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Contents

Editor's Introduction vi

Waiting for the Paladin: 8
Ideology, Imagination, and Archetypes of the Female in The Odyssey and The Anniad
MARY KAY BANSMER

Society's Tragedy: 17
The Death of Lovers
KATIE DWYER

The Lyric: 21
Giving Shape to Darkness
SHANNON MURPHY

Rhetoric and Rivalries: 27
The Reunion of Fathers and Sons
AMANDA ANGLIN

Beauty and Monstrosity: 36
A Reading of Fruit Chan’s Short Film “Dumplings”
KATHRYN DARNALL
Translating Refined Appearance into Raised Social Status in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Bourgeois Gentleman*

ERIN CAREY
Editor's introduction

NOMAD is proud to bring out this, the sixth volume of the best undergraduate essays written as a part of the comparative literature curriculum. These essays encompass work done between the fall of 2006 and the summer of 2007. The course papers collected here are indicative of the breadth of work being undertaken in Comparative Literature, reflecting both the particular concerns and interests of undergraduates, and the research of our graduates and faculty members. Topics in this issue range from contemporary adaptations of Homeric women, to a Kristevan engagement with director Fruit Chan’s short film “Dumplings”.

All papers have been refereed both by the original instructor and, anonymously, by an editorial board comprised of graduate students. The board decides which essays are of publishable standard and, if publishable, what changes are necessary. Accepted papers are then given back to the students to begin the revision process. Final drafts are collected and undergo a final round of copyediting by the editorial staff. Out of close to thirty submissions of the best work by COLT students, the top half-dozen are presented here.

NOMAD provides a crucial forum in which students can improve their writing and learn the ins-and-outs of getting their work published. Additionally, it provides important opportunities for graduate students to gain experience in the publication process. Recognizing this, the Program of Comparative Literature is excited to announce that we are currently revamping our submission process, editorial process, and the format of the journal. The changes promise to place NOMAD at the center of an exciting and innovative program for Comparative Literature undergraduates. Look out for the new NOMAD at the beginning of the 2008/9 academic year.

Thank you to all those who helped put this edition together, either by submitting essays, copyediting, or undertaking administrative tasks. A special thank you, finally, to outgoing NOMAD editor Tom Dolack. If we, in Comparative Literature, can be proud of this and past editions of NOMAD and can look forward to editions to come, it is in no small part because of his enormous contribution.

Max Rayneard
NOMAD Editor
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Waiting for the Paladin: Ideology, Imagination and Archetypes of the Female in The Odyssey and The Anniad

Mary Kay Bansmer

Between the texts of The Odyssey by Homer and The Anniad by Gwendolyn Brooks lies a gulf of time and cultural experience. All the expectations and rituals that may have been true of Homer’s Ancient Greece do not necessarily apply to the experiences of middle-class African-Americans in the 1950s as presented in Brooks’ poetry. However, despite differences inherent in such comparisons, sets of social rules governing women have not been radically altered in the intervening years. In both time periods most young women, across all social classes, were looked upon as future wives and their days were spent preparing for this role. For obedient girls, such as Nausikaa in The Odyssey, there were no protestations or worries about the impending marriage, whereas for independent, imaginative Annie of The Anniad, the journey to womanhood would be a treacherous one. Annie’s nonconformist nature creates difficulties for her
as she tries to assume the proper behaviors expected of her as a woman. Yet, despite her sufferings, Annie is equipped to deal with painful circumstances by her ability to reshape reality. Furthermore, as Annie consciously pastiches various ideologies available within her landscape to create an inner world that sustains her she is more adept at surviving disappointment than Nausikaa, who lacks an inner life.

For centuries, women have been expected to wait for a husband to choose them, wait for their husbands to return from war, wait for them to return from philandering, wait to bear children: The acceptance of this gender role is the major episode for both Annie and Nausikaa in their respective narratives. While women waited men made decisions, built empires, and created in ways from in which women were barred from participating. This separation between genders, effectively creating a gender of leaders and one of followers, allows for one half to sail off to Troy to sack the citadel while the other waits behind at home, enduring suffering without the opportunity to escape it. Where society grants men such as Odysseus the agency to take action in untenable situations, women have little recourse but to suffer while waiting for a paladin to rescue them. In The Odyssey, Nausikaa is a young woman setting forth on the path that will turn her into a waiting woman, having already mastered the practice of pampering men. Yet in the Annie Allen cycle of poems Annie is too full of life, too impatient for extended waiting. Being forced to do so changes her negatively. Over the course of the poems Annie becomes a waiting woman, morphing from a creative, “thaumaturgic lass” to a woman “tweaked and twenty-four” (39, 49).

Western culture’s definition of a young unmarried girl’s place is that of devotion to her father, with attaining a husband as her goal, for it is only in marriage that she will obtain status and through her husband she will have agency. Such expectations had not significantly changed from the time that The Odyssey was composed in Ancient Greece to mid-20th century United States when Brooks wrote The Anniad. Such ideologies are present in every human organization, informing our every thought and action, usually subconsciously. It is the purpose of ideology for each member of a society to learn the rules “according to the job he is ‘destined’ for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience,” (Althusser, 132). Both Nausikaa and Annie are bound to their places within
that cultural inheritance as marriageable maidens despite the differences in their time periods and social status. They are second-class citizens as women within patriarchal societies, held subservient to these males who hold the authority. Nausikaa, for example, is responsible for cleaning and doing laundry for her male relatives:

*When you sit among the first men in council and share their counsels, [you] ought to have clean clothing about you; and also, you have five dear sons [...] they are forever wanting fresh clothing, to wear it when they go to dance, and it is my duty to think about all this* (Odyssey, 6.60-65).

This obedient, dutiful stance Nausikaa assumes with her father is correct and desired by her society, and although Nausikaa does not appear at first glance to be disadvantaged, as a princess she bears the full weight of cultural expectation upon her young shoulders. Dominated as she is dominated by the conjunction of patriarchy and religion, Nausikaa understands her place as both subservient to males and gods. Yet she is simultaneously a servant and a person of importance within her community, which she asserts in her first meeting with Odysseus, “It is the Phaiakians who hold this territory and city, and I myself am the daughter of the great-hearted Alkinoos, whose power and dominion are held by right, given from the Phaiakians” (Odyssey, 6.195-197). This speech and the accompanying lordly manner in which she deals with Odysseus when she assumes he is of lowly birth is evidence that she has already learned how “to ‘handle’ the workers correctly, [...] to ‘order them about’ properly, [...] to ‘speak to them’ in the right way,” an important social skill in the hierarchal world she exists in (Althusser, 132). Nausikaa is so firmly entrenched in the hierarchy of her society that she accepts being both a servant and a princess concurrently without considering the paradoxical nature of her situation. For Nausikaa, order is not to be questioned, as it both serves and controls her.

Despite her apparent privilege as a member of the ruling class, Nausikaa’s status as beloved daughter and princess holds her hostage to cultural norms in a way that Annie is not as rigorously subjected to. During an episode when Annie is lazing about during
the day rather than doing her chores, Brooks describes Annie’s mother scolding of her daughter:

“Be I to fetch and carry?
Get a broom to whish the doors
O r get a man to marry.” (35)

Annie’s daydreaming and the expectation that she ought to be cleaning instead both reference common Western fairytales, such as Cinderella, in which a young woman indulges in imaginative fancy while dealing with domestic reality, all the while taking no action to alter her material circumstances. Rebellious teenage Annie also rejects the standards of her middle class community, uninterested in the neighborhoods bordered by “prim low fencing pinching in the grass” and peopled with individuals whom “settled for chicken and shut the door” (33). Annie further asserts her ideal for a husband of an impossibly wealthy stature such as a girl of her lower class background is unlikely to attain. Her imagined husband is a flat image, made of “lacquer”, rather than a man. Annie expects him to provide her “With melted opals for my milk/
Pearl-leaf for my cracker” as though she were a fairytale princess rather than a girl of the lower middle-class (35). In all this imagining, Annie is simultaneously passive and active. She is passive as a participant in the mating ritual, she waits for a paladin to find her, but as she waits she is constructing an imagined reality, a fantasy in which she is the heroine, the winner of an ancient courtship game. At this young age Annie has become entirely focused on an outsider as her savior. She has already expressed dissatisfaction with her humble background, but she takes no active steps to change her situation aside from casting her nets for a lover by appearing beguiling. Yet Annie’s fantasizing is a quality absent in the normative-associated behavior of Nausikaa, for rather than accepting her status as Nausikaa has, Annie proclaims her intentions of rising above it. Her methods of social climbing are traditionally female, using the marriage contract as an opportunity for status elevation, but the magical nature of her imagined lover is an exceptional interpretation of the ideals she has inherited.
Both Annie and Nausikaa begin their narratives as unmarried maidens waiting to become wives and mothers, the same no-man’s-land occupied by Artemis, a virginal goddess who also rules over childbirth. Yet unlike Annie, Nausikaa is stationary in the epic, with the arc of her development into womanhood remaining unexplored. She is a prospective wife, the virgin preparing to become a woman by marriage and childbearing. Her comparison to the maiden goddess Artemis illustrates both her beauty and her virginity:

> It was Nausikaa of the white arms who led in the dancing; and as Artemis [...] above all the others, and she is easily marked among them, though all are lovely, so this one shone among her handmaidens, a virgin unwedded (Odyssey, 6.101-109).

