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“Not a muscle at my command”: Mesmeric Trance, Consent, and #MeToo in Richard Marsh

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Never before had I realized what was meant by the power of the eye. They held me enchained, helpless, spell-bound. I felt that they could do with me as they would; and they did. (Marsh, *The Beetle: A Mystery* 54)

I had . . . taken out that plum-coloured cloak. . . . [T]he blood with which it was soaked, as it dried, had glued the folds together. . . . And the stiffness was horrible. When one reflected with what it has been stiffened, and how, and when, and associated with the reflection that fair-faced girl, with truth in her voice and innocence in her eyes, one wondered. (Marsh, *The Goddess: A Demon* 55)

<1>The fin-de-siècle imperial gothic narrative is all too familiar, marked by tremulous uncertainty and paralyzing fear surrounding the figure of a foreign and criminal mesmerist and the bloody sexual violence the figure unleashes. Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle: A Mystery* (1897) and *The Goddess: A Demon* (1900) are preoccupied with sexual violence as perpetrated across variable gender, racial, and species boundaries, and they stage the violence of the attack through the mesmeric incapacitation of the victim by the violator. In this essay, I argue that mesmerism, or hypnotism, functions in the texts as a metaphor for the uncontestable power hierarchies that undergird the professional and social space, structuring it in ways that make any kind of performance of consent—the granting or the withholding/refusing of it—impossible at the very outset, much like the hypnotic trance that leaves the hypnotized incapable of free self-willed action. That is, the mesmeric paralysis of the victim represents the unavailability of the very space of consent to the hierarchical inferior in an unequal relationship—the kind that typically populates our workspaces and social structures. Further, this image of hypnotic incapacitation demonstrates the complexity and apparent inscrutability of a situation of sexual harassment—a complexity that often escapes our social understanding, leaving us incapable of grasping the full extent of the victim’s horrifying predicament. As such, the novels have crucial overlaps with the recent socio-discursive digital and media-based movement called #MeToo that attempts to expose sexual harassment and harassers, especially in workspaces, through assertive declarations of personal experience. The #MeToo movement aims to overthrow the institutionalized sexist blindness that leads society to not only normalize sexual violence in the socio-professional sphere but to also discredit/criminalize the survivor for the putative fuzziness of the resistance (the ‘No’). The movement foregrounds the impossibility of the articulation of the ‘No’ (the

refusal of consent) in a hierarchical relationship while simultaneously insisting on the reality of the sexual attack. And it crucially sculpts a new digital language—“#MeToo”—to express and bypass this very linguistic problem that is the unique complexity surrounding sexual harassment and violence. Christine Hume gestures towards this crucial intervention performed by #MeToo when she notes how the movement “started by using the power of *language, narrative, and performance* to force a large-scale public reckoning with patriarchy and toxic masculinity” (3; emphasis added). My essay brings together these strands of a twenty-first century digital activist movement with nineteenth-century texts that were indirectly beginning to address similar tensions through the filter of contemporary sexual anxieties surrounding mesmerism. My essay ultimately indicates how a retrospective look at these cultural narratives, produced at a time that saw the calcification of modern legal, political, and social systems, enriches our ability to better understand the real human stakes underlying the often hazy current-day debates surrounding rape, sexual consent, and rights.

<2>Located in contemporary British-Egyptian imperial tensions, *The Beetle* tells the tale of Britain’s invasion by a shape-shifting, gender-ambiguous invader, one that Roger Luckhurst calls a “liminal man-woman-goddess-beetle-Thing”—a priestess of the Egyptian goddess Isis that seeks vengeance upon her former captive, Paul Lessingham, a member of the House of Commons and a rising political figure (160). In an episode from the past, we learn that Paul was captured and sexually violated in Egypt in the beetle-emblazoned temple of Isis by her priestess. Paul attempts to kill the woman, but she transforms into a beetle and escapes. He returns to England, and in the present-day narrative, the hybrid colonial priestess-idol-insect figure follows him, seeking revenge. The Beetle hypnotizes and arguably rapes the homeless and destitute Robert Holt in order to use him as a pawn in its mission of vengeance against Paul. It also attempts to hypnotize, control, and violate Paul’s fiancée Marjorie. Ultimately, however, the Beetle is (seemingly) overcome by the combined efforts of the British protagonists, including Paul, Marjorie Lindon, Marjorie’s friend Sydney Atherton, and the private detective, Augustus Champnell. In *The Goddess: A Demon*, a less well-known imperial gothic novel, Marsh shows the invasion of London by a destructive Indian idol of “an ancient Hindoo Goddess” (Marsh, *The Goddess* 294). The novel begins when the detective-narrator, Ferguson, imagines being near his friend Edwin Lawrence’s room, hearing animalistic noises coming from the inside, and seeing a “creature” in a long robe butchering someone whom he supposes to be Lawrence. Just as he recovers from this imaginative experience—portrayed as being on the cusp of dream and reality—a woman (Bessie, an innocent and famous actor) enters his room, dazed about her identity and location, and wrapped in the same blood-stained cloak that Ferguson had seen on the “creature.” The imagined murder of Edwin is confirmed by legal discovery and Ferguson tries to save Bessie (whom he considers innocent) from police allegations of murder by flouting British law. At the end, one learns that it was in fact Edwin’s brother, *Philip* Lawrence, who had been murdered by Edwin. The more interesting discovery, however, is that the heinous act had been committed in Edwin’s presence, through what seems to be the physical mediation of Bessie (who happened to be present), *both of them* entirely under the influence of a demoniacal Indian idol—a goddess-statue that then proceeds to butcher Edwin himself at the end of the novel when he surrenders himself to it. In the reassuringly final scenes of the novel, the goddess-statue is dismembered by the legal authorities and is revealed to have been a contrivance manufactured in an Allahabad workshop, used to orchestrate human sacrifices in the honor of the gods at an Indian temple, and subsequently purchased and transported to England by Edwin. What is crucial

for the purpose of this discussion is the way the text implies that Bessie was mysteriously hypnotized and sexually assaulted by the goddess while in a trance so that she appears at the start of the novel in Ferguson's bedroom, soaked in blood, and with no recollection of the past.

