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Fear of the Colonized Other in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

FEAR OF THE COLONIZED OTHER IN RICHARD MARSH'S *THE BEETLE*

by

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A Thesis
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of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

FEAR OF THE COLONIZED OTHER IN RICHARD MARSH'S *THE BEETLE*

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This thesis argues Richard Marsh's Victorian novel *The Beetle* offers a critique of British colonial practices through the reverse colonization experiences had by British characters in the novel. Intrusive, exploitative actions perpetrated by the British subjects in the novel invite reciprocal mental and physical invasions from the female colonized subject. These encounters serve as metaphors for British imperialism, and the fear and loathing for the colonized subject felt by the British characters reveals anxiety felt by Victorian England regarding colonial subjects. The monstrous acts of the colonized subject mirror the exploitation of British imperialism, which ultimately critiques the practice.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| ABSTRACT | ii |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| II. METHODOLOGY | 4 |
| <i>Fin de siècle</i> Monster Egypt History Reverse Colonization | |
| III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS | 11 |
| IV. CONCLUSION | 30 |
| WORKS CITED | 34 |

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Richard Marsh's 1897 novel *The Beetle* is a product of the *fin de siècle*. The *fin de siècle*—or end of the century—novel often deals with society's anxiety surrounding the turn of the century. Two major concerns explored in *fin de siècle* literature are colonialism and gender/sexual identity: "on the legacies of imperialism, on the constructions of gender, sexuality, and self—the *fin de siècle* has come to be regarded as a critical historical matrix" (Ledger and Luckhurst xx). Colonial conquests have occurred for centuries, often motivated by different causes. However, it is safe to say the result of all colonial conquests is the same: exploitation. While colonial exploitation came in many forms, the type dealt with most often in *The Beetle* is that of sexual exploitation. Contrasting views of gender performance and sexuality prevailed in the colonies: on one hand, sex was considered something that needed to be managed and controlled because of the depraved view of "native" sexuality. On the other hand, the "Orient" was a place of sexual fantasy (Levine 136). This contradiction made sexual exploitation possible on two fronts: first, any type of native sexuality different from socially acceptable British sexuality, including different gender performance, elicited disdain, fear, and regulation from colonizing powers. Second, natives—especially women—suffered at the hands of British colonizers seeking to fulfill sexual fantasies through everything from rape to pornography (136). *The Beetle* engages this contradiction through the sexually dominant female character of the Beetle. The novel presents the Beetle as a colonized sexual deviant as well as a desirable sex object, and her

confrontations with British characters epitomize the feelings regarding sexuality in the colonies.

The Beetle centers around the vengeful character known only as “the Beetle” and her ultimate goal of exacting revenge on the English politician Paul Lessingham. Throughout the course of the novel, the Beetle takes the form of a decrepit Oriental-looking man, a gigantic insect, and a beautiful Egyptian woman.¹ While on a trip to Egypt in his younger days, Paul encounters the Beetle in her female form. The Beetle, who is a priestess in the cult of Isis, holds Paul as a sexual captive for several months, but Paul eventually escapes his captivity by killing the Beetle in Egypt. A reincarnated form of the Beetle follows Paul to London, where she mesmerizes an out-of-work clerk named Robert Holt and uses him to confront Paul. This encounter nearly drives the politician mad. Paul’s fiancée Marjorie Lindon also encounters the Beetle, once in her father’s home and once in the Beetle’s home in London. The Beetle mesmerizes Marjorie as she did Holt, kidnaps her, and leads her out of London. Sydney Atherton, an English scientist, functions as a worthy opponent to the Beetle in the story: Sydney is the only character who encounters the Beetle without falling into a mesmeric trance. Instead, Sydney uses his scientific prowess to counteract the mesmeric influences of the Beetle. Ultimately, Paul and Sydney pursue the Beetle in an attempt to recover Marjorie; the pursuit results in the Beetle's disappearance and possible demise, Marjorie's amnesia and temporary insanity, and Holt's death. Eventually Marjorie recovers and marries Paul, and Sydney also marries happily.

¹ Although the Beetle takes several forms throughout the course of the novel, for the sake of clarity I will refer to her with a feminine pronoun. While the characters who interact with the Beetle in the novel identify her most often as a male, the text itself suggests that the Beetle identifies herself as a female. As such, I will use the gender designation chosen by the Beetle.

Confrontations between the colonizers and the colonized are played out in the novel when several characters intrude into spaces where they do not normally belong and when they do so with selfish motivations. These intrusions—or forceful, uninvited entrances into foreign spaces with the intent of exploitation—authorize reciprocal intrusion of these characters—both mentally and physically—from the Beetle. The Beetle’s power to conquer her victims results first from each victim’s intrusive action and second from each victim’s fear of the unknown Other embodied by the Beetle through her presence as a colonized subject as well as her gender nonconformity. The experiences that take place between the Beetle and her victims are described with highly sexualized language and parallel the perpetration of British colonialism—specifically in the area of sexual exploitation. As such, the British characters’ fear and loathing towards the Beetle reveal the overwhelming anxiety felt by Victorians regarding Britain’s colonized subjects and native sexuality. In addition, the Beetle’s monstrous acts of exploitation provide a mirror which confronts the British characters with the monstrous nature of their own behavior, ultimately leaving them terrified not only of the colonized Other who defies gender norms, but of themselves as well.

