appear to change overly the theater of the monstrous in this initial category (though it certainly would in the second and third).

³¹ “What Would St. George Do?,” *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, April 7, 1910, p. 6.

³² See for instance, Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) and “Monsters on the Brain: An Evolutionary Epistemology of Horror,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2014): 941–68.

³³ “I am inclined to think myself that the wreck of the Titanic has something to do with the presence of this strange creature in water where nothing of the kind has ever been noticed before. Is it making food of the dead bodies below?” (“Makes Drawing of a Marine Monster,” *Upland Monitor*, November 20, 1913, p. 2).

³⁴ “The Great Sea-Serpent,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1876, p. 7. Italics mine.

always fears these locales would be ethnocentric. Instead, these are the spaces in which movements and senses are meaningfully compromised: the very capacities that we use to interact with and navigate the world are inhibited.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly considering the Derrida material, *none of the viewers address their monster as a monster*. That is, while the authors of the articles make the attribution (“Makes Drawing of a Marine Monster. Second Officer of the Steamship *Corinthian* Describes Fifty-Foot Sea Serpent”; “Thrilling Time in Dark Cave. Members of Exploring Party Encounter Strange Beast Which Attacks Them. Like Prehistoric Monster”; “The Great Sea-Serpent. The Fabled Monster Reappears”; “What Would St. George Do? African Hunter Face to Face with Monster Unknown to This Day Scientists”), the witnesses only reflect on the perceived hybridity of the things which they saw. In fact, Matthew Strong, when told by the captain that they had seen the fabled “sea serpent,” rejected this categorization, instead saying “the thing could not possibly have been a serpent.”³⁵ Similarly, Mr. Ershom seems to reject monstrous attribution as well when he states, “Whether the animal seen by us was one of the prehistoric monsters, some of which, it is asserted, were seen in the far north last summer, is a puzzle to us.”³⁶

I now come to my linking narrative: the so-called Mothman of Point Pleasant. While the Mothman would later rise to fame in John Keel’s 1975 book *The Mothman Prophecies* (and opposite Richard Gere in the 2002 film of the same name), the first sighting of the Mothman was reported in the *Point Pleasant Register* on 11/16/1966 in the article “Couples See Man-Sized Bird...Creature...Something.”³⁷

Just like the encounters previously discussed, the first sighting of the Mothman conforms to the four traits laid out. The observers describe the object of their encounter by its marked hybridity: “It was a bird...or something. It definitely wasn’t a flying saucer.... It was like a man with wings... maybe what you would visualize as an angel.”³⁸ While the initial response of the observers is fear (“I’m a hard guy to scare...but last night I was for getting out of there”), this fear later gives way to wonder in the desire to find the creature again (“Are they going back out to look for the creature? ‘Yes,’ Mallette said, ‘this afternoon and again tonight.’”).³⁹ The encounter similarly occurred in the non-native spaces to which I referred previously: the “TNT area” referred to in the article is within the 3,655-acre McClintic Wildlife Management area, with 1,775 acres of that being mixed hardwood forest, in which the abandoned, unlit bunkers of the TNT area sit. The time of the encounter was listed at “about midnight.”⁴⁰ Finally, the observers reject the category of the monster for their encounter: “‘It was like a man with wings,’ Mallette said. ‘It wasn’t like anything you’d see on TV or in a monster movie.’”⁴¹ Similarly, “It was an animal but nothing like I’ve seen before.”⁴²

In this first category of monstrosity, then, the monster simply shows (*monstrare*) itself. There does not seem to be evidence to me of immediate attribution of cultural or social content, prodigious meaning, or internalized grave warnings or threats. Rather, our first response to the

³⁵ “The Great Sea-Serpent,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1876, p. 7.

³⁶ “Thrilling Time in a Dark Cave,” *The Bastrop Advertiser*, January 16, 1909, p. 5.

³⁷ “Couples See Man-Sized Bird...Creature...Something,” *Point Pleasant Register*, November 1966, p. 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.* Though not part of the original article, the label “monster” is swiftly applied to the creature, e.g., in Roger Bennett’s “Monster No Joke for Those Who Saw It,” *The Athens Messenger*, November 18, 1966, p. 1.

monstrous seems to me to be playful: a zoological “Rubik’s Cube” with an “aura of mystery”⁴³ presents itself, patterned with a confusing array of familiar colors in bewildering variety and the viewer sets about trying to make it conform to recognizable patterns or creatively imagines why it might not.

There are two benefits to this category. First, it opens the possibility of reassessing archival and first-person experiences of the monstrous in a new way, both those that are labeled as monstrous by the viewer and those that are not. For example, although the word “monster” is never used to describe the creatures later identified as cherubim in the first chapter of Ezekiel, I would argue that the same hybridity and awe can be seen in the passage as I have found in the newspaper articles above.

The second is more speculative. If the reaction to such encounters turns out to be relatively uniform across time periods and cultures, it would allow scholars to track which such encounters are coded as “monstrous” and which are not. Doing so would allow us to begin to develop theories on why such encounters might be coded as monstrous and how this changes temporally and culturally.

2ND- CATEGORY: THE MONSTER AS DIRT

The second category of monstrosity, The Monster as Dirt, is much more well-trod territory. It is these monsters that are most often represented in media of all ages and cultures, monsters that previous scholarship has rightly pointed out are representative of a society’s fears, dissonance, and undesired elements. These are the monsters of Cohen’s work, harbingers of category crisis molded from cultural phenomena that dwell at the gates of difference and police the boundaries of the possible.⁴⁴ They are the “skin shows” of Halberstam that reveal the “deviant sexuality and genderings”⁴⁵ of the modern Gothic monster; the alienation from Greco-Roman culture that produces the “monstrous races” in Friedman’s work⁴⁶; and the creatures that “structured the enslavement of African Americans, constructed notions of crime and deviance, and provided mental fodder for the culture wars of the contemporary period”⁴⁷ for Poole. In point of fact, the notion of monsters as representations of societal fears and discomforts is so widely known and has been so successful that it would be silly to attempt to revise the concept entirely.

Instead, I wish to offer two additional observations. First, while I believe it is useful to consider monsters as the products of culture, I find it even more useful to consider them products of dealing with dirt.⁴⁸ That is, monsters either analogously stand in for dirt or they symbolically

⁴³ Ruth Waterhouse, “Beowulf as Palimpsest,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 28.

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–25.

⁴⁵ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 4.

⁴⁶ See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ W. Scott Poole, *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), xvi.

⁴⁸ This is a reference to Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002). I am not the first to make this connection between Mary Douglas’ work and monstrosity. For instance, Cohen acknowledges his indebtedness in fn. 37 of his “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)”; Beal seems to be drawing on Douglas when he writes “They represent *the outside that has gotten inside*,

point towards dirt,⁴⁹ and I believe that the distinction between these two states is important. When monsters analogously stand in for dirt, we might consider them “bogeymen”; they warn, *monere*, by showing themselves. Here we might locate both Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, with intimations of the British fear of reverse colonization and loss of empire⁵⁰ and the perceived pollution of Jewish heritage,⁵¹ as well as Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (1992), where one of the most salient fears of the 90’s, HIV/AIDS, plays out in all its sexual, blood-drenched, intravenous glory.⁵² Similarly, we might add Lycaon’s lycanthropic transformation – a mask for the greatest Greek monster, the tyrant – from Plato⁵³ and Ovid⁵⁴; as well as the threat of “the homosexual” in Waggner’s film *The Wolf Man* (1941).⁵⁵

When monsters symbolically point towards dirt, we might consider them “prodigies”⁵⁶; they warn by pointing towards that which they represent. That is, there is nothing inherently threatening about the “Papal Ass” or the “Monk-Calf” discussed so extensively by Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon; rather they are symbols whose interpretation points to the fact that dirt has invaded God’s Church.⁵⁷ Similarly, the “winged monster” and colt with a man’s face of which Ambrose Paré writes, testify to the “wrath of God” at the war between Pope Julius II and King Louis XII and the war between the Florentines and the Pisans.⁵⁸

While the distinction between the two might at first seem unnecessary, it is an essential one for outlining this particular theater of the monstrous. Bogeymen are “mobile” dirt: they threaten to invade the nomic universe and defile it. Thus the primary emotion that they engender is fear: the presence of the monster suggests a possible upending of reality, a transformation of the safety and order of the “home” into danger and lawlessness.⁵⁹ Yet, this threat is also avoidable: the monster can be killed, evaded, or stymied, and any of these outcomes likely result

the beyond-the-pale that, much to our horror, has gotten into the pale” (Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 4; italics mine); and Carroll’s concept of “art-horror” relies upon the notion of “impurity” (Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* [New York: Routledge, 1990], 31-32).

