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Don't Ask, Don't Tell: *The Beetle*, Scandal, and the Trials of Oscar Wilde

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<1>In 1993, when President Bill Clinton signed into law the policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," it marked a great triumph for political ambivalence. It was thought to be progressive by some and harmful by others because it finally allowed queer men and women to serve in the US military but only if they kept their sexual identity secret. Late nineteenth-century gothic fiction had its own version of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" insofar as the anxieties it raised concerning "unspeakable" realities were frequently resolved by accepting that some things are best not brought out in the open, that society is better off pretending not to know ghoulish truths or what they imply, or that denial and acting as if something that does exist doesn't is good psychological therapy for the individual and a way to ensure harmony, community, or mutual interests for the whole. Abercrombie Smith in Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249" (1892), for example, destroys the ancient mummy creature he encounters at the end of the story so that the fine young men at Oxford can continue to produce knowledge that is more personally and socially acceptable. Against this was the Victorian habit of explication, as seen in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, where positivist particularization ensures that mysteries will be scrutinized and solved. Such tension between exposing and denying would be eased by recognizing that *some things* were better left unsaid: that if something is "unspeakable," then don't speak about it.

<2>Foucault's famous understanding of the medicalization of sexuality in late Victorian Britain underscores a similar duality in epistemology. Matthew Sweet in *Inventing the Victorians* adds that easy characterizations of sexual repression ignore a good deal of daily nineteenth-century cultural history. On the other hand, Oscar Wilde's trials are frequently used to demonstrate that sexual taboos often did prevail, and that a culture of secrecy existed for good reason: at least some

articulations of sexuality were best kept out of official discourse and far from the legal apparatus, though they might very well have circulated as gossip. As Joseph Bristow has argued, the newspapers covering Wilde's trials followed the courts in avoiding explicit language, as if keeping something unnamed made it less real (52-3). The press, however, largely determined the fate of public knowledge, whether it circulated in such a way as to force authorized institutions to address what was unofficially known, compelling either reform or censure and initiating what I will call "knowledge acts," the marshalling of public opinion. W. T. Stead's exposure of the sale of young girls to brothels in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, for example, forced the government to act, to alter laws around the age of consent.(1)The New Journalism of the era forced into the open uncomfortable conversations on late Victorian urban life that had undoubtedly been taking place in less schematic ways, in fiction for example. The media coverage of the Canonical Five – of "Jack the Ripper" – bears out that newspapers fed an appetite for speculation and participation, largely controlling the borders between gossip and news, holding power over how and when gossip could be turned into news, and putting pressure on governments and public agencies to act. The circulation of knowledge in the late nineteenth century cannot be summed up easily, and I am not attempting to do so here. But the idea that the media could radically alter people's lives by turning gossip into a scandal and officially exposing things the public already knew or assumed privately, forcing knowledge acts, made discretion and the performance of respectable behaviour a significant Victorian theme. It is in this context that I read Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, a novel that in its own way says, "Don't ask, don't tell."

<3>Wilde's trials took place in 1895, two years prior to the publication of *The Beetle*. Greg Robinson notes that they "dominated British public discourse" (1). As is well known, the first trial was initiated by Wilde himself, Wilde suing John Douglas, 9thMarquess of Queensberry, for criminal libel. The two subsequent trials against him, the final one resulting in two years hard labour at Reading Gaol, came about as a result of the first one, because Wilde pressed his sexual life into the public. Queensberry had been manically harassing Wilde before the first trial; for Wilde to sue him was an opportunity to end the persecution, but it did not work out that way. The speed by which the case against Queensberry became a case against Wilde made it seem as if it were always Wilde on trial, as might the nature of Queensberry's defence, that being true the libel was justified, and its publication for the public benefit. When the first trial was still taking place, the *St. James's Gazette* commented as if Wilde was on trial, not Queensberry:

> Take this Oscar Wilde and Queensberry case. We are not, we trust, in any way prejudicing the issue when we say what is perfectly notorious. We do not, of

> course, attempt to form a judgment as to whether Lord Queensberry did or did not libel Mr. Wilde, or whether, if he did so, the libel is justifiable. But in fact, as distinguished from form, the case is a trial of an individual for committing, or attempting to commit, or pretending to commit, offences so abominable that they cannot be mentioned. (Thursday, April 4).

Wilde, who was the talk of the town prior to the scandal for the success of his plays, continued to be the talk of the town but now for his ruined celebrity, because his already well-known sexual identity had been made a matter of formal public discourse, even if it could not "be mentioned," forcing a knowledge act, the second and third trials.

