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Exquisite Grotesques

Evolutionary Thought and the Mythic Hybrid at the *Fin de Siècle*

Billie Gavurin

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts, School of English.
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Abstract

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a startling resurgence of cultural interest in hybrid figures from classical mythology. This thesis argues that the ubiquity of mythic animal-human hybrids in *fin-de-siècle* culture stemmed in significant part from anxieties prompted by the popular genesis of evolutionary theory. The evolutionary hypothesis destabilised the perceived boundaries between human and animal. In doing so, it granted a renewed imaginative power to the hybrid, through whose composite form evolutionary fears (and fantasies) could be embodied, developed, and played out. The significance of the mythic hybrid in expressing evolutionary anxieties during this period has been critically underexamined; this thesis seeks to rectify this lack.

After an initial chapter that addresses the close relationship between evolutionary science and myth-studies during the nineteenth century, each subsequent chapter focuses on a different hybrid being: the faun, the sphinx, the siren, and the centaur. I examine works by Arthur Machen, Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells, and Algernon Blackwood, in genres ranging from poetry to Weird fiction. Dates of publication span from 1894-1911. In each of these texts, evolutionary concerns are not only reflected, but also generated and imaginatively enacted, through the figure of the hybrid. The implications of evolutionary theory were wide-ranging, and this study touches on a correspondingly broad array of related issues. These include the possibility of human degeneration, the scientific recognition of ‘deep time’, post-Darwinian constructions of femininity, and the evolutionary significance of same-gender attraction. All of these find expression in narratives involving mythic hybrids.

Composite beings were an important element in the imaginative expression of pervasive evolutionary anxieties at the turn of the century. This study shows that an examination of this critically neglected literary phenomenon can offer fresh insight into the broader intersections of science and culture at the *fin de siècle*.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated with love to my parents, David Gavurin and Harriet Wheeler, and my brother, Frank. Without you, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for your boundless patience, love, and support.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Billie Gavurin DATE: 17th December 2021

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Introduction

‘Creatures approaching man’

T. H. Huxley begins his 1863 work *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature* with a striking set of images:

Ancient traditions, when tested by the severe processes of modern investigation, commonly enough fade away into mere dreams: but it is singular how often the dream turns out to have been a half waking one, presaging a reality. Ovid foreshadowed the discoveries of the geologist: the Atlantis was an imagination, but Columbus found a western world: and though the quaint forms of Centaurs and Satyrs have an existence only in the realms of art, creatures approaching man more nearly than they in essential structure, and yet as thoroughly brutal as the goat's or horse's half of the mythical compound, are now not only known, but notorious.¹

Huxley, the man sometimes referred to as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ in reference to the ferocity with which he defended and espoused the nascent evolutionary hypothesis, references the hybrid beings of classical myth as he sets out upon his enquiry into human evolutionary history. In depicting composite animal-human forms, he suggests, the ancient Greeks and Romans had unknowingly anticipated the nineteenth-century genesis of evolutionary theory. Classical mythology had imagined creatures intermediate between human and animal; now evolutionary theory informs us that these must once have existed – not in the form of centaurs and satyrs, but of our ‘brutal’ proto-human forebears. The ‘dreams’ of antiquity are revealed to have contained a germ of truth.

At first glance, Huxley’s comparison of early hominins with mythical hybrids may appear strange: it seems surprising, in illustrating a radical new science, to reach for the fantastical beasts associated with an ancient and defunct belief system. But, as we shall see, Huxley was not alone in his approach. The publication of Huxley’s text only four years after that of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (a work which had delicately and deliberately skirted around the issue of human evolution), and in the same year as Charles Lyell’s *Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man*, is representative of a rising concern with the question of humanity’s evolutionary past.² At the same time, academic interest in

¹ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1863), p. 1.

² Darwin’s own work on human evolution, *The Descent of Man*, would not be published until 1871.

mythology was rising: myth scholars including Friedrich Max Müller, Edward Burnett Tylor, and later James George Frazer, offered ambitious comparative analyses of myth and ritual that sought to establish essential truths about human development. Sylvia Hardy observes that myth studies during the latter half of the nineteenth century were closely linked with evolutionary concerns:

[T]he object of study was not, as in earlier periods, the interpretation of individual myths, but a scientific exploration of the ways of thinking of mankind's prehistoric ancestors. Dominated by comparative studies of early language and of early man, mythography after 1856 played an important part in what has been described as an obsession with origins in the nineteenth century.³

Evolutionary science and mythography were both intensely preoccupied with the question of human origins – a connection I will examine in greater depth in Chapter 1 of this thesis. It is not wholly incongruous, then, for Huxley to have turned to the creatures of classical myth in describing evolutionary theory. Margot Norris directly refers to hybrid forms in her powerful description of the destabilising impact of evolutionary theory upon the nineteenth-century worldview:

The philosophical ramifications of Darwin's theories are so immense that they strike at the most fundamental oppositions at the heart of Western culture: the difference between human and animal, male and female, nature and culture. He reverses a system of signification at least as old as the Greek polis with whose emergence the images of hybridity and intermediary forms (centaurs, Amazons, cyclops) were banished to the realms of monstrosity and otherness.⁴

While her references to the complete reversal of a system of signification are arguably hyperbolic, Norris is right to draw a link between the popularisation of evolutionary thought, and the reemergence of 'intermediary forms' such as the centaur. The core proposition of Darwinism – that species exist in constant (albeit gradual) flux, rather than eternally fixed incarnations set by a divine author – threw into question essential and long-held assumptions about both what it meant to be human, and humanity's relationship with

³ Sylvia Hardy, 'The Time Machine and Victorian Mythology', in *H. G. Wells' Perennial Time Machine*, ed. by George Slusser, Patrick Parrinder, and Danièle Chatelain (London: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 76-96 (p. 77).

⁴ Margot Norris, *Beasts of the Modern Imagination: Darwin, Nietzsche, Kafka, Ernst and Lawrence* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 37.

the natural world.⁵ With this uncertainty came a renewed interest in hybrid bodies. The erosion of a binary opposition between human and animal allowed the hybrid to reenter the public consciousness as something more than merely a quaint relic of earlier human ignorance. Anxieties surrounding the dilution of human exceptionalism found a mirror in the peculiar shapes of classical hybrids, and, as evolutionary theory filtered gradually into the popular imagination across the latter half of the nineteenth century, hybrid beings began to feature ever more prominently both in literature and visual art.

This thesis will focus upon the four classical hybrids most frequently encountered in the culture of the *fin de siècle*: the faun, the sphinx, the centaur, and the siren. I will chiefly analyse English-language prose fiction, but where relevant, I will also consider poetry and visual art, as well as works translated from French and German. Employing primary texts dating from between the 1890s-1910s, I will examine the connections – sometimes explicit, sometimes subtle – between these mythic forms’ depictions in literature, and the newly emerged evolutionary hypothesis. And since the concerns raised by evolutionary theory are so fundamental and pervasive, its implications so far-reaching, this study will necessarily touch on a broader array of connected issues. These span from gender and sexuality, to essential questions around time, history, and what it means to be human. *Fin-de-siècle* cultural responses to evolution reveal an anxious awareness that this new theory had changed *everything*.

A range of critical schools and perspectives have shaped my understanding of this subject, and underpin my approach. Not least among these is Gillian Beer’s influential argument, established in her book *Darwin’s Plots* (first published 1983), that evolutionary theory is ‘first a form of imaginative history. It cannot be experimentally demonstrated sufficiently in any present moment. So it is closer to narrative than to drama’.⁶ The idea that evolutionary theory, with its focus on lineage, inheritance, and transformation, is not

⁵ Within this thesis, I use the words ‘Darwinism’ and ‘Darwinian’, as is commonly accepted, to refer to nineteenth-century evolutionary theory more broadly. I do not intend this to suggest that Darwin was the first proponent of evolutionary theory, or the only influential figure in nineteenth-century evolutionary science – this thesis acknowledges the central importance of numerous early evolutionary scientists, including Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Robert Chambers. I do not employ the term when discussing aspects of evolutionary theory that diverged from Darwin’s approach.

⁶ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 6.

only inherently narrative but inherently *mythic*, is essential to my argument, and will be further explored in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

Equally relevant to this study is the ‘Monster Theory’ most famously championed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who in his 1996 edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, makes two observations of central importance to my argument. Firstly, that the monster is by its very nature hybrid: monsters ‘[refuse] to participate in the classificatory order of things’; they are ‘disturbing hybrids’.⁷ Secondly, that the monster inevitably represents ‘an embodiment of a certain cultural moment’, and that its form therefore ‘quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy’.⁸ Not every being examined in this thesis is explicitly depicted as a monster, but they are all to some degree *monstrous*, even if only by virtue of their unnervingly composite bodily forms. And if, as Cohen argues, it is possible to gaze upon the monster and see reflected within it the nexus of fears, hopes, and desires particular to the ‘cultural moment’ from which it emerged, then my contention within this thesis is that evolutionary theory, with all its implications for humanity, is visible at the centre of this knot. Hybrid bodies in *fin-de-siècle* culture do not merely mirror existing evolutionary anxieties, but creatively develop them; the form of the hybrid serves as an imaginative space in which new kinds of thinking can take place, and new fears can develop and be played out.

My understanding of the hybrid’s significance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture owes much to Kelly Hurley’s description of the ‘abhuman’, or ‘not-quite-human’, in her 1996 book *The Gothic Body*.⁹ Hurley details the focus of *fin-de-siècle* literature on ‘a [human] body metamorphic and undifferentiated’, identifying this trope as, in part, an anxious response to the development of the evolutionary hypothesis.¹⁰ Hurley is not interested in the mythic hybrid specifically; instead, her analysis spans ‘the astonishing range’ of abhuman forms found in *fin-de-siècle* literature: ‘slug-men, snake-women, ape-men, beast-people, octopus-seal-men, beetle-women, dog-men, fungus-

⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Monster Culture: Seven Theses’, in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Cohen, (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 3-25 (p. 6).

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁹ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, materialism and degeneration at the fin de siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

people'.¹¹ But her characterisation of abhuman forms as reflecting evolutionary anxieties, and specifically fears of indifferenciation, is highly relevant to my own argument. As we will see in the following chapters, hybrid beings in turn-of-the-century literature are often linked with fears of complete physical indifferenciation, due to the blended nature of their bodies. Paradoxically, however, these beings are also intensely differentiated. Animal and human body parts combine in them, yet these parts are sharply and clearly physically delineated. This, I believe, lies at the heart of the mythic hybrid's popularity as a symbol for evolutionary concerns. It offers a visual representation of the alarming possibilities of species mixing, while remaining recognisable enough for us to (attempt to) imaginatively comprehend it. In this sense, the mythic therianthrope may be said to embody the Freudian uncanny: it is at once intensely familiar, possessing identifiable elements of humanity, and intensely *other*.¹² As Pramod K. Nayar argues, animal studies has shown 'how the animal as a life form is the constant other to the human, and it is the animal that enables the construction of the human as a category'.¹³ When these essential boundaries are disturbed, deep and abiding anxieties are provoked.

While there has been a great deal of criticism devoted both to the impact of evolutionary theory upon nineteenth-century culture, and to the significance of myth during the nineteenth century, no book-length academic study yet exists in which the *fin-de-siècle* literary interest in the mythic hybrid is examined in connection with evolutionary thought. In fact, even critical analysis of the period's hybrid-craze more broadly is lacking. As I will discuss later in this introduction, and in subsequent chapters, certain authors writing in the early decades of the twentieth century did show an awareness of the phenomenon: both Max Beerbohm and William Somerset Maugham commented, in 1919 and 1930 respectively, on the late Victorian and Edwardian preoccupation with Pan, for instance.¹⁴ Yet I have been unable to find any evidence of a focused *critical* engagement with the

¹¹ Hurley, p. 4.

¹² Having raised the spectre of Freud, it is necessary to acknowledge both the relevance of facets of his work to this thesis, and the fact that Freudian analysis and readings will not play a central role in my approach here. My primary texts overlap temporally with the beginnings of Freud's research, and while I will touch on Freudian aspects of my texts where relevant, this is not a Freudian study.

¹³ Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), p. 80.

¹⁴ Max Beerbohm, 'Hilary Maltby and Stephen Braxton', in *Seven Men* (London: William Heinemann, 1919), pp. 49-104 (p. 53); William Somerset Maugham, *Cakes and Ale* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1930), pp. 331-332.

significance of hybrid beings in *fin-de-siècle* culture dating from this time. The earliest example of an academic work with such a premise seems to be Patricia Merivale's 1969 text *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times*. This is a comprehensive survey of the god's appearances across English-language literature from the Renaissance period onwards, but its chief concern is with the years between 1890-1926, during which occurred, as Merivale observes, an 'astonishing resurgence of interest in the Pan motif'.¹⁵ The broadness of the book's scope comes at the expense of truly detailed textual analysis, and Merivale's most significant achievement is to highlight the sheer and startling number of texts in which Pan makes an appearance during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bram Dijkstra's 1986 work *Idols of Perversity* also devotes considerable page space to the significance of hybrid beings in *fin-de-siècle* culture, often in direct connection with evolutionary theory. His focus, however, is almost entirely on visual art rather than literature, and his overall enquiry (monstrous depictions of women) far broader than mine is here.

In more recent years, a few unpublished or partially published doctoral theses have similarly addressed the significance of individual hybrid beings at the *fin de siècle*. A 2000 thesis by Margaret Debelius entitled *The Riddle of the Sphinx at the Fin de Siècle* examines the role of the sphinx in 1890s literature and literary circles, while Mark De Cicco's 2016 thesis *The Queer God Pan and His Children: A Myth Reborn 1860-1917* builds upon Merivale's work to explore the idea of Pan as a queerly disruptive force in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature (parts of De Cicco's thesis have since been published as a chapter in the 2020 collection *Monsters and Monstrosity from the Fin de Siècle to the Millennium*, edited by Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown). A thesis by Marko Teodorski, also from 2016 and entitled *Through the Siren's Looking Glass: Victorian Monstrosity of the Male Desiring Subject*, focuses on the siren in late nineteenth-century literature. A published work, *The Book of the Sphinx* by Willis Goth Regier (2004), offers an account of the sphinx's receptions in culture across time, including many *fin-de-siècle* examples. None of these works, however, are centrally concerned with the evolutionary

¹⁵ Patricia Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. vii.

significance of the hybrid beings they examine, mentioning evolutionary theory either briefly or not at all.

The last decade has seen an increased academic interest in the evolutionary hybrid. Marsha Morton's 2014 book, *Max Klinger and Wilhelmine Culture*, acknowledges the use of centaurs to express evolutionary concerns in *fin-de-siècle* culture, arguing that 'the centaur, together with the mermaid, [became] the popular face of evolution during the later nineteenth century, embodying principles of metamorphosis'.¹⁶ But, as with Dijkstra, Morton's main interest is in visual art, and the interplay of myth and evolution makes up only a small portion of her argument. A 2015 book chapter by Alex Murray, 'Enigmatic Intertexts: Decadence, De Quincey, and the Sphinx', touches briefly upon the idea of the sphinx as a symbol of post-Darwinian anxieties.¹⁷ Lastly, a book chapter by Jessica George, published in the 2021 edited collection *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays* and entitled "'Dissolution and Change": Reading *The Great God Pan* as Monstrous Adaptation', looks at both the scientific and the mythic concerns of Machen's novella.¹⁸

All of the abovementioned works have been of immense help and relevance to me in the creation of this thesis, and the wealth of scholarship that exists *around* my chosen subject demonstrates that this is a rich field of enquiry. Yet there has been no sustained, focused study of the role of the mythic therianthrope in embodying evolutionary concerns at the *fin de siècle*. This thesis will address this lack, arguing that animal-human hybrid figures occupied a significant position in literary responses to the nascent evolutionary hypothesis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The recent publications mentioned in the previous paragraph suggest that the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with hybrid forms is increasingly recognised as having been connected with evolutionary theory; my research in this thesis aims to constitute the first comprehensive study of this cultural phenomenon.

¹⁶ Marsha Morton, *Max Klinger and Wilhelmine Culture: On the Threshold of German Modernism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 112.

¹⁷ Alex Murray, 'Enigmatic Intertexts: Decadence, De Quincey, and the Sphinx', in *Decadent Romanticism*, ed. by Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 89-101.

¹⁸ Jessica George, "'Dissolution and Change": Reading *The Great God Pan* as Monstrous Adaptation', in *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays*, ed. by Antonio Sanna (London: Lexington Books, 2021), pp. 135-150.

Hybrid beginnings: prehistoric and ancient origins

Look around any museum collection of classical artefacts, and you will encounter the familiarly uncanny form of the animal-human hybrid. Walking through the Greek galleries of the British Museum, you will see the much-contested high classical reliefs taken from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin in the early nineteenth century, in which human warriors grapple with centaurs (Figure 1); in adjacent rooms, horse-tailed satyrs with pointed ears dance across red-figure amphorae. Upon entering Rome's National Etruscan Museum, housed in the beautiful Renaissance-era Villa Giulia, visitors are greeted by the Centaur of Vulci: a sixth century BCE statue, its strange archaic smile almost worn away, but its bodily form immediately recognisable (Figure 2). Further into the museum, painted vases and dishes bristle with hybrid shapes: winged sphinxes, bird-bodied sirens. These same figures appear in later Roman art. Their composite forms are such a distinctive and ubiquitous aspect of classical culture that their image has become almost a shorthand for the period; as J. Michael Padgett writes, such beings 'are denizens of the mythical fantasy world of the ancient Greeks, and [...] they are part of our fantasies as well'.¹⁹

But the idea of the hybrid did not originate in classical antiquity. Therianthropic beings – imagined forms whose bodies combine features of both animal and human – seem to have preoccupied the human imagination for almost as long as we have been producing art. A foot-tall ivory figurine discovered in southern Germany and dated to between 35,000-40,000 BP (Before Present) shows a standing human body with the head of a lion (Figure 3). The 'Lion Man' is the oldest known artistic representation of an animal-human hybrid, but it is far from the only surviving prehistoric work to combine human and bestial elements. Camilla Power notes that '[a]nthropomorphic and therianthropic concepts [...] are found in the earliest European traditions of painting and sculpture'.²⁰ Paintings found in the Trois Frères cave in the south of France, and dating from around 15000 BP, show several hybrid forms including a bipedal creature with the horned head and front hooves of a bison, and an antlered humanoid figure often known as 'the Sorcerer'. (This latter has

¹⁹ J. Michael Padgett, 'Horse Men: Centaurs and Satyrs in Early Greek Art', in *The Centaur's Smile: The Human Animal in Early Greek Art* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 3-48 (p. 3).

²⁰ Camilla Power, 'Women in Prehistoric Art', in *New Perspectives on Prehistoric Art*, ed. by Günter Berghaus (London: Praeger, 2004), pp. 75-104 (p. 93).

prompted comparisons with the horned Celtic god Cernunnos, and also shares some visual similarities with early visual depictions of the Greek god Pan, in which he is shown as a human body with a goat's head.) Dušan Borić, Oliver J. T. Harris, Preston Miracle and John Robb write that these prehistoric images appear 'to evidence a theory of being [...] unlike our own, where the boundaries between human and animal may have been understood as permeable, rather than rigid'.²¹ While, ultimately, we can do no more than hypothesise as to the original meaning of these earliest representations of the hybrid, the frequency with which hybrid forms appear in prehistoric art suggests that such beings held a particular significance for the cultures that depicted them.

As Despoina Tsiafakis observes, numerous different civilizations across history have conceived of

supernatural creatures that incorporate aspects of diverse natural beings – half-human, half-animal. These creatures [combine] understandable traits such as human intelligence, physical strength (lion), and the power of flight (bird).²²

Therianthropic forms play a significant role in ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern art and belief, dating from before the appearance of such beings in Greek culture. As well as the famous animal-headed gods of Egypt, the earliest known sphinxes are found in ancient Egyptian art, while winged male sphinx- and centaur-like creatures are depicted in Assyrian cylinder seals from as early as the thirteenth century BCE.²³ Though they differ from them in certain regards, the hybrid beings now familiar to us from ancient Greek and Roman art and mythology are broadly agreed to have been inspired by these older creations. In Padgett's words, '[t]here is no question that the distinctive forms of many Greek composite creatures were derived from Egyptian and Near Eastern sources, as demonstrated by their appearance in everything from Mesopotamian cylinder seals to Phoenician ivories'.²⁴ This connection is so clear, in fact, that 'the evolving forms and roles of human animals in early Greek art are important indicators of the nature and degree of

²¹ Dušan Borić, Oliver J. T. Harris, Preston Miracle and John Robb, 'The limits of the body', in *The Body in History: Europe from the Palaeolithic to the Future*, ed. by John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 32-62 (pp. 40-1).

²² Despoina Tsiafakis, "'ΠΙΕΛΩΠΑ': Fabulous Creatures and/or Demons of Death?", in *The Centaur's Smile*, pp. 73-104 (p. 73).

²³ Exhibition catalogue, *The Centaur's Smile*, pp. 127-129.

²⁴ Padgett, Preface, *The Centaur's Smile*, pp. viii-xi (p. ix).

contact between Greece and older Near Eastern cultures'.²⁵ As Ekrem Akurgal writes, it is no coincidence that 'griffins, sphinxes, centaurs [...] – themes and motifs that heretofore had been entirely lacking in Greek art – suddenly appeared on gold plaquettes, in vase-painting and on bronzes' during a notable upsurge in Near Eastern exports and trade.²⁶

The hybrid forms of Greek and later Roman myth, then, were not specific to the classical imagination, but developed out of earlier belief systems. However, this thesis will focus on the versions of these beings associated with classical mythology, simply because it is these incarnations of the hybrid that appear with the greatest frequency in the literature and visual art of the period upon which I will focus. With the partial exception of the sphinx, whose Egyptian aspect is arguably as significant to the creature's *fin-de-siècle* receptions as its Greek form, the revival of interest in therianthropic forms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was chiefly focused upon classical mythology. It is unsurprising, then, that the pages and canvases of the *fin de siècle* are populated by fauns and centaurs, rather than Assyrian lamassus or Egyptian *ba*-birds. My focus on classical hybrids reflects this fact, rather than a belief that the Greek mythic imagination was uniquely creative or original in its depiction of such beings.

'One animal within another': making sense of the hybrid

Unlike the prehistoric artistic depictions described above, the presence of an accompanying body of literature means that we do not have to guess at how hybrid beings were thought about within classical antiquity. We know that questions surrounding both the possible existence of the hybrid, and its physical nature, were a consistent source of both interest and anxiety for ancient Greek and Roman writers. Various surviving literary sources attempt to address the tension between the prevalence of hybrids within the mythic tradition, and the fact that these beings were not in evidence in the real world. Adrienne Mayor, whose book *The First Fossil Hunters* argues that certain classical monster narratives may have been inspired by the discovery of prehistoric fossil remains within antiquity, observes that one response to this inconsistency was to conclude that, while such

²⁵ Padgett, p. ix.

²⁶ Ekrem Akurgal, *The Birth of Greek Art: The Mediterranean and the Near East*, trans. by Wayne Dynes (London: Methuen, 1968), p. 169.

species had once been found on the earth, they had since passed out of existence: ‘It is generally assumed that the idea of extinction of a whole group of animals did not develop until the seventeenth century. But some 2,500 years ago, notions of extinction, both catastrophic and gradual, were developed by the Greeks’.²⁷ Mayor cites a number of myths in which a god or hero entirely eradicates a monstrous species, as well as the likelihood that the ancient Greeks will have been aware of relatively recent extinctions.²⁸

The Greek understanding of time as epochal – with the events of mythology having taken place in a heroic age now past, peopled by literally larger-than-life humans and mythical beasts – is well-suited to narratives of extinction (an idea that I will examine in greater depth in Chapter 5 of this thesis). Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (believed to have been written in the late eighth century BCE) describes the destruction of several successive races of humanity prior to the creation of our own. Since myth tells of the existence of creatures now not in evidence, and ancient Greek thought acknowledges the possibility of species extinction, it is unsurprising that many people within classical antiquity believed that the beings of myth had once lived, only to die out in some earlier age. Indeed, this belief even seems to have extended to speculation that certain mythical creatures had lived on in small and isolated pockets of population, an idea which Mayor likens to our contemporary fascination with cryptozoological ‘living fossils’ like the Loch Ness Monster or Bigfoot.²⁹ She compiles a list of cases in which the remains of hybrid beings (most likely comprised of modified human mummies) were put on display as curiosities. During antiquity, sightings of live hybrids were occasionally reported, with a group of wild centaurs rumoured to be living in Saune, modern day Arabia. One of the creatures was apparently captured, but quickly died; its mellified remains were exhibited in Rome for almost a century afterwards.³⁰ As well as demonstrating the enduring cultural appeal of therianthropic forms, these examples anticipate the numerous nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction texts in which the mythic hybrid (in particular the centaur) is depicted as a relict species surviving into modernity.

²⁷ Adrienne Mayor, *The First Fossil Hunters: Dinosaurs, Mammoths, and Myth in Greek and Roman Times*, reissued edn (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 204.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 205-206.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 22.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 239-240.

Other classical writers, however, were unconvinced that hybrid creatures had ever existed. Aristotle dismisses the hybrid entirely, writing in his biological work *On the Generation of Animals* (fourth century BCE) that:

[I]t is [...] impossible for a monstrosity of this type to be formed (i.e., one animal within another), as is shown by the gestation periods of [different species], which are widely different, and none of these animals can possibly be formed except in its own proper period.³¹

The creation of hybrid creatures is presented as an impossibility, not only because the variety in gestational periods means that a blending of different species could not result in a viable pregnancy, but also because, as Greta Hawes observes, Aristotle's central assumption is that 'species will replicate stable, species-specific characteristics throughout multiple generations. [...] True hybridity – the blending of forms through the mating of individuals of separate species – cannot occur on account of the specificity of species-specific traits'.³² Aristotle's approach allows for the possibility of 'congenital defects' leading to deformity, yet cannot accommodate the radical bodily *weirdness* of the true hybrid.³³

Some Greek writers attempted to accommodate the presence of the hybrid in myth within a rational framework. Plato, in his dialogue the *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BCE) offers an example of how the unlikelier elements of myth might be explained naturalistically. Discussing the story of the wind-god Boreas' abduction of a girl, Plato's dialogic Socrates observes that 'I might give a clever explanation of it, and say that a gust of wind from the north pushed her from the nearby rocks [...], and although this caused her death she was said to have been abducted by Boreas.'³⁴ However, he goes on to note the pitfalls of this approach:

[A]lthough I find these kinds of explanations fascinating, they are the work of someone who is too clever for his own good. He has to work hard and is rather unfortunate, if only because he next has to correct the way Centaurs look, and then

³¹ Aristotle, *The Generation of Animals*, trans. by Arthur Leslie Peck (London: William Heinemann, 1943), p. 419.

³² Greta Hawes, *Rationalizing Myth in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 56.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

³⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 6.

the Chimaera, and then there pours down upon him a horde of similar creatures, like the Gorgon and Pegasus and countless other extraordinary beasts with all kinds of monstrous natures.³⁵

Plato's listing of hybrids positions them, as Hawes observes, as the mythic figures 'most in need of rationalization'.³⁶ The obvious impossibility of their existence, coupled with their ubiquity in mythic narratives, marks them out as particularly troubling to anyone attempting such an undertaking. Later Greek writers would, however, take up the task, most notably Palaephatus, whose work *On Unbelievable Tales* (fourth century BCE) attempts a systematic deconstruction of the more improbable elements of myth, including its many hybrid beings. Of the centaurs, he writes: '[E]ven if there are some people who believe that such a beast once existed, it is impossible. Horse and human natures are not compatible. [...] And if there ever was such a shape, it would exist today.'³⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the explanation offered for the belief in such creatures is that men on horseback glimpsed from certain angles gave the impression of a single, conjoined beast.

Other explanations are more tenuous, such as that of the sphinx, the winged monster with the head of a woman and the body of a lion, who was believed to have blocked the road to Thebes and devoured any who failed to correctly answer her riddle. She is rationalised by Palaephatus as an Amazonian queen named Sphinx who conducted ambushes upon passers-by outside of Thebes. She was eventually defeated by Oedipus – not, as is claimed in myth, when he solved her riddle, but in physical combat. The detail of the riddle is explained through reference to etymology: Palaephatus claims that since 'the Cadmeian [Theban] word for "ambush" is "riddle"', simple misunderstanding led to the tradition of the sphinx as a riddler.³⁸ This casting of myth as the result of etymological confusion anticipates the nineteenth-century theories of Friedrich Max Müller, who believed that classical myth was composed of misinterpreted fragments of ancient Indo-European language. Max Müller's approach to myth will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

³⁵ Plato, p. 6.

³⁶ Hawes, p. 57.

³⁷ Palaephatus, *On Unbelievable Tales*, trans. by Jacob Stern (Waukonda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1996), p. 30.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 36.

A later attempt at rationalisation comes startlingly close to Huxley's linking of proto-humans and mythic hybrids. The historian Philostorgius, writing in the fifth century AD, describes the strange creatures believed to be found in India:

There are countless kinds of apes [...] and many other species of animals with which the form of the ape is found combined. [...] There is for instance the so-called Pan, whose head is goat-faced and goat-horned, and which is goat-legged from the flanks down, while the stomach, chest, and hands are simply those of an ape. [...] For my part, I believe the pagans of old saw this animal and, struck by how odd it looked, gave it the status of a god, accustomed as they were to divinize strange things, as they did, for instance, with the satyr as well. That is also an ape, with a red face, swift movements, and a tail.³⁹

Philostorgius rationalises the appearance of Pan by replacing the human features of his body with those of an ape. The sphinx is given similar rationalising treatment: she too is believed to be an ape, this time one with 'a woman's breasts [...] [i]ts face is rather rounded, giving it the shape of a woman's. Its voice is somewhat human but is inarticulate'.⁴⁰ While the thought of a half-ape, half-goat, or else of an ape with a human face and breasts, seems to the modern reader quite as unlikely as the mythical appearance of Pan or the sphinx, Philostorgius' concern seems to have been the preservation of human specificity: he writes apparently unquestioningly of the existence of phoenixes, of unicorns with the feet of lions, yet the idea of a creature combining human and animal traits is dismissed as an impossibility.

I include these snippets of ancient mythography because they demonstrate two points of central importance to this thesis:

1. That the mythic animal-human hybrid has been a source of both fascination and unease since antiquity.
2. That this unease has to do particularly with the troubling of boundaries – both the boundaries between human and animal, and between rational/scientific knowledge and imagination.

³⁹ Philostorgius, *Church History*, trans. by Philip R. Amidon (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature), p. 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 49.

It is striking that Philostorgius, writing more than a millennium earlier than Huxley, sought to explain myths of therianthropic beings through reference to apes. This fact speaks to an awareness of the biological proximity of humans to apes, and an attendant anxiety: there is something innately troubling about an animal that appears close to, but not quite, human.

Hybrid forms did not disappear after antiquity. Therianthropic beings from classical mythology feature prominently in mediaeval bestiaries, while the Hereford Mappa Mundi, which is believed to date from the late thirteenth century, includes images of a sphinx and a centaur.⁴¹ It was the Renaissance, however, that saw a truly widespread revival of ancient Greek culture, including increased interest in mythic hybrids. European visual artists depicted numerous animal-human hybrid beings whose apparent symbolic significance ranged from the sublime to the profane. And, as Gary A. Schmidt has demonstrated in his work *Renaissance Hybrids: Culture and Genre in Early Modern England*, this period also saw ‘the increasing presence of hybrid creatures [...] in English literature and iconography’, a trend he identifies as a response both to increasing ‘*generic* hybridity’ in literature, and to ‘the renegotiation of a “mixed” national identity’.⁴²

The individual classical depictions and post-classical receptions of my four chosen hybrids will be examined in greater detail in their respective chapters. The mythic therianthrope has been the object of fear and fascination alike across millennia – but perhaps never more so than at the *fin de siècle*.

Project parameters

Before outlining the chapters of this thesis, it is necessary to establish clearly both the parameters of the study, and the reasoning behind them: why have I chosen to focus on this particular period of time, and why on these particular creatures? In answering the first of these questions, a useful place to begin is Max Beerbohm’s abovementioned observation, in a short story first published in 1919, that ‘[f]rom the time of Nathaniel Hawthorne to the outbreak of the War, current literature did not suffer from any lack of fauns.’⁴³ Hawthorne’s

⁴¹ Elina Gertsman and Barbara H. Rosenwein, *The Middle Ages in 50 Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 92.

⁴² Gary A. Schmidt, *Renaissance Hybrids: Culture and Genre in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 1.

⁴³ Beerbohm, p. 53.

novel *The Marble Faun* – a narrative set in Rome, and centering partly upon the mysterious resemblance of one of the central characters to a beautiful statuary faun by the ancient Greek sculptor Praxiteles – was published in 1860. Beerbohm, therefore, identifies this cultural fascination with fauns as having existed between roughly 1860 and 1914.

Beerbohm is writing specifically of fauns, yet his observation is applicable to animal-human hybrids more generally. Across the latter half of the nineteenth century, and into the first two decades of the twentieth, mythic therianthropes appeared with startling frequency in both European literature and visual art. Artists associated with the European Symbolist movement, in particular, displayed a marked interest in such beings. The Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827 - 1901) depicted a range of hybrid forms, most often fauns and centaurs. While his earlier artworks are largely naturalistic landscapes or portraiture, hybrids begin to appear in his compositions from the 1850s, and increasingly dominate his work from that period onwards. The French artist Gustave Moreau (1826 – 1898) produced numerous images of classical therianthropes, particularly sphinxes, beginning in the 1860s and continuing into the 1880s (it has even been speculated that H. G. Wells named his fictional Doctor Moreau, vivisection creator of composite humanoid forms, after the artist, in a nod to his interest in ‘half-human, half-animal hybridities’).⁴⁴ Böcklin and Moreau were two of the earliest and best-known Symbolist artists to adopt these themes, but they were far from the only ones to do so; as John Christian writes, Symbolist art ‘abounds with enigmas, hybrids, and chimeras’.⁴⁵ At the same time, as Beerbohm observes, literary depictions of hybrid beings were on the increase. Fauns and centaurs, sphinxes and sirens, all began to appear with increasing frequency in European and English-language literature.