⁴⁹ Alternatively, this could be thought of in Berger and Luckman’s concept of a nomic universe. In this case, monsters represent a threat to the nomic order of the universe, metaphorical manifestations of disorder meant to eradicate the desired, ordered state.

⁵⁰ See Stephen D. Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: ‘Dracula’ and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” *Victorian Studies* 33, no. 4 (1990): 621–45.

⁵¹ See especially Judith Halberstam, “Technologies of Monstrosity: Bram Stoker’s ‘Dracula,’” *Victorian Studies* 36, no. 3 (1993): 333–52; Jeffrey Weinstock, “Circumcising Dracula,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 12, no. 1 (45) (2001): 90–102; and Sara Libby Robinson, “Blood Will Tell: Anti-Semitism and Vampires in British Popular Culture, 1875–1914,” *GOLEM: Journal of Religion and Monsters* 3, no. 1 (2009): 16–27.

⁵² Frank Rich, “The New Blood Culture,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 1992, sec. 9.

⁵³ Plato, *Plato: “The Republic,”* ed. G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 279–80.

⁵⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1960), 8–11.

⁵⁵ Robert Spadoni, “Old Times in Werewolf of London,” *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 4 (2011): 3–20.

⁵⁶ From the Latin *prodigium* – a sign, portent, or omen.

⁵⁷ See for instance Arnold Davidson, “The Horror of Monsters,” in *The Boundaries of Humanity: Humans, Animals, Machines*, ed. James John Sheehan and Morton Sosna (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 37–40; Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Surekha Davies, “The Unlucky, the Bad and the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter Dendle (Burlington, N.Y.: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 49–75.

⁵⁸ Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels*, trans. Janis L. Pallister (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5–7.

⁵⁹ Here I am partially invoking Beal’s discussion of “at-homeness” (Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 4–5).

in a symbolic return to order.⁶⁰ The bogeyman also need not be a “known” thing: even when the dirt cannot be identified, the monster is still effective.⁶¹

Prodigies, on the other hand, invert many of the bogeyman elements. The prodigy has no mobility, because it requires none: the threat that the prodigy points to must have *already* invaded the nomic universe. If this were not the case, then the prodigy could not be identified as a signifier. Similarly, this means that the threat to the nomic order, the dirt, that the prodigy points to must always be a “known” thing. Given that the prodigy is both known and represents a realized threat to order, it is more difficult for a prodigy to engender fear; instead the prodigy most often invokes wonder.

In both cases, it must be remembered that the individual human reaction to dirt is not always overwhelming disgust and avoidance: presented with the same disorder, some will react with revulsion and horror while others will not be bothered. Douglas signals this range of individual human reaction to disorder when she notes, “There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” and that she is “personally rather tolerant of disorder.”⁶² Instead, individual human beings negotiate their identity through tension between a complete lack of dirt and being totally mired within it; what one’s society identifies as dirt informs but does not necessarily limit one’s individual human reaction. Thus, this identification of monsters with dirt does not preclude being aroused by or desiring the monster.⁶³ As Cohen suggests, the giant in medieval England, “...signifies those dangerous excesses of the flesh that the process of masculine embodiment produces in order to forbid; he functions at the same time to celebrate the pleasures of the body, to indulge in wine and food and sex.”⁶⁴

Finally, I turn to the Mothman of Point Pleasant once more as both an example of this model and an example of elision from the first category of monstrosity to the second. Picking up the story where we left off, the wider national press began to spread the original report, individuals within the area claimed to see the creature, and others came from far and wide to attempt to catch a glimpse of the phenomenon.⁶⁵ At this point, the “Bird... Creature... Something” has been sufficiently domesticated that it has garnered the title of “monster”⁶⁶ and acquired another mark of domestication as well: its name.⁶⁷ From here, the monster is interpreted as *both* a bogeyman and a prodigy by different groups. On the one hand, the Mothman can function as bogeyman, and folklorist Jan Brunvand recorded several anecdotal narratives in

⁶⁰ It is this return to order that the dying Quincy Morris points to when he remarks “‘Now God be thanked that all has not been in vain! See! the snow is not more stainless than her forehead! The curse has passed away!’” (Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. A. N. Wilson [Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], 377-78).

⁶¹ I am reminded of when I teach post-9/11 films how surprised many of my students are to see the connections between their favorite zombie films and terrorism. For more on this link, see Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), esp. chapter 7, “They Won’t Stay Dead: The Ghosts, Zombies, and Vampires of 9/11.”

⁶² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

⁶³ I would suggest that arousal is limited to 2nd and 3rd category monstrosity. Desire and arousal ultimately exist within a framework of anticipation. If one is unable to anticipate (per 1st category), one is unable to desire.

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.

⁶⁵ “Everyone was now seeing *Mothman* or the ‘Bird,’ or so it seemed. Sightings were reported in Mason, Lincoln, Logan, Kanawha, and Nicholas counties. People were traveling for hundreds of miles to sit in the cold TNT area all night, hoping to glimpse the creature” (John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* [New York: Tor Trade, 2013], 82).

⁶⁶ See footnote 42.

⁶⁷ The earliest reference I have found is Pat Siler, “Mason Countians Hunt ‘Moth Man,’” *Huntington Herald-Dispatch*, November 17, 1966.

which the Mothman supposedly dive-bombed the cars of teenagers parked in romantic, out-of-the-way spots or was formed from an accident in a chemical plant.⁶⁸ On the other hand, there are many who connect the Mothman with the Silver Bridge tragedy that occurred on December 15, 1967 in which 46 people were killed.⁶⁹ In this sense, the Mothman serves as a prodigy for the deaths that occurred after it was sighted.

The transition of the Mothman from the first to second category appears to me largely as a change of screens in the theater of the monstrous. While the initial sighting of “something” occurs in the non-native spaces previously discussed, the encounter with the Mothman that quickly becomes common is through a mediated social space: the newspaper. This brings crowds of people to attempt to have encounters with the creature and, based upon how often the newspapers of the time address the topic, creates conversations about the creature. Now, human beings are meaning-making machines, a conclusion that is foregone in Religious Studies and equally so in areas such as Semiotics, Cognitive Psychology, Linguistics, and so on. To frame this within the previous discussion, human beings appear to crave a nomic universe, a home where dirt, if not absent, is at least controllable. Given this, we can read the attempted encounters with the Mothman and the conversations surrounding the creature as a search that attempted to classify the being as part of the nomic universe or as the dirt that need necessarily be discarded from it. Regardless of whether it stands as bogeyman or prodigy, the theater of the monstrous for the second category is the non-native social spaces of a community, the outside of the ordered, nomic universe. This classification of the monster leads to further domestication, labeling and parsing the unknown so that our fear and wonder can be more tightly-controlled.⁷⁰

The benefits of this category are primarily comparative in nature. By contextualizing monsters specifically as manifestations of dirt and anomie, the category invites comparison between monstrous and non-monstrous topics. Rather than monsters simply being compared with other monsters, monstrosity can be integrated into discussions of such topics as ritual purity,

⁶⁸ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Baby Train: And Other Lusty Urban Legends* (New York; London: WW Norton & Company, 1993). 98-100. The first clearly indicates that the monster is a bogeyman for the dirt of premarital/underage sexual activity. Brunvand takes it as a modification of the “The Boyfriend’s Death” urban legend. In the latter, the notion of monsters being created by the technological hubris of humankind is not new either: consider Godzilla, the popular bogeyman for nuclear energy (see for instance Sean Rhoads and Brooke McCorkle, *Japan’s Green Monsters: Environmental Commentary in Kaiju Cinema* [Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2018]).