<4>Marsh, a journalist in 1895, having been released from the gaol himself ten years earlier after spending eighteen months in Maidstone for forging cheques, undoubtedly knew about the case. In this paper I argue that *The Beetle* can be read at the very busy intersection of the New Journalism, scandal, gossip, and the trials of Oscar Wilde, especially as the fear of knowledge acts converges with conventions of late nineteenth-century gothic fiction. Minna Vuohelainen documents "Marsh's sensitivity to questions of belonging and displacement" (9) and this can be seen in the novel's treatment of scandal, in its examination of the risks associated with public personality, and its fascination with the management of private affairs. As with a great deal of popular fiction from the era, the novel indulges in representing concealments, obscurities, and the fear of exposure. But it also registers a fear of self-exposure and self-incrimination that closely aligns with Wilde's trials. Its homoerotic overtones have been pointed out, as have its difficulties with modern epistemologies. However, the complications the novel recognizes with knowing can be read as less about knowing or not knowing per se, and more about discretion, keeping private affairs private. The novel identifies the danger of making information explicit, making it public, specifically recommending that "the love that dare not speak its name" does not speak its name. It does not advise repressing desires as much as it insists on closeting them, using the gothic trope of secrecy to point out that a scandalous act is only truly so when it becomes public. It does not state whether indiscretions should or should not be considered scandalous – it is not a defence of "gross indecency" – only noting that the media will produce scandal if given the chance. Nick Freeman suggests, "To judge from the fiction published under his name from the late 1880s onwards, 'Richard Marsh' had few if any ethical scruples" (33). The novel argues the importance of keeping secrets in light of Wilde's trials, but it does not critique the social rules dictating conformity it tacitly acknowledges; same-sex activity, on the other hand, is less "unspeakable" than simply not to be spoken of directly. The contradictions in the novel are ample, not

the least of which is this argument for discretion matched by the over-the-top sensation of the novel itself, publicly broadcasting as grotesquely and gratuitously as it can the importance of subtlety. Yet its interest in concealment points to a willingness to accept the dismantling of hard gender codes the novel ostensibly rejects through its conservative posturing, as long as it is done unobtrusively.

<5>*The Beetle* has been insightfully read as attempting "to trace the activities and anxieties surrounding knowledge production at the end of the nineteenth century" (McReynolds 113). Since Julian Wolfreys's Broadview edition renewed interest in it – it had been hugely successful when first released but mostly forgotten after that – critics have focused on the way it causes "the late-imperial English mind to reflect on the absolute limit of its inquiry" (Wolfreys 31). Scarlet Lux notes that the multiple "narrators of *The Beetle* have inconsistent degrees of control over their own stories," adding to its undecidability (395). For other critics it "articulates a fear of the unpredictable consequences of productive, self-willed energy" (Jones 66) and is "often ideologically ambivalent, even counter-hegemonic" (Vuohelainen 3). What these readings have in common is the idea that Marsh subverts stoic Britian's confidence in itself, fitting his novel neatly into late century preoccupations with the hazy insecurities of modern life. Max Nordau famously wrote in *Degeneration* (1895), "Over the earth the shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in a mysterious dimness, in which certainty is destroyed and any guess seems plausible. Forms lose their outlines, and are dissolved in floating mist" (6). With Marsh's novel, readers are left in the deepening gloom, uncertain about key events – such as what happens to Marjorie Lindon when the creature kidnaps her or whether the Beetle dies in the train wreck at the novel's end – and key ideological points. Marsh's allusion to Sheridan Le Fanu's misquotation of scripture – Paul Lessingham says, "in a glass darkly" and not "through a glass, darkly" (243) – underscores that internal, psychological complexities make for less knowable external certainties. The novel, in fact, seems to be generally admired for its lack of directness, its virtual incomprehensibility, and the way it obfuscates its own moralizing. Most critics agree that in producing a novel for popular consumption, Marsh appealed to conservative values, especially regarding gender roles. But despite its ostensible commentary on the importance of women remaining womanly, men manly, and, almost as a corollary, for Britan remaining Christian and white, the political positioning of the novel remains indefinite because all four narrators have only a tenuous understanding of the events they narrate. For good reason, attention is especially directed towards the figure of the Beetle themselves. Frederick King and Alison Leepoint out that "The Beetle is a figure of misdirection, a red herring that turns our attention away from the real mystery – how the believable is mistaken for truth" (59).