<3>The reason that these fin-de-siècle novels about mesmerism are formative to the debate surrounding sexual harassment in the twenty-first century is that mesmerism, beginning in the late-eighteenth century and leading up to the late-nineteenth century, was always precariously associated with fears and anxieties surrounding the mesmerist's undue and potentially sexual control over the entranced subject. Outlining how the three waves of production of gothic fiction are "bound up with the cyclical history of trance-states," Luckhurst observes that from the "first accounts of Mesmer's treatments it was the risk to women at the hands of male charlatans that was the key anxiety" (148, 156). The first official report on Mesmerism in 1784, notes Luckhurst, cited women's easy excitability and nerves as dangers and described their entranced (hypnotized or mesmerized) state as one of sexual arousal. Luckhurst crucially notes both sides of the question that concern us in the #MeToo discourse: sexual violence and regressive societal fears surrounding putatively false accusations of sexual violence. He explains that, on one hand, "it was argued that it was the very passivity and amnesiac state of trance that left women open to ravishment," and, on the other hand, "doctors were also concerned that the 'voluptuous feelings' associated with trance could lead to women patients inventing accusations of rape from their disorderly and sensual trains of thought" (157). Julian Wolfreys notes that for nineteenth-century texts, "mesmerism is readable as an act analogous with sexual penetration" (13). Maurizio Ascari explains that while nineteenth-century crime fiction often portrayed mesmerism "as an instrument at the service of detection and justice," mesmerism was also regarded as a "dark power" and the list of mesmeric villains in nineteenth-century literature is intriguing (72). Ascari explains that the "power of mesmerism, which promised the complete control of one mind over another," had in fact been "repeatedly fictionalised all over Europe, giving writers the opportunity to explore the dreams and fears of sexual dominance it implied" (73).<1> Referring to works of mesmeric fiction by Oliphant, Buchanan and Murray, George du Maurier, and Besant, Mary Elizabeth Leighton studies "the force of popular representations of the hypnotist as criminal" (222). Noting how the hypnotist was "construed as a criminal" ("as power-thirsty exploiter of vulnerable female subjects; as money-grubbing *faux* spiritualist; as vengeance-seeking charlatan; and as innocent-seeming, clandestine schemer"), Leighton demonstrates how this representation "figured in the press of the 1880s and 1890s as well as in fiction" (221).<2> Leighton notes that writings of this sort were "consistent in representing hypnotism as dangerous," that "the threat that hypnotism represent[ed] in these novels" was either directly or indirectly sexual, and that it confirmed the power that the hypnotist was seen to hold over his subject "either to exploit or to respect the subject's sexual or moral integrity" (221). As Alex Owen concludes, the very notion of the trance, in mesmerism or spiritualism, was infused with sexuality—the very "vocabulary of trance mediumship oozed sexuality" and "[m]ediums surrendered and were then entered, seized, possessed by another" (218).

<4>Mesmerism and its sexual associations have frequently featured in critical discussions of Marsh's *The Beetle*, even though *The Goddess* has been woefully under-researched. Wolfreys discusses the sexual implication of the mesmeric undertones in *The Beetle*, and identifies the foreigner's particular kind of sexual threat as "syphilophobia"—"the anxiety and fear of widespread transmission of sexually transmitted disease" (13). Victoria Margree notes how

Robert is “placed under ‘mesmeric’ control by the man in the bed” and how “the series of assaults [on him] is clearly to be read as a form of sexual violation” (66). Margree argues, however, that if it is true that the “physical and mesmeric assaults are to be understood as ‘sexual’ assaults that establish their victim in a ‘feminised’ position in relation to another man,” then the text must be understood as “forming an extended homoerotic and masochistic fantasy” (67). That is, “despite the rhetoric of repulsion that surrounds the descriptions of assault,” according to Margree, these episodes are actually narrated with the aim of “inducing ‘perverse’ pleasure in the reader” (67). Resonating more with Kelly Hurley’s description of “the Beetle’s atrocities” as some “gothic version of rape, inflicted upon male and female bodies alike” (124), I argue conversely that *The Beetle*, and, in less pronounced ways, *The Goddess*, portray the mesmeric interludes as episodes not of sexual pleasure but of sexual violence. Additionally, I particularly emphasize the complexities of #MeToo—especially surrounding the understanding of consent—that find expression in the nuanced portrayal of rapacious mesmerism in the novels.

Anxiety of Encounters: Mesmerism and Assault

<5>The texts are explicit in their depiction of what are undeniably accounts of sexual violence accompanied by the victim’s distressing inability to resist. As Kelly Hurley notes, *The Beetle* is “obsessed with naked bodies” and the “victims of the Isis cult” are all stripped, “leeringly examined, or tormented, or sexually molested” (139). The novel opens with the unemployed and famished tramp, Robert Holt, seeking shelter in a house with a half-open window. Inside, he discovers the horrors of the foreign “Beetle” that violates and incarcerates him, first by appearing as a mysterious animal (part-spider, part-beetle) and later as a gender-labile man. During Robert’s initial encounter with the terrifying animal that predominantly chases him as a pair of haunting eyes, we are served a graphic description of the molestation that follows:

I realized that the creature was beginning to ascend my legs, to climb my body. . . . [I]t mounted me . . . It pressed lightly against my clothing with . . . spider’s legs. . . . They embraced me softly, stickily, . . . each time it moved. Higher and higher! It had gained my loins. It was moving towards the pit of my stomach. . . . It was at my chest . . . it touched my lips . . . [it] embraced me with its myriad legs. (51-2)