As Nausikaa is compared with an ambiguous goddess of both fertility and virginity, Annie similarly begins her journey away from girlhood described as “ripe” with “all her harvest buttoned in” and “all her ornaments untried” in the third stanza of The Anniad. Annie, like Nausikaa, is “waiting for the paladin,” the knight of fairytales to rescue and conquer her. Each phrase hints at her position of a girl waiting to be sexualized. Many of the metaphors applied to Annie’s sexuality are flora-related, she possesses ripeness and harvest, likening her to fertility goddesses. Later, in Annie’s initial encounters with her lover Brooks describes his consumption of her innocence as if eating a plate of salad greens:

> And a man of tan engages  
> For the springtime of her pride,  
> Eats the green by easy stages,  
> Nibbles at the root beneath  
> With intimidating teeth. (39)

It is after the consummation that Annie’s powers of imagination are confronted by unpleasant realities, such as when her lover Tan Man, leaves for war and possible death. Annie
waiting for the paladin

time...imagining her new role of waiting wife as she waits for his return in the poem “the sonnet ballad”:

They took my lover’s tallness off to war.
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.
He won’t be coming back here anymore. (51)

As a wife, Annie is expected to refrain from fantasy and fold her hands patiently, waiting for her husband to return as Penelope waited twenty years for Odysseus. However, Annie and Tan Man’s reunion has none of the reconciliation that is associated with that archetypal couple, instead leading to adultery on the part of Tan Man and more waiting for Annie. Through this second separation Annie’s continued experimentation with denial methods of masking the pain leads to her refusal to just suffer in silence.

As Annie has no hope of fitting the normative role, she is actually allowed more leeway to blend social ideologies and does so when she pastiches ideals to create a rich inner life. This essential creative quality is what Nausikaa, for all her wealth and privilege, lacks. Moreover, Annie draws upon the Western canon, making associations with fairytales such as Cinderella and the epic Odyssey, and uses these aspects of these texts at will for her reworking of everyday existence. Annie’s creative qualities can construct a heaven within a hellish relationship or lead her into trouble, as when her romance with Tan Man reaches its apex in their first sexual encounter she willingly fools herself into believing it is all she had hoped for as he “leads her to a lowly room. Which she makes a chapel of” (Brooks, 40). This imaginative quality loses effectiveness as time progresses, but it continues to strengthen Annie even as she grows older and more wearied by her troubles, such as the death of a beloved cousin late in the Annie Allen cycle. In “the rites for Cousin Vit” we see that Annie has retained her ability to revise situations, to even transform death from an entrapment to freedom as she imagines her cousin escaping the coffin to fly away:
In the act of revising death to be a rebirth for this beloved cousin Annie reinvents herself, drawing comfort and power from the memory and from the recreation of it.

While it may be possible that Nausikaa has the capacity for growth, during her appearance in the epic she has not shown much evidence for it. After Odysseus politely rejects an offer of her hand in marriage, Nausikaa reminds him that he owes her his life, a claim that could be made by multiple characters, for providing him with clothes and information during their first encounter on the beach. Odysseus, mindful of having been indebted to women before, tactfully replies that he will pray to Nausikaa as a goddess all the days of his life. It must be noted that Odysseus has previously engaged in sexual relationships with Circes and Calypso, both women with some measure of control over their own realms and the ability to manipulate their surroundings, and is returning to Penelope, a wife who both waits and cleverly manipulates her suitors with tricks to avoid their marriage proposals. Nausikaa has much growing to do before she can compare with Penelope, the paragon of a waiting wife.

While the lyric form of Brook’s Anniad conveys Annie’s single experience, several sections of the poems ponder the singularity of the female experience as a whole, such as preparing for a date or waiting for a lover to return from war. Whereas epics traditionally function as a vehicle of transmission for a culture’s ideologies, with roles and proper behavior outlined, from the lowly swineherd up to the king of Ithaca, and lyric poetry serves to illuminate the individual, Brooks subverts the standard epic format by not concentrating on a culture as a whole, but instead on an outsider individual’s experience within society. Thusly she makes the epic intimate and brings the outsider inside. The lyric poem’s expression of one point of view is not entirely in conflict with
the all-encompassing scope of the epic: for TheAnniad exists not to explain life but to offer one possible life as example of how to exist within the strictures of society while never fitting the normative role. It is in “Poem IV” of “TheWomanhood” section, the last lines of the AnnieAllen cycle that we find Annie in conversation with a man who advises her to accept the rules of culture laid out by fathers, the supposed receptacles of wisdom:

So our fathers said—
And they were wise— we think— At any rate,
They were older than ourselves. And the report is
What’s old is wise. (65)

Annie rejects his simple explanation of patriarchal wisdom, having suffered through the experience of the waiting woman as demanded by cultural fathers. Her answer to him illustrates her final acceptance of self-reliance as the cross each individual must bear. Still, Brooks shows the readers that she retains both her fantastic imagery and her toughened, world-weary outlook as “other” even as she has grown out of her Nausikaa-like naiveté: “There are no magics or elves/ Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must/ Wizard a track through our own screaming weed” (65). As weary as this final statement sounds, Annie has retained her capacity to refashion imagery for her own purposes. In this stanza Annie has come to see reality clearly for what it is and admits that fantasy is limited. Perhaps her years of waiting have hardened her to the point that even “Kissing in her kitchenette/ The minuets of memory” no longer holds the comfort that it once did (49). For all of her waiting and despite her eventual submission to wifely duty, Annie does not achieve the triumphant reunion that Penelope receives upon Odysses’ homecoming. Annie’s husband has left her a widowed young mother, and now she must find her own way home without guidance, for she has no gods as Nausikaa does to direct her. Instead Annie must “wizard a track” alone, with only her dreams to support her on the path.
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In both The Great Gatsby and Miss Julie, we see examples of the consequences of overstepping societal bounds: the trespassers pay with their lives. Both Gatsby and Miss Julie transgressed society's stigma against loving outside of one's class, and the nature of tragedy demands that society be returned to balance, which demands the death of the trespassers. Each character oversteps societal boundaries by falling in love outside their own social class. And in each work, the character first realizes the futility of their dreams, and then dies a tragic death. Gatsby pursues a woman impossibly above him in class, devoting all his energy to rise in status in order to marry her, and then lives only long enough to find that the love of his life is a flawed human being, instead of being the symbol of perfection he pursued throughout his adulthood. Miss Julie realizes not only that she cannot live happily with her lower-class lover, but also that she cannot live her life as it was before he entered it, and, trapped by her impulsive acts, commits suicide at his command. The nature of tragedy can be seen in the nature of the relationships in The Great Gatsby and Miss Julie, and in the form of the two characters' deaths.

Gatsby’s death is inevitable because of his obsession with Daisy and the social rules he breaks to try to win her love. Their relationship is doomed not only by their difference in class, but also by Daisy’s marriage to the rich and successful Tom Buchanan.
Despite this, Gatsby spends his entire adult life illegally obtaining money with which to buy an impressive house and throw fancy parties to appear as rich and cultured as Daisy. He pretends to be above his true station in life, wearing his military uniform daily because he had no other clothes, while courting a refined “nice girl” from old money and a good family. During his time in the military, Gatsby becomes utterly obsessed with Daisy as an idea, and as a standard of perfection. She loses her humanity and becomes an impossible dream. After returning home he becomes a carpetbagger and a criminal, further and further from Daisy’s social status, but ever more determined to win her love.

In The Great Gatsby, Tom’s adulterous relationship with the lower-class Myrtle mirrors Gatsby’s affair with Daisy. In each relationship, it is the lover who desires to appear to be part of a higher class that pays with their lives. Myrtle attempts to seem refined with her apartment in the city. She dresses up and throws parties, and furnished an apartment in an ostentatious way that, instead of appearing classy, is only clutter. This mirrors Gatsby’s extravagant parties and his mansion, with which he hopes to appear as though a wealthy life were the only one he knew. Both Myrtle and Gatsby struggle to appear refined and deserving of their upper-class lovers, and both fail in their attempt to fit in with the wealthy, and pay for their charade with their lives. Thus, in The Great Gatsby, a relationship and life above one’s social status ends in failure and death.

