

“Lost Spirits”: Fear of Unstable Identities Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*

In the nineteenth century, at the height of its power, the British Empire should have had little to fear from outside threats, but its culture was still characterized by fear of the Other. Richard Marsh illustrates these prominent fears in his novel *The Beetle*. The eponymous monster does not introduce problems but rather exacerbates existing ones, surrounding itself with an atmosphere of fear that it creates by calling attention to the social problems that it represents. This atmosphere causes other characters to scrutinize each other, each seeing in everyone else the monstrous traits that are embodied by the Other. Caught up in trying to correct these social transgressions in each other, they are unable to respond properly to the actual external threat. Thus, it is not the Other itself but the fear of the Other among regular citizens that creates division among those citizens and destabilizes the Empire, putting it at risk by making it unable to respond properly to the threat the Other represents.

Around the time when *The Beetle* was published, definitions of race, gender, and sexuality were uncomfortably in flux. In her book *Queering the Color Line*, Siobhan Somerville points to the late nineteenth century as a highly significant period in the construction and codification of modern racial and sexual identities. In her introduction, she writes, “The emergence of ‘new’ sexual identities and the reconfiguration of racialized identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not singular ‘events’ through which those meanings were simply established once and for all” (Somerville 14), and the instability of those categories provoked a great deal of anxiety in U.S. and British societies. Implicit within the question of sexuality is the question of gender, for sexuality cannot be defined if gender is not defined as well. Victoria Margree points out about *The Beetle* that “one of the many anxieties with which the novel engages has to do with the changing nature of the social fabric of Britain”

(64). The Beetle is constructed around fears of uncodified and unstable definitions of race, gender, and sexuality, characterized as an ambiguously gendered Egyptian creature whose interactions with other characters are always sexually loaded.

The Beetle is only able to mesmerize characters who already break social rules in some way and when it does, it uses its control to exacerbate those characters' transgressions. Robert Holt is the first example of this – when he encounters the Beetle, he is emasculated by his descent from employment and financial comfort to homelessness and starvation. Holt is so weak that he experiences what feels like a “swoon of sleep” (Marsh 46), a particularly feminine way of expressing that he collapses from hunger and exhaustion. His decline in status is in some ways racial as well – Somerville points out that “In nineteenth-century scientific usage, it [race] might refer to groupings based variously on geography, religion, *class*, or color” (Somerville 21; emphasis added), indicating that Holt's financial troubles change his racial status as well as his class.

Before encountering the Beetle, Marjorie Lindon's racial status is unquestionable, but her gender performance is certainly not. She is first introduced when she is interrupting Sydney Atherton, telling him to “Stop, please!” (Marsh 91) when he begins confessing his love to her. Showing her interrupting a man immediately establishes her as masculine, especially because she is trying to stop Atherton from being emotional, inverting the typical script of a reasonable man trying to stop a hysterical woman. She knows Atherton well and rejects him because she knows that he has discovered his feelings “within the last half-hour” (Marsh 94) and says similar things “to every girl” (Marsh 121). Her rejection is an attempt to maintain her individuality and assert that she is not “every girl” and has her own feelings which she can direct towards whomever she pleases. Atherton responds by describing her as “elder-sisterly” (Marsh 95), denying her

individuality by implying that she is still a simple embodiment of an archetype and using this to complain that she acts towards him as though she has authority, like an older sister taking charge of her younger siblings, while not being attracted to him because of the non-sexual implications. Marjorie's masculine power is present in her interactions with her father as well. Although as her father he should hold authority over her, she constantly denies his wishes, pursuing a relationship with a man her father thinks is "devoid of decency, destitute of principle" (Marsh 158) and even caring for a strange man in her house without informing her father.