<6>At some level, however, identifiable things do happen in the novel and its messaging can be exceedingly direct, even if the novel is, as Victoria Margree says, "very peculiar" (63). Through its reproduction of classic gothic tropes, its intertextuality, *The Beetle*allows itself to be quickly understood by readers "in the know," readers who have read other gothic stories. On the record, however, the novel remains obscure, without explicit answers: the final narrator, "confidential agent" Augustus Champnell, repeatedly insists at the novel's end that "what actually transpired will never, in all human probability, be certainly known" (320). *The Beetle* has a nudge-nudge, wink-wink narrative, operating through innuendo and implication. Readers *know* what happens to Holt or Marjorie, or what happened to Paul in Cairo, but only in the way that a gossip will be sure of themselves while knowing half the facts. As a confidential agent, Champnell keeps his investigations undercover. Paul hires him because "My friend, Sir John Seymour, was telling me, only the other day, that you have recently conducted for him some business, of a very delicate nature, with much skill and tact; and he warmly advised me, if ever I found myself in a predicament, to come to you" (236). Champnell works to prevent indiscretions from becoming scandal; Marsh knows that the elite have the power to keep them from becoming scandal, though celebrities are more likely to be scrutinized, especially in the age of the New Journalism. It is not possible to prevent a Miss Coleman or a Miss Henderson from gossiping, the reader as well, but official knowledge needs to be carefully managed.

<7>Not despite its use of the ostensibly unintelligible, its cloak of hazy liminality, but because of it, readers know what they know, though again only in the way a gossip knows what they think they know. This is not the kind of knowledge that produces knowledge acts. As with Dracula, an old-world creature turns up in modern London, in its suburbs this time, because modern London has, in that very Gothic way, invited it by being undecided itself, unintelligible and liminal. Like Geraldine behind the oak tree, carried over the castle's threshold by Christabel, the Beetle appears to its familiars, even calling Holt "my familiar spirit" (62). Paul's past indiscretions as a young man in Cairo come back to haunt him; the past is inescapable in the shape of the Lady of the Songs. The plot of the novel is both elaborate and simple, and since the book has now been subject to a great deal study, a full recap is unnecessary. The Beetle directs Holt to rob Lessingham, seeking vengeance on the latter for abandoning them and punishing Marjorie, Paul's fiancé, to get at him. But just as Lucy Westerna is ripe for conversion, Marjorie is recognizable to the Beetle insofar as she is "mannish" before the arrival of the Beetle, as a New Woman, the Beetle merely announcing a more obvious gender slippage. Marjorie's brash confidence and paternal disobedience indicate she has adopted a liberated male style; in the logic of the novel, her crossdressing at the hands of the

Beetle only completes the identity she was pursuing. Paul too is not as firmly gendered as he might be – "Lessingham" / less-of-a-man – making the Beetle once again appear to be the exaggerated manifestation of something closer to home. Robert Holt, similarly, is a bit of a housebreaker before the Beetle makes him explicitly a thief by having him rob Lessingham. The creature arrives because forms of deviancy and decline were becoming all too familiar. London is less and less definable – more sexually ambiguous, secular, cosmopolitan, criminally minded – so the immigrant Beetle finds a home there, furthering the indefinability and chaos. But England itself, the novel argues, had become so decadent as to welcome the creature, who we first glimpse lying luxuriously on a bed of exotic rugs. In this way, the novel reproduces wonted topoi, not just "the other" but a warning about "the other within," a way to evaluate Western culture, or as Edward Said pointed out years ago, a "surrogate or even underground self" (3), encouraging the West to reclaim its self-image as at least outwardly cogent.

<8>The gothic trope of "the familiar" corresponds with the novel's anxiety over the disclosure of private information, the second self needing to be managed or kept hidden. Having characters invite their own demons and bring about their own demise takes on a new dynamic given Wilde's trials; the well-used theme of "you do it to yourself" resonates differently given that newspapers were underlining that Wilde had brought about his own conviction by lacking discretion, "both a victim and a culprit in his own demise" (Schulz 38). After the sentencing, Henry Labouchère,(2) wrote in *Truth*, a magazine he edited dedicated to exposés, "As for Oscar Wilde, the curious thing in the man is that he seems to have been proud of the avowal of doctrines which the most abandoned would, even if they held to them, carefully conceal." Ironically, Labouchère argues the need for concealment, and to maintain airs of composure: "The spectacle, however, of his shame and degradation, and of the utter ruin that has overtaken him when at the zenith of his fame and popularity, should at least serve as a wholesome warning to others of the same class who still remain at large" (May 30, 1895). The way official knowledge in *The Beetle* remains confidential – incomplete and inoperative – reinforces the need to "carefully conceal" one's private identity. Calling *The Beetle* "an exemplary specimen," Leigha High McReynolds notes that the late nineteenth-century gothic "both reflects and creates anxieties about the limits of knowledge" (113). McReynolds quotes Margree and Bryony Randall who had argued that "realities may be in evidence that no existing body of knowledge is adequate to the task of explaining" (114). But the anxieties around knowledge production also mask a warning about the dangers of revealing information, not just the difficulty of knowing. The novel, that is, obscures what can be known, but it also uses

indetermination to underline that knowing can lead to highly volatile acts, uncontainable praxes.