Very soon after this, Robert is forcibly undressed by the “man in the bed,” a foreign and gender-fluid entity, that commands him to strip (“Undress!”)—an instruction that Robert has no ability to resist. Robert “let[s] [his] . . . sodden, shabby clothes fall anyhow upon the floor,” and as he “st[ands] naked in front of him,” he notices how “[a] look came on his face” which “if it was meant for a smile, was a satyr’s smile” (55). The violent voyeurism and sexual harassment continues as the creature makes him parade naked across the room to fetch clothes from a cupboard and “devour[s] [him] . . . with his glances” as he does (55). Eventually, the creature hypnotizes and traps Robert for days in the house, at the end of which time it returns to assault him. Strapped inexplicably to a bed, Robert says he was suddenly “aware of the extinction of the lamp” and of a “rustling sound as if the man in the bed was settling himself between the sheets” (56). Soon after, the creature stands by Robert’s bed looking down at him, and then proceeds to sexually violate him. And we are offered a full account, unforgiving in its disturbing detail:

It stooped, then knelt. My only covering was unceremoniously thrown off me, so that I lay there in my nakedness. Fingers prodded me then and there, as if I had been some beast ready for the butcher’s stall . . . Fingers were pressed into my cheeks, they were

thrust into my mouth, they touched my staring eyes, shut my eyelids, then opened them again, and—horror of horrors!—the blubber lips were pressed to mine. (57)

Later in the novel, Marjorie Lindon describes her similarly horrifying experience of rape by a strange buzzing animal that is likely a beetle. It begins with her petrified at the sense of the intruder in her room, alerted as she is by the buzzing sound that she hears. Soon after, acting “in the madness of [her] . . . terror” and under the influence of some inexplicable power, she strips: “I tore [my dress] . . . off anyhow, letting it fall in rags on the floor at my feet. All else that I had on I flung in the same way after it; it was a veritable holocaust of dainty garments” (206). The animal, invisible in the dark, then proceeds to invade her even after she jumps into bed under her sheets. Marjorie says that she became “conscious that it was progressing, slowly, yet surely, towards the head of the bed” (206). And then, in a chilling climax, she notes that when “it reached the head of the bed, what [she] . . . feared . . . would happen, did happen” (207). What follows is a brief but sufficiently suggestive account of the violent culmination:

It [the creature] began to find its way inside,—to creep between the sheets; . . . I felt it coming nearer and nearer, inch by inch; I knew that it was upon me, that escape there was none. I felt something touch my hair. And then oblivion did come to my aid. For the first time in my life I swooned. (207)

<6>The evidence of sexual violence is subtler in *The Goddess*. In fact, the text’s foremost suggestion seems to be that Bessie was hypnotized by an oriental deity into playing a part in the murder of Philip Lawrence. However, Ferguson repeatedly insists on the impossibility of this premise: “I found it impossible to accept the conclusion to which it all pointed” (55). Instead, the sight of the blood-soaked Bessie and her gory cloak, quoted in my epigraph, is a broad enough hint of the sexual attack and subsequent trauma that she likely suffered. Following her entry into Ferguson’s bedroom, he describes her as one might a suspected survivor of rape: “There were stains upon her uplifted hand, and upon the other hand which dangled loosely at her side. They were half covered with something red—and wet” (14). The horrifying spectacle of assault becomes unmistakable: “She [Bessie] had smeared her countenance with her fingers; all down one side of her face was a crimson stain” (15). If the sight and conjecture were not clear enough, Ferguson articulates explicitly to the housekeeper, Mrs. Peddar, that by extending her protection to Bessie, she was being rightfully compassionate to someone who had just emerged from a situation of (sexual) attack: “You will find that it was not the worst action of your life when you took that young girl, when she had just escaped, by the very skin of her teeth, unless I am mistaken—from things unspeakable, from the very gates of hell, under the shadow of your wing” (54). Not only is this portrayed as sexual violence, it is even suggestively shown to be a case of statutory rape through the many references to Bessie as a “child” (9, 11, 15, 19, 20). And it is precisely in order to counterbalance the obvious textual implications of rape that Ferguson constantly reassures us of her “purity” by referring to her “innocence” and “truthfulness” (15, 54, 14, 55). He confidently says of Bessie’s honesty: “It was impossible to imagine that a voice in which, to my ears, rang so unmistakably the accents of truth, could belong to one who was false” (14). Along a parallel vein, Bessie herself substantiates the implication of sexual violence when she displays a frantic eagerness to get rid of the “taint” of rape by cleansing herself of the blood that serves as its visible proof and reminder. Perplexed, she asks Ferguson: “Will it come off if I wash them?” (18). Very soon after this, she returns with washed hands and anxiously seeks to confirm her regained “purity”: “I’m clean now. Aren’t I clean?” (19). If the reader is left in any doubt of the sexual rapaciousness of the deity, the novel’s closing descriptions of Edwin being

slaughtered by the goddess resemble violent penile penetration. The deity—“of a brilliant scarlet” color that is indicative of its bloody culpability—comes alive with a mass of knives that sprout from all over its body, which it then uses to skewer Edwin all over, additionally “pierc[ing] him through and through” with its one long blade eighteen inches long (289). The victim is pierced so irrevocably that he cannot be separated from the deity so that, ultimately, down Edwin falls, “with his assailant sticking to him” (292). The graphic description of rape is self-evident: “Pinning him [Edwin] on to the floor, it [the deity] continued its extraordinary contortions, lacerating its victim . . . in a hundred different places” (292). And then, at the end of this violent penetration, we learn that “it [the goddess] was still; its movements ceased,” and “[a]s if its lust for blood was glutted, it rolled over, lethargically, upon its side” with a smile “born of repletion” (293). Thus ends the narrative of rapacious violence and villainous satisfaction, leaving the reader assured about the reality of sexual crime.