⁶⁹ For example, two of the most widely known writers on the subject, reporter John Keel and cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, suggest that there is a connection between the Silver Bridge disaster and the Mothman’s appearance. Keel (to my knowledge) never connects them directly, but his opening to the final chapter of *The Mothman Prophecies* is telling: “Thirteen months to the day (November 15, 1966-December 15, 1967) the Year of the Garuda came to an end. Like some evil specter of death, *Mothman* and the UFOs had focused national attention on quiet little Point Pleasant and lured scores of reporters and investigators like myself to the Ohio River valley. When the Silver Bridge died of old age many of these same reporters returned once again to the village to revisit old friends and to share the pain of that tragic Christmas” (John A. Keel, *The Mothman Prophecies* [New York: Tor Trade, 2013], 286). I might further suggest that the title invites such a connection: what are the “Prophecies” if not the supposed foreknowledge of the Silver Bridge disaster and its attendant predictions, and from where do they emerge if not the “Mothman”? Similarly, Loren Coleman in his book *Mothman: Evil Incarnate* connects the event and the creature in the first paragraph of his introduction: “*You do know about Mothman, don’t you?* This book assumes a basic familiarity with the large, mysterious, flying creature seen in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, in 1966-1967 – a remarkable series of events that culminated with the collapse of the Silver Bridge, which killed 46 people” (Loren Coleman, *Mothman: Evil Incarnate*, Kindle [New York: Cosimo Books, 2017], Introduction, location 51; italics author’s).

⁷⁰ This impulse to order is discussed in Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 9-10.

sexual proscriptions, and dietary laws (dirt) as well as religious values, norms, and social constructs (anomie). Effectively, we can begin asking questions such as “In what way is monstrosity like X?” where “X” need not have monstrous content.

These questions have already begun to be asked within the field, but they tend to be posed in an idle fashion or not to be taken farther than the initial comparison. For instance, in his seminal *Religion and Its Monsters*, Beal notes that “monsters bring on a limit experience that is akin in many respects to religious experience, an experience of being on the edge of certainty and security, drawn toward and repulsed by the *monstrum tremendum*.”⁷¹ To reconfigure using the above: In what way is monstrosity or an encounter with monstrosity like a religious/mystical experience? Not only would this question make for an interesting article or book, but it also broadens the context of the monster to allow it to inform more traditional categories in the field of Religious Studies (and potentially, other disciplines as well).

3RD- CATEGORY: THE MONSTER AS SELF

And yet, monsters need not be only strange oddities emerging from the water, dripping hybridity and brine, nor only the dirt that we attempt to discard, the anomic blips within the nomic universe that we crave. As David Gilmore argues, monsters are “sources of identification and awe as well as of horror, and they serve also as vehicles for the expiation of guilt as well as aggression.... We have to address this issue of dualism, of emotive ambivalence, in which the monster stands for both the victim and the victimizer.”⁷²

I would take this one step further: in the third category, The Monster as Self, we can do away with negative associations of the monster entirely. While awe and our search for “at-homeness” can account for many monsters, the fact is that we sometimes identify deeply with the monster; we open the door and invite them in for a spell. Here we might place the growing community of individuals who identify as “Therianthropes”⁷³ and “Otherkin”⁷⁴; the various individuals and societies around the globe that classify themselves as vampires, either “sanguinary” or “psychic”⁷⁵; and even Robin Morgan’s 1972 feminist poem which encouraged women to see themselves as the titular “Monster.”⁷⁶ Clearly, monsters can be on the inside looking out just as much as on the outside looking in. The theater of the monstrous in this last category is the *native* social spaces of a community and the thresholds that exist between subcommunities.

I argue that this kind of identification is embraced when domestication is great enough that the monster no longer constitutes or points to dirt entirely (or, in some cases, never did). This often comes about from a restructuring of the nomic universe.⁷⁷ No longer is the monster

⁷¹ Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, 195.

⁷² Gilmore, *Monsters*, 4-5.

⁷³ Venetia Robertson, “The Beast Within: Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 3 (2013): 7–30.

⁷⁴ Jay Johnston, “Vampirism, Lycanthropy, and Otherkin,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London; New York: Routledge, 2015), 412–23.

⁷⁵ Joseph P. Laycock, *Vampires Today: The Truth about Modern Vampirism* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2009).

⁷⁶ Robin Morgan, *Monster: Poems by Robin Morgan* (New York: Random House, 1972), 85-6.

⁷⁷ For example, the unicorn continues to be a popular monster in the contemporary period even though the dirt represented by the phallic horn has been all but forgotten. Similarly, I do not believe that members of the

entirely the Other or the Outsider: instead, the monster is a liminal figure, a liminality that allows it to slip between category distinctions like safe-unsafe, healthy-unhealthy, normal-abnormal, Self-Other, and so on.⁷⁸ Individuals or communities that seek to renegotiate their own social boundaries are thus able to identify with the liminal figure of the monster to accomplish this end. By adopting monstrous guise, individuals or communities give license to themselves and others to reformulate the way they are thought about, both personally and in relation to other socio-cultural structures. The hybridity of the monster becomes the hybridity of the group.

I return to the example of the Mothman of Point Pleasant to present two examples of this identification. The first example is a commodification of the monstrous: the town of Point Pleasant, WV has appropriated the Mothman as both an attraction and mascot of sorts. In 2001, the Point Pleasant Chamber of Commerce issued a Christmas ornament with a painted Mothman, an odd development given the “direct association between the Christmas-time collapse of the Silver Bridge and Mothman.”⁷⁹ This invocation of the monster in its prodigious role may have helped the community to “play” with the tragedy and achieve some measure of catharsis. It is equally possible that the town was seeking to preemptively capitalize on upcoming fame: *The Mothman Prophecies* (Pellington 2002) was released in January of the following year. Regardless of which (or both), the town quickly developed an association with its “resident” monster: the Point Pleasant “Annual Mothman Festival” began in 2002 and is still being held as of the time of this writing, the iconic 12 foot-tall statue of the creature (which interestingly enough looks nothing like the creature was described) by Bob Roach in 2003, and the Mothman Museum and Research Center opened in 2005. On some level, Mothman *is* Point Pleasant.

The second example is deeper than simple commodification. The Mothman has recently become one of the faces of the LGBTQ+ movement. In fact, a search on Google for “Mothman LGBTQ+” yields a deluge of monstrous images – well, sort of: there’s a “chibi” Mothman wrapped in a pride flag; a cartoon Mothman sharing a milkshake with the Jersey devil; an image of Mothman in a pink, white, and blue sweater that reads “Support Trans Kids;” a vinyl sticker/button produced on Etsy that reads simply “Mothman is Gay,” and many others. Commenting on this trend, John Paul Brammer writes that “Where I’m from, a small town in the middle of nowhere, the gay man was the bogeyman. He was constantly waiting to prey upon the hapless straights in their locker rooms, salivating at the prospect of converting them to the gay dark side with his bite.”⁸⁰ Brammer later draws a connection between his feelings of isolation

“worldwide mermaid community” (“Mermaid Magazine: About,” accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.mermaidmagazine.com/about/>) belong because they have an interest in being perceived “sexually or economically threatening” (Tara E. Pedersen, *Mermaids and the Production of Knowledge in Early Modern England* [Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015], 15). Likewise, many born with handicaps that would once have caused the likes of Ambrose Pare to brand them “monsters” or P. T. Barnum as “freaks” can justifiably anticipate that modern Americans will not think of or address them as either (see section VI of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* [New York: NYU Press, 1996], which addresses the relocation of the latter theme).

