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Epideictic Rhetorics, Queer Spatiality, and Monstrous Sexuality in The Beetle

A vaguely ethnic, multigendered humanoid spectre morphs into an enormous coleopteran insect. Terror ensues, as a queered, Gothic body threatens the sanctity of London. Simultaneously, men debate Victorian politics; a New Woman emerges; gender fluidity, mind control, and unstable self-identity emerge as inescapable facets of reality. Threats of violence and miscegenation loom large. A train crashes, a fugitive escapes the wreckage unscathed, and the truth is lost.

Given this articulation of Richard Marsh's enigmatic Gothic novel, The Beetle, published in 1897, it is unsurprising that Victorian readers were enamored of the melodrama of the text. A close reading, one that probes beyond the scandalous – and entertaining – surface materials, reveals transgressive queer rhetorics that promote alternative cultural figurations of gender and sexuality. Specifically, the spatial fluidity, I argue, facilitates the epideictic rhetoricity of the eponymous figure.

To address the function of The Beetle, though, one must first articulate the spectacle of Victorian sensationalism, a phenomenon that reached a remarkable pitch in contemporary legislation on homosexuality, culminating in the trial, conviction, and decline of that towering public figure Oscar Wilde. Karl Beckson's London in the 1890s sketches the secret ideological circles that were concealed alongside the greater public consciousness of Victorian England. Specifically, homosexual proclivities and sentiments dominated this subset of artistic and discursive output, with Wilde contributing his own share of materials to the alternative intellectual movement. That such figures were forced to operate beneath the dominant current of mainstream culture is illuminated through a parsing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Though it was initially created "for the protection of women and girls, [through] the suppression of brothels and other purposes" (Beckson 1992, 191), a controversial addition to the legislation drew public attention to homosexual behaviors and alternative identities. Though the crime of "buggery," the legal term for sodomy, was illegal at this time, Section XI decreed that "any homosexual act between males, whether in public or in private, could lead to imprisonment" (1992, 191). Prior to the enactment of such legislation, buggery and other homosexual "crimes" were rarely prosecuted. Thus, it was not until the creation of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, with the language it introduced into the English vernacular, that homosexuality became part of the terrain of Victorian culture.

It here becomes imperative to resituate the conversation within the marginalized experiences of the men who comprised this alternative intellectual, sexual, and religious lifestyle – "Uranians," as they styled themselves (on female homosexuality, see Castle 1995). Marriage in 19th-century Victorian England was linked to property and ownership; homosexual romantic relationships, on the contrary, so the Uranians urged, fulfilled natural desires and allowed for the accommodation of a higher form of love.
One was a social construct; the other, more naturalistic and meaningful (Beckson 1992, 194-208). Given these ideologies and the correlatives found in Marsh, it is virtually impossible to read the text apart from this discourse. Just as Uranian love typically consisted of middle- and upper-class men instigating romantic or sexual relations with younger, lower-class men, such as clerks and stable boys, *The Beetle* depicts a monstrous and grotesque figure that frequently transgresses social boundaries – class, yes, but also the boundaries of gender and nationality. In *The Beetle*, the transgression of margins upsets the nature of categorization or rigid social classification. As was typically the case in Victorian England, white patriarchal authorities chose to address these concerns through public discourse, the creation of harmful cultural narratives, and complex legislative and journalistic language and rhetoric. Essentially, "because of Philistine attitudes, legal and religious considerations of Uranian love rarely proceeded in the 19th century beyond the condemnation of its criminal or sinful nature" (Beckson 1992, 206). On the political stage, only one side of the situation was presented for socially-sanctioned public consumption.

Positioning myself at the intersection between queer theory and the Gothic genre, I will delineate the manner in which *The Beetle* subverts heteronormative discourses via Gothic tropes such as the grotesque, the uncanny, and the carnivalesque. I here employ these terms because, in their combination, they illuminate the manner in which the characters in *The Beetle* respond to the creature – and consequently, the manner in which 19th-century Britons near the fin de siècle may have responded to alternative sexualities and gender abnormalities. Importantly, though, these themes create the gaps through which the reading public might have imagined alternative sexualities.