CHAPTER II
METHODOLOGY

Fin de siècle Monster

Critics have read the Beetle as the ultimate transgressor against Victorian society because of her depiction as a monstrous, degenerate figure of the colonized Other. The *fin de siècle* utilizes monstrousness to mark Othered characters with very specific characteristics. The Beetle exhibits all of the characteristics of the *fin de siècle* monster as outlined by Roger Luckhurst, which contributes to the terror evoked by her character:

Certainly, hypnotic or mesmeric power is part of the repertory of the fin-de-siècle monster, and certainly representatives of hypnosis are traversed by racial stereotyping . . . degenerate criminality . . . and sexual terrorism. . . . Indeed, one of the central reiterated tropes from this phase of the genre that needs analysis is the *remote controlled* person, involuntarily dragged, like the justified sinner, towards the horrifying other. (150)

The Beetle possesses the power of hypnosis, and she uses it to remotely control several characters in the novel to terrifying ends. But the Beetle fits the other three categories Luckhurst mentions as well. Marginal as well as main characters in the novel consistently discuss the Beetle through racial stereotypes. Although we know the Beetle hails from Egypt, several characters refer to her simply as “the Oriental.” These characters neither bother to discover the Beetle’s nationality, nor care about it. They assume that because she looks like what they imagine an Oriental man to be, that must be what she is. Also, these characters assume that the Beetle participates in criminal activity, and they base these assumptions solely on her appearance as something other

than an Englishman. Despite acts of racial stereotyping that unjustly accuse the Beetle of crimes, we do see her perpetrate several illegal acts including theft, kidnapping, and breaking and entering. And finally, the Beetle rapes Paul repeatedly in Egypt and sexually assaults Holt and Marjorie in London, so the novel provides evidence of her sexual terrorism. Thus, according to Luckhurst, the Beetle embodies everything considered monstrous by Victorian standards.

Another aspect of the monstrous displayed by the Beetle is that of degeneration: “Degeneration was founded on and promoted notions of psychological deviance and criminal behaviour according to the reading of supposedly typical racial and corporeal features” (Wolfreys 15). The notion of degeneration imputes any character that seems to display “savage” or “barbaric” features with the inclination to perpetrate criminal activities. Such features may include racially stereotypical qualities that could also be attributed to primitive man and apes. Wolfreys claims “In drawing on so-called theories of degeneracy as the basis for representing the creature, [*The Beetle*] occludes its historical and ideological fears. . . . The visible signs render it virtually impossible to apprehend it/him/her as being anything but the most abject and monstrous overdetermined figure of alterity” (16-17). Wolfreys asserts that the text implicates the Beetle through its strong descriptions of her degeneracy. While Wolfrey’s reading of the Beetle’s degeneracy is sound, this depiction is necessary in order to mirror the degeneracy of the British characters the Beetle encounters in the novel. Through the text’s attribution of these qualities of degeneration to the Beetle, it also attributes the byproducts of degeneracy to the British characters the Beetle mirrors.

In her criticism on *The Beetle*, Kelly Hurley claims that the monstrous nature of the Beetle functions as a scapegoat on which to place all of the potential sexual sins of the white British characters: “while the novel throws into question the sexualities of all the non-supernatural characters in *The Beetle*, these characters are finally exonerated at the expense of the villainess whose monstrous female—and monstrous Oriental—body is the ultimate locus of all perversions” (125). Hurley reads the Beetle as the ultimate transgressor whose presence in the novel does not implicate her British victims but instead exonerates them of all guilt through their comparison with her. Rather than reflect the anxieties of the Victorian *fin de siècle*, Hurley argues that the sexualized Otherness of the Beetle rationalizes xenophobia, and her gendered Otherness rationalizes conformity to prescribed gender norms. While Hurley’s reading of the Beetle’s monstrousness is accurate, the text also suggests that the Beetle’s monstrousness provides her critical function in the novel. Through her monstrous and degenerate Otherness, the Beetle provides a mirror for the monstrousness of the British subjects with whom she interacts. Ultimately, the Beetle’s transgressions result from the British subjects’ own transgressions, placing all of the blame for the horrors in the story on the British characters.

While this novel centers on the horrific transgressions of the Beetle, the novel never provides her with an opportunity to tell her version of the story. Instead, the story comes to us through the inter-woven narratives of four British characters, three of whom are victims of the Beetle. This lack of voice for the Beetle merits mentioning because we see glimpses of her version of the story through dialogue with other characters, and these brief moments do not coincide with the main story told to us. For instance, the Beetle

comes to England seeking revenge against Paul, but Paul claims the Beetle victimized him in Egypt which would not warrant revenge. Also, the Beetle expresses to Sydney that Paul “spilled the blood of her who has lain upon his breast” (Marsh 146). This phrase implies a mutual intimate relationship between Paul and the Beetle, which is quite different from the sexual slavery detailed by Paul. The fact that the novel includes these contradictory moments without giving the Beetle a chance to speak elicits our reflection about the critical function of the novel. Although the novel seems to criticize the Beetle and her actions, it subtly presents a much more sympathetic view of the Beetle to a reader willing to read critically.

Egypt History

Through the downplaying of the Beetle’s Egyptian origin, the novel suggests Victorian ambivalence regarding Britain’s occupation of Egypt. The novel provides clues pointing to Egypt as the Beetle’s country of origin even before the novel reveals Paul’s history with the Beetle in Egypt; however, the characters in the novel do not acknowledge that the Beetle hails from Egypt. Instead, they use the blanket term “Oriental” or “Arab” to denote the Beetle’s obvious foreignness. This fact is important considering Britain’s history in Egypt is even more complicated than its involvement in other countries. Although Egypt was never officially a British colony, British influence was very strong in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century. British fascination with Ancient Egypt can be seen as early as the mid-nineteenth century in popular culture and fiction, but colonial interest in Egypt centered around the access it provided to the East—particularly India (Bulfin 417). In his book *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, John Darwin asserts, “The prime function of Egypt,

occupied by the British in 1882, was to preserve the British use of the Suez Canal and protect the ‘Clapham Junction’ of imperial communication” (3). Ultimately, Britain maintained a presence in Egypt because of the strategic benefit gained by Egypt’s location. Initially, Britain intended to occupy Egypt temporarily, but Egypt quickly became irreplaceable as a gateway to Britain’s interests in the East. Although the occupation of Egypt remained controversial both politically and socially due to the costs of keeping it, by the 1890s the necessity of British occupation was more or less accepted by British citizens and politicians (Darwin 104). Most important to the novel’s treatment of the Beetle’s Egyptian origin is the fact that Britain’s interest in Egypt revolved around access to other Eastern colonies. Just as Britain viewed Egypt only as the gateway to other colonies, the British characters in the novel regard the Beetle only as a window revealing all colonized subjects. She provides access to the Otherness that terrifies the British characters, and that Otherness comes from her status as a colonized subject, not from her status as a citizen of Egypt.