⁷⁸ For instance, one has to assume that when individuals wear T-shirts proudly proclaiming “I am a Mermaid” that they are not thinking of the eponymous creature in the horror film *The Mermaid: Lake of the Dead* (Podgaevsky and Fantina 2018). Rather, the monster is evincing this same kind of liminal slippage, in that it can simultaneously be both benevolent Self and threatening Other (likely, Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* [1989] has something to do with this).

⁷⁹ Loren Coleman, *Mothman: Evil Incarnate*, Kindle (New York: Cosimo Books, 2017), Chapter 6, location 500.

⁸⁰ John Paul Brammer, “How Did A Bunch Of Mythical Monsters Become Queer Icons?,” BuzzFeed News, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jpbrammer/how-did-a-bunch-of-mythical-monsters-become-queer-icons>.

and persecution and the treatment of various monsters. He goes on to suggest that queer people draw strength from these monstrous associations.

This strength is not acquired through a simple commodification of the monstrous but rather emerges out of the depiction of queer individuals in monstrous roles (and vice versa). The root of this monstrosity begins in gothic literature, a medium that frequently conjoins the homoerotic and the monstrous.⁸¹ Harry Benshoff notes that the threads of the homoerotic in gothic literature are woven into the fabric of horror films in America. These films often constructed their villains and monsters around queer archetypes and styled their protagonists as heteronormative couples. Thus, the monster queer is depicted as a threat to the heterosexual patriarchal continuance of society by threatening “proper” reproduction.⁸² This changes in the late 60s as “the signifier ‘monster’” splits into two opposing ideas: “a traditional one which continued to posit the monster as a threat to the moral order of society, and another which saw the monster becoming increasingly domesticated.”⁸³ Focusing on this latter idea, shows such as *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* offered positive familial representations, albeit couched within a more “traditional” family structure. This domestication was somewhat reversed in the 90s as increased visibility of queer communities and panic over HIV/AIDS resulted in increasing backlash from conservative religious circles.⁸⁴

On some level, the images of Mothman and other cryptids continue the domestication that the 60s introduced with *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*. First, many of the images or slogans place cryptids in committed, romantic relationships either with one another or with the creator (e.g., Mothman sharing a milkshake with the Jersey Devil, the Babadook and Pennywise the Clown holding hands or sharing a kiss, the slogan “Nessie is my girlfriend”) or as singular maternal figures (especially, the Flatwoods “Momster”). Inasmuch as the domestic space in America is constituted around a committed, romantic relationship and these domestic spaces are often coded as maternal, these images refigure this space as a queer one. In effect, it performs the same domestication the aforementioned shows did in the 60s without relying upon “traditional” family values and ideologies, relying on the liminality of monstrosity to queer these roles.

These cryptids also share in the non-threatening monstrosity that *The Munsters* and *The Addams Family* created. The overwhelming emotion that these images and slogans suggest (and if I am any indication, inspire) is happiness, a notable problem for theories of monsters that rely exclusively on fear and horror. Instead, these depictions represent *both* fear and wonder of Mothman as implicitly ridiculous and unwarranted. In turn, by identifying Mothman as queer, the fear and wonder that some people associate with members of the queer community becomes equally ridiculous and unwarranted. As an author for the site *Autostraddle*, “the world’s most

⁸¹ See for instance Christopher Craft, “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” *Representations*, no. 8 (1984): 107–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928560>; George E. Haggerty, *Queer Gothic* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006); William Hughes and Andrew Smith, eds., *Queering the Gothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁸² It is interesting to note that Frank Franzetta’s cover art for John Keel’s *The Mothman Prophecies* (1975) seems to have been influenced by this trend in horror films as well. In the painting, a lithe, butterfly-winged Mothman menaces an attractive, heterosexual couple. While one might expect that the “Mothman” would code male, the positioning of its legs is most often mirrored by female characters in Franzetta’s work (e.g., his artworks “From Dusk til Dawn,” “A Princess of Mars,” “At the Earth’s Core”) while male characters are depicted in poses that suggest action or stability (e.g., “Day of Wrath,” “Fire and Ice,” and “Dark Kingdom”).

⁸³ Harry Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 173.

⁸⁴ Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet*, 237–38.

popular lesbian website,”⁸⁵ writes, “there’s a subversion in taking something unknown and feared and making it gentle and protective. In taking that which is labeled monstrous and naming it lovable.”⁸⁶

This subversive liminality is not only located in the LGBTQ+ community’s reconfiguration of Mothman and other cryptids but in other “monstrous” communities as well. For example, Venetia Robertson notes that “as animal-humans, Therianthropes are living contradictions: their identity is fragmented and liminal, but this is exactly the point.”⁸⁷ It is this fragmentary and liminal nature that allows them to “construct their identities as direct descendants of other threshold dwellers: tribal shamans, magic-workers, and superhuman warriors, who fully embodied the power of animals in the mythical past.”⁸⁸ Joseph Laycock seems to signal this move as well, writing that vampire communities are not only busy renegotiating their own identities but in some cases also as “energy manipulators” rather than “parasites,” a process of liminal renegotiation that he compares to the autistic community’s “neurodiversity movement.”⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted to articulate a framework to understand three different types of monstrosity, particularly with regard to domestication and the theater of the monstrous. In the first category, The Monster as Awe-ful, I argued that individuals who see creatures later identified as monsters do not typify their encounters as monstrous (i.e., the encounter is premonstrous), even to the point of denying the attribution of others. Instead of monstrosity, they stress the hybridity of their encounter and the awe (fear and/or wonder) that they feel. This appears to be most frequently set within a physical space in which humankind is non-native (but not necessarily a fear-invoking space). The second category, The Monster as Dirt, takes place within the non-native social spaces of the community, and the monster functions as either an allegory for the ruin of the nomic universe (bogeyman) or a sign that said universe has already been compromised (prodigy). In the case of bogeymen, the key emotion is fear; in the case of prodigies, wonder.⁹⁰ The final category, The Monster as Self, takes place in the native social spaces of a community and the thresholds that exist between subcommunities. As monsters shed dirt (or are labeled as monsters apart from dirt) they figuratively approach the boundaries of the community. When the monster becomes the Self, these boundaries have become permeable enough that the monster can become part of the nomic universe. By identifying with the monster, those who might be excluded from the nomic universe (i.e., those perceived by the occupiers as “dirty” or “anomic”) can benefit from similarly permeable boundaries, allowing them to restructure their social identities and relationship to those understood as “normal” within the

⁸⁵ “What Is Autostraddle?,” Autostraddle, January 19, 2012, <https://www.autostraddle.com/about/>. Somewhat tellingly for the monstrous theme, this “About” page contains an image of a unicorn with a butch haircut and thick-frame glasses shaking hands with two humans wearing royal headwear.

⁸⁶ Sam Wall, “Nessie Is My Girlfriend: What Is It With Queer People and Cryptids?,” Autostraddle, May 24, 2018, <https://www.autostraddle.com/nessie-is-my-girlfriend-what-is-it-with-queer-people-and-cryptids-420335/>.

⁸⁷ Venetia Robertson, “The Beast Within: Anthrozoomorphic Identity and Alternative Spirituality in the Online Therianthropy Movement,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 16, no. 3 (2013): 24.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Joseph P. Laycock, *Vampires Today: The Truth about Modern Vampirism* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2009), 164.

⁹⁰ Once more, arousal could be a factor in either emotion.

universe. The monster is at this stage entirely domestic, allowing members of the community to organize their identity around the monster rather than in opposition to it.

In all three cases, I used the Mothman of Point Pleasant as both an example of each stage and to illustrate the way in which monsters could occupy all three categories. In the first category, the creature is simply a “something” spotted by four people in a pitch-black forest. As newspapers pick up the story, the creature slips from the non-native physical space of the forest into the non-native social space of a media firestorm. The creature is named (and thereby domesticated), and people attempt to force encounters with it. As the conversation around the Mothman grows, narratives begin to build: that the Mothman attacks the cars of necking teenagers (bogeyman) and that it was the prophetic herald of the Silver Bridge accident (prodigy). Decades later, the dirt of the incident has dissipated enough that the Point Pleasant community begins to celebrate the Mothman, and its (perhaps by now, his) fame reaches the point where the Mothman (along with several other “cryptids”) can be appropriated to “demonstrify” members of the LGBTQ+ community and construct domestic spaces as queer ones.