<9>The four narrators regularly seek obscurity, cover and concealment. At the beginning of the novel, Holt breaks into the suburban home because "There was not one to see what I might do; not one to care. I need fear no spy" (47). Fearing the creature's "powers of penetration" (55), he also welcomes the "cover" provided by the "cloak of invisibility" given to him by them (65). Though Holt says, "All the world knows Paul Lessingham" (63), the politician very carefully manages what is known about him, intensely guarding his private life. Marjorie wants to end their "concealment," but Paul wants to keep the engagement unannounced for political reasons (193). He later says, "I am not in sympathy with the spirit of the age which craves for personal advertisement. I hold that the private life even of a public man should be held inviolate. I resent, with peculiar bitterness, the attempts of prying eyes to peer into matters which, as it seems to me, concern myself alone" (236-37). Incidentally, Percy Woodville, "is one of those fellows who will insist on telling me [Atherton] their most private matters" (123). Percy is effete and naturally nervous: the ability to conceal private matters dovetails with the ability to maintain manly composure, what Paul has and Percy does not. Holt says Paul's "impenetrability is proverbial" and that as a result he is always "unruffled" (75). Marjorie wants Atherton to consider her inner thoughts "*terra incognita*" (94) and also exudes confidence. Though Marjorie claims of Atherton that "The things which most people would like to have proclaimed in the street, he keeps tightly locked in his own bosom; while those which the same persons would be only too glad to conceal, he shouts from the roofs" (193-94), it is quite possible that she entirely misreads him and that he too does not allow his private life to be exposed. Marjorie reads Atherton "by what seemed so like a flash of inspiration" (94), thinking she has understood his desires for her only moments after he himself realizes them. But as been noted and will be furthered explored later, his desires are not as simple as this. When Atherton, reflecting on Paul's private life, says, "In the book of every man's life there is a page which he would wish to keep turned down," he adds, "in my case the page may extend to several" (121). Champnell, finally, denies he knows anything definite at all, though he notes Paul looking at him "fixedly, as if he were trying to make out what sort of man I was" (235).

<10>In modern London, secrets are kept secret for a reason and the greater the celebrity, the greater the need for concealment. When Atherton confronts Paul about "the individual, practically stark naked, who came out of your house, in such singular fashion, at dead of night," he says that "Unless you can explain them to my satisfaction, you will withdraw your pretensions to Miss Lindon's hand, or I shall

place certain facts before that lady, and, if necessary, publish them to the world" (177). Paul pleads to keep his affairs from the papers, not to "tickle the public ear" (177). He also says, "Do you seek to catch me tripping? You conduct your case with too much animus" (178), later accusing Atherton of "judging another man too harshly" (182). Reminiscent of Wilde's trial, with Atherton playing the role of prosecuting attorney Sir Edward Carson, Paul begins to show signs of "discomposure" (179). But when the scene is first narrated, Paul plays the role of the prosecutor, noting that Atherton guards his own secrets from the papers and questioning him until Atherton accuses Paul of "treating me as if I was on the witness stand" (112).(3) That both men feel as if on trial, first Atherton then Paul, again raises the specter of Wilde's trials. More generally, it underscores the way celebrity had to carefully manage information that could become scandal in the hands of the New Journalism.

<11>Paul and Atherton, both famed men, recognize the power of the court and the press as if they were one, noting what either might do with just a fragment of information. The New Journalism was the name that Matthew Arnold applied to newspapers in 1887 and is often associated with W. T. Stead at the *Pall Mall Gazette* and T. P. O'Connor at *The Star*. In an attempt to sell more copy, papers pursued sensation under the guises of "human interest" and investigative reporting. Margot Gayle Backus notes that it was also known as "scandal journalism" for of its "publication of decontextualized private acts" (105). Through its content and presentation, it marks the beginning of tabloid journalism, but Stead's aim was to make journalism agentic, to introduce what he called in 1886, "government by journalism," an instrument that converts knowledge into knowledge acts, shaping the court of public opinion to force action. It has also been called "campaign journalism" for that reason. Backus further explains that "Central to the Oscar Wilde scandal, and to all of the sensational scandals that were to make the terms 'scandal journalism' and 'New Journalism' interchangeable in the turn-of-the-century British press, was what I am terming a scandal fragment, a reference to or evidence of some private act that, owing to its reconstitution as evidence in a trial or other empirical investigation, becomes superlatively public" (107). In Wilde's case the fragment was Queensberry's calling card with "somdomite" written on it. In *The Beetle*, it is the Beetle; just the single word is enough to control Paul's fate. Recognizing the public appetite for scandal, the novel notes the inherent dangers in the conversion of private to public knowledge, especially when based on incomplete knowledge to begin with.