Beerbohm identifies the faun-craze as having begun around 1860; Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859, and (as we will see in Chapter 1 of this thesis) evolutionary and proto-evolutionary ideas had already been circulating for several years before this. I believe it is no coincidence that interest in hybrid beings rose in the years directly following the popular birth of evolutionary theory. We have already seen from the

⁴⁴ Jürgen Meyer, ‘Surgical Engineering in the Nineteenth Century: *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *Flatland*, in *Unmapped Countries: Biological Visions in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture*, ed. by Anne-Julia Zwierlein (London: Anthem Press, 2005), pp. 173-182 (n. 244).

⁴⁵ John Christian, ‘Fame at Home and Abroad’, in *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer*, ed. by Stephen Wildman and John Christian (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), pp. 191-270 (p. 204).

Huxley quotation on the first page of this introduction that an early response to questions of human evolution was to turn to the figure of the mythic therianthrope. At the core of my argument in this thesis, then, is the belief that the preponderance of hybrids in *fin-de-siècle* culture resulted not wholly, but in significant part, from the absorption of evolutionary theory into the cultural imaginary over the latter half of the nineteenth century.

However, while I will touch on numerous texts (both literary and scientific) dating from the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the central literary works upon which this thesis will focus date from between 1894 and 1911. The reason for this comparatively tight temporal focus is that it was between around 1890 and the start of the First World War that literary portrayals of the hybrid began to truly proliferate. Between 1890 and 1914, a vast and varied range of writers including (though certainly not limited to) Arthur Machen, Oscar Wilde, H. G. Wells, E. F. Benson, Algernon Blackwood, Kenneth Grahame, E. Nesbit, and E. M. Forster produced works featuring mythic hybrid beings. Bernard Lightman argues that, although the popularisation of evolutionary theory had begun in the mid nineteenth century, it was not until the *fin de siècle* that it had been fully absorbed into the cultural consciousness:

Darwin provided scientific legitimacy to evolutionary theory, and during the sixties and seventies an influential group of scientists argued for its validity to fellow scientists as well as to the Victorian reading audience. But they were a small group and they supported different versions of evolution. It wasn't until the 1880s that a large number of popularizers of science began to convey evolution to the Victorian reading audience in children's literature, in biographies of Darwin, and in sweeping histories of the development of life on earth. Many of the best-selling books popularizing evolution did not appear until the 1890s.⁴⁶

Lightman suggests that evolutionary thought had not fully permeated popular culture until the final years of the nineteenth century. This aligns with my belief that the 1890s through to the early 1910s represented the apogee of a surge of interest in the hybrid as an evolutionary symbol which had been building since the 1860s.

⁴⁶ Bernard Lightman, 'The popularization of evolution and Victorian culture', in *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, ed. by Lightman and Bennett Zon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 286-311 (p. 288).

Secondly, which hybrid beings have I chosen to focus on, and why? A vast range of composite creatures appear in classical myth and art, from those as widely known as the centaur or the sphinx, to more obscure creatures like the hippalektryon (a horse with the hind legs and tail of a rooster). This thesis, however, will focus entirely upon beings whose bodily forms incorporate both human and animal parts. It will not, for instance, look at gryphons (lion-eagle composites), or at the chimera, the mythological beast composed of lion, goat, and snake parts.⁴⁷ This is because my enquiry here is restricted to the reception of hybrid beings in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, in which animal combinations such as the chimera do not feature with anything like the same frequency as therianthropic beings such as the faun or the centaur.⁴⁸ This disparity, I believe, stems from the fact that the *fin-de-siècle* fascination with animal-human hybrids was intensely bound up with contemporary concerns surrounding the implications of evolutionary theory for *humans in particular*. The idea that non-human species might intermingle or alter across time was unsettling, certainly, but the destabilisation of long-held ideas of human specificity was at once infinitely more troubling and more intriguing.

One obvious exclusion from this project is the Minotaur, the human-bull hybrid whose existence, according to myth, resulted from an ill-advised liaison between the Cretan queen Pasiphaë and a sacred bull. Housed in a labyrinth beneath the palace of Crete, this monstrous offspring survived on a diet of Athenian youths, until the hero Theseus battled and killed him. The Minotaur does feature in late nineteenth-century culture, perhaps most notably in the journalist W. T. Stead's 1885 writings against child prostitution, in which the young victims are likened to the sacrificed Athenians, and their abusers to the Minotaur. A striking symbolist painting by George Watts, dating from the same year as Stead's articles and likely inspired by them, depicts the Minotaur gazing out to sea, a small bird

⁴⁷ It is worth noting, however, that the word 'chimera' has come to refer to hybrid beings more generally, as we see in Moreau's painting *The Chimera* (1867), in which a woman embraces a winged centaur, or even in our contemporary biological use of the word to refer to a single organism composed of cells from more than one species. Thus a hybrid being may be described as a chimera, or as chimerical, without possessing the traditional appearance of the Greek monster, and the word is now often used to describe human-animal combinations.

⁴⁸ There are, of course, exceptions, perhaps most notably Lewis Carroll's inclusion of a gryphon in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). By and large, however, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture reveals significantly less interest in mythic animal-animal hybrids than in animal-human hybrids.

crushed beneath its fist. Watts claimed that the image had been intended ‘to hold up to detestation the bestial and the brutal’.⁴⁹

Yet the Minotaur is not as popular a subject in the art or fiction of the *fin de siècle* as the four hybrids examined in this study. I believe this is because the Minotaur is set apart from these others by his animal-headed form. The fact that the faun, the sphinx, the siren, and the centaur all possess a human face is central to their popularity as loci for evolutionary concerns at the *fin de siècle*. The peculiar fascination of the human-headed hybrid lies in the fact that we can look into its face and see ourselves reflected there, despite the impossible otherness of its body. It is the uncanny made manifest, and as such is a fitting embodiment for fears surrounding the evolutionary hypothesis, whose implications included the unnerving relational proximity – the *familiarity* – of humans to the animal Other. The Minotaur, with its bestial head, is too far divorced from humanity; it has tipped the scale into the straightforwardly monstrous.

I have also chosen not to include the Gorgon Medusa. Depicted in early Greek art as a humanoid female figure with a snarling mouth and snakes for hair, Medusa most often appears in later classical and post-antique art as a beautiful woman, with her serpentine curls the only physical signifier of her monstrous nature. Medusa is a popular subject in *fin-de-siècle* visual culture, almost always in a *femme fatale* role, and is referenced in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) when the flirtatious Lucy Westenra is resurrected as a man-hungry vampire.⁵⁰ However, I regard Medusa as distinct from the hybrid beings examined in this study for several reasons. Firstly, the animal component of her physical makeup is limited to her hair, an alterable and nonessential physical attribute. Secondly, her form is composed of a whole human body, with entire, living snakes making up her hair. Both of these facts differentiate her from therianthropic beings like the faun or the sphinx, for whom the animal portions of their bodies constitute vital and integrated parts. This element of mixture, absent from Medusa’s form, is a significant aspect of the evolutionary anxieties that exist behind *fin-de-siècle* receptions of ‘true hybrids’: as I have already discussed, fears about the implications of evolutionary theory often centred upon ideas of physical

⁴⁹ George Watts, quoted in ‘The Autumn Exhibitions’, in *The Art-Journal* (London: J. S. Virtue & Co., 1885), pp. 321-324 (p. 322).

⁵⁰ Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst, Oxford World’s Classics edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 197.

indifferentiation, and so found expression in the disturbingly mingled forms of mythic therianthropes.

Both the Minotaur and Medusa are figures with rich mythic histories, and there is undoubtedly much to be said about their receptions in nineteenth-century culture. However, I ultimately regard them as occupying a subtly distinct position in the *fin-de-siècle* cultural consciousness from the four hybrid beings discussed in this thesis, all of whom possess human heads and faces, and are ‘true hybrids’ whose animal aspects comprise essential body parts.

Central works and chapter outlines

The five central texts examined in this thesis are Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* (1894), Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Sphinx’ (1895), H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Sea Lady* (serialised 1901, published in book form 1902), and Algernon Blackwood’s *The Centaur* (1911). These works are by no means uniform in style, and cover a range of genres. Wilde’s decadent poem is the only non-prose work I look at in depth. Machen and Blackwood are often grouped together under the broad designation of ‘Weird fiction’ – defined by H. P. Lovecraft in 1927 as a genre concerned with ‘[a] certain atmosphere of breathless horror and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces’ – yet *The Great God Pan* and *The Centaur* are very different texts: the former a gothic thriller, the latter a meandering meditation on nature and modernity.⁵¹ Even Wells’ two works are distinct from one another in their approach, with *The Time Machine* clearly a work of science fiction, and *The Sea Lady* a low-fantasy social satire. Each text, however, has a mythic animal-human hybrid either at its centre, or occupying a significant position within its narrative, and each, I will suggest, is preoccupied with evolutionary concerns. Each of the authors was born within fifteen years of one another, and, other than Wilde, who was born in 1854, all of them were born during the 1860s. This means, as David C. Smith writes of Wells, that they ‘[grew] to manhood in the middle of the first burst of creative energy’ generated by the popular advent of evolutionary theory.⁵²

⁵¹ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Abergele: Wermod and Wermod, 2013), p. 6.

⁵² David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 50-51.

The importance of evolutionary thought to Wells' work in particular is readily apparent. As a young man, he studied biology under the tutelage of T. H. Huxley, and many of his works constitute what Michael R. Page describes as 'imaginative exploration[s] of the implications of contemporary evolutionary theory'.⁵³ From the debased deep-future hominins of *The Time Machine* to the composite beast-people of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, Wells' writings reveal an open fascination with human evolutionary possibilities (*The Sea Lady*, in fact, is comparatively unusual among his earlier works in that it does not *explicitly* engage with evolutionary questions, although, as I will argue in Chapter 4, evolutionary anxieties lurk just beneath the text's surface). While the other three writers lack the scientific background of Wells, Machen's early work consistently displays an anxious awareness of contemporary degeneration theory: his characters have an alarming propensity to collapse into puddles of primordial slime, embodying, in Adrian Eckersley's words, 'a fall [...] from the highest branches of the tree of evolution'.⁵⁴ Blackwood's writing in general is less obviously influenced by evolutionary science, yet it is permeated by an awareness of the tension between human society and the natural environment, and in particular the way humans relate to the nonhuman world – a tendency that has its origins in concerns raised by evolutionary theory about the degree to which humans are a part of nature, and one that has made his work a popular subject for ecocritical approaches in more recent years.

The thesis is composed of five chapters. The first chapter explores the connections between myth studies and evolutionary thought during the nineteenth century, while each subsequent chapter focuses on a different mythic animal-human hybrid, examining its representation in a text or texts in connection with evolutionary thought. The decision to explore a separate hybrid being in each chapter reflects the fact that different mythic figures were employed by writers and artists of the *fin de siècle* to embody distinct (albeit often intersecting) concerns. For example, depictions of sirens nearly always reflect fears of dangerous femininity, while centaurs are frequently employed to explore anxieties surrounding a cruelly indifferent post-Darwinian conception of nature. There is, inevitably,

⁵³ Michael R. Page, *The Literary Imagination from Erasmus Darwin to H. G. Wells: Science, Evolution and Ecology* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 170.

⁵⁴ Adrian Eckersley, 'A Theme in the Early Work of Arthur Machen: "Degeneration"', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, (35), 277-287 (278).

a degree of overlap in the ways in which these beings were depicted. *Femme fatale* sphinxes, as well as *femme fatale* sirens, are not uncommon in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and art (Dijkstra dedicates a section of *Idols of Perversity* to the discussion of the sphinx as embodying the motif of ‘woman as predatory beast’).⁵⁵ In E. F. Benson’s short story ‘The Man Who Went Too Far’ (1904), meanwhile, the faun, rather than the centaur, is linked with the inherent brutality of the natural world: the story’s protagonist longs to experience communion with Pan, the god of nature, only to discover to his cost that “[a]ll nature from highest to lowest is full, crammed full of suffering”.⁵⁶ While I acknowledge this convergence, I believe that, nonetheless, sufficiently clear and noteworthy thematic trends accompany the depiction of each of these beings that a ‘creature by creature’ structure is the most fruitful angle of approach. This has also allowed me to address previously underexamined aspects of various beings’ receptions – for instance, analysis of the sphinx has frequently focused, as in Dijkstra’s case, on its links with female sexuality, while I focus here on its connection with evolutionary timescales.

In Chapter 1 (“‘Fossils of Rite and Creed’: The Science of Myth in the Late Nineteenth Century”), I will provide a broad outline of the relationship between evolutionary science and mythography during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This introductory chapter demonstrates the degree to which myth and the natural sciences were regarded as interconnected in the decades leading up to, and including, the *fin de siècle*. Examining important nineteenth-century myth scholars including Friedrich Max Müller, Edward Burnett Tylor, and James George Frazer, I will demonstrate first that such writers leaned heavily upon the language and imagery of contemporary geology and palaeontology: myths are described as fossils, remnants, geological strata; ancient belief systems are linked with evolutionary relics. Not only did myth theorists employ the lexis of evolution, but theories of cultural development were based upon ideas of evolutionary progression: the belief that human societies grow increasingly complex and sophisticated over time.

⁵⁵ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 327.

⁵⁶ E. F. Benson, ‘The Man Who Went Too Far’, in *Ghost Stories* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp. 45-74 (p. 68).

In the second half of the chapter, I will suggest that scientific writing of the late nineteenth century was, in turn, deeply influenced by myth. Not only does Darwin employ mythic imagery in *The Origin of Species*, as Gillian Beer has argued, but the status of myths as inherited narratives, handed down to us from earlier societies, links them with the idea of evolutionary adaptation through inheritance. Moreover, questions of growth and transformation are central to both myth and evolutionary theory. Both hostile and approving nineteenth-century responses to evolutionary theory frequently draw attention to perceived connections between this new theory and ancient myth, either to mock it as fantastical, or to bolster its imaginative power. Darwin's hypothesis, with its emphasis on species alteration, is likened to Ovid's tales of metamorphosis, while the scientist himself is depicted in satirical cartoons as an intermediate form: a human-ape hybrid. Therianthropes are often invoked to illustrate the radical peculiarity of evolutionary theory and its implications for human specificity.

This chapter will ultimately argue that myth studies and evolutionary science enjoyed a reciprocal relationship during the nineteenth century, with each drawing upon and enriching the other. The closeness of the two fields helped to establish the cultural conditions in which the mythic hybrid came to function as an embodiment of evolutionary theory, thus paving the way for the literary portrayals of 'evolutionary hybrids' examined in the next four chapters of this thesis.

Chapter 2 ('The Abyss of All Being': Myth, Degeneracy and the Faun) explores the relationship between mythology and evolutionary degeneracy in Arthur Machen's 1894 novella *The Great God Pan*. Machen's narrative describes the disastrous chain of events that result when an overreaching scientific experiment unwittingly unleashes the power of the goat-legged Greek deity Pan through his daughter, the *femme fatale* Helen Vaughan. The first half of the chapter will examine Machen's depiction of Helen as a simultaneously mythic and evolutionary figure: like Walter Pater's vampiric Mona Lisa, she has accrued within herself the natural history of all life, and her body is therefore at constant risk of degeneration. This degenerate potential reveals itself through physiognomic 'clues' that hint at her mythic heritage, yet remain uninterpretable to the book's characters.

The second half of the chapter focuses chiefly upon the novella's climactic scene, in which Helen's body finally undergoes the long-threatened physical 'devolution',

culminating with her transformation into a faun. Drawing connections between Helen's dissolution into basic matter, and Pan's traditional role as a god of 'everything', I will argue that Machen repurposes mythic tropes to express contemporary fears surrounding the possibility of human evolutionary degeneration. The novella's conclusion, which reveals that Helen's birth is part of an ongoing cycle and is therefore destined to recur, implies that humanity can never fully escape the threat of degeneracy.

Chapter 3 ('Knowing Fragments: The Sphinx and the Riddle of Deep Time') examines the sphinx as an embodiment of anxieties surrounding 'deep' or evolutionary time at the *fin de siècle*. The nineteenth century saw an expansion of interest in both geology/palaeontology and archaeology, academic fields which were then regarded as far more closely interrelated than they are today. As a result, nineteenth-century responses to ancient archaeological fragments – in particular, sphinxes – often engage with ideas of unfathomably vast spans of time. In Oscar Wilde's 'The Sphinx' (1895), ancient Egyptian history and mythology mingle with palaeontological time in the imagined past of a sphinx statuette, whose dalliances with huge lizards and scaly dragons evoke contemporary nineteenth-century conceptions of prehistoric saurians.

The coalescence of archaeological and palaeontological timescales around the figure of Wilde's sphinx is mirrored in H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), which may have been partially inspired by Wilde's poem. In Wells' novel, a colossal white marble sphinx looms over a far-future England populated by the degenerate descendants of humanity. The sphinx's composite, human-animal form symbolically unites deep time and history, appearing to offer the possibility of an answer to the troubling questions of human endurance in time thrown up by the Time Traveller's experience of the far future, if only its significance can be deciphered, as Oedipus correctly deciphered the riddle of the Theban sphinx. However, late nineteenth-century literary and artistic encounters with the sphinx most often end not in elucidation, but in obfuscation and uncertainty. Wells' White Sphinx is no exception; ultimately, its massive, enigmatic form functions as an embodiment of the unknowable nature of deep time – allowing us to approach the question, but not to answer it.

In Chapter 4 ('"She may be anything": The Siren and Femininity After Darwin'), I focus on a second, but far less critically examined, text by H. G. Wells: *The Sea Lady*

(1901). The novel tells the story of a beautiful fish-tailed siren, who appears on a Kentish beach, charms her way into the lives of a group of upper-middle-class holidaymakers, and ends by tempting a respectable young man to his death in the sea. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which conflicting *fin-de-siècle* ideas around the role and nature of women interact with evolutionary anxieties in Wells' depiction of the siren.

Beginning with an overview of nineteenth-century belief in sirens or mermaids as beings that might conceivably exist or have existed, I will go on to argue that Wells' 'Sea Lady' simultaneously embodies two opposing post-Darwinian visions of femininity. Firstly, she is depicted as a fearfully hypersexual *femme fatale*, whose determination to seduce and overpower men reflects nineteenth-century fears concerning the sexual behaviour of female animals, and its implications for human women. Secondly, and antithetically, the Sea Lady is presented as a sexless being. She did not come into being through sexual reproduction, and she does not appear to be physically capable of procreative sexual intercourse. Her erotic appeal lies, paradoxically, in the fact that she exists on a plane apart from the dispiritingly terrestrial facts of human reproduction.

This internally divided portrayal ultimately reflects the conflicted state in which cultural conceptions of femininity existed in the wake of evolutionary theory, which had thrown up unsettling questions about human sexuality. The impossible form of the siren is able simultaneously to embody these contradictory versions of post-Darwinian femininity.

Chapter 5 of this thesis ('Golden Ages: The Threatened Centaur and Homoerotic Possibility') will examine the complex interactions between mythic and evolutionary time in Algernon Blackwood's novel *The Centaur* (1911), focusing particularly upon the work's critically underexamined homoerotic subtext. The chapter begins with an examination of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tendency to depict the centaur as a species that was once plentiful, but that now lives on only in a few isolated areas: we see this approach in the German writer Paul Heyse's short story 'The Last Centaur' (1873), and in the French writer Andre Lichtenberger's novella *The Centaurs* (1904). In keeping with this approach, Blackwood presents the centaur as a relict species, driven into obscurity by encroaching human civilisation.

In Blackwood's *The Centaur*, the evolutionary isolation of the centaurs finds a mirror in the societal alienation of its central character, a young man named O'Malley who has long felt himself to be ineffably 'other' than those around him. O'Malley finds acceptance and recognition only amongst the last surviving centaurs, with whom he shares an intense bond that I read as homoerotic in nature. I will argue that Blackwood's presentation of the centaur as a simultaneously mythic and evolutionary figure reveals an overlaying of imagined 'golden ages': an evolutionary past in which centaurs were abundant and unthreatened, and an idealised mythic/Hellenic past in which homosexual attraction might be encouraged rather than condemned. O'Malley and his centaurs are beings out of time, fated to be destroyed by the indifferent modernity that surrounds them.

Chapter 5 ends on a note of evolutionary hope, however, as I draw attention to the influence upon Blackwood of Edward Carpenter's optimistic writings on sexuality. Carpenter argued that homosexuality in fact represented a positive evolutionary development, and that same-gender attracted people would eventually come to function as leaders and teachers of future society. I suggest that *The Centaur* ultimately contains a similar message of hope: O'Malley may be rejected by current society, but he is paving the way for a return to a more organic and authentic way of life.

Through these five chapters, I aim to demonstrate that the mythic animal-human hybrid played an important and critically overlooked part in the literary and artistic expression of anxieties surrounding evolutionary theory at the *fin de siècle*. The development of the evolutionary hypothesis in the mid nineteenth century, and its popularisation over the subsequent decades, caused widespread and well-documented existential unease. The long-assumed distinction between human and animal had been fundamentally destabilised by the revelation that humans had evolved from 'less complex' life forms, opening the door to the idea of beings existing somewhere between human and animal. Beer has argued that '[w]hen it is first advanced, [scientific] theory is at its most fictive'.⁵⁷ 'The awkwardness of fit between the natural world as it is currently perceived and as it is hypothetically imagined holds the theory itself for a time within a provisional scope akin to that of fiction'.⁵⁸ At the *fin de siècle*, evolutionary theory was still new

⁵⁷ Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

enough to appear quasi-fictional, and thus the adoption of the mythic therianthrope as a figure through which evolutionary unease may be explored is less outlandish than it first appears. This thesis will argue that a close examination of the depiction of mythic animal-human hybrids in *fin-de-siècle* texts offers fresh and illuminating perspectives on the cultural response to what was surely the most fundamental scientific development of the nineteenth century. Beyond merely displaying or reflecting existing concerns, the hybrid in *fin-de-siècle* literature becomes an unnerving generative space, within which new fears may evolve, and latent or repressed anxieties come to light.

Chapter 1

‘Fossils of rite and creed’: The Science of Myth in the Late Nineteenth Century

In his vastly influential mythographic work *The Golden Bough* (first published 1890; this quotation first included in the 1912 edition), James George Frazer writes of ‘the quaint rites which in Europe have long dwindled into mere fossils’.¹ Frazer’s choice of words is significant. He is discussing contemporary European harvest rituals, which, according to his approach, may be read as the residual evidence of earlier mythic systems. But the language used is that of palaeontology: the traditional practice of binding together a sheaf of wheat into the shape of a ‘corn-mother’ is here figured as a physical remnant, as if it were directly identifiable with the petrified fish and nautili whose ghostly, imprinted forms adorned many a Victorian drawing room. Frazer was far from alone in choosing to evoke the mythic in the lexis of the geological; comparisons between myth and contemporary science had been being made – explicitly or implicitly – throughout the nineteenth century, as the field of myth studies expanded alongside that of evolutionary science, and each impacted upon the other.

I began my introduction by pointing out T. H. Huxley’s unlikely use of mythological imagery to illustrate his evolutionary argument. Rather than focusing on a work or works of fiction in connection with a specific hybrid form, as with each of the following four chapters, this first chapter will chart the close relationship between evolutionary theory and mythography across the nineteenth century, with the aim of gaining a clearer picture of how and why therianthropic forms came to function so often as a repository for fears and fantasies surrounding evolution. I hope to illustrate not only the more readily apparent influence of evolutionary thought upon myth studies, but also the very real sense in which contemporary natural science drew, in turn, upon the ideas and conventions of both myth and mythic discourse. Ultimately, I will posit a reciprocal relationship between theories of myth and evolution during the nineteenth century. The closeness of this relationship, I will argue, set the stage for the figure of the mythic hybrid to become an unlikely cultural signifier for the brave new world of evolutionary thought at the *fin de siècle*.

¹ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1922), p. 413.

Background

For many during the nineteenth century, mythology was the chief point of cultural connection with the classical past. Frank M. Turner writes that

Early Victorian classicists, commentators, and historians, as well as the reading public at large, were more familiar with the Greek myths than with any other single aspect of Hellenic culture. Numerous versions of the myths and channels of information about them already existed. Throughout the eighteenth century the Homeric epics had enjoyed a wide readership in the original and in translation. A considerable number of handbooks and dictionaries of classical myth were readily available. Mythological scenes were commonplace in painting and sculpture, and from Renaissance, neoclassical, and romantic poets the early Victorians had *inherited* [emphasis mine] a literature rich in allusions to the Greek myths.²

Classical mythology was increasingly accessible and widely known. Perhaps as a result of this availability, the academic examination of myth exploded in popularity during the first half of the nineteenth century. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson describe the ‘enormous impact’ of mythography at this time, noting that ‘the study of myth became increasingly sophisticated and increasingly central to the study of history, language, and culture’.³ Robert Ackerman traces this growing interest in mythography back to the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment-era philosophers had begun to question the nature and aetiology of religion.⁴ In ‘establishing the kinship of the languages of the Indo-European speech area’, German philologists of the early-to-mid nineteenth century then paved the way for the comparative mythographic methods that would characterise the latter half of the century.⁵

This last point is arguably the most significant for my argument. Early comparative philologists such as Franz Bopp and Jacob Grimm stressed the connections between languages, arguing, in the case of Bopp, that grammatical similarities existed between

² Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 77.

³ Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680-1860* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 297.

⁴ Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School: J. G. Frazer and the Cambridge Ritualists* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 22.

Sanskrit, Latin, Ancient Greek, Persian, and modern German. These similarities implied the existence of a lost root language, out of which all of these ostensibly disparate tongues had gradually developed. Not only would Bopp's comparative approach prove deeply influential upon later mythographic writers, it was also peculiarly proto-evolutionary. Bopp published his first comparative work in 1816, decades before evolutionary theory as we know it had begun to gain popular acceptance. Yet his method places emphasis on interconnectivity and gradual development – both central tenets of evolutionary theory – as well as the premise that the past incarnation of a language leaves identifiable traces upon those that have grown out of it, just as an evolutionary biologist might identify the vestigial remnants of an extinct ancestral type upon a surviving species.

An 1891 article by the American philosopher John Fiske on 'The Doctrine of Evolution' argues that '[v]ague notions of evolution were in the air long before Darwin', and lists Bopp alongside the early palaeontologist and taxonomist Georges Cuvier as an example of a pre-Darwinian thinker whose work 'rapidly [educated] the minds of the younger generation of students into a vague perception of development as something characteristic of all sorts of phenomena' during the early years of the nineteenth century.⁶ Similarly, the influential philosophical writings of Georg Hegel emphasised the idea of a *Geist*, or world-spirit, that progressed gradually within a society, 'passing through a series of stages and forms'.⁷ Hegel first proposed this idea in his 1807 text *The Phenomenology of Mind*, yet the concept has clear parallels with later evolutionary thought in its focus on gradual development and adaptation on a grand scale. John Herman Randall notes that, while 'there is in Hegel no biological evolution of species', his work nonetheless 'made fundamental the evolution of human society, institutions, and culture'.⁸ Hegel and Bopp were in fact well acquainted, with the philosopher owning many of the philologist's works.⁹ Early comparative philology may not have been explicitly evolutionary, then, but

⁶ John Fiske, 'The Doctrine of Evolution: Its Scope and Influence', in *Evolution in Science, Philosophy and Art: Popular Lectures and Discussions Before the Brooklyn Ethical Association* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1891), pp. 435-466 (pp. 432, 433).

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. by J. B. Baillie, 2 vols (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1910), II, p. 434.

⁸ John Herman Randall, *Philosophy After Darwin: Chapters for The Career of Philosophy, Volume III, and Other Essays*, ed. by Beth J. Singer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 35.

⁹ Jon Stewart, *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World: The Logic of the Gods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 119.

it participated in a shared conceptual framework that stressed growth and change across time.

Occurring more or less contemporaneously with the advent of comparative philology and myth-studies – and equally connected with issues of development – was the emerging scientific recognition of the existence of a ‘deep past’. Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) drew upon the earlier work of James Hutton (who had famously declared in 1788 that he could identify for the earth ‘no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end’) to argue that the world had not existed for a mere six thousand years, as had traditionally been assumed, but for a far greater span than that.¹⁰ Rather than enduring perpetually in a fixed state, or else being altered by sudden cataclysmic upheavals of biblical fire or flood, as ‘Catastrophists’ such as Cuvier had believed, Lyell suggested that the current condition of the earth had been attained by slow and continuous change over vast reaches of time, through ‘the slow agency of existing causes’.¹¹ He also argued that the study of extant geological features – whether rock strata or the fossil remnants of once-living creatures – could provide the modern geologist with information about the distant past.

Lyell’s writings would prove important to the subsequent expansion of evolutionary thought. Most notably, a young Charles Darwin avidly consumed the recently published *Principles* during his travels aboard the *Beagle* (1831-36), and was deeply influenced by Lyell’s emphasis on gradual natural change. In 1844, meanwhile, drawing upon both contemporary developments in geology and proto-evolutionary thought, the Scottish publisher Robert Chambers anonymously published a work entitled *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. *Vestiges* argued that, rather than being created in one act of divine generation a few thousand years ago, life on Earth had progressed gradually from simplicity towards complexity, not as the result of ‘any immediate or personal exertion on the part of the Deity, but [through] natural laws which are expressions of his will’.¹² The book – which was first published a startling fifteen years before *The Origin of Species* –

¹⁰ James Hutton, quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, ‘Toward the Vindication of Punctuational Change’, in *Catastrophes and Earth History: The New Uniformitarianism*, eds. William A. Berggren and John A. Van Couvering (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 9-34 (p. 12).

¹¹ Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 16.

¹² Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1969), p. 154.

caused an immediate stir. Bernard Lightman credits it with ‘[making] evolution an acceptable – as well as accessible – topic of polite discussion and [bringing] it into the middle-class home’.¹³ Evolutionary theory began to edge increasingly into public view.

By the 1850s, the excavation of manmade tools alongside the remains of extinct animals had provided compelling physical evidence that the span of human history was far greater than previously imagined. In 1859, the year in which Darwin’s *Origin of Species* first appeared in print, leading British scientists travelled to France to confirm that ancient flints uncovered by the French archaeologist Boucher de Perthes in the same strata as the bones of extinct animals had indeed been crafted by humans. That these two formative events – the confirmation that humanity itself possessed a ‘deep past’, and the publication of Darwin’s era-defining text – took place within the same year seems almost too narratively convenient to be true. In actuality, it reflects the fact that various avenues of scientific query were rapidly converging upon essential questions of natural history, the resolution of which seem to have been felt as an increasingly urgent scientific priority. The corroboration of the French flints’ age came at the ideal time for evolutionary theory. Ackerman writes that ‘[w]ith the advent of human prehistory it became feasible to attempt to extrapolate backward into the dim reaches of time so that some evolutionary developmental schema for man might be established.’¹⁴ The acknowledgement of the existence of a deep past for humanity ‘gave the evolutionists the time needed for man to evolve.’¹⁵ Darwin’s theory proved reciprocally significant to the deep time hypothesis, providing, in Daniel Lord Smail’s words, ‘a crucial link in the time revolution [...] because it offered a way to link the history of life and the descent of humanity to the emerging geological timescale, thereby unifying biological time’.¹⁶

While Chambers’ earlier evolutionary argument had received a good deal of public attention, it had broadly been met with scepticism by the scientific community.¹⁷ *The Origin of Species*, on the other hand, proposed a specific evolutionary mechanism – descent with modification via natural selection – and copious evidence for the existence and

¹³ Lightman, p. 288.

¹⁴ Ackerman, pp. 31-32.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (London: University of California Press, 2008), p. 26.

¹⁷ Lightman, p. 288.

functioning of that mechanism. As such, the *Origin of Species* ‘provided scientific legitimacy to evolutionary theory, and during the sixties and seventies an influential group of scientists argued for its validity to fellow scientists [as] well as to the Victorian reading public’.¹⁸ While, as Lightman goes on to observe, evolutionary theory would not reach true public acceptance until the final two decades of the nineteenth century, its impact was already immense by the 1860s.¹⁹

Jerome Buckley writes in his 1967 work *The Triumph of Time* of the profound effect of evolutionary theory on nineteenth-century conceptions of time, history and the past:

Evolution [...] meant an organic growth of all things in time, a development in which the past, though never repeating itself, would persist through each successive modification. The past accordingly became the object of solicitous regard; the present could not be cut off from its history; civilization was a branching plant which would droop and wither if its roots were neglected or dislodged. [This] organic image [...] replaced the standard eighteenth-century mechanistic analogy; the world was no longer a machine operating on a set cycle, but a living body fulfilling itself in constant adaptation to new conditions.²⁰

The evolutionary approach posited an understanding of the world that stressed its organic development. The past is constantly present, and inevitably informs the current day – an idea reminiscent of Bopp’s abovementioned belief that traces of extinct languages persist in those that developed out of them. Importantly, Buckley emphasises that this increasingly prevalent view of the world as a slowly and organically developing entity was ‘applied both to nature and to human culture’.²¹ The ramifications of evolutionary theory were so vast, so far-reaching, that inevitably, the impact of its popular acceptance could not remain limited to the scientific realm. The recognition of a past whose scale dwarfed the reaches of known history, the destabilisation of belief in an absolute and divinely-ordained distinction between human and animal, each struck at the heart of preexisting conceptions of human nature and culture. As a result, it is difficult to overstate the extent to which evolutionary thought coloured nearly every form of cultural discourse during the latter half

¹⁸ Lightman, p. 288.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jerome Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 15.