In Miss Julie, the roles are reversed as a noble lady falls in love with a servant, which results in a loss of identity and then in her death. Julie begins the play somewhat confused as to her true social status. Her mother raised her alternately as equal to boys and as a noble lady. Julie, therefore, is both the refined lady and the wild woman without respect for normal social divisions. Her relationship with Jean, her servant, is an example of this, as she desires to break free of the cage of her social status, but once she has slept with Jean she realizes that she cannot remain in her father’s house. After exploring several romantic options of running away to the country and living a classless life together, she succumbs to his rational acknowledgement that she cannot hide, but must kill herself to maintain her honor. In complying with Jean’s command that she commit suicide, she loses all trace of a social class: she has obeyed the orders of a servant. Jean’s fate is not spelled out at the end of the play: his ending is ambiguous, although
there seems little hope that he could escape unpunished. Jean had little power in the relationship: he had to comply with Julie’s orders throughout, even the suggestive kissing of Julie’s shoe. It was Julie’s power and overt acts which led to the tragic situation in the first place, which reemphasizes the importance of class status in the play. In order for society to come back into balance, Miss Julie had to be sacrificed.

The nature of the deaths of Gatsby and Miss Julie also advances the similarly tragic plots. Gatsby, after losing Daisy, is murdered by mistake. Myrtle’s husband kills him because he believes that Gatsby was Myrtle’s lover and murderer. Gatsby was killed for Tom’s crimes, which serves as an anticlimax in the novel. The murder is not even directly described, but is reported after the action occurs. The true climax of the novel takes place at the apartment in the city, when the truth about the affair between Daisy and Gatsby comes into the open. This scene represents the end of Gatsby’s dreams for a life with Daisy, as she falls short of his romantic dreams and admits that she had loved Tom when she tells him “I can’t help what’s past” (Fitzgerald 132). This statement is important, because Gatsby has spent all this time trying to change past, present, and future to be with a woman beyond his social class. After this tragic scene, his death is just an inevitable follow-up to the real heartbreak— the loss of an impossible but beloved dream.

Miss Julie’s death is one more instance of social bounds overstepped. In the end, she destroys the last vestige of her rank by obeying Jean’s command to kill herself. She commands him to command her: “Help me now! Command me, and I’ll obey you like a dog” (Strindberg 162). Thus, she commits suicide at the behest of this man below her station who has contributed to her downfall. While her death is necessary to return society to the balanced state it had been in before, this aspect of her death is important in that she continues to act against the rules of society. Both Jean and Julie recognize that “there’s no other end to it” (Strindberg, 163). Miss Julie had to kill herself to preserve any honor left to her, but she loses some of that honor in lowering herself to taking orders from her servant. She does not have the courage or willpower to take action alone: “I can’t do anything; can’t repent, can’t run away, can’t stay, can’t live— can’t die” (Strindberg 162). The hopelessness of her situation combines with the hopelessness of
inaction and the realization that she is trapped, humiliated, and dishonored. Thus, in lowering herself to Jean’s level and sleeping with him, she lowers herself further in taking a final order from him and killing herself.

The tragic natures of Strindberg’s Miss Julie and Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby arise from a love affair outside the socially accepted boundaries of love. Gatsby and Julie are doomed to death as soon as they actively pursue a relationship with someone outside their class. This breaking down of social barriers requires a re-ordering of society—namely the deaths of those who have broken the rules. Gatsby suffers the double tragedy of losing Daisy to Tom, and then dying at the hands of a man he has not wronged. Miss Julie, in her final act of suicide, continues to commit sins against society as she takes orders from her lowborn servant and lover, Jean. The warning is in each is clear: the penalty for breaking society’s laws is both the loss of personal identity and tragic death.

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The experience of darkness is one of deprivation of light, of boundary, of community, and of communication. Its powerful force of dispossession isolates its victims in oblivion. Robert Frost’s poem “Acquainted with the Night” conveys the solitude and fear of darkness as a state of perpetual meaninglessness. In doing so, the form of the poem itself emerges as a force countering the oblivion of darkness with external and internal creations of form. “Acquainted with the Night” illustrates the capacity of lyric poetry to not only convey personal, psychological, and perceptual expressions of absence, but also to forge from those absences the creation of a shaped and measured poetic form; a form which mediates space and time by engaging with both the tradition of poetic making, specifically that of Dante Alighieri, and the universality of human animation.

In Frost’s poem, constructions of absence convey personhood and contextualize the speaker in the poem as “other,” and the thus poem as a lyric. Lyric poetry as a genre is concerned with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the “I,” or the speaker of the poem. The lyric is, in the words of Gwendolyn Brooks, in the service of conveying “my
own personal truth as I have seen it.” It is when this “I” asserts his or her personhood as an outsider or a deviant from society or tradition that he or she is characterized as other, or strange. In Frost’s poem, the “I” is contextualized as such because of the unusual decision to characterize experiences and convey personhood by what he or she is not, rather than define the speaker clearly and positively by what he or she is. Hegel calls this act “an indefinite definition by negation,” (Stewart 3). In “Acquainted with the Night,” a series of mental and perceptual absences of personhood rather than statements of personhood perform the lyric function of conveying the feelings, qualities and thus the personhood of the speaker. References to absences of light, of communication, and of time convey the speaker’s feelings of solitude and oblivion. The speaker identifies himself in the first line as “one acquainted with the night,” (1) rather than by name or quality, and in anonymity states that he has been walking alone in the rain without light. The line, “I have outwalked the furthest city light,” suggests that the speaker alone has wandered beyond the reaches of civilization and crossed a threshold into darkness (3). By negating self-definition in favor of anonymity and by wandering beyond society’s illuminated paths, the speaker expresses his strange or “other” subjectivity through the absence of societal expectations and of light. The speaker conveys his silent oblivion in the lines, “I have passed by the watchman on his beat/ and dropped by eyes, unwilling to explain,” (5-6). In a state of oblivion, the speaker is described by what he lacks, which is the motivation to communicate to another human any information about who he is, why he is walking, or where he is going. In passing the watchman, who is perhaps a representative of societal laws or the eyes of social scrutiny, and in offering no explanation for himself or for his chosen path in spite the watchman’s expectation of one, the speaker illustrates the breach between his or her society and the alterity of the speaker. The words “dropped my head,” may even suggest the gesture of shame, of fear, or of a desire to go unseen or unnoticed; all desires that classify the speaker as a strange “other”. By negating the impulse to express his personhood and interact with another human, the speaker alienates himself. The speaker also records the time as absent of meaning with the repetition of “have been,” and with its indefinite and negated description as “neither wrong nor right” (13). The repetition of the ambiguous linguistic construction “have been,” indicates both past and
present tense action, thus conveying a sense of continuous motion and timelessness. Despite the rhythmic, ticking effect of the words or the sound of shuffling, dragging feet that the repetition recalls, the phrases circle upon themselves line after line, just as the poem itself pivots back to the first line in a circular progression, creating a soundscape of droning endlessness. Rather than tell the exact time, the “luminary clock against the sky” which represents the circular images of the face of a clock and of a moon, uses the negative statement of “neither... nor” to emphasize the speaker’s feeling of timeless perpetuity (12). In this way, absence of being functions as a means of conveying personal interiority and experience, which characterizes the poem as a lyric and its speaker as “other”.

Susan Stewart’s characterization of the realm of night’s darkness as one of privation and vacuity in her essay “Poetry and the Fate of the Senses” is the same realm that Robert Frost’s poem describes and occupies. However, it is the lyric engagement with the sense and spirit of human animation that creates, from the speaker’s experience of remote solitude, the phenomenon of universal and intersubjective meaning. In a sense, it is poetry itself as it engages with the animal self that creates something out of nothing, such as intersubjective meaning out of human privations and subjective solitude. Stewart explains this phenomenon as the function of poetry “to make visible, tangible, and audible the figures of persons, whether such persons are expressing the particulars of sense impressions or the abstractions of reason or the many ways such particulars and abstractions enter into relations with one another,” (Stewart 2).