<12>In turn, all four narrators, as said, carefully manage information to avoid attention; the novel keeps its own secrets as well, secrets that would be far from comforting if confirmed. Instead of explicitly stating that gender as known is a fraud

and Christianity a sham, it holds that social and psychological peace comes with denial, acting as if ignorant of what troubles inherited systems of classification. Figures of abject horror exist and cannot be explained by recourse to earlier taxonomies of understanding, so they are simply destroyed: *The Beetle* concludes remarkably like "Lot No. 249" and Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), by destroying that which cannot be incorporated, in this case "the den of demons" (321). The invited demon should never have been invited: if it represents a return of the repressed, its presence indicates that primitive, unsocial desires have been made too obvious, too public. *The Beetle*especially develops the idea that secrets should be kept secret for the best ordering of society, that surface meaning will do, and that performances and politeness are all that matter. The novel in this way argues the need for the English to maintain the appearance of their Englishness, even if it is mostly a lie. Holt exclaims that "had I been dressed as Englishmen are wont to be, who take their walks abroad, he would not have found in me, on that occasion, the facile instrument which, in fact, he did" (69). Acknowledging only the need to look manly and rational, powerful and dominant, the novel reflects colonial paranoia, that showing weakness causes it, though more generally it demonstrates a new urgency in the struggle to control public opinion.

<13>That safety resides in appearance, composure, artifice, and concealment invites into the novel the image of Wilde and his trials. King and Lee examine how Marsh's emphasis on performance underlines Wilde's aesthetic creed, the way "Wilde ironically places authority into the hands of the liar" (48). We see this primarily reproduced in Paul's rhetorical skills, but this is a world where talk is constantly performed to impress – Marjorie calls her servant "slightly sesquipedalian" (195). Parliament is a theatre and Paul, known as "the greatest living force in practical politics," speaks with such flamboyance as to make his audiences hang on every word (63). That it is a performance hardly seems to matter. Atherton describes Paul's speechifying at length, often associating it with his confidence.

> His voice was clear and calm, not exactly musical, yet distinctly pleasant, and it was so managed that each word he uttered was as audible to every person present as if it had been addressed particularly to him. His sentences were short and crisp; the words which he used were not big ones, but they came from him with an agreeable ease; and he spoke just fast enough to keep one's interest alert without invoking a strain on the attention. (126)

He adds to his analysis of Paul's Parliamentary performance that it was a triumph "so far as appearances went" because just prior Paul had been "a nerveless, terror-stricken wretch" (126). Atherton describes Paul's speech to Parliament in the same

way that Lord Henry's rhetorical eloquence is described in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890),(4) as style over substance, but also in the way that the newspapers described Wilde's early performances on the dock. During the trials, the press would frequently comment on Wilde's verbal abilities, with papers as far a way as the *New York Times*stating, "Eloquence of the Accused Man Provokes a Burst of Applause" (May 1, 1895). A dominant narrative emerging as the trials proceeded, however, involved Wilde's simultaneous loss of eloquence and composure. The *Evening News*goes from describing Wilde as "the poet, with his hyacinthine locks and air of easy abandon [who] almost lolled in the witness-box" (April 3, 1895) to saying, "his features had acquired a coarseness that had robbed the man of his intellectual impressiveness" (May 27, 1895). Paul's verbal skills, his confidence and self-command, and his ability to influence others, resonates differently after Wilde's trials, especially knowing it is all a show – that a single word can bring him down (Beetle), Wilde's "somdomite" – but a show that he needs to put on so as avoid scrutiny, even to maintain his public manhood.

<14>If rhetorical confidence is linked to a mask of self-control, the novel's anxiety around mesmerism can also be understood not only as a fear of losing it and the Victorian brand of manliness associated with it, but also with the disclosure of secrets or hidden psychological truths. Atherton is cautious of the Beetle's gaze, noting they were attempting to take "advantage of the removal of my mask to try his strength on me" (105). Unease over mesmerism plays into the general menace of "reverse colonization" that the narrative registers, where the colonized now have the powers of the colonizer (and the dominant man is now a woman). But the novel also identifies that aspect of self-control jeopardized by disclosing truth. Under the general threat of exposure, the novel also identifies the threat of blackmail – Paul fears it – consistent with many other fin-de-siècle narratives such as *Dorian Gray* or *Jekyll and Hyde* (1886). Finally, it anticipates the modernist argument about acting as if a knowable, Christian *and* scientific world was possible so as to maintain both social and personal controls.(5) Threats are not removed, only denied, but denial is offered as a form of digestible conservatism keeping new realities at bay. Boundaries are disappearing, definitions are being rewritten, orientations are fluctuating, but the novel insists that admitting or confirming these changes has its own inherent dangers because it forces society to act, to accept new norms or formally deny their development. Focusing "on the seemingly inconsistent enforcement of homosexuality norms in Victorian England and the dynamics of the Oscar Wilde affair" (213), Ari Adut argues that before Wilde's trials all of London society, at the very least, knew about Wilde's sexuality. He notes that, "Wilde's well-known homosexuality did not cause a scandal until his trials simply because it was not publicly denounced. People prattled – much and maliciously, but always in

