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# Into the Woods: Masculinity, Humanness, and Primitivism in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*

Ian Bradshaw

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Richard Marsh's 1897 horror novel, *The Beetle*, features Sydney Atherton, a careful restrained, but effectively mad scientist, whose jealousy compels him to invent a weapon of mass destruction (Marsh 102). He is a curious character who blurs the lines between nobleness and savagery and reveals the nexuses between imperialism, orientalism, masculinity, and Victorian constructions of "humanness." For all his dignified airs, Atherton's violent and sexual impulses control him, and his inventions propagate imperial violence.

In this essay, I argue that Sydney Atherton's chauvinist, imperialist designs, sexual insecurities, and proximity to the racialized Other identify him as a primitive, despite his "civilized," Western ideals. Throughout the paper, I employ two definitions of primitivism: a standard definition that refers to devolved, debased, or not-fully-human people, and an imperialist definition that refers to nonindustrial, non-Western, "uncivilized" people. These definitions overlap considerably, and I use them interchangeably, because we cannot ignore how imperial, Western thought cast non-Westerners as less than human. My paper combines New Historical and psychoanalytical approaches to literature to determine how the novel responds to a collective psychological experience within a specific historical moment. More specifically, I focus on Victorian anxieties about human devolution. Drawing on W. C. Harris and Dawn Vernooy, I examine Atherton's aggression. However, Harris and Vernooy never explicitly identify Atherton as a primitive or explain how he manifests Victorian anxieties about human devolution. Thus, I remedy a significant oversight in the scholarship by making this claim. I also reference Thomas M. Stuart's commentary on evolutionary competition, and I synthesize Victoria

Margree's study of Britishness and masculinity with my own thoughts about primitive sexuality in ostensibly "civilized" society (Stuart 223; Margree 69).

Atherton's deep, sexualized hatred of Paul Lessingham speaks to Victorian anxieties about human devolution and emasculation, which dominate Marsh's novel. When the scientist discovers that Lessingham intends to marry his childhood friend and life-long love, Marjorie, he teases and scolds her, then gracefully excuses himself (Marsh 92-96). However, the scientist immediately fantasizes about violent revenge (Marsh 97-98). He passes Lessingham's house, and he curses him, his supporters, and his career, before confronting the Robert Holt and retiring to his private laboratory. Holt's interaction with Atherton, according to Holt, is especially curious. Marsh introduces Atherton before Atherton introduces himself, and the version of Atherton that we see is incomplete, inchoate, and possibly inhuman. Holt describes Atherton as "gentle" and "handsome," yet the scientist enthusiastically recommends murder (Marsh 82-83). This conversation reveals the tension between Atherton's "civilized" self-presentation and primitive reality. The scientist does not reveal his identity or name, so he implicitly dehumanizes himself. Immediately, he ceases to be a whole person; he is a mysterious, violent stranger who wants his rival dead.

Marsh does not offer a mere male rivalry based on sexualized hatred; he stages a conflict between sexes that reveals how sexual hierarchies and constructions of "civilization" are inextricably linked. As Atherton retreats from the party, he offers some angry complaints, which reveal how he views his friend, their relationship, and romantic relationships in general. His vision of romance is paradoxically artificial and deeply primitive. He declares, "if everyone has his own, she [Marjorie] is mine, and, in that sense, she will always be mine" (Marsh 97). He imagines marriage as an artificial, social relationship, but recommends a "natural," primitivist gender hierarchy by asserting his "right" to Marjorie's affection. Thus, he ironically embraces primitive

impulses by appealing to conventional, “civilized” British gender divisions and hierarchies.

Margree reminds us that the Victorian construct of “the ‘angel of the house’ organized masculinity and femininity around a division between public and private that relegated women to the domestic space” (72). The metrosexual, dandyish Atherton responds to the “New Woman,” whom Marjorie Lindon typifies, with conservative hyper-masculinity (Harris and Vernooy 345). However, the masculinity that Atherton performs, while conventionally “British,” completely debases him. His desires to re-relegate the woman to the domestic sphere, erase female sexuality, and reclaim the virile masculinity that New Women ostensibly usurp go together with his sexualized hatred for Lessingham. His desires for sexual control reveal primitive impulses. Not only does female sexual emancipation threaten to destabilize gender hierarchies, but it also threatens to destabilize civilization itself. In this way, Atherton effectively surrenders his humanity to protect a construction of it.