²¹ Ibid, p 15.

of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth.²² As thoughts turned increasingly to humanity's past, myths – the imaginative products of previous civilizations – were an obvious subject for post-Darwinian reassessments of culture.

Myth studies and the influence of evolutionary theory

In a 1909 work issued to celebrate the centenary of Charles Darwin's birth, the Cambridge myth-scholar Jane Harrison suggested that 'the title of my paper might well have been "the creation by Darwinism of the scientific study of [ancient] religions"', but that I feared to mar my tribute to a great name by any shadow of exaggeration'.²³ Harrison's statement is in fact something of an exaggeration; as we have seen, interest in ancient belief systems had been on the rise since the eighteenth century, and important developments in geology, palaeontology and proto-evolutionary theory were already well underway by the time Darwin published *The Origin of Species*. Any statement that positions Darwin as the sole creator and driver of evolutionary thought is reductive. Nonetheless, her words reflect the degree to which myth studies were recognised to be connected with evolution by the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century. In this section of the chapter, I will offer a brief overview of some of the most influential theories of myth during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, and examine the ways in which they openly drew upon evolution and evolution-adjacent thought.

More than half a century before Harrison's comments on Darwinism and ancient religion (and three years, even, before the publication of the *Origin of Species*) the German philologist Friedrich Max Müller published 'Comparative Mythology' (1856), an essay described by Ackerman as 'epochmaking'.²⁴ In it, Max Müller builds upon Bopp's abovementioned theory that the Indo-European languages may be traced back to a common

²² Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon's *Evolution and Victorian Culture* does an excellent job of demonstrating the breadth of evolutionary theory's impact upon nineteenth-century culture, devoting chapters to the influence of evolutionary theory on subjects as diverse as dance and architecture, as well as more obvious areas such as literature and visual art.

²³ Jane Harrison, 'The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religion', in *Darwin and Modern Science: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of the Birth of Charles Darwin and of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Publication of The Origin of Species*, ed. by A. C. Seward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), p. 494.

²⁴ Ackerman, p. 26.

pre-literate root language, ‘Aryan’ (now known as Proto-Indo-European). While of course no written evidence of this language now exists, Max Müller believed it to be possible, by comparing commonalities between its surviving daughter languages, to speculatively reconstruct snippets of it. Myths were an important tool in this endeavour, since, according to Max Müller, they were in fact composed of misinterpreted fragments of Proto-Indo-European language. Mythology, in his view, was ultimately no more than a linguistic byproduct:

Mythology [...] is in truth a disease of language. A myth means a word, but a word which, from being a name or an attribute, has been allowed to assume a more substantial existence. Most of the Greek, the Roman, the Indian, and other heathen gods are nothing but poetical names, which were gradually allowed to assume a divine personality never contemplated by their original inventors.²⁵

As such, myths could be broken down through linguistic analysis to reveal their original meaning. Max Müller offers the example of the Greek myth of Kephalos and Prokris:

Before we can explain this myth, [...] we must dissect it, and reduce it to its constituent elements.

The first is ‘Kephalos loves Prokris’. Prokris we must explain by a reference to Sanskrit, where *prush* and *prish* mean to sprinkle, and are used chiefly with reference to rain-drops. [...]

The same root in the Teutonic languages has taken the sense of ‘frost’; and Bopp identifies *prush* with O. H. G. *frus*, *frigere*. In Greek we must refer to the same root *πρῶξ* *πρωκός*, a dew-drop, and also *Prökris*, the dew. Thus, the wife of Kephalos is only a repetition of *Herse*, her mother – *Herse*, dew, being derived from Sanskrit *vrish*, to sprinkle; Prokris, dew, from a Sanskrit root *prush*, having the same sense. The first part of our myth, therefore, means simply ‘The Sun kisses the Morning Dew’.²⁶

Max Müller argues that such painstaking comparative analysis has allowed him to decode ancient myths, revealing their true origins as statements about the natural world, most often the sun, which he believed was an object of devotion for the Proto-Indo-Europeans.

²⁵ Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1881), p. 21.

²⁶ Max Müller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology and Religion*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1881), I, pp. 392-393.

Despite his impressive credentials as a linguist, Max Müller's theories around myth were academically dubious to say the least. His motivations – in part, as Sarah Iles Johnston writes, a desire 'to prove that the Aryan races he so admired (especially the Greeks and the Indians) had been proto-monotheists, rather than polytheists, and in part [a] desire to exonerate those Aryans from the apparent savagery of many of their myths' – seem to have been equally questionable.²⁷ Feldman and Richardson note '[t]he unlikely combination in his work of hard-headed, complex, erudite philology and the dreamy, rhapsodic reduction of all myth to silly locutions for sunrise and sunset'.²⁸ While comparative linguistic reconstruction remains a respected method, Max Müller's arguments on myth were already regarded as dated by the final quarter of the nineteenth century.²⁹

Nonetheless, elements of his approach provided important tools for later thinkers. Particularly relevant for this thesis is Max Müller's emphasis on the idea of linguistic *remnants*, which, as we shall see, appears to have influenced the subsequent work of Edward Burnett Tylor. Besides the clear influence of Bopp, Max Müller seems to have based this aspect of his studies at least in part upon contemporary developments in geology. Lourens van den Bosch observes that

Müller was impressed by geological and palaeontological findings that had changed time perspectives and led to new theories about creation. But he was particularly fascinated by the analogies he saw between the layers and fossils in the earth's strata and certain developments in comparative philology.³⁰

A friend of Max Müller recalls a trip taken with him and Professor Phillips, a geologist, and the impact their conversations apparently had on the philologist:

[W]hat struck him most was the odd fragments that were indications of obliterated rock formations. He was fascinated by the inferences which Phillips drew. I cannot but suspect that there was in his mind the perception of close analogy offered by his own favourite study of the history of language. These fragments of early strata

²⁷ Sarah Iles Johnston, 'The Comparative Approach', in *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology*, ed. by Vanda Zajko and Helena Hoyle (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp. 139-150 (p. 140).

²⁸ Feldman and Richardson, p. 480.

²⁹ Ackerman, p. 93.

³⁰ Lourens Peter van den Bosch, *Friedrich Max Müller: A Life Devoted to the Humanities* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 210.

were parallel to the presence of roots or old forms of words embedded in later linguistic strata.³¹

Max Müller's linguistic analysis rests on the premise, lifted from scientific discourse, that the study of surviving remnants allows us to deduce information about the past. If we assume, as Lyell did, that the gradual action of 'existing causes' has led to the current state of affairs, then it follows that it must be possible to trace those causes backwards from where we are now in order to gain a greater understanding of what came before us.³² Max Müller's writings on myth and religion are full of geological imagery. In an 1888 lecture, he expounded upon his view of mythology as a geological remnant:

[Mythology] represents what in geology we should call a *metamorphic* stratum, a convulsion of rational, intelligible, and duly stratified language produced by volcanic eruptions of underlying rocks. It is metamorphic language and thought, and it is the duty of the geologist of language to try to discover in the widely scattered fragments of that mythological stratum the remains of organic life, of rational thought, and of the earliest religious aspirations.³³

In an earlier lecture, Max Müller dismissively refers to contemporary Indian belief systems as 'a half-fossilised megatherion walking about in the broad daylight of the nineteenth century'.³⁴ He repeatedly describes his own method as 'linguistic palaeontology'.³⁵ The influence of geology upon his work could not be more evident.

Despite Max Müller's interest in contemporary science, however, he was unconvinced by evolutionary theory. He was broadly opposed to Darwinism, maintaining that humans were innately and spiritually distinct from animals, marked out in particular by our capacity for speech.³⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, tensions arose between Max Müller and some among those of the succeeding wave of myth-scholars, the evolutionary anthropologists, whose work was openly influenced by evolutionary theory. Ackerman identifies Andrew Lang and Edward Burnett Tylor as two of the chief figures of this

³¹ Frederick William Farrar, quoted in van den Bosch, p. 210.

³² Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, p. 16.

³³ Max Müller, *Natural Religion: The Gifford Lectures Delivered Before the University of Glasgow in 1888* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893), p. 518.

³⁴ Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873), p. 279.

³⁵ Max Müller, *Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1888), p. 130.

³⁶ van den Bosch, p. 186.

movement; their belief that ‘humanity necessarily passes through certain predetermined stages in its evolution, and that the myth-making mind characterized one of these’ was far more in line with the evolutionary mindset described by Jerome Buckley than Max Müller’s belief in myth as a decay of language.³⁷ However, as noted above, Max Müller’s focus on leftover ‘fragments’ of earlier linguistic and mythic systems remained influential. Tylor, for instance, based his theory upon what he referred to as ‘[the] doctrine of survival in culture’:³⁸

Among evidence aiding us to trace the course which the civilization of the world has actually followed, is that great class of facts to denote which I have found it convenient to introduce the term “survivals”. These are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and they thus remain as proofs and examples of an older condition of culture out of which a newer has been evolved.³⁹

Writing in his influential 1871 work *Primitive Culture*, Tylor here employs not only specifically evolutionary language, but also a central idea that is notably reminiscent of Max Müller’s linguistic palaeontology. A ‘survival’ is a cultural artefact – a custom, a superstition, a behaviour – that has outlived its original context, and now persists as an isolated island of antiquity within the modern world. Examples offered by Tylor of “survivals” include Midsummer festivals, celebrations of All Souls’ Night, and even the use by ‘an old Somersetshire woman’ of an obsolete hand-loom, long after the development of more efficient versions of the tool.⁴⁰ From these persisting remnants, we can make inferences about the past from which they emerged. As Ackerman notes, Tylor’s belief that human culture is filled with such informative artefacts bears a ‘striking’ similarity to Max Müller’s theory of linguistic remnants.⁴¹

Besides the obvious influence of Max Müller’s palaeontological approach, Tylor’s prose is rife with phrases that might have been lifted directly from a contemporaneous work

³⁷ Ackerman, p. 34.

³⁸ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1871), I, p. v.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Ackerman, p. 38.

on species evolution. In a chapter entitled ‘The Science of Culture’, he sets out his evolutionary view of culture: ‘Progress, degradation, survival, revival, modification, are all modes of the connexion that binds together the complex network of civilization’.⁴² By 1871, each of the words listed by Tylor as ‘modes of connection’ was already inextricably associated with evolutionary theory. ‘Modification’ in particular could be directly linked to Darwin, who had initially described his theory as one of ‘descent with modification’, resisting the use of the word ‘evolution’ (coined in its current usage by Herbert Spencer) until the 1872 edition of *The Origin of Species*.⁴³ Tylor describes the way in which human fashions change and develop over time:

[T]he books of costume, showing how one garment grew or shrank by gradual stages and passed into another, illustrate with much force and clearness the nature of the change and growth, revival and decay, which go on from year to year in more important matters of life.⁴⁴

His emphasis on the gradual nature of cultural change is deeply enmeshed with evolutionary discourse; Darwin employs the word ‘gradual’ dozens of times throughout *The Origin of Species*, writing of ‘the slow and gradual accumulation of [...] variations’.⁴⁵ Tylor, in his reference to fashion as a microcosm of the changes that take place ‘in more important matters of life’, seems to gesture to the grander macro-narrative of species evolution.

Tylor’s overarching evolutionary argument is that all of humanity has either passed, or is passing, through three stages of cultural development, on a general trajectory ‘from savagery towards civilization’.⁴⁶ In *Anthropology* (1888), he defines these stages as ‘Savage, Barbaric, [and] Civilized’: the savage stage is pre-agricultural and often nomadic; the barbaric stage is defined by the adoption of agriculture, leading to ‘immense results in the improvement of arts, knowledge, manners, and government’; and the civilized stage is reached only with the advent of writing, ‘which by recording history, law, knowledge and

⁴² Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 16.

⁴³ Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 220-221.

⁴⁴ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, ed. by Jim Endersby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 168.

⁴⁶ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 19.

religion for the service of ages to come, binds together the past and the future in an unbroken chain of intellectual and moral progress'.⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, this was a racist and Eurocentric position: Tylor regards the modern white European as the pinnacle of development, arguing that 'the European may find among the Greenlanders or Maoris many a trait for reconstructing the picture of his own primitive ancestors'.⁴⁸ Contemporary peoples perceived as 'primitive' are themselves classed by Tylor as 'survivals' of a kind, through the study of whom he imagined it would be possible to reconstruct facts about the 'hypothetical primitive condition' of his own European forebears.⁴⁹ This idea of 'human survivals' is echoed in several of the texts I will go on to examine: Machen's faun-woman and Blackwood's lonely centaur are both presented as living remnants of a distant mythic-evolutionary past.

It was out of the earlier stages of humanity that myth had first developed, Tylor argues, as a result of animistic tendencies in 'the savage mind':⁵⁰

Animism takes in several doctrines which so forcefully conduce to personification, that savages and barbarians, apparently without an effort, can give consistent individual life to phenomena that our utmost stretch of fancy only avails to personify in conscious metaphor. An idea of pervading life and will in nature far outside modern limits, a belief in personal souls animating even what we call inanimate bodies, [...] a sense of crowds of spiritual beings, sometimes flitting through the air, but sometimes also inhabiting trees and rocks and waterfalls, and so lending their own personality to such material objects – all these thoughts work in mythology with such manifold coincidence, as to make it hard indeed to unravel [sic] their separate action.⁵¹

Thus myth arose from a stage of development during which Tylor believed the human mind to have been 'qualitatively different from our own' in its propensity to bestow personhood upon inanimate natural forms.⁵² While most people do not now believe the natural world

⁴⁷ Tylor, *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), p. 24.

⁴⁸ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁵² Ackerman, p. 38.

to be populated by invisible animating spirits, the legacy of this period of thought lives on in the form of myths: ‘records of a past which was never present’.⁵³

Andrew Lang, who was greatly influenced by Tylor’s work and adopted wholesale his theory of ‘survivals’, lays out the perceived connection between myth and evolutionary science in even plainer terms in *Modern Mythology* (1897):

Our system is but one aspect of the theory of evolution, or is but the application of that theory to the topic of mythology. The archæologist studies human life in its material remains; he tracks progress (and occasional degeneration) from the rudely chipped flints in the ancient gravel beds, to the polished stone weapon, and thence to the ages of bronze and iron. He is guided by material ‘survivals’—ancient arms, implements, and ornaments. The student of Institutions has a similar method. He finds his relics of the uncivilised past in agricultural usages, in archaic methods of allotment of land, in odd marriage customs, things rudimentary—fossil relics, as it were, of an early social and political condition. The archæologist and the student of Institutions compare these relics, material or customary, with the weapons, pottery, implements, or again with the habitual law and usage of existing savage or barbaric races, and demonstrate that our weapons and tools, and our laws and manners, have been slowly evolved out of lower conditions, even out of savage conditions.

The anthropological method in mythology is the same. In civilised religion and myth we find rudimentary survivals, fossils of rite and creed, ideas absolutely incongruous with the enviroing morality, philosophy, and science of Greece and India. Parallels to these things, so out of keeping with civilisation, we recognise in the creeds and rites of the lower races, even of cannibals; but there the creeds and rites are not incongruous with their environment of knowledge and culture. There they are as natural and inevitable as the flint-headed spear or marriage by capture. We argue, therefore, that religions and mythical faiths and rituals which, among Greeks and Indians, are inexplicably incongruous have lived on from an age in which they were natural and inevitable, an age of savagery.⁵⁴

As with the geologist or the archaeologist in their study of specimens or artefacts, the scholar of myth uses the vestigial remnants of defunct belief systems to construct a backwards-projected understanding of the past. Note, too, Lang’s casual elision of archaeology and palaeontology – the linguistic slippage in his immediate likening of archaeological finds to ‘fossil relics’. The understanding of ancient human-made artefacts as analogous to geological remnants is significant to my argument in terms of the mythic

⁵³ Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, I, p. 294.

⁵⁴ Andrew Lang, *Modern Mythology* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897), p. viii.

hybrid, a figure that is at once a product of human culture, and a composite form embodying anxieties surrounding the greater scope of evolutionary development and/or decay, with all its attendant implications for a loss of human exceptionalism. Chapter 3 of this thesis will examine in greater depth the nineteenth-century tendency to conflate archaeology and geology.

No examination of nineteenth-century mythography would be complete without touching upon James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the text with which I began this chapter. *The Golden Bough* (1890) is perhaps the single most significant work of myth scholarship to emerge from the period, both in terms of its impact on mythography and on literature more broadly; John B. Vickery describes it as 'one of the most influential works in the twentieth century'.⁵⁵ Frazer, as we have already seen, employed the same palaeontological language in his discussion of myth as the other theorists examined above, as well as a Tylorian theory that human cultural development has evolved through three distinct stages (Frazer defines these stages as belief in magic, religious belief, and finally belief in scientific methodology). In *The Golden Bough*, he examines the creeds and rituals both of extant peoples perceived as 'primitive', and of classical and near-eastern antiquity, concluding that nearly all civilisations have at some stage worshipped a deity or symbolic figure whose repeated deaths and rebirths mirrored the yearly dying back and regrowth of vegetation. Again, contemporary nineteenth-century responses to Frazer's work emphasise the connections between mythography and evolution. Alfred C. Lyall, in a piece first published in *The Edinburgh Review* (1890) and later reproduced in his work *Asiatic Studies* (1899), writes of *The Golden Bough* that 'nowhere has the doctrine of evolutionary development produced a more remarkable change than in the point of view from which recent writers have approached the study of primitive ritual and beliefs'.⁵⁶ Vickery notes, too, the sense of evolutionary unease that permeates Frazer's work:

Of all evolutionary thinkers he was perhaps closest in position to the later Huxley. [...] In the pages of both men we find recurring notes of the inexorability of change

⁵⁵ John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Alfred C. Lyall, *Asiatic Studies: Religious and Social* (London: John Murray, 1899), p. 177.

and the ubiquity of wanton destruction and suffering. [...] Both see human history as a record of “infinite wickedness, bloodshed, and misery.”⁵⁷

Despite the gently lyrical quality of his prose, and the teleological optimism of his theory, Frazer regards past human history as having been characterised by violence and aggression. This form of evolutionary anxiety – the fear that, as Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), the essential force of Nature has been revealed to be not one of maternal beneficence, but one with ‘no purpose or conscience, no compassion or fairness, [...] Indifference itself as a power’ – is one that arises repeatedly in the *fin-de-siècle* narratives of hybridity that I will go on to examine.⁵⁸

While it would be impossible to give a full account here of the field of mythography during the late nineteenth century, I hope that this broad overview has demonstrated the extent to which both evolutionary language and evolutionary ideas were employed by myth theorists of the time. We might usefully regard the re-emergence of the mythic hybrid in late Victorian and Edwardian culture as something akin to the cultural ‘fossils’ described by Tylor, Frazer and Lang: a phenomenon that appears entirely incongruous with its modern context, yet whose power lies in its direct connection with a distant past, be that evolutionary, mythic, or both at once.

Evolutionary theory as inherently mythic

It is easy to demonstrate the ways in which nineteenth-century mythography drew upon evolutionary thought, particularly since, as we have seen, many mythographers openly refer to the influence of contemporary natural science upon their work. Less immediately apparent, perhaps, but equally significant, are the ways in which the development of evolutionary theory was in turn influenced by, and/or perceived to be connected with, mythology. Gillian Beer argues that the boundaries between scientific and cultural discourse were far less clearly defined during the nineteenth century:

⁵⁷ Vickery, pp. 21-22.

⁵⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by Marion Faber, Oxford World’s Classics edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 10.

In the mid-nineteenth century, scientists still shared a common language with other educated readers and writers of their time. There is nothing hermetic or exclusive in the writing of Lyell or Darwin. Together with other scientific writers [...], they shared a literary, non-mathematical discourse which was readily available to readers without a scientific training. Their texts could be read very much as literary texts. In our own century scientific ideas tend to reach us by a process of extrapolation and translation. [...] We unselfconsciously use the term 'layman' to describe the relationship of a non-scientist to the body of scientific knowledge. The suggestion of a priestly class and of reserved, hermetic knowledge goes mostly unremarked. In the mid-nineteenth century, however, it was possible for a reader to turn to the primary works of scientists as they appeared, and to respond directly to the arguments advanced. Moreover, scientists themselves drew openly upon literary, historical, and philosophical material as part of their arguments[.] [...] Because of the shared discourse not only *ideas* but metaphors, myths, and narrative patterns could move rapidly and freely to and fro between scientists and non-scientists: though not without frequent creative misprision.⁵⁹

Nineteenth-century scientific writings, far from existing in a rarefied academic enclave, drew from and interacted with creative literature, and, moreover, were themselves examples of it. In this portion of the chapter, I will examine the idea that evolutionary theory as it was conceptualised during the nineteenth century shared certain characteristics with mythic narratives, and that, ultimately, this sense of evolution as inherently mythic helped to establish the classical animal-human hybrid as an improbable symbol for evolutionary concerns.

Beer suggests that Darwin himself actively 'sought to appropriate and to recast inherited mythologies, discourses, and narrative orders' in his evolutionary writings.⁶⁰ She highlights his repeated use of potent biblical metaphors such as the tree of life, arguing that

[i]t is the element of obscurity, of metaphors whose peripheries remain undescribed, which made *The Origin of Species* so incendiary [...]. It encouraged onward thought: it offered itself for metaphorical application and its multiple discourses encouraged further acts of interpretation. The presence of *latent meaning* made *The Origin* suggestive, even unstoppable in its action upon minds.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 92-93.

Darwin's employment of evocative mythic and metaphorical language allowed for a range of imaginative responses to his argument, many of which themselves circled back to mythology.

The connections between mythology and evolutionary science go far beyond the style in which Darwin composed the *Origin of Species*. Myths have long been recognised as *inherited* narratives. Even within antiquity, there had been an understanding that these stories of monstrous beings and demigods proceeded from a prior age, and had been handed down over time. In the *Iliad*, one of the oldest surviving works of ancient Greek literature, the character of Helen reveals a startling metafictional awareness of the heredity of mythic narratives when she comforts the Trojan prince Hector with the promise that their lives will function as “subjects of song for listeners as yet unborn”.⁶² In an article first published in 1840, the American Unitarian minister Theodore Parker defines myth as ‘a narration proceeding from an age, when there was no written, authentic history, but when facts were preserved and related by oral tradition’.⁶³ Parker's use of the word ‘related’, although here used to mean ‘communicated’, also suggests the importance of heredity to myth. It was understood that classical mythology had originally been maintained between generations through repeated verbal re-telling, much like the ‘folktales’ told in contemporary societies. As such, these stories had relied on a direct connection between teller and receiver, in which the narrative was bequeathed to, or inherited by, its recipient. Heredity was regarded as a central and defining feature of myth.

This focus on ideas of cultural inheritance was mirrored by the growth of evolutionary theory, which emphasised descent and continuance. Elision between the language of biology and of culture is evident in many early evolutionary texts: Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Biology* (1864) describes how ‘individual traits are *bequeathed* from generation to generation’ [emphasis mine], while in his 1879 work *The Evolution of Man* Ernst Haeckel refers to the ‘worthless primeval heirlooms, which have been inherited

⁶² Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Peter Green (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), Book VI, l. 358, p. 176.

⁶³ Theodore Parker, *The Critical and Miscellaneous Writings of Theodore Parker* (London: John Green, 1843), p. 259.

from our lower vertebrate ancestors'.⁶⁴ The inheritance of traits between generations could be likened to the intentional human passing-down of valued objects or traditions; Haeckel's description of 'worthless primeval heirlooms' would fit perfectly into a description by Tylor of corn-dollies or May Day rites.

Meanwhile, the popular nineteenth-century belief that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny' – that the growth and development of an individual member of a species across its own lifetime mimics the broader evolutionary development of the species as a whole – led to arguments that earlier stages of human civilisation (as well as contemporary societies regarded as 'primitive') represented the 'childhood' of humanity, which was only now coming into its maturity in the form of European imperial powers. Again, this approach found a mirror in preexisting thought around classical culture. Building upon a longstanding tradition of characterising the Greco-Roman past as the rightful inheritance of (Western) Europe, the eighteenth-century classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann had famously described ancient Greece as the 'childhood of Europe', as Michael Shanks observes, out of which 'all European culture sprang'.⁶⁵ Although he had been dead for ninety-one years by the time of the publication of the *Origin of Species*, Winckelmann's influential and evocative depiction of classical antiquity as the youthful beginning of European nations anticipated the arguments of evolutionary anthropologists.

Closely connected with these ideas of linking and heredity is the fact that aetiology is a central function of both myth and evolution: each attempts to shed light on the series of causes that exist behind the current state of affairs. Paul Forbes Irving writes that 'mythical aetiology of all types clearly had a very old and wide role in Greek life and religion'.⁶⁶ Callimachus' *Aetia* (third Century BCE) is composed entirely of origin myths, which aim to explain everything from the existence of strange religious rituals to the foundation of cities. In the opening lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), the poet sets out his artistic aims:

⁶⁴ Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology*, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1884), I, p. 242; Ernst Haeckel, *The Evolution of Man: A Popular Exposition of the Principal Points of Human Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, 2 vols (New York: D Appleton and Company, 1879), II, p. 436.

⁶⁵ Michael Shanks, *The Classical Archaeology of Greece: Experiences of the Discipline* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 55.

⁶⁶ Paul M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 32.

Changes of shape, new forms, are the theme which my spirit
impels me
now to recite. Inspire me, O gods (it is you who have even
transformed my art), and spin me a thread from the world's
beginning
down to my own lifetime, in one continuous poem.⁶⁷

Ovid highlights the human desire to find and identify a causal 'thread' that may be traced from the world's origins down to the present moment. Explanatory mythic narratives provide a sense of this continuous thread. Writing in 1877, T. H. Huxley characterises aetiology as a motivating force behind the development of evolutionary theory, too:

Morphology, distribution, and physiology, investigate and determine the facts of biology. Aetiology has for its object the ascertainment of the causes of these facts, and the explanation of biological phenomena, by showing that they constitute particular cases of general physical laws.⁶⁸

When, famously, Darwin noticed the diversity in beak size and shape between the Galapagoan finches he had seen during his voyage aboard the *Beagle* (1831-6), he questioned the environmental causes that might have led to this disparity, constructing a speculative evolutionary account intended to explain the birds' current appearance: 'Seeing this gradation and diversity of structure in one small, intimately-related group of birds, one might really fancy that from an original paucity of birds in this archipelago, one species had been taken and modified for different ends'.⁶⁹ The anthropological approaches examined earlier in this chapter are relevant here: Angus Nicholls writes that, for both Tylor and Frazer, '[myth] is the "primitive" counterpart to natural [...] science', since it 'originated and functioned to do for "primitive" peoples what science now does for moderns'.⁷⁰ In an almost exact mirroring of this idea, Michael R. Page argues that evolutionary theory can be described as 'one of the central myths of modernity', since

⁶⁷ Ovid, Prologue, *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation*, trans. by David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), ll.1-4.

⁶⁸ Huxley, *A Manual of the Anatomy of Invertebrated Animals* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1878), p. 37.

⁶⁹ Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the Natural History and Geology of the Countries Visited During the Voyage of H.M.S. Beagle Around the World* (London: John Murray, 1873), p. 380.

⁷⁰ Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. xv, xiv.

myths ‘often [serve] to explain natural phenomena and the people’s origins. Darwin’s narrative encapsulates this definition of myth, as it purports to be the origin story of all life’.⁷¹

As Beer observes, the concepts of growth and transformation are also deeply relevant to myth and evolution both.⁷² The lines from Ovid quoted above, with their references to ‘changes of shape [and] new forms’, appear oddly prescient of evolutionary thought. Ovid’s choice to use metamorphosis as the uniting theme of his mythic anthology reflects the ubiquity of narratives of transformation within classical myth. He had inherited, rather than invented, the stories of Daphne turned into a laurel tree, Io disguised as a heifer, Tiresias altered from male to female; these images of change pervade Greco-Roman mythology.

While the belief in species as immutable still held sway in the public consciousness, it was possible to regard these ancient stories as nothing more than the peculiar fantasies of long-vanished civilisations, whose unenlightened worldviews had allowed them to give credence to stories as absurd as a woman turning into a tree. An 1887 zoological manual offers a succinct account of the (by then largely abandoned) ‘Doctrine of the Fixity of Species’.⁷³

On this view of the nature of species, which may be said to have been generally held up to the middle of the present century, it is held that “species” are essentially fixed and immutable. Although the older naturalists recognised the variability of species, they believed variation to be strictly limited and definite. Hence, though a species might oscillate backwards and forwards on both sides of a central line, it would, sooner or later, return to the position of equilibrium represented by the *type-form* of the species. Closely connected with the fixity of species is the belief in their “special creation”. If species be fixed and immutable, then each must have come into existence at a particular moment of time and at a particular place in space.⁷⁴

For as long as species were regarded as fixed and preset entities, myths involving transformations had appeared purely fantastical. Initial hostile responses to Darwin’s

⁷¹ Page, p. 3.

⁷² Beer, *Darwin’s Plots*, p. 97.

⁷³ Henry Alleyne Nicholson, *A Manual of Zoology for the Use of Students*, 7th edn (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887), p. 40.

⁷⁴ Nicholson, p. 40.

theory in fact attempted to discredit it by pointing out its proximity to mythic narratives: an 1863 article in *The Methodist Review* suggests scathingly that '[t]he only difference between his theory and the Metamorphoses of Ovid is that Mr Darwin's theory requires a long time for transmutations, while in the poet they are sudden', while an 1869 essay published by the Ethnological Society of London argues that the alterations of species described by Darwin 'are more extravagant than the metamorphoses of Ovid'.⁷⁵ However, as evolutionary theory increasingly came to dominate the scientific stage, and it was widely accepted that, in Darwin's words, 'all [species] undergo modification to some extent', the transformation narratives of classical myth began to seem closer to a scientific reality than previously imagined.⁷⁶ Marsha Morton writes that '[evolutionary theory's] themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and cosmology recalled earlier mythic narratives as much as they suggested the world of empirical data and laboratory experiments'.⁷⁷ Classical mythology had, as Huxley observes in the quotation with which I began this thesis, 'presag[ed]' a scientific reality.⁷⁸

Evolutionary thought, then, was connected to classical myth through shared themes of transformation and heredity, as well as by Darwin's deliberately mythopoetic style. And, as Beer notes, discussion of the plasticity of species seems, in the Victorian mind, to have led not only to myth, but to the *mythic hybrid* in particular.⁷⁹ If evolutionary theory proposed a world in which species were unfixed and constantly changing, then perhaps it also allowed for the existence of the kind of intermediate forms seen in classical myth. Darwin devotes much of *The Origin of Species* to the discussion of crossbreeding, even including a chapter titled 'Hybridism'. He was not, of course, thinking of centaurs, or sphinxes, or anything of the sort when he wrote this chapter. The hybrids he discusses include mules, the offspring of common geese bred with Chinese geese, and certain flowering plants. But Darwin's focus on interspecies interaction, and his theory's broader reliance on ideas of adaptation and alteration, seem nonetheless to have inspired thoughts

⁷⁵ Henry H. Harman, 'Natural Theology', *The Methodist Review*, 23 (1863), 181-203 (191); J. Crawford, 'On the Theory of the Origin of Species by Natural Selection in the Struggle for Life', *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, 7 (1869), 27-38 (29).

⁷⁶ Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (2009), p. 266.

⁷⁷ Morton, *Max Klinger and Wilhelmine Culture*, p. 95.

⁷⁸ Huxley, *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, p. 98.

of a different kind of hybridity. The more outlandish possible implications of evolutionary theory were a common target for the satirical magazine *Punch*, and many of its pictorial responses to Darwin's writings depict the naturalist himself as a kind of ape-human hybrid, placing his bearded face atop the body of a hirsute chimpanzee, or else of a monkey with a sinisterly prehensile tail. These depictions seem to have proliferated in the wake of the publication of *The Descent of Man* in 1871, as it was here that Darwin first stated openly that which he had left implicit in the *Origin*: that humans were included in his theory of evolution, and could therefore trace their heritage back to what he euphemistically refers to as 'some less highly organised form'.⁸⁰ Janet Browne gestures to the Ovidian flavour of such images, observing that they 'drew on age-old themes of metamorphosis and the animal traits that seemingly reside in humanity'.⁸¹

This newly invented ape-Darwin hybrid was one manifestation of the post-evolutionary interest in therianthropic beings. Other responses employed established mythic forms to demonstrate the perceived absurdity of evolutionary theory. An 1860 review of the *Origin of Species* by Andrew Murray draws a direct link between Darwinism and the hybrids of classical culture:

[A species] may be lost in another way than by the death of its component individuals. It might, were there no check upon this this power of modification, be lost by hybrids and modified individuals taking the place of species; in fact, were the power of variation unlimited and uncontrolled, all species would be confounded, and there would be nothing but an indiscriminate mass of creatures running all into each other, as should be the case under Mr Darwin's theory were it true in fact. Centaurs and mermaids, nay, even dryads, would cease to be impossible fables, and the beauty of creation would be lost in one undistinguishable chaos.⁸²

In Murray's view, the hybrid forms of ancient myth are an inevitable consequence of Darwin's approach – the logical consequence of a natural world in which species are free to alter and intermingle over time. The fact of these mythic beings' nonexistence, he

⁸⁰ Darwin, *The Descent of Man: And Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1901), p. 926.

⁸¹ Janet Browne, 'Darwin in Caricature: A Study in the Popularization and Dissemination of Evolutionary Theory', in *The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture*, eds. Barbara Larson and Fae Brauer (London: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), pp. 18-39 (p. 25).