“Acquainted with the Night” operates within the visual, tangible, and audible registers of meaning in order to evoke individual and all-embracing loneliness and fear. The darkness it describes, the persons, objects and figures it makes tangible to the reader as anonymously draped in darkness, and the sounds of ticking and tromping it evokes with its diction recall for the reader these feelings of heightened sense, of loneliness, and of fear. It is a universal truth that just as the darkness of night prevents light necessary for vision, so the darkness also prevents security. The line, “I have been one acquainted with the night,” communicates the speaker’s familiarity with the night as well as suggests a type of human acquaintance with it (1). The experience of the darkness of night is one
that universally affects all humans. Every human has experienced the act of moving through the dark, and of groping in panic for some tangible image, or of straining the ear for the guiding sound of a voice, only to realize that “in the end, the fear of the darkness is the fear that the darkness will not end,” (Stewart 1). Darkness prevents our animal senses from finding or directly interacting with the form of another human as well as viewing reflections of ourselves. Isolated in loneliness and unable to reflect, any acquaintance with darkness is one that makes it impossible to interpret others or oneself. The loneliness and lack of meaning triggers a primal fear of meaningless perpetuity and isolation. Thus the perceptual experience of movement through darkness is a highly vulnerable and vain act. Without vision, the fear of injury is minor compared to the fear of meaningless perpetuity. Frost conveys the perpetual and inexhaustible wandering of the individual in the line, “I have walked out in rain- and back in rain,” (2). In this way Frost shows that the animal experience of moving through the dark also evokes a fear of perpetual movement without meaning, and reveals to the reader the animal senses and spirit of personhood. In this way, the poem not only gains inter-subjectivity with the reader, as they share in the animal experience of darkness and its evocations of fear and loneliness, but also creates from nothing the animated form of personhood and its engagement with the reader.

Just as Frost’s poem engages with the reader through expression of animal senses and spirit in order to create form from absence, “Acquainted with the Night” also engages with the national cultural tradition of the sonnet in constructing an organized, inhabited universe from a state of darkness and privation. In particular, the poem engages with the tradition of Dante Alighieri’s Italian sonnets. The three-line stanza form, which concludes with a couplet and follows the meter of Terza Rima, is one that also characterizes the poetry of “The Inferno” from Dante’s Divina Commedia. In adopting the same structure and meter that describes the experiences of a man wandering through the rings of Hell, Frost suggests that the speaker’s mental and perceptual state of darkness condemns him to a realm of Hell, making him, like Dante, a figure of “otherness”. Both Dante’s Inferno and Frost’s poem operate within a state of absence, as the Inferno is a realm created from absence, particularly that of light and of God or goodness, and is
defined by negation much in the same was that Frost’s poem derives its meaning from its states of absence and its speaker defines him or herself by what he or she is not. The perpetuity of time, one of the most excruciating punishments of Dante’s Inferno, and the meaningless and largely anonymous existence Dante’s sinners lead also enhance the experience of the speaker in Frost’s poem. Therefore, the allusion to the Italian sonnet form gives expanded scope to the speaker’s fear and loneliness and to the absence of light in Frost’s poem, enhancing the breadth of darkness and engaging the poem with the Italian sonnet tradition. In this way, rather than conveying the speaker’s experience solely through absences of meaning, the allusion to Dante’s Inferno also acts as another molding force for the state of darkness, as it encompasses the poem’s fear and privations as its own universe of meaning, and in doing so adds the complexities and rigorous structural form of Dante’s Hell to the Hell the speaker in Dante’s poem finds himself in. In effect, like the lyric engagement of animation, that of the Italian sonnet tradition reveals the making of the poetic form as a means of, as Stewart said, “staving off” its own meaninglessness and perpetual darkness by adding external creations of form.

Terza Rima and the hypnotic use of anaphora also serve to counteract the void and limitless expanse of darkness and meaninglessness by formally enclosing it in a ring. The circular structure of the poem connects it in meaning to the rings of Hell in Dante’s Inferno. Thus, from meaningless and darkness, the formal arrangement of language helps to shape a meaningful form within the poem. As stated by Stewart, “the cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness,” (Stewart 2). Frost employs anaphora throughout the poem as a means of accelerating the pace of the walker and of plunging the reader into the realm of circular progression in the poem. “I have” is used in six out of seven of the first lines, until the speaker’s progression is paused by the sound of an “interrupted cry,” (8). By repeating the same phrase, the rhythm of the poem accelerates, drawing the reader into the swift progression of the speaker. Once the speaker stops to listen to the meaningless cry and proclamation of the “luminary clock,” the rhythm of the poem relies on that of the terza rima. The chainlike metrical form of terza rima enhances the soldiered progression to the lines of the poem, guiding it in a circular motion. The interlocking rhyme scheme of a-b-a, b-c-b, c-d-c, d-e-d, e-e serves
to pull the ends of the three-line stanzas together, creating a hypnotic drone that circles back on itself in the last couplet, in which anaphora is used again in connection with the first lines. The repetition of the first and final line, “I have been one acquainted with the night,” weaves together the ends of the poem to create a ring-like boundary of form and creates an echo-like circularization of sound. The poem’s circular aesthetic and sonorous qualities not only correspond to the rings of Hell but also include the round face of the “one luminary clock,” which proclaims with ambivalence that “the time was neither wrong nor right,” (12-13). The circular form of the faces of the moon and the faces of a clock match the circular form of the ring of Hell, and the entrancing circular rhythm of the clock’s chiming corresponds to Hell’s eternity. In effect, the circular formal arrangement of the poem serves to counteract the fear of darkness as a state of perpetual meaningless.

By creating formal parameters of meter and rhythm, and by engaging the poem with both human animation and the Italian sonnet tradition in order to create internal elements of form, Frost’s “Acquainted with the Night” evokes the fear and solitude of darkness only to counteract the force itself with measured, shaped language. In conveying darkness as a ring of Hell, Frost also shows the triumph of poetry as a creation of form, of sound, and of meaning. The association of divine making with that of light deifies the art of lyric poetry. Through the use of poetry as a means of organizing language and conveying a fear and solitude worse than death, Frost illustrates the power of the language of the lyric poem to animate absence and to deify even the realm of Hell.

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As the adolescent sons of two powerful, well-respected men in their respective communities, both Telemachos and Prince Henry face the challenges of defining themselves in society as they become individual men rather than children hidden behind the reputations of their fathers. Ironically, in order to establish their roles as independent adults, both must become closer to the fathers with whom they were formerly distant, physically in the case of Telemachos and Odysseus, and emotionally in the case of Prince Henry and King Henry. Society mandates that in order to do so, the young men must learn to express themselves first linguistically and later militaristically so they may establish a commonality with their fathers and eventually gain their approval.

In The Odyssey, Telemachos is a helpless boy “among the suitors... imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter,”. Telemachos thus first enters the story as a child, reliant upon a father he has never met and incapable of improving his own situation (I. 114-117). He comes to depend on divine assistance to guide him in his journey to adulthood and to
mentor him in expressing and defending himself among his peers and elders so that he may define his role in the larger society as well as in his own household, where the suitors constantly belittle his authority as a man. Prince Henry, also lacking a connection with his father at the beginning of his story, is more inclined to achieve his reunion than Telamachos because he knows from the beginning “how much better than [his] word [he is]” and that he needs only to reveal his existing abilities to his father to gain his acceptance, rather than acquire the skills completely as Telamachos must (I.II.214). To demonstrate his potential, Prince Henry must adopt the mannerisms valued by royalty so that his father may recognize him as a legitimate and worthy heir. One such necessary change involves his speech. Prince Henry must abandon his familiar prose style and therefore the people with whom he associates, who speak only colloquially as a result of their lower social status, in favor of the poetic style associated with nobility. This means giving up his childhood mentor Falstaff who, unlike Telamachos’ mentor Athene, serves as an obstacle in Prince Henry’s path to become closer to his father rather than a guide. Thus, although the ultimate goals of the two young men are equal, the journeys they must take to achieve them vary. Prince Henry has an advantage over Telamachos in his secret knowledge of language and royal expression, but faces the additional challenge of giving up his closest friend.

Gathered atop Mount Olympus, the Greek gods discuss the prolonged absence of the mortal Odysseus, delayed at the will of Poseidon. Athene, her “heart... torn for the sake of wise Odysseus,” appeals to her father Zeus to allow the captive man to return home to his family (I. 48). The assembled gods agree to Odysseus’ worthiness in escaping Poseiden’s wrath and agree to “work out his homecoming and see to it that he returns” (I.76-77). Athene then entrusts herself with preparing Odysseus’ son Telamachos for his father’s return. Knowing Odysseus’ approaching homecoming leaves little time for Telamachos to prove himself among the suitors currently occupying his home, Athene hopes to encourage the young man so that he may “make a statement to all the suitors” and therefore prove his power as a man so his father may return to meet a mature and capable adult rather than a child (I. 91). She further commits to guiding Telamachos on a journey to several neighboring countries “to ask after his dear father’s homecoming, if he
can hear something, and so that among people he may win a good reputation” (I. 94-95). According to Greek mythology, the gods control mortal experiences, meaning Athena herself determines what will come of Telemachos’ efforts. She therefore need not include the conditional phrase, “if he can hear something” except to emphasize that whether he does or does not find the answer to his question makes no difference because, if it did, she would have predetermined the results of his efforts, which clearly she did not. Instead, she concerns herself with helping young Telemachos establish a reputation among the rulers of the neighboring countries through the interactions he makes under the pretext of inquiring as to his father’s whereabouts, as his ability to speak to these men and properly ask for their assistance will determine how they regard him as a man in their society.