Reverse Colonization

Stephen Arata discusses the idea of “reverse colonization” in late-Victorian fiction, specifically in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which came out the same year as *The Beetle*. Arata’s notion explores the role of the colonizer and the colonized being reversed in order to reflect the British anxiety surrounding the implications of colonization: “In such narratives what has been represented as the ‘civilized’ world is on the point of being overrun by ‘primitive’ forces. . . . In each case a fearful reversal occurs: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter is exploited, the victimizer victimized” (108). Reverse colonization involves the physical presence of a cultural

other in the center of the empire. As such, *The Beetle* certainly provides an example of reverse colonization; the Egyptian Beetle believes herself to have been exploited by a representative of the white colonizing power—Paul Lessingham. As such, the abused colonial subject goes to the center of the British Empire—London—and in turn exploits and humiliates the colonizers. In addition, the notion of reverse colonization criticizes imperial practices through the depiction of colonizing actions performed by a monstrous figure: “if fantasies of reverse colonization are products of the geopolitical fears of a troubled imperial society, they are also responses to cultural guilt. In the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms” (108). The English characters in this novel experience horror and revulsion not only because they face cultural invasion by a colonial Other, but also because that invasion confronts them with the realities of their own horrific behavior towards the colonized subjects.

The Beetle provides a slightly different look at Arata’s concept because, whereas Stoker’s colonized Other Dracula is male, Marsh’s colonized figure is female. As such, the Beetle functions not only as a colonized figure perpetrating the horrors of imperialism, but also as a depiction of the British anxieties surrounding gender issues: while providing a mirror of the British subjects’ own exploitative actions, the Beetle also challenges their notions of gender roles in the Empire. The Beetle’s sexual dominance evokes a terror in her victims unknown to Dracula’s victims simply because Dracula is male. Sexual dominance and desire in male exploits, however deviant, do not challenge gender norms because male sexuality is accepted as dominant sexuality. The Beetle, however, is a female who exerts sexual dominance over her victims, which challenges

British gender norms and Others the Beetle in a new way. Also unlike Dracula, the Beetle does not exact revenge only because of colonial invasion of her homeland. Because she is female, the Beetle is a target for sexual exploitation at the hands of colonial powers, and she exacts her revenge for that through her own acts of sexual exploitation.

CHAPTER III
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Paul Lessingham perpetrates the first act of intrusion that begets all others in the novel when he ventures uninvited into Egypt and, more specifically, into what he himself calls the “native quarter” (Marsh 238).² The text remains ambiguous about Paul’s intentions for his trip to Egypt. He claims only that as a young man, “I decided that I should learn more from travel than from sojourn at a university. So, since there was no one to say me nay, instead of going either to Oxford or Cambridge, I went abroad. After a few months, I found myself in Egypt” (Marsh 237). We can safely assume that Paul ventured forth on some version of the Grand Tour of Europe, which included Egypt because of its relative closeness and accessibility.³ We also learn that Paul intrudes “into the town in search of amusement . . . which had in it a spice of adventure” (238). However, Kelly Hurley claims that Victorian tourists often ventured into what Paul calls the “native quarter” for a sexual experience: “Not only is the Orient a space in which the Victorian male may pursue the luxury of the body itself, it is also a space he associates with the body itself, with the body’s physicality and fertility, with bodily pleasure. The Orient is synonymous with sexuality” (Hurley 128). Read through this lens, the adventurous “amusement” becomes a euphemism for sex, and Paul’s use of the word “spice” implies exotic flavoring. Together these terms suggest that Paul’s motives for

² While the text does not explicitly state it, we can assume that this term implies a place not friendly to or safe for English tourists.

³ According to Jayati Gupta, the European Grand Tour was a main form of socially acceptable tourism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. At its inception, the Grand Tour took young aristocratic men to important cultural areas in Europe, such as Greece and Rome, in order to expose them to classic influences. Over time the tour changed to include other “less civilized” areas such as the colonies (60).

intrusion into this foreign space include a search for a sexual encounter with an exotic native woman, which is a form of exploitation.

Paul's description of the native quarter of Egypt contains sexualized language that provides further evidence of his intentions: "I remember it all as clearly as if it were yesterday . . . the dirty street, the evil smells, the imperfect light, the girl's voice filling all at once the air. It was a girl's voice, full, and round, and sweet; an organ seldom met with, especially in such a place as that" (Marsh 238). His description of the "dirty street" with "evil smells" and "imperfect light" brings to mind images of a house of prostitution. The word dirty applies to both the location of such institutions, which even in England were located in less reputable areas of town, as well as the nature of the sex acts performed there. The phrase "evil smells" suggests the smell of sex, and "imperfect lighting" conjures thoughts of an intimate setting. Paul's description of the girl's voice—"full, and round, and sweet"—suggests a female body, particularly that of a virgin considering he claims it is an "organ seldom met with." The sexualized nature of his language places Paul in the role of the British colonizer intent upon sexual exploitation for his own benefit and pleasure. Despite Paul's intentions, however, his first experience with the Beetle results in his own sexual exploitation rather than hers.

Paul experiences the effects of reverse colonization at the hands of the Beetle through the uncanny effect produced by the reversal of prescribed sexual roles. While he expected to be the subduer, she subdues him easily through a drugged drink and her mesmeric ability: "Those eyes of hers! They were a devil's. I can positively affirm that they had on me a diabolical effect. They robbed me of my consciousness, of my power of volition, of my capacity to think,—they made me as wax in her hands" (Marsh 240).