I think this is likely only the first step in a larger process of recognizing liminal monstrosity that theorists to this point have largely avoided. Acknowledging that monstrosity can not only engage fear and anxiety, but a wide variety of emotional responses, prevents researchers from leaping to conclusions about the content of the monstrous. And maybe, just maybe, it will cause someone to give Tōfu-kozō, that poor, lonely tofu boy, his moment in the spotlight.

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“So we’re just going to ignore the bear”: Imagining Religion at *Midsommar*

***Midsommar*. Written and directed by Ari Aster. B-Reel Films, 2019.**

“An idyllic retreat,” reads the IMDB description of the 2019 “folk horror” film *Midsommar*, “quickly devolves into an increasingly violent and bizarre competition at the hands of a pagan cult.” While we might question the usefulness of the word “cult,” that’s the bare bones of the plot. *Quickly*, however, rather overstates the case, and writer-director Ari Aster will never be convicted of working too much *in media res*. Indeed, *Midsommar* features one of the longest (and, arguably, least relevant) cold opens I can remember in a film of this type, something that signals the principal weaknesses of what could have been a very disturbing film. The reality, though, is that it’s simply too long to carry the story it wants to tell. Now, whether one considers *Midsommar* too long is, of course, a matter of taste. But, for me, it was a 100-minute movie that was close to 150 minutes in length—with the director’s cut adding yet another half-hour to that. Three main reasons account for this: (a) competing storylines; (b) self-indulgent filmmaking; and (c) unnecessary set dressing.

First, while we can certainly feel for Dani’s anguish at the sudden loss of her family, her constant insecurity about Christian’s feelings for her, and the ambivalence she endures from Christian’s friends, we don’t need to be constantly reminded of it throughout the film. Rather than supporting the main storyline, her story becomes a competing narrative that consistently gets in its way. Similarly, although the competition among the three American graduate students for Hälsingland as a thesis project implicates questions about how and why we study religion, it too vies unhelpfully for our attention. Next, with his penchant for lengthy atmospheric cinematography and drawn-out establishing sequences, Aster ignores what is arguably theater’s prime directive: show, don’t tell. While obviously intended to convey the strangeness of the Hälsingland community and their Midsommar festival, unfortunately these extended scenes telegraph most if not all of the major plot points. That is, by the time something horrific does take place—the elderly couple’s grotesque suicide, the highly ritualized mating sequence between Christian and Maja, or the burnt offering that concludes the film—we know exactly what’s going to happen, and our only choice is to watch or not.

Put differently, Aster might consider taking director’s notes from someone like Ridley Scott rather than Peter Jackson. And we know that he *can* do it. Two of the most effective sequences in the film, for example, are brief, vertical drone shots that Aster gradually inverts or shifts in ways that all but induce vertigo in the audience. These unsettling effects, however, are almost immediately muffled by Aster’s return to prolonged atmosphere and mood scenes. Finally, there’s Mark, one of the American grad students who have joined their friend Pelle in his native Sweden. Like an out-of-tune Greek chorus, his sole purpose in the film seems to be pointing out—either explicitly or implicitly, but at every opportunity—how strange things are at Hälsingland. In this, however, he’s simply a superfluous stereotype, a kind of inconsiderate Jar Jar Binks character whose presence onscreen says little more than, “Mesa Mark! Mesa culturally insensitive American!”

All these—an uncertain main story, self-indulgent filmmaking, and pointless set dressing—add up to an overwhelming sense that Aster doesn’t quite trust the intelligence of his audience, either to understand the generic conventions of the film, or to follow the story he’s

setting up if he doesn't lead them by the hand. That's the bad news, but it isn't to say that we can't glean something worthwhile from *Midsommar*.

While scholars of religion may not want to force the entire film on a class, a number of sequences do offer rich ground to explore pop culture examples of religious history, the religious imagination at work in real time, and the problems that often accompany researching less-than-conventional religions. Among other things, aspects of *Midsommar* could be used to consider how we conceptualize the sacred, how we memorialize revelation, and how we reinforce (or, in *Midsommar*'s case, enforce) distinctions between esoteric and exoteric knowledge. The grad student storyline opens up discussion of the phenomenological principle of *époché*, and how we study religions that are distinctly, and often uncomfortably, different from our own. A number of scenes could profitably explore the social construction of ritual, the communal participation in ritual events (cue Durkheim), and even the dynamics of new religious conversion. Finally, together with a film such as Robin Hardy's classic *The Wicker Man*, with which *Midsommar* will inevitably be compared (and to which we might usefully add recent films such as *The Ritual* and *Apostle*), it forces us to consider how we think about the religious imagination in terms of religion's dirty little secret—soteriological scapegoating through human sacrifice.

Consider just a few of these.

It's a basic principle of religious studies that *nothing is inherently sacred*, but becomes so only by agreement among the community that regards it as sacred. For the Hälsingland group, the hundreds of volumes of carefully guarded sacred texts are a living revelation of their most profound beliefs, and are communicated in an almost shamanic manner through a severely disabled young man named Ruben. When one of the American grad students asks about this, an old man explains that Ruben has been disabled "since birth. He draws, and we, the elders, interpret. You see, Josh, Ruben is unclouded by normal cognition. It makes him open to the Source." The community's process asks, who is more open to what William James called "the unseen order" than those who are not cumbered with mundane concerns? "What happens when Ruben... dies?" asks Josh. "Do you just wait for a baby that is... not clouded?" The elder smiles as though what he is about to say is the most natural thing in the world. "No, no, no. Ruben was a product of inbreeding. All of our oracles are the deliberate products of inbreeding." Though, earlier in the film, the visitors are told that the Hälsinglanders "respect the incest taboo," apparently, they respect it unless they don't, that is, unless it serves the sacred needs of the group.

Although some people may exchange one religious worldview for another on the basis of belief, the study of new religious movements over the last generation has demonstrated fairly conclusively that movement toward conversion as a function of shifting social ties is far more common. That is, intellectual assent to a particular suite of doctrinal positions is a second-order process, one that is preceded by growing attachment to a new group in the face of attenuating connection with an old group. At some point, converts may retroactively interpret their experience to conform to particular doctrines and teachings (this is common among converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint, for example, who only much later in their conversion careers speak in earnest about the so-called burning in the bosom), but the origins of conversion lie in the establishment of different social and personal relationships. Abandoned in the world by the murder-suicides of her family, and keenly aware that her boyfriend is only marginally committed to her, Dani finds what amounts to a new primary group, a new clan at Hälsingland. The important scene in this respect is not the dance competition for the honour of being May Queen, but Dani's earlier invitation to cook with the rest of the women in the

community. That is, they take an ordinary, mundane interest in her, offering her a place in their midst as they share the most routine of daily tasks. Rather than being a fifth wheel to the American grad students, she begins to feel as though there is a place she might belong.

Finally, as with any film that involves a non-traditional religious group, there is the issue of what I call “the good, moral, and decent fallacy” (which is also known as *approbation bias*). This is the mistaken belief that religions can be defined according to what we commonly consider goodness, morality, and decency, and that if they display qualities other than these, then they cannot be “real” religions. In those cases, and in what often amounts to an astonishing act of theological hubris, religions that are sufficiently different from the “norm” are regularly denigrated and dismissed as “false religion,” “religion gone wrong or done badly,” or, per IMDB’s conventional piety, a “violent,” bizarre,” “pagan cult.” The problem here is the enormous swath of religious history (and religious present) that one has to willfully ignore in order to maintain this position. “Religion is not nice,” declared the late Jonathan Z. Smith, and the sooner we realize this, the sooner we can get on with the business of understanding the religious imagination in more depth. Films such as *Midsommar* and its genre horror cousins provide excellent ground to problematize these terms and concepts, rather than simply accept them as part of cultural stock of knowledge on which the horror genre regularly draws.