Marjorie appears to be all but an angel in the house, but although she has no problem asserting herself, other characters have no problem asserting their masculinity over her anyway because their only issue with her is her choice of romantic partner. When Atherton is upset that she rejects his proposal, his problem is not with her conduct, only with the fact that she loves another man. Although in the moment he chafes under her condescension, after they part his anger is directed entirely at Paul Lessingham – he even goes so far as to kill "The cat which [he] choose[s] to believe is Paul Lessingham's" (Marsh 137). When they see each other again, Atherton spends no time trying to convince Marjorie that she should love him, focusing instead on trying to convince her that she should not love Lessingham, pushing her to consider what she might not know about his "private life" (Marsh 121). This reveals that Atherton is entirely unconcerned with Marjorie's attempts to assert her autonomy and still believes that were Lessingham removed from the equation, she would automatically fall in love with him instead, even though her feelings towards Lessingham are independent of her feelings towards Atherton. Mr. Lindon thinks similarly – when Marjorie disrespects him, he attributes it to her attraction to Lessingham rather than thinking that her behavior might reflect her own thoughts. When she leaves the House with Lessingham rather than her father, Mr. Lindon is furious that "he's w-

walked off with her!” (Marsh 130), even though his anger is directed at Marjorie’s behavior, not Lessingham’s. He even suggests to Atherton that Marjorie “should marry you [Atherton]” (Marsh 160) to curb her rebelliousness. In spite of the fact that Marjorie’s masculine way of interacting with men reflects a desire to be seen as an individual, the men around her assume she acts as she does because of another man.

Marjorie and Holt both fall under the Beetle’s control when their gender transgressions (and in Holt’s case, his racial troubles) are most prominent. Holt comes across the Beetle when he is at his weakest, so desperate for shelter that he climbs in someone’s window. The Beetle does not have to go out of its way at all to find its first target; Holt’s unstable gender and racial identities lead him to come to the Beetle of his own volition. It is only once he tries to flee, though, that the Beetle takes control. “Shrieking like some lost spirit” (Marsh 52) as he runs to try to escape the Beetle’s house, Holt is at his most feminine and his least white. In “shrieking” he gives up all pretenses of middle-class white propriety and masculine stoicism. It is at this moment that the Beetle is able to exert its power, freezing Holt in place simply by telling him to “Keep still” (Marsh 52) because with his identity so unstable, Holt is a “lost spirit.” Marjorie’s gender is similarly insecure when she is taken by the Beetle. Having refused to stay home while Atherton took Holt to find the Beetle’s house and encouraged Atherton to leave her in pursuit of Holt after his flight from the house, Marjorie is now alone. She is already at her most masculine simply by daring to allow Atherton to leave her without anyone to protect her, and this is only magnified when, rather than waiting for him to send someone back for her, she decides to “expend my [her] curiosity – and occupy my [her] thoughts – in an examination of the bed” (Marsh 230). While normally a woman would be expected to do nothing but wait for a man,

Marjorie continues to investigate the house on her own, so of course it is at this moment that she discovers that the Beetle “had been hidden in the heap of rugs all the while” (Marsh 230).

When the Beetle mesmerizes people, not only does it take control of them when they are at their most socially transgressive, but it also forces them to heighten those transgressions when they are under its spell. In Holt’s case, it forces him to “Undress!” and then allows him to wear only a cloak because Holt’s clothing is already in terrible condition. Then, because of Holt’s weakened state, it forces him to spend a day immobile on the floor and at the end of the day, having thoroughly emasculated Hold, it penetrates his mouth with its fingers. After humiliating Holt, it commands him to “go through a window” (Marsh 63) because it already perceives Holt as “a thief” (Marsh 62), not allowing him to conform even to the most basic expectation of using a door to leave the house. Finally, when the Beetle leaves him lying near-dead in an inn, he is found without “an ounce of flesh on the whole of his body” (Marsh 303) because he was starving when he first encountered the Beetle and so was forced to continue to starve. The Beetle’s actions towards Marjorie seem to relate only to her gender because her transgressions are limited to her gender performance. It cuts her hair “off at the roots – so close to the head in one place that in one place the scalp itself has been cut” (Marsh 265) and then disguises her as a “young man” (Marsh 279) to smuggle her out of the house. Even in Lessingham’s case, the Beetle only magnifies his offense – he is not kidnapped until, rather than entering the café where he hears it singing, he tries to see it by “mov[ing] one of the lattice blinds a little aside” (Marsh 239), making what might otherwise be innocent observation into a more voyeuristic, intrusive act. From this, it is clear that the Beetle is not dangerous in itself; it only exacerbates the social transgressions of the British people it encounters.