private" (228). Wilde continued to enjoy enormous success as a playwright and celebrity because what "everyone knew" remained at the level of gossip. The first trial and the widespread coverage of it in the newspapers forced a conversion of knowledge into a knowledge act, forcing the application and implementation of the law. Editorializing on the trials, the *London Star* quotes Labouchère: "There is (he says) no question that matters had reached a pass in London which rendered it necessary for the law to be put in operation, unless it was to be treated as a dead letter" (May 29, 1895). The *Bristol Mercury* congratulates Queensbury for "getting rid of a pest which must have been known to many others in London" (April 6, 1895). Both Wilde and Marsh had been journalists. Only Wilde was explicit in his rejection of the press and the New Journalism, (6) saying four years before his trials in "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891), "The tyranny that it proposes to exercise over people's private lives seems to me to be quite extraordinary. The fact is, that the public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything, except what is worth knowing. Journalism, conscious of this, and having tradesmanlike habits, supplies their demands" (1189). Marsh might agree, asking why Wilde gave it such opportunities in the first place, despite his own tradesmanlike habits.

<15>Adut also argues that "Scandals in effect trigger a great deal of the normative solidification and transformation in society" (213). Norms are not, that is, established through public chatter, but when the media or some other public entity forces a transgression onto the public stage, then society needs to react by either transforming and liberalising its codes or enforcing norms that it might otherwise quietly ignore. When the violation of the norm becomes officially public and not just something gossiped about, then it is as if society is forced to act, sometimes as Adut notes, "showing extraordinary zeal vis-a`-vis the offender, to signal rectitude or resolve" (216). This, Adut argues, is what happened to Wilde during the trials, leading to his demise. *The Beetle* in turn demonstrates how toleration in modern Britain only works by minimizing public exposure, especially for celebrity, and that that is the limits of its modernity. More specifically, it recognizes that "the love that dare not speak its name" must not speak its name.

<16>It is not unusual for the novel of the fin de siècle to both raise moral panic and to offer a comforting resolution that sees the destruction of its ostensible cause. But the monster in these novels cannot truly be vanquished if they represent some form of moral corruption from within, as they tend to do. *The Beetle* incorporates a similar stratagem, but it brings the theme of concealment, of the required discretion needed to mask sexual/gender dissidence into stark relief. By echoing the Wilde trials and the attendant threat of popular media, it refocuses attention not on the indiscretion per se but on open secrets, worst-kept public secrets and the fear of law and order

that keeps them private and undisclosed. When the Beetle drags Marjorie through the streets of London, it would be a strange sight. But Champnell reports on onlookers going about their day, remembering the scene when called as witnesses but not acting at the time. “Minding your own business” and “not rocking the boat” are presented as basic survival techniques in modern London. The novel distinguishes itself by locating danger not so much in taboo acts, but in the exposition of them. It does not seek to censure forbidden acts, as do its many of its contemporaries, if coyly, as much as it exposes the limits of what can and cannot be made public.

<17>Though the Beetle is to be feared because of its fluid sexuality, fluid sexuality or a touch of sexual curiosity is not entirely denounced in the novel, if it remains unspoken, muffled and indistinct. The novel can be blatantly homophobic, even for the age it which it was written. Early in it when the creature presents as male, they seem to flirt with Holt, which makes the clerk want to kill it:

> ‘What ails you? Are you not well? Is it not sweet to stand close at my side? You, with your white skin, if I were a woman, would you not take me for a wife?’
> … I would have given much to have been able to strike him across the face,—or, better, to have taken him by the neck, and thrown him through the window, and rolled him in the mud. (86)