<7>What is crucial for these novels, as I will proceed to show, is the way in which they deploy the metaphorical charge of nineteenth-century mesmerism to portray the complexity of these situations of sexual violence and their relationship to consent—issues that are raised and staged dramatically by the #MeToo movement.

Mesmerism, Consent, and Assault: A Nineteenth-Century Debate in Retrospect

<8>The #MeToo movement has been conceived in terms of a linguistic predicament by recent commentators. For example, in “Virtue Rewarded: What #MeToo Can Learn from Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*,” Diana Rosenberger ponders the dynamics of the #MeToo movement in relation to *Pamela*, discussing it alongside Kaitlin Prest’s 2017 four-episode podcast mini-series entitled *No*. Rosenberger explains that much of the recent writing on the #MeToo movement “explicitly deals with the question of language, or more precisely, its unavailability” (17). She points to Prest’s demonstration of the “ambiguity of sexual boundaries, especially when they are navigated behind closed doors, and between intimates,” and in particular to “the difficulties of *telling* this story” (17). Rosenberger shows how closely Lauren Berlant’s “The Predator and the Jokester” relates to this issue, exploring as it does the “efforts to *name* sexually-informed power dynamics, as well as the uneasiness they result in” (17). Because it is ultimately language that is at the center of the issue, Rosenberger says that Richardson’s *Pamela*—a text that is also about the sexual harassment of the titular character by her powerful employer—makes us “reconsider #MeToo not as the coordinated efforts of ‘users,’ but as those of ‘readers’ and ‘writers’” (23, emphasis added). That is, there are multiple ways of reading narratives of/around sexual assault, such as *Pamela*. Richardson’s consciousness of this fact—that multiple audiences will interpret Pamela’s accusation of assault or claim of feminine virtue differently, or that different readers will align themselves differently (and some with the villain instead of the heroine)—led him to craft his novel with an “imaginary paratextual letter to the ‘Editor’” that relinquished authorial responsibility and made all subsequent meaning a matter of readerly interpretation (Rosenberger 22).

<9>Marsh’s novels also situate the act of sexual violence as fundamentally a *linguistic* struggle because it involves the failure of language. The novels foreground this linguistic predicament in various ways. In *The Goddess*, Bessie is shown to be predominantly silent in her confused, dream-like, dazed state, and when she does speak it is “as a child might speak, with a little

tremulous intonation, as if she were on the verge of tears” (11). In *The Beetle*, Robert repeatedly mentions how he was “spellbound” and “speechless” as he goes through the experience of being hypnotized and assaulted. And finally, when he speaks in response to the creature’s queries, the words are, as he explains, not his own (54, 68, 49):

Then I spoke,—to answer him. There was this odd thing about the words I uttered, that they came from me, not in response to my will power, but in response to his. It was not I who willed that I should speak; it was he. What he willed that I should say, I said. Just that, and nothing more. (54)

Clearly, this instance of linguistic failure resonates powerfully with #MeToo, a movement that protests against our “culture . . . [for the way it] devalues and stifles women’s voices” (Airey 9). Underscoring how the “story of sexual harassment and assault is, from its earliest conception, also the story of silencing,” #MeToo is directed at providing survivors a space for finally speaking on their own terms and telling their own stories (Airey 9).

<10>The issue of language, however, leads us to the deeper structural problem that comes up frequently but obliquely in the scholarship surrounding #MeToo. Critics analyzing #MeToo typically highlight the tension and duality underlying this movement—the hashtag acting as a “relinquishment of particularity,” the “‘me’ as a residual identity marker” of particularity, and the “‘too’ as an attempt to version a collective subject” (Rosenberger 21). Christine Hume similarly brings up the strain of this duality at the current moment of #MeToo. She emphasizes how this movement which is all about “collective outrage” is designed to address the systemic nature of the assault instead of the personal one, and how despite this, our current moment ignores “the systemic nature of the problem” and continues to try to fixate on the “isolated traumatic event,” that is, on the female victim’s “individual sadness and injury . . . which privileges the subjective and the tragic . . . female pain” (3). Rosenberger indicates the need for addressing the same structural issue that underlies sexual violence when she insists that we need to look at the cases neither as individual/isolated ones (“as autonomous individuals”) nor as masses of cumulative and anonymous statistics (“as algorithmically aggregated data”), explaining that “#MeToo [instead] seeks a new language within the virtual, a collective accounting that is not a mere accounting of the collective” (29). Sarah Jaffe argues that “despite the individualizing tendency of the tales of horror flowing through the press,” the #MeToo movement intends to “collectivize” (81). She, too, highlights the structural nature of the problem when she reminds us that the “threads of power and dominance leak into every corner of our lives” and asserts that “violations are not purely or even mostly about sex, but instead reinforce a structure that offers power to a few by pretending to offer rewards to many” (83).<3>

<11>The most useful analysis of this distinction between individual experience and systemic sexual violence is offered by Robin West who explores its legal underpinnings. In “Manufacturing Consent,” West contextualizes the #MeToo movement, explaining that sexual harassment has always been legally theorized as a civil rights offence carried out in a professional setting that is already hierarchically structured. According to West, tort law against sexual assault or battery views the crime as personal and directed against an individual. As opposed to this, anti-sexual harassment laws have been framed as laws addressing civil rights offences—that is to say, offences that are experienced by a collective and that interfere with their capacity to operate in the workplace. Thus, unlike sexual assault, sexual harassment is legally perceived as a systemic problem, not a personal one. Further, West clarifies that sexual assault is

legally conceived as involving the presence or absence of consent, while sexual harassment operates altogether outside the zone of consent:

What is the legal wrong of sexual harassment? Sexual harassment is not simply boorish, immoral sexual behavior on the job. Nor is it nonconsensual—and therefore criminal—sexual assault or sexual battery. Sexual harassment is the imposition of *unwelcome*—not necessarily nonconsensual—sexual advances or behavior, either physical or nonphysical, at work or school. (61)

What West's observation suggests is that sexual harassment of the kind that #MeToo exposes precludes consent. That is, because it operates in hierarchically structured settings between persons of unequal power, sexual harassment does not allow the victim the space for the performance of consent in the first place. Like mesmerism, sexual harassment does not allow the victim to perform the offering or withdrawing of consent, having reduced the victim to "an example of passive obedience" (Marsh, *The Beetle* 54). That consent is a matter of performance, in specific and nuanced ways, has already been theorized by scholars pondering it as a legal, political, or ethical question.<4> And the unavailability of the performative space of consent in situations of sexual harassment is symbolically portrayed in Marsh's texts through the idea of mesmerism that is repeatedly shown to leave the victim overpowered and inexplicably incapable of action—that is, action involving the refusal of consent.

