

LEAKY BODIES: MASCULINITY, NARRATIVE AND IMPERIAL DECAY IN RICHARD MARSH'S *THE BEETLE*

Leslie Allin
(University of Guelph)

Abstract

While Richard Marsh's *fin-de-siècle* gothic novel has most frequently been read in contemporary scholarship as a work that seeks to recuperate threatened imperial masculinity, this article argues that *The Beetle* works to subvert British representations of imperial imperatives. More preoccupied with the penetration of male bodies and the instability of narratives emerging from them than with their solidification, this novel uses the register of the male body to interrogate imperial authority and the physical prowess on which it was frequently based. Written in a period of increasing doubt about imperial stability and anxiety regarding threats from the East, *The Beetle* explodes traditional conceptions of masculinity while deploying fantasies of sexual subjugation to highlight an unruly porous, and unstable British imagination, underscoring that modes of sexual desire traditionally associated with the East are actually domestic. Deploying representations of both male bodies and male narratives as leaky and grotesque, Marsh's novel critiques both the credibility of empire writing and British governmental legitimacy.

An eccentric piece of late Victorian Gothic fiction, Richard Marsh's incredibly popular *The Beetle* (1897) exhibits the theme of decline and loss so typical of texts of this period. As Stephen Arata has noted, *fin-de-siècle* works frequently articulated 'unwieldy [...] anxieties, including, but not limited to, the retrenchment of empire, the spread of urban slums, the growth of "criminal" classes, the proliferation of "deviant sexualities"',¹ and, as I argue here, doubts about the impenetrability of British male bodies and the stability of Western knowledge and narrative authority.² While the traditional conception of the male body as a bounded entity was inextricably linked to Victorian perceptions of masculinity and masculine prowess,³

¹ Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 2.

² *The Beetle* also reflects a pervasive concern with 'reverse colonization,' which was often expressed through narratives where 'the 'civilized world' is on the point of being overrun by 'primitive' forces', and which often featured a linkage 'to perceived problems—racial, moral, spiritual—within Great Britain itself' (Arata, p. 108).

³ See Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 3; Andrew Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 13-14; Joseph Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot: Scholar Press), pp. 97-98; and John A Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven:

in the context of imperial decay, *The Beetle* represents both the male body and male imagination as porous entities, rather than solid ones.⁴ Interrogating the boundaries of both bodies and institutional and fictional empire writing, ultimately linking bodily sensation to narrative through the ‘erotics of reading,’⁵ this novel critiques justifications of patriarchal governance and imperial legitimacy: which ultimately become leaky, grotesque, and thus profoundly unstable. Thus, this Gothic text is an example of late Victorian empire writing that, while seemingly indulging in imperial fantasy, actually deploys a strategy of auto-critique (that is, demonstrating its own instabilities by way of excavating its ostensible representations) in order to destabilize imperial epistemology.

The Beetle’s concerns with the frailty of masculinity, the penetration of the male body, and the dissolution of narrative efficacy are timely: British economic institutions faced pressure surrounding the maintenance of the Suez Canal,⁶ anxieties about sexual exchange and contagion were coming to the fore, and the Egyptian Question and the Mahdist menace loomed on the horizon. Tapping into prevalent popular concerns about British economic and cultural stake in Egypt,⁷ Marsh’s novel brings the impacts of imperial projects in Egypt on British masculinity to the home front as it uses the metaphor of invaded physical bodies to explore the instabilities of bodies of knowledge as constructed by culturally and institutionally authorized imperial narratives. In working through these problems of stability, *The Beetle* explores dangers of gender disruption, capture, physical dissolution, bodily penetration, and threats to normativity and to ‘white skin’⁸ in the *fin-de-siècle*

Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 187-189.

⁴ As Pamela K. Gilbert has shown in *The Citizen’s Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), the tension between the fluid and solid body that Herbert Sussman suggests is so crucial to the formation of Victorian manhood was not only pervasive, but crucially underpinned discourses of social health (pp. 133-134).

⁵ Arata uses this term to describe the libidinal aspects of reading: the deferral, deciphering, and grasping of textual information (pp. 68-69).

⁶ See Alise Bulfin’s ‘The Fiction of Gothic Egypt and British Imperial Paranoia: The Curse of the Suez Canal’ in *English Literature in Translation 1880-1920*, 54:4 (2011), pp. 411-443.

⁷ Throughout the nineteenth century, Egyptian lore and imagery increasingly infused British art and literature. Even the chauvinist J.W. Buel described Egypt as ‘the parent of human advancement’ that ‘gave to the world the genius of substantial progress, which developed the highest intellectual faculties, builded [sic] magnificent cities, established museums of arts, set examples of human aggrandizement, produced surprising results in engineering, created sciences, and gave form to government and law’ in *Heroes of the Dark Continent: A Complete History of all the Great Explorations and Discoveries in Africa, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Time* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), p. 33.

⁸ Richard Marsh, *The Beetle* [1897] ed. Julian Wolfreys (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004), p. 86. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

British imagination. In a four-part narrative, the novel begins with the perspective of Robert Holt, an unemployed clerk, who, emaciated and exhausted, crawls into a mysterious house in the western suburbs of London in search of shelter. Inside, he is hypnotized, assaulted, and possessed by the Lord of the Beetle, a bi-gendered, shape-shifting priest(ess) in the cult of Isis. He is sent on a mission across London to steal a packet of letters from celebrity parliamentarian Paul Lessingham, whose own fraught history of subjugation by the Beetle has rendered him traumatized. The creature then uses these letters, written by Paul's fiancée, Marjorie Lindon, an independent young woman sympathetic to Lessingham's Liberal politics, to draw her into its schemes and abduct her. Also sucked into the subsequent mysterious hazards is Sydney Atherton, a mercurial gentleman scientist who is Marjorie's confidant and would-be lover. Sydney's narrative takes over from Holt's and conveys his supposed devotion to Marjorie, his fiery competition with Paul, and his discovery of the Beetle's plan for vengeance against Paul for escaping its clutches. Marjorie's story then comes in: recounting her dedication to Paul, her encounter with the near-dead Holt, which leads her into the Beetle's trap, and the events leading up to her subsequent capture. Detective Champnell's narrative follows: he is employed to track down the transgressor, account for Sydney's truce with Paul, the newly formed band's chase after the Beetle and the hypnotized Marjorie, whose identity the Beetle disguises by dressing her in men's clothes, and her ultimate (if incomplete) rescue.

One way to read the search for Marjorie is as a quest that galvanises male bonds, establishes the efficacy of the British network of communication, patriarchal social networks, technology, railways, transportation, the telegraph, and so on.⁹ This would complement a reading of Paul Lessingham as a broken man rebuilt, having overcome his cowering fear of his Eastern adversary and being sparked into action by the threat of losing his prized fiancée.¹⁰ Seemingly affirming this transformation, Champnell observes Paul's arousal into activity: 'he was getting a firmer hold of the strength which had all but escaped him [...] he was becoming more and more of a man' (p. 315). Such a narrative of recuperation, however, is ultimately unfulfilled: not only is resolution absent, but, upon closer examination of the dynamics between characters, genders, and narration, the idea that the novel offers a conventionally heroic male defence of British space, bodies, and identity is profoundly troubled. Critics tend, to varying degrees, to recognize the gender-disrupting work this novel

⁹ This is how Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), so often compared to Marsh's novel, is typically read.

¹⁰ Jennifer McCollum, 'Animation and Reanimation in the Victorian Gothic' (Diss. University of Washington, 2012), p. 180; and Patricia Margree, "'Both in Men's Clothing': Gender, Sovereignty and Insecurity in Richard March's *The Beetle*", in *Critical Survey*, 19:2 (2007), pp. 63-81 (p. 77); read Lessingham in precisely this way.

enacts, but frequently read *The Beetle* as participating in, rather than challenging, an extant imperialist patriarchal ideology.¹¹ While recognizing that the novel's problematic construction of the East is crucial for understanding the terms by which *The Beetle* engages the Egyptian Question and its impact on British manhood, I also want to suggest that the novel's rendition of the East is more complex than many critics have allowed for; whilst on the one hand activating numerous stereotypes about the Orient and articulating various forms of threat, Marsh's text participates in the established discourse in order to highlight these fears and draw readers' attention to his real target: British conduct and fantasy. Whilst the novel's concern with British morality has been recognized,¹² this article zones in on Victorian gendered power dynamics, articulating how doubts about morality, reliability, and empire writing register in treatments of the male body, and how this novel uses this register to point to the grotesqueness of imperial narratives and render them suspect.

This article thus draws out *The Beetle's* underlining of the relationship between character, body, and narrative, and in doing so redresses the assumption that *The Beetle* is dedicated to maintaining patriarchal dominance and stability:¹³ its ostensibly authoritative male characters are in fact just the opposite. Examining the problematics of the bodies and narratives of male characters typically understood as manly men (Atherton, Lessingham, and Champnell) I argue that the novel underscores the leakiness of male bodies in order to pull apart traditional narratives of British manliness and male narratives about empire. Such norms frequently celebrated men's bodies as being bounded, solid, and impermeable. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, traditionally it is

woman's corporeality [that] is inscribed as a mode of seepage [...]
The metamorphics of uncontrollability, the ambivalence between

¹¹ For instance, Kelly Hurley adopts an Orientalist reading of *The Beetle* in 'The Inner Chambers of All Nameless Sin: *The Beetle*, Gothic Female Sexuality, and Oriental Barbarism', in *Virginal Sexuality and Textuality in Victorian Literature*, ed. Lloyd Davis (Albany: New York Press, 1993), pp. 193-213, suggesting that 'textual stereotypes that construct the oriental as "Other"' serve a unifying function for the culture that produces them, a culture which, in the service of a coherent and idealized self-definition, denies those qualities that threaten or undermine its own self-image and projects them onto extracultural groups [...] a paranoiac text like *The Beetle* serves to reflect and feed into British suspicion of contempt for Egyptians during a period of heightened British military activity in Egypt.', (pp. 196-7).

¹² Julian Wolfreys, in 'Introduction' (Marsh, pp. 9-34) is less condemning than Hurley, arguing that 'the human-scarab pursues the politician Paul Lessingham, less from some irrational and barbaric Oriental blood-lust, than out of a sense of injustice for the "barbaric" English defilement of ancient Egypt's sacred locations', p. 24.

¹³ See, for instance, Margree.

desperate, fatal attraction and strong revulsion, the deep seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body [...] its powers of cynical seduction and allure are all common themes in literary and cultural representations of women (p. 203).

While men's bodies have tended to be defined in contradistinction to this construct, *The Beetle* inverts this ontology, representing men's bodies and/or their narratives (their credibility) as leaky, unstable, and subject to various forms of penetration: undermining the grounds on which representations of Eastern "Others" and assertions of imperial legitimacy stand. Kelly Hurley has explored a number of ways in which late Victorian Gothic fiction has deployed the threat of the porous male body in order to render subjectivity fragmented and permeable. The leaky body becomes profoundly dangerous to identity: 'If the distinction between liquid and solid can be effaced, then other, more crucial oppositions—between human consciousness and the material body, for instance—threaten to collapse as well' (p. 35). Thus, in much *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, material threats such as undifferentiated bodies, slime, and grotesque creatures threaten to permeate, eat, and fully absorb the object of desire. As we will see in *The Beetle*, however, it is not so much the material danger of the leaky male body, though this certainly has repercussions for masculine identity, that acts as the most fearsome peril, but rather the untrustworthy, sexually violent, and seductive narrative representations that threaten to consume passive readers, drawing them into dark imperial fantasies.

Subjugation

The novel's most overtly emasculated man, Robert Holt, experiences penetration on a number of levels: he is homeless, and therefore has no "fortress" beyond his own body; he's mesmerized and surveyed by the Beetle; and ultimately the stability of his narrative comes apart. From the beginning, Holt's unemployment circumstances fracture his independence. In approaching what turns out to be the Beetle's lair in search of shelter, he encounters an entrapment that destroys any remaining autonomy.¹⁴ Upon entering, he becomes engulfed by 'panic [at] the presence [of] something evil'. In attempt to resist this presence in the darkness, Holt becomes rigid

¹⁴ As McCollum suggests, the house is presented with 'vagina-like imagery' (p. 183): 'When he [Holt] sticks his arm through the hole [of the window] he finds that 'it was warm in there!' (p.183). While Holt starts out as the penetrator of the space, once he is inside, the sexual metaphor flips, and his becomes the invaded body.

and frozen, 'stricken by a sudden paralysis'. A Theweleitian reading would understand this stiffness as an attempt to ward off the threat of female envelopment.¹⁵ Instead of successfully becoming a phallus himself, however, Holt is emasculated: he admits, though 'I made an effort to better play the man [,] I knew that, at the moment, I played the cur' (p. 49). His bodily control fails, as he is overpowered and 'constrained': 'I could not control a limb; my limbs were as if they were not mine' (p. 50). This presentation of the male body as incapable becomes more entrenched as Holt renders himself sexually dominated by the creature:

On a sudden I felt something on my boot, and, with the sense of shrinking, horror, nausea, rendering me momentarily more helpless, I realized that the creature was beginning to ascend my legs, to climb my body [...] it mounted me, apparently, with as much ease as if I had been horizontal [...]

Higher and higher! It had gained my loins. It was moving toward the pit of my stomach. The helplessness with which I suffered its invasion was not the least part of my agony [...] I had not a muscle at my command (p. 51).

This presages Lessingham's description of being captured and sexually assaulted in a 'horrible den' (p. 243) in Cairo, where he is 'emasculated' (p. 245) and rendered 'incapable of offering even the faintest resistance' (p. 243). Submission thus becomes a major problem for both men. Indeed, Holt reflects, 'such passivity was worse than undignified, it was galling' (p. 52).

If subjugation is central in these passages, the particular characteristics of the subjugator underpin the ostensible threat to masculine prowess. When 'the man in the bed' (p. 52) bids Holt 'Undress!', 'A look came on his face, as I stood naked in front of him, which, if it was meant for a smile, was a satyr's smile, and which filled me with a sensation of shuddering repulsion' (p. 55). For Marsh's readership, 'satyr' would have connoted lasciviousness, lechery, and male-on-male rape, as well as signalled the blurring of lines demarcating species: the union of two orders coming together in one monstrous body. It is this menacing, unclassifiable body that renders Holt 'impoten[t]' (p. 62). Furthermore, Holt's physical frailty is linked directly to the

¹⁵ Klaus Theweleit's analysis in *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), I of Freikorps officers' terror of feminized 'flow' and their defensive response of 'stiffening' is highly relevant here. In an effort to retrench the male body's boundaries, to repel the grotesque feminine force that threatens, the male figure seeks to become hard and impenetrable. In Holt's case, this fails completely, and the would-be phallus that his body has become is powerless here.

questionability of his narrative. Holt's inability to read the "Other", especially in terms of gender, renders his powers of discernment dubious. In fact, as Holt admits to being suspicious of tricks being played on his 'abnormally strained imagination' (p. 76), these weaknesses undermine his story: observation as a form of knowledge dependent on the physical body becomes unstable.

The ramifications of subjugation for the male body, this power/knowledge dynamic, and authorship are devastating. Returning from his burglary mission, Holt's body is in quite a state:

I was in a terrible sweat,—yet tremulous as with cold; covered with mud; bruised, and cut, and bleeding,—as piteous an object as you would care to see. Every limb in my body ached; every muscle was exhausted; mentally and physically I was done; had I not been held up willy nilly, by the spell which was upon me, I should have sunk down, then and there, in a hopeless, helpless, hapless, heap (p. 84).

In other words, the Beetle's control exhausts Holt's body, which in turn becomes grotesque here. Fluid exchange with the environment through sweat, blood, and mud renders his body porous and open, as opposed to bounded and closed.¹⁶ However, this absence of boundaries also characterizes the very form of this passage. The sentences run on, ramble, and are held together by semi-colons – in other words, closure is continually deferred. At each possible point of suture, Holt's narrative repeatedly extends through it, refusing to be stitched shut. Additionally, the alliteration in the final sentence here doubly prolongs the closure, not only through repetition, but also through the use of soft sounds. The fricatives h and s serve to defy both the boundary of the sentence and of the body; these last four words together produce a panting sound, as the breath quickly moves in and out of the body, circulating convulsively. This passage, both thematically and formally, pushes against the construction of the male body and narrative as bounded.

Meanwhile, the crucial vehicle of Holt's penetration is surveillance. He reflects that leading up to his invasion, 'I had the horrible persuasion that, though unseeing, I was seen; that my every movement was being watched' (p. 49). It is the

¹⁶ Minna Vuohelainen, "'Cribb'd, Cabined, and Confined': Fear, Claustrophobia and Modernity in Richard Marsh's Urban Gothic Fiction' in *Journal of Literature in Science*, 3:1 (2010), pp. 23-36, makes the point that in this novel, the city of London seems to shrink around and envelope characters through fog, rain, and wind, thus employing the gothic theme of spatial transgression (pp. 30-31), but I would also suggest that these elements work to saturate the body and thus threaten its borders.

creature's eyes that 'held me enchained, helpless, spell-bound. I felt that they could do with me as they would; and they did' (p. 53). The erotics of looking are overtly intertwined with power here, as this scene foreshadows Paul's description of his bi-gendered captor when he recalls his own subjugation in the Cairo den: 'And, while she talked, she kept her eyes fixed on my face. Those eyes of hers! [...] They robbed me of my consciousness, of my power of volition, of my capacity to think,—they made me wax in her hands'. This surveillance, or visual penetration, is disabling for both men. They are certainly physically powerless, but significantly, through this, they also lose the power of utterance. Paul confesses, 'I do not think that after she touched my wrist I uttered a word' (p. 240), just as Holt becomes incapable of speaking his own story: '[the words] came from me, not in response to my will power, but in response to [the Beetle's] [...] what he willed that I should say, I said'. This loss of power over his own narrative has a profound effect on Holt's sense of prowess: 'For the time I was no longer a man; my manhood was merged in his' (p. 54). Even worse, as we find at the end of the novel, Holt himself did not in fact write his narrative; rather, it has been compiled second-hand through Marjorie's and Sydney's memories. This cobbled-together history, on reflection, becomes extremely unstable. Thus, as the novel establishes authorship as deeply intertwined with masculinity and efficacy, it demonstrates, using the register of Holt's permeable body (and mind) to undercut his manhood, that his account of the Eastern "Other" and his own participation in the events that unfold are less than credible; his narrative of imperial contact remains inadequate.

Unreliability

Sydney Atherton, on the other hand, has been read by some as the closest thing in this novel to a representation of normative masculinity. For one thing, Sydney is the only man in the novel able to resist the Beetle's attempts to hypnotize him. As Natasha Rebry points out, the dynamics of mesmerism were gendered (p. 145): the mesmerizer was associated with active masculinity while the mesmerized was associated with passive femininity. Since 'the sensitive something which is found in the hypnotic subject happens, in me, to be wholly absent' (p. 105), he is able to resist the Beetle's attempt to penetrate him mentally, thereby ostensibly affirming his manliness. Other reasons he may appear at first to occupy the role of traditional hero¹⁷ are his impressive stature, his well-established attractiveness, his breeding and

¹⁷ Margree reads him precisely in this way (p. 73).

status,¹⁸ and, of course, his ‘long, drooping, moustache,’ (p. 83) which we can easily read as phallic. In Marjorie’s opinion he is ‘quick, and cool, and fertile in resource, and [...] showed to most advantage in a difficult situation’ (p. 209). On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that these qualities are brought to the fore only to show how even the novel’s most traditional model of masculinity is subject to “foreign” invasion as his narrative opens itself up to critique.

Atherton is blocked from the full position of hero in a number of ways. He becomes Marjorie’s object of humour as she relentlessly ridicules him, emasculating and infantilising him. He also proves himself to be an unreasonable, impulsive man, driven by his vacillating moods, and morally flawed. A gentleman scientist, he excitedly ‘plan[s] legalized murder—on the biggest scale it had ever been planned’, and there are certain obvious kinks in his ethics:

If weapons of precision, which may be relied upon to slay, are preservers of the peace—and the man is a fool who says they are not!—then I was within reach of the finest preserver of the peace imagination had ever yet conceived.

What a sublime thought to think that in the hollow of your own hand lies the death of nations,—and it was almost in mine (p. 102).

His ambitions are indeed imperial, tying him directly to an expansionist, belligerent stance of which the Aboriginal Protection Society (founded 1837) would have been quite critical; Sydney plans destructive experiments in ‘one of the forests of South America, where there is plenty of animal life, but no human’ (p. 118). Dismissing both the presence of indigenous and animal life, Sydney reveals the morals of his projects to be profoundly misdirected concerning the impacts of military research.¹⁹

¹⁸ Roger Luckhurst similarly reads Sydney’s middle-class station and ability to resist hypnosis as markers of masculine power in *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Anna Maria Jones likewise finds Sydney problematic, condemning his propensity for killing street cats at random: ‘Arguably, a Victorian audience might have been less shocked by Atherton’s impromptu animal testing than many twenty-first-century readers; however, given the popularity and visibility of the anti-vivisection movement and of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which had been instrumental in passing the Drugging of Animals Act (1876) and the Cruelty to Animals Act (1876), it seems likely that many of Marsh’s readers would have understood Sydney’s actions as at least legally culpable if not morally reprehensible’, ‘Conservation of Energy, Individual Agency, and Gothic Terror in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle*, or, What’s scarier than an ancient, evil, shape-shifting bug?’ in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39:1 (2010), pp. 65-85 (p. 78). Further references are given as citations in the text.

As Anna Maria Jones aptly puts it, ‘Of all people, Sydney Atherton seems ill-suited to hold ‘the life and death of nations’ in his ham-fisted hands’ (p. 79). In these ways, he fails to uphold the masculine ideals of control, restraint, and honour.

Most importantly for recognizing his narrative as unreliable, however, is the fact that Atherton’s accounts are frequently contradictory. His descriptions of Lessingham’s physique are inconsistent: Sydney at one time sketches Paul as ‘broad shoulder[ed]’ (p. 75), and at another as ‘a stick of a man’ (p. 92). Atherton is also evasive about his reasons for letting Holt escape after robbing Lessingham of Marjorie’s letters (provoking Champnell to remark, ‘at certain seasons, Atherton is a queer fish,—but that [letting Holt escape] sounds very queer indeed’ [p. 250]). Furthermore, he withholds from his own narrative the likelihood that, after hours of drinking with his friend Woodville, he finds himself quite intoxicated (as his behaviour indicates) when the Beetle appears at his lab in the middle of the night. This of course renders his account of what happened less than firm. In Atherton’s words, ‘My own senses reeled’ (p. 138); ‘whether or not I had been the victim of an ocular delusion I could not be sure’ (p. 145). Thus, if the ostensible standard of British manliness is feminized, infantilized, vacillating, and profoundly unreliable, then the standard British ideal is very much in trouble.

Sydney’s questionability intensifies, however, when he admits to the Beetle that its attempts to con him will not work, since ‘I’m a bit in that line myself, you know’ (p. 142). Whatever the ‘line’ is to which he refers here, this admission aligns Atherton’s practices with those of the creature. And in terms of his position as a scientist and technological producer whose interest in ‘legalized’, and therefore state-sanctioned, ‘murder’ and weapons of war (p. 102) is very much aligned with militant imperial imperatives and national prowess, Atherton destabilizes British masculine identity through his embodiment of the disruptive qualities belonging to the very “Other” to which he is ostensibly opposed. In other words, Atherton becomes associated with the East and its attendant threats. The text subtly continues to position him in this way. While Sydney’s inventions are on one hand products of Western science and technology, references to his work suggest otherwise. The chapter title, ‘Atherton’s Magic Vapour’ (p. 131) connotes sorcery, his lab is described as a ‘wizard’s cave’ (p. 154), and he boasts to the Beetle: ‘You may suppose yourself to be something of a magician, but it happens, unfortunately for you, that I can do a bit in that line myself [...] my stronghold [...] contains magic enough to make a show of a hundred thousand such as you’ (p. 145).

Indeed, though he has his own ‘magic’, Atherton finds himself drawn to the Beetle’s mysterious powers: ‘If the thing had been a trick, then what was it? Was it something new in scientific marvels? Could he give me as much instruction in the

qualities of unknown forces as I could him?’ (p. 146). He recognizes the Beetle’s extraordinary abilities, musing, ‘there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in our philosophy’ (pp. 149-50). Meanwhile, Marjorie ascribes to Atherton extraordinary powers: of sex appeal: ‘I have heard it said that he possesses the hypnotic power to an unusual degree, and that, if he chose to exercise it, he might become a danger to society’ (p. 194). This is seemingly teasing and lighthearted, but Atherton’s other disruptive, destabilising qualities and the very real danger to humanity he poses through his ‘pleasant little fancy [...] for slaughtering my fellows’ (p. 155) render this ‘hypnotic power’ akin to the Beetle’s. Lastly, as the Beetle compares Atherton to itself, it remarks, ‘Those who hate are kin’ (p. 143). Both Atherton and the Beetle are menaces associated with the East that reside in London; but, with Atherton, threats traditionally associated with the foreign are now represented not only through a sense of ‘reverse colonization’²⁰ as the foreign controls spaces within the metropole, but as emerging from within male British bodies and narratives themselves.

Indeterminacy

Paul Lessingham, too, represents infiltration of the supposed foreign into the domestic male body. Similarly to Holt, Lessingham starts out an emasculated figure. His story of penetration emerges as he relates his capture and subjugation in Cairo by the Children of Isis that rendered him a ‘fibreless, emasculated creature’ (p. 245). Significantly, by the close of the novel, he doesn’t recover fully and it is implied that he never will. But if Paul is a penetrated figure, he is simultaneously a sign of indeterminacy.

Descriptions of Lessingham are vague. For Holt he is ‘a fine specimen of manhood’ (p. 64). The Beetle only says that ‘he is good to look at’: ‘He is straight,—straight as the mast of a ship,—he is tall,—his skin is white; he is strong’ (p. 64), giving an idea of manly qualities rather than a physical image of Paul. Atherton, as we have seen, gives different accounts of Lessingham’s appearance. But while Lessingham’s body resists being confirmed, the same is true of his character; his back-story is heterologic. The Beetle describes him as ‘all treachery’, ‘false’, and ‘hard as the granite rock,—cold as the snows of Ararat. In him there is none of life’s warm blood’ (p. 64). Importantly, the Beetle’s story and Paul’s are contradictory: Lessingham maintains he was imprisoned and violated, while the Beetle rages, Paul ‘has taken [her] to his bosom’ only to ‘steal from her like a thief in the night’ (p. 64).

²⁰ See Arata, p. 108.

Holt notices in the Beetle's reflections 'a note of tenderness,—a note of which I had not deemed him capable' (p. 64). Meanwhile, for Marjorie, Paul is 'stronger, greater, better even than his words' (p. 187). And then again for Sydney, Paul is an empty person: 'If you were to sink a shaft from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, you would find inside him nothing but the dry bones of parties and politics' (p. 97).²¹ This typifies the insubstantiality of both Paul's character and body; he's secretive, reticent, and very keen on hiding his past from Marjorie (p.251). No interiority for Paul is offered: glimpses of his internal state are only provided through the lenses of other characters. And what these characters seem to know of him is only what 'all the world knows' (p. 63, p. 75, p. 121, p. 158, p. 170, p. 250);²² a public veneer obfuscates the hidden, insubstantial private one. His presence is iconic rather than material; he is 'the god of [Holt's] political idolatry' (p. 76), while the phrase, 'The Great Paul Lessingham' (p. 75), is used repeatedly and ironically signals inadequacy. But most importantly, like the Beetle, Paul is unclassifiable and resists really being known.

What he is in fact known for is eloquence, which is his own means of enchanting. Even Atherton is won over by Lessingham's speech in parliament; it is his rhetoric and performance rather than content, however, that are convincing. The same is true for Marjorie when she first encounters his prose: 'The speaker's words showed such knowledge, charity, and sympathy that they went straight to my heart' (p. 187). His words are the means of her enchantment, 'the first stirring of my pulses' (p. 187). Lessingham thus functions as a mesmerizer of the citizenry, being positioned alongside two other magicians in this text: Atherton and the Beetle. In this way, Marsh argues that the authenticity of narrative and narrative forms are limited by instabilities and contradictions highlighted by the foreign threat but exemplified within British male narratives themselves.

The narrative instability that emerges upon a closer examination of the representation of Paul's performance is reflected in his bodily discomposure. The Beetle predicts early in Holt's narrative that Paul's body will violently dissolve: 'he shall be ground between the upper and the nether stones in the towers of anguish, and all that is left of him be cast on the accursed stream of the bitter waters' (p. 87). This does, in a sense, unfold, from the notional internal ruptures of the parliamentarian's invented 'local lesion', offered as an explanation for Paul's ostensible reliving of past

²¹ This anticipates Marlow's description of the brick maker, the 'papier-mâché Mephistopheles' in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1963), as hollow: 'it seemed to me that if I tried I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe', p. 26.

²² 'what is known to all the world', p. 250.

trauma inflicted by the Beetle (p. 115), to the crumbling that Detective Champnell witnesses: 'I was conscious of his pallid cheeks, the twitched muscles of his mouth, the feverish glitter of his eyes [...] The mental strain which he had been recently undergoing was proving too much for his physical strength' (p. 292). Importantly, Lessingham's physical weakness is linked to the untrustworthiness of his narrative, which, as I argue below, also threatens to fold in on itself. As the novel moves on to the detective's account, it intensifies its argument that if these gendered bodies are shown to be unstable and grotesque, then narratives emerging from these bodies are also frighteningly unstable.

Grotesque Narratives

In considering narrative mechanisms, it is worth recognizing that the late-Victorian interest in hermeneutic method and close reading of patterns and signification²³ is exemplified in this novel in at least three ways. First, *The Beetle* engages with the problematic, so fundamental in detective fiction, of using information to track down truth. Secondly, it asks readers to themselves be closely attentive of narrative, not to passively imbibe it. Thirdly, it cultivates criticality in the readership by forcing evaluation of characters' discernment. As we have seen, these men's accounts are decidedly fallible, but it may be Paul's story of his capture in Egypt, framed by Champnell, that most destabilizes the credibility of narrative.

Paul's story about his captivity in Egypt at the hands of the Priestess of Isis is not a cleanly enclosed, complete, or contained story: he rambles, interrupts himself with meta-narrative reflections, and refers back to the present moment, disrupting boundaries of time and locations of the present. These incisions into his narrative are frequent: 'You will smile,—I should smile, perhaps, were I the listener instead of you' (p. 240); 'You must forgive me if I seem to stumble in the telling' (p. 241); 'I do not, of course, pretend to give you the exact text of her words, but they were to that effect' (p. 241); 'I have hesitated, and still do hesitate, to assert where, precisely, fiction ended and fact began' (p. 242); and so on. Not only does he keep disrupting the flow of events in his tale, but he also pokes holes in its truth value: in other

²³ See Arata's discussion of the emergence of the figure of the 'professional reader' and social interest in practices of interpretation during the *fin-de-siècle*, pp. 3-4. D.A. Miller's analysis of the ways in which the significance of supposedly 'trifling' details began to register in late-Victorian novels is also relevant here in terms of recognizing the dynamics of disciplinary power and resistance that are at stake in the narrative of *The Beetle*. Though, in this case, the novel may be said to be disciplining its readers to be critical subjects. See *The Novel and the Police*, esp. pp. 17-32.

words, his own methods of narration render his narrative leaky, uncertain, and unbounded.²⁴

While he is able to offer what I am arguing is a narrative in grotesque form, his mode of expression has been yet further compromised. Paul's trauma manifests itself in the inability to recognize written language, to produce it, and to speak: 'I suffered from a species of aphasia' (p. 246). When he tells his story to Champnell, he cannot utter the name of his tormentor: 'You see for yourself, Mr. Champnell, what a miserable weakling, when this subject is broached, I still remain. I cannot utter the words [Holt] uttered, I cannot even write them down' (p. 249). Significantly, this unravelling of narrative prowess is directly connected to the corporeal by being sexualised: 'The most dreadful part of it was that I was wholly incapable of offering even the faintest resistance to her caresses. I lay there like a log. She did with me as she would, and in dumb agony I endured' (p. 243). Thus, the British subject is seemingly depicted here as penetrated as a consequence of Eastern desire. However, it nevertheless appears that desire for the exotic, to be desired by the exotic, and for possession of qualities traditionally associated with the East simultaneously underlie the British imagination, as the novel's subject matter itself illustrates.

The problematic of using imagination to construct knowledge, to arrive at some concrete knowledge of the East, is central in this novel: and that is where Champnell comes in. Since he is a detective, 'it falls on him to draw together the various strands, to decipher the clues and provide a sense of closure, though [...] as it turns out, this can hardly be said to happen'²⁵, for Champnell's narrative is entirely inconclusive. And in this way, Champnell's analysis of this case forces a reconsideration of the notion of writing as a concretizing power. Its ostensible function is to record and "nail down" events, but it cannot contain the disruption the Beetle instigates. Champnell's narrative fails to capture history, and it does not contribute to a stable reality; in other words, this encounter with empire refuses to be contained. Thus, while Thomas Richards argues that the imperial archive, the obsessive control of knowledge and the accumulation of data, was used to build empire, *The Beetle*, I suggest, demonstrates some considerable limitations to the solidification of knowledge through "authoritative" male writing. Indeed, Champnell's narrative, instead of providing satisfaction, explanation, and demarcation of boundaries, in fact does quite the opposite.

²⁴ As Hurley points out, Gothic works often featured narratives that were incomplete in the sense that they failed to fully explain 'reality' or describe 'thing so terrible as to resist or exceed language' (p. 13). In using incomplete narratives, Gothic texts facilitated, as *The Beetle* does here, an 'estrangement' (pp. 19-20) from epistemological foundations.

²⁵ Wolfreys, p. 26.

Champnell's narrative, in my reading, serves two major functions. First, in terms of dealing with masculinity, it critiques *fin-de-siècle* romantic and militaristic male prowess. Second, in terms of dealing with narrative inadequacies for the project of consolidating masculinity, it illustrates leakiness and instability, profound contradictions within strategies of protection and fortification of boundaries, and the grotesqueness of fantasy and erotic experience. Detective Champnell, as an authority figure removed from both the experiences of trauma and the love triangle in which the others are involved, offers an ostensibly objective perspective that works to parody the forms of masculinity in which both Paul and Sydney attempt to indulge. Amongst a number of exchanges in which the two bumbling lovers compete through proclamations of devotion to the missing Marjorie, one stands out. As the men discover her absence at the house, Atherton and Lessingham are both dramatically indignant at the prospect of Marjorie's death. However Champnell's treatment of their lamentations undercuts the possibility of pathos by contrasting their expostulations with drier, more subdued descriptions and by illustrating the competitiveness underlying their expressions of grief. For instance, Paul establishes his dedication by threatening Sydney: 'If hurt has befallen Marjorie Lindon you shall account for it to me with your life's blood' (p. 265). Sydney then counters by bidding his own devotion: 'Let it be so [...] If hurt has come to Marjorie, God knows that I am willing enough that death should come to me' (p. 265). Enter Champnell to frame their antics: 'While they wrangled, I continued to search' (p. 265). Thus, while the lovers continue to quarrel over which of them is more dedicated to the maiden, the detective focuses on her actual rescue. Subsequently, when Marjorie's discarded garments are found, both lovers jump the gun in assuming her death and professing to avenge it. Snatching at a tress of snipped hair, Paul exclaims:

"this points to murder,—foul, cruel, causeless murder. As I live, I will devote my all,—money, time, reputation!—to gaining vengeance on the wretch who did this dead."

Atherton chimed in.

"To that I say, Amen!" He lifted his hand. "God is my witness!"
(p. 265)

Champnell's use of 'chimed in' matches the register of neither Atherton's nor Paul's noble vows of retribution; instead, through its contrast, it signals to the readership to understand these declarations as melodramatic. Further, this treatment frames these men as being a bit too eager to accept that Marjorie is dead, and instead leap to

establish their own nobility. In effect, Champnell's account renders them buffoons rather than fearsome avengers of Marjorie's kidnapping.

But in addition to undercutting models of masculinity in the novel, Champnell's narrative simultaneously demands critical reading practice by unraveling itself, indicating its own profound instability. Problems with Champnell's narrative go beyond his inability to wrap up the story with a clean suture or his failure to provide a complete archive of the events related; contradictions in Champnell's story demand active reading. For instance, he writes that an English boy was brought to authorities in Egypt in 'a state of indescribable mutilation' (p. 296). This continues the theme of dissolution; his body, but also his mind, had been rent, for he died 'without having given utterance to one single coherent word' (p. 297). However, this statement comes on the heels of Champnell's other note that the boy had screamed, 'They're burning them! they're burning them! Devils! Devils!' (p. 297) which, of course, includes a number of coherent words. Subsequently, Champnell insists, 'Paul Lessingham [...] has ceased to be a haunted man' (p. 320). Well, almost: 'None the less he continues to have what seems to be a constitutional disrelish for the subject of beetles, nor can he himself be induced to speak of them [...] there are still moments in which he harks back, with something like physical shrinking to that awful nightmare of the past' (p. 320). Thus Paul, despite Champnell's assessment, is still very much haunted.

Indeed, as the novel draws to its conclusion, more narrative problems emerge, not least significantly the perforations in the notion of authenticity. Only in the last chapter do we learn that "Paul Lessingham" is a pseudonym (p. 319). Because this is not disclosed at the start, it forces a rethinking of what we've been asked to believe all along. Furthermore, we learn that Marjorie's narrative was written during a period of madness; 'she was for something like three years under medical supervision as a lunatic', and then her 'restoration [...] was a matter of years' (p. 319). This undoubtedly colours the reliability of her story. Even Champnell cannot offer a particularly reliable account, as it is 'several years since I bore my part in the events which I have rapidly sketched' (p. 319). As for Holt's narrative, it is a composition of information related to Atherton (who we can only assume has been asked to provide an account at the same time Champnell and Marjorie have set theirs down: that is, many years after the fact) and Marjorie (who, as we discover only at the novel's close, has to work back across the divide of madness to recount what Holt had divulged to her [p. 321]). Further, Champnell reveals that he made the choice to present Holt's narrative as first person for aesthetic reasons rather than offering information as it was gathered: another strike against the objectivity seemingly

claimed by this genre of multi-voiced narration. In these ways, Champnell's narrative deeply undermines itself.

But perhaps the most significant discrepancy evident in Champnell's prose is his simultaneous loathing for the foreign entity assaulting Marjorie and his fantasising about her fate. In dialogue with a larger collective imagination, the novel ostensibly depicts Eastern desires in a particular way, namely, the burning of white women and the emasculation of white men via their subjugation (and in *The Beetle's* case, rape) and consequent impotence in failing to protect said white women. Accordingly, the narratives within the novel use violence against women in order to solidify the vilification of the "Other": this process hinges on both the objectification of women's bodies, i.e. as things that experience pain and assault, and an eroticization of torture via the circuitous route of the lusty foreigner. These violent erotics are expressed both in idea and in form, as Champnell's reverie illustrates. When Paul queries, 'what must this wretch have done to her? How my darling must have suffered', Champnell muses, 'That was a theme on which I myself scarcely ventured to allow my thoughts to rest' (p. 293). But he does:

The notion of a gently-nurtured girl being at the mercy of that fiend incarnate, possessed [...] of all the paraphernalia of horror and dread, was one which caused me tangible shrinkings of the body. Whence had come those shrieks and yells, of which the writer of the report spoke, which had caused the Arab's fellow-passengers to think that murder was being done? What unimaginable agony had caused them? What speechless torture? And the 'wailing noise,' which had induced the prosaic, inundated London cabman to get twice off his box to see what was the matter, what anguish had been provocative of that? The helpless girl who had already endured so much, endured, perhaps, that to which death would have been preferred!—shut up in that rattling jolting box on wheels, alone with that diabolical Asiatic, with the enormous bundle, which was but the lurking place of nameless terrors,—what might she not, while being borne through the heart of civilized London, have been made to suffer? What had she not been made to suffer to have kept up that 'wailing noise'? (p. 293)

No new information is given here, the details were conveyed in the reports received. Champnell lingers here for emphasis.²⁶ The idea of suffering is reiterated through

²⁶ Vuohelainen recognizes that *The Beetle* dwells excessively, even titillatingly, on the unseen

references to ‘horror,’ ‘dread,’ ‘torture,’ ‘agony,’ ‘endured,’ ‘anguish,’ and so on, and is emphasized through sensory language such as “shrieks,” ‘yells,’ and ‘wailing,’ and kinetic signifiers like ‘rattling’,. ‘jolting’ and ‘tangible shrinkings of the body.’ This impact on the body is significant: Champnell physically feels the effects of the assault he is conceiving, and the implication is that, due to this process of reading sensational language, a parallel dynamic between the reader and the text occurs. This reverberation is specific: Champnell’s rendition emphasizes penetration, not only in terms of resonances throughout his body. In addition to the phallic connotations of the ‘enormous bundle, which was but the lurking place of nameless terrors’, the idea that ‘the helpless girl’ suffers as she is ‘borne through the heart of civilized London’ suggests an ultimate invasion of the nation, a transgression that is augmented by the fact that England seems powerless to protect its ‘own flesh and blood’ in its own capital (p. 298). Yet what enables Marjorie’s violation is the gender slippage that the Beetle instigates. In addition to its own gender being ambiguous, the creature also disguises Marjorie as a man. In-so-far as her body occupies both male and female positions simultaneously, the novel asks its readers to imagine sexual assault against both sexes. Similarly, when Paul lies hypnotized in the Cairo den, his own subjugation is imbricated with his witnessing of ‘a young and lovely Englishwoman [...] outraged, and burnt alive, while I lay there helpless, looking on’ (p. 244). The rape of the white woman is thus simultaneously the rape of the English man, both because of his inability to safeguard her and because of the way the assault on Marjorie-as-man resonates with previous ones on other hypnotized male bodies. And on yet another level, masculinity gets perforated: if the Beetle and Marjorie can perform passable masculinity, then not only have women in a sense permeated maleness, but also maleness becomes uprooted from essential ontological categorization.

Alongside this penetration of the supposedly invulnerable body emerges the penetration of the supposedly invulnerable mind. While Sydney resists mesmerism, Holt and Paul intimate that their defenselessness is rooted in physical weakness. Champnell, the rational private detective, would seem to possess the most impenetrable faculties; so why does he let his imagination run away with him as he pictures sexual assaults within the cab, despite his professions to resist doing so?

The narrators emphatically state that they do not know what happened in Cairo, or possess solid evidence about the burnings, tortures, outrages, and mutilations. Lessingham admits he is never sure if he imagined it, while Atherton confesses,

horrors that take place inside the train compartment and the public cab’ (p. 31); but Champnell’s role in their narration is crucial.

‘Were I upon oath, [...] I should leave the paper blank’ (p. 149). Meanwhile, the possibility of fancy underpins Champnell’s imaginative exploration of horrors currently under discussion. Thus, the violent fantasies considered in this novel are rooted in the minds of these male characters and in the circulation of their narratives. Indeed, this is the very function the novel itself, as cultural artefact, fulfils. Crucially, as this passage illustrates, the central focus of violence is not Marjorie herself as an individual, but English women in general. Champnell thinks of her not as *that* gently-nurtured girl, but as ‘*a* gently-nurtured girl’: she stands in for all white women of a certain class and nationality. Similarly, the victim in Paul’s story is a random ‘young and lovely Englishwoman’ (p. 244), a generic female body that suffers, while the women in the youth’s story are just nameless ‘members of a decent English family’ (p. 295).²⁷ Finally, we learn explicitly that the offending cult seems to prefer ‘white Christian women, with a special preference, if they could get them, to young English women’ (p. 297). For Champnell, Marjorie is an abstraction and the notion of her suffering is rooted in a larger titillating fantasy that produces a sensual reaction: ‘The blood in my veins tingled at the thought’ (p. 298). Yet this fantasy is equally about male subjugation: in various ways, their mental, physical, and narrative powers are penetrated and rendered grotesque.

This idea of narrative grotesqueness suggests a dark function of late-Victorian popular fiction. Popular literature and its circulation plays out, through textual representation, the very stereotypes of Eastern desires they construct. In other words, what *The Beetle* shows us is that literature depicting these desires can itself enact them. Thus, writing becomes a profoundly destabilizing force because it reveals this and thus tracks the process of masculinity’s disruption. If the Beetle commits violence directly, and Paul and Champnell enact it conceptually, then writers can similarly do violence by conjuring visions of women as primarily objects of abuse and sacrifice: and in this, women as individual identities are sacrificed in literature to the production and circulation of fantasy. They become reduced to beings that suffer. This process highlights the dependence of sexual energies on literature that activates fantasies about the East. In this way, British writing that betrays anxiety about penetration from the East in actuality demonstrates a kind of self-penetration, being from the start a leaky body continuously circulating and recirculating different forms of violent fantasy.

Thus, Champnell’s narrative is not only unstable because of factual insufficiencies; it is grotesque in the sense that it transcends the ostensible boundary

²⁷ I would argue that their brother’s disfigurement is bound up with his inability to either save them or to adequately narrate the story of what happened to them.

between text and reader via the vehicle of what Arata identifies as the erotics of reading, and the use of prose to elicit bodily excitement. If ‘the act of reading is itself erotic, especially when reading takes the form of critical apprehension—with apprehension being understood in all three of its senses at once: anxiety, perception, seizure’ (Arata, p. 68), then the transcendence of boundaries happens on numerous levels through erotic acts: information gathering and fantasy production within the novel (which registers as sensual experience), the process of reading popular fiction for pleasure, and various acts of critical reading. Because of this, the narratives within the novel continuously expand, leak out, shift according to interpretation and apprehension, and resonate in different bodies in diverse ways. In this reading, narrative becomes inherently grotesque and refuses to be contained within a stable body; in *The Beetle* this is especially clear. Particularly in detective fiction, the delaying of conclusions and the deferral of information parallels the experience of reading. Precise details, concrete evidence, and the final climax are all continuously postponed. In this way, *The Beetle* delays climax, with resolution being deferred even beyond the novel’s conclusion.

Conclusion

Fin-de-siècle Empire writing about the East is thus represented as being profoundly unstable as *The Beetle* participates in the discourse in order to underline its instabilities. Such representation is limited, as Holt asserts: ‘Pen cannot describe the concentrated frenzy of hatred with which the speaker dwelt upon the name,—it was demonic’ (Marsh, p. 87).²⁸ It betrays fissures in self-construction, as Holt further observes: ‘In [Lessingham’s] bearing there was a would-be defiance. He might not have been aware of it, but the repetitions of the threats were, in themselves, confessions of weakness’ (p. 80). And it traces the circulation of unacknowledged British desires: while penetration is on one level represented as coming from the East, this novel shows that imperial narratives and the larger imaginative body of literature that fantasised about Eastern desire, unruliness, and British economic, sexual, and military vulnerability in Egypt was always already grotesque, dependent on circulations and exchanges, and continuously defied containment. That this kind of indulgence in dark sexual fantasy is shown to be “home grown” destabilizes the English narrative credibility even further. Just as Lessingham’s and Champnell’s

²⁸ Underscoring the inadequacy of language for representing that which exceeds extant epistemological structures is a key Gothic trope that subverts the transmission and production of knowledge. See Hurley’s discussion of ‘rhetorical obfuscation’, pp. 13-16.

fantasies of penetration are demonstrated to emerge from within their own imaginations, the fantasy of various forms of penetration by the East emerges from within the national literary body. In one sense, the Beetle's function as a destabilizing force engendering madness works as a metaphor for the inability to distinguish reality from imagination. In this, and in its disconcerting repulsiveness, the figure of the Beetle parallels the instabilities of writing, speaking, and weaving narrative; thus the confrontation with the creature brings on the dissolution of manhood since manliness and masculine prowess is in many ways understood in terms of the ability to write, make, and normalize reality. But, more crucially, it is the textual confrontation with the creature, the narrative inability to contain it, and the imperial fantasies about sexual desire and the East, that in their erotic grotesqueness threaten to engulf the reader.

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