Holt might be understood as reflecting the official voice of the novel. But as W. C. Harris and Dawn Vernooy have explored, “erotic exchanges about and between men are implied as often as any other kind of amatory connection” (352), and these exchanges, though muted, are not obviously censured.(7) They often involve Atherton, who frequently comments on the masculinity of the men he observes. He says of Paul, for example, “He possesses physical qualities which please my eye – speaking as a mere biologist, I like the suggestion conveyed by his every pose, his every movement. ... The fellow’s ... well hung” (108). Commenting on the phrase “well hung,” Harris and Vernooy note “The first definition that the *OED* provides for nineteenth-century usages of the phrase denotes large male genitals” (359). Harris and Vernooy also point to the strange scene late in the novel when Lessingham and Atherton pursue the Beetle, who at this point has abducted Marjorie and converted her appearance to a manly one. Atherton meets a police officer and says, “I looked at him, and he looked at me, and then when we’d had enough of admiring each other’s fine features and striking proportions …” (281). In a plot-driven novel, the moment is notable because it does not advance the plot. There is always another way to read these moments: Atherton sees men and measures how

good they would be in a fight – boxers became celebrities in the late nineteenth century and his evaluation of the male body might point to his own rugged, violent self-imaging. Still, the ambiguity reinforces Marsh's argument regarding plausible deniability, given that keeping sexuality and true desire cloaked, as Wilde's trials had punctuated, was a necessity.

<18>Atherton's hyperbolic masculinity is conspicuously put on display in how he presents himself, when saying he "could have shaken" Marjorie (95) or when destroying what he thinks is Paul's cat. As Atherton is building a weapon that will instantly kill huge numbers of young men with his "Magic," the line between exaggerated and self-destructive masculinity is crossed, though his hyper masculinity can be read as a mask, not unlike the gasmask he puts on to prevent the Beetle from hypnotising him. Meanwhile, when Percy is about to die having inhaled Atherton's destructive gasses, the creature saves him by gently kissing him on the lips in a scene that echoes *Sleeping Beauty*. Earlier, when the Beetle confronts Atherton in his lab, they say, "'I have come because you wanted me.'" Atherton responds incredulously: "'Because I wanted you! – On my word! – That's sublime!'" But the Beetle insists that "'All night you have wanted me, – do I not know? When she talked to you of him, and the blood boiled in your veins; when he spoke, and all the people listened, and you hated him, because he had honour in her eyes" (142). In many ways this rehearses the conventional gothic trope where the monster acts out the unconscious will of the protagonist, acting as a personal demon. But the creature is motivated by sexual revenge and when it asks, "Do you not feel for him the same as I?" (143), readers know that the creature's hatred comes from a sexual connection doomed to failure. Atherton's sexuality, at least, is ripe for gossip and in fact only readable as gossip, not something the Victorian reader must confront.

<19>Atherton's presentation of a rugged masculinity keeps the peace, ideologically for Marsh and structurally for the novel. Among all the men who have close contact with the Beetle, only Atherton resists becoming outwardly feminized through contact with them. This might be a show, but it is a show that maintains the values associated with the gender codes that also prove to be a show in the novel. Holt becomes the Beetle's plaything; he is reduced to rags, repeating the cliché that masculinity and poverty cannot converge. Paul becomes hysterical. Champnell says, "this Leader of Men, whose predominate characteristic in the House of Commons was immobility, was rapidly approximating to the condition of a hysterical woman" (292). The Beetle, "unsexing" the nation that had already begun to unsex itself, is ultimately an opportunity for "Lessingham" to become "more of a man." Though Lessingham does seem to become "more and more of a man" (315) by pursuing the Beetle, with his cowering at the mention of the word "beetle," the reinforcement of

masculinity that the novel ostensibly encourages is extremely tenuous, unless, of course, the word is simply not mentioned.

<20>It is not only gay identity that seems to be tolerated in the novel as long as it does not fully announce itself. If there is a character who has a truly happy ending it would be Dora Grayling, whose name plays on Wilde's Dorian Gray. Like Marjorie, Dora can be read as a New Woman in that she is financially independent, sexually active (she makes her interest in Atherton known to him and indeed marries him), and direct. Harris and Vernooy call her "a stronger contender for the role of a New Woman" than Marjorie (347). Dora, however, like her namesake, keeps her true desires, her second self, behind a screen, presenting herself in a way that does not attract attention. She remains unseen and unharmed because she does not broadcast her interests or make a spectacle of herself in the way that Marjorie is said to do. The Beetle turns Marjorie's masculinity into a true spectacle, parading her through the streets with short hair and a man's dress, because in the logic of the novel, she had already made herself into a spectacle. Dora challenges the expected gender role of the Victorian woman as much as Marjorie does, but she is more subtle than her counterpart, more willing to appear as the proper, patient, unambitious woman. She does not dress the part and flaunt her objectives the way Marjorie does, and she is not "found out." The politics here are obscure at best; Marsh accepts progressive gender ambiguation as long as it is not too confrontational, too assertive, too political.