Current scholarship assesses the extent to which monstrous Gothic figures embody cultural anxiety related to burgeoning issues in contemporary environments (see Baldick and Mighall (2000) for an extended discussion of trends in Gothic criticism). However, more nuance is required to assess the relationship between this strange tale and the sociocultural milieu of its writing. It is worthwhile, then, to analyze the extent to which characters in the novel attempt to modulate the identity of the Beetle for themselves. Instead of viewing the creature solely as the manifestation of cultural anxiety, this essay regards characters' incessant need to "read" the figure as such a manifestation. It is the characters, then, who are pathological, not the Beetle. Just as many cisgender individuals today feel the need to "read" their transgender peers, thereby reinforcing the gender binary of male/female normality, Marsh's characters ruminate upon the gendered, cultural, and species identities of the Beetle in the attempt to situate the figure within hegemonically established ideologies governing these spheres. By paying attention to the conventions of the Gothic mode and tropes, this paper situates *The Beetle* both within its genre and within the contentious sociopolitical environment of its publication, identifying the manner in which the text itself becomes uncanny, becomes a subversive entity embodying Gothic standards and thereby epideictically promoting queer identity.
Queering *The Beetle*

Richard Marsh divided *The Beetle* into four parts, each one chronicling the first-person narrative of a different protagonist. It is not always clear whether these figures write these narratives or 'speak' them directly to readers. Each section is incomplete, granting insights into the mystery of the Beetle based solely upon what each character is able to discern. Robert Holt presents us the first glimpse into this enigmatic creature, when he sneaks into a house and happens across a human entity who appears to be both male and female simultaneously. Why the novel is titled *The Beetle* becomes clear when this figure hypnotizes Holt and transforms into a beetle of monstrous proportion. Other characters come into play after Holt, whilst under the influence of the Beetle's mesmeric powers, confronts a man named Paul Lessingham, a politician with connections to two other narrators, Sydney Atherton and Marjorie Lindon. The more ominous the Beetle's presence becomes, the more these characters feel the need to investigate the mysterious happenings that take place throughout the novel. Marjorie, too, eventually finds herself hypnotized, and her kidnapping leads the men, who are soon joined by Confidential Agent Augustus Champnell, on a pursuit through the city of London.

In her essay "Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory's Debt to the Gothic," Mair Rigby highlights the fact that "at times the language and imagery of the Gothic seems to suffuse queer theory" (2009, 47). Rigby makes the compelling argument that "what we encounter in the Gothic is manifestly not the repression of sexual meaning, but rather the production of certain kinds of sexual meaning as *that which is supposed to be repressed*" (2009, 50-51; original emphasis). From Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to the Victorian context in which *The Beetle* was published – and beyond – specific kinds of sexuality (perhaps what one might today consider "queer") are characteristically repressed or explicitly identified as deviant on a grand social stage. However, alternative sexualities have not been left out of literary texts, popular novels, or discursive tracts; significantly, "deviant" sexual behavior is often foregrounded in Gothic fiction – more overtly so in the Victorian Gothic – suggesting that sexuality comprises a central, significant theme in these texts. As Rigby states, "the impression of concealment, the suggestion that there is a repressed secret and that secret is probably sexual, is important in many Gothic texts" (2009, 52). Thus, the Gothic genre entails the rhetorical maneuvering of secret or illicit sexual activity. It is precisely this "secret," this mysterious or nebulous sexuality, that captivated, horrified, or titillated Victorian readers deeply enmeshed within a fracturing cultural narrative of heterosexuality. Marsh, well aware of this Gothic tradition, manifests openly this deviant sexuality in the figure of the monstrous Beetle, thereby forcing the rest of his characters to look that complex, unnerving reality in the face.