⁸² Andrew Murray, 'On Mr Darwin's Theory of the Origin of Species', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, 4 (1857-62), 274-91 (276-7).

suggests, is itself proof of the falsity of Darwin's theory. Despite his scathing tone, Murray's response reveals a kind of fear; such indifferentiation would be nightmarish, he implies. Similar concerns are evident in later nineteenth-century fiction: in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I will examine Arthur Machen's novella *The Great God Pan* (1894), in which the reader witnesses the physical dissolution of the faun-woman Helen Vaughan as her body devolves through various animal shapes, culminating in a formless substance reminiscent of the 'undistinguishable chaos' of species imagined by Murray.

It was not only the evolution-skeptics who alluded to the figure of the hybrid, however. Believers in the theory were just as likely to employ it, as we have already seen in the case of Huxley's assertion that 'the quaint forms of Centaurs and Satyrs' can be likened to prehistoric proto-humans.⁸³ A particularly notable example of this phenomenon occurred in 1862, when the author and priest Charles Kingsley wrote to Darwin with a strange suggestion. Kingsley had been an early admirer of Darwin's work on evolution, writing shortly after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859) that he himself had 'long since, from watching the crossing of domesticated animals and plants, learnt to disbelieve the dogma of the permanence of species'.⁸⁴ His 1862 letter to Darwin proposed an evolutionary thesis of his own:

I want now to bore you on another matter. This great gulf between the quadrumana & man; & the absence of any record of species intermediate between man & the ape. It has come home to me with much force, that while *we* deny the existence of any such, the legends of most nations are full of them. Fauns, Satyrs, Inui, Elves, Dwarfs—we call them one minute mythological personages, the next conquered inferior races—& ignore the broad fact, that they are always represented as more bestial than man, & of violent sexual passion. The mythology of every white race, as far as I know, contains these creatures, & I (who believe that every myth has an original nucleus of truth) think the fact very important. [...] The Faun of the Latins (or Romans, I dont know w^h.) has a monkey face, & hairy hind legs & body— the hind feet are traditionally those of a goat, the goat being the type of lust. The Satyr of the Greeks is completely human, save an ape-face & a short tail— [...] That they should have died out, by simple natural selection, before the superior white race, you & I can easily understand. That no skulls [sic], &^c. of them have been found, is a question w^h. may bother us when the recent deposits of Italy & Greece have been as well searched as those of England. Till then, it concerns no man. I hope that you

⁸³ Huxley, *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Charles Kingsley, 'Letter to Charles Darwin, November 18th, 1859', in Charles Darwin, *Autobiography and Selected Letters*, ed. by Francis Darwin (New York: Dover, 1958), p. 241.

will not think me dreaming— To me, it seems strange that we are to deny that any Creatures intermediate between man & the ape ever existed, while our forefathers of every race, assure us that they did— As for having no historic evidence of them—How can you have historic evidence in pre-historic times?⁸⁵

In this extraordinary letter, Kingsley picks up on the contemporary nineteenth-century fascination with the idea of a ‘missing link’ – a now-extinct type transitional between ape and man, the discovery of which would, it was popularly believed, serve to bolster the claims of Darwinism – to argue that the hybrid beings of antique myth might in fact correspond to a lost set or sets of savage and bestial near-humans. Before this species’ inevitable collapse in the face of ‘the superior white race’, they managed nonetheless to leave some impression upon the belief systems of early Europeans. In other words, Kingsley posits the theory that the fauns and satyrs of Greek mythology (or at least something very like them) really once existed. Cannon Schmitt notes that, in a ‘somewhat circular’ use of reason, Darwinian theory is employed both to advance the idea of ‘an actual biological referent’ for such creatures, and then to justify their disappearance, since ‘simple natural selection’ is given as the explanation for their vanishing.⁸⁶ Jessica Straley observes that ‘Kingsley’s letter can, and perhaps should, be dismissed as late Victorian racism and despicable imperialist ravings’, and certainly it is tempting to do so.⁸⁷ Darwin himself appears to have been unimpressed: ‘It is a very curious subject, that of the old myths;’ he writes in response, ‘but you naturally with your classical & old-world knowledge lay more stress on such beliefs, than I do with all my profound ignorance.’⁸⁸ With characteristic tact, Darwin politely recuses himself from offering any opinion on Kingsley’s theory, by which he was presumably unconvinced.

Whatever Darwin may have thought of it, though, and however repugnant its white supremacist claims are to the twenty-first-century reader, Kingsley’s letter is significant because it demonstrates the authenticity bestowed upon hybrid forms by the popularisation

⁸⁵ Darwin Correspondence Project, “Letter no. 3426”, <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-3426>>, accessed on 28 November 2017.

⁸⁶ Cannon Schmitt, *Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages and South America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 117.

⁸⁷ Jessica Straley, *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children’s Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 83.

⁸⁸ Charles Darwin, ‘Letter no. 3439’, <<https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-3439.xml>>, accessed on 20 June 2018.

of evolutionary theory. While he was unusual in proposing it as a valid scientific possibility, Kingsley was, of course, far from the only writer to imagine a world populated by therianthropic beings in the light of Darwin's theory. In the decades following the publication of the *Origin of Species*, the landscapes of late Victorian and Edwardian literature and art began increasingly to stir with the strange in-between shapes of antiquity: their woods, hills, and even cities playing host to centaurs and fauns, their seas swimming with sirens.

A symbiotic relationship

The folklorist Gillian Bennett describes a reciprocal connection between nineteenth-century natural science and comparative mythology, noting that 'rather than springing from evolutionary theories of natural history, theories of cultural evolution developed *alongside* them'.⁸⁹ This is, I believe, the most fruitful way in which to consider the interactions between these two areas of thought. Each fed into and informed the other; neither would have been able to develop as it did without the influence of the other. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted from two critics, one of whom suggested that myth can be seen as an ancient counterpart to natural science, while the other argued that evolutionary theory can be seen as a modern myth. While evolutionary theory gained imaginative power through its perceived links to ancient myth systems, nineteenth-century philology and anthropology in turn drew from contemporary natural science to establish mythology as part of an evolutionary system of cultural development.

At the intersection of these two fields exists the animal-human hybrid, a mythic figure given startling new life by the genesis of Darwinism. In each of the following chapters, I will focus on a different mythological hybrid being, examining the ways in which its depiction in the literature and visual art of the *fin de siècle* reflects contemporary fears, hopes, and desires about and around evolutionary theory.

⁸⁹ Gillian Bennett, 'Geologists and Folklorists: Cultural Evolution and "The Science of Folklore"', *Folklore*, 105 (1994), 25-37 (p. 27).

Chapter 2

‘The abyss of all being’: Myth, Degeneracy and the Faun

‘The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve.’¹

So begins the climactic scene of Arthur Machen’s 1894 novella *The Great God Pan*, a text which may be characterised by its obsessive deconstruction of the human form. As the story’s titular deity – unleashed by a scientific experiment gone wrong – wreaks havoc upon London society, the narrative continually dwells upon the resultant modification, both physical and mental, of its characters. Minds are destroyed, faces altered so as to appear unaccountably inhuman, and the story culminates with the above image of complete physical disintegration. Hurley identifies *The Great God Pan* as paradigmatic of these concerns: ‘When introducing some of the thematic, rhetorical, and narrative strategies characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, one could do worse than begin with a summary of *The Great God Pan*.’² Such narratives, she argues, were influenced by ‘scientific discourses [...] which served to dismantle conventional notions of “the human”’, including both evolutionary theory and degeneration theory.³

The Great God Pan is, as we shall see, a story that appears startlingly aware of its own scientific context, but it is also a narrative which, as Jessica George observes, ‘clearly signposts its religious and mythical sources’.⁴ This chapter will present a reading of Machen’s story that acknowledges the close relationship between mythology and contemporary science – specifically, the degeneration theory that functions as a kind of sinister twin to evolution – within the text. Drawing from nineteenth-century scientific writings, mythography, and ancient sources, I will examine the ways in which Machen utilises and adapts aspects of the classical and post-classical Pan to develop his vision of a degenerate hybrid-god.

¹ Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light* (London: John Lane, 1894), p. 99. All further references will be to this edition.

² Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ George, p. 140.

From rustic god to all-god

Of the many mythic hybrids whose names and images enjoyed a renaissance during the late Victorian period, the ‘Pan-craze’ that emerged in the final years of the nineteenth century and lasted into the early decades of the twentieth has been subject to the greatest degree of critical attention. As noted in the introduction, even contemporaries of the craze seem to have been strikingly conscious of it as a cultural phenomenon. I have already quoted Max Beerbohm’s 1919 observation that from the late nineteenth century to the First World War, English literature suffered from no shortage of fauns. Writing in 1930, William Somerset Maugham offered a similarly pithy summation of Pan-mania at the turn of the century:

God went out [...] and Pan came in. In a hundred novels his cloven hoof left its imprint on the sward; poets saw him lurking in the twilight on London commons, and literary ladies in Surrey and New England, nymphs of an industrial age, mysteriously surrendered their virginity to his rough embrace. Spiritually they were never the same again.⁵

Pan and fauns were rife in visual art as well as literature during the final decades of the nineteenth century. On the continent, they proved a popular subject matter for symbolist artists such as Franz von Stuck and Arnold Böcklin, both of whom produced numerous paintings of fauns, often shown in scenes of violence or sexual pursuit; Böcklin’s myth-inflected work in particular would prove influential upon some British writers.⁶ In Britain, Edward Burne Jones’ *Pan and Psyche* (1874) presented a more civilised vision of the god, based on the scene from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass* in which the ‘goat-legged country god’ comforts the distressed Psyche after she attempts to drown herself.⁷ By the 1890s, Aubrey Beardsley had established himself as a prolific illustrator of strange and often grotesque fauns and faun-like creatures. He would in fact produce the cover illustration and frontispiece for *The Great God Pan*, which shows a smiling, long-haired Pan with curving horns, surrounded by sinuous Art Nouveau vines (Figure 4).

⁵ Somerset Maugham, pp. 331-332.

⁶ See Anne Varty’s essay ‘E. M. Forster, Arnold Böcklin, and Pan’, *The Review of English Studies*, 39 (1988), 513-18. Algernon Blackwood also references Böcklin by name in his novel *The Centaur* (1911), which will be discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

⁷ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. by Robert Graves (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 114.

It is reasonable to question how a deity whose original, antique incarnation Merivale describes as ‘a comic-grotesque little country god, kept under control by the laughter of the more “civilized” Olympian gods’ came to occupy such a central position in *fin-de-siècle* literature and art.⁸ Pan seems to have originated as a god of the countryside: nearly all early sources refer to him in conjunction with shepherds, flocks and pastures, and his Arcadian provenance links him with a landscape which, even within antiquity, was figured as an idealised wilderness. Pan’s status as a ‘wild’ god is evident, too, in his unrestrained sexuality. He is frequently portrayed as bestially aggressive in his amorous pursuits: a red figure vase painting from the 5th Century BCE shows a goat-headed, priapic Pan, who chases after a fleeing shepherd boy, while a Hellenistic marble statue shows the goddess Aphrodite covering her naked body and raising a sandal in self-defence, as a grinning Pan seizes her by wrist and waist. Perhaps most famously, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* describes Pan’s pursuit of the nymph Syrinx, whose transformation into a reed prompted the god to create the reed pipes which would become his emblem.

Pan emerges from the idylls of Theocritus (3rd Century BC) as a largely benevolent country god, but also as a source of occasional fear for shepherds and their charges:

We’re not allowed to pipe at midday, shepherd – not allowed.
It’s then that Pan rests, you know, tired from the hunt.
We’re afraid of him; he’s tetchy at this hour, and his lip
Is always curled in sour displeasure.⁹

John Boardman notes that Pan’s frightfulness was thought to be responsible for the ‘sudden madness’ which occasionally afflicts a flock of sheep or goats, sending them scattering in fear for no discernible reason.¹⁰ Other ancient sources, most notably texts by Herodotus and Longus, describe the god as accompanying soldiers into battle, in order to strike terror into the opposing side. Pan’s ability to induce panic (the word is in fact derived from his name) in both animal and human is, as Merivale observes, one of several traits of the antique Pan to be seized upon and enthusiastically developed by Victorian and Edwardian writers.

⁸ Merivale, p. 227.

⁹ Theocritus, ‘Idyll I’, in *Theocritus: Idylls*, trans. by Anthony Verity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 1-7 (p. 1), ll. 14-17.

¹⁰ John Boardman, *The Great God Pan: The Survival of an Image* (Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 26.

A further significant facet of the Pan mythos most likely arose due to an etymological error: his name, which is now believed to have its root in the word *pa-on* (herdsman or grazer), was mistakenly identified with *pan*, meaning ‘all’.¹¹ The *Homeric Hymn to Pan*, which Merivale identifies as the god’s first known appearance in literature, offers the ‘singularly unconvincing’ suggestion that the infant Pan was named thus ‘because he charmed or delighted *all* the gods’ [emphasis mine].¹² Several centuries later, the Orphic Hymn to Pan (composed either in the late Hellenistic or early Roman period) proposed an alternative explanation for the god’s name:

I call upon Pan, the pastoral god,
I call upon the universe,
upon the sky, the sea, and the land [...]
I also call upon immortal fire;
all these are Pan’s realm. [...]
Present in all growth, begetter of all
many-named divinity,
light-bringing lord of the cosmos[.]¹³

Late antique and early mediaeval receptions of the god built upon the idea established by the Orphic Hymn, claiming that Pan’s physical attributes represented various aspects of the natural world (his horns being equivalent to the rays of the sun and moon, his hooves to the solidity of the earth, and so on): ‘[he is] the god of things and of all nature: whence they call him Pan, as if to say Everything.’¹⁴ In Merivale’s words, ‘etymological confusion made possible this extension of Pan’s form to include the heavens, the sea, earth, and fire – universal Nature – and the extension of his function, becoming Supreme Governor or “soul” of the World.’¹⁵ Pan had gone from a god of shepherds and flocks – a minor rustic deity, whose relevance and power did not extend greatly beyond his pastoral domain – to a god of *everything*. Pan’s traditional association with ‘all-ness’ would prove particularly significant to Machen’s vision of a degenerate Pan.

¹¹ Boardman, pp. 26-27.

¹² Merivale, p. 1.

¹³ ‘To Pan’, in *The Orphic Hymns*, trans. by Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin M. Wolkow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), p. 13, ll. 1-4, 11-13.

¹⁴ Isidore of Seville, quoted in and trans. by Merivale, p. 10.

¹⁵ Merivale, p. 9.

While Pan appears once or twice in other interesting circumstances within ancient literature – most notably, the episode described by Plutarch in which a sailor passing by the island of Paxi heard a voice crying from the shore that ‘Great Pan is dead’ – it is not an oversimplification to state that the three aspects examined above (his wild nature, his ability to induce panic, and his all-ness) are the most significant attributes of the god to come down to us from antiquity.¹⁶ These traits were adapted and expanded upon by post-antique writers. Merivale argues convincingly that in most of his appearances prior to the Romantic period, Pan functions as ‘only an emblem or icon of the pastoral scene’: a figure called upon to lend charm or interest to a rustic backdrop.¹⁷ The early nineteenth century, however, saw a resurgence of interest in the god’s Orphic qualities, with Wordsworth referring to ‘the universal PAN’, and Shelley describing an invisible, all-pervasive god:¹⁸

And universal Pan, ’tis said, was there,
 And though none saw him, – through the adamant
 Of the deep mountains, through the trackless air,
 And through those living spirits, like a want,
 He passed out of his everlasting lair
 Where the quick heart of the great world doth pant[.]¹⁹

Pan is here defined more by absence than by presence. Unseen, he is felt in living spirits as ‘a want’, a word suggesting both desire and lack. The mention of the god’s passage through the ‘trackless air’ appears particularly significant in differentiating the Romantic Pan from his subsequent embodiments: in many of his later appearances, the god’s presence is inferred from the discovery of hoof tracks (hence Somerset Maugham’s mention of the imprinted sward).²⁰ Shelley’s Pan is a pastoral god, but one divorced from any physicality or individual agency: he is reduced to a spirit of the landscape, immanent but immaterial.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Moral Essays*, trans. by Rex Warner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 53-54.

¹⁷ Merivale, p. 76.

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, ‘O’er the wide earth, on mountain and on plain’, in *Wordsworth: The Poems*, ed. by John O. Hayden, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), I, p. 828.

¹⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘The Witch of Atlas’, in *The Poems of Shelley: Volume 3, 1819-1820*, ed. by Jack Donovan, Cian Duffy, Kelvin Everest, and Michael Rossington, founding ed. Geoffrey Matthews, 5 vols (London: Longman, 2011), III, pp. 552-618 (p. 575), ll. 113-118.

²⁰ See E. M. Forster’s ‘The Story of a Panic’ (1904), and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). In E. F. Benson’s ‘The Man Who Went Too Far’ (1904), the marks of Pan’s hooves are left not on the ground, but on the body of his unfortunate disciple, whom he tramples to death.

By the mid nineteenth century, some writers were beginning to restore certain of the god's more earthy features. Merivale and De Cicco both argue that the Pan poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning proved instrumental in reestablishing Pan as something more than Arcadian icon or pastoral spirit. The Pan of 'A Musical Instrument' (1860) is 'a sexualised monster':²¹ a terrifyingly physical man-beast, who sits 'splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat' as he hacks violently at a broken reed.²² This emphasis upon Pan's hooves – as mentioned above, an element lacking from most Romantic portrayals, which tend to neglect his goatliness in favour of his godliness – anticipates the Edwardian stories in which hoofprints left in the earth function as the god's calling card.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, then, a rather different kind of god from that favoured by Wordsworth and Shelley came to the fore: what De Cicco refers to as 'the sinister or terrifying Pan'.²³ Taking their cue from the classical sources in which Pan inflicts fear, poets such as Barrett Browning, her husband Robert Browning, and Algernon Charles Swinburne established a far darker version of the deity than any previously seen.²⁴ This new Pan would prove vastly popular with turn of the century writers, who, combining his terror-inducing qualities with his Orphic and Romantic immanence, developed him into a vastly powerful figure whose visitations engendered dread, madness and often death. Thus we arrive at *The Great God Pan*, which seems to be the first prose fiction representation of the terror-inducing Pan in English literature, and which builds upon the legacy of many earlier incarnations of the god.

It is worth drawing attention to one final aspect of the Pan mythos. In the passages quoted above, Beerbohm refers to fauns, and Somerset Maugham to Pan; the question of whether, or to what extent, the two are interchangeable is one to which it is difficult to give a clear answer. Within classical mythology, Pan exists alongside other creatures with which he shares certain traits: both fauns and satyrs are semi-divine followers of the wine-god

²¹ Mark De Cicco, 'The Queer God Pan: Terror and Apocalypse, Reimagined', in *Monsters and Monstrosity from the Fin de Siècle to the Millennium: New Essays*, ed. by Sharla Hutchison and Rebecca A. Brown (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), pp. 49-68 (p. 52).

²² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'A Musical Instrument', in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by Sandra Donaldson, 5 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2010), V, pp. 57-59 (p. 58), l. 4.

²³ Merivale, p. 154.

²⁴ For detailed analysis of Barrett Browning and Swinburne's Pan poems, see de Cicco; for a comparison of Barrett Browning's 'A Musical Instrument' and Browning's 'Pan and Luna', see Corinne Davies: 'Two of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Pan Poems and Their After-Life in Robert Browning's 'Pan and Luna'', *Victorian Poetry*, 44 (2006), pp. 561-569.

Dionysus, with whom Pan is also associated, and both, like him, possess animal features (pointed ears and horse tails in the case of satyrs, and pointed ears, horns and often goat legs in the case of fauns). The name faun seems to derive from that of the Latin god Faunus, a sylvan deity who, from the Roman period onwards, was elided with Pan. This is a tangled mythological web, and, as Boardman observes, ‘a certain readiness for mutual contamination between Pan and satyrs [...] and fauns’ is evident across much of classical literature and visual art.²⁵ The Victorian and Edwardian Pan, too, is frequently mentioned in conjunction with satyrs and, in particular, fauns. E. F. Benson’s 1904 short story ‘The Man Who Went Too Far’ creates a fictional ‘River Fawn’ in which its Pan-loving protagonist swims; and, as we shall see, Machen’s Pan is consistently associated with ‘fauns and satyrs and Aegipans’ (Machen p. 66), Aegipan being an alternative name for Pan himself.²⁶ The general trend in *fin-de-siècle* literature seems to have been to regard the faun as the ‘type’, and Pan as the chief example of that type: he was, in Ronald Hutton’s words, regarded as ‘the greatest faun of all’, and as such was sometimes imagined to possess a retinue of lesser fauns or satyrs.²⁷ I will therefore refer to Pan, fauns, and satyrs within this chapter, the principal difference between them being that Pan is the only one with an individual mythic identity or history.

Degeneration and hybridity at the fin de siècle

During the final decades of the nineteenth century, as the Pan-craze was beginning to take hold in art and literature, another, superficially quite distinct, preoccupation was developing within the scientific world. Evolutionary theory was by this time well-established in the popular consciousness; Bill Cooke writes that

[e]volution, particularly as it was expressed in the first half century after Darwin, was overwhelmingly progressionist in tone, being widely regarded as a process whereby organisms, including humans, move from simple to more complex forms of organization. When this was applied to human evolution, many people assumed that this meant history operated in a linear progression from backward states toward

²⁵ Boardman, p. 9.

²⁶ Jenny March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 19; Benson, p. 49.

²⁷ Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 46.

civilization. Furthermore, this progression was widely held to be a permanent condition.²⁸

Evolution lent itself to optimistic, progressionist views of human development. Robert Chambers, whose popular science work *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) I have discussed in the previous chapter, regarded humanity as the finest achievement of ‘organic progress by virtue of law’, and wrote rapturously of the possibility of still greater attainment:²⁹

Is our race but the initial of the grand crowning type? Are there yet to be species superior to us in organization, purer in feeling, more powerful in device and act, and who shall take a rule over us! [...] The present race, rude and impulsive as it is, is perhaps the best adapted to the present state of things in the world; but the external world goes through slow and gradual changes, which may leave it in time a much serener field of existence. There may then be occasion for a nobler type of humanity, which shall complete the zoological circle on this planet, and realize some of the dreams of the purest spirits of the present race.³⁰

Herbert Spencer, whose ‘neo-Lamarckian’ approach proved vastly influential upon Victorian thought, argued in an essay first published in 1857 that ‘[f]rom the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which Progress essentially consists’.³¹

Yet, while evolution was assumed by many to mean an assured progression towards greater complexity and sophistication, a parallel current of scientific thought suggested that the opposite was possible. Unlike Lamarck, Chambers and Spencer, all of whom posited a broadly teleological view of evolution, Darwin’s approach was less obviously sanguine. As early as the 1860 second edition of the *Origin of Species*, he refers briefly to instances of ‘retrogression in the scale of organisation’ – cases where a species has grown less, not

²⁸ H. James Birx, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, 5 vols (London: Sage Publications), I, s.v.

‘Degenerationism’.

²⁹ Chambers, p. 276.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 142.

³¹ Bernard Lightman and Bennet Zon, Introduction, *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, pp. 1-16 (p. 3); Herbert Spencer, ‘Progress: Its Law and Cause’, *Humboldt Library of Popular Science Literature*, 17 (1882), 233-285 (p. 234).

more, complex over time – going on to explicitly contradict Lamarck’s evolutionary optimism.³²

But it may be objected, that if all organic beings thus tend to rise in the scale, how is it that throughout the world a multitude of the lowest forms still exist[...]? Why have not the more highly-developed forms everywhere supplanted and exterminated the lower? Lamarck, who believed in an innate and inevitable tendency towards perfection in all organic beings, seems to have felt this difficulty so strongly, that he was led to suppose that new and simple forms were continuously being produced by spontaneous generation. I need hardly say that science in her progress has forbidden us to believe that living creatures are now ever produced from inorganic matter. On my theory the present existence of lowly organised productions offers no difficulty; for *natural selection includes no necessary and universal law of advancement or development* [emphasis mine]; it only takes advantage of such variations as arise and are beneficial to each creature under its complex relations of life.³³

Darwinism, with its insistence upon the indifferent nature of evolutionary change – the blindness of its push towards survival – allowed for the disturbing possibility that species development might not always move solely in the direction of ‘positive’ progress. The mid-Victorian ideal of steady progression towards a higher good (an ideal which superficially appeared to be supported by evolutionary theory) might be inverted to paint an alarmingly bleak picture of regression and collapse.

Hurley writes that one of the most striking effects of Darwinism was its implications of ‘human ephemerality, relativity, and potential “degradation”’.³⁴ While Darwin himself did not engage closely with the question of *human* degeneration, writers such as Huxley addressed the potential ramifications of his theory, ‘[arguing] that humanity had come into existence through a random combination of natural processes, and that Nature was ethically neutral and under no compulsion to privilege the human species.’³⁵ Humanity could no longer be regarded as inherently distinct from, or elevated above, its fellow creatures. More troubling still, it appeared eminently possible that, at some future evolutionary juncture, the human race might sink back into a truly bestial state.

³² Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, revised edn. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1860), p. 119.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 56.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 57.

In an 1891 essay entitled ‘Zoological Retrogression’, H. G. Wells attacks the comfortable notion that ‘the great scroll of Nature has been steadily unfolding to reveal a steadily richer harmony of forms and successively higher grades of being’, arguing instead that ‘the path of life, so frequently compared to some steadily-rising mountain slope, is far more like a footway worn by leisurely wanderers in an undulating country.’³⁶ Listing various examples of creatures perceived as displaying regression within their own life cycles – such as the sea squirt and the barnacle, both of which swim freely as juveniles, before adhering to a rock for the entirety of their adult lives – Wells echoes the popular contemporary belief that ontogeny mimics phylogeny: ‘If one were to [name] all those genera the ancestors of which have at any time sunk to rise again, it is probable that we should have to write down *the entire roll of the animal kingdom!*’³⁷ Given this evidence of widespread degeneration among species, there can be ‘no guarantee in scientific knowledge of man’s permanence or permanent ascendancy’:³⁸ ‘The presumption is that before [humanity] lies a long future of profound modification, but whether that will be, according to present ideals, upward or downward, no one can forecast.’³⁹ Wells would, of course, go on to explore the nightmarish possibilities of humanity’s ‘downward’ future development in his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, a text which will be examined in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

We have already seen that evolution and hybridity were frequently linked by artists and scientists alike during the nineteenth century, and this holds true, too, for degeneration theory. In an 1876 work on evolution, the German biologist Ernst Krause had placed images of a classical faun statue, and a contemporary Indian boy who had been born with a vestigial tail, side by side.⁴⁰ It was common to represent people who exhibited such traits as examples of atavistic regression towards a more ‘primitive’ form of humanity, often with overtly racist overtones.⁴¹ In her study of the German symbolist artist Max Klinger, Marsha Morton observes that Klinger’s 1880 etching *Second Future* – an image of a

³⁶ H. G. Wells, ‘Zoological Retrogression’, *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 271 (1891), 246-253 (pp. 246, 247).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Morton, *Max Klinger and Wilhelmine Culture*, p. 112.

⁴¹ See Elizabeth Edwards, ‘Between specimen and imagination: Photography in the age of evolution’, in *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, pp. 64-93 (pp. 80-83).

sinister anthropoid figure with pointed ears, poised with spear in hand astride a vast eel-like creature – was frequently interpreted by critics as depicting a satyr, yet also closely resembles ‘a distant transitional stage of human evolution as described by Darwin’ (Figure 5).⁴² Morton draws attention to Darwin’s evocation of proto-humans as ‘once covered with hair [...] their ears were probably pointed and capable of movement and their bodies were provided with a tail’.⁴³ Both fauns and satyrs frequently appear in Greek and Roman art as anthropoid creatures with pointed ears and long tails; once again, the mythic hybrid functions as an analogue of the early human. While Klinger’s etching appears to reference Darwin’s vision of humanity’s distant past, its title implies that our future may be similarly degraded.

It is unsurprising that the faun, visually signifying as it does an unsettling combination of human and animal, should have emerged as a locus for anxieties surrounding degeneration; George writes that the revelation of human evolutionary proximity to animals ‘raised the specter of monstrous hybrid forms’.⁴⁴ Contemporary literary receptions of the faun or Pan frequently focused on his paradoxical physical shape; as we have seen, the move from Romantic to Victorian depictions of the god was marked by an increased interest in his bodily *weirdness*. Whereas writers of the early nineteenth century had largely tended to represent Pan as ‘[an] all-infusing spirit of the landscape’, their Victorian successors made more of his corporeal appearance, ‘[stressing] the paradox that he was both a goat and a god’.⁴⁵ The goatish Pan of Barrett Browning’s ‘A Musical Instrument’ is a ‘great god’, capable of powerful artistic creation: he whittles a reed into a pipe and plays ‘piercing sweet’ music.⁴⁶ Yet he is also, as the poet reminds us in the final stanza, ‘half a beast’.⁴⁷ His rationality compromised by the animalistic portion of his being, he is unable to comprehend the brutality of his assault upon the reed (an act presented as a sexual violation, since in the original myth the reed is in fact the transformed body of the

⁴² Morton, p. 147.

⁴³ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 248.

⁴⁴ George, p. 136.

⁴⁵ Merivale, p. 76.

⁴⁶ Barrett Browning, ‘A Musical Instrument’, in *The Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, pp. 57, 59, ll. 1, 32.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 59, l. 37.

nymph Syrinx). Robert Browning's 'Pan and Luna' (1880) draws upon the imagery of his wife's poem, evoking a disturbingly bestial Pan who assaults the moon-goddess Luna:

So did girl-Moon, by just her attribute
Of unmatched modesty betrayed, lie trapped,
Bruised to the breast of Pan, half god half brute,
Raked by his bristly boar-sword while he lapped
--Never say, kissed her! that were to pollute
Love's language--which moreover proves unapt
To tell how she recoiled--as who finds thorns
Where she sought flowers--when, feeling, she touched--horns!⁴⁸

Luna's shock at discovering the animal aspects of 'rough red Pan' is a motif mirrored in Machen's *The Great God Pan*, in which the horror of realising that someone is not, after all, fully human is a recurring theme.⁴⁹ Machen's text deals with the same disturbing interplay of man and beast evident in the Brownings' Pan poems; this time, however, it is couched in the language and imagery of late-Victorian degeneration theory.

Myth and recapitulation in *The Great God Pan*

The Great God Pan, whose narrative begins in 1865 and concludes in the early 1890s, is a text underpinned by an acute awareness of the power of scientific innovation to disrupt and unsettle. The story begins as the ambitious scientist Doctor Raymond performs surgery upon his young ward Mary, having devoted decades to the study of 'a certain group of nerve-cells in the brain' (p. 6). He aims to alter her perception so that she may look beyond the 'veil' of phenomenal reality (p. 3). He relates this experience to unspecified aspects of classical thought, possibly the ecstatic ritual practises of ancient Greek and Roman mystery cults: '[T]he ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan.' (p. 3). As George observes, Dr. Raymond's speech 'oscillates between the language of mysticism and the occult, attributed to the distant past, and that of contemporary science'.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Robert Browning, 'Pan and Luna', in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. by Allan C. Dooley and David Ewbank, 17 vols (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), 15, pp. 58-62 (p. 61), ll. 81-88.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60, l. 66.

⁵⁰ George, p. 144.

From the first pages of the novel, Machen establishes a link between the mythic and the scientific.

Inevitably, the experiment goes wrong. Mary glimpses something so terrible that her mind is permanently damaged; she is left unable to communicate her experience, and dies some months afterwards. However, as is revealed at the close of the tale, Mary did indeed ‘see Pan’: his entrance into her mind allowed him to impregnate her, and their offspring – a daughter named Helen Vaughan – grows into a monstrous *femme fatale* who wreaks havoc upon fashionable London society, compelling numerous aristocratic young men to commit suicide, and inducing madness in those who survive her attentions. At last, she is tracked down by a team of men who force her, too, to take her own life.

Aaron Worth has argued that Machen’s work displays an anxious awareness of ‘the nineteenth century’s emergent deep pasts – evolutionary, paleontological, and geological’, and that this awareness is evident in the text’s many references to depths and abysses.⁵¹ Machen’s characters continuously utilise this imagery: Doctor Raymond speaks of ‘the unutterable, the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between [...] the world of matter and the world of spirit’ (p. 6) (a gulf that he hopes to bridge by means of his experiment) while Clarke, who witnesses the procedure, describes himself as ‘a traveller who has peered over an abyss, and has drawn back in terror’ (p. 58). For Worth, such language suggests a visceral fear of ‘the sheer and horrifying profundity [...] of the temporal span’ revealed by contemporary developments in scientific knowledge.⁵² This horror of ‘deep time’ finds physical expression in the person of Helen Vaughan, who appears despite her youth to have existed in some sense for millennia (if not far longer than that). Helen is the living equivalent of a Tylorian ‘survival’: an ancient fragment which has persisted into the present day. When a guest enquires about the age of the claret served at one of her decadent parties, her response is telling: “About a thousand years, I believe.” (p. 62). She is, in Worth’s words, ‘an embodiment of the kind of terrifyingly expansive past that had forced itself into the Victorian consciousness during the previous decades’.⁵³ This means, as becomes horribly apparent at the close of the tale, that she contains within herself the entire history

⁵¹ Aaron Worth, ‘Arthur Machen and the Horrors of Deep History’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40 (2012), 215-227 (p. 216).

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

⁵³ Worth, p. 216.

of life, from primordial slime, to beast, to human. She is the degenerate centre about which the story revolves, with her essential nature first hinted at, and at last gruesomely revealed.