His emphasis on her eyes and the fear that results connects to Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny. According to Freud, an uncanny effect takes place when one is confronted with something that is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. In the case of Paul, he sees familiar sexual desire that mirrors his own in a location which is unfamiliar, the female body. Sexual desire is familiar to Paul in the male body both personally and culturally. As a man, he experiences sexual desire, which actually led him to the native quarter in the first place. Also, British culture accepts male sexual desire as normal and appropriate. British culture does not, however, accept female sexual desire as such. The Beetle's eyes display her sexual desire and strong will, which in the female body produce an uncanny effect on Paul: "I cannot describe to you the sense of horror and of loathing with which the contact of her lips oppressed me. There was about her something so unnatural, so inhuman, that I believe even then I could have destroyed her with as little sense of moral turpitude as if she had been some noxious insect" (Marsh 241). Paul uses language of exploitation in this passage when he admits that her kisses "oppressed" him. Through her sexual advances, Paul experiences a mirror of his own sexual exploits had he been able to carry them out. Paul's description of her as "unnatural" and "inhuman" reveals that her sexual dominance not only leaves Paul utterly emasculated, but also presents the Beetle as an Other because she is a female who is performing prescribed male sexuality. Paul's desire to destroy her as if she were an insect reflects the anxiety about gender roles in late Victorian England. The uncanny Otherness she embodies to him comes from his socially constructed notion of proper gender performance. Paul experiences an uncanny effect at the hands of the Beetle because she acts outside of

society's prescribed gender norm, and as such, he feels the desire to destroy this reminder of his anxiety.

Robert Holt's intrusion into the Beetle's home in London provides another instance of reverse colonization in the novel. After seeking shelter at a workhouse on a rainy night and being refused, Robert Holt wanders upon a seemingly unoccupied house in a poorer district in London. However, the Beetle is actually renting and occupying the house. While Holt breaks into the Beetle's home only because he is unemployed and destitute, he describes the encounter with highly sexualized language that symbolizes sexual fantasy resulting in penetration: "Above all, I saw the open window. I stared at it, conscious, as I did so, of a curious catching of the breath. It was so near to me; so very near. I had but to stretch out my hand to thrust it through the aperture. . . . And, inside that open window, it was, it must be, so warm, so dry!" (Marsh 47). The "curious catching of the breath" that Holt experiences when he stares at the open window corresponds to the accelerated breathing that takes place during sexual arousal. Holt looks longingly at the window, desires to "thrust" his hand into it, and imagines it to be warm inside. The language Holt uses to describe this encounter suggests he is experiencing a sexual fantasy. Holt debates about whether or not to proceed through the window, weighing the pros and cons:

It was my plain duty to knock at the door, rouse the inmates, and call attention to their oversight,—the open window. The least they could do would be to reward me for my pains. . . . And, even if the people were at home, I might go unrewarded. . . . To have caused the window to be

closed—the inviting window, the tempting window, the convenient window!—better anything than that. (47)

His deliberation reveals that he knows that he has a responsibility not to exploit the situation, yet his language continues to suggest sexual arousal. The notion of a potential “reward” implies a sexual favor, and the fear of going “unrewarded” implies a missed opportunity. The scene is further sexualized by the repetition of “the inviting window, the tempting window, the convenient window!” Inviting and tempting could both be used to describe a sexual encounter, and the quick repetition of the phrases ending in an exclamation mark mimic the rhythmic sound of sexual climax. The culminating event is Holt’s passage through the window and into the house. While Holt does not actually sexually exploit a colonized subject, this scene represents the figurative act of exploitation which places Holt in the role of British colonizer and consequently instigates Holt’s reverse colonization experience.

Holt’s experience of sexual victimization at the hands of the Beetle provides an excellent example of reverse colonization: Holt commits an act of exploitation (although mostly figurative), and as a result the colonized Other mirrors back his exploitation. Once inside the house, Holt becomes aware of a presence in the house with him identified only by a pair of luminous eyes.⁴ In this instance, the Beetle confronts Holt in her insect form. Under the effects of either fear or mesmerism (perhaps both), Holt remains rooted to the spot as he watches the eyes advance towards him. When the creature finally reaches Holt, the encounter is described in a highly sexualized manner:

On a sudden I felt something on my boot, and, with a sense of shrinking, horror, nausea, rendering me momentarily more helpless, I realized that

⁴ The Beetle can morph into a giant beetle at will.

the creature was beginning to ascend my legs, to climb my body, . . . it mounted me, apparently, with as much ease as if I had been horizontal instead of perpendicular. . . . Higher and higher! It had gained my loins. . . . The helplessness with which I suffered its invasion was not the least part of my agony, – it was that helplessness which we know in dreadful dreams. (Marsh 51)

Essentially, this unidentified creature rapes Holt. The creature “mounts” him as if he were lying “horizontal,” and it “gains his loins” which basically describes the act of sexual penetration. Through the use of words such as “suffered,” “agony,” and “dreadful,” Holt describes his helplessness with the language of a sexual assault victim. The passage continues with the creature’s ascent up Holt’s body. “It reached my chin, it touched my lips, – and I stood still and bore it all, while it enveloped my face with its huge, slimy, evil-smelling body, and embraced me with its myriad legs” (52). Whereas the previous description gendered the creature as more male than female, the language here—“slimy, evil-smelling body”—suggests the wetness of female genitalia. Holt’s encounter with the androgynous beetle is similar to that of Paul’s with the Beetle in Egypt. The creature has both male and female sexual qualities: for instance, the male ability to penetrate and invade and the female ability to “envelop.”

When confronted by the Beetle in the form of a decrepit Oriental-looking man, Holt is still unable to determine the Beetle’s race, ethnicity, or even gender; this unknown Otherness unnerves Holt and allows the Beetle to continue to exert complete control over him. In the interview that follows, the Beetle reminds him of his exploitative intrusion and uses it as vindication for her consequent exploitation of Holt: “I say you are a

thief!—a thief, Robert Holt, a thief! You came through a window for your own pleasure, now you will go through a window for mine” (Marsh 63). The sexualized nature of the phrase “for your own pleasure” further implicates Holt in the figurative sexual exploitation of the colonized subject.