<12>Both texts abound with references to mesmerism, direct and indirect, where the characters appear to be in hypnotic trances. In *The Goddess*, the allusions to mesmerism are only suggestive, though Ferguson does describe Bessie as the girl with the "poor, numbed brain" (122) and Mrs. Peddar, the housekeeper, says about Bessie's initial entranced state that "there's something the matter with her mind" (45). After she enters Ferguson's room in the middle of the night, it seems to him as though "she was looking at the world out of a dream" and as though she had been "walking in [her] . . . sleep" (11). He explains shortly afterwards that she seemed "mazed [sic]," as if "she had recently been roused from sleep and had not yet had the time to acquire consciousness of her surroundings" (12) or as if she was a "somnambulist" (26). Befuddled at this situation and unable to recollect anything, Bessie herself asks: "What is the matter with me? Have I been asleep?" (17). And Ferguson comes closest to guessing a hypnotic prelude to Bessie's entry when he says to Mrs. Peddar: "I am . . . of opinion that something strange has happened to her. She is unable to tell me her name, who she is, whence she comes, or anything about herself; she seemed as if she were mazed" (26). In *The Beetle*, Robert describes his incarcerated state at the foreign intruder's house as death-like, and then he comes "out of death" and is "alive again" when the creature returns, after a lapse of days in between, finally concluding: "I realized that he exercised on me a degree of mesmeric force which I had never dreamed that one creature could exercise on another" (63). As Robert tells us, it is precisely through the "wicked, and unconscionable exercise" of the "hypnotic powers with which nature had to such a dangerous degree endowed" the creature that it was later able to force Robert to commit a burglary at Paul Lessingham's. Sydney Atherton identifies the foreign creature as a mesmerist when it visits him to recruit him in an offensive against Paul, though he also declares that he is not vulnerable to the hypnotic force because he does not possess "[t]he sensitive something which is found in the hypnotic subject" (105). And the novel ends with the disturbing spectacle of Marjorie being paraded across London on trains in what is clearly a hypnotized state, transformed unrecognizably to look like a tramp.

<13>Mesmerism, however, as I outlined above, functions as an elaborate metaphor for the violence of the power hierarchy that leaves the victim in no position to perform consent (by refusing)—to say ‘No’ in the first place—and that makes the unwelcome sexual encounter *appear* consensual, while consent is precluded structurally at the outset. This becomes evident from the victim’s confession of personal powerlessness in the face of the sexual attack, from the victim’s bafflement at her or his own inability to resist the sexual (voyeuristic and physical) assaults, and from the general fading of the victim’s capacity for any kind of self-expression. In *The Beetle*, when Marjorie hears the buzzing in her bedroom and cannot detect the source of it, she anticipates the state of inexplicable powerlessness that is to follow which will render her unable to resist the intrusions, and she says: “I began to think that my brain must be softening” (205). Soon after, she admits that she was “helpless” and “over-mastered,” and as the creature invades her body she admits that she was paralyzed and “incapable of movement” and “dominated by something” (205, 206-7). Earlier in the novel, when Robert enters the house of the fiendish foreign creature and senses its threatening animalistic presence in it, he speaks the language of one under a spell, baffled at the way he himself surrenders to this creature despite his clear disinclination: “What it was that was with me I could not tell; I could not even guess. It was as though something in my mental organization had been stricken by a sudden paralysis” (49). And as he continues to navigate further through the scary room despite not wanting to, he remarks: “I was sensible of a much keener desire to retreat than I had ever had to enter” (49). Typically resonant of his frightened sense of being under invisible shackles throughout, Robert further describes the kind of constraint that acts upon a victim of sexual harassment: “What constrained me, to save my soul I could not have said,—but I was constrained” (49). As the pair of animalistic eyes close in on him and he finds it impossible to move, Robert panics and confesses: “So intense was my desire to fly that I would much rather have died than stood there still; yet I could not control a limb; my limbs were as if they were not mine” (50). He confesses his “incapacity to escape them [the eyes],” and as the animalistic creature begins to mount him, Robert realizes that he “had not a muscle at [his] . . . command” (50-1). He summarizes succinctly that his own behavior was marked by complete “passivity,” that he was forced to behave “mechanically, like an automaton,” that when he tried to meet the creature’s eyes he “shriveled into nothingness,” and that though he resented it he became in the presence of that creature regretfully “invertebrate” or spineless (52, 54). And, summarily proving how he has been robbed of his capacity to consent, and therefore of his ability to express his selfhood, Robert concludes when the creature brings him more and more under his dominion and control: “[S]omething was going from me,—the capacity, as it were, to be myself” (56).