Helen is, as noted above, an archetypal *femme fatale* figure: beautiful, sexually magnetic, and dangerous (particularly to men – the vast majority of her victims are her male lovers). Her appearance and behaviour in fact serve to align her with a specific, late nineteenth-century manifestation of the *femme fatale* trope. In his work *The Romantic Agony* (1933), Mario Praz identifies a tendency amongst *fin-de-siècle* writers to characterise the fatal woman as having been ‘successively incarnate in all ages and in all lands’, often through reference to myth.⁵⁴ He cites the character of Ennoia, from Gustave Flaubert’s *The Temptation of Saint Antony*:

She was that Helen of Troy whose memory was cursed by the poet Stesichorus. She was Lucretia, the patrician woman violated by kings. She was Delilah, by whom Samson’s locks were shorn. She was that daughter of Israel who would give herself to he-goats. She has loved adultery, idolatry, lying and foolishness. She has prostituted herself to all nations. She has sung at the angles of all crossroads. She has given herself to all men.⁵⁵

Ennoia – also referred to as Hélène – is presented as the embodiment of various mythic women, all of them associated with sexuality or promiscuity. As such, the fatal woman unites within herself ‘all forms of seduction, all vices, and all delights’.⁵⁶ Perhaps the most influential example of this approach is Walter Pater’s celebrated evocation of the Mona Lisa as a vampiric figure, ‘older than the rocks among which she sits’:⁵⁷

[S]he has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 219.

⁵⁵ Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Antony*, trans. by Lafcadio Hearn (New York: Modern Library, 2001), p. 93.

⁵⁶ Praz, p. 220.

⁵⁷ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 80.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Pater's Mona Lisa is the Hegelian *Geist* 'figured as a person', in Carolyn Williams' words: an embodiment of 'trans-historical' development and adaptation.⁵⁹

Machen appears to consciously reference this famous passage, which was already twenty-five years old at the time of *The Great God Pan*'s publication. Of a pen-and-ink sketch of Helen's face, he writes: 'the woman's soul looked out of the eyes, and the lips were parted with a strange smile' (p. 53). In describing a portrait of an enigmatically smiling woman, Machen inevitably evokes Pater's essay, which had spawned numerous imitations. Machen's Helen, like Flaubert's Ennoia or Pater's Mona Lisa, seems to enjoy a preternatural connection with the ancient and mythic past. She is repeatedly linked with antique objects: the millennial wine, a Roman statue of a faun, an ancient and mysterious stone tablet. We are to suppose that her divine ancestry functions as a link between present and past, allowing her some unspecified form of interaction with antiquity.

Her name, too, links her with an ancient heritage: Helen of Troy, the Spartan queen whose abduction sparked the legendary Trojan War, appears in the art and literature of the late nineteenth century as an archetype of dangerous and destructive beauty. Helen Vaughan, whose own beauty draws hordes of well-born young men to their deaths, is a clear descendant of this type. Notably, Helen of Troy is also (like Machen's Helen) a demigod, the product of a union between Zeus and the mortal queen Leda. The fact that the unfortunate mother of Helen Vaughan is named Mary appears equally deliberate, suggesting a troubling inversion of the biblical nativity story. Sophie Mantrant observes a possible connection with a further mythic birth: that of Dionysus, the child of Zeus and the mortal Semele, and a figure frequently associated with Pan, fauns and satyrs in classical culture.⁶⁰ In most versions of the myth of Dionysus' birth, the pregnant Semele, tricked by Hera, begs Zeus to reveal to her his true divine aspect. He finally agrees, with disastrous consequences, as described in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

[...] Semele's
mortal frame was unable to take the celestial onslaught.
His bridal gift was to set her ablaze. The baby, still

⁵⁹ Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 116.

⁶⁰ Sophie Mantrant, 'Pagan Revenants in Arthur Machen's Supernatural Tales of the Nineties', *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*, 80 (2014) <DOI: 10.4000/cve.1466> ; <<http://journals.openedition.org/cve/1466>>, accessed on 30th January 2018.

in the foetal stage, was ripped from her womb[.]⁶¹

Semele's human body is unable to withstand the sight of Zeus' true form. Her destruction after catching a glimpse of the sublimely terrible being who fathered her child has clear parallels with the fate of Machen's Mary, reduced to mental collapse and eventual death by her encounter with Pan. Both women, too, give birth to children whose supernatural abilities include the power to induce madness. Dionysus is, in the words of E. R. Dodds, 'the Master of Magical Illusions, who could make a vine grow out of a ship's plank, and in general enable his votaries to see the world as the world's not.'⁶² Pan, with his ability to induce panic-terror, is also included by Dodds among the 'deities who [cause] mental trouble'.⁶³ His daughter Helen Vaughan's talent seems to lie not in creating illusions, but in compelling others to see what is *really there*: it is heavily implied that her victims meet their deaths or mental declines after she 'lifts the veil' between the phenomenal world and that which lies beyond it, forcing them to look upon Pan. Both she and Dionysus, however, engender madness in mortal people by showing them fantastical images.

Dionysus, like Pan, had been the subject of renewed interest during the nineteenth century, particularly in terms of his perceived relation to Christ: both male deities born to mortal women, associated with wine, whose worship involved themes of death and resurrection. The German Romantic writer Friedrich Hölderlin wrote of the two gods as brothers in the early nineteenth century, suggesting a connection between the Christian Eucharist and the Greek wine-god, and reflecting a broader contemporary interest in what Ian Balfour refers to as '[the] syncretic rewriting of old mythologies, principally the Judeo-Christian and the Hellenic'.⁶⁴ In 1853, Heinrich Heine published his essay 'The Gods in Exile', in which he imagines the pagan gods as something like Tylorian 'survivals', toppled from their supremacy at the advent of Christianity, and forced to assume the guise of mortals. Bacchus appears clothed in the garb of a monk, and accompanied by diabolical fauns and satyrs.⁶⁵ Pater is known to have been influenced by Heine, and in his 1887 work

⁶¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book 3, ll. 308-311.

⁶² E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (London: University of California Press, 2004), p. 77.

⁶³ Dodds, p. 77.

⁶⁴ Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 183.

⁶⁵ Heinrich Heine, 'The Gods in Exile', in *The Prose Writings of Heinrich Heine*, ed. by Henry Havelock Ellis (London: Walter Scott, 1887), pp. 268-289 (p. 275.)

Imaginary Portraits offers the fictional story of ‘Denys L’Auxerrois’: a figure explicitly both Christlike and Dionysian, Denys tends to grapevines and lambs, designs a church organ which is likened to the pipes of Pan, and is at last torn to shreds by his erstwhile admirers in a Bacchic frenzy, while dressed in a monk’s habit.⁶⁶

It was against this backdrop that Frazer’s work of evolutionary anthropology *The Golden Bough*, with its thinly-veiled comparisons between the two dying-and-rising gods, Christ and Dionysus, appeared in 1890. Frazer’s description of Dionysian rites appears deliberately reminiscent of Christian worship: ‘[I]n rending and devouring a live bull at his festival the worshippers of Dionysus believed themselves to be killing the god, eating his flesh, and drinking his blood’.⁶⁷ It is implied that Dionysus and Jesus are simply two different manifestations of the same archetypal figure, with each participating in a recurrent cycle of death and revival. In associating Helen Vaughan’s genesis with that of both Dionysus and Christ, Machen is therefore able to suggest a linked and recurrent cycle of divine births to mortal women – a kind of mythic recapitulation. I will return to this idea of recurrence later in the chapter.

Machen’s implicit references to these classical and biblical figures serve both to situate the story of Helen Vaughan within a wider mythic and mythographic framework, and, as we have seen, to associate her with the mythic *femme fatale* as described by Pater. The Paterian trope in fact works here in a double sense: not only does Helen, like Pater’s Mona Lisa, figuratively embody numerous mythical characters, but, as mentioned above, she also physically incorporates the history of human evolution. Pater speaks of the Mona Lisa’s ‘beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions’.⁶⁸ The image of the growing deposit of cells signals a shift into a scientific register, and brings to mind Jerome Buckley’s characterisation of evolution as ‘[the] organic growth of all things in time, a development in which the past, though never repeating itself, would persist through each successive modification’.⁶⁹ The gradual accrual of change and experience is visible in the face of the Mona Lisa; she represents, in Kate Hext’s words, ‘Pater’s aesthetic embodiment of the

⁶⁶ Pater, ‘Denys L’Auxerrois’, in *Imaginary Portraits* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1887), pp. 49-88.

⁶⁷ Frazer, p. 390.

⁶⁸ Pater, p. 80.

⁶⁹ Buckley, p. 15.

Darwinian spectre ‘of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences’.⁷⁰ Even the reference to her age – ‘older than the rocks’ – places her within a geological or evolutionary timescale, rather than a solely historical one.

Machen builds upon the existing idea of the woman who has accumulated within herself all myths and histories, and develops the Darwinian implications of Pater’s description of the Mona Lisa into the explicitly evolutionary figure of Helen Vaughan. At last, the reader witnesses this accumulation in reverse, as Helen’s body disintegrates at the close of the tale, cycling backwards through both intermediary evolutionary stages, and mythic forms. Mythohistorical and evolutionary time are elided to create an uncanny embodiment of degenerate collapse.

Mythic markers of degeneracy

Even before her ultimate devolution, Helen’s inner inhumanity constantly threatens to seep out and reveal her for what she is. While superficially presenting as a normal woman, certain aspects of her bearing and appearance betray her fundamental strangeness. As a girl of twelve, she is not described as having a particularly unusual appearance, other than the fact that her olive skin and ‘somewhat foreign character’ set her apart in the Welsh village where she is raised (p. 21). Machen’s decision to depict this abhuman *femme fatale* as ‘somewhat foreign’ in appearance may be seen as an extension of the abovementioned nineteenth-century tendency to draw racist and dehumanising connections between people of colour and mythic hybrids. At nineteen, Helen has grown into ‘the most wonderful and strange beauty’ (p. 33). By the time Machen’s group of ‘bachelor heroes’ begin their attempts to trace her, however, her appearance has shifted into something more unsettling:⁷¹

Clarke looked again at the sketch; it was not Mary after all. There certainly was Mary’s face, but there was something else, something he had not seen on Mary’s features when the white-clad girl entered the laboratory with the doctor, nor at her terrible awakening, nor when she lay grinning on the bed. Whatever it was, the glance that came from those eyes, the smile on the full lips, or the expression of the

⁷⁰ Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), p. 157.

⁷¹ Worth, p. 215.

whole face, Clarke shuddered before it in his inmost soul, and thought, unconsciously, of Dr. Phillips's words, 'the most vivid presentment of evil I have ever seen.' (p. 55)

The quote from Doctor Phillips refers to an earlier episode in which a young boy who had previously witnessed Helen at play with "a strange naked man" (p. 23) – presumably her father or one of his retinue – was frightened into hysterics by the sight of 'a stone head of grotesque appearance [...] evidently of the Roman period [and] pronounced by the most experienced archæologists of the district to be that of a faun or satyr' (p. 25). Helen, despite her beauty, gives off an impression of evil and a disturbing 'wrongness' that associate her with the statuary faun's head. What, precisely, gave the stone head its grotesque appearance is never specified; nor what makes Helen appear at once beautiful and chilling. In 'The Inmost Light', the short story published alongside *The Great God Pan* in its first edition, Machen gives a similar account of a woman who looks indefinably *wrong* (in this case because her husband, an overreaching scientist much in the vein of Doctor Raymond, has managed to extract her soul, thus allowing an apparently demonic force to occupy her body instead):

...in an upper window of that house I had seen for some short fraction of a second a face. It was the face of a woman, and yet it was not human. [...] [A]s I saw that face at the window, with the blue sky above me and the warm air playing in gusts about me, I knew I had looked into another world – looked through the window of a commonplace, brand-new house, and seen hell open before me. [...] I heard that Mrs. Black had been much admired for her beautiful golden hair, and round what had struck me with such a nameless terror, there was a mist of flowing yellow hair as it were an aureole of glory round the visage of a satyr. (p. 123)

Like Helen, Mrs Black looks not only nightmarishly wrong, but wrong in such a way as to bring to mind a *satyr*. Machen's suggestion that degeneracy might in some sense be visually detectable within a person's face finds an obvious parallel in the nineteenth-century craze for physiognomy. One of numerous evolution-adjacent pseudosciences to gain in popularity in the wake of Darwinism, advocates of physiognomy made the claim that it was possible to infer a person's character and behavioural traits purely through an examination of their facial structure. Perhaps its most well known practitioner was the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who argued in his book *The Criminal Man* (1876)

that criminals and non-criminals could be physically differentiated. While an English translation of Lombroso's text did not appear until the early twentieth century, Henry Havelock Ellis had written extensively on Lombroso's work in his own book *The Criminal* (1890); this, along with the significant European popularity of *The Criminal Man* (Havelock Ellis himself notes that its influence 'in Italy, France and Germany seems to have been as immediate and as widespread as that of the *Origin of Species*') meant that Lombroso's views had been widely disseminated by the early 1890s.⁷²

Lombroso argued that the physical markers of criminality that could be found on both face and body were signs of 'atavism': regression towards an earlier, more primitive form of humanity, or even towards another species altogether. For Lombroso, Hurley observes, 'the [degenerate] human body [...] is utterly chaotic, unable to maintain its distinction from a whole world of animal possibilities'.⁷³ Machen's degenerate characters are similarly incapable of maintaining a convincing façade of humanity, instead reminding their observers irresistibly of fauns and satyrs: beings defined by their quasi-humanity, their liminal position between human and beast. Max Nordau, whose influential 1892 work *Degeneration* (first published in German as *Entartung*) was dedicated to Lombroso, even identified 'long pointed faun-like ears' as symptomatic of 'atavism and degeneration'.⁷⁴ Dijkstra notes that late nineteenth-century artistic depictions of fauns and satyrs were frequently 'given the "scientific" physiognomy of the degenerate, as delineated by Lombroso'.⁷⁵

Yet while Helen's face may mark her out as degenerate, Machen's characters seem unable to accurately interpret her symptoms. Stephan Karschay writes that 'her face seems readable in physiognomic terms [...] yet the distinctiveness of her features remains strangely intangible'.⁷⁶ She has no such revealing physical attributes as the prognathous chins or elongated ears by which Lombroso and Nordau suggest that degeneracy may be

⁷² Henry Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal* (London: Walter Scott, 1892), pp. 38-39.

⁷³ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 94.

⁷⁴ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), p. 131.

A French translation of *Degeneration* appeared in 1893, the year before *The Great God Pan* was published, and it seems likely that Machen, who had previously worked as a French translator, would have been familiar with the work.

⁷⁵ Dijkstra, p. 277.

⁷⁶ Stephan Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 99.

diagnosed. On the contrary, she is consistently described as a great beauty. What exactly is horrific about her appearance – what it is that reveals her as abhuman – is, as with the soulless Mrs. Black, impossible to precisely define. Helen is monstrous, but in a way that defies obvious description or categorisation. Her appearance is all the more disturbing for the fact that one is unable to say precisely what is wrong about it. A similar anxiety is evident in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), a text with numerous parallels to *The Great God Pan* (Karschay has fruitfully compared the two), in which the atavistic, degenerate form of Hyde inspires fear and revulsion for no obvious reason:

Mr Hyde was pale and dwarfish, he gave an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation [...] all these were points against him, but not all of these together could explain the hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear with which Utterson regarded him.⁷⁷

Hurley observes that the presence of the abhuman in *fin-de-siècle* literature is frequently a source of disgust and nausea.⁷⁸ She links her definition of the abhuman with Kristeva's theory of abjection, with its emphasis upon deep-rooted sensations of revulsion provoked by a collapse of the distinction between self and other. Confronted with the abhuman, 'the subject is compromised by its confrontation with the disgusting object, drawn into the field of its Thing-ness.'⁷⁹ The abhuman being threatens its viewer with the possibility that they may see themselves mirrored within it, a fear compounded in *The Great God Pan* by the fact that Helen manages to live undetected – even celebrated as a popular and charming hostess – for some time before her true nature is revealed.

Helen's victims do appear to take on something of her uncanny appearance. Towards the end of the novella, Villiers describes glimpsing one of her paramours shortly before his suicide:

'[I]t made my blood run cold to see that man's face. [...] [T]he man's outward form remained, but all hell was within it. Furious lust, and hate that was like fire, and the loss of all hope and horror that seemed to shriek aloud to the night [...]. [T]hat man no longer belonged to the world; it was a devil's face I looked upon.'

⁷⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 13.

⁷⁸ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 45.

Pan has long been associated with the Devil, and *fin-de-siècle* receptions of the god frequently draw upon this link.⁸⁰ In E. M. Forster's 1904 short story 'The Story of a Panic', a vicar speculates that hoofprints presumably left by Pan are instead those of the Devil.⁸¹ Once again, then, an encounter with Pan – through the medium of his degenerate daughter Helen – leaves its victim in some sense resembling him. The unfortunate man now displays symptoms akin to Helen's: an apparently normal appearance that nonetheless provokes intense distress and revulsion on the part of the viewer, and which is reminiscent of a monstrous, hybrid being. Clarke writes of Helen's only female victim that 'into this pleasant summer glade Rachel passed a girl, and left it, who shall say what?' (p. 105). Helen's 'abhumanness' spreads like an infection amongst those who encounter her.

The revolted inability to characterise degeneracy that I have described above is mirrored on the level of narrative within *The Great God Pan*. Just as the details of her appearance remain ineffable, so the exact nature of Helen's awful deeds is never revealed, with characters repeatedly shrinking back in horror from any explicit description of what she has shown them or done. A mere glance at a manuscript detailing 'the entertainment Mrs Beaumont provided for her choicer guests' (p. 91) is enough to leave Austin pale, sweating and nauseous, while Clarke, reading an account of Helen's childhood exploits, 'close[s] the book with a snap' (thus cutting off the reader's view, too) just as he reaches the 'wild story' of what actually happened between Helen and the friend she corrupted (p. 28). Much of the novella is made up of complex and interlocking narratives, with Machen's characters attempting, detective-like, to piece together the facts of Helen's crimes.

At the culminating moment of the story – Helen's death, at which her true nature is finally revealed – the narrative collapses entirely. The novella's final chapter (entitled 'The

⁸⁰ This tendency to cast Pan as a satanic figure may be seen to reflect a broader *fin-de-siècle* interest in both the diabolical and the occult more broadly. Machen himself was briefly a member of the occultist Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as was Algernon Blackwood, whose novel *The Centaur* will be examined in Chapter 5 of this thesis. For more information on Machen and Blackwood's involvement with the society, see Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood*, revised edn. (Eureka, CA: Stark House Press, 2019), pp. 153-154. Aleister Crowley, perhaps the best-known occultist figure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, wrote extensively on Pan; for more on Crowley's interest in Pan, see Hutton, p. 49, and De Cicco, *The Queer God Pan and His Children: A Myth Reborn 1860-1917* (Unpublished doctoral Thesis, The George Washington University, 2016).

⁸¹ E. M. Forster, 'The Story of a Panic', in *Collected Short Stories of E. M. Forster* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1946), pp. 1-29 (p. 11).

Fragments’) is composed entirely of scraps of correspondence: a translation of a manuscript written in Latin by a doctor who witnessed the event, later dying suddenly of an ‘apoplectic seizure’ (p. 98); a letter from Clarke to Doctor Raymond confirming this description and detailing his own investigations into the Roman ruins at Caermaen in Wales where Helen grew up, and Raymond’s response, expressing regret for his part in Helen’s creation, and admitting to having sent the girl away in early childhood after she showed signs of supernatural ability. While these ‘fragments’ do manage to impart the essentials of what transpired around Helen’s death, the fractured state of the narrative – with neither Clarke nor Raymond’s letters reproduced in their entirety, and Doctor Matheson’s manuscript illegible in places – suggest that aspects of the story simply cannot be communicated in language. In Hurley’s words, ‘[t]he novel is composed of a confusing mass of interlocking stories, all of which circle around the indescribable phenomenon of Helen Vaughan, all of which interrupt themselves and one another and will not conclude.’⁸² The story itself undergoes a degeneration, beginning as a single narrative thread, and gradually degrading into a mass of uncertain and semi-interpretable accounts.

‘The form of all things but devoid of all form’: Pan as a god of base matter

Hurley writes that the abhuman subject in *fin-de-siècle* literature is ‘continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other.’⁸³ Helen, with a beauty that constantly threatens monstrosity, is such a being. At the close of the novel, she finally undergoes the othering physical transformation that her *unheimlich* appearance and behaviour have foreshadowed throughout the story. Having traced her whereabouts to a London house, Clarke and Villiers present Helen with a length of cord and tell her that either she must strangle herself with it, or they will summon the police and she will be punished for her many crimes. Rather surprisingly for a being of apparently vast power, Helen agrees to kill herself rather than face the law. The scene of her death, recounted in Doctor Matheson’s manuscript, reads as a powerful distillation of contemporary anxieties surrounding evolutionary degeneration:

⁸² Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 48.

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 4.

‘Though horror and revolting nausea rose up within me, and an odour of corruption choked my breath, I remained firm. I was then privileged or accursed, I dare not say which, to see that which was on the bed, lying there black like ink, transformed before my eyes. The skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve.

‘I knew that the body may be separated into its elements by external agencies, but I should have refused to believe what I saw. For here there was some internal force, of which I knew nothing, that caused dissolution and change.

‘Here too was all the work by which man has been made repeated before my eyes. I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited. Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed. [...]

‘I watched, and at last I saw nothing but a substance as jelly. Then the ladder was ascended again . . . [*Here the MS is illegible*] . . . for one instant I saw a Form, shaped in dimness before me, which I will not further describe. But the symbol of this form may be seen in ancient sculptures, and in paintings which survived beneath the lava, too foul to be spoken of . . . as a horrible and unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast, was changed into human form, there came finally death. [...]

 (pp. 99-101.)

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud identifies ‘an urge in organic life to restore an earlier state of things’.⁸⁴ This is the so-called ‘death drive’, which is, in Margaret Iverson’s words, ‘bent on returning the living organism to the [...] matter whence it came’.⁸⁵ The extraordinary passage from *The Great God Pan* quoted above seems to anticipate Freud’s approach, as Helen ‘descends’ into primordial jelly. Her body performs (in reverse) evolutionary processes that, in reality, would occur over such a vast span of time as to be imperceptible. Oliver Gaycken has written of attempts in early film to represent ‘an approximation of evolutionary time’ by ‘collapsing the duration of a long event into a much briefer period’ through the use of time lapse cinematography.⁸⁶ Machen’s description predates this ability – the first cinematic films were not shown until

⁸⁴ Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, trans. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XVIII, p. 37.

⁸⁵ Margaret Iverson, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), p. 5.

⁸⁶ Oliver Gaycken, ‘Early Cinema and Evolution’, in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, pp. 94-120 (pp. 107-108).

1895, a year after *The Great God Pan* first appeared in print – yet clearly a similar desire is at play here: to evoke ‘an experience of deep time [that is] more directly accessible’ by making visible what would usually be invisible.⁸⁷

Karschay argues that the manner of Helen’s death suggests that:

[Her] transgressions (whatever they may be) have their basis less in her mythical heritage (she is claimed to be the product of a union between an orphan girl and the Greek god Pan) but in the biological history which binds *all* human beings together on an evolutionary ladder that rises shakily from the gunk of prehistory.⁸⁸

According to this reading of the text, Helen’s connection to Pan is ultimately not of central significance: it is merely a convenient narrative cover for the fact that the monstrousness depicted within the story stems, in truth, from humanity’s less than exalted natural history. It is true that Pan is consistently referred to throughout the text as a symbol for some greater horror: “Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint, poetic fancy”, Villiers tells Austin as they contemplate Helen’s crimes (p. 93), while Clarke writes of ‘the horror which we can but hint at, which we can only name under a figure’ (p. 102). It is true, too, that Machen’s Pan is less obviously ‘Pan-like’ than many portrayals of the god that would come after him. Merivale observes that Machen ‘makes [...] the mistake of leaving out the hoofs and the murky odour’ which would characterise many of Pan’s subsequent literary appearances, leading to a vague and diminished vision of the goat-god:⁸⁹

Pan appears at the beginning and is mentioned briefly at the end, and from time to time he hovers briefly over the plot in touches like the satyr head [...]. For the most part, his human incarnation, Helen, has to take the brunt of the theme, and she is no more specifically Pan-like than are any of the diabolical Fatal Women of the nineteenth-century’s Romantic Agonies.⁹⁰

Machen’s Pan is certainly a less concretely realised figure than the bestial god of the Barrett Brownings’ poems. He does not leave behind him ‘goats’ footmarks’, as in E. M. Forster’s 1904 short story ‘The Story of a Panic’, or a ‘sharp and acrid smell’ as in Benson’s ‘The

⁸⁷ Gaycken, p. 108.

⁸⁸ Karschay, p. 103.

⁸⁹ Merivale, p. 167.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Man Who Went Too Far' (1904).⁹¹ It is tempting, as a result, to dismiss his mythic identity, and to read him merely as an emblem of the evolutionary anxieties that represent the true heart of the story.

Yet I believe Helen's evolutionary degradation and her mythic origins to be inextricably linked, and therefore of equal significance. First, it is worth noting that, while Karschay relegates Helen's relationship to Pan to a parenthesised mention, and seems to question its authenticity altogether, numerous references throughout the text appear both to substantiate the novel's central claim (that Helen is indeed the child of Pan), and to prove that, 'symbol' as he may be, the god remains recognisable as the figure of classical myth. Tellingly, Helen's degeneration does not entirely end, as might be expected, with her descent into jelly. Instead, it is at this point that 'the ladder [is] ascended again', with formlessness once more giving way to form. At this point the manuscript becomes briefly illegible, meaning that the reader is denied the details of this last, most awful of transformations. When the narrative resumes, the change is already complete: Helen has become 'a horrible and unspeakable shape'. While this shape is never explicitly named, the doctor's references to ancient sculptures and paintings 'which survived beneath the lava' confirm its identity. The excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii which began in the early to mid-eighteenth century had revealed a treasure trove of art objects, amongst which Pan featured prominently. The goat-god appears in numerous scenes and guises, the most infamous of which is surely the marble sculpture in which he is shown copulating with a nanny goat. This piece is arguably the best-known of the many excavated objects deemed so shocking that they spent well over a century restricted to the so-called 'Secret Cabinet' of the Museo Borbonico in Naples, viewable only by men and with access at times restricted to scholars.⁹² Mary Beard notes that even while the Cabinet was officially closed to the public at large, images of the collection were widely available during the nineteenth century, 'thanks to a number of illustrated catalogues of the Secret Cabinet (not to mention several copies of key pieces, such as a small terracotta version of Pan and the Goat from

⁹¹ Forster, p. 11;
Benson, p. 71.

⁹² Mary Beard, 'Dirty Little Secrets: Changing Displays of Pompeiian Erotica', in *The Last Days of Pompeii: Decadence, Apocalypse, Resurrection* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2012), pp. 60-69 (pp. 61-68).

the Townley collection in the British Museum[]’.⁹³ Doctor Matheson’s mention of Pompeiian art, therefore, appears deliberate and pointed, suggesting both the form of Pan as seen in these ancient images, and the notorious sensuality of the scenes in which he appeared.

Again, there is a degree of obfuscation here: Matheson writes that ‘the *symbol* of this form’ [emphasis mine], rather than the form itself, may be seen in ancient art and sculpture; we are to understand that something of this ultimate horror remains incommunicable in mere physical terms. Yet the doctor’s description makes clear that this nightmarish form is a hybrid – “neither man nor beast” – so evidently Helen’s shape remains in some sense recognisable as that of a faun. Giving weight to this interpretation is the earlier discovery of a book of drawings made by Arthur Meyrick, an artist who fell prey to Helen’s attentions. Its pages are filled with ‘[a] frightful Walpurgis Night of evil’ (p. 66):

The figures of Fauns and Satyrs and Aegipans danced before his eyes, the darkness of the thicket, the dance on the mountain-top, the scenes by lonely shores, in green vineyards, by rocks and desert places, passed before him: a world before which the human soul seemed to shrink back and shudder. (p. 66)

Machen’s description of these images, which are ‘set forth in hard black and white’ (p. 66) seems intentionally reminiscent of the decadent illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley, who provided the cover drawing for the first edition of *The Great God Pan*, and in whose work fauns and faunlike creatures are, as noted above, a recurring motif. This is not a vague evocation of formless evil, but a vividly realised scene of mythical creatures – and one which it seems we are to believe really took place. Having read in full the account of Helen’s crimes, Villiers tells Austin: “It’s of no use my going into details as to the life that woman led; if you want particulars you can look at Meyrick’s legacy. Those drawings were not made from his imagination.” (p. 88). Similarly, Helen’s boy victim recognises the statuary faun’s head as her companion, “the man in the wood”, with the resemblance being plain enough to send the child into ‘paroxysms of fright’ (p. 25). Indeed, the story’s final narrative flourish is Raymond’s admission that “when [the child Helen] was scarcely five years old, I surprised it, not once or twice but several times with a playmate, you may

⁹³ Beard, p. 68.

guess of what sort. [...] You know now what frightened the boy in the wood” (p. 109). Whether or not Pan and his accompanying train of fauns and satyrs exist merely as the fleshly casing for a greater and more incomprehensible force, Machen makes it clear that the form they assume when appearing to humans is recognisable from ancient myth.

Helen’s transformation deconstructs any sense of human bodily security: dismantling the binaries between male and female, animal and human, even form and formlessness. She does not merely become animal, she becomes less than animal: ‘a substance as jelly’. The prominent German zoologist Ernst Haeckel had written in 1866 of ‘the idea that the phenomena of life in all organisms proceed from a common chemical substance, [...] a general simple *vital-substance*’, referred to as ‘*Urschleim*, or *original slime*’.⁹⁴ In positing the existence of an essential matter, Haeckel was inspired by the earlier work of Lorenz Oken, to whom he ascribes this rather unsettling statement: ““Every organic thing has arisen out of slime, and is nothing but slime in different forms. This primitive slime originated in the sea, from inorganic matter in the course of planetary-evolution.””⁹⁵ This, it seems, is the jelly into which Helen descends: a primordial substance in which ‘the principle of life, which makes organism’ yet remains observable (p. 100). Drawing upon Huxley’s 1868 essay ‘On the Physical Basis of Life’, Hurley has written at length about the significance of slime in *fin-de-siècle* Gothic literature:

A “nucleated mass of protoplasm turns out to be what may be termed the structural unit of the human body ... Beast and fowl, reptile and fish, mollusk, worm and polype [sic], are all composed of structural units of the same character, namely, masses of protoplasm with a nucleus”. [...] Human particularity is thus disallowed in two ways: the most basic human structure is no different from that of any other organism, animal or vegetable; and the human body at this basic level [...] is a quasi-differentiated mass, pulsing and viscous.

Nothing illustrates the Thing-ness of matter so admirably as slime. Nor can anything illustrate the Thing-ness of the human body so well as its sliminess, or propensity to become-slime. [...] Within an evolutionist narrative, human existence has its remote origins in the “primordial slime” from which all life was said to arise. In the minus narrative of devolution, sliminess may be posited as well as the logical terminus of mutable human identity.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation; Or, the Development of the Earth and its Inhabitants by the Action of Natural Causes*, trans. by E. Ray Lankester, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), p. 96.

⁹⁵ Lorenz Oken, quoted in Haeckel, p. 97.

⁹⁶ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 34.

In the scene of Helen's dissolution, 'matter is no longer subordinate to form'.⁹⁷ The primitive substance of which all life – human, animal and plant – is ultimately composed has rebelled against its trammellings, and returned to the base materiality that is its essential nature.

Whether in her retrogression into primordial ooze, or her final metamorphosis into the 'unspeakable' shape of the hybrid god, Helen's form consistently resists scientific comprehension or interpretation. As Doctor Matheson observes Helen's bodily degeneration, he reassures himself that he has retained his sanity by reminding himself of his learning: 'I did all that my knowledge suggested to make sure that I was suffering under no delusion. [...] I ran over the anatomy of the foot and the arm and repeated the formulae of some of the carbon compounds' (p. 99). Matheson attempts to hearten himself by considering the reassuringly static facts of human anatomy and chemical composition, even as the body before him melts and distorts, defying form and substance, organisation and classification. 'Whether science would benefit by these brief notes if they could be published, I do not know, but rather doubt', the doctor observes at the beginning of the manuscript (p. 98), attesting once again to the impossibility of accommodating this monstrous transformation within a rational framework. While figured in the language and imagery of degeneration theory, Helen's body is ultimately indecipherable in these terms, just as her face, while seeming to offer the possibility of physiognomic interpretation, remains hieroglyphic.

An earlier scene of the novella both foreshadows this denouement, and offers a further clue as to why Machen cast this particular classical deity as the embodiment of the 'unspeakable elements' that dwell at the heart of his tale (p. 29). As Doctor Raymond prepares Mary for the surgery that will result in Helen's conception, Clarke, who is witnessing the operation, accidentally inhales the scent of the potion with which Raymond anaesthetises his patient. He drifts off into a fantasy of a countryside walk, at the climax of which he encounters Pan:

[A]n infinite silence seemed to fall on all things, and the wood was hushed, and for a moment of time he stood face to face there with a presence, that was neither man

⁹⁷ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 32.

nor beast, neither the living nor the dead, but all things mingled, the form of all things but devoid of all form. And in that moment, the sacrament of body and soul was dissolved, and a voice seemed to cry ‘let us go hence’, and then the darkness of darkness beyond the stars, the darkness of everlasting. (p. 12)

Machen plays upon Pan’s traditional association with all-ness – with ‘universal nature’, in Merivale’s words – to suggest that the god functions not only as a symbolic embodiment of ‘everything’, but that he exists in a literal sense at the level of matter, as an immanent ur-substance like that into which his daughter dissolves at the close of the story: ‘the form of all things but devoid of all form’.⁹⁸ While Raymond’s experiment allowed him entrance into, and agency within, the phenomenal world, it is implied that Pan has always existed, beyond perception, in ‘the secret place of life’ (p. 93).