One of the most difficult aspects of studying religious traditions different from our own is bracketing our own assumptions about those traditions in order to understand (or at least appreciate) them in terms of their own internal systems of meaning. What do the stages of life that Pelle describes mean for those raised as part of the Hälsingland community, and for whom they are as natural as traffic noise and intermittent cell service for the rest of us? When Josh asks the Hälsingland elder if he can photograph their sacred texts, the old man recoils in utter horror, appalled at the thought of such sacrilege. In an explicit nod to the perennial insider/outsider problem in religious studies, this asks the question of how someone who is not a part of the community can even pretend to understand the depth of feeling that group members have for their sacred traditions, beliefs, and artifacts. And how do we proceed if we can’t? Unfortunately, these questions notwithstanding, late modern culture’s profound religious illiteracy almost ensures that the religious communities depicted in such films as *Midsommar* will remain indexed under the label, “pagan cult.” More’s the pity, because, for all its shortcomings, there is much for us to learn at *Midsommar*.

And, yes, we’re just going to ignore the bear.

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REVIEWS

Basil Glynn, *The Mummy on Screen. Orientalism and Monstrosity in Horror Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 216 pp, cloth. \$115.00.

The volume under review studies Mummy movies in English-language cinema, with primary reference to their ways of figuring the monster as a non-Western Other. The focus of the volume is on the early twentieth century, with a structure predictably centering on the “classic” Universal film *The Mummy* (1932) and its much-derided sequels of the 1940s. Glynn brings to this research an extensive knowledge of early twentieth-century films featuring mummies, and in early chapters he convincingly charts a progression from using mummies as comedic bit players to depicting them as uncanny threats. Later chapters show how the Mummy of early and mid-century cinema develops into a racialized villain whose menace often manifests as category-crossing romance. In what follows, I adhere to Glynn’s practice of using capitalized “Mummy” for the horror monster and lowercase “mummy” for the historical artifact.

The book is composed of an extended Introduction followed by eight chapters. The Introduction (1–22) lays out the reasons for critical neglect of Mummy movies. The chief causes that Glynn identifies for this neglect are two pervasive perceptions. First, the Mummy character is stereotypically a mute and shuffling lummoX, so that he therefore appears semantically impoverished. Second, the Mummy is claimed to experience repetitive film deployments, so that he seems semantically static. Throughout the volume, Glynn conclusively shows that both of these are unfair assessments. In Chapter 3, “On the page and stage: The Mummy movie’s literary and theoretical influences” (41–59), Glynn contests another discourse potentially contributing to the Mummy’s neglect: the notion that this figure has no founding literary myth like those of Dracula or Frankenstein’s monster. As Glynn perceptively observes, this incomplete view ignores an extensive Mummy literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century but has nevertheless reinforced the impression that the Mummy is a less prestigious and cultured figure. In between these two arguments are a chapter framing what follows as an analysis of Mummy movie Orientalism (Chapter 1, “The creature’s features: Moulding the Mummy and the Mummy movie”) and a cursory sketch of Egyptian mummies and Western encounters with these (Chapter 2, “The Mutating Mummy: From ancient artefact to modern attraction”; 32–38).

Chapter 4, “Preserved on film: The silent Mummy of early cinema” (60–93), supplements Glynn’s excavation of influential Mummy literature with an investigation of silent Mummy films from the twentieth century’s first three decades. Primary attention is given to their film historical and Egyptological context. Glynn ably documents how films featuring mummies in this time frame participate in period tendencies towards slapstick and mix-up plots; humans dressed up as mummies, especially for criminal or romantic purposes, prove far more common than actual mummies or threatening Mummies. It is convincingly argued that the shift towards horror framings is likely prompted at least in part by the well-publicized excavation of Tutankahmun’s tomb (1923)

and the subsequent rise in media narratives attributing the deaths of certain prominent participants, especially Lord Carnarvon (1866–1923), to a putative “mummy’s curse.” One strange fact, noted repeatedly but also acknowledged to remain unexplained, is that this shift did *not* take place immediately but manifested after a downshift in Mummy movie production during the mid- to late-1920s.

Chapter 5, “*The Mummy* (1932): Overcoming the silent treatment” (98–118) is a detailed study of that Universal film’s context, narrative, and characterizations, some aspects of which are discussed below. Despite its title, Chapter 6, “The 1940s Mummy film: A decade of decay” (119–39) is in fact largely a *defense* of these movies against critics who would deny their significance for understanding the genre. As will be suggested below, this aesthetic dispute often overshadows other lights in which these films might have been explored. The final two chapters bring the Mummy film’s story up to the present day in concise and compelling fashion. Chapter 7, “Hammer’s resurrection of the Mummy: Sex and digs and wrap and roll,” discusses the most significant revival of Universal’s franchise, Hammer’s 1959 *The Mummy* and its sequels; for this chapter’s core hypothesis on the relevance of the Suez crisis to interpretation of these films, see immediately below. The concluding Chapter 8, “Wrapping up the Mummy: The last sixty years,” is extremely brief, part catalogue of Mummy films since ca. 1980 and part summarizing conclusion. The most significant new observation is that the most recent Mummy films, especially Universal’s 1999 and 2017 movies, both titled *The Mummy*, often depict the antagonist as a climatological “millennial menace” (160), in line with turn-of-the-century apocalyptic thinking and heightened anxiety around American Middle East imperialism.

The subtitle of *The Mummy on Screen*, its first chapter, and many formulations throughout promise a focus on the ways in which Mummy movies have participated in Orientalist tropes and structures. Such work is occasionally accomplished, but more rarely than the rich source material might have allowed. Successful analyses along these lines include viewing *The Mummy*’s (Universal, 1932) duality of Kharis and the Nubian as a sort of bifurcated Other corporeality (see esp. 114–17), in which each half encapsulates the threat and shortcomings White Europeans attributed to supposed “races” they encountered in colonial contexts. Arab “Easterners” like Kharis are imagined to be duplicitous, mysterious, and seductive of White women, but ultimately avoidant of physical confrontation with White men. The Black Nubian, on the other hand, is understood to be mute but brutal, a quintessential “savage” who is easily conquered and exploited. Similarly, Glynn’s reading (esp. 151–57) of Hammer’s *The Mummy* (1959) and its sequels as, in the wake of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s 1956 reclamation of the Suez Canal, grappling with the failures of British colonial domination. In this context, it becomes possible for the film to figure its archaeologists, Stephen Banning and his son John, not as noble empiricists but as obsessives illegitimately preoccupied with stripping Egypt of its possessions and sacrality.

Plenty of other images and scenes could have sparked similar analysis and contributed to a more coherent focus for the volume. As noted above, Chapter 6, on the 1940s Universal Mummy films, is curiously preoccupied with rescuing these sequels from critical neglect and even hostility. Once this argument has been made, though, one expects a further step that deploys the redeemed

films towards Glynn's ostensible aim, of analysis with attention to cinematic Orientalism. For example, a fascinating aspect of *The Mummy's Curse* (1944) is its setting in a backwoods Louisiana bayou and—though this goes strangely unnoted by Glynn—its featuring several highly racialized African American characters, particularly Napoleon Simpson's superstitious and subservient Goobie. Especially because this location shift represents a huge continuity break from the previous film, *The Mummy's Ghost* (also 1944; see p. 136), further study might explore how such locations and characters compensate for the Mummy's otherwise domesticizing move to American environs; to the present reviewer, they seem to provide an accessible "Orient" in the imagined filmgoer's backyard, complete with local "savages" against whom the dispassionate White archaeologist can be more effectively contrasted.