<14>Likewise, in *The Goddess*, the foreclosure of the place of consent becomes evident through Bessie’s lack of awareness about the violent assault itself and her obliviousness surrounding the blood that covers her. When Ferguson asks Bessie to explain what he saw on her hands, she “h[olds] out her hands in front of her, staring at them with the most innocent air in the world,” asking: “My hands? What is on my hands?” (15). And after Ferguson informs her that it was blood, she continues in the same vein, equally ignorant of the full extent of the violence visited upon her, “Blood? Where has it come from?” (15). Drawing on his observation of Bessie’s entranced or hypnotized state—a metaphor for the unavailability of the space to consent—Ferguson seems to delineate almost categorically that the violent (sexual) encounter undergone by Bessie was forced or rapacious in nature—that it did not involve her consent in any way

because she was structurally denied the position of offering or refusing it. He explains to the housekeeper, Mrs. Peddar, that Bessie, emerging from the trauma of the sexual assault, is “as helpless as any child could be” and that she had “no hand or finger in this matter; she is as innocent, and as blameless, as you or I” (54). He concludes by clarifying most transparently that Bessie was excluded from any agentive position of consent and from any equality of voice in the sexual encounter, saying: “She has suffered, but she has not sinned” (54). Demonstrating that the violence was inflicted upon her one-sidedly, causing her to “suffer,” and displacing the assumption that she actively chose to participate (and therefore “sinned”), the novel indicates the impossibility of consent in an unequal relationship and thus visibly anticipates the #MeToo conversation about sexual consent and its limits.

#MeToo and Marsh: Overlapping Shades of the Sexual Harassment Debate

<15>Both texts also make evident the existing structure of economic inequality and financial constraints that structurally disadvantage the victims, leaving them incapable of direct protest in fear of losing a livelihood or sustenance. #MeToo has made these undergirding injustices and pressures spectacularly visible, for example through the way struggling actors from the entertainment industry and dependent students from the academic sector have announced the reality of their sexual exploitation by their professional superiors, demonstrating the financial/professional constraints that required them to play along without even being allowed into the privileged domain of consent.<5> Such destitution is obvious in the case of Robert who arrives at the mysterious house famished and homeless after being denied entry even by the charitable casual ward nearby. In his own words that practically open the novel:

To have tramped about all day looking for work; to have begged even for a job which would give me money enough to buy a little food; and to have tramped and to have begged in vain,—that was bad. But sick at heart depressed in mind and in body, exhausted by hunger and fatigue, . . . to solicit in vain!—that was worse. Much worse. About as bad as bad could be. (41)

A little further into the text, Robert confesses his joblessness to the foreign intruder he meets inside the house—the gender-labile animalistic entity that subsequently assaults him—and clearly detects the “scorn” in the voice of this person that manifestly stages hierarchical condescension (54). The foreign creature takes this further, modeling the typical social behavior that greets a sexual assault survivor who is mocked for and accused of acting too flirtatiously, welcoming sexual advances by stepping into the situation willfully, or being motivated by selfish greed of one or the other kind. This creature that is in control of the house and that hypnotizes and assaults Robert also mocks him for coming through the window of his house, asking him whether “clerks come through the window,” and when Robert explains that the window was open, the creature presses further mordantly, “Do you always come through a window which is open?” (54). Implying that Robert willingly walked into what may be alleged to be assault (and what truly is assault), the creature further pressures him into confessing his financial exigency—that he entered through the window because he was “wet—and cold—and hungry—and tired”—suggesting that it was a willing entry on Robert’s part and by implication a consensual relationship and not assault (54). What the text foregrounds however, by staging this classic example of victim-blaming, is the impossibility of consent under the precise conditions of economic hardship and inequality that Robert describes here. Even more poignantly and transparently, Robert speaks of the painful compromises into which these financial strains force

him when he says that due to his endless struggle for subsistence he felt “compelled to pocket any little pride [he] . . . might have left, and solicit” help (41). This describes very closely the surrender of dignity, safety, and rights that victims of sexual harassment feel coerced into when subjected to assault by a professional superior. In a later passage, Robert explains even more fully how his usual “high . . . spirit” and “solid . . . resolution” had been crushed by the fact that he had been “dragged through the Valley of Humiliation, and plunged, again and again into the Waters of Bitterness and Privation”—a grueling financial state that compels one to play along with the powerful rapist in order to retain a professional position, in other words, a position that leaves a man “constrained to a course of action of which, in his happier moments, he would have deemed himself incapable” (50).

<16>The novels also address the institutionalized practices of victim-blaming that populate the judicial process and deny survivors any possibility of actual redress, an aspect that forms a cornerstone of the #MeToo movement. As Jaffe observes, the remarkable thing about #MeToo is that it does not wish to resort to the legal machinery because “one of the deepest assumptions of the #MeToo movement is that the society we live in provides no real options for justice” (82). *The Goddess*, for instance, responds to the common socio-legal accusations that blame the woman for not acting rationally and reporting immediately, and instead alleging assault after a passage of time. To understand this, we can draw on Heather Stewart who advances the idea of “epistemic harm” to characterize the way society, with its legal machinery, discredits rape survivors’ “abilities to be credible givers of knowledge” (68). The violence that is effected through “testimonial injustice,” “gaslighting,” and “testimonial smothering” in the legal process basically consists of a dismissal of the survivors’ narratives/“truth” and of the repeated question—“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” (70, 68). Stewart’s analysis may suggest that this socio-legally alleged “imbecility” on the part of the survivor is what Bessie is seen as demonstrating in *The Goddess* (Marsh, *The Goddess* 52). However, in this case it is shown to be the outfall of the mesmeric trance undergone by Bessie that leaves the survivor incapable of rational action—the mesmerism itself metaphorically signifying, as I have suggested, the hierarchical nature of the relationship between the assaulter and the survivor that disables any concrete resistance, complaint, or reporting on the part of the survivor (52). Therefore, Ferguson ponders Bessie’s complete failure at remembering accurately or reporting intelligently what she had undergone, but ultimately challenges the typical socio-legal interpretation of this behavior as imbecility: “Was she, naturally, mentally deficient? I could not believe it. Hers was not the face of an imbecile. Intellect, intelligence was writ large in every line. What then was the meaning of the cloud which had temporarily paralysed the active forces of her brain?” (52). Undoubtedly, Ferguson’s rumination undercuts familiar accusations of rash, “imbecile,” or avaricious behavior on the part of the survivor who names the assaulter. Instead, the “cloud” that overcomes Bessie, the mesmeric trance to which she is subjected, and her incapacity to function rationally comes to signify the impossibility of legal redress in a power-infused situation of assault that makes consent itself impossible. The legal mechanism is ridiculed outright in the novel’s courtroom scene where Ferguson derides the judicial process and its ability to reach at the truth and quits the proceedings midway. *The Beetle* similarly stages an extended breakdown of the legal system by demonstrating its failure to rescue the clearly assaulted, hypnotized, and transformed Marjorie as she is shunted across London on trains dressed as a tramp. And as in real life, where legal prosecution of the perpetrator often remains a distant dream because of the power they enjoy, the