The seventeenth century classicist and philosopher Ralph Cudworth writes in his theological work *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678) (a text still in print during the nineteenth century) of the ancient belief in Pan’s material nature, citing a quote from the late Roman writer Macrobius: ‘non sylvarum dominum, sed universae substantiae materialis dominorum [...] not the lord of the woods, but the lord or dominator over all material substance’.⁹⁹ Thus ‘[Pan] and the world [are] both together, as one system; the world being but the efflux and emanation of their Deity’.¹⁰⁰ Cudworth’s use of the word ‘efflux’ – a term evocative of seeping fluidity – appears almost prescient of Machen’s primordial slime. Pan, god of all things, becomes a protoplasmic demon, whose presence within matter threatens disruption and chaos.

Hurley notes that the unclassifiability of slime ‘constitutes a threat to the integrity of the human subject’, since ‘[i]f the distinction between liquid and solid can be effaced, then other, more crucial oppositions [...] threaten to collapse as well’.¹⁰¹ Cohen, meanwhile, observes that the ‘ontological liminality’ of the monstrous being means that it is ‘a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions’.¹⁰² Helen’s death is indeed threatening: her visible devolution is a potent reminder that our origins lie not in the Garden, but in ‘the abyss of all being’ (p. 100), while her ultimate transformation into

⁹⁸ Merivale, p. 9.

⁹⁹ Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1845), p. 582.

¹⁰⁰ Cudworth, p. 583.

¹⁰¹ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 35.

¹⁰² Cohen, p. 6.

the hybrid form of her father speaks to the newly-realised terrors of materiality, of which Pan the all-god functions as the sovereign. Her unstable, metamorphic body illustrates the unpalatable truth that, if all life may be reduced to a basic unit of matter, the material substance that constitutes a human is no different to that which constitutes an animal. The brief appearance of a hybrid form further erodes human specificity, by implying that the boundary between man and beast may be collapsed altogether to create a disturbing conglomeration. No wonder, then, that the doctor seeks to reassure himself with thoughts of solid human anatomy.

Degenerate cycles

While Helen's existence is presented as the aberrant result of an overreaching scientific experiment, it is heavily implied that her death will not succeed in permanently eradicating the threat she represents. In the final pages of the novella, Clarke describes in a letter to Raymond 'a small square pillar of white stone' found in the same wood where the youthful Helen once tormented her child victims (p. 106). This Roman fragment bears a semi-legible inscription, whose surviving words he translates thus:

'To the great god Nodens (the god of the Great Deep or the Abyss), Flavius Senilis has erected this pillar on account of the marriage which he saw beneath the shade.'
(p. 106).

Local antiquaries, we are told, 'were much puzzled [...] as to the circumstance or rite to which the allusion is made' (pp. 106-107). Once again, human expertise and classification break down when faced with Pan – for it seems we are to conclude that he is the god to whom the inscription refers. Machen's references to the Romano-Celtic deity Nodens seem to have been influenced by an 1879 report into Roman archaeological remains found at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire, in which the author, William Hiley Bathurst, refers to Nodens both as the "God of the Abyss" and the "God of the deeps", phrases identical to those later used by Machen.¹⁰³ Tellingly, one of the scholars quoted by Bathurst is named Meyrick – the same name as the fictional Beardsleyesque artist of *The Great God Pan*.

¹⁰³ William Hiley Bathurst, *Roman Antiquities at Lydney Park, Gloucestershire: Being a Posthumous Work of the Rev. William Hiley Bathurst, M. A.* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1879), p. 39.

Although Nodens' link with Pan seems to be of Machen's own invention, it is readily apparent why he might have chosen to connect the two: Machen's Pan is a god of evolutionary and temporal depths. Helen's earlier descent into 'the abyss of all being' is mirrored in the linking of Pan with this chasmic deity.

Not only does this ending enact, in Susan J. Navarette's words, 'a kind of narrative recapitulation' by returning to the site of Helen's childhood exploits, it also functions as a reminder of the inescapability of degeneracy.¹⁰⁴ Having happened before, this unholy nativity seems destined to take place again: it is part of a cycle of supernatural annunciations, a recurrent pattern like that of Frazer's dying and rising gods. As Morton writes of the demonic ape-satyr of Klinger's *Second Future*, 'the future recapitulates the past because it is predetermined by our origins from which there will never be any rescue by evolutionary ascent.'¹⁰⁵ Chambers had written optimistically in 1844 of a 'zoological circle' which might one day be completed by a more ideal form of humanity.¹⁰⁶ For Machen, the image of the mythic-evolutionary circle is not one of completion or perfection, but of awful inevitability. Just as another Helen will be unleashed upon the world, so humanity can never free itself entirely from the taint of the bestial, nor from the fear that, whatever heights of reason or culture we might ascend to, the wheel of evolutionary fortune will eventually turn downwards again, plunging us back into animality or worse.

Machen's Pan is fear and uncertainty made flesh, a potent distillation of contemporary anxieties and fascinations. As both an emblem of protoplasmic materiality, and a hybrid body functioning as 'the archetype of therianthropic blending in the Western cultural tradition', he draws together the story's twin strands of myth and evolutionary concerns.¹⁰⁷ 'Half god, half brute', as Browning wrote, his physical form literally embodies concerns surrounding human evolutionary proximity to animals, while Helen, his avatar, speaks to fears that the abhuman might pass for human, spreading its degeneracy undetected throughout respectable society.¹⁰⁸ The terror he symbolises cannot be effectively combated; Helen may have been killed, but the force that animated her

¹⁰⁴ Susan J. Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 191.

¹⁰⁵ Morton, p. 148.

¹⁰⁶ Chambers, p. 142.

¹⁰⁷ Worth, p. 224.

¹⁰⁸ Browning, 'Pan and Luna', in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, p. 61, l. 83.

continues to skulk on the periphery of human perception, awaiting the next time that ‘the house of life is [...] thrown open’ (p. 108). Moreover, if Machen’s Pan is a god of basic substance – ‘the form of all things’ (p. 12) – then the reader is ultimately left with the unsettling notion that they themselves may contain something of ‘the universal Pan’.

Chapter 3

Knowing Fragments: The Sphinx and the Riddle of Deep Time

Deep time is so alien that we can really only comprehend it as metaphor.¹
(Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle*)

Little remains now at Crystal Palace Park in Sydenham. The site of Joseph Paxton's masterpiece of glass and iron – originally built to house the Great Exhibition of 1851 in Hyde Park, reconstructed and reopened in South London in 1854, and finally destroyed by fire in 1936 – is marked only by a few crumbling flights of stone steps, and by a strange collection of creatures. Flanking these staircases to nowhere stand six vast sphinxes, modelled in the couchant Egyptian style after a red granite original held in the Louvre. Standing guard over a building that has been gone for more than eighty years, and overshadowed by the looming shape of a 1950s television transmission tower, these Victorian relics appear surreally out of place. Yet they are not alone. Following a path around the outskirts of the park, the modern visitor passes the elegant nineteenth-century Crystal Palace railway station, an incongruous 1960s athletics stadium, and is then confronted with a peculiar scene. Ranged around a series of boggy islands stand a group of creatures almost as strange as the human-lion hybrids just up the hill. These are the 'Crystal Palace Dinosaurs', imaginatively reconstructed from fossil remains in 1853-54 by the palaeontologist Richard Owen and the sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins.²

Only a few of them are 'true' dinosaurs; most notably, two *Iguanodon* models, inside one of which a dinner party was notoriously held by Waterhouse Hawkins and Owen on New Year's Eve of 1853. The rest represent ancient amphibians, marine reptiles, and even a few extinct mammals. Mocked in more recent years for their many inaccuracies (famously, the rhinoceros-like horn on the model *Iguanodon*'s nose is now known to have been the creature's thumb-bone), this rather lumpen collection of figures is the result of a bold and ambitious Victorian endeavour. The first life-size models of dinosaurs ever to be created, they offered, as Virginia Zimmerman observes, 'as close an encounter with the past as many Victorians could achieve'.³ The creatures are even arranged chronologically,

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Deep Time* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 3.

² Virginia Zimmerman, *Excavating Victorians* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 53.

³ *Ibid*, p. 53.

so that visitors can take a temporal-spatial journey from the frog-like labyrinthodonts of the Palaeozoic era to the Irish Elk of the Pleistocene epoch.

To the modern viewer, the surviving nineteenth-century figures at Crystal Palace Park appear bizarrely ill-matched: the sphinxes fictional relics of a defunct mythology; the dinosaurs evidence of an early attempt at scientific comprehension of the prehistoric past. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, the remnants of this mid-nineteenth-century vision are an apt image with which to begin this chapter's examination of the sphinx's association with deep time. For this chapter is concerned with remnants, both physical and figurative. As we have already seen in Chapter 1, myths, as the imaginative products of an earlier age, could be figured as cultural fossils: artefacts that, when 'read', might provide us with information about the past. Focusing chiefly upon the living statue of Oscar Wilde's poem 'The Sphinx' (1894), and the colossal White Sphinx of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), I will suggest that the hybrid form of the sphinx occupies two paradoxical roles in relation to deep time. First, it serves as an embodiment of the vastness and strangeness of time: allowing it a shape and, therefore, allowing the reader to approach and attempt to understand it. Secondly, and contradictorily, its uncanny, unclassifiable form testifies to the impossibility of any true comprehension of deep time. In both of these texts, a physical monument in the form of a sphinx functions as an overlaid manifestation of different temporal spans and intellectual disciplines. Despite this apparent tangibility, however, these symbolic forms ultimately remain opaque to their human interrogators.

Protector and demon: the sphinx's mythic history

The sphinx's mythic background is peculiarly dual: its origins lie in both Greek and Egyptian myth, each of which has left its own mark upon our contemporary understanding of the creature. The most famous sphinx is, of course, the colossal limestone one at Giza, which Paul Jordan argues is likely to have been the first sphinx ever depicted.⁴ Its form – a couchant lion's body with front legs outstretched, and a solemnly smiling human head in pharaonic headdress – certainly conforms to the archetypal image of the Egyptian sphinx, whether or not it was truly the originator of the type. Very little is known of the original

⁴ Paul Jordan, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998), p. 1.

mythos surrounding the figure, although later Egyptian sphinxes often appear in pairs outside the entrances to temples or palaces, suggesting a protective or apotropaic function. The Egyptian sphinx is known to have shared a symbolic connection with the pharaoh, with the face and headdress of the Great Sphinx showing similarities to statues of Fourth Dynasty kings.⁵ Later sphinxes were sometimes inscribed with the name of a particular ruler, suggesting that the creature could function as the pharaoh's avatar.⁶ A 1916 article by Alan H. Gardiner offers a useful summary of the various ways in which the significance of the Egyptian sphinx may be read:

There are [...] four possible ways in which an individual sphinx might be interpreted, (1) as the king under the image of a lion, (2) as some powerful god under the image of a lion, (3) as a victorious king manifesting himself in the leonine form of a god, and (4) as a powerful god revealed in the dreaded personality of the king. These various views were in no way mutually exclusive, and it is probable that with regard to one and the same material sphinx of stone, the Egyptians tended to shift rapidly from the one opinion to the other.⁷

The Egyptian sphinx, then, seems to have been a fearful protector, an embodiment of the pharaoh's godly power. Beyond that, we can only speculate as to the creature's earliest significance.

The sphinx's classical pedigree is rather less opaque, and rather more bloody. In Greek mythology, the creature is a violent female demon (there is no tradition of a male sphinx in Greek thought). The 8th Century BCE poet Hesiod refers to her as 'Phix', and identifies her as the daughter of that archetypal hybrid, the Chimera, and the monstrous hound Orthus. Hesiod writes that Phix was 'death to the people of Cadmus'.⁸ Cadmus is the legendary founder of Thebes; Thebes is, of course, the site of the sphinx's famous encounter with Oedipus.

This story, while widely known, bears repeating here, since it has played such a central part in post-antique receptions of the sphinx. King Laius of Thebes and his wife

⁵ Jordan, p. 4.

⁶ Christine Zivie-Coche, *Sphinx: History of a Monument*, trans. by David Lorton (London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 10.

⁷ Alan Gardiner, 'Some Personifications', *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, 38 (1916), 83-94 (p. 92).

⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. by M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, reissued 2008), p. 12.

Jocasta are warned by an oracle that a son born to them will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. When a boy is born, they pin his ankles together (hence the name Oedipus – ‘Swollen-Foot’) and leave him to die of exposure on the mountainside. The baby, however, is found and adopted by a herdsman, and raised in Corinth. Years later, another oracle warns the young man that he will one day kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus leaves Corinth, hoping to avoid hurting the people he has known as his parents. On the road to Thebes, he quarrels with a stranger and eventually kills him. Outside the city itself, he encounters the sphinx, which has taken up residence outside the city, killing and devouring anyone who cannot correctly answer her riddle:

‘There is a creature on earth which has two and four feet, a voice, and three feet; of all the creatures that live on earth, in the air and in the sea, it alone can change its nature. But the strength of its limbs is at its lowest precisely when it supports itself on the greatest number of feet.’⁹

Oedipus, of course, is the first to offer the correct response: the creature is a man, who crawls on hands and knees as an infant, walks on two feet in his prime, and relies upon the ‘third foot’ of a cane in his old age. Furious, the sphinx hurls herself to her death. Oedipus is rewarded with the crown of Thebes and the hand of its recently widowed queen Jocasta, thereby unknowingly fulfilling the prophesied chain of patricide and incest, since the man he killed on the road to Thebes was in fact his father, King Laius.

Beyond the Oedipus myth, the Greek sphinx is most often depicted upon funerary monuments. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood writes that ‘sphinxes formed the upper part of Attic stelai from the late seventh century until c.530 [BC]’, while later vases found in tombs take the form of sphinxes, or else have sphinxes painted upon them.¹⁰ The form of the Greek sphinx across vase painting and sculpture is largely consistent: like the Egyptian sphinx, her body is leonine, but with the notable addition of wings, which are usually

⁹ Almut-Barbara Renger, *Oedipus and the Sphinx: The Threshold Myth from Sophocles through Freud to Cocteau*, trans. by Duncan Alexander Smart and David Rice, with John T. Hamilton (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 11.

¹⁰ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, *‘Reading’ Greek Death: To the End of the Classical Period* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 271; Herbert Hoffmann, ‘The riddle of the Sphinx: a case study in Athenian immortality symbolism’, in *Classical Greece: Ancient histories and modern archaeologies*, ed. by Ian Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 71-80 (p. 73).

shown curving upwards over her back. Unlike her Egyptian counterpart, she is most often depicted sitting upright.

How closely the Greek and Egyptian sphinx are related is difficult to say with any certainty. It seems likely that the Greeks were influenced to some degree by the Egyptian sphinx tradition. Jordan observes that '[t]he emerging artistic tradition of the Greek world in its archaic phase was heavily influenced by Egyptian art', noting too that the word 'sphinx' itself, which the Greeks associated with their verb *sphingein* – to strangle – was in fact 'very probably derived [...] from an ancient Egyptian formula [used to refer to sphinx statues] which transliterates as "shesepankh" with conjectured vowels, meaning "living image".¹¹ The Greeks may also have been influenced by the winged sphinxes of Mesopotamian art, which they themselves seem to have been adopted and adapted from the Egyptian tradition in around 1500 BCE.¹² The overthrow of Egypt by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE saw 'the reintroduction of the sphinx idea into Egypt in the changed form of the Theban throttler that the native Egyptians surely could hardly recognize as [...] a product of their own civilization'.¹³ An inscription dating from the Roman era upon the paw of the Great Sphinx at Giza points out that this is a different sphinx from that defeated by Oedipus, suggesting, in Don Riggs' words, 'an early association of – or confusion between – the two sphinxes'.¹⁴

Both the Greek and the Egyptian sphinx have enjoyed a rich post-antique reception, and a tendency to elide the two has also continued into modernity. Eleanor Cook observes that traditionally '[m]ysterious thought is associated with the Egyptian sphinx, while voluptuousness is associated with the Grecian, at least in some later manifestations', yet writers and artists of the Renaissance also seem 'to have happily intermingled' the iconography of the two types.¹⁵ She references the frontispiece of Athanasius Kircher's unsuccessful attempt at translating hieroglyphics, *Oedipus Aegypticus* (1652), which shows a female sphinx seated 'high on a rock' above a male questioner; the standard artistic

¹¹ Jordan, pp. 207, XVIII.

¹² Ibid, p. 208.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 208-209.

¹⁴ Don Riggs, 'The Sphinx', in *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, ed. by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 521-523, p. 522.

¹⁵ Eleanor Cook, *Enigmas and Riddles in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10.

formula for Oedipus' encounter with the creature outside Thebes.¹⁶ But Kircher's sphinx is also wingless, sporting a pharaonic headdress, and set against a background of palms and pyramids. The two versions are thus commingled to suggest a sphinx that is both formidable female riddler, and male embodiment of arcane wisdom.

By the late nineteenth century, portrayals of the sphinx often combine both Greek and Egyptian traits. A contributor to the journal of the British Archaeological Association complained in 1876 that 'some modern artists have disregarded [the] marked distinctions [between the Greek and Egyptian sphinx] and confounded the two types together'.¹⁷ Franz von Stuck's 1895 painting *The Kiss of the Sphinx* shows a violent female sphinx who grips her unfortunate lover in a clawed embrace; again, though, she is wingless, and resting in the couchant Egyptian pose. In Elihu Vedder's 1863 work *The Questioner of the Sphinx*, the colossal and weathered head of a stone sphinx emerges from a sand dune, while a ragged man kneels before it, pressing his ear to its lips (Figure 6). While the appearance of Vedder's sphinx is entirely Egyptian, the presence of the Questioner suggests a connection with the Greek riddler: again, we see a male figure in a submissive posture before a creature who apparently possesses privileged knowledge. The freedom with which late nineteenth-century artists combine aspects of the Greek and the Egyptian sphinx suggests that the creature was, by this point, nearly always something of a composite, often both in terms of appearance and of symbolic import. This mythic duality is, as we will see, similarly evident in both Wilde's 'The Sphinx', and in the White Sphinx of *The Time Machine*.

Egyptian fragments and deep time in nineteenth-century literature

Having examined the twin strands of the sphinx tradition – the benevolent guardian of Egyptian iconography; the demonic riddler of Greek myth – I will return briefly to the image with which I began this chapter: that of the strange remnants at Crystal Palace Park. When the Palace opened at Sydenham in 1854, Egyptology and palaeontology were equally vogueish disciplines; the Egyptian Court and the dinosaur lake were two of its most popular

¹⁶ Cook, p. 10.

¹⁷ H. S. Cuming, 'On an Ancient Signet-Ring Found at Evesham', in *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 32 (1876), 115-25 (p. 116).

displays.¹⁸ An 1855 *Punch* cartoon entitled ‘The Effects of a Hearty Dinner after Visiting the Antediluvian Department at the Crystal Palace’ depicts a man lying in troubled sleep, while the newly completed Crystal Palace Dinosaurs cluster around his bed, gesturing threateningly at him (Figure 7).¹⁹ An Egyptian pharaoh in full regalia sits astride the Megalosaurus, smiling down at the sleeping man. Other figures appear in the background – a generic racist caricature of a ‘savage’ who peers at himself in a looking glass; an enthusiastic musical band – but dinosaurs and pharaoh both are the central focus of the illustration. Despite hailing from vastly different time periods, these products of the past are clearly aligned together against the nineteenth-century man. My object in this portion of the chapter is the question of how and why ancient Egyptian remnants came to be thus associated with palaeontological remnants and timescales in the nineteenth-century cultural consciousness.

The nineteenth century saw a growing fascination with Egypt’s ancient past. Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign of 1798-1801 had included a large group of scientists and academics; their findings were published between 1809-1829 as the *Description de L’Eygpte*, making accurate measurements and depictions of ancient Egyptian monuments widely available in Europe for the first time. By 1822, twenty-three years after its discovery, the hieroglyphic portion of the Rosetta Stone was beginning to be deciphered, allowing a greater understanding of Egyptian history and mythology. Meanwhile, continued excavations in Egypt ensured that a steady flow of artefacts (including numerous sphinx statues) made their way to Europe. A dedicated Egyptian Room was opened in the British Museum in 1837, although the museum had already boasted an extensive collection of Egyptian artefacts for some years before this. Elements of Egyptian iconography began to find their way into European design and architecture. By 1838, the fashionable Highgate Cemetery in North London boasted an ‘Egyptian Avenue’, complete with pillars, obelisks, and sunken tombs.

At the same time, the fields of geology and palaeontology were rapidly expanding. As we have already seen in Chapter 1, the work of eighteenth century geologists such as

¹⁸ This point is based upon a comment made by Kenneth Kiss, curator of the Crystal Palace Museum, in conversation (14.10.18).

¹⁹ ‘The Effects of a Hearty Dinner after Visiting the Antediluvian Department at the Crystal Palace’, *Punch*, 28 (1855), p. 50.

James Hutton and Georges Buffon had first brought to prominence the idea that the earth was vastly older than had previously been imagined, and that knowledge of its past states could be gained through the study of geological strata. The French naturalist Georges Cuvier, meanwhile, studied and compared fossil remains, arguing in his 1812 work *Recherches sur les Ossements Fossiles de Quadrupèdes* that many of these corresponded to species which were now extinct. Zimmerman suggests that these scientists paved the way for Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) (a work which, in turn, is known to have influenced Darwin's development of a theory of evolution).²⁰

These major developments in archaeology and geology took place almost concurrently during the final years of the eighteenth century, and the early decades of the nineteenth. Hugh Torrens has argued that our modern understanding of the two as separate disciplines is a departure from the nineteenth-century understanding of these subjects. Scholars of the time, he suggests, regarded both geological and archaeological remnants as the products of worlds which were 'continuous, and equally past'.²¹ Both geology and archaeology involved excavation; both centred upon the 'reading' of ancient fragments for information about the past, and both raised unsettling questions about human and pre-human history. My argument in this chapter, then, builds upon the premise that the lines that we now draw between the two fields – 'the one human, the other scientific', in Torrens' words – were faint or even nonexistent during the nineteenth century.²² Viewed in this context, the Crystal Palace's collection of sphinxes and prehistoric beasts no longer appears so ill-matched: both groups are the objects of what was, in 1854, still a unified academic field.

Eleanor Dobson stresses the importance of 'material culture' to the literary reception of ancient Egypt at this time:²³

In a field based around excavation, and the recovery and comprehension of artefacts, the physical object is of vital importance. [...]

²⁰ Zimmerman, pp. 34-35.

²¹ Hugh Torrens, 'Geology and the Natural Sciences: Some Contributions to Archaeology in Britain 1780-1850', in *The Study of the Past in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Vanessa Brand (Oxford: Oxbow, 1998), pp. 35-60 (p. 36).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²³ Eleanor Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx: Literature, Culture and Egyptology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 8.

Encounters with Egyptian ‘things’ were, without doubt, integral to engagement with ancient Egypt, particularly during the nineteenth century, when mummy unwrapping spectacles allowed bandages and trinkets from the body to be inspected, touched and smelled.²⁴

Engagement with Egyptian antiquity was made possible chiefly through interactions with its surviving physical artefacts, and these artefacts therefore played a central role in cultural responses to Egypt. Nineteenth-century literature about such objects frequently invokes the idea of incomprehensibly vast temporal spans. Most famous of these is Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1817 sonnet ‘Ozymandias’, composed in response to the news that a colossal granite head of Ramesses II was being transported to London for display in the British Museum. The poem describes the vast and fragmentary remains of the pharaoh’s statue, which lie ‘half sunk’ in the desert (much like the Great Sphinx itself, which was at that time still mostly submerged in the sand).²⁵ The hubristic words inscribed upon the statue’s base – ‘Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!’ – are contrasted with its maimed and lonely condition:²⁶

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.²⁷

The speaker does not relate this story firsthand, but claims to have encountered ‘a traveller from an antique land’ who told him of the figure (l. 1). Here, Shelley conflates the spatial and the temporal: the land from which the traveller hails is itself characterised as *antique*; as if, by voyaging there, one might transcend time as well as distance. Zimmerman argues that Victorian literary responses to questions of time (in particular deep time) are often marked by a ‘sense of time as spatial’; Shelley’s poem anticipates this approach.²⁸ The image of the ruined statue thus seems to reach the poem’s reader across a chasmic gap of

²⁴ Dobson, p. 8.

²⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’, in *The Poems of Shelley: Volume 2, 1817-1819*, ed. by Kevin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (2000), II, pp. 307-311, l. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 12-14.

²⁸ Zimmerman, p. 36.

both space and time, with its own wasted form functioning at once as a symbol of endurance and decay.

An alternate version of the poem written at the same time by Shelley's friend Horace Smith makes plain what 'Ozymandias' leaves unsaid:

We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro' the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.²⁹

Smith explicitly transfers the threat of civilisational collapse from the ancient Egyptian ruins to his own society. While he stops short of envisaging a posthuman world – a human hunter is still present to witness the ruins of the past – his references to 'fragments' and 'annihilation' evoke both extinction and palaeontological remnants, thus linking the poem with the burgeoning early nineteenth-century awareness of species disappearance. Smith's vision of a future visitor stumbling upon British ruins is strikingly anticipatory of the narrative of Wells' *The Time Machine*, which will be examined in the latter half of this chapter.

The idea of the Egyptian fragment as possessing a kind of trans-temporal sublimity is evident, too, in Thomas De Quincey's essay 'The Affliction of Childhood' (1853), in which the statuary head of Ramesses is referred to as '[wearing] upon its lips a smile co-extensive with all time and all space'.³⁰ In his earlier essay 'System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse's Telescope' (1846) – ostensibly a review of J. P. Nichols' popular contemporary work of astronomy, *Thoughts on Some Important Points relating to the System of the World* (1846), but more accurately characterised by Robert Platzner as 'an

²⁹ Horace Smith, 'Ozymandias', in *The Poems of Shelley*, II, p. 307.

³⁰ Thomas De Quincey, 'The Affliction of Childhood', in *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Daniel Sanjiv Roberts, 21 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), XIX, pp. 3-21 (p. 12).

inquiry into the sublime’ – De Quincey describes his encounter with the head in greater detail:³¹

It was the Memnon’s head, then recently brought from Egypt. I looked at it, as the reader must suppose, in order to understand the depth which I have here ascribed to the impression, not as a human but as a symbolic head; and what it symbolised to me were: 1. The peace which passeth all understanding. 2. The eternity which baffles and compounds all faculty of computation; the eternity which *had* been, the eternity which *was* to be. [...] You durst not call it a smile that radiated from the lips; the radiation was too awful to clothe itself in adumbrations or memorials of flesh.³²

For De Quincey, the statue does not merely represent the millennia that have passed since its own creation, but a far vaster and more incomprehensible span: all the time, it seems, that has *ever* passed. It is an object associated explicitly with deep time, rather than history. That past eternity is then projected forwards: the product of the ancient past invites its observer to consider the ‘deep future’.

Significantly, De Quincey invokes the head of Memnon here in order to suggest that the image has a ‘pendant’: the perceived appearance of an awful ‘face’ in the distant constellation of Orion.³³ This had been made clearly visible by the Earl of Rosse’s recent construction of a powerful telescope in Ireland.³⁴ De Quincey offers an imaginative description of the image:

You see a head thrown back, and raising its face, (or eyes, if eyes it had), in the very anguish of hatred, to some unknown heavens. What *should* be its skull wears what *might* be an Assyrian tiara, only ending behind in a floating train. This head rests upon a beautifully developed neck and throat. [...] In the very region of his

³¹ Robert Platzner, “‘Persecutions of the Infinite: De Quincey’s “System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescope” as an Inquiry into the Sublime’, in *Sensibility in Transformation: Creative Resistance to Sentiment from the Augustans to the Romantics*, ed. by Syndy McMillen Conger (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 195-207 (p. 195).

³² De Quincey, ‘System of the Heavens as Revealed by Lord Rosse’s Telescope’, in *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Frederick Burwick, 21 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), XXI, pp. 393-420 (p. 403).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

³⁴ Jonathan Smith, ‘De Quincey’s Revisions to “The System of the Heavens”’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 26 (1993), 203-212 (p. 204). Smith also notes that, while De Quincey writes as if he is working from an image drawn from Rosse’s new telescope, he is in fact describing a much earlier drawing of the nebula made by Sir John Herschel in 1826 – it is unclear whether De Quincey himself was aware of the fact that Rosse’s telescope had in fact revealed the nebula as quite different in appearance from Herschel’s impression (Smith, p. 206).

temples, driving itself downwards into his cruel brain, and breaking the continuity of his diadem, is a horrid chasm, a ravine, a shaft, that many centuries would not traverse[.]³⁵

In evoking this astronomical image, De Quincey reaches once more for the language of archaeology, endowing the nebular head with ‘an Assyrian tiara’. Again, time and space are confounded in the image of the ‘chasm’ which would take centuries to cross. This ancient and terrible cosmic face is described as a ‘dreadful cartoon’ – a preliminary sketch – of the head of Memnon.³⁶ Thus the Egyptian fragment moves beyond its own status as a historical artefact, becoming something at once greater and more troubling.

Oscar Wilde’s palaeontological sphinx

In *fin-de-siècle* poetry, the Great Sphinx in particular is often figured as an impassive observer of the ravages of time. With its worn and ambiguous smile, it is readily apparent how it might have come to be regarded as an especially powerful example of the archetype of the Egyptian remnant as imbued with ‘a kind of primal inner truth and uncanny longevity’, as Dobson writes of Egyptian inscriptions.³⁷ The American poet John Spollon’s work of 1900, ‘The Sphinx’, describes the statue as ‘The Watcher [...] who never winks’, and states that ‘Empires rise and Empires fall / The Sphinx’s eyes beheld them all’.³⁸ John Davidson’s 1895 poem ‘St George’s Day’ similarly establishes the statue as a constant and unchanging presence in time:

The sphinx that watches by the Nile
Has seen great empires pass away:
The mightiest lasted but a while;
Yet ours shall not decay.³⁹

Oscar Wilde’s poem ‘The Sphinx’ (first published in 1894, although likely composed during the late 1880s) is a particularly notable example of the ‘sphinx as watcher’ trope.

³⁵ De Quincey, ‘System of the Heavens’, pp. 404-5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

³⁷ Dobson, p. 136.

³⁸ John Spollon, ‘The Sphinx’, in *Mary Ann; Or, Advice to a Street-Walker, and Other Poems* (Boston: Jos. M. Wade, 1900), pp. 54, 53.

³⁹ John Davidson, *St George’s Day: A Fleet Street Eclogue* (New York: John Lane, 1895), p. 14.

While his sphinx is described as an Egyptian artefact, Wilde turns repeatedly to language and imagery associated with a deeper past to suggest a link between the creature and evolutionary prehistory.

The poem is a monologue, delivered by a young man to the sphinx statuette that sits in the corner of his room. This sphinx is female, and dangerous; both traits she shares with the Greek sphinx. Other than that, however, she is consistently associated with Egyptian imagery, even from the first mention of her pose as ‘couching’ rather than sitting, and the poem as a whole clearly draws upon the contemporary craze for all things Egyptian.⁴⁰ Like other late nineteenth-century sphinxes, she is immediately established as a being who is, in some sense, outside of time:

Inviolat and immobile she does not rise she does not stir
For silver moons are naught to her and naught to her the suns that reel.

Red follows grey across the air, the waves of moonlight ebb and flow
But with the Dawn she does not go and in the night-time she is there.

Dawn follows Dawn and Nights grow old and all the while this curious cat
Lies couching on the Chinese mat with eyes of satin rimmed with gold.
(ll. 3-8)

The model sphinx, like her giant counterpart at Giza, is a creature immune and indifferent to the movement of day and night, defined by her static immutability in time. The speaker then states the creature’s imagined age: ‘A thousand weary centuries are thine while I have hardly seen / Some twenty summers cast their green for autumn’s gaudy liveries’ (ll. 17-18). This number is significant: not only is Wilde’s sphinx therefore described as being immensely older than the oldest known sphinx (the Great Sphinx is, by modern estimates, around four thousand five hundred years old), but immensely older than the world itself had only recently been imagined to be. It was only in 1859, following the discovery of manmade flint tools alongside the bones of Pleistocene-era mammals, that Charles Lyell had reluctantly admitted that ‘man was old enough, at least, to have coexisted with the

⁴⁰ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Sphinx’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, 8 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), I, l. 8. All further references are to this edition.

Siberian mammoth’ – meaning at least twenty thousand years old.⁴¹ A thousand centuries must still, in 1894, have seemed an almost incomprehensibly vast swath of time; at a hundred thousand years old, this sphinx is a product of the deep past.