The volume occasionally veers into contextual information that also has the potential to contribute to such overall arguments but is more often utilized as mere trivia. For example, approximately three pages (128–31) are devoted to documenting Lon Chaney, Jr.'s (1906–73) dislike for the mummy character he played in *The Mummy's Tomb*, *The Mummy's Ghost*, and *The Mummy's Curse*, as well as the physical hardships he suffered by remaining in the uncomfortable mask and costume for long periods of time. This short section is preoccupied with reports—including from the actor himself—that Chaney was perpetually drinking from "a container (presumably a hip flask) of vodka tucked away somewhere in his mummy costume, with a long straw" (130). In the present context of the book, it is hardly clear why this anecdote is highlighted. But much could have been made of how Chaney's discourse recursively contributes to the "Orientalist" figurations on which the volume promises reflection. It is interesting to me, for example, that Chaney describes blazing heat (see the quote on p. 129) and intoxication as dominating his "Oriental" experience. This section, in other words, seems like a missed opportunity to reflect on ways in which actors, even in their seemingly naïve and grumbling press encounters, add fortifying dimensions to the Orientalist lenses adopted by the films in which they appear.

With these possibilities for further exploration in mind, one should stress that *The Mummy on Screen* is an exciting introduction to the potential for studies of Mummy cinema to contribute to both studies of Orientalism and studies of horror and monstrosity. Further research into this genre now has a strong foundation in Glynn's pioneering analyses and exhaustive collection of Mummy representations in film, theater, and beyond.

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Filippo Del Lucchese, *Monstrosity and Philosophy: Radical Otherness in Greek and Latin Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 432 pp, cloth. \$140.00.

Monstrosity and Philosophy is a genealogical reconstruction of the notion of monstrosity in Graeco-Roman philosophy. The aim of Del Lucchese's analysis is to chart the development of discourses of monstrosity from myths, and expose their diverse nature up to Neoplatonism (3rd century CE).

The book primarily examines the reception of the monstrous in the ancient world, and is constituted by a foreword and eight chapters, all dealing with the reception of the monstrous in the ancient world. The foreword lays out the key topic of the book: Del Lucchese sets out to "reconstruct the concept of monstrosity in classical thought from its earliest beginnings, through pre-Platonic and Attic philosophy to the Hellenistic systems, arriving finally at Neoplatonism" (2).

Chapter 1, "The Myth and the Logos," describes monstrosity in its mythical beginning. The emergence of Logos (rationality) is predicated on the all-encompassing nature of Myth (irrationality). The two concepts necessarily go hand in hand: there cannot be monstrosity without order in the same way there cannot be order without monstrosity. The interplay of order and monstrosity was to be appreciated in Greek tragedy, especially in Aeschylus. In Del Lucchese's view, therefore, monstrosity has an ambiguous status, trapped between the benign and the violent.

Chapter 2, "The Pre-Platonic Philosophers," describes the treatment of the monstrous by Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Democritus. Anaxagoras's materialist construal of the world stipulates that the monstrous does not originate from the action of a higher power, but it is inherent in everything. As a result, according to Anaxagoras, monstrosity is the result of how matter is moulded. Matter contains different quantities and proportions that can be shaped in diverse ways. Del Lucchese makes a very convincing case because it excludes the work of an outside agent and emphasizes the innate nature of monstrosity. Like Anaxagoras, Empedocles believes that the world is the result of the fight between two elements constantly at variance with each other, Strife or Discord and Friendship or Love. The incessant cyclical conflict between the two causes monsters to appear. Empedocles does not frown upon the cyclical nature of the world, but considers monstrosity to be necessary because, without it, the world would not exist. This second chapter ends by focussing on Democritus's philosophy. His philosophical system stands out because it is based on the notion of chance. Given the fact that the cosmos is not ruled by a general principle, then monstrosity is the result of chaos and difference. Thus, monstrosity is the result of the chance organization of the world.

Chapter 3, "Plato," describes the way monstrosity is constructed by the Athenian philosopher. The Platonic philosophical program constitutes a major challenge to the one articulated by his predecessors. In Plato's philosophy, monstrosity is unavoidably frowned upon because it is a threat to an orderly world. The demiurge creates and organizes a world dominated by the "beautiful" and the "good." The dialectic between the realm of the ideas and the world of the imperfect copies is stipulated: anything that is terrestrial is inherently disorderly and bad. And so must be monsters, the products of terrestrial existence.

Chapter 4, "Aristotle," concerns itself with the encyclopaedic thinking designed by the Stagirite, a system which was to influence Western philosophy for centuries. Aristotelianism's account of monstrosity is one that emphasises the ontology of monstrosity. If a *telos* ("aim") is to be appreciated in nature, then it means that the monstrous has a specific role to play in the make-up of the world itself. Unlike Platonism, in which there is an unbridgeable hiatus between forms and copies, Aristotelianism welcomes the presence of agents which work against the normal structure of the

world. On Aristotle's view, anything that runs counter to the pre-established order of the world shows its diversity and multiplicity. The acknowledgement of such variety is necessary because, otherwise, perfection and order would destroy the multifarious nature of the world.

Chapter 5, "Epicurus and Lucretius," analyzes the response of both philosophers to Aristotle and Plato. On account of the dualism between forms and copies and the teleological disposition of the world, Plato argues that monsters run counter to the pre-ordained structure of the cosmos. Aristotle echoes Plato by positing the exceptional and, at the same time, unavoidable nature of monsters, as they account for diversity in nature. Epicurus and Lucretius, instead, argue for the necessity of the monstrous. Monsters should not be thought of as the exception, but the norm, because such is the nature of the world. If one espouses Epicurean and Lucretian's arguments, then this means accepting the views previously held by Anaxagoras and Empedocles, which had emphasized the material and cyclical order of the world.

Chapter 6, "Stoicism," investigates Stoic attitude towards the monstrous. Stoicism negates the idea of transcendency and does so by ordering the universe according to degrees of perfection. This means that Stoicism reintroduced a new kind of teleology into the philosophical discourse, since allows for experiencing the imperfections of the world as a way to appreciate a divine plan. These very imperfections are necessary because this diversity of nature enables monstrosity to be understood. An important case, in this respect, is made by Pliny the Elder. He argues that the monstrous, the beautiful, and the good co-operate in allowing the divine to manifest in the world. Therefore, according to the Stoic argument, the monstrous is one of the facets of nature (and thus of a divine principle within the world).

In Chapter 7, "Scepticism," the author contends that Sceptic arguments question the nature of principles as important as justice or truth. Thus, such a position means that it is not possible to provide a conclusive definition of things, and it is not possible to define monstrosity because there is no clear definition of morally important concepts. Since judgements are not universal, opinions differ, and there is no such thing as an objective standard, then it is inevitable for humankind to embrace *epoché* ("suspense"). Since embracing *epoché* is the only option amidst the multifarious structure of the world, then the next step is the achievement of *ataraxia* ("quietude"). So, the argument goes, if there is no consensus on the way the world works, then one cannot establish the nature of monstrosity. A compelling example in this regard is the one of the comet. While we all know how the sun works, we are all amazed at the comet, because it is a portent of the gods.

Chapter 8, "Middle and Neoplatonism," concludes what has been a very careful and well-argued exposition. Del Lucchese prefaces his final chapter with a necessary caveat: finishing on a Neoplatonic note means acknowledging both the influence of Christianity and the wide range of African and Eastern elements that shaped a new take on the monstrous. Proclus's argument on the nature of evil makes Del Lucchese's exposition very compelling (248). Proclus contends that evil is not bad *per se* but it is necessary to cause the perfection of the Good. Ironically, the Good cannot exist without its contrary and, thus, evil is necessary for the development of the Good. Evil is a parasitic and inferior structure that creeps into the Good, in the same way that monstrosity creeps into the world to exist and show the diversity of nature. By doing so, the author acknowledges the inevitable presence of Good and Bad in the world.

Del Lucchese's argument is that the theorisation of the monstrous and otherness in the Graeco-Roman world needs tackling systematically, because every school has its own conception of what it means to be considered as Other and Monstrous. What he tries to outline is the diverse responses articulated by the Graeco-Roman world to what a monster is. The author has managed to make his

point cogently, because he has shown that the diverse treatment of monstrosity and otherness in Graeco-Roman thought coincides with our own: thinkers like Plato were suspicious of monsters, and philosophers like Pliny the Elder welcomed their presence.