Athene presents herself to Telemachos in the form of Mentes and becomes witness to his childish manners. Although Telemachos knows enough to offer food and rest to his guest before inquiring his identity and the reason for his visit, he lacks restraint in his emotions and discloses his frustration with the suitors to his unfamiliar guest. As if he knows that venting anger to a guest is inappropriate, Telemachos introduces his complaints with the rhetorical question, “dear stranger, would you be scandalized at what I say to you?” (I. 158) But then, unable to suppress his need for someone to listen and side with him on the matter, he proceeds to list the faults of the suitors and the hardships they inflicted upon him, hoping to gain the sympathy of this unknown stranger, as would a child searching for validation on his perspective of the latest schoolyard tussle. The conversation continues as Athene introduces herself as Mentes, using her own exemplary speech as an example in her first lesson to Telemachos. She sneaks tutorial phrases into her language to encourage her student to notice the tactics she employs without pointing to them directly. For example, she begins her answer to Telemachos’ questions with “see, I will accurately answer,” using her first word to emphasize that Telemachos should take note of what she says and how and continuing to follow the customary format of an introduction, emphasizing her accordance with the traditional style (I. 179).

Once Telemachos and Mentes exchange stories, Mentes begins to offer advice
To Telemachos, encouraging him to take control of the situation and “tell the suitors to scatter and go back to their own holdings” (I. 274). Then, in accordance with the plan Athene announced to the gods, Telemachos must travel in search of news of his father’s whereabouts so that he may know if he “should still hold out for another year” (I. 288-9) or accept his father’s passing “and give [his] mother to a husband” (I. 292). Mentes presents the option of actively pursuing a resolution as the more preferable alternative by appealing to Telemachos’ need to demonstrate his power as a man, declaring that he “should not go on clinging to [his] childhood [because he] is no longer of an age to do that” (I. 296-297). With this statement, Athene clearly asserts her position that learning to speak for himself will expel Telemachos out of the state of inferiority to the suitors that now prevents him from reaching a solution and will earn him the authority and respect he needs to solve the problem once and for all. To further promote her plan to Telemachos, Athene promises him fame among his people as a reward for defending his father’s properties. Just as Orestes was famed for his murder of his father’s killer, so too “in generations to come they will praise” Telemachos for avenging his father’s honor (I. 302). Simply by learning to speak appropriately to an audience, employing the skills presented in Athene’s tutorials, Telemachos will improve his current status immensely, gaining independence as an adult, winning control over his estate, learning the fate of Odysseus, and earning the respect of future generations.

Centuries after Telemachos’ story was spread around ancient Greece and the rest of the world, Shakespeare introduced a similar character into The History of Henry IV, Part I, a melodrama in which the strained relationship between the king and his heir threatens the stability of the country’s future. As was the case with Telemachos, Prince Henry’s shortcomings are presented to the reader before the character himself through the dialogue of others. King Henry confides to his trusted advisor the Earl of Westmorland his jealousy of “Lord Northumberland… father to so blest a son: a son who is the theme of honor’s tongue” (I.1. 79-80). Noting that “riot and dishonor stain the brow of [his] young Harry,” King Henry expresses his wish that the two had been switched at birth so that he may have “a prince to boast of” instead of a son who brings him only shame (I.1.76).
The root of King Henry's dissatisfaction with his son lies in the company young Henry chooses over his father; a group of hooligans who spend their time at the tavern plotting crimes. In fact, when the audience of the play finally does meet the prince himself, he is exchanging puns with his close friend Falstaff. Teasing Henry about his future as the king, Falstaff plays a suppliant to Henry's royalty saying “I prithee, sweet wag, when thou art a king, as, God save thy Grace—Majesty I should say, for grace thou wilt have none” (II.II. 16-18). According to social class, Falstaff is Henry's inferior, but as their interactions show, this distinction to them is only a joke; their mutual trust and respect allows Falstaff to comfortably insult Henry and tease him about his royal heritage and the gracelessness and felonious behavior Falstaff perceives as impeding Henry from ever becoming king. Falstaff is justified in his prediction that Henry must change his current ways to properly lead the country, but ironically what he must do is not become more graceful, but rid himself of those who prevent him from demonstrating the hidden grace he already inherently knows.

In the presence of Falstaff and his other companions, Prince Henry maintains his trickster façade. He comments that “the fortune of us that are the moon’s men doth ebb and flow like the sea, being governed as the sea is by the moon,” suggesting that all of them, himself included, are of low social class, governed not by the sun, indicative of royalty and wealth, but by the moon, a force in direct opposition with the sun and representative of an opposing class of people (I.II. 32-34). In this speech and others he makes throughout the scene, Henry not only directly states his equality with the low class of men in his gang, but also mimics their style of language so as to blend in among them. All of his interactions with Falstaff and the others consist solely of prose language, free from any metrical structure or rhyme such as was found in the dialogue between his father and Westmorland in the preceding scene.

Finally, after both Falstaff and Poins leave and Prince Henry is alone on the stage, he reveals his true character. He explains his intent to “break... through the foul and ugly mists of vapors that did seem to strangle him” (I.II. 206-207) so that he may “imitate the sun” (I.II.201). Henry clarifies, through this soliloquy, his position in the play and his awareness of that position. He states that a king, or a future king, should shape his life in
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accordance with the sun, a metaphor for nobility, rather than the moon, which he referenced earlier as his guiding force in his faux criminal life with Falstaff and the others. Furthermore, he plans to alter his habits so as to conform to this standard by distancing himself from the crowd of which he is now part. Contrary to the opinion of them he expressed a few lines earlier, Henry now reveals that he sees these companions as “base contagious clouds” behind which he could hide himself from his father and the rest of society by conforming to their dishonorable habits and adopting their colloquial style of speech, as demonstrated in his earlier interactions with Falstaff as the two joke in the bar and plot their next theft (I.II.202). After years of blending into this lifestyle, his transformation into the respectable son, capable of the poetic rhetoric he demonstrates for the first time in this soliloquy, “shall show more goodly and attract more eyes than that which hath no foil to set it off” (I.II.218-219). This plan to build up a contrast so that his new self will be even more appreciated shows careful planning on the part of Henry, more than one would have deemed him capable on first impression. Another surprise is the eloquence with which he presents these thoughts, formed into lines of verse with the carefully measured metrical structure of iambic pentameter. This quality of linguistic expression is one we have come to regard, based on the pattern Shakespeare develops throughout the play, as indicative of characters of a higher status and honor in society. Thus, a commonality between Prince Henry and his father first forms here in his adoption of an equally sophisticated language. The concepts Henry proposes about changing his identity among the people also echoes the same sentiments King Henry later describes of his own experiences in Act III scene II, uniting them further with a shared desire to gain public approval by contrasting fresh new images of themselves against less desirable pasts.

Although the progression towards reconciliation between father and son, a development that will set the country at ease by establishing a solid future for the throne, is now apparent to the audience, the two have yet to formally make amends. Finally, after Henry demonstrates his military skill by killing Hotspur and thereby invalidating his father’s skepticism of Henry’s abilities, which the King first described in his comparison of the two boys, King Henry recognizes his son’s growth and his own mistaken judgment
and pays his son a compliment. Addressing Prince Henry, the King proclaims “thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion, and showed thou mak’st some tender of my life” (V.IV.47-48). At last, King Henry recognizes his son’s respectability as a man and acknowledges him as an asset and honor in his life, allowing the two to proceed as united leaders, together capable of bringing peace to their country, as they have brought peace to the future of the throne.