Marjorie Lindon, the third character in the novel who comes under the Beetle’s influence, has an experience that differs slightly from those of Paul and Holt because Marjorie does not commit the act of physical intrusion that sanctions her attack from the Beetle. Instead, she authorizes the intrusion of Holt into her father’s home after Holt implies Paul may be in danger. Holt passes out in front of Marjorie’s home after becoming exhausted from doing the Beetle’s bidding. Attracted by the large crowd accumulating around Holt, Marjorie hears him utter Paul’s name and has him brought into her house. Although she and Paul are engaged, Marjorie’s father disapproves of Paul because of their differing political views. Marjorie makes it clear in her later discussion with Sydney that her father would not approve of Holt’s presence in his home, and for that very reason she keeps the information from her father. In addition, Marjorie fears her father discovering anything incriminating about Paul that might add to her father’s dislike of him. As a result, Marjorie chooses to keep Holt a secret from her father. On the surface, one may conclude that Marjorie only commits an act of kindness. After all, she resuscitates a man who would surely have died in the street without her aid. However, she does so for selfish gain rather than out of altruistic benevolence. At first, Marjorie seems to have only a passing interest in Holt: “As you know, I have had my smattering of instruction in First Aid to the Injured, and that kind of thing, so, as no one else seemed to have any sense, and the man seemed as good as dead, I thought I would

try my hand” (Marsh 163). Her language here reveals her nonchalant attitude. She admits to having a “smattering of instruction,” which translates to a very superficial knowledge in first aid. She also confesses that Holt “seemed as good as dead,” but she does not send for a doctor. Instead she decides to offer what assistance she can alone. Marjorie becomes truly concerned for Holt only after he mentions Paul’s name: “It was very silly of me, perhaps, but I cannot tell you how his words, and his manner—the two together—affected me. Well, the long and the short of it was, that I had him taken into the house, and washed, and put to bed, – and I had the doctor sent for” (164). In this passage Marjorie claims that Holt’s words about Paul and his manner of saying them were what affected her, not Holt’s dreadful physical condition. Furthermore, Marjorie’s concern for Paul can be translated as an indirect concern for herself because of her engagement to Paul. In essence, Marjorie aids Holt because he alludes to information that she desires about her fiancé and his well-being. The assistance she offers Holt comes with exploitive strings attached. Much like the British colonizers, Marjorie invests in Holt in order to reap benefits from him later. This behavior sets her up for her own experience of reverse colonization.

When Marjorie encounters the Beetle in her father’s home she experiences a deep, petrifying fear of the unknown presence surrounding her. The Beetle does not appear to Marjorie visibly but hovers around her head and face in insect form: “I became convinced,—and the process of conviction was terrible beyond words!—that there actually was something with me in the room, some invisible horror,—which, at any moment, might become visible” (Marsh 204). Marjorie’s inability to identify her tormentor only magnifies her fear. The harder Marjorie tries to fight her fear, the more

paralyzing it becomes: “I tried to pray. But I was speechless,—words would not come; my thoughts would not take shape. I all at once became conscious, as I struggled to ask help of God, that I was wrestling with something evil,—that if I only could ask help of Him, evil would flee. But I could not. I was helpless” (205). Marjorie seeks to resist the overwhelming fear caused by the presence of the Beetle through the articulation of her fears in prayer. The effects of the Beetle’s presence feel evil, so she concludes that the presence must be foreign and thus deterred by Western religion. By abandoning her rational thought and resorting to prayer, Marjorie relinquishes herself to her fear of the unknown. She cannot identify the presence, cannot rationalize it, and therefore cannot handle it, so she relies on divine intervention for her rescue. When rescue does not come, Marjorie remains utterly powerless against her invader.

Marjorie describes her physical encounter with the Beetle in the distressed language of a sexual assault victim. She describes feeling the Beetle move towards her slowly from the foot to the head of the bed:

The emotion of horror with which I realised what this progression might mean, will be, I fear, with me to the end of my life, – not only in dreams, but too often, in my waking hours. My heart, as the Psalmist has it, melted like wax within me. I was incapable of movement, – dominated by something as hideous as, and infinitely more powerful than, the fascination of the serpent. When it reached the head of the bed, what I feared—with what a fear!—would happen, did happen. It began to find its way inside. . . . The wonder is I did not die! (Marsh 206-207)

Although thinly veiled, Marjorie's encounter does read like a sexual assault. A force dominates her and renders her unable to move. She describes the force by a Biblical allusion to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. The fascination of the serpent refers to the claim the serpent makes to Eve in the Garden that to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge will make one like God. The main piece of knowledge Adam and Eve gain is the awareness that they are naked. A force more hideous and powerful than this knowledge would be the awakening of sexual desire aroused by the naked body. Thus, the force dominating Marjorie is the force of sexual desire. What she fears does happen; the Beetle finds her way inside. In the text Marjorie clarifies that "inside" refers to in-between the sheets, but the sexual implications of the Beetle finding her way inside are undeniable. Marjorie's exclamation wondering that she did not die suggests that in her eyes rape bears the ultimate shame, and death might be a preferable option to living with that shame.

The Beetle's requisitioning and reconditioning of Marjorie, a New Woman character, reflects the *fin de siècle* anxiety about the New Woman. Wolfreys explains that Marjorie's character incites anxiety in Victorian society even before she is invaded by the Beetle because she possesses masculine characteristics adverse to typical Victorian society: "Marjorie is thus figured as a transgressive social element. Resistant to order, control or being ideologically or ontologically determined or pinned down, she exceeds her normative social use-value, endangering the assumptions underpinning Late Imperial English hegemony" (29). Marjorie's independent behavior in the novel, her liberal political views, and her defiance of her father reveal her transgressions against society: "Arguably, the fear for Victorian masculinity is that the New Woman presents a form of

parodic masculinity, thereby transgressing both the boundaries of her own supposedly ‘proper’ gendered identity and that of a certain self-defining Victorian masculinity” (Wolfreys 29). Marjorie does not conform to Victorian gender norms which threatens male characters in the novel.