novel ends by confessing the uncertainty and the impossibility of “pronounc[ing] a confident opinion” about what finally happens to the creature, who escapes the British police (322).

<17>Scholars have paid particular attention to the way the #MeToo movement challenges the normalization of sexual harassment, showing how #MeToo stories have functioned narratively and literarily. Airey notes that the greatest success of the #MeToo movement lies in the “defamiliarization” of stories of sexual harassment—stories to which we have become increasingly habituated or numb and which we now consider an inevitable part of being a woman. More specifically, argue Svetlana Ilinskaya and Douglas Robinson, the movement strategically draws on a literary device known as “estrangement” to debunk the “beauty-and-the-beast” myth and the misogynist stereotype of violent and chivalrous men on which it is founded. The authors explain Shklovsky’s idea of estrangement, a concept used by Russian formalists to describe what they consider to be art’s fundamental aim: the estranging of things or realities that we are otherwise overly familiar with and numb to because of their repeated presence. Shklovsky explains that by rendering strange what seems excessively familiar, this literary device compels us not merely to *recognize* something but to really *see* this reality—that is, feel its full impact. Ilinskaya and Robinson argue that the normativity of social expectations is that “men are chivalrous gentlemen (except for a few bad apples),” and #MeToo—with the “verbal manifestations of the ubiquity of sexual misconduct”—“*estrang[e/s]* that normality/normativity” (381). So the “‘shock value’ of #MeToo is an estrangement effect” that, by “estrang[ing] that chivalric narrative,” ensures that we do not merely recognize the violent episodes underlying these reports but also really see them as unacceptable instances of sexual assault (381). Thus, the authors underline the literary-aesthetic dimension of #MeToo—revealing that “the ‘art’ . . . in the #MeToo movement is the hashtag itself”—and show how the movement functions like art to overturn the “‘normative’ invisibility of sexual misconduct” (382).

<18>*The Beetle* and *The Goddess* perform the same artistic maneuver by rendering sexual assault entirely strange, fantastical, and otherworldly because of the colonial, part-supernatural, and often species-indeterminate nature of the mesmerist-assaulter. In *The Goddess*, the suggested source of sexual violence—the deity—is shown to be entirely unfamiliar, strange, and demonic. Ferguson describes the deity when he first sees it in a half-awake state as a “strange creature,” calls the violent scene (and implicitly the scene of sexual assault) he had witnessed at the outset of the novel a “strange happening,” and declares with certainty about the night of the suggested sexual assault that “something strange has happened to her” (6, 14, 26). Categorically, the ordinariness and expectedness of sexual assault is dismantled, and this effect is intensified as we become increasingly aware of the uncanny supernatural force of this Hindoo goddess that has travelled from across time and the orient to haunt London. In *The Beetle*, the grotesque strangeness of a similarly oriental and ancient assailant that comes to terrorize London is evident throughout. Hurley points to this terrifying strangeness of the creature when she notes the “Beetle-Woman’s unspeakability” and explains how that is a function of its “racial difference,” “species fluctuability,” and its “metamorphic sexual identity” (125). The text is insistent on this aspect of unfamiliar foreignness. On hearing the creature’s voice for the first time, Robert remarks: “There was a quality in the voice which I cannot describe . . . [A] something malicious, a something saturnine” (52). The mysterious foreignness of the situation is further emphasized when Robert says that he had “no doubt it was a foreigner” (52). The unrelatable alienness is particularly embossed upon the mind of the reader through the persistent metaphor of visual

haziness. An impossibility to see clearly serves as a constant imagistic reminder of the unfamiliarity of the circumstances. As Robert says of his interaction with the creature-assaulter: “Throughout the whole of that strange interview I cannot affirm that I saw clearly; the dazzling glare caused dancing specks to obscure my vision” (53). This creature in itself is strangely ambiguous because Robert is unsure “if it was a man or a woman” or whether it was even “anything human” (53). The creature lies so entirely out of the realm of familiarity that even its age is a mystery about which Robert notes: “Had he asserted that he had been living through the ages, I should have been forced to admit that, at least, he looked it. And yet I felt that it was quite within the range of possibility that he was no older than myself” (53). Not only is the creature unsettlingly foreign in every way, it also looks alien compared to all human perception of appearances—a deformed face that was a mass of wrinkles, in a saffron yellow color, with no hair on the head or the face, and with animalistic traits like an abnormally large nose, blubber lips, and no chin (53). The overarching framework of strangeness in both novels, of course, derives from the racial and colonial inflection of the creatures, the “Beetle” and the “Goddess” symbolizing religious threat and counter-insurgency in the form of the racial Other.<6> Sufficiently “estranged,” sexual assault becomes the inconceivable and unbelievable drama of the racially-foreign and gender-labile animalistic and abhuman creature, removed geographically and culturally from mainstream England, and therefore also behaviorally from acceptable and normative social conduct. Sexual violence remains no longer ordinary but becomes a strange thing—demonic and unacceptable to English sensibilities.