21st-century readers and critics tend to regard Victorian culture as one fixated upon sexuality and the maintenance of sexual hygiene; this fixation manifested itself in Gothic literature as secrets that characters feel the need to decipher and consolidate within their mental frameworks. Such secrets, thinly veiled in *The Beetle*, represent what is a characteristic 19th-century phenomenon: the very real attempt to comprehend nebulous sexualities, changing identities, confusion, fear, dangerous Other figures (often crafted in the minds of patriarchal authorities) – all things that find their direct
counterparts in Gothic convention. What is most decidedly and significantly Gothic, at least as is useful in the present context, is what Julian Wolfreys regards as the ultimate function of the Gothic text, which "manifests itself as both a subversive force and a spectral mechanism through which social and political critique may become available and articulable, as we come to apprehend material realities, political discourses and epistemological frameworks from other invisible places" (2004, 11). The novel, when read along these lines, problematizes contemporary presentations of a benign hegemonic order free from the taint of dangerous Others and refuses to grant victory or satisfaction to any figure representative of the white patriarchy. Because the issue at hand in *The Beetle* is gender- and sex-oriented – a non-binary or gender non-conforming figure complicates dominant discourses surrounding both gender and sexuality and takes advantage of men and women alike – the application of queer theory becomes all the more salient, inextricable from the analysis of the text as Gothic subversion. Essentially, Marsh's text, whatever his intentions, complicates and dismantles prominent narratives endorsing heterosexuality and gender role conformity.

In keeping with the true spirit of queer theory, the Beetle will subsequently be referred to by the personal pronoun "they" in the lines that follow, "they" being the preferred pronoun of many individuals who do not adhere to the traditional gender binary. This practice is additionally supported by the fact that the Beetle possesses both male and female anatomical characteristics, thereby becoming a "they" by virtue of such multiplicity.

The power of the queer – and of queerness more generally – lies in its transgressive, subversive potential, a power utilized by the Beetle by virtue of their queer Gothic nature. I outline here the specifics of these connections between the queer and the Gothic as they play out for the Beetle, though later I will delineate more concretely the links made between the two in literary scholarship, particularly focusing on more recent moves to trans the Gothic. Though I take a work of fiction as my artifact of analysis in this essay, my goal is to understand Victorian readers' overwhelmingly positive response to the text – at the time, it was on a par in terms of popularity with the now canonical *Dracula* (Vuohelainen 2006, 89) – and so my guiding theoretical frame is decidedly rhetorical. There are thus two elements I will untangle: the gender, sexual, and spatial queerness of the Beetle and the generative subversion of *The Beetle* in real-world Victorian England as the reading public delighted in the sensational volume. Marsh's text was so well received during its time because, I argue, it offered readers a glimpse into corporealties that might be – sexual- and gender-based lives made possible through the kind of queer transgression and radical spatial maneuvering depicted by the novel.

This understanding of queer rhetoric(s) of *The Beetle* can be usefully combined with what is traditionally conceived of as epideictic, or celebratory, rhetoric(s). Briefly stated, epideictic rhetoric has frequently been defined as a means for orators to easily secure the agreement of their audiences; by praising (or blaming) something in a way with which the audience already agrees, orators strengthen their ethos and therefore establish connections with those whom they wish to persuade. In deploying this rhetorical concept, however, I do not imply that readers of *The Beetle* inherently *a priori* agreed with any themes contained within the novel. Instead, I mobilize Cynthia Miecznikowski Sheard's more recent articulation of the epideictic: "we also use the
epideictic to express the differences among our perceptions of what is and our visions of what could be, and to imagine possible, alternative worlds that might accommodate us all” (1996, 791).

In Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance (2014), Erin J. Rand articulates the radical potentialities of queer rhetorics grounded in identity and playfulness. Specifically, agency occurs (or not) as the result of a “productive indeterminacy” (2014, 24) that often inheres in an act of discourse. This act, itself agentic to the degree that preceding moments of discourse contained gaps necessary for its production, never aligns fully with the actor's intentions, and it certainly does not have a uniform effect upon audiences. There is ample room for (mis)interpretation and action other than what the rhetor intends. This, according to Rand, is distinctively queer – this productive indeterminacy – though she discusses only the queerness of the polemic generic form, highlighting ways in which "the form itself enables rhetorical acts that do not merely repeat the status quo" (2014, 67). Rand views "rhetorical forms," or genres, "as specific instantiations of institutional power" that somewhat determine and constrain the options for action available (2014, 164). In this case, the genre is the Gothic. For Rand, though, there is hope here. Importantly, "every instance of agency is, no matter how slightly, always delightfully queer" (2014, 168). It strikes me that this is something worth celebrating, worth embracing. Queerness is a state of embodiment that is always in flux, always radical, always undecided, and we see this quite concretely in the figure of the Beetle as they realize the radical potential outlined by Rand.