<21>For good reason, critics of *The Beetle* tend to express difficulty locating Marsh's position on the issues he raises, though there is general agreement that he exploits fears surrounding "sexual deviation," immigration and racial integration, and the speed of modern change more generally. But as Luk says with refreshing candour, "The question of where Richard Marsh sits as an authorial agent in his novel is a vexing one. I have been unable to decide or determine whether or not Marsh is either critiquing his narrators and their ideologies – that is, discreetly in support of Beetle – or actively endorsing his narrators" (391). The ideological ambiguity of the novel suggests a personal dimension to it, or at least an understanding of the consequences of explicitly challenging social mores. This observation does not weigh in on what Marsh himself thought of "transgression," only that he understood an awareness of the effects of public exposure on those who expose themselves or allow themselves to be exposed. The novel in this way parallels other late nineteenth-century gothic fiction and their interest in reputation, such as *Dorain Gray* or *Jekyll and Hyde*. But *The Beetle*goes further in its adoption of performance and denial as a mode of survival by reflecting and reflecting on Wilde's trials, though they are not and cannot be explicitly mentioned. For both

Wilde and Marsh, surface truth is paramount. But Marsh indicates sadly that Wilde broke the code, sought out more than surface truths by pursuing legal ones, directly and explicitly defying public authority.

<22>The sense that some things are better off not brought into the open runs deep in the novel. The unreliable, partial, and discordant narration reinforces the idea that some things are better off unsaid or only indirectly said, so that knowledge does not need become a knowledge act. But readers do know what is at least implied in the novel, that the Beetle is a mixing of gender for example, anticipating the demise of monolithic gender roles. Like Dracula, the Beetle is a depository for any and every popular prejudice – its shifting, indeterminate sex, race, and species make it easy for the casual observer to pass judgment, as do the gossiping Misses Coleman and Henderson. But that's the most the reader can do as well, chit chat. The novel frustrates knowing in favour of insinuating, offering a populist contract with its audience: it implies, the reader infers, but no one knows, for official knowledge is not to be trusted. The characters end up denying what is in front of them, refusing to pursue knowledge because knowing, even "knowing thyself" forces action, creating chaos in their comfortable worlds. The novel in this way is supremely populist, not only expressing a lack of faith in formal authority, in the systems that are in place to act on knowledge, but refusing to take a stand, almost as a matter of principle, on what it knows, refusing to improve the world it identifies as unfair and unjust. Walter Benjamin credits Bertolt Brecht as "the first to formulate for intellectuals this far-reaching demand: do not simply transmit the apparatus of production without simultaneously changing it to the maximum extent possible" (4). Noting the "difference between merely transmitting the apparatus of production and transforming it," he goes on to define the hack writer "as a writer who fundamentally renounces the effort to alienate the apparatus of production from the ruling class … by means of improving it" (4). Marsh is not necessarily a "hack" writer, but he does deny an opportunity to validate political transformation. *The Beetle* knows that it exposes a restrictive, repressed and oppressive, self-denying world. It just pretends that it doesn't.

Notes

(1)Stead's *Gazette* articles were called "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" and led to the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, also known as "Stead's Act."(^)

(2)Labouchère introduced the bill making "gross indecency" a crime in 1885, known as the Labouchère Amendment. Wilde was found guilty of "gross indecency."(^)

(3)Paul accuses Atherton of trying to "wrest" from nature "her secrets" (109) while making his weapon of mass destruction. Echoing Frankenstein's "longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" (26), the way he "pursued nature to her hiding-places" (40) in Shelley's novel, *The Beetle* again suggests that some secrets are better kept secreted for the good of all.(^)

(4)Atherton says of Paul in Parliament, "He found their arguments, and took them for his own, and flattered them, whether they would or would not, by showing how firmly they were founded upon fact; and grafted other arguments upon them, which seemed their natural sequelae; and transformed them, and drove them hither and thither; and brought them – their own arguments! – to a round, irrefragable conclusion, which was diametrically the reverse of that to which they themselves had brought them. And he did it all with an aptness, a readiness, a grace, which was incontestable" (127). Lord Henry has similar abilities: "He played with the idea and grew wilful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and philosophy herself became young, and catching the mad music of pleasure, wearing, one might fancy, her wine-stained robe and wreath of ivy, danced like a Bacchante over the hills of life, and mocked the slow Silenus for being sober. Facts fled before her like frightened forest … It was an extraordinary improvisation. … He was brilliant, fantastic, irresponsible. He charmed his listeners out of themselves, and they followed his pipe, laughing" (43).(^)

(5)In H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), the far future proves humankind to be cosmically meaningless, and both human and social evolution offer nothing but despair. But the interminable conclusions to the novel underline the narrator's closing words accepting denial: "He [the time traveller] … thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilisation only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so" (155).(^)

(6)In "The Critic as Artist" (1891), Wilde calls the New Journalism "but the old vulgarity 'writ large'" (1145).(^)

(7)TKelley Hurley, Victoria Margree, and others have looked at same-sex innuendo between women in the novel.(^)

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