Because Atherton has broken no social rules, the Beetle cannot mesmerize him; however, his fear after seeing it has a similar exacerbating effect to the Beetle's mesmerism, intensifying his attachment to gender roles and actually making him do more harm than both Marjorie and Holt. After he discovers that the Beetle is "a woman" who is "by no means old or ill-shaped" (Marsh 152), Atherton becomes very anxious about maintaining rigid gender roles. The Beetle's "by no means old or ill-shaped" body scares Atherton because "In the logic of biological determinism, the surface and interior of the individual body rather than its social characteristics, such as language, behavior, or clothing, became the primary sites of its meaning" (Somerville 23). He cannot understand that someone with such a lovely, womanly body can be so masculine and evil. Wanting to be sure that he is the only one who is sure that the Beetle is not a man, he asks Holt, "You are sure this thing of beauty was not a man?" and then, "Did you think it was a woman?" (Marsh 212). He does not want anyone else to know that he was nearly mesmerized by the Beetle, and he especially does not want anyone to know that a woman has been causing all of this trouble because of the implications that would have about womanhood. His anxiety does not affect the way he interacts with everyone, though; it only impacts the way he interacts with the characters who are directly involved with the Beetle.

When Atherton speaks with Holt about what happened to him and subsequently makes him take Atherton and Marjorie to the Beetle's house, it is clear that Atherton is trying to force Holt back into a masculine role. It is no accident that Atherton is a scientist – he is even less likely than any other man might be to trust Holt's "instinct" (Marsh 212) (which could also be called feminine intuition) and pushes him to be more sure of himself. When this fails, he decides that "the doctor's orders shall be ignored" (Marsh 213) and forces Holt to get out of bed and show him to the Beetle's house. This reflects the hypermasculine notion that it is possible to

overcome health problems by simply manning up and dealing with them. Even though he encountered Holt before he met the Beetle and, despite it being clear that Holt had just broken into Lessingham's house, let him go, Atherton's anxiety about gender forces him to intervene now and try to put Holt back in his proper, masculine place.

Just as he is with Holt, Atherton is very invested in ensuring that Marjorie is properly ladylike after his encounter with the naked Beetle because the Beetle has involved her by using her as bait to try to mesmerize Atherton (Marsh 143). He has no trouble betraying her confidence to her father, thinking that "all things considered, her father had probably as much right to be a sharer of his daughter's confidence as I had, even from the vantage of the screen" (Marsh 163) even though he has "not the faintest inkling of what was the actual purport of her visit" (Marsh 163). Regardless of the secrets Marjorie may be about to impart to him, Atherton believes that a daughter should be subservient to her father, so he allows Mr. Lindon to eavesdrop. Only when Marjorie points this out to Atherton does he realize that he has "borne my [his] share in playing her a very shabby trick" (Marsh 168), but even then, he blames Marjorie for not understanding his hint and leaving the room when he suggested it at the beginning of their conversation. Although he goes on to refuse to take Mr. Lindon's side entirely in the dispute that ensues, he also refers to Marjorie as "baggage" (Marsh 170), revealing that this refusal to engage is not out of any respect for her. Even though he tells Mr. Lindon to "Give the girl her head" (Marsh 171), it is not much later when he tries to get Lessingham to prove that "she [Marjorie] will be happy with you [Lessingham]" (Marsh 174), indicating by not trusting Marjorie's word that he does not believe that she should have "her head" at all.