Jack Halberstam characterizes the Gothic genre as one of excess:

Gothic, within my analysis, may be loosely defined as the rhetorical style and narrative structure designed to produce fear and desire within the reader. The production of fear in a literary text (as opposed to a cinematic text) emanates from a vertiginous excess of meaning. Gothic, in a way, refers to an ornamental excess (think of Gothic architecture – gargoyles and crazy loops and spirals), a rhetorical extravagance that produces, quite simply, too much. (1995, 2)

The Gothic as genre therefore facilitates the gaps and slippages – the "productive indeterminacy" that makes possible the Beetle's subversive agency. Further, "the monster always represents the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities and so we need monsters and we need to recognize and celebrate our own monstrosities" (1995, 27). Finally, and most importantly, the Gothic "produces models of reading (many in any one location) that allow for multiple interpretations and a plurality of locations of cultural resistance" (1995, 23). Multiple interpretations and cultural resistance are both subversive options made possible via epideictic potentiality.

Ultimately, it is the Beetle's spatiality that facilitates their radical potentialities. In Richard Marsh, Minna Vuohelainen reads The Beetle through three spatial lenses: literary cartography (the way in which an author constructs a fictional world), literary geography (the way readers make sense of that fictional local), and geocriticism (the way critics analyze spatial features of a fictional text) (2015, 14). Focusing on the latter function, she (and I) highlights the ways in which the tropes of the Gothic genre enable Marsh to situate his characters spatially in London: "Genre thus becomes an essential
organisational and navigational tool both for the author and for the reader" (2015, 15). The Gothic genre renders the city of London uncanny in a manner that disorients the book's readership. Much like the characters, they, too, become lost and disoriented in attempting to navigate the metropolis, which Vuohelainen identifies as the means by which the author constructs the monstrous atmosphere of the text. The Beetle, of course, masters the layout of the city and moves about with ease. Considering the contrast to the characters, I argue that this navigational facility arises precisely from the Beetle's queerness – or, at least, that we can read the monster's movement through the lens of queerness and imagine radical alternatives à la Rand and Sheard.

Homosexuality, of course, was not clearly delimited at this point in time, but the text nonetheless projects sexual alternatives into the overarching cultural imaginary, and it is not fruitless to imagine that many readers may have delighted in the successes of the monstrous figure. While audiences today likewise delight in the wonderfully monstrous, it is worth noting that even current media frequently kill off queer characters. The Beetle, however, depicts the radical survivability of its queer monster. This is rendered all the more significant in a historical (and modern) context in which LGBTQ+ are often harassed, assaulted, and murdered because of their sexual and/or gender identification.

Highlighting the liminality of the Beetle, as I likewise do here, Vuohelainen portrays the navigability of the figure as follows: specifically, their "travelling and walking […] allow us to tell stories and imagine alternative modes of life, promoting subversive marginality as opposed to conformity" (2015, 59). The urban setting combined with the Gothic backdrop and the queer/trans identification therefore set the stage for the alternative imaginings made possible by the text.

Vuohelainen goes on to write of Gothic domesticity, which "provides a space for the imagination, its rooms promoting not only sensations of horror but also curiosity, passion, vulnerability, creativity, and an uncanny sense of homelessness, of belonging" (2015, 84). It is thus relevant that many of the novel's events take place in domiciles as much as across the streets of London, as the text depicts Gothic belonging not dissimilar to the queer families that have always existed across time and space. Finally, Vuohelainen concretizes the link between the Gothic and the transgressive potential of its monsters: "Marsh's Gothic is counter-panoptic, its settings transitory non-places and heterotopic counter-sites, its characters homeless exiles and spectral or nomadic boundary-crossers" (2015, 121). This analysis of the text necessitates a focus on the queer rhetorics of the novel and the transgressive potential of the monster, as I view this potential as inextricable from their queerness. In my view, it is virtually impossible to read The Beetle apart from its radical sexual imagination – one that I suspect garnered attention in Victorian England.