If you are approaching teratology for the first time, I recommend perusing Filippo del Lucchese's text. He has written a real masterpiece for all those who intend to understand the wide range of philosophical approaches to defining the Monstrous, Otherness and Evil in the classical world. The text is well written and clearly organized to allow readers to follow the exposition of the author. Multidisciplinary scholars can benefit from *Monstrosity and Philosophy*; literary critics, classicists, philosophers, and scholars in religious studies can appreciate the diversity of the scholarship and the author's superb grasp of the subject matter. I can only hope that Del Lucchese will cover the interplay of the monstrous and philosophy from the Middle Ages up to now in future work.

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JOURNAL OF GODS AND MONSTERS, VOLUME 1, NUMBER 1

REVIEWS

***Into the Dark: "Pure."* Written and directed by Hannah Macpherson. Blumhouse Television, 2019.**

Currently in its second season, *Into the Dark* is a horror anthology series produced through a collaboration between Hulu and Blumhouse Television. From October 2018-September 2019, Hulu released a new film from the series each month, each one self-contained and centering on a different holiday. While all episodes of the *Into the Dark* series offer critical potential, the series finale, "Pure" (2019), is of particular interest to media and religion scholars. The film, directed by Hannah MacPherson, centers around a father-daughter purity retreat where the demon Lilith intervenes. "Pure" utilizes elements of myth and horror to critique American "purity culture," arguing for the dangers of patriarchal control and the liberating potential for feminist reclamations of mythological figures.

We follow the story of Shay (Jakhara Smith), a young woman attending her first purity retreat with her father, Kyle (Jim Klock), and half-sister, Jo (McKaley Miller), two people she had met only recently. While there, Shay becomes close with other retreat attendees Kellyann (Annalisa Cochrane) and the pastor's daughter, Lacey (Ciara Bravo). Both girls, along with Jo, have attended the retreat multiple times. On Shay's first night, the girls go out into the woods and perform a ritual to summon the demon Lilith. Unlike in past years, where Jo and Kellyann had performed the ritual by themselves, this time it is successful.

For the remainder of the film, Shay is plagued with images of Lilith and of the fathers at the retreat as demonic entities. Shay is fearful of these visions at first, but later comes to understand that Lilith is trying to protect her. The fathers begin to become more openly hostile and controlling towards their daughters. For example, Kellyann is shamed by her father for her weight and appearance, while Jo is kidnapped and mysteriously punished by the fathers for having sex. At the film's climax, Shay and the other girls stand up for themselves against their fathers. Lacey (the pastor's daughter) reveals that she's not as pure as her father thinks, having kissed a boy during the weekend. She suddenly steals a gun from her father and kills herself on stage, triggering Shay to beg Lilith to take over her body. While possessing Shay, Lilith takes control of the men and kills them all, burning down the retreat in the process. The film ends on a hopeful note as Shay, still possessed by Lilith, leads the remaining daughters through an open field.

The decision to center a purity retreat in the film works to strengthen the connection between purity culture and desire for patriarchal control. At the weekend long retreat, the girls are separated from their cell phones and isolated from the outside world. The father's ultimately have final control, and in this liminal space of the purity retreat the audience can more clearly witness the harmful effects of these father-daughter relationships. The experiences of Jo, Kellyann, and Lacey operate as examples of how patriarchal control is specifically damaging to young women's relationships, self-esteem, health, and potentially their very lives. Kellyann exercises excessively and suffers disordered eating due to her father's disparagement. Jo feels completely disconnected from her father, constantly in a struggle to seek love and approval while being angry and disappointed in him. Lacey operates as the greatest tragedy of the film, as living with her pastor father and participating in these retreats led her to tie her worth as a person to her sexual purity. When she kisses a boy, making her "impure," she sees herself as worthless, opting

to kill herself rather than live a life where she's "not good anymore" ("Pure," *Into the Dark* 2019).

In order to escape this control, the girls rewrite the myth of Lilith and call upon her to save them. Early on the girls witness a sermon where the leader of the retreat, Pastor Seth (Scott Porter) tells the story of Lilith, the Biblical Adam's first wife. Adam demands that Lilith submits to him, but she refuses and is caught having sex with an angel. For these misdeeds, God banishes Lilith to Hell, and makes Eve for Adam in her place. Jo, however, tells the girls that this is not true. Based on a book she read about Lilith, Adam lied about her promiscuity because he wanted control over her. Pastor's Seth version of the Lilith myth seems to refer to various Jewish texts from the Middle Ages (Gaines 2001), where Jo's version points to feminist reclamations of the archetype, particularly in practices of modern witchcraft (Valinete 2008). Through this feminist reclamation, Lilith become a symbol of independence, defiance, and female sexuality-- the ideal savior for the girls, standing for everything they are taught to deny and hate about themselves.

The fact that the girls summon Lilith through a ritual connects them to practices of witchcraft as well, calling to the archetypal symbol of the witch and the historic witch trials. Lilith's myth and calls to witchcraft could also operate as an attempt to connect the girls to similar stories of female struggle and oppression. The girls are able to see themselves as the descendants of Lilith, only the most recent in a long, connected history of women. Again the film points to the potential of feminist re-writing of myth and reclamation of characters to create a sense of community and connection to the past.

While I would largely consider the film a feminist critique, there are a few important places where it falls short. For example, Shay's selection as the "chosen one" has some problematic implications, especially in how it is presented. Once Shay announces to the group of men at the purity ball that she is not a virgin, Jo tells her that this must be the reason why the ritual worked. In the film's location within the horror genre, this explanation is a clear subversion of the virginal "Final Girl" archetype as most famously discussed by Carol Clover (1992). The "Final Girl's" innocence and purity is often positioned as the reason why she is able to survive and fight back against the monster (in addition to her otherwise masculine characteristics). While I do find it important that Shay's characterization rejects this trope, painting her power as stemming only from her sexual experience has similar implications. If what makes Shay different from the other girls is that she's had sex, this still supports the idea of sex as inherently transformative for women and as having an effect on their value as people. Making Shay the "non-virginal final girl" merely reverses where the value is placed.

With that being said, the film displays some ambiguity surrounding Shay's selection as the chosen one. While Jo's explanation of Shay as not being a virgin is the only explicit answer given, other parts of the film suggest different potential explanations. Shay receives visions of Lilith before she even becomes aware of her as an entity. It is also implied that Shay may have a connection to witchcraft, as she seems most excited to perform the ritual and finds the final piece for the offering. Throughout the story, shots of her dreaming coincide with images of nature, like the forest and woodland animals. It is also critical to acknowledge that Shay is the only person of color among the ritual attendees and the main cast of the film. Shay's characterization as a Black woman connected to magic and nature, especially in a primarily white cast, calls to mind tropes of the "magical negro" and the long history of Black women in horror cinema being portrayed as powerful magical beings, sinister or otherwise (Means Coleman 2011).

Whether watching the film for entertainment or analysis, "Pure" is a mixed bag. Like the other episodes of *Into the Dark*, "Pure" has a "B-movie" quality to it. The acting is acceptable

but nothing exceptionally interesting. The camera work is beautiful at times, especially in scenes of nature, but the use of pop music is often overbearing. As I've described here, the feminist critique of purity culture succeeds in some ways but fails in others. However, it is this exact complexity that makes "Pure" a fascinating site for potential academic inquiry. Scholars may be interested in comparing this contemporary film to earlier works that cover similar themes, such as *Saved!* (2004) or *Easy A* (2010) to investigate how critiques of purity culture have evolved over time and genre. Scholars may also be interested in further considering the film's portrayal of Lilith, and perhaps feminist reclamations of mythology in a broader sense. The film can also be viewed in comparison to other witchcraft narratives in cinema, like *The Craft* (1996) or the more recent *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-), which show witchcraft as both powerful and potentially dangerous, particularly when placed in conflict with the dominant social order. While perhaps not as financially profitable or well-known as other contemporary horror films, "Pure" is a complex project worth investigating further.

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