Just as Prince Henry successfully proves himself to his father by revealing his hidden abilities and potential as a member of the nobility through his actions and speech, so too does Telemachos demonstrate a proficiency in language in his first attempt abroad. Following the traditional practices, he begins by flattering his host, then continues in the form Athene taught him in her introduction as Mentes, responding to Nestor’s questions humbly and directly while providing all of the expected information regarding his identity, lineage, and request for help. Immediately, Telemachos’ efforts are rewarded; Nestor responds to him as a mature adult, sharing what he knows of Odysseus’ detainment, and offering sympathy and support, as to a friend and equal, without the patronizing tone Telemachos has become accustomed to. Although he does not yet find the answer he is looking for, this meeting advances Telemachos in his journey towards uniting with his father by demonstrating his newly developed rhetorical skills and establishing the beginnings of his reputation abroad as the brave and devoted son of Odysseus.

Once the potential of Athene’s plan for Telemachos is established, the focus of The Odyssey shifts to Odysseus’ story, returning again to Telemachos only when Odysseus arrives at Ithaka. Telemachos is skeptical of his father’s identity, but after some convincing he “fold[s] his great father in his arms and lament[e][s]” (XVI. 214). United at last, the two strategize how they may together defeat the suitors and restore peace in their home. Showing his trust in his son, Odysseus reveals his identity to Telemachos alone, not even confiding in his wife until after the suitors are destroyed. The two men return to the palace, Odysseus disguised as the homeless guest of Telemachos. When the suitors attempt to force him from the palace, Telemachos demonstrates his newfound authority and proclaims his power over the estate, causing them to “bit[e] their lips in
amazement at Telemachos, and the daring way he had spoken to them” (XIX. 268-269). Clearly, Telemachos’ growth in maturity, presence, and rhetorical skill as a result of his journey is profound because, where before the suitors would simply laugh at what he said to them, they now recognize his authority and “accept the word of Telemachos,” acknowledging him as their superior (XIX. 271). Telemachos thus further strengthens his new bond with his father by proving the commonalities they share as enemies of the suitors and eloquent commanders of the estate who can use their authoritative speech to change the actions of others.

Despite these progressions toward stable father-son relations, as in The History of Henry IV, Part I, the complete acceptance of the son by the father is not achieved until the two of them win a battle, the son having proved his courage and capability not only in speech, but in war as well. Far outnumbered by the suitors, Odysseus and Telemachos rely on each other and their strong communication to outsmart the opponents, each of whom is more concerned for his own life than the wellbeing of the mass. This teamwork, combined with Athene’s assistance in “putting to proof the strength and courage alike of Odysseus and his glorious son,” allows them to succeed in killing all of the suitors (XXII, 237-238). The skill Athene grants Telemachos in this scene with regard to his military capabilities adds to the power of speech she provided in her earlier interactions with him, ultimately earning him his father’s approval. At the conclusion of the epic, Odysseus asks Telemachos for a commitment to continue the legacy the family has established “all across the world” as being superior “in manhood and valor” (XXIV, 509). The confidence Telemachos gained through his experiences in the story, as well as the knowledge and skills he learned, allow him to accept his father’s challenge and promise “not to shame the blood of [his] fathers” (XXIV, 508). This commitment, backed by the ability Telemachos has proved to uphold it, finalizes the union between father and son.

The final interactions between the fathers and sons in both The Odyssey and The History of Henry IV, Part I conclude their respective stories by bringing meaning to the transformations the sons both must make. In granting their approval to their sons, both Odysseus and King Henry reference the positive reflection they have come to see the young men as having upon their own characters. Since, in patriarchal cultures, fathers’
successes in raising their sons greatly reflects on their characters as patriarchs, the journeys Telemachos and Prince Henry take in conforming to the societal standards for men of their social ranks is essential to gaining their father’s respect. Therefore, the sons must prove their skills in those areas most valued by the societies in which they live, the most prominent of which is the ability to present oneself eloquently through oral expression and back the claims of authority presented in speech through military action.

Works Cited

Beauty and Monstrosity: A Reading of Fruit Chan’s Short Film “Dumplings”

Kathryn Darnall

When three Asian directors are asked to make three separate short films, each depicting the most “horrifying” situation possible, one would expect torture, blood, guts and a high body count. But what if the body count isn’t of fully developed humans, but unborn babies? Fruit Chan’s short film “Dumplings” addresses murder, cannibalism and beauty, but not in the way one would expect a typical horror film to do so. Instead, Chan toes the line between genres, creating a sort of dystopian horror film that repulses the viewer with its graphic depiction of baby eating and at-home abortions.

Despite the most horrific elements of the film being those related to abortion and the consumption of fetuses, these images are not the most horrific element present in the film. The most horrific concept presented is that of a society that permits and encourages women and men to do whatever they must do in order to be sexually desirable. Instead of being bothered by a woman who is so desperate to look beautiful she will consume anything, audiences are disturbed by the violent images of a relatively commonplace procedure, a reaction that is indicative of
skewed cultural ideas. The thought of a woman desperate to look young and beautiful is not shocking or horrific in the way an induced labor is, but it should be equally terrifying. The horror lies not with the women who see fit to eat unborn children, but in the motivation that drives this desperate and unthinkable act. Fruit Chan’s film asks the question, “Is society really so far removed from this?” People are willing to eat duck embryos in order to maintain sexual vitality, so why not humans? “Dumplings” explores a hypothetical in which two women are willing to take that step.

A retired actress, Qing Li comes to Aunt Mei with the hopes of restoring her youth and beauty. She has been told that Aunt Mei’s dumplings will restore her youth as well as her sexual allure; a concept that is appealing to Qing because her husband has been cheating on her for quite some time. This is no cabbage diet, however, for Aunt Mei’s dumplings contain aborted fetuses Mei has either removed herself or picked up from local Chinese hospitals. At first Qing is reluctant to consume the flesh of once-living human embryos, but slowly she becomes more and more accepting of her absorption of the abject. In her quest for the most “potent” fetus (fifth month fetuses have the most powerful effects) Mei performs an abortion on a 15-year-old rape/incest victim who is conveniently five months pregnant. Mei then serves the fetus in her dumplings to Qing, who feels revitalized and goes home to rekindle her husband’s lust for her. Meanwhile, Mei’s patient Kate dies from internal bleeding on a bus ride home. Aunt Mei is forced to retire from the dumpling business and flee to another city, leaving Qing with no one to supply her with the miracle diet food she has become accustomed to.

After a doctor’s visit because she is experiencing nausea and headaches, the previously barren Qing learns that she is three months pregnant, presenting a horrific solution to the problem of Mei’s retirement. One of the last scenes of the film shows Qing sitting in her bathtub and sticking a long metal hairpin into her vagina to terminate the pregnancy, and the final cut shows Qing sitting at a table consuming dumplings once more.
Abjection and the Fetus

In her essay “The Powers of Horror” Julia Kristeva asserts, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection” (4). However it is not merely the corpse that is the strongest representation of the abject; it is the corpse of the fetus. The fetus, no longer a living breathing child after having been expelled from the womb, is a combination of the two horrific natures present in Kristeva’s treatise: the excremental and the menstrual. It is this horror that initially labels Dumplings as a disturbing and threatening film. Qing and Aunt Mei’s consumption of the fetuses (the pinnacle of abjection) is their incorporation of the abject into their own bodies and the acceptance of their Otherness as females and especially as menstruating women. Consumption of the fetus creates a cycle of acceptance and acknowledgement of the abject. Childbirth and abortion both begin with the female body’s excretion of a child into the world, an act that is considered abject and contaminated in many societies. By taking what is essentially a waste product (childbirth and defecation are often linked, which is part of what makes childbirth so abject [Kristeva 77]) and then consuming it, Qing and Mei are recycling the abject and absorbing it into their bodies. This cycle of excretion-consumption-excretion is a self-sustaining system that eventually leads Qing to the monstrous act present in the film’s final scenes.

The concept of the abject is surrounded by the idea of a “clean and proper body,” and that body is decidedly masculine (Kristeva 78). Women are polluted because of their association with childbirth and the menstrual. Menstrual defilement— which can be expanded to include placental blood and the blood expelled during childbirth— is considered the most threatening of abjections because of its association with the female body and excretion. It is these images and common associations with the abject that tend to stick with the viewer as “horrific” images because society has long been trained to reject corpses and the menstrual as waste, and the constant sight of dead fetuses as well as placental blood onscreen causes the viewer to look away in horror and disgust— the viewer must reject the images shown on the screen.
Consuming the Abject

Food loathing and dietary restrictions have often been the realm of the feminine. Although women are not the only ones to ascribe to strange diets, the concept of food loathing is primarily linked to fear of contamination with the menstrual and more largely the feminine aspect. Kristeva discusses the link between childbirth, the menstrual and dietary restrictions in her analysis of the Biblical book of Leviticus, a book that initially discusses dietary restrictions yet for some reason sandwiches a treatise on the contamination of childbirth in between a long list of thou-shalt-not-eats (99), furthering the implication that it is childbirth and the menstrual that contaminate food. Mei’s dumplings are exactly what man and woman have been fearing from their food for centuries: they are food filled with a menstrual byproduct.