The Beetle augments Marjorie’s gender non-conformity by dressing her in a man’s clothing and parading her through the streets of London. Marjorie accompanies Sydney to the Beetle’s house in order to discover the Beetle’s connection to Paul. Once Marjorie invades the Beetle’s home, the Beetle mesmerizes Marjorie, cuts her hair, and dresses her up in Holt’s old clothes so that she resembles a young man. It takes the gentlemen pursuing her quite some time and several clues before they figure this out, and once they do they consider it monstrous of the Beetle to dress Marjorie as a man. Sydney and Paul describe the Beetle as “the hound,” “the devil,” “the wretch,” and “the fiend” all in close succession, and Sydney remarks, “Great Potiphar! To think of Marjorie like that!” (Marsh 286). On the surface, the men indict only the Beetle for this gross act of gender-nonconformity. However, upon close inspection, the men’s anger at the Beetle’s treatment of Marjorie only mirrors their subconscious fear of Marjorie’s already non-conformist behavior. Sydney’s reference to Potiphar is the most telling of his fear and anxiety about what the Beetle has done to Marjorie. In Genesis, Potiphar was an Egyptian officer whose wife made a sexual advance towards Potiphar’s slave Joseph. Subtly relating Marjorie to Potiphar’s wife reveals the anxiety about women who contradict gender normative behavior: Marjorie is only a step away from becoming sexually demanding and lascivious like Potiphar’s wife. Her public appearance in male attire literally places Marjorie in the position of a woman performing socially as a man,

which makes the men incapable of ignoring their anxiety surrounding the New Woman. Again, the Beetle mirrors back the men's anxiety about the impending Otherness of gender nonconformity, except that this time she uses a British subject to do it.

Sydney Atherton—a childhood friend of Marjorie's and an experimental scientist—is the only British character that encounters the Beetle and does not end up terrorized, mesmerized, and mentally wrecked because he does not seem to be unnerved by the Beetle's mesmeric ability. The Beetle intrudes into Sydney's laboratory early on in the novel. She forces herself in by hypnotizing Sydney's servant, and Sydney realizes almost immediately that the Beetle possesses mesmeric ability. "I was immediately conscious that in his eyes there was, in an especial degree, what, for want of a better term, one may call the mesmeric quality . . . and which are apt to exercise an uncanny influence over the weak and foolish folk with whom they come in contact" (Marsh 105). In this statement, Sydney not only explains the powers of which a mesmerist is capable, but also the way in which he may exert that power. Sydney claims that "weak and foolish folk" are those susceptible to mesmerism. The term "weak" obviously refers to the mind, but the term "foolish" can be interpreted in two different ways. First, and most obviously, it refers to the mind: those who are foolish enough to believe in the power of mesmerism are certain to come under its power. The problem with this interpretation lies in the fact that Sydney gives credibility to the act of mesmerism by acknowledging that the Beetle possesses mesmeric ability. As such, "foolish" must refer to the actions taken by people. Through this interpretation, we can see that Sydney has an initial understanding of the rules which govern the Beetle's power to mentally invade his victims: the foolish acts of his victims allow the Beetle to subdue them mentally.

Sydney's lack of fear comes from his knowledge about mesmerism and science. He describes the sensation he experiences under the Beetle's influence as "peculiar," which is a mild term compared to the horror-filled adjectives used by Paul, Holt, and Marjorie. To the Beetle's other victims, her ability to mentally subdue and control them provides part of the mystery that helps to petrify them. The Beetle practices a sort of magic that unnerves those unfamiliar with it. However, Roger Luckhurst explains in his article "Trance-Gothic, 1882-97" that scientists in the late nineteenth century worked to "de-mystify" claims surrounding "trance phenomena" (152). Luckhurst includes information about the Society for Physical Research, which was founded in London "to investigate the 'nature and extent of any influence which may be exerted by one mind upon another, apart from any generally recognized mode of perception'" (Luckhurst 152-153). As a distinguished scientist in London in the late nineteenth century, Sydney Atherton would be well aware of this society as well as its reports about mesmerism and trances. These scientists were not the only ones interested in explaining Eastern mysticism. Lieutenant Colonel R.H. Elliot was stationed in India during the early twentieth century and was interested in the so-called magic of Indian conjuring. He wrote detailed accounts debunking tricks that could be seen performed by street magicians in India. He asserted that the English who watched these tricks were so enthralled as to become mesmerized, which allowed the conjurers to perform slights of hand that would otherwise have been noticed by onlookers. His account of the English public's amazement at the so-called "native magic" and his care in debunking it suggest that there was a significant infiltration of Indian mysticism into common English culture (Elliot). Thus, to Sydney, the Beetle does not practice some ancient magic found in

secret cults deep in the Orient because Sydney believes that the Beetle's magic can be explained by empirical scientific evidence. At one point in the novel, Sydney even begins to admire the Beetle's mesmeric prowess:

If it was a case of hypnotism, it was very neatly done. The conditions were both unusual and trying, the effect produced seemed all that could be desired,—the change brought about in half a dozen seconds was quite remarkable. I began to be aware of a feeling of quasi-respect for Paul Lessingham's friend. His morals might be peculiar, and manner he might have none, but in this case, at any rate, the end seemed to have justified the means. (Marsh 139)

In this passage, Sydney delivers a very clinical description of the Beetle's hypnotism of a man who was on the brink of death. Sydney concludes that what distinguishes the Beetle as Other—her use of Eastern mesmerism, her different standards of morality, and her lack of Western manners—pale in comparison to the prowess with which she performs her task. Unlike Paul and Holt, Sydney can overlook the abhorrent appearance of the Beetle in favor of her effective work, suggesting that Sydney does not share their anxiety about the infiltration of their world by non-English cultural influences.