Importantly, though, this radical spatiality becomes possible only in the context of the Beetle's visibly queer body, as a close reading of the text illustrates. Employing traditional Gothic tropes of the grotesque, the uncanny, and the carnivalesque, Marsh constructs a fascinatingly queer figure who unashamedly exists on their own terms. Of import here is the manner in which cultural transformations and conflicting notions of identity interacted with literary productions of the period, particularly those in the Victorian Gothic mode.
Primarily,

the changes that many experienced in late-19th-century Britain are symbolised by excessive display of figures of indeterminant or altered shape: beasts with human characteristics; humans who are, or who become, beastly; characters of dubious or shifting classification. (Youngs 2014, 1)

Such a catalog of beastly figures lends itself well to an analysis of The Beetle, as the creature is frequently described in grotesque terms. Robert Holt's narrative, which presents readers with the initial description of the figure, sketches the Beetle as follows: "The cranium, and, indeed, the whole skull, was so small as to be disagreeably suggestive of something animal. The nose on the other hand, was abnormally large [...]" (Marsh 2004, 53). What follows these lines is a lengthened rumination upon the disagreeable and disturbing appearance of the apparently male figure lying prone on the bed in the house into which Holt has intruded. The gruesome nature of this figure is additionally defined along terms of gender, or rather multi-gender, as the Beetle's monstrosity is depicted as simultaneously a result of their disturbing physical appearance as well as their refusal or inability to adhere to the gender binary. Upon noticing something decidedly "feminine" in the creature's visage, Holt categorizes them as "some ghoulish example of her sex, who had so yielded to her depraved instincts as to have become nothing but a ghastly reminiscence of womanhood" (2004, 61). Early in the narrative, sexual depravity, whatever such a term entails, is identified as monstrous, and it is through such depravity that the Beetle becomes an 'Other' figure.

Most significantly, the Beetle's grotesque existence is linked to the female gender and femininity. This is not unique to the text, the Gothic form, or even the Victorian period as a whole. Mary Russo's work on the female grotesque (published under the same title) highlights salient features of this traditional literary figure: "The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official 'low' culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation" (1994, 8). For Russo, the grotesque figure, often feminized, is inextricably linked with marginalized groups – people of color, queer figures, non-European races/ethnicities, and women. Identified by Russo, with reference to Julia Kristeva, as "the privileged site of transgression" in artistic output, the female body has been used throughout history to uncannily situate subversive or frightening images within what is simultaneously supposed to be the comforting and life-giving maternal body (Russo 1994, 10). Thus, the female grotesque intricately links to contemporary prescriptions regarding the Angel in the House, misogynistic tendencies of the Victorian populace to regard women as susceptible to grotesque renderings, and the transgressive messages made possible in such depictions. In The Beetle, the creature's body serves as the repository of these subversive messages. Gender, sexuality, and an obscure ethnicity operate on a plane alternative to mainstream conceptions of identity, and the Beetle's mesmeric talents illustrate their ability to efface boundaries for the privileged adherents to Victorian hegemonic standards. For Russo, in 19th-century artistic production "the grotesque returns as the repressed of the political unconscious, as those hidden culture contents which by their abjection had consolidated the cultural identity of the bourgeoisie" (1994, 8-9). Sydney Atherton, Robert Holt, Marjorie Lindon, and
Augustus Champnell in large part comprise the bourgeois, or the mainstream, element of the novel, and it is their cultural identities, their mentalities, that are problematized by the Beetle's grotesque body.

It is perhaps only through the vehicle of the Gothic that Marsh is able to address such concerns as societal transformation, cultural anxiety, and intractable other figures. Subversive by definition, Gothic conventions enable writers, as Ardel Haefele-Thomas articulates, to interrogate "hegemonic ideals regarding sexuality, gender, identity, race, empire and nation" (2012, 2). The Beetle can be said to address all such concerns, problematizing the very society in which it was written. Presented in an imperial context, the creature is depicted as representative of an enigmatic foreign entity infiltrating the sanctity of the English homeland; they are neither man nor woman; and, to further complicate things, they are portrayed as possessing "in an especial degree, what, for want of a better term, one may call the mesmeric quality" (Marsh 2004, 105). The Beetle's extensive gift in mesmerism enables them to gain unimpeded access to the depths of Victorian reality and reveal secrets that people are most unwilling to share. Thus, the Beetle, by virtue of supernatural agility, not only adheres to traditional Gothic troping, they additionally provide the vehicle by which to question patriarchal authority. The queer existence of this figure, furthermore, only complicates this process by enabling the Beetle to reside beyond "a hegemonic Victorian construction of the patriarchal British family as upholder of gender, sexual, national and racial purity" (Haefele-Thomas 2012, 5). Thus, the Victorian Gothic figure necessarily must become a queered figure, as the late 19th century was perhaps the first time when gender and sexuality were being called into question on a widespread scale.