Wilde’s speaker goes on to detail the exploits of his ‘false sphinx’ (l. 171), offering a highly-coloured, decadent account of her past deeds, and speculating that the creature was present at various pivotal events from Egyptian, Greek, and Biblical mythology. With her ‘curved archaic smile’ (l. 86) and propensity for silence, Wilde’s eternal sphinx draws an obvious line of descent from Pater’s all-knowing, perpetually indifferent Mona Lisa. At times, the sphinx seems to function as a kind of avatar of the Great Sphinx statue itself: Wilde writes that ‘the Holy child [...] slept beneath your shade’ (ll. 31-32), which, as Patricia Flanagan Behrendt observes, appears to be a direct reference to Luc Olivier Merson’s 1879 painting *Rest on the Flight into Egypt*: a depiction of Mary and the infant Jesus sleeping between the paws of the Great Sphinx, which has raised its stone head to smile beatifically heavenwards.⁴²

At other times, Wilde’s sphinx is a living, acting being; much of the poem is composed of a fanciful list of her various lovers, which include gryphons, chimaeras, and the god Ammon. Among that number are creatures whose presence appears to link the sphinx with a palaeontological, rather than merely archaeological, timescale. We hear that she once entertained ‘giant Lizards’ (l. 47), ‘gilt-scaled dragons’ (l. 50), and the biblical monsters Leviathan and Behemoth (l. 56). Each of these implies a connection with a deeper past than that of ancient Egypt. Most obviously, the mention of ‘giant lizards’ immediately suggests the word ‘dinosaur’, coined by Richard Owen in 1842 from the Greek *deinos* (terribly great) and *sauros* (lizard). Dinosaur, then, literally means ‘great lizard’. Wilde’s description of vast creatures ‘crouch[ing]’ on ‘reedy banks’ (l. 47) evokes not our contemporary understanding of lizards as usually small and mobile creatures, but an image of the kind of heavy, ponderous beasts Owen himself had designed along with Waterhouse

⁴¹ Charles Lyell, ‘On the Occurrence of Works of Human Art in Post-pliocene Deposits’, in *Report of the Twenty-Ninth Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (London: John Murray, 1860), pp. 93-95 (p. 93).

⁴² Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), p. 60.

Hawkins for the waterside tableau at Crystal Palace (Figure 8). (We can assume that Wilde, who had lectured at the Palace in 1884, was familiar with the sculptures.)

The mention of dragons, while superficially referring to creatures as fantastical as the chimaera, may similarly be argued to imply a link with the prehistoric past. John McGowan-Hartmann argues convincingly that '[a]n important and intentional cultural connection between the dragon and the dinosaur can actually be plotted historically'.⁴³ Focusing chiefly upon Owen's construction of the Crystal Palace dinosaur display (in a guide to which Owen himself refers to 'a flying reptile or dragon, called Pterodactyle'), McGowan-Hartmann demonstrates that the word 'dragon' was frequently employed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to refer to animals which, while now extinct, had really once existed.⁴⁴ Indeed, prehistoric 'dragons' as understood in the nineteenth century arguably had more in common with the sphinx than simply their mythic name. It has been widely observed that the Crystal Palace dinosaurs are themselves hybrids of a kind. The creations of Owen and Waterhouse Hawkins are curiously motley in appearance: heavy, quadrupedal beasts whose elephantine bodies are at odds with their scaly skin and reptilian heads. They are an uncanny melding of mammal and reptile, and to refer to them, as many nineteenth-century sources do, as 'monsters' (beings defined, as we have already seen, by their 'incoherent', unclassifiable bodily forms) seems perfectly apposite.⁴⁵ McGowan-Hartmann argues, in fact, that late nineteenth-century pictorial representations of dinosaurs in general tended to represent them as 'visual hybrids' in which 'features of the dragon [combine] with increasingly recognisable elements of extinct animals'.⁴⁶ In her dalliances with 'dragons', then, Wilde's sphinx is implied to be engaging with creatures that really once existed, but whose taxonomically composite appearances link them with a mythic tradition.

Wilde's reference to the Leviathan and Behemoth is also significant for this thesis. Both creatures appear most prominently in the Book of Job, mentioned as examples of the

⁴³ John McGowan-Hartmann, 'Shadow of the Dragon: The Convergence of Myth and Science in Nineteenth Century Paleontological Imagery', in *The Journal of Social History*, 47 (2013), pp. 47-70 (p. 49).

⁴⁴ Richard Owen, *Geology and Inhabitants of the Ancient World* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1854), p. 11.

⁴⁵ Cohen, p. 6.

⁴⁶ McGowan Hartmann, pp. 59-60.

unknowable greatness of God, who has dominion over these powerful beasts. The Behemoth is an apparently vast land-living animal, whose ‘bones are as pipes of grass, his gristles are like bars of iron’ (Job 40. 18). The Leviathan is a scaly water-dweller, with a dragon-like ability to breathe out smoke and flames. Having no obvious living referent, these animals had long provoked the interest of theologians and scientists alike, and in 1835, an article on the subject by Thomas Thompson (‘one of the Vice Presidents of the Hull Literary and Philosophical Society’) appeared in *The Magazine of Natural History*.⁴⁷ Thompson first notes that previous thinkers believed the leviathan to refer to a whale or a crocodile, and the behemoth a hippopotamus or elephant. He, however, disagrees with all of these readings, and offers an alternative interpretation – one which, in 1835, would only recently have become available to him. The biblical Leviathan, he argues, refers to

that animal of the crocodylian family known to geologists by the name of megalosaurus, an animal proved to have once existed even in this country; of immense size, even 70 ft. long, with limbs exceeding in size those of the elephant.⁴⁸

The Behemoth, meanwhile, is identified as ‘the now extinct saurian animal known to geologists by the name of iguanodon, found in a fossil state in the same situation as the fossil megalosaurus’.⁴⁹ Both *Megalosaurus* and *Iguanodon* were newly known from excavated remnants: the former named by William Buckland in 1824, the latter by Gideon Mantell in 1825. They had not yet been united under the order *Dinosauria*, which, as noted above, would not be described by Owen until 1842.

Thompson appears to have been the first to draw this comparison between the biblical and the palaeontological, but he was certainly not the last to do so. The hypothesis was often seized upon by clergymen, appearing as it did to offer a neat and scripture-friendly answer to uncomfortable questions thrown up by recent developments in geology. The species invoked sometimes varied, but the basic premise remained the same. *Geological Confirmations of the Truth of Scripture*, an 1850 work by the Presbyterian minister Warrand Carlile (written in an attempt to reconcile biblical narratives with the

⁴⁷ Thomas Thompson, ‘An Attempt to Ascertain the Animals designated in the Scriptures by the Names Leviathan and Behemoth’, in *The Magazine of Natural History*, 8 (1835), pp. 193-197; 307-321 (p. 193).

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 308.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p. 313.

geological arguments set forth in Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), while also refuting the evolutionary thesis therein) speculates that 'it is not improbable' that the Behemoth corresponds to the mammoth, and the Leviathan to the pliosaur.⁵⁰ An 1881 commentary on the Old Testament by the American academic Daniel Denison Whedon mentions the belief of various scholars that 'behemoth answers to some extinct pachyderm of the mammoth or mastodon species'.⁵¹

In fact, we need look no further than Wilde himself for an example of this approach. He draws an explicit connection between the biblical and the geological in his 1891 essay 'The Critic as Artist':

The man of science can from some tiny bone, or the mere impress of a foot upon a rock, recreate for us the winged dragon or Titan lizard that once made the earth shake beneath its tread, can call Behemoth out of his cave, and make Leviathan swim once more across the startled sea.⁵²

The palaeontologist's ability to reconstruct extinct species – to bring them back to life, in one sense – is represented as analogous with a revival of Behemoth and Leviathan. Wilde himself having made a direct comparison between the biblical monsters and contemporary palaeontological discoveries, his decision to link his temporally ambiguous sphinx with these beings appears a further deliberate nod to the creature's geological significance.

Finally, the poem elides archaeological and palaeontological timescales by dwelling upon images of excavation and of reconstruction. The god Ammon – chief among the sphinx's many lovers – is now to be found only in the form of a broken and buried statue:

The god is scattered here and there: deep hidden in the windy sand
I saw his giant granite hand still clenched in impotent despair.

And many a wandering caravan of stately negroes silken-shawled,
Crossing the desert, halts appalled before the neck that none can span.

⁵⁰ Warrand Carlile, *Geological Confirmations of the Truth of Scripture* (Glasgow: Blackie and Co., 1850), p. 59.

⁵¹ Daniel Denison Whedon, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (New York: Phillips and Hunt, 1881), p. 275.

⁵² Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Criticism*, ed. by Josephine Guy, 8 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), IV, p. 201.

And many a bearded Bedouin draws back his yellow-striped burnous
To gaze upon the Titan thews of him who was thy paladin.

Go, seek his fragments on the moor and wash them in the evening dew,
And from their pieces make anew thy mutilated paramour!

Go, seek them where they lie alone and from their broken pieces make
Thy bruised bedfellow! And wake mad passions in the senseless stone! (ll. 115-
124)

The image of the fragmentary colossus inevitably recalls the ‘half-sunk’ form of Shelley’s Ozymandias, and the speaker’s command to the sphinx – that she excavate her dead lover, and piece his body back together – is, superficially, a reference to the Egyptian myth in which the body of the god Osiris is dismembered, and his wife Isis must find and reconstruct the pieces. Yet these lines also serve to connect Egyptian history and mythology with the deeper past. Wilde’s references to these vast and buried fragments suggest both human and pre-human time. The sphinx’s proposed resurrection of her lover from scattered remnants is reminiscent of modern attempts to reconstitute ancient species, beginning with speculative drawings like Mantell’s famous sketch of a lizard-like *Iguanodon* (c. 1824), and progressing to three-dimensional restorations such as the Crystal Palace exhibit, or the eventual display of entire or near-entire wired dinosaur skeletons. Once again, human and evolutionary timescales coalesce around the figure of the sphinx.

H. G. Wells’ future-past

Wilde’s sphinx flirts with the deep past, her liaisons with extinct creatures suggesting an ability to occupy both archaeological and palaeontological timescales. Yet these interactions with the prehistoric past are implied, even within the world of the poem, to be metaphorical. The speaker himself acknowledges that the sphinx remains silent throughout; the poem is composed not of her responses to his questions, but of his own frenzied speculations as to her history. It seems likely that she is not even a genuine Egyptian fragment but a modern reproduction. Behrendt notes that, since sphinxes were a popular subject in the Victorian decorative arts, it is quite possible that Wilde’s version of

the creature was inspired by something as unromantic as ‘a bookend [or] a table leg’.⁵³ The poem deals in ideas of deep time, but is firmly located in the figurative, rather than the literal.

In *The Time Machine* (1895), by contrast, Wells’ inclusion of the mechanism of actual time travel allows him to address more explicitly the temporal questions only suggested by Wilde’s poem. Roger Luckhurst in fact identifies Wilde’s ‘The Sphinx’ – published only a year before *The Time Machine* – as a probable inspiration for the White Sphinx of Wells’ novella.⁵⁴ This seems plausible, particularly given the fact that Wells’ White Sphinx, despite its centrality to the text’s action, is, like the sphinx of Wilde’s poem, a statue, rather than a living being. Whether or not Wells consciously drew upon Wilde’s poem, *The Time Machine* further develops a connection between the figure of the sphinx and deep time. In this case, the focus is not upon the past, but the future: in De Quincey’s words, ‘the eternity which was to be’. As we shall see, however, Wells’ ‘deep future’ is constantly haunted by the deep past: posthuman temporalities are revealed to be disturbingly analogous to pre-human temporalities, and future evolutionary decline mimics primordial indifferentiation. This layering of times finds physical expression in the figure of the White Sphinx.

The unnamed Time Traveller voyages 800,000 years into the future, to find the Surrey landscape of his day transformed into a bountiful garden, littered with the decaying monuments of an earlier civilisation. The first of these structures to be encountered by the Time Traveller has a familiar appearance:

‘I stood up and looked round me. A colossal figure, carved apparently in some white stone, loomed indistinctly beyond the rhododendrons through the hazy downpour. But all else of the world was invisible.

‘My sensations would be hard to describe. As the columns of hail grew thinner, I saw the white figure more distinctly. It was very large, for a silver birch-tree touched its shoulder. It was of white marble, in shape something like a winged sphinx, but the wings, instead of being carried vertically at the sides, were spread so that it seemed to hover. The pedestal, it appeared to me, was of bronze, and was thick with verdigris. It chanced that the face was towards me; the sightless eyes

⁵³ Behrendt, p. 59.

⁵⁴ Roger Luckhurst, critical notes in H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, ed. by Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 106.

seemed to watch me; there was the faint shadow of a smile on the lips. It was greatly weather-worn, and that imparted an unpleasant suggestion of disease.’⁵⁵

This looming shape, with its mysterious smile, appears overtly symbolic. The creature’s central significance to the story is further substantiated by the fact that the novella’s first edition boasts a cover image of a winged sphinx (Figure 9). J. R. Hammond writes that the statue’s presence functions as ‘an implicit challenge to both the narrator and the reader. What, it seems to ask, is the meaning of the story?’.⁵⁶

Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of Wells’ White Sphinx is that it plays much the same role as does its Egyptian cousin in the poems examined above: that of an impassive observer of civilisational collapse. With its worn face, it is itself physical evidence of what Keats, writing of the maimed and broken Elgin Marbles, described as ‘the rude wasting of old Time’.⁵⁷ While attempting to decode the workings of this strange future society, the Time Traveller observes that

‘I felt I lacked a clue. I felt—how shall I put it? Suppose you found an inscription, with sentences here and there in excellent plain English, and interpolated therewith, others made up of words, of letters even, absolutely unknown to you? Well, on the third day of my visit, that was how the world of Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One presented itself to me!’ (p. 54)

The Time Traveller’s references to an unknown and cryptic alphabet further the idea of a connection between the landscape of the year 802,701, and the ruins of ancient Egypt. Paul Jordan writes that, prior to the birth of Egyptology in the wake of Napoleon’s campaign,

everything about ancient Egypt – including the Sphinx – was something of a riddle. [...] The language was not understood at all and the hieroglyphs were usually thought of as some complicated sort of picture writing with mystical meanings rather than as an everyday script representing the sounds of everyday words.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, in *The Works of H. G. Wells*, Atlantic Edn, 28 vols (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924), I, pp. 1-118 (p. 27). All further references will be to this edition.

⁵⁶ John R. Hammond, *H. G. Wells’ The Time Machine: A Reference Guide* (London: Praeger, 2004), p. 93.

⁵⁷ John Keats, ‘On Seeing the Elgin Marbles’, in *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 293, ll. 12-13.

⁵⁸ Jordan, p. 21.

For the Time Traveller, the future England is as unreadable, as strange, as ancient Egypt had been in the centuries between its collapse and the eventual reinterpretation of its language. And, as with many nineteenth-century receptions of ancient Egypt, the White Sphinx functions as an embodiment of this lost and unknowable civilisation. It exists to suggest what does not: to evoke the vanished society of which it is a remnant.

This is a convincing reading. But Wells' sphinx, like most sphinxes, resists any easy or single interpretation, instead appearing open to a range of hermeneutic possibilities. While the Time Traveller's mention of an unknown script brings to mind the ruins of Egypt, his reference to a missing 'clue' evokes the other strand of the sphinx mythos: that of the Theban riddler. Numerous critics have noted that, like the monster of Greek legend, Wells' sphinx appears to offer a riddle which can be answered only by the same response as that given by Oedipus: 'Man'. Gazing at the statue soon after his arrival in the future, the Time Traveller wonders what might have happened to humanity across the intervening years:

'I looked up again at the crouching white shape, and the full temerity of my voyage came suddenly upon me. What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness—a foul creature to be incontinently slain.'

(pp. 27-28)

Margaret Debelius observes that

[l]ike so many passages in the short novel, this one raises more questions than it answers. [...] Why does the sight of a statue of a mythical creature suggest that men might have grown into something 'inhuman'? And how would a sphinx, a symbol of an ancient culture, make him feel that *he* is the 'old-world savage'?⁵⁹

While Debelius goes on to address these questions with reference to *fin-de-siècle* concerns surrounding race and empire – undoubtedly a fruitful angle to take with *The Time Machine* – my own approach to Wells' sphinx will focus largely upon its connection to geological or evolutionary time. Because, of course, the human race *has* grown 'inhuman' in the

⁵⁹ Margaret Debelius, *The Riddle of the Sphinx at the Fin de Siècle* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Princeton University, 2000), p. 60.

millennia since the Time Traveller set out upon his voyage, although not in quite the way he imagines. Instead, it has split into two distinct strands: the beautiful but dissolute Eloi, who have lost all intellectual acuity, and the intelligent but monstrous Morlocks, who inhabit underground industrial structures, and feed upon the Eloi by night. The Eloi are all that is left of a feckless, pleasure-loving upper class, while the abhuman Morlocks represent the remnants of an abused proletariat who gradually evolved into a chthonic species as a result of increasingly inhumane living and working conditions. While the Eloi are superficially attractive, both species are presented as degenerate, and it is the Time Traveller who ultimately comes to regard these inhabitants of the future Earth as something akin to ‘animals’, rather than the other way around.

The White Sphinx, whose appearance immediately prompts the Time Traveller to question the possible ramifications of human evolution, may therefore be read as a descendant of the riddling Greek sphinx. Wells specifies that this sphinx is winged – it is in fact one of the first details we hear about the statue. Wings are, as we have seen, a feature of the Greek, rather than the Egyptian sphinx, and so this detail alone may be seen as a clue as to the creature’s heritage. The Time Traveller is also repeatedly described as standing before the sphinx to look up at it, particularly at moments of uncertainty or confusion. This occurs first in the passage quoted above, directly following his arrival in the year 802,701, and again when he returns from exploring the future world to discover that his Time Machine has vanished:

‘When I reached the lawn my worst fears were realized. Not a trace of the thing was to be seen. I felt faint and cold when I faced the empty space among the black tangle of bushes. I ran round it furiously, as if the thing might be hidden in a corner, and then stopped abruptly, with my hands clutching my hair. Above me towered the sphinx, upon the bronze pedestal, white, shining, leprous, in the light of the rising moon. It seemed to smile in mockery of my dismay.’ (p. 45)

This description closely follows the almost universally accepted formula for visual depictions of the encounter at Thebes, in which Oedipus, usually shown in an attitude of thought, stands directly before the sphinx, who sits or lies above him, often resting on a stony outcrop or pillar. This ‘canonical’ presentation is seen in everything from classical-

era red figure vases, to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' famous painting (1808-27); the echoes of such images are clear in this scene.⁶⁰

Giving further weight to the reading of the Time Traveller as an Oedipus figure is the fact – first noted by David Ketterer, and since commented upon by numerous critics – that he is repeatedly referred to as suffering from an injury to his foot, just like Oedipus himself.⁶¹ The Time Traveller even describes the afflicted foot as “swollen at the ankle” (p. 80), recalling the direct translation of the Greek hero's name as ‘swollen-foot’. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the White Sphinx literally contains within itself the answer to the Time Traveller's question (“What has become of humanity?”), since it is later established that the base of the statue serves as an entrance to the underworld community of the Morlocks. The riddle of the original Theban sphinx – most often transcribed as ‘what goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at midday, and three legs in the evening?’ – already deals with questions of human endurance and change within time. The riddle implicitly posed by Wells' sphinx simply replaces ontogeny with phylogeny, examining not the development of a single human life, but the broader arc of human species (d)evolution.

To recognise the White Sphinx as a version of the Greek riddler is to suggest that it is in possession of an essential and arcane truth that its questioner must attempt to ascertain. We have already seen that this is true, in the sense that the Morlocks dwell beneath the statue. I will argue, however, that the truth held and embodied by Wells' sphinx extends beyond this interpretation. I began this chapter with a quotation from *Time's Arrow*, *Time's Cycle*, Stephen Jay Gould's account of the development of the theory of geological time, in which he claims that deep time is so unimaginable a concept to us that we can only hope to comprehend it in the form of metaphor.⁶² The White Sphinx of *The Time Machine* functions as the metaphor by which its reader might hope to approach, Oedipus-like, the vast and looming question of deep time. In this sense, it is clearly as much an inheritor of the nineteenth-century sphinx-as-watcher archetype – usually linked with the Egyptian sphinx – as of the Greek riddler tradition. Like Wilde's sphinx, the White

⁶⁰ Renger, p. 53.

⁶¹ David Ketterer, ‘Oedipus as Time Traveller’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 9 (1982), pp. 340-341 (p. 340).

⁶² Gould, *Time's Arrow*, *Time's Cycle*, p. 3.

Sphinx of *The Time Machine* is doubly hybrid: between human and animal, and between Egyptian and Greek mythic traditions.

The White Sphinx mediates between deep time and what Aaron Worth, in his essay on Arthur Machen, refers to as ‘deep history’ – a phrase borrowed from Daniel Lord Smail’s abovementioned book *On Deep History and the Brain*. Deep history is based upon a rejection of the traditional understanding of history as having begun with the genesis of the written word. Instead, ‘deep historians’ locate the birth of history at the evolutionary development of modern humans. In other words, deep history includes within its remit the portion of deep time inhabited by humanity. While deep history was not yet a named concept in the late nineteenth century – in fact, Smail argues that historians of the time ‘recoiled’ from the idea, choosing to relegate pre-literate, human-inhabited time to the foggy designation of ‘prehistory’ – Worth argues that an anxious awareness of the implications of deep time for our understanding of history is nonetheless evident in nineteenth century historiography, as well as in Machen’s fiction writing.⁶³

For Worth, the significance of deep history for writers such as Machen lies in its blending of ‘the conceptual spaces of historiography and deep (evolutionary or palaeontological) time, in a move whose concomitants include the imaginative transference of such conceptual elements as the idea of a continuity between nature and culture’.⁶⁴ Worth’s essay focuses solely upon Machen, but I believe that this aspect of his argument may fruitfully be brought to bear upon *The Time Machine*, a text whose inclusion of literal time travel (as opposed to the nebulous temporal transcendence seen in Helen Vaughan’s possession of thousand year old wine, or her ability to visibly ‘devolve’, in *The Great God Pan*) adds an interesting dynamic to questions of deep history. While Wells’ text deals with the future rather than the past, I would argue that the society visited by the Time Traveller – as a distant temporal ‘location’, inhabited by hominins – should be included under the umbrella of deep history; particularly since Wells’ vision of the future is so deeply influenced by ideas of the past.

⁶³ Smail, pp. 1-2;

Worth, p. 217.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 219.

Worth's mention of the elision of nature and culture is particularly relevant here. Worth writes of Machen that he 'imaginatively [attributes] an impossible antiquity to symbolic forms' such as the faun, thus suggesting an unsettling melding of 'the cultural and the biological'.⁶⁵ Rather than being projected impossibly into the past, Wells' sphinx occupies a distant future; yet the implications of its presence there are equally disturbing, and similarly serve to blur the lines between organic and human-made. The White Sphinx is, we must assume, the product of an earlier human culture – one that thrived before the evolutionary schism between Eloi and Morlocks developed. The derelict state in which the Time Traveller finds the statue is, as we have already seen, visual evidence of the depth of time that has passed between its creation and the year 802,701. The fact that the figure is that of a sphinx, a shape recognisable from Egyptian and classical antiquity, suggests, in Patrick Parrinder's words, 'a grotesque repetition implying that what is to come is (like the Sphinx's famous riddle, to which the answer is "a man") no more and no less than we already know'.⁶⁶ The civilisation which produced the White Sphinx recapitulated the iconography of Ancient Egypt in its creation; rather than ascending to new heights, this supposedly advanced future society circled back upon the ancient past – and, like the empires of antiquity, ultimately fell.

This idea of recapitulation is doubly significant to the figure of the sphinx. Not only does its presence suggest a regression to the belief systems of earlier societies, but its physical form – part human, part animal – echoes the evolutionary regression visible in the inhabitants of the future earth. While the Eloi remain at least superficially human in appearance, the Morlocks are consistently described as bestial. Glimpsing one of the creatures' luminous eyes in the darkness, the Time Traveller admits to feeling "the old instinctive dread of wild beasts" (p. 59). His first proper look at a Morlock leads him to liken it initially to "a queer little ape" (p. 59), and then to "a human spider" (p. 60). These comparisons serve at once to emphasise the creature's proximity to, and divergence from, humanity. One of Wells' first references to the sphinx, meanwhile, describes it as a "crouching white shape" (p. 27), a phrase echoed in the numerous allusions to the pallor of

⁶⁵ Worth, p. 217.

⁶⁶ Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 16.

the Morlocks, and their stooping, ape-like movements. The sphinx, a being hovering unsettlingly between human and beast, anticipates the future humanity's descent back into animality. Moreover, since evolutionary science denies human specificity, arguing instead that our species developed from animal ancestors, the sphinx's human-inhuman form also suggests humanity's prehistoric origins (Huxley, after all, reached first for the image of mythic hybrids when describing our proto-human forebears).⁶⁷ Both the deep past and the deep future of human evolution are thus implied by the White Sphinx, with its presence suggesting an unsettling temporal recapitulation. As both a cultural artefact created by humans, and a transitional form embodying evolutionary time, Wells' sphinx is therefore able to mediate between deep time and deep history. This reading is compounded by the fact that the Time Machine – which we know to be capable of both 'forward' and 'backward' temporal travel – is ultimately retrieved from inside the base of the statue. The White Sphinx may thus be said to contain, and therefore embody, time itself.

The idea of deep future as recapitulating deep past was not of Wells' own invention; Charles Lyell had famously suggested that coming epochs would see the return of earlier climatic conditions, accompanied by flora and fauna akin to those of the prehistoric past. In an 1830 letter to Gideon Mantell, he writes that '[a]ll these [climatic] changes are to happen again, and Iguanodons and their congeners must as assuredly live again in the latitude of Cuckfield as they have done so'.⁶⁸ Zimmerman observes that, while Lyell is often associated with a cyclic interpretation of time, 'reading time as purely cyclic reduces time's complexity, and Lyell also embraced the linear. [...] In his view, progress *and* decay are the Earth's texts' [emphasis mine].⁶⁹ Wells' approach to time is similarly complex. While the evolutionary development seen in his vision of the deep future in many senses recalls and recapitulates the deep past, it appears simultaneously to be moving linearly towards a set end point of complete indifferentiation and destruction. When, having eventually regained his machine, the Time Traveller voyages even further into the future, he finds the earth barren and cold, and devoid of any being even distantly resembling humanity. Instead, the Time Traveller encounters "a thing like a huge white butterfly",

⁶⁷ Huxley, *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Charles Lyell, Letter to Gideon Mantell, February 20th, 1830, in *Life and Letters of C. Lyell*, ed. by K. Lyell, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1881), I, p. 262.

⁶⁹ Zimmerman, p. 38.

which emits a “dismal” screaming sound as it flees from “a monstrous crab-like creature” with a mouth “all alive with appetite” (pp. 106-107). This predator-prey dynamic is familiar from the earlier section of the novella, and, while the Time Traveller himself never explicitly suggests as much, it seems likely that the frail and defenceless butterfly-creatures are all that remain of the Eloi, while the vicious crab-monsters represent a further degeneration of the Morlocks.

Travelling still further ahead, he finds that even this level of recognisability has been lost: all that remains is a sterile sea, and one living creature: “a round thing, the size of a football perhaps [...] tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about” (p. 110). Sickened by this image of utter degeneracy, he boards his machine once more, and returns to the nineteenth century. Alex Eisenstein suggests that this ‘Last Creature’ may, like the butterflies and the crab-monsters, be read as a final and ultimate degeneration of humanity: ‘[A] highly specialised and atrophied edition of genus *Homo*. Note particularly the size of the creature; it is about “the size of a football” – which is to say, about the size of a human head’.⁷⁰ Eisenstein suggests that the Time Traveller’s nauseated response to this creature stems from his subconscious recognition of ‘what man has become’.⁷¹ There is no sense, here, of an ongoing cycle in which humanity will someday rise again to greatness – only of a gradual waning into shapelessness and extinction. Yet this grim vision of future life also inevitably recalls the earliest stages of evolutionary development: the amorphous, tentacled creature which we presume to be the last vestige of humanity might just as easily be taken for a sea creature from millions of years in the past. The evolutionary wheel seems, at its stopping-point, to have come almost full circle, ending with a primitive life-form described by W. Warren Wagar as ‘nothing more than a glorified horseshoe crab’.⁷² Thus the future presided over by the White Sphinx may be read both as one stage on a linear journey towards the annihilation of life on earth, and as part of a cyclical return to the deep past.

⁷⁰ Alex Eisenstein, “‘The Time Machine’ and the End of Man”, *Science Fiction Studies*, 3 (1976), 161-165 (p. 163).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), p. 51.

The riddle with no answer

I have discussed the implications of reading Wells' White Sphinx as a version of the riddling Greek sphinx: a being in possession of privileged information. Interpreted thus, the White Sphinx seems to promise a key to the enigma of deep time. Now, however, I will turn to the discomfiting possibility that there is, after all, no such key to be found. As we have seen, in this reading of the text, the Time Traveller functions as a futuristic Oedipus, standing before the sphinx and attempting to answer her riddle. Yet throughout *The Time Machine*, human comprehension is represented as faltering and failing in the face of deep time.

This failure is seen nowhere more clearly than in the scenes involving the Palace of Green Porcelain, the derelict museum to which the Time Traveller voyages, accompanied by Weena, an Eloi woman with whom he forms a kind of friendship. On his way to the Palace, resting overnight and in fear for his safety, he realises that the night sky has undergone a change in the many millennia that have passed between the time in which he once lived, and that in which he now finds himself:

‘All the old constellations had gone from the sky [...]: that slow movement which is imperceptible in a hundred human lifetimes, had long since rearranged them in unfamiliar groupings. [...]

‘Looking at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life. I thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements out of the unknown past into the unknown future. I thought of the great precessional cycle that the pole of the earth describes. Only forty times had that silent revolution occurred during all the years that I had traversed. And during these few revolutions all the activity, all the traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence.’ (p.79)

Here, more perhaps than anywhere else in the text, there is a clear recognition of the disturbing enormity of deep time, as well as its potential to confound ideas once held as essential. The stars have shifted from their familiar places; the sky itself is no longer legible. It is significant that this realisation of temporal vastness occurs in the pages directly before the Time Traveller reaches the Palace of Green Porcelain, a locus within which the ability of time to lay waste to human understanding is made particularly evident. The passage is reminiscent of the existential dread experienced by Doctor Matheson in

Machen's *The Great God Pan*, as he watches Helen Vaughan's evolutionary recapitulation undo any faith in the fixity of the human form.

Initially, the Time Traveller merely seeks to find a building impregnable to the Morlocks; it is only upon his arrival at the Palace that he realises the building must once have been a museum, inferring this from the presence of "a long gallery lit by many side windows" (p. 83). Again, an unintelligible script is referenced: an inscription "in some unknown character" (p. 82) appears across the façade of the museum, suggesting once again a link with Egyptian hieroglyphics. Neither the Time Traveller nor Weena is able to decipher it; indeed "I learned [...] that the bare idea of writing had never entered her head" (p. 82). For the Time Traveller, this is proof of an essential lack in Weena's being; the revelation of her illiteracy prompts him to comment that "[s]he always seemed to me, I fancy, more human than she was" (p. 82). Humanity is here characterised by the ability to interpret the marks and symbols left by earlier generations of our species. Yet in this future world, the educated Time Traveller finds himself as ill-equipped to decode these remnants as the unlettered Weena.

This obscurity continues as the two make their way further into the ruined museum. They are greeted by the "strange and gaunt" skeleton of "some extinct creature after the fashion of the Megatherium" (p. 83), leading the Time Traveller to conclude that this is a gallery of palaeontology. While he recognises an object here and there (the bones of a Brontosaurus; a sea urchin with which Weena idly plays), for the most part, the pair's arrival at the museum is characterised by opacity and incomprehension. The palaeontological display is composed of "a remarkable array of miscellaneous objects [...] shrouded in the same grey covering [of dust]" (p. 83); rather than fulfilling its intended purpose of elucidatory classification, the museum has collapsed into indifferenciation.

Entering a gallery of natural history, the Time Traveller finds that the evidence of evolutionary development, despite the painstaking attempts of this vanished society to preserve it, is now as illegible as the script on the front of the museum:

'Apparently this section had been devoted to natural history, but everything had long since passed out of recognition. A few shrivelled and blackened vestiges of what had once been stuffed animals, desiccated mummies in jars that had once held spirit, a brown dust of departed plants: that was all! I was sorry for that, because I

should have been glad to trace the patient readjustments by which the conquest of animated nature had been attained.’ (pp. 84-85)

Due to the degraded state of the exhibits, which have rotted away over millennia “with extreme sureness if with extreme slowness” (p. 83), the Time Traveller is unable to observe the evolutionary path by which the world arrived at its current state. What was once a library is discovered to contain only “the decaying vestiges of books. They had long since dropped to pieces, and every semblance of print had left them’ (p. 87). In a further instance of disturbing regression, the museum itself has become an archaeological site – and one whose artefacts the Time Traveller finds himself incapable of interpreting.

Much has been written about the Victorian fascination with classification and display, a tendency which is perhaps most evident in the development of a ‘museum culture’ during the nineteenth century. London alone saw the extensive redevelopment of the British Museum, with Robert Smirke’s neoclassical edifice completed in 1847; the opening, ten years later, of the South Kensington Museum, and the creation, between 1873 and 1881, of an imposing new building for the Natural History Museum. Wells draws an explicit connection with such ambitious nineteenth-century projects when he has the Time Traveller remark, upon entering the Palace of Green Porcelain, that “[c]learly we stood among the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington!” (p. 83). The South Kensington Museum was originally based around a core collection of exhibits culled from the Great Exhibition of 1851, and critics have been quick to observe a possible connection between the Palace of Green Porcelain, and the Crystal Palace, whose Hyde Park incarnation housed the Great Exhibition. Wells himself is known to have visited the Sydenham Palace as a child, and, in a later work (*Kipps*, published 1905) refers directly to Waterhouse Hawkins’ Labyrinthodont statue.⁷³ The decorative exterior of Wells’ Palace of Green Porcelain, combined with the name given to it by the Time Traveller, seem to intentionally invite comparison with the Crystal Palace.