Humanity and masculinity occupy similar spaces in *The Beetle*, and injury to one usually means injury to the other. Constructs of humanity and masculinity hinge on experiences of Britishness. As Margree argues, Marsh advances a specific construction of British normativity, which “demands the preservation of the integrity of a British identity envisaged as virile and masculine, and this requires the repudiation of anything that would threaten this – racial otherness, femininity. . .” (Margree 79). We cannot separate sexual and social instability because they create crises of identity as is evident in this novel. Most men in Marsh’s novel lose their humanity and masculinity to the supernatural Other, yet the Beetle never successfully “unmans” or dehumanizes Atherton in a real, physical way. Instead, Lessingham and Marjorie reveal Atherton’s sexual insecurities.

While Atherton and Lessingham’s contest for Marjorie is inherently debasing and “primitive,” we can read their relationship in other ways that support my thesis. Atherton admires Lessingham, and

his strange admiration identifies Atherton as a primitive in several important, indirect ways. Harris and Vernooy observe that, “While Atherton is not physically overpowered by the Beetle as Holt is, Atherton finds himself intellectually obedient to Lessingham’s verbal arguments, to the power of his words, his mesmerizing charisma” (359). These references to Lessingham’s hypnotic power are significant, especially since Atherton resists the Beetle’s mesmerism. Curiously, Atherton compares Lessingham’s style of rhetoric to witchcraft (Margree 71). He suggests that there is something unnatural—or too natural—and primitive about it. In this way, Marsh conflates foreign and domestic threats to Victorian constructions of civilization, and he casts the steadfast representatives of British civilization as decidedly anti-British. As a hypnotic, Radical upstart, Lessingham’s politics fail to be functionally British, and we can read Atherton’s attraction to his rhetoric as a form of anti-British, anti-civilization, “primitivist” dissent. However, they are still sexual competitors, and their contest for Marjorie directs the narrative. Thus, we can read the planned murder of Lessingham as, paradoxically, anti-primitive violence against him that translates to real, imperial violence. Just as Atherton resorts to “base” hypermasculinity to combat the New Woman, he resorts to imperial violence to protect or promote Britishness that Lessingham and Marjorie seem to undermine. Ironically, imperial violence also reveals nonnormative, degenerate, and primitive impulses, as I explain later.

Atherton’s proximity to the Beetle identifies him as a primitive. Marsh cleverly doubles them, and both characters demonstrate similar sexualized hatreds: “The Oriental and Atherton are doubles in their reanimation after nearly dying, their status as outsiders to the political process, their hypnotic ability, their sexual designs on Marjorie, and their simultaneous hatred of Lessingham” (Vuohelainen 300n2). By doubling the characters, Marsh implicitly others and primitivizes Atherton. He conflates the Beetle’s “oriental magic” with Atherton’s Western science because he refers to his invention as “magic” (Marsh 145). In his analysis of *Dracula* and *The Beetle*, Thomas Stuart insists

that, “They are not monsters of degeneracy but rather of stopped time, their existence emphasizing humanity’s failure to progress in evolutionary competition” (223). We can apply the same reading to Atherton. He undergoes total social and sexual stagnation, rather than atavistic reversion. His sexual frustrations and insecurities motivate him.

When the Beetle confronts Atherton, he escapes its hypnosis, declaring, “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). Here, Atherton clearly, implicitly racializes the Beetle. The inventor’s casual violence, misanthropy, and racism are curious, and his threat against the Beetle reflects the anti-imperial undercurrents in Marsh’s novel. His inventions represent gestures towards violent, “Western” masculinity and constructions of humanity that magnify their fragility. It is important to note the symbolic implications of Atherton’s decision to murder Lessingham’s cat, because it is feminized, racialized, orientalist symbol. Thus, we see “an act that reads as a coldly objective experiment, a literalizing of violence against the Other” (Harris and Vernooy 363). Victorian anxieties about human devolution hinge on xenophobic anxieties. Britons’ interactions with a nameless, foreign Other at home and abroad apparently threaten their identity and biology, and their imperial projects represent a kind of self-endangerment. In this case, Marsh conflates identity and biology, and normative “Britishness” typifies superior, masculine, evolved humanity.