The Gothic genre indeed seems tailor-made for the analysis of social mores and the articulation of marginalized identities. The Beetle is both familiar and unfamiliar throughout the novel. They are undeniably a humanoid figure, but they exhibit multiple gender characteristics. They are foreign, though they harbor the knowledge of British culture and custom needed to navigate society literally and figuratively. They share enough in common with the middle- to upper-class white British protagonists that there are lines of connection affixing these characters to the Beetle, and there is enough that is dissimilar to force the characters to question their own identities on the basis of this camaraderie. Characters map their own notions of reality upon the creature, and when that creature responds or behaves in a manner not consonant with that perceived hegemonic truth, the various protagonists are left unsettled. In this sense, the Beetle becomes the double of everyone who encounters them; "in the double there is both that which is familiar enough to be disturbing and strange enough to remind us of the otherness that inhabits the self-same" (Wolfreys 2004, 15). Essentially, the Beetle – the double – operates as a grotesque mirror of the society in which it thrives and which it subverts by its very existence.

Though Wolfreys (2004) specifically references narratives involving ghostly presences and the attendant anachronisms inherent in such appearances, much of his theorizing can be applied directly to The Beetle, if we are willing to address the otherworldliness of the creature. Much of the Beetle's identity is anachronic in that they possess no clear history or past, and they seem to arrive suddenly from an ancient African heritage rooted in mysticism and sexual prowess. When transplanted into
Victorian London – that modern hub of discourse, social rhetoric, scientific and technological advances, and socioeconomic mobility – chaos ensues. The supernatural enigma exists alongside the carefully cultivated dandy scientist and the audacious young woman trying to define herself in a man's world, all taking place amidst rapid cultural expansion, transformation, and decay. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, and the Beetle's presence was felt every step of the way.

Paulina Palmer delineates the "hybrid construction" of the Gothic, particularly highlighting "its destabilizing of the binary oppositions male/female, human/animal, man/demon and cultural definitions of them" (2012, 152). Victorian Gothic literature and queer existence alike function to overturn the oppressive binaries left unexamined by the average citizen, and they do so through their relation to the uncanny. Specifically emphasized by Palmer are the "uncanny sensations, and the disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar that they generate, [which] reflect the projection of unconscious fears and desires originating in 'something repressed which recurs'" (2012, 2; original emphasis). The Beetle's relation to the uncanny, then, is twofold: on the one hand, the figure represents the transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar, as a foreign, multi-gendered entity residing in a human form. On the other hand, the uncanniness of the Beetle catalyzes the burgeoning consciousness of fears and desires that had otherwise lain dormant in the various individuals who come into contact with them, as each one comes to comprehend the dangerous unfamiliar masquerading as a familiar, one that is no longer safe or dependable. Contemporary readers, too, experienced similar results when confronted with the reality of queer or homosexual epistemologies – both when they engaged with Gothic texts and when they were subjected to the cultural dialogue on homosexuality. Of course, it should be noted that queer figures themselves are not monstrous, but only rendered so in Gothic fiction in proportion to common fears and misconceptions surrounding them. And today, certainly, such representation is no longer feasible.