The Great Exhibition itself may be seen as paradigmatic of the mid-nineteenth-century classifying drive: Thomas Richards writes that ‘[a]s vast as it was in execution, the Great Exhibition of 1851 had at its root a single conception: that all human life and cultural

⁷³ Parrinder, pp. 53-54.

endeavour could be fully represented by exhibiting manufactured articles'.⁷⁴ A complex system of display was devised by the scientist and later MP Lyon Playfair.⁷⁵ The Exhibition, and its system of display, represented a perceived pinnacle of human achievement. The development of a supposed classificatory structure for all the world's industry and production implied a dominion over the world itself; an ability to comprehend, and therefore master, all things. Following the Crystal Palace's removal to Sydenham, it played host to a series of exhibits ranging from a Natural History display to a series of 'fine arts courts', with each representing a different location or historical period, and all arranged according to 'culture, chronology and geographical region'.⁷⁶ As noted above, the 'Geological Island' of Owen and Waterhouse Hawkins is likewise arranged chronologically, with each inhabitant of the prehistoric world occupying its correct temporal location. Sarah Victoria Turner observes that 'the emphasis at Sydenham was very much on a teleological sequence of courts that represented 'progress'' towards a European ideal.⁷⁷ As with the Great Exhibition, the Palace's South London incarnation was, at least at its genesis, a shrine to the educating and containing powers of classification.

Wells' decaying museum bears an undeniable resemblance to such institutions. Parrinder observes that:

[T]he age to which it is a monument is, pre-eminently, the nineteenth century. [...] The museum as an institution apparently continued to hold the same key position, and to fulfil the same function, as it did in the age of Queen Victoria.⁷⁸

The Palace of Green Porcelain is a museum of *everything*, displaying not only human industry and culture, but also natural and earth sciences. The comprehensiveness of the museum's collections only serves to emphasise the magnitude of the loss its decay represents. Marooned in an alien time, the Time Traveller is unable to interpret what

⁷⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 17.

⁷⁵ Introduction, *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851* (London: William Clowes and Spicer Brothers, 1851), p. 22.

⁷⁶ Kate Nichols and Sarah Victoria Turner, "'What is to become of the Crystal Palace?'" The Crystal Palace After 1851' in *After 1851: the Material and Visual Cultures of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 1-23 (p. 7).

⁷⁷ Sarah Victoria Turner, 'From Ajanta to Sydenham: 'Indian' art at the Sydenham Palace', in *After 1851*, pp. 122-142 (pp. 126-127).

⁷⁸ Parrinder, p. 74.

vestiges of intelligence remain. The Eloi are capable only of play, as evidenced by Weena's toying with the sea urchin, and by the sight of "rare fossils broken to pieces or threaded in strings upon reeds" (p. 83). The Morlocks, meanwhile, have "bodily removed" some of the exhibits (p. 84), presumably for their own mysterious ends, yet their brutal chthonic existence suggests that, despite being of superior intelligence to the decadent Eloi, they possess no recognisable 'culture' of their own.

While the scenes in the Palace of Green Porcelain take place a day's walk away from the White Sphinx, the enigmatic statue is never far from the Time Traveller's mind. He has realised by this point that his machine may be hidden within the sphinx's base, and, as he first approaches the Palace, he hopes that he might find within its walls

'some means of fire, so that I should have the weapon of a torch at hand [...] . Then I wanted to arrange some contrivance to break open the doors of bronze under the White Sphinx. I had in mind a battering ram. I had a persuasion that if I could enter those doors and carry a blaze of light before me I should discover the Time Machine and escape.' (pp. 81-82)

The Time Traveller imagines breaking down the doors of the White Sphinx, and entering the statue in "a blaze of light" to uncover whatever lies within. This would be the ultimate fulfilment of his role as Oedipus-figure: what Willis Goth Regier describes as 'the overthrow of enigma by thought, of nature by man, of mystery by clarity'.⁷⁹ Yet Eleanor Cook observes that the Oedipus myth does not end in certainty or illumination, but in 'darkness and blinding': upon discovering the truth of his parentage, Oedipus stabs out his own eyes, and lives out the rest of his life sightless and in exile.⁸⁰

In his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835), Hegel writes of the Theban encounter as an example of human mastery over enigma: 'Oedipus found the simple answer: a man, and he tumbled the Sphinx from the rock.'⁸¹ In this reading of the myth, Oedipus' response is characterised as an objective truth, and sphinx and riddle both are dismissed as an almost comically feeble obstacle to human ingenuity. Yet the nineteenth century saw an increasing tendency for writers and artists to recast the Oedipus' answer as a failure of human reason,

⁷⁹ Willis Goth Regier, *The Book of the Sphinx* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 5.

⁸⁰ Cook, p. 70.

⁸¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T. M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), I, p. 361.

rather than a triumph, and to depict the sphinx as a creature of fundamental and irresolvable enigma. As we have already seen, Elihu Vedder's painting *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863) presents an Oedipus-inspired scene in which any riddle that has been posed seems unlikely to be answered. An 1864 review of the painting foresees a bleak outlook for the questioner, writing that he 'asks to know the Great Secret of Life, but receives no answer except the devouring silence, solitude and death that encompass him'.⁸²

In Gustave Doré's 1871 painting *The Enigma*, an Egyptian sphinx reclines upon a battlefield strewn with bodies (Figure 10). The sphinx is embraced by a figure resembling an angel or a winged Victory, who, like Vedder's questioner, appears to beg for an answer to whatever calamity has occurred here. Leon Burnett observes that 'no answer is proffered in explanation for the debacle': the painting 'depicts the moment of enigma'.⁸³ The sphinx offers no explanation for the tragedy; its questioner is left in suspense, surrounded by the evidence of an inexplicably harsh world.

Thomas De Quincey, whose writings on the Head of Memnon I examined earlier in this chapter, offers a literary attack on the Hegelian assumption that Oedipus' answer of 'a man' had conclusively solved the sphinx's riddle. In 'The Sphinx's Riddle' (1850), De Quincey argues that, while Oedipus' response is *a* solution to the riddle, 'it is not *the* solution' [emphasis mine], since '[a]ll great prophecies, all great mysteries, are likely to involve double, triple, or even quadruple interpretations — each rising in dignity, each cryptically involving another'.⁸⁴ Instead, 'the full and final answer to the Sphinx's riddle lay in the word Œdipus. Œdipus himself it was that fulfilled the conditions of the enigma.'⁸⁵ Oedipus was, as an injured infant, particularly vulnerable in his four-legged crawling. He then stood on his own two feet as, 'trusting exclusively to his natural powers as a man', he rose to power in Thebes.⁸⁶ Finally, the answer to the riddle must be Oedipus himself, since, blinded and in exile, he leaned upon his daughter Antigone, using her as the 'third leg' or staff alluded to as the final age of man in the riddle. 'In this way', De Quincey argues, 'we

⁸² James Jackson Jarves, *The Art-idea: Sculpture, Painting, and Architecture in America* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston, 1865), p. 247.

⁸³ Leon Burnett, 'Accommodating the Primordial: Myths as Pictorial Storytellings', in *Translating Myth*, ed. by Ben Pestell, Pietra Palazzolo and Leon Burnett (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 28-42 (p. 31).

⁸⁴ De Quincey, 'The Sphinx's Riddle', *Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by Edmund Baxter (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), XVIII, pp. 14-22 (p. 19).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

obtain a solution of the Sphinx's riddle more commensurate and symmetrical with the other features of the story', which are all marked by an air of mystery.⁸⁷

Thus Oedipus – who believed himself to have reasoned the sphinx out of existence – is shown to have been blind to a greater truth, long before he put out his eyes. De Quincey suggests that the sphinx herself may have been unaware of the implications of her riddle, writing that this second reading was '*possibly* unknown to the sphinx, and *certainly* unknown to Oedipus'.⁸⁸ Despite his speculation that the sphinx may not have known the full answer to her own riddle, De Quincey emphasises her fundamentally enigmatic being: 'The Sphinx herself is a mystery. Whence came her monstrous nature, that so often renewed its remembrance amongst men of distant lands, in Egyptian or Ethiopian marble? Whence came her wrath against Thebes?'⁸⁹ Whether or not the sphinx comprehends the full answer to her own riddle, she is a being 'clothed with the grandeur of mystery'.⁹⁰

The influential nineteenth-century occultist Helena Blavatsky takes a similar approach to the Oedipus myth, writing in an 1875 open letter that

Oedipus unriddled but one-half of the enigma offered him by the sphinx, and caused its death; the other half of the mystery avenged the death of the symbolic monster, and forced the King of Thebes to prefer blindness and exile in his despair, rather than face what he did not feel himself pure enough to encounter. He unriddled the man, the form, and had forgotten God – the idea.⁹¹

The scene is evoked in the lexis of Blavatsky's own mysticism, yet the message is the same: again, it is suggested that Oedipus' response ultimately failed to reach the heart of the enigma. In this version, the sphinx is imagined to have been privy to the deeper knowledge behind her riddle. In her 1888 work *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky expands upon this idea: 'If the Sphinx threw herself into the sea and perished, it is not because Oedipus *had* unriddled the secret of the ages, but because, by anthropomorphizing the ever-spiritual and the subjective, he had dishonored the great truth forever'.⁹² The sphinx did

⁸⁷ De Quincey, 'The Sphinx's Riddle', p. 20.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Helena Blavatsky, 'An Open Letter Such As Few Can Write', *Spiritual Scientist*, September 23rd, 1875, pp. 25-27 (p. 25).

⁹² Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, third edn, two vols (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), II, p. 543.

not die because Oedipus successfully decoded her riddle, but because, in his attempt to force the ‘great truth’ into the shape of a man, he debased that which must remain unknowable and inexpressible.

I will examine one further nineteenth-century reception of the sphinx’s riddle before returning to *The Time Machine*. Alex Murray highlights a fascinating but now little-known text: *Riddles of the Sphinx: A Study in the Philosophy of Evolution*, an 1891 work by Ferdinand Canning Scott Schiller (originally published under the pseudonym ‘A Troglodyte’). *Riddles of the Sphinx* purports to ‘[accept] without reserve the data of modern science, and [derive] from them a philosophical cosmology’.⁹³ At its heart is the symbol of the sphinx, which, for Schiller, can be found ‘seated in the soul of each man’, asking the answer to the fundamental questions ‘[w]hat is man or what is life?’ – both of which queries are equally central to *The Time Machine*.⁹⁴ The work culminates with an imagined encounter between philosopher and sphinx:

And when he finds the Sphinx, enthroned amid the desert sands far from the pleasant paths of life, he cannot read the ambiguous smile that plays around her face. It may be much that she is not grimly unresponsive to his plea, but he cannot tell whether he have answered her aright, whether her smile betoken the approval and acknowledgement of a goddess to be won by toil and abstinence, or the mocking irony of a demon whom no thought can fathom and no sacrifice appease. And even though he abide to sit at the feet of the Sphinx, if so be that his steadfast gaze may read the signs of her countenance in the light of long experience; yet anon will the wild storms of fortune tear him away, and the light of life fade out, the rushing pinions of Time sweep him along into darkness, and the bitter waters of Death engulf the questioner. For life is too fragmentary and experience too chequered wholly to dissipate a dread that springs from the heart rather than from the reason, and shrinks too vehemently from the cruelties of the world’s ways to be consoled by the subtleties of a metaphysical demonstration.⁹⁵

This evocative passage, with its image of the questioner prostrating himself before the inscrutable desert sphinx, appears influenced by Vedder’s painting. It is reminiscent, too, of the Time Traveller’s encounters with the White Sphinx, who, upon the Traveller’s first arrival in the future, ‘seemed to watch me all the while with a smile at my astonishment’ (p. 32). Any attempt to answer the riddle of the sphinx must necessarily be in vain; no

⁹³ F. C. S. Schiller, Preface, *Riddles of the Sphinx* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), p. vii.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 8, 9.

⁹⁵ Schiller, p. 436.

matter how we devote ourselves to the essential questions of existence, their answers will ultimately remain inaccessible to us. In Murray's words, this excerpt suggests that 'there is no form of philosophical reflection that could wholly combat the experience of uncertainty and profound sense of finitude that characterizes a post-Darwinian world'.⁹⁶ Murray identifies the birth of evolutionary theory as the precipitating factor in this deep sense of *fin-de-siècle* dread. Certainly, this is true of *The Time Machine*, in which the abyssal spaces of evolutionary time provoke horror and revulsion in equal measure. It seems likely that Wells (whose own essay 'Zoological Retrogression' appeared the same year as *Riddles of the Sphinx*, and who was fascinated by evolutionary science) would have been familiar with Schiller's text. Indeed, the Time Traveller's observation that 'Man as I knew him [...] had been swept out of existence' (p. 79) might be taken as a conscious echo of the passage above. Time, in Schiller's text as much as in Wells', is chasmic and dangerous.

I wish to suggest that, like the unfulfilled questioners of Vedder and Doré's paintings, and De Quincey and Schiller's prose, Wells' Time Traveller ultimately fails to unravel the enigma of the White Sphinx – and, by extension, the enigma of Deep Time. Upon his return from the Palace of Green Porcelain, the Time Traveller, who had been preparing to fight his way into the sphinx to retrieve his machine, finds instead that the doors to the base of the statue are already open: "Within was a small apartment, and on a raised place in the corner of this was the Time Machine. [...] So here, after all my elaborate preparations for the siege of the White Sphinx, was a meek surrender" (p. 102). Superficially, the Time Traveller has succeeded in solving the riddle implicitly offered by the silent sphinx. He has deduced that both Eloi and Morlocks represent the debased future of the human race, and the sphinx itself has opened to allow him entry. But the Time Traveller does not enter, as he imagined, bearing "a blaze of light" which will defeat the Morlocks (p. 82). Instead, he finds that his matches – which Bradley W. Buchanan identifies as representing for the Time Traveller '[the] idea of a human nature based on mental achievement' – will not light.⁹⁷ He is left in the dark, scrabbling to fight off the

⁹⁶ Murray, p. 100.

⁹⁷ Bradley W. Buchanan, *Oedipus Against Freud: Myth and the End(s) of Humanism in Twentieth Century British Literature* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 10.

hungry advances of the Morlocks, and admits that his escape on the Time Machine is “a [near] thing” (p. 103). Fleeing into two increasingly desolate futures, he finds only disgust, and greater obscurity: the last thing he sees before returning to the nineteenth century is, in fact, an eclipse. Thus the Time Traveller’s narrative ends, like that of *Oedipus Rex*, with a blinding: as darkness sweeps over the face of the dying Earth, like the final falling of a great theatre curtain.

The frame narrative that closes the novella offers a last allusion to the Oedipus myth. The unnamed narrator reports that, the day after hearing the Time Traveller’s story, he visited him again, finding him about to embark upon his second voyage. Catching a glimpse of the Time Traveller’s departure – ‘a ghostly, indistinct figure sitting in a whirling mass of black and brass’ – the narrator determined to wait for his return (p. 116). But, we are told, three years have since passed, and, ‘as everybody knows now’, the Time Traveller has not yet reappeared (p. 117). The epilogue is composed of the narrator’s speculations as to where (or rather *when*) the Time Traveller might be:

It may be that he swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone; into the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea; or among the grotesque saurians, the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times. He may even now — if I may use the phrase — be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age.

(p. 117)

Once again, prehistory and futurity are shown to be intimately connected. The narrator’s fear that his friend might have been felled by the ‘blood-drinking’ races of the Stone Ages mirrors the Morlocks’ attempt to kill and devour their fellow man. Deep past, like deep future, provokes revulsion: dinosaurs are ‘grotesque brutes’; prehistoric humans ‘hairy savages’. The narrator finds comfort only in the possibility that the Time Traveller may instead have gone ‘forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved’ (p. 117). In travelling to a nearer future, the narrator hopes that his friend might have arrived at ‘the manhood of the race’ (p. 117): an age in which the fundamental enigmas of human existence – ‘what is man or what is life?’, to return to Schiller’s sphinx-question – could finally have been resolved. It is the only point in the novella at which the word ‘riddle’ is

actually used, and it seems a deliberate reference to the Oedipus mythos: a last nod to the White Sphinx whose watchful presence overshadows the entire narrative. A further implication of this comment, of course, is that, despite his mastery of movement within time, the Time Traveller did not himself manage to answer these ‘riddles’.

Even before his voyages, the Time Traveller was apparently less optimistic than the narrator about the future of humanity:

He, I know – for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made – thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilisation only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end.

(p. 117)

The narrator rejects this idea, favouring instead a stolid pragmatism: ‘If that is so, then it remains for us to live as if it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank: a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story’ (p. 117). Again, deep time is figured as abyssal, and again, human (in)comprehension of deep time is marked by imagery of darkness and blindness. The few spots of illumination created by the Time Traveller’s story cannot compensate for the fact that the deep future is, for the most part, a space of human ignorance.

The Time Traveller set out, in his own words, intending to “explore time” (p. 14). Despite his apparent cynicism, this construction recalls an earlier, and more optimistic, worldview: the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of progress and expansion, with European exploration and colonization usually figured, as Patrick Brantlinger observes, as ‘the ever-advancing march of civilization’.⁹⁸ If the educated Englishman hoped to subdue the world through imperial expansion, why might he not also expand his reach outwards into time itself? And what should he hope to find in the future, but a greater and more developed version of his own society?

Yet *The Time Machine* is not a product of the Victorian mid-century, but of the *fin de siècle*: a time marked by a widespread sense of cultural malaise, and an increasingly profound awareness that before and aft the present time lay, in Marvell’s famous phrase,

⁹⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, ‘Empire, Place, and the Victorians’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Literary Culture*, ed. by Juliet John (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 233-250 (p. 245).

‘deserts of vast eternity’.⁹⁹ Wells’ vision of the deep future mocks the sanguine midcentury doctrine of progress, presenting the reader instead with a bleakly post-Darwinian approach to human development. For the narrator, there is reassurance to be found in his possession of ‘two strange white flowers’ – gifts from Weena to the Time Traveller – which remind him that ‘even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man’ (p. 118). Critics have observed that these final lines are unconvincing, with George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain observing that they appear ‘against all the evidence of the Traveller’s story’.¹⁰⁰ Wells ends the novella with the answer to the sphinx’s riddle: the word ‘man’ – an ironic choice, given that his narrative has so determinedly obliterated any sense of human continuity or endurance in time.

The silent sphinx

We have seen that the only way to satisfactorily conceptualise deep time is through metaphor. As Gould writes, ‘[a]n abstract, intellectual understanding of deep time comes easily enough [...]. Getting it into the gut is another matter’.¹⁰¹ Both Wells’ White Sphinx, and, in a subtler sense, Wilde’s voracious living statue, serve as super-saturated embodiments of deep time: physical monuments onto which vastly different timescales may be simultaneously projected. Their presence links deep past and deep future; time occupied by humans, and time in which humanity is less than a memory. Through their association with the sphinx, a recognisable man-made artefact, these vast temporal questions are made tangible, and therefore approachable.

But the sphinx at the *fin de siècle* was associated as much with mysterious silence as with elucidation, with Blavatsky writing in 1877 that the creature ‘has become a greater riddle in her speechlessness than was the enigma propounded to Œdipus’.¹⁰² Both Wilde’s and Wells’ sphinxes remain silent; they neither offer an answer themselves, or confirm the

⁹⁹ Andrew Marvell, ‘To His Coy Mistress’, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Donno (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 51.

¹⁰⁰ George Slusser and Danièle Chatelain, ‘Introduction: The Time Machine’s Centennial Audience’, in *H. G. Wells’ Perennial Time Machine* (London: The University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. xi-xvi (p. xii).

¹⁰¹ Gould, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle*, p. 3.

¹⁰² Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, 6th edn, 2 vols (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1892), I, p. 515.

speculation of their questioners. To engage with them is at once to perceive the possibility of an answer to the fundamental questions of life and time, and to recognise that such a thing is ultimately unattainable. While we might sit at the feet of the sphinx, we cannot hope to read her.

Chapter 4

‘She may be anything’: The Siren and Femininity After Darwin

The siren or mermaid is undoubtedly the most enduringly popular of the four mythic animal-human hybrids examined in this thesis. Combining the face and upper body of a beautiful woman with the tail of a fish, its image is as ubiquitous in twenty-first-century culture as it was more than a century ago, when siren/mermaid iconography flourished in response to the genesis of evolutionary theory. The mermaid of today is, for the most part, a benevolent and unthreatening figure, thanks in no small part to the vastly popular 1989 Disney animated adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*, which presents the mermaid as a peppy red-haired teenager, and swaps Andersen’s tragic ending for a G-rated happily-ever-after. Juliette Wood, in her study of mythic and folkloric creatures, devotes several pages to the omnipresence of the mermaid in current popular culture, particularly in advertising.¹ But the mermaids that now grace Starbucks coffee cups, children’s lunchboxes, and even tuna cans, are not the same creatures that swim and coil through the art and literature of the *fin de siècle*. The siren of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is an altogether darker and stranger entity.

I will turn now to a second work by H. G. Wells: his 1901 novel *The Sea Lady*, which may be seen as one culmination of the late-Victorian siren craze. At the centre of this story of seduction and death exists what was sometimes referred to during the latter half of the nineteenth century as ‘the woman question’. This served as a shorthand for a tangled net of sociocultural issues surrounding women’s rights and identity, central amongst which was the much-disputed question of the essential nature of woman: what did it mean to be a woman? *The Sea Lady*, like many *fin-de-siècle* cultural responses involving sirens, seeks to examine this query. And as we have already seen, it was all but impossible to address any such existential question at the *fin de siècle* without reference to evolutionary thought.

I will suggest in this chapter that Wells’ siren functions as a repository for various and often conflicting ideas and anxieties regarding the intersection of gender theory and

¹ Juliette Wood, *Fantastic Creatures in Mythology and Folklore* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 119-120.

evolutionary theory. My argument will centre upon the paradoxical characterisation of the Sea Lady as both an unevolved and hypersexual *femme fatale*, and a sexless and unattainable elemental. This internally contradictory depiction is revealing of the shifting and uneasy state in which conceptions of femininity existed at the *fin de siècle*.

Classical origins and Victorian receptions

Anyone familiar with ancient Greek vase paintings of sirens will know that they were originally conceived as a very different beast from the woman-fish hybrids of *fin-de-siècle* culture. The most famous classical literary mention of the sirens – that in Homer’s *Odyssey*, where the hero is warned against the creatures by Circe – tells us only that they ‘bewitch everybody who approaches them’, and that they ‘sit [...] in a meadow piled high with the mouldering skeletons of men’ whose ships they have lured onto the rocks with their fatal song.² While Homer does not describe the physical appearance of the sirens, the visual art of antiquity is more informative. A fifth Century BCE red figure vase now held in the British Museum depicts Odysseus’ ship in its passage by the rock of the sirens, who are here portrayed as three large birds with the heads of women, their mouths open in song (Figure 11). One of the three is hurling herself downwards into the sea, presumably in despairing response to Odysseus’ ability to resist their tempting music (for, as Circe advised him, he has had himself bound to the mast of his ship, while the rest of his men have plugged their ears with wax against the sound).³ The nineteenth-century classical scholar Jane Harrison highlights the difference between these sirens and those seen in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature, observing that Homer’s sirens, ‘though they sing to mariners, are *not* sea maidens[...]. Ancient art, like ancient literature, knows nothing of the fish-tailed mermaid. Uniformly the art-form of the [ancient] Siren is that of the bird-woman.’⁴

How precisely the avian songstress of classical myth became aligned with the watery mermaid is, as with most elements of myth development, impossible to ascertain definitively. Certainly it seems to have been a post-antique development, although Wood

² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin, 2003), Book 12, ll. 39-40, 44-5.

³ We can draw a comparison between the siren’s death in this image, and the Greek sphinx’s suicidal leap into the sea upon Oedipus’ correctly answering her riddle.

⁴ Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. 199.

notes that beings possessing both human and piscine elements date back as far as the Mesopotamian sea god Oannes, and occur in numerous cultures.⁵ The winged siren and the fish-tailed mermaid, she observes, ‘existed side by side for a considerable period’.⁶ Gradually, however, the figure of the mermaid began to be associated with the siren mythos: in Roberta Milliken’s words, the mermaid ‘essentially fed off and usurped the siren’s history and made it its own’.⁷ In some mediaeval visual depictions, this amalgamation is made manifest in the shape of a mermaid-siren who possesses both birdlike wings and a scaly tail – a transitional form in the evolutionary development of the siren mythos. By the end of the mediaeval period, however, the fish-tailed mermaid had all but eclipsed the siren as bird-woman.⁸ This version of the siren has remained prevalent in iconography ever since.

By the late nineteenth century, as mythic hybrids became an increasingly popular subject for artists and writers alike, it was rare to see the siren portrayed as anything other than the now familiar woman-fish hybrid, or else as a woman fully human in appearance, whose maritime habitat – usually lounging naked atop a seaside rock, or, as in Herbert James Draper’s 1894 painting *The Sea Maiden*, dredged up in the nets of a fishing boat (Figure 12) – revealed her true nature. When not tempting boats onto the rocks, these sirens had another method of dispatching their prey: pulling them down into the water, in a sensual but ultimately fatal embrace, as seen in Frederic Leighton’s *The Fisherman and the Syren* (1856-8, Figure 13). A notable exception to the reign of the piscine mermaid in nineteenth-century art is John William Waterhouse’s *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891), which seems to have drawn inspiration from the abovementioned Siren Vase in its depiction of singing bird-women fluttering around the head of the mast-bound Odysseus. Yet the name ‘siren’ continued to be used more or less interchangeably with ‘mermaid’ – indeed, Waterhouse himself produced a later painting entitled *The Siren* (1900) in which a beautiful woman, each of her legs ending in a finned and scaly tail, plucks at a lyre while she stares indifferently down from her rocky perch at a drowning sailor. A mocking *Punch* article of

⁵ Wood, p. 81.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁷ Roberta Milliken, *Ambiguous Locks: An Iconography of Hair in Medieval Art and Literature* (London: McFarland & Company, 2012), p. 125.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

1871 even offered a faux-taxonomic name for the mermaid: *Siren canora* ('melodious siren').⁹

In this chapter, I will for the most part use the word 'siren', rather than 'mermaid', to refer to the fish-tailed women of *fin-de-siècle* culture. There are two reasons for this choice: firstly, I wish to emphasise the fact that the siren art and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constitutes part of the broader use of specifically *classical* mythic hybrids to embody contemporary evolutionary concerns. Secondly, though the word 'siren' is used only twice in Wells' novel (for the most part, Wells favours 'mermaid'), the behaviour of Miss Waters, the titular 'Sea Lady', clearly establishes her as an inheritor of the Homeric siren tradition: she is a dangerously seductive temptress, who lures young men to their deaths in the sea with the promise of "*better dreams*".¹⁰

It is worth noting that, just as the centaur and faun are almost always male, the siren is almost always female. There are a very few exceptions, among them Matthew Arnold's 1849 poem 'The Forsaken Merman', in which the merman mourns his wife, who has abandoned him and their children to live on land; and the paintings of Arnold Böcklin, who on occasion included male figures in his depictions of sea-beings. But for the most part, the siren is a distinctly female phenomenon, making it an obvious cultural focal point for questions surrounding femininity and the nature of women.

When H. G. Wells described the discovery on a genteel English beach of an attractive young lady possessing a lower half "[l]ike the tail of a big mackerel" (p. 53), he was evoking a scenario less outlandish-seeming than we might now imagine. Of the four hybrid beings studied in this thesis, the siren is the only one whose ongoing existence seems to have been a matter of serious debate during parts of the nineteenth century. We have seen that animal-human hybrid forms could be creatively employed to give life to evolutionary ideas, as in the opening lines of Huxley's *Man's Place in Nature* (1863), or even suggested as the imaginative result of early civilisations' encounters with 'creatures intermediate between man and the ape', as in Charles Kingsley's 1862 letter to Darwin.¹¹

⁹ 'The Mermaid No Myth', *Punch*, 61 (1871), p. 79

¹⁰ H. G. Wells, *The Sea Lady* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), p. 167. All further references will be to this edition.

¹¹ Darwin Correspondence Project, "Letter no. 3426", <<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/DCP-LETT-3426>>, accessed on 28 November 2017.

Prehistoric humans, it was suggested, had come across surviving proto-human beings, and fancifully translated them into mythic creatures with both animal and human bodily components. The siren, however, occupies a subtly different position in the nineteenth-century imagination: it was believed by a not insignificant number of people that not only had such a being once existed, but that it *still* existed.

Sightings of human-fish hybrids have been reported throughout history; Jan Bondeson lists numerous examples, beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth (mermaids were apparently sighted off the coast of Scotland in 1809 and again in 1812, arousing much public interest).¹² But it was in 1822 that the most notorious nineteenth-century ‘mermaid’ made its debut, in the form of a peculiar artefact first displayed in Cape Town. A contemporary description by one Dr Philip, the representative of the London Missionary Society in Cape Town, is marked by a sense of excitement and wonder:

I have to-day seen a mermaid, now exhibiting in this town. I have always treated the existence of this creature as fabulous; but my skepticism is now removed. The head is almost the size of that of a baboon. [...] The forehead is low, but, except in this particular, the features are much better proportioned, and bear a more decided resemblance to the human countenance than those of any of the baboon tribes. The ears, nose, lips, chin, breasts, fingers and nails, resemble that of the human figure. [...] From the point where the human figure ceases, which is about twelve inches below the vertex of the head, it resembles a large fish of the salmon species. [...] The figure of the tail is exactly that which is given in the usual representation of the Mermaid.¹³

This rather horrifying dried specimen – which would come to be known as the ‘Feejee Mermaid’ – had been purchased from Dutch navymen near what is now Jakarta by an American sea captain, Samuel Eades, who showed it in Cape Town on his way to London.¹⁴ Once displayed in London, the mermaid rapidly became the city’s ‘greatest scientific sensation’, attracting vast crowds.¹⁵ In October 1822, a letter by one Dr Rees Price

¹² Jan Bondeson, *The Feejee Mermaid, and Other Essays in Natural and Unnatural History* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 42.

¹³ John Fairburn, *Wonder of the World!! Fairburn’s Account of The Mermaid* (London: John Fairburn, 1822), p. 11.

¹⁴ Bondeson, p. 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 41.

appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, claiming that the mermaid's appearance 'completely answers the description' of the earlier Scottish sighting, and ultimately making the bold pronouncement that '[t]he introduction of this animal into this country will form an important æra [sic] in natural history'.¹⁶ Sadly, it was not to be. A month earlier, in fact, the Conservator of the Hunterian Museum, William Clift, had examined the mermaid, and declared it to be a fake, cobbled together from parts of a baboon, an orangutan, and a salmon.¹⁷ By December, Clift had published his findings, and the mermaid was revealed as an imitation.

Yet, as Béatrice Laurent observes, this disclosure failed to eradicate the interest in Eades' mermaid, which continued to be displayed at fairs, and was ultimately sold to the American showman P. T. Barnum in the early 1840s, to continue its notoriety in the United States.¹⁸ Laurent suggests that the mermaid's persistent appeal was, at least in part, due to the belief that 'even if this one specimen was a fake, this did not invalidate the existence of the whole species'.¹⁹ The 'Feejee Mermaid' offered its viewers a glimpse of how a creature composed of both human and animal elements might appear; while it was not a genuine hybrid, it 'looked scientifically plausible', and functioned as a tantalising embodiment of hybridity (despite the fact that, as Laurent notes, it was 'far [...] from the expected beautiful appearance' of the mermaid).²⁰ Rather than dispelling hopes of the existence of a true mermaid, this faked artefact seems to have inflamed them.

In 1835, the English naturalist Simon Wilkin wrote optimistically in an editorial note to the works of the seventeenth-century writer Thomas Browne that, while many 'high authorities' had rejected the possibility of mermaids existing, 'I am not disposed to give up their cause as altogether hopeless. I cannot admit the probability of a belief in them having existed from such remote antiquity, and spread so widely, without *some foundation* in truth.'²¹ While Wilkin accepted that the mermaid was unlikely to exist as 'the fair lady of the ocean, admiring herself in a hand-mirror', he postulated that mermaid myths instead

¹⁶ Dr Rees Price, 'The Mermaid', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 92 (1822), p. 366.

¹⁷ Bondeson, p. 45.

¹⁸ Beatrice Laurent, 'Monster or Missing Link? The Mermaid and the Victorian Imagination', *Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*, 85 (2017), DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.3188>>, <<https://journals.openedition.org/cve/3188>>, accessed on 25th October 2020.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Simon Wilkin, ed, *Sir Thomas Browne's Works*, 3 vols (London: William Pickering, 1835), III, p. 143.

corresponded to ‘a most supposable, and probably often seen, though hitherto undescribed, species of the *herbivorous cetacea*, (the seals and lamantins,) more approaching, in several respects, the human configuration, than any species we know’.²² The mermaid is explained as a real, taxonomically explicable species, simply one not yet officially described. Ultimately, Wilkin writes that he ‘persist[s] in expecting one day to have the pleasure of beholding – A MERMAID!’.²³ While he explains mermaid sightings with reference to a naturalistic phenomenon – an as-yet unclassified species – Wilkin continues to refer to them by their mythic name, suggesting that the creature he envisages would be close enough to the traditional idea of a mermaid to remain deserving of that title.

Over the subsequent decades, the developing evolutionary hypothesis could be employed to add a veneer of scientific respectability to tales of sirens. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin describes the distant aquatic ancestor of humans:

[T]he progenitors of man must have been aquatic in their habits; for morphology plainly tells us that our lungs consist of a modified swim-bladder, which once served as a float. The clefts in the neck of the embryo of man shows where the branchiæ once existed.²⁴

Despite the fact that he goes on to note that such creatures would have been ‘as simply, or even still more simply organised than the lancelet or the amphioxus’ (tiny, filter feeding marine invertebrates), Darwin’s words seem to have brought to mind something closer to home for many of his readers.²⁵ A contemporary review in the *Athenaeum* complains that ‘a great desideratum [...] is lacking, namely, an illustrative sketch or two of such a remarkable ancestry, with