The Beetle's inability to affect Sydney also comes from the fact that Sydney does not perpetrate selfish acts of intrusion and exploitation. Early in the novel, Sydney confesses his love for Marjorie as well as his desire to marry her. Somehow the Beetle learns of Sydney's feelings as well as Marjorie's recent rejection of his love and attempts to use them against him. In one of their encounters, the Beetle offers Sydney the power

to have Marjorie as his own. The terms in which Sydney thinks of the Beetle's offer reveal his potential act of intrusion and exploitation:

I thought of my love for Marjorie,—which had revealed itself after all these years; of the delight of holding her in my arms, of feeling the pressure of her lips to mine. As my gaze met his, the lower side of what the conquest of this fair lady would mean, burned in my brain; fierce imaginings blazed before my eyes. (Marsh 143-144)

In this moment Sydney contemplates accepting the Beetle's offer and all that it implies, and he imagines for a moment the physical relationship he would be able to have with Marjorie. Within his own mind he refers to this as “the conquest of this fair lady,” suggesting that his relationship with Marjorie would entail an act of conquering. Because Sydney confesses he imagines the “lower side” of this conquest, we can assume that he is referring to an act of sexual penetration. Although Sydney's acceptance of the Beetle's offer would not result in immediate physical intrusion, his desire and intention to sexually exploit Marjorie remains the motivation behind his action. Had Sydney accepted the Beetle's aid, he would have placed himself in the role of sexual exploiter because he not only would have invaded Marjorie, but also he would have exploited the Beetle's abilities for his own gain.

The tables turn when the Beetle is the first to invade. The Beetle barges into Sydney's laboratory and offers her help so Sydney can win Marjorie's affections. However, Sydney refuses her offer and attempts to subdue the Beetle with an electricity-producing machine. The Beetle's act of invasion activates Sydney's means of counteracting mesmerism—science. The effect of science on the Beetle matches that of

mesmerism on the Western victims. Sydney's electrical exhibition and chemical flames frighten the Beetle into submission for a moment. Incidentally, the Beetle's intrusion into the laboratory makes her vulnerable to the effects of modern science at Sydney's disposal. ". . . Perhaps I'm a trifle better at the game than you are. Especially as you have ventured into my stronghold, which contains magic enough to make a show of a hundred thousand such as you" (Marsh 145). Sydney indicates that the Beetle's latest intrusion was her fatal mistake, and for a time the Beetle is unable to overcome the fear produced by Sydney's scientific experiments. However, towards the end of their interview the Beetle transcends her fear. "As if ashamed of his cowardice, plainly, on a sudden, he made a desperate effort to get the better of his fears, – and succeeded better than I had expected or desired. He drew himself up with what, in him, amounted to an air of dignity. 'I am a child of Isis!'" (149). Much to Sydney's dismay, once she conquers her fear, the Beetle removes herself from the debilitating influences of her surroundings by taking the form of an insect and then the form of a woman before she disappears from his laboratory. Despite his inability to control the Beetle for an extended period of time, Sydney's power recalls the Beetle's own control over the other characters in the novel. Also like the Beetle, Sydney expresses no remorse for his actions against the Beetle.

While Sydney fearlessly confronts the unknown colonized Other, he exhibits severe anxiety about the truth of the Beetle's gender, a fact which suggests Sydney's progressive views do not include gender nonconformity. Sydney witnesses the Beetle's transformation from insect back into human form which leaves her standing naked before him:

One startling fact nudity revealed,—that I had been egregiously mistaken on the question of sex. My visitor was not a man, but a woman, and judging from the brief glimpse which I had of her body, by no means old or ill-shaped either. If that transformation was not a bewildering one, then two and two make five. The most level-headed scientist would temporarily have lost his mental equipoise on witnessing such a quick change as that within a span or two of his own nose. I was not only witless, I was breathless too,—I could only gape. (Marsh 152)

Like the other characters in the novel, Sydney reveals his unease through his language. He claims that the transformation was bewildering, and he compares it to an impossible arithmetic problem. In their earlier encounters, Sydney relies on his scientific understanding to relate to the Beetle as a colonized Other. In describing her change from male to female before his very eyes as something scientifically impossible, Sydney signals to the reader his complete inability to account for the encounter. By claiming that any level-headed scientist would feel as he felt, he ensures the reader does not feel that he overreacts. Finally, he describes himself as witless, breathless, and gaping. With this admission, Sydney confesses that he does not know how to handle the Beetle's change into a woman because it cannot be explained scientifically. At this moment, Sydney does not fear the Beetle as strongly as the other characters do, but he cannot identify with her as he could before. From this point in the novel onwards, the Beetle moves from being an object of curiosity and admiration for Sydney to a full-blown enemy who must be eradicated.

The symbolic roles Paul, Holt, and Marjorie play in the representation of Britain as a colonial power, along with their subsequent mental invasions by the Beetle—a representative of the colonized subject—reveal an underlying social issue: fear of a cultural invasion by colonized subjects. According to Arata, in reverse colonization novels, “aggressions against the body are also aggressions against the body politic” (116). He explains this through Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*:

Indeed, the Count can threaten the integrity of the nation precisely because of the nature of his threat to personal integrity. His attacks involve more than an assault on the isolated self, the subversion and loss of one's individual identity. . . . Dracula imperils not simply his victims' personal identities, but also their cultural, political, and racial selves. (116)