This food loathing takes on a new aspect when it is applied to Qing because her exploration into the abject and her eventual incorporation of the abject into her person is primarily motivated by society’s standards of beauty. It is Qing’s awareness of her husband’s indiscretions and her own disgust with her aging body that lead her to visit Aunt Mei in the first place, and once there her experiences with the dumplings symbolize her journey into the incorporation of the abject and her eventual transformation from victim to monster.

Qing’s first encounter with eating Mei’s dumplings is perhaps one the most alimentary and repulsive scenes in the film. Qing’s loud smacking and crunching sounds as the juice from the dumplings dribbles down her mouth and back onto the spoon present a very graphic depiction of consumption. Such an auditory and visual experience produces an immediate visceral reaction in the viewer. Although the audience does not yet know what Qing is consuming, it is obviously something that society has deemed inappropriate for human consumption. Qing’s eating is inspiring feelings of abjection and food loathing before the audience is even fully cognizant of what it is she’s consuming.
Her second meal at Mei’s home provides more insight into what it is the two women are eating in order to regain or maintain their youth. The reverence and palpable hunger with which Mei describes the removal of the fetus and the fetus itself are quite intriguing and present a threatening contradiction. The archetypal mother figure is supposed to be empty and regretful at the loss of her child through birth and separation, yet Mei is being reunited with the children she brings into the world through the act of consumption. Qing’s consumption and digestion of Mei’s dumplings demonstrate her slow path towards accepting the abjection of childbirth. However, it is not until her third meal that she truly confronts what she has already been consuming.

The scene immediately following the graphic induced labor in Mei’s apartment is of Qing’s third serving of dumplings at Mei’s apartment, which is a meal that is remarkably different from her first. This time, instead of careful, methodical bites Qing casually pops each dumpling into her mouth whole. She slouches at the table as opposed to her typical stiff-backed posture and eats with a satisfied smile upon her face as though she were simply eating an afternoon snack, not a meal made from the fetus she had earlier screamed at and fled from. The camera and Mei also watch Qing through different eyes; Mei normally sits at the table with her or sings while Qing eats but today she observes her with a calm expression of triumph from behind the slatted windows in her living room, and the camera maintains its distance by watching Qing from the same slatted window that Mei is using to observe her.

It is after Qing’s third meal that she has finally fully incorporated the abject into her body through the consumption of Mei’s dumplings. She begins to feel sexually revitalized, she is able to make love to her husband, and her youthful looks are beginning to return. It appears that Qing has indeed found the fountain of youth, but her existence as whole woman is does not last long, for she soon travels across the divide from whole human being to monstrous female in the final scene of the film.
Abortion and Excretion

The act of excreting or expelling any sort of foreign material from the body be it fecal matter or a child is consistently associated with the abject but in a way that is the inverse of consumption and food loathing. Consumption is the act of taking in and absorbing foreign and possibly contaminated material from outside of the body, and excretion is the act of banishing waste from the body. Childbirth and abortion are considered abject and horrifying because they are in fact the expulsion of a foreign material from the body. Excretion blurs the border between the self and the Other, or abject and because of this waste that is expelled from the body is viewed as abject and threatening (Creed 39).

Audiences may find the most horrific scene in the film to be the abortion Mei performs on a fifteen-year-old girl, which is a graphic depiction of a real world scenario. Oddly enough, this scene is the most realistic in the entire film, yet it is also the one that causes the most horror. The scene is that of a ‘typical’ black market abortion; an older woman who appears to know how the procedure works, a young confused girl who is a victim of rape/incest and her mother who merely wishes to make the problem “go away.” Mei’s handling of the procedure is calm and matter-of-fact; she inserts the speculum with little issue or verbal coaching for the young girl, and fans her while waiting for the water to break. It is ironic that this scene tends to contain many of the traditional elements found in a horror scene, such as blood, screaming and physical mutilation, yet the scene is of a common, everyday occurrence.

Director Fruit Chan’s decision to make the most true to life scenario in the film the bloodiest is his attempt to show how closely related the violence and horror in the film are related to the violence and horror present in every day life. Part of the film’s intention is to show that the film is not really an extreme, but merely a continuation of society’s blurred boundaries between rejection of the abject and the assimilation of it into our world culture.
Consumption and the Monster

The penultimate scene of the film in which Qing uses what appears to be a long crooked hairpin to perform her own abortion shows her drastic change from a woman skittish about fetus consumption to a woman who has fully incorporated the abject into her system and then moves one step further into the realm of the monster. The camera does not look away from this scene, but instead maintains focus upon her face, and Qing returns the audience’s gaze. When she stabs her cervix with the hairpin she lets out one small yelp of pain, but she never breaks her eye contact with the camera, even as her eyes well with tears. Ultimately, it is the viewer who is first to look away. The camera then cuts to a side angle of Qing’s face as a small dribble of blood runs from her lower lip to her chin. Qing glances sideways at the camera and then looks down as she uses a long, reptilian tongue to lap up the dribble of blood on her chin. After lapping up the remains of her former child, she glances back at the camera and raises her eyebrow in a fashion that is somehow both monstrous and sexually alluring.

After Qing defiantly looks into the camera, it cuts away to what appears to be Mei’s apartment from a bird’s eye view. The camera pans downward, past a poster of two children gleefully playing, and directly into Qing’s face which is expectantly looking up at the camera. Without blinking, she lifts a ceramic spoon containing a dumpling into her mouth and slurps it down loudly, then audibly crunches into the finely chopped filling, all the while looking directly into camera.

Qing’s feelings of empowerment in the final scenes are palpable to the audience; she is no longer demure and reserved, but perfectly willing to look back at the camera without shame for her strange culinary tastes. By her third meal of dumplings she has been forced to confront and make peace with her role in abjection as a female, and later she must reassess this role when she learns that she is no longer barren, but a woman with the ability to menstruate and procreate like other women. It is no small coincidence that she is only able to experience the full power of the dumplings after making peace with their key ingredient; only by incorporating the abject into her body and accepting her power as a menstruating woman is she able to feel revitalized, sexually appealing and whole.
beauty and monstrosity

Yet the line between acceptance and exploitation is thin, for Qing has gone against the societal laws of contamination and food loathing. The final scenes in which Qing terminates her own pregnancy and then eats the fetus shows her crossing the barrier between accepting the abject and exploiting it for her own purposes; her first glance at the camera when she sticks the hair pin into her body is strong and powerful, a gaze that defies the audience. Qing has moved into the territory of monster, a woman who has not taken her life into her own hands, but a woman who has cannibalized a fetus.

Beauty At All Costs

Although these scenes may be the most bloody and violent, the true horror of this film lies beyond fetus eating and back alley abortions. The primary motivator for this miracle diet is Qing’s wish to be beautiful so her husband will love and desire her. She is aware of the role she plays in society; she marries a rich, much older man, and either chooses to look the other way when it comes to his disloyalties or she remains sexually appealing and willing for the duration of the marriage. Her willingness to quickly step from diet, exercise and exfoliation to smashing up babies and eating them is symptomatic of a society that is willing to turn a blind eye to her cannibalism provided it makes her beautiful.

Qing is a trophy wife, and as such her looks are what makes her a valuable human being. Although she was once an actress (a different economic choice that requires her to stay young and beautiful) Qing is now useless to the society she lives in because she can produce nothing of value; her looks are her value, and as she ages her worth to society is exponentially lessened. Qing’s character is true to life; in both Chinese and American society the role of the trophy wife exists as a valid economic role, and as such beauty is permitted to be a commodity in society. Because her husband has the money to spend he can afford a wife and extra mistresses and because Qing is lovely and willing to spend Mr. Li’s money their marriage is entirely logical from an economic standpoint. The concept of marriage as an economic arrangement and the treatment of beauty as a commodity are the underlying horrors Fruit Chan is highlighting in his film. Once one moves past
the horrific images and onto the situations and ideas that motivate these disturbing decisions it becomes clear that the most “horrifying” situation according to Fruit Chan has already taken place: a market economy that is willing to accept beauty as currency.

**Works Cited**


Translating Refined Appearance into Raised Social Status in The Great Gatsby and The Bourgeois Gentleman

Erin Carey

Refinement of speech and gestures often serves as an indication of high social status. It is possible however, for this very refinement to cue others into what is truly false refinement. Such is the case in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel The Great Gatsby as well as Moliere’s play The Bourgeois Gentleman. In each of these texts, the main character strives to refine his appearance and person in order to gain acceptance into a higher class than the one allotted him by birth; also in each of these texts, both characters fail to successfully transform themselves. Through these characters’ desperate attempts to appear as other than they are, each text addresses the theatrical tendencies of mankind, expertly demonstrating and commenting on the role of gesture and appearance in determining social class.