The moment of uncanny recognition figures greatly in The Beetle, however, as the novel registers instances in which the characters' gender-based assumptions are shown to have been erroneous. The first of such moments occurs when Holt realizes that he has "mistaken a woman for a man" (Marsh 2004, 61). Such recognition is not all that occurs, however, as Holt also references "the effect [upon Holt] of the changes which had come about in his appearance" (61) – alterations that are brought about as he increasingly registers the horrific implications of the uncanny life before him. Though he does not specifically define such changes within his narrative, it becomes clear that his encounter with the uncanny prompts mental processes by which Holt must justify his mistake in the context of a society that requires clearly demarcated gender categories. He must overcome the mental confusion that results from such an encounter, for the uncanny trope locates the Gothic queer problematic within the consciousness of those who directly encounter it. In this sense, the uncanny manifests itself as a result of the characters' desires to "read" the Beetle's identity. Given the popular success of the novel, however, I argue that Victorians' reading of the body paved the way for radical sexual reimaginings instead of merely eliciting the cultural anxieties so frequently applied to Gothic texts.
Keeping with Gothic convention, the primary function of the uncanny in *The Beetle* is to call into question Victorian norms regulating individual expression of sexuality and gender. For Palmer, "references to the uncanny, rather than being incidental and merely contributing to the novel's atmospheric effect […] tend to be employed instrumentally to investigate and represent key aspects of queer existence" (2012, 179). This investigation manifests itself in the mental work the characters undertake when confronted with queer realities, paralleled by the legal proceedings initiated by the Confidential Agent. Representation manifests itself in the depiction of the plight of queer beings rendered monstrous by societal ostracizing and widespread ignorance.

To address such a concern, particularly regarding problematic hegemonic discourse, it is worth examining the extent to which *The Beetle* aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's articulation of the carnivalesque. Though a text like *The Beetle* does not display overt qualities of the carnivalesque tradition (there are no carnivals, festivities, or the inversion of social class), it nonetheless shares elements of this heritage via the "grotesque body." For Mary Russo, it is this grotesque body, frequently anatomically feminine, that enables the message of the carnivalesque to foreground itself in relation to the equilibrium or hegemony of the period and culture of its operation. For example, Russo characterizes the carnivalesque – the marginalized or oppressed subculture assertively emerging into the dominant culture – as follows:

> The categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation […]. Carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. (Russo 1994, 62)

When applied to *The Beetle*, the carnivalesque reveals the subversive nature of the novel. By virtue of its uncanny qualities, as we have seen, the Beetle transgresses the boundaries between the high and the low, the dominant and the marginalized, the heterosexual and the Uranian, the familiar and the supernatural. Accordingly, various identities simultaneously reside within the body of the enigmatic figure, and because they are grotesque, they elicit frightening images of both the dominant and the hidden.

If one of the functions of the carnivalesque (in its literary manifestations) is to reveal "the possibility of a completely different life, a life organized according to laws different from those governing ordinary life" (Bakhtin 1999, 147; original emphasis), then the novel may be considered potentially representative of an imaginative rendering of an alternate queer lifestyle. Atherton, primarily, seems to be the ideal vehicle for such an endeavor. However, the text's characters do not explicitly imagine such a reality, and this foreign, queer existence is depicted as incomprehensible and subject to widespread societal derision. Ultimately, Marsh does not overtly present the possibility of a new Victorian world in which gender relations are more fluid, and in which adherence to cultural norms is not strictly enforced via social pressure and self-policing. This latter occurrence has more to do with the internal mindset of the characters and their refusal to imagine alternate realities, however, than with the author's inability to
conceive of such. What Marsh presents instead is complication and ambivalence, as the Beetle ultimately operates beyond the full conceptualization of the novel’s characters, leaving the carnival in the minds of the readers.

It is within Holt’s narrative that hegemonic ideals governing sexuality are first directly subverted and presented to readers as inherently nuanced. Pointing to ”a metamorphosis [that] took place in the very abysses of my being,” Holt articulates the transformative nature of the Beetle’s presence (Marsh 2004, 62). However, it is not the Beetle who transforms in this context, but rather Holt himself when hypnotized by the creature; his ”condition was one of dual personality, – while physically, I was bound, mentally to a considerable extent, I was free” (69). The Beetle already possesses such a dual personality by virtue of their multiple genders; displacing such an identity into the cogitations of a narrator figure enables readers to imagine the plight of the real-life Victorian ‘queer’ identity.