Like *Dracula*, *The Beetle* presents a colonized villain who takes possession of the minds and bodies of her victims, which in turn allows her control of the parts of society represented by her victims. In short, when the Beetle possesses the minds of her victims, she also possesses everything they represent. Paul is a rising political star with great political influence. Marjorie is engaged to him, and her father is also a famous politician. While not famous or rich, Holt does represent the working class of Britain. Thus, through her invasion of the minds and bodies of Robert Holt, Paul Lessingham, and Marjorie Lindon, the Beetle controls several different facets of the white colonizing power. The anxiety produced by this realization explains why the very sight of the Beetle produces such repulsion and despair. When British characters see the Beetle, they see the cultural invasion of their world in two different ways. First, they see the literal physical invasion of the colonized into the metropole. Second, they see the symbolic invasion of

their world by the Beetle's possession of the bodies and minds of British subjects. Again, the Beetle's gender allows her to also attack the British idea of masculinity and male dominance through her control of Paul and Holt. They are controlled not just by a colonized subject, but by a female colonized subject, which abolishes the British notion of male dominance and control.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The underlying fear of cultural invasion by colonized subjects is implicit in this text. Reverse colonization can be seen as cultural invasion in the form of the colonized subject coming to seek revenge. However, the presence of the monstrous Other was not the only cultural invasion feared by Victorian England. The English also feared the colonized in their appropriation of English cultural practices. In India and Bengal Despatches from 1848, there are two brief accounts of the use of mesmerism to replace anesthesia in surgeries performed in India by English doctors. Not many details were included in this document; however, it is of note that a distinctly Eastern practice of pain-relief was practiced in a distinctly Western medical practice (Despatches). Another instance can be seen in the *babu*, the westernized Indian native. “Macaulay in the 1830s had raised up this class—‘a class of persons Indian in colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect’—to act as ‘interpreters between us and the millions we govern’” (Porter 46). These individuals presented a problem in the colonies as well as in the metropole because they no longer fit in the picture Britain had of its Indian colony. These westernized Indians suffered an identity crisis because they did not belong in either place. They could not fit in their native societies because their cultural tastes had been completely realigned. But they also could not fit in a traditional English society because of their appearances. Catherine Hall explains that the colonized subject’s desire to be identified as white pervaded in North Western colonies as well: “By mid-century white colonists wanted to be seen as part of white society across the Empire: the increased racism of white society both ‘at home’ and in the colonies meant that any association

with ‘natives’ had to be denied” (68-69). The children that resulted from the relationships between white colonists and native women felt an extreme amount of pressure to be identified by their white rather than native parentage. Hall recounts a story of a young mixed-race woman who avoided riding to church with her Indian mother so as not to be associated with “nativeness” (68).

Subtle hints in the text reveal that the Beetle struggles with this desire to be identified as white or with whiteness. After the Beetle orders Holt to undress, she looks at Holt’s naked body and exclaims, “What a white skin you have,—how white! What would I not give for a skin as white as that,—ah yes!” (Marsh 55). Conversely, the Beetle is constantly described as having yellow skin. One reason the Beetle desires white skin is so that she may easily move about London without being identified as a racial Other; however, like the *babu* and the mixed-race children of colonists, the Beetle cannot change her racial identity. Even when she regenerates in some way and no longer looks as old and malformed, her yellow skin remains. She wears it as a badge of her Otherness that she cannot shed. The Beetle also shows sexual interest in the bodies of white men. In fact, her only sexual encounters in the novel take place with white British subjects. Hurley explains that the Beetle’s trespasses against white bodies truly reveal her desire to possess a white body: “The Beetle’s crimes . . . are represented as sexually executed but racially motivated, as if her Egyptian hatred of a white skin only masked a frustrated longing to ‘possess’ a white body herself, in any sense of the word” (126). The Beetle understands that she cannot be white, but her obsession with whiteness leads her to capture and manipulate white bodies to make up for what she lacks. The cultural invasion of the Beetle’s homeland by British colonizers creates in her a contradictory

desire and hostility for whiteness. Thus, the Beetle's acts against the white bodies in the text ultimately indict the colonial system which instigated them.

Perhaps the greatest influence on Great Britain came from the westernized Indians who found their way into the British culture as well as the British homeland. In fact, this westernization of natives and the resulting migration to England is ultimately what made the downfall of British Imperialism possible:

Slowly Asian youths began to find their way to European seats of learning. . . .The first impulse which took young Indians across the seas was not to probe the mysteries of European life, but the more material consideration of a chance to compete in the Civil Service examination. . . . The essential point for our purpose is that in every one of the countries of Asia, the leadership in the movement which ultimately displaced European supremacy belonged to those who had been trained by the West under the aegis of imperialism. (Panikkar 110)

These individuals, born in colonies, but bred to mimic the British, underwent a sort of mental invasion that encouraged them to physically intrude upon the British homeland; taught to think like the English, they naturally desired to go to England to learn. Through their physical intrusion into "European seats of learning," these individuals transcended mimesis and ultimately subverted the traditional colonial power structure.

Marsh's novel presents a provocative picture of the interactions between white colonial powers and the colonial subjects as well as the anxieties present in Victorian society. Through multiple instances of mostly sexually exploitative intrusions, the novel constructs a textual mirror for the imperial practices of the British Empire through which

the British characters see their own transgressions in a monstrous Othered form. It also draws attention to the underlying fear of cultural invasion and gender nonconformity inherent to Victorian England. Ultimately, the text offers a criticism of colonialism through the monstrous portrayal of both the Beetle and, through her, the British subjects. The Beetle mirrors back the horror of colonial exploitation as a way to bring awareness and critique to the actions performed by the British subjects in the novel. While the Beetle is portrayed as monstrous in the novel, the ultimate function of this portrayal is to implicate the British powers as equally monstrous. The text also critiques the contradictory views of gender and sexuality through the reciprocation of sexual exploitation in the novel. The text never imagines a situation in which colonial exploitation ceases to exist; we have exploitation either at the hands of the British subjects or at the hands of the colonized Other. This fact also critiques colonialism by proving that the system cannot exist without some form of exploitation. The text repeatedly shows instances of colonial exploitation—literal or figurative—that result only in more exploitation and devastation.

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