Later, when Atherton goes to Marjorie's house, he abandons all pretense of respecting her individuality and actively tries to subdue her independence. He lies to her about not having

heard about the Beetle before, and goes so far as to ask her, “Do you suppose I live in an atmosphere of fairy tales?” (Marsh 211), implying that it is preposterous for her to suppose that he could have previous knowledge of what Holt told him, even though he actually does. When Marjorie says that she will accompany Atherton and Holt on their journey to find the Beetle’s house, Atherton first pretends to not know what she means, asking where she will go and then assumes that she does not want to be bothered with it, telling her that it “may prove a more tedious business than you [she] imagine[s]” (Marsh 213). Atherton is trying to put her in her place as the angel of the house by insinuating that she is not truly invested in the situation and only wants to go along for the ride. When they are at the Beetle’s house and he feels he needs to leave in pursuit of Holt, he wastes precious time agonizing over whether he can leave Marjorie alone. He only leaves after she suggests that he “send the first person you [he] meet[s]” (Marsh 227), but by this point, it is too late for him to catch up to Holt. His obsession with forcing femininity on Marjorie and stepping into the role of masculine protector makes him unable to catch Holt, losing his best way to find the Beetle at the same time as Marjorie is being kidnapped in his absence.

Dora Grayling is the first person who visits Atherton the day after he sees the Beetle naked, and although she is a very independent woman, a trait Atherton dislikes in Marjorie, Atherton has no problem with her masculine conduct. He even appreciates her boldness when she strikes another man off her dance card so that she can dance with him – Atherton “had not thought her capable of it” (Marsh 118), indicating that this is unusually assertive behavior for a woman, but he expresses no qualms, and joins her to “dance the waltz right through” (Marsh 118). His attraction to her masculine traits are even more apparent when he says, “she was in such a surprising passion – and it suited her!” (Marsh 119). When she visits him, his primary

interest is in her wealth, which is her most masculine trait. Grayling notably lacks a man in her life, being a single woman and speaking only of her “aunt” (Marsh 155) in terms of relatives. Atherton invites her over only for business, which is an unusual reason for a man to ask for the company of a young woman. Grayling thinks so, too – when Atherton assumes she wants a demonstration of the weapon she had told him she wanted to invest in, Grayling responds, “Is it possible that you imagine I came here to see something killed?” (Marsh 156), even though she had been promised a demonstration. When Atherton still fails to understand the most obvious reason for her visit, that she wishes to pursue a romantic relationship, she leaves. Atherton does not even “call a hansom” (Marsh 157) to take her to her destination – he allows her to leave alone and on foot, even though later on he is loath to leave Marjorie in a house by herself. Atherton’s behavior seems only to strengthen Grayling’s masculine independence.

When Mr. Lindon visits right after Grayling leaves, once again, Atherton does nothing to reinforce Victorian gender roles. In stark contrast with the way he treats Holt, trying to force him into a more masculine role, Atherton condescends to Mr. Lindon as a man might to a hysterical woman (just as Marjorie did to Atherton at the ball). Whenever Mr. Lindon asks a question, regardless of what Atherton may want to reply, he gives only neutral answers or answers that Mr. Lindon wants to hear. He says that he only knows “What all the world knows” (Marsh 158) of Lessingham, even though he knows more than that by this point. When Mr. Lindon asks how Atherton thinks Marjorie responded to being forbidden from seeing Lessingham, Atherton guesses that “She promised to obey you [Mr. Lindon], I make no doubt” (Marsh 159), even though he knows that this would be completely uncharacteristic of Marjorie. He only refuses Mr. Lindon when he suggests that Atherton marry Marjorie, denying him the ability to choose a husband for his daughter, making him fail even more as a father and a

masculine figure. Finally, Atherton, however reluctantly, allows Mr. Lindon to hide behind a screen when Marjorie arrives. If confrontation is masculine, this dramatic avoidance of conflict is decidedly feminine, and Atherton does nothing to prevent it.

Centering primarily around members of Parliament and their closest social circles, the setting of *The Beetle* indicates its events' significance in the wider context of the British Empire. Because of its characters' prominence, "what is at stake is no less than British sovereignty itself" (Margree 68). Failures of the characters involved point to possible failures of real Parliamentary figures and their associates and put the entire nation at risk. The Beetle is designed to invade, but not to have a permanent effect. While Marjorie is certainly impacted by the trauma she endured under its control, she is no longer a danger to anyone else. Therefore, although the Other does represent a threat, the true danger is in the inadequacy of the characters' response to it. The Beetle is never truly defeated – although the temple of the Children of Isis is destroyed, the Beetle is not found. Its survival reveals Marsh's central thesis: the true threat represented in fear of an Other is that fear itself.

Works Cited

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