Atherton argues that good, civilized government depends on superior scientific knowledge: “ ‘You’re adding to your stock of information every second, and, in these days, when a member of parliament is supposed to know all about everything, information’s the one thing wanted’ ” (Marsh 137). However, his quest for information depends on extraordinary violence and thus ceases to be authentically human. Percy Woodville’s severe anxiety surrounding Atherton’s inventions separates the inventor from “civilized” society, in this case

embodied by Percy, who is cruel and unsympathetic, and he manipulates his friend. Atherton's treatment of Percy is curious, and their interactions have obvious homoerotic connotations, which we cannot dismiss. Of course, Percy's intense dislike for cats could be an invitation for a queer reading (Marsh 135). The context seems to recommend it. Atherton gets Percy drunk, "takes him home where he forces more liquor on him, and proceeds to demonstrate. . . his own deep-seated homosocial desire/hatred for Paul" (Harris and Vernooy 363). In this way, Atherton's laboratory is a sexual laboratory where degradation is possible, and the proximity between imperial and nonnormative sexual violence conflates them. Harris and Vernooy acknowledge a "link between imperialism's discursive (and so often material) circumscription of women and male homoeroticism" (342). Here, we can see that link in practice; his attempts to destroy Lessingham and undermine Marjorie's "masculinity" by proving his own make different kinds of sexual "abnormalities" possible. Thus, Atherton becomes an agent of devolution and degradation, as well as a microcosm for the insidious, degrading power of imperialism. Even if this connection does not identify Atherton as a primitive, it proves that he encourages devolution and primitivism.

Finally, how should we read Atherton and Grayling's relationship, and why does Marsh include it in his novel? Grayling's affection for Atherton's is curious. She is incredibly supportive and enthusiastic, and she offers to finance his projects (Marsh 118-119). Atherton evades her advances, but eventually marries her (Marsh 321). Like Marjorie, Grayling tries to demonstrate "masculine" female power, and her partnership with Atherton undermines his chauvinistic, imperial gesture; it "functions as a bid to forward her own romantic victory rather than to promulgate a national project for military dominance" (Harris and Vernooy 347). In this way, she simultaneously empowers and emasculates him. Like Atherton, Grayling uses imperial violence to assert her "masculinity"; however, she uses it to undermine Britishness, rather than promote it, because she wants to upend normative gender

hierarchies. Ultimately, Grayling fails as a New Woman. According to Harris and Vernooy, “Her daring. . . is cut short by her conscientious stance on pussy-protection in Atherton’s lab: her unwillingness to participate in (feline) slaughter” (348). This symbolic analysis suggests that Grayling cannot realize sexual emancipation because she does not completely commit to “masculine” violence; she will not kill the cat.

Now that we understand Atherton and Grayling’s relationship, we can determine how it identifies him as a primitive. How can their relationship be primitive if it depends on normative Western gender hierarchies? The novel ends with an epilogue: “She [Grayling] began, the story goes, by loving him immensely; I can answer for the fact that he has ended by loving her as much” (Marsh 321). Atherton did not love Grayling when she wanted masculine authority, and he could not love her until she fell into a feminine gender role. Margree concludes, “Neither the masculinised woman nor the emasculated man will survive. . . In the case of Marjorie, it is because by the end of the novel she has been returned to a position of normative femininity” (78). In the case of Grayling, this is also true. While they have a normative relationship, the masculinity that Atherton performs completely debases him. His desires to relegate Grayling to the domestic sphere and reclaim the virile masculinity that she tries to usurp identifies him as a primitive. Sexual insecurities thus dominate his relationships and stabilize his identity as a primitive.

Readers might struggle to identify a main character in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* that best serves the author’s purposes, but I would argue that he gives the most rich and radical social commentary to Sydney Atherton. My readings of Atherton, his identity, and his relationships prove that he interacts with devolution anxieties in meaningful ways, and the novel seems to revolve around his problems. His chauvinist, imperialist designs and his relationship with the Other identify him as a primitive, and he clearly manifests the hypocrisy and violence of “civilized” Western society. I believe that Marsh uses him to interrogate this hypocrisy; however, he still resorts to traditional



categories of normalcy and abnormalcy. Regardless, we can use his novel to gauge late-Victorian gender, racial, and social anxieties.

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