Primarily, ”the foreigner’s sexual identity renders Holt’s own uncertain in relation to it” (Youngs 2014, 88), an occurrence which not only calls into question prevailing Victorian notions governing gender identity, it additionally presents a cogent image of those who found themselves unable to adhere to these notions. Of course, this is not to say that Victorian England was rampant with transgender individuals, or even people who recognized themselves as homosexual (or Uranian); instead, I articulate within a queer paradigm the oppressive nature of strict hegemonic norms and their inability to retain value in a quickly changing society like England at the fin de siècle. Significantly, the Beetle permanently sustains a multiple identity; they never alter in this respect. Rather, it is others who are compelled to transform against their will in the novel, relocating the queerness into the heteronormative Victorian body.

Holt, Lindon, Champnell, and, to a lesser extent, Atherton are limited by their adherence to Victorian cultural mores dictating gender expression and sexual identity. Their need to ‘read’ the uncanny creature and categorize them within more stable identity hierarchies prohibits them from fully understanding the Beetle’s existence as a queer individual. It is this phenomenon, furthermore, that enables the Beetle – and the novel itself – to operate under the radar, so to speak. Because such figures expect the creature to adhere to societal conventions governing gender identity and sexual expression, the path is opened for them to pursue alternative avenues of action – very literally within the spatial context of London.

The novel’s conclusion itself refuses to categorize the Beetle, either sexually or otherwise, ensuring that the creature remains enigmatic, aloof, and intractable. Marsh refuses even narrative clarity, as the ultimate fate of the Beetle, as it can be known to Augustus Champnell, eludes understanding, for the Confidential Agent is not acquainted with the true outcome of the events that have heretofore transpired. Several years following the train crash scene, from which the creature escapes undetected, Champnell attempts to piece together the history of the Beetle and their eventual escape – all to no avail. Though an explosion near Dongola reveals ”fragments of what seemed bodies […] bodies neither of men nor women, but of creatures of some monstrous growth” (Marsh 2004, 320) appears to outline the violent death of the incomprehensible figure, such a hypothesis can never be proven. The novel, then, forces the reader to conclude, alongside Champnell, that ”it cannot be certainly shown that the Thing is not
still existing” (322). Just as the Beetle's operations remain obscure during the text's narrative events, by virtue of their subversive, uncompromising existence, they ultimately escape the bounds of the written text, rendering the conclusion ambivalent and undetermined.

**Queer/Trans Gothic Lineage**

Though I do not explicitly address transgender theory in this essay, I use this remaining space to offer voice to the trans reality of the Beetle, as it is necessary to regard the character as both a queer and trans figure. A recent collection, *TransGothic in Literature and Culture* (2017), links monstrous spatiality and border crossing to transness: "'transgothic' helps us understand the genre as a mobile one that actively crosses boundaries and margins, creating and marking various forms of transitions and migrations in its narrative path" (Zigarovich 2017, 4). Specifically, for Jolene Zigarovich, trans in this mode offers "transformation, development, creativity, reorganization, and reconstruction" (2017, 4) – a fitting description of the epideictic rhetoricity of the Gothic monster by virtue of its fluid and multiple identity.

Further work needs to be done in order to assess the longstanding heritage of a text like *The Beetle* in which the queer/trans monster ambiguously survives the story's plot. In heeding Halberstam's call "that horror be read backwards through the history of horror and forwards through the potential of horror" (1995, 157), I consider, for example, recent public infatuations with the monster of the horror film *The Babadook*. To very briefly summarize, the Babadook is a Gothic monster that emerges, literally, from a closet to terrorize a single mother and her six-year-old son. At her wit's end, imbued with the power of motherly devotion, the woman banishes the monster to the home's basement, where she continues to care for and feed this entity. It is possible, and rewarding, therefore, to read the Babadook as a queer figure that does not reinscribe heterosexual violence or normativity. Rather, the monster in this story becomes a member of the family, though not in a normatively sexualized manner. The woman and the Babadook are not lovers but instead reside in queer kinship, an alternative imagining of "family." In Victorian England, as today, mainstream representation of marginalized lifestyles produced discursive disruptions into hegemonic ideology worth celebrating.

What ultimately becomes of the Beetle we as readers do not know, but if we are now in the business of queer re-imagining, I have faith we scholars and creative writers can construct a few possibilities.

**Works Cited**

*The Babadook*. Dir. Jennifer Kent. Screen Australia, 2014. DVD.