<19>Marsh’s novels, therefore, anticipate and channel the various complex issues at the heart of the twenty-first century #MeToo movement through the nineteenth-century cultural and sexual tensions surrounding mesmerism; they perform a linguistic intervention that reshapes discussions surrounding intimate consent and sexual assault, and reiterate for the reader the necessity of “*systemic change . . . for the re-conceptualization of subjectivity*” and the alteration of individual violent behavior “rather than the other way around” (Rosenberger 29, emphasis added). Through the “raced and sexed body” at the heart of both texts, we encounter what would appear from our current moment to be something like a nineteenth-century hashtag (if by hashtag we mean an invitation to contemporaneous readers to join a conversation)—one that inaugurates the crucial literary-philosophical debates on sexual harassment which underlie our current legal dilemmas, and that offers a nuanced understanding of the issues at stake in this struggle for gender rights (Hurley 126).

Notes

(1) A whole range of texts are discussed by nineteenth-century scholars as instances of the dark force that mesmerism represented at the time. Ascari cites as examples Charles Felix's *The Notting Hill Mystery* (serialized in 1862-63), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Parasite" (1890), among others. The last of these texts shows, as Ascari explains, "the influence of the redoubtable mesmerist"—"the evil Miss Penclosa"—"who is able to impose her will on him [Gilroy], entering his body like a parasite" (76). In fact, Doyle figures largely in these discussions of villainous mesmerism. Catherine Wynne notes that "susceptibility to mesmeric trance is sexually determined in Doyle's fictions" (229). Discussing the "parasitic rapport" in "The Parasite" and how its "mesmeric experiments" are "saturated with the language of sexuality," Luckhurst observes how the text's "triangulation of trance, sexual urge and primitivism expresses the dominant medical view that to disengage conscious self-control is to risk mental and moral degeneration" (158, 157, 158). In the same chapter, Luckhurst also cites Doyle's "John Barrington Cowles" as an example of a text in which mesmeric "[s]usceptibility is rendered . . . as occulted, orientalized and a channel for sexual terror" (156)—in a way very similar to Marsh's *The Beetle*, as my essay will show.

(2) The intricate debates within the mesmerist movement aside, "the press at large was naturally more interested in the titillation of sexual scandal" (Kaplan 25). John Elliotson, the most famous mesmerist of the 1840s, was himself surrounded by "oblique suggestions of sexual impropriety in his treatment of the Okeys" (Melechi 75). And in fact, James Braid in the mid-century tried particularly to remove from mesmerism "the sexual associations that attended the 'passes,' and the personal relationship between mesmerist and subject explicit in the claim that one person's body, mind, or will impinged on another's" (Winter 185).

(3) This is made most manifest in *The Beetle* by the way in which the novel avoids the stereotypical societal narrative of sexual harassment that revolves around a heterosexual dynamic, imagined to be about sexual desire and not about power-play. The novel obfuscates gender- and sexual-normativity by *not* staging the assault across a necessarily heterosexual template and by portraying it *not* as the work of a man against a woman. The assaulter in the novel is gender-indeterminate and even species-indeterminate—part-man, part-woman, part-insect, part-supernatural—and the survivors of the assault include not only women, but men like Robert. Similarly, in *The Goddess*, as already noted earlier, the colonial, animalistic, supernatural deity, apparently female but with male penetrative energies, rapaciously lacerates the male victim, Edwin Lawrence.

(4) Theorization of consent in general, and in the realm of sexuality in particular, is a wide area that cannot be exhaustively discussed here. However, two crucial essays serve as examples of a theory of consent that sees it not as something static but as both performative and transformative—aspects that are crucial for the kind of understanding of consent that I am proposing in this essay. Neil C. Manson argues against a "'mentalist' account of consent" that views "consent behaviour as *making known* a completed act of consent" (3317). Borrowing from performativity theory, Manson argues among other things that consent is also performative, and that "[n]ormatively transformative acts of consent" change others' reasons for acting in certain ways. Alan Wertheimer similarly contends that consent "has the power to be *morally, institutionally, and legally transformative*" (559).

(5) Several media articles and scholarly essays discuss directly and indirectly this economic disparity and the resulting power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim, and even a cursory look at a few examples suffices to underscore this reality. According to Manickam, “[u]nderstanding sexual harassment as an economic problem is crucial” because it is the systemic economic inequality that is at the heart of the issue. The “economic relations that exist between . . . alleged perpetrators and victims” are decisive since it is the perpetrators’ “extensive economic influence and power over the [economically disadvantaged] victims” that facilitates the violence (Manickam). Kathleen Bryant and Jared Bernstein sum it up, saying that “[l]ow-income women . . . are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment.” Lynn Parramore also notes how data reveals that it is the low-wage women workers who are most vulnerable to sexual harassment. Alissa Quart argues for the need to extend the protections of this movement to exactly these sections of the population who are most vulnerable, arguing that “we should clearly classify #MeToo both as what it is and what it should be: a labor movement.” Explaining the fundamental problem, Caitlin Doyle-Markwick explains that the roots of sexual harassment and the dominant “rape culture” must be located not in some nebulous notion of societal sexism and patriarchy but in a more solid understanding of our political economy. That is, we need to grasp the “structural inequalities”—the “culture of entitlement, abuse and cover-up”—that allow “a man [to use] . . . his immense power and wealth [in order] to abuse women with comparatively little or no economic power” (Doyle-Markwick).

(6) Of the two novels, *The Beetle* has been studied most rigorously for its inherent dramatization of the threat of reverse-colonization by the racial Other. See the work of scholars like Ailise Bulfin, Kelly Hurley, Victoria Margree, Leslie Allin, Anna Maria Jones, Thomas M. Stuart, Julian Wolfreys, and W. C. Harris and Dawn Vernooy. *The Goddess* has been examined for similar tensions in my earlier article.

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