For F. Scott Fitzgerald’s protagonist Jay Gatsby, life develops into one elaborate charade. His appearance and each of his day-to-day actions are fashioned for the sole
purpose of winning the affection of Daisy, the love of his life from his younger years. Daisy, however, stable with her old money in her fashionable East Egg home, maintains a higher social status to which Gatsby can only aspire; his home in West Egg rigidly classifies him as a person of new money, and therefore of lesser importance to members of elite society. Aware of this seemingly insurmountable divide, Gatsby flaunts his new money, hoping in vain to appear on a level equal to that of his lost lover. In doing this, however, Gatsby loses his sense of himself; his actions become so carefully premeditated that he seems not a genuine person, but merely an actor playing a detailed and scripted part.

These theatrical tendencies override Gatsby’s life, appearing most obviously through his extravagant parties. Recognizing the importance of appearance, Gatsby’s guests include both the rich and the famous despite his having, at best, only a passing acquaintance with many of these people. Nick Carroway, the story’s narrator and Gatsby’s next-door neighbor, comments on this as soon as he arrives at his first of Gatsby’s gatherings: “I believe [... ] I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited [... ] once there they were introduced by somebody who knew Gatsby [... ] sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all,” (Fitzgerald, 41). The wealthy presence of such guests, however false the pretences of their association with Gatsby, lend him an air of sophistication and importance absolutely necessary if a relationship with Daisy is to again develop. Additionally, these parties set the stage for Gatsby and Daisy to “inadvertently” meet; by inviting guests of her rank, Gatsby hopes to lure Daisy as well.

Gatsby’s lack of a true relationship with his guests also provides an initial clue of the discrepancy between Gatsby’s person and the person his actions suggest. Gossip runs wild among the partygoers, each one concocting larger-than-life stories about Gatsby’s person and his past. One guest announces: “Gatsby [...] Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once,” while another claims: “I don’t think it’s so much that, its more that he was a German spy during the war,” (44). Despite the importance granted to Gatsby through such elaborate tales, not one of the guests devising these histories knows the man about whom they speak. In addition, the amount of speculation and
mystery around Gatsby raises doubts about the legitimacy of his wealth and refined appearance: if truly of societal importance, why is the nature of his past so uncertain?

A similar discrepancy between appearance and reality exists in The Bourgeois Gentleman. Protagonist M. Jourdain, like Gatsby, attempts to melt smoothly into the core of the noble circles. Appearance is cited as the apparent defining boundary between social classes; proficiency in the arts of dancing, fencing, and philosophy was characteristic only of the nobility. For example, upon learning that “people of quality” learn music, M. Jourdain resolves: “Then I’ll learn it,” (Moliere, 193). The result is the same for each of the other subjects with M. Jourdain going so far as to hire tutors to teach him the knowledge he requires to appear noble. So firm in his desire to raise his social status, his decision to learn is based solely upon the idea that mastering the arts will grant him the ability to appear as a nobleman, allowing him entrance into the upper social circles.

Also like Gatsby, however, M. Jourdain’s attempts seem staged. Trying desperately to pass himself off as noble, he only appears false with a “mania for nobility and elegance” (183). Seeming ridiculous, he highlights his place in the bourgeoisie, and, in addition, draws discussion of the deceitful nature of his actions. While in The Great Gatsby, the mystery of his true rank leads to suspicion, M. Jourdain leaves no room for even the consideration of himself as a possible noble. He too robs himself of a true personality as he blindly accepts the opinions of others, no matter their absurdity. Unable to think for himself, M. Jourdain questions every one of his actions, seeking assurance from his tutors that his behavior is in accordance with expectations of the nobility. Through this, M. Jourdain becomes an actor, performing only in a way that aids in his attempt to reconstruct himself as a noble.

In The Great Gatsby, Gatsby uses scraps of truth to construct an idealized portrait of himself. Through modifying realities of his past in order to display his present self in a more positive light, Gatsby hopes to become someone worthy of Daisy’s love. Indeed, his unworthiness, in terms of class, is evident throughout the story, even in the details of his past: “He knew that he was in Daisy’s house by a colossal accident [...] he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand,” (149).
This “colossal accident” dictated every motion of the rest of Gatsby’s life. Each step he took was a step toward achieving the right to find happiness in Daisy, as well as to grant her happiness. So consumed by his desire, Daisy herself became an ideal, representing not only the object of his devotion, but also his means of raising his social status with his transformation complete upon attaining her.

All of his actions, while dishonest, are done, therefore, with the intention of increasing his worth. The very language that Gatsby uses, for instance, is meant to serve this purpose. For example, in initially telling Nick his family story, Gatsby’s choice of words and intonation is so stylized that it rings untrue, having the air of being carefully recited and retold time and time again: “he hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford,’ or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before. And with this doubt, his whole statement fell to pieces,” (65). Nick goes on to describe his phrases as being “threadbare” and “worn.” These points indicate that while Gatsby may have the money of a member of the upper class, no amount of practice will ever fully erase the discrepancy between his true self and the guise he strives to maintain.

Subtle qualities, such as his language, demonstrate the distance between Gatsby’s person and his image. For M. Jourdain, however, the discrepancy is made blatantly obvious through his incessant and comedic attempts to completely erase any signs of his less than ideal past. He seeks to do all things exactly as would be done by “people of quality,” (187) attempting to refine his store of knowledge, his language, his clothing, and even his family. His new and “dignified” clothing earns him especial ridicule throughout the story, particularly from his wife: “Husband, what’s this get-up? Are you playing a joke on people, trussing yourself up this way?” (249). Through his utter disregard for his truly outrageous appearance, M. Jourdain becomes nothing more than a characterized representation of the hopelessness of seeking to rise through society. No matter what he studies or how he dresses, M. Jourdain cannot escape his bourgeois status.

As his scheme continues, the comedy of M. Jourdain’s failings increases. This comedy reaches its peak when he, consumed with the need to be noble, fails to recognize his daughter’s bourgeois lover disguised as the son of the Turkish sultan. Blinded by the belief that such an “important figure” wishes to marry his daughter, and the implications
of such a union on his own social status, M. Jourdain finds himself unable to recognize the man's true identity. Thus, through granting his permission for the marriage, M. Jourdain firmly establishes his complete failure to achieve his goal; he is incapable even of recognizing the falseness of another undergoing the same social modifications as he. In this, Moliere comments on the ridiculousness and inconsistency of utilizing appearance as a defining characteristic of social structure. M. Jourdain, though meeting the requirements for noble status, in terms of his studies and attire, fails miserably in successfully transforming himself into nobility; while his daughter's lover, dressed in foreign clothing and speaking a nonsense language, succeeds in passing himself off as truly be noble. Appearance, therefore, though an important aspect of society's beliefs, should ultimately have no meaning in social categorization.

The actions of Gatsby and M. Jourdain represent two possible routes in the quest to change one's social status. Gatsby acts out of blind devotion to a woman time has turned into only an unreachable ideal; no matter how convincingly he could play his part, he would never become the man he sees as Daisy's equal. His quest is therefore pathetic and pointless, with a goal that can never be accomplished. Similarly, M. Jourdain acts without regard to reason, and completely ignores the opinions of his peers, other members of the social class he tries so desperately to escape. Despite the fact that not one person of the bourgeoisie or the nobility takes him seriously, he relentlessly pushes on, furthering his ridiculous appearance and believing his meager "studies" to have pushed him above and beyond the realm of understanding or comprehension of the "lower classes." While Gatsby is pitiful and M. Jourdain comedic, neither man succeeds in his attempts to manipulate his appearance into that which he desires.

In both The Great Gatsby and The Bourgeois Gentleman, the protagonists approach the subject of social class with the idea that boundaries between classes are superficial, based on appearance alone. Social classes are defined, therefore, by the perception of society, and by an individual's ability to play a part or to act out a script. However, while this may be true, both texts also suggest that simply acting a part is not enough to cross the invisible line between new money and old money, between bourgeoisie and nobility. Appearance is important, but there must be substance and support behind it for a man to
truly raise his status; this substance is what both Gatsby and M. Jourdain lack. The extravagance of Gatsby’s ruse and the ridiculous and superficial desires motivating M. Jourdain’s actions demonstrate the failure of appearance as a crucial factor in determining social status, as well as showcasing the human tendency to act out a role in order to achieve that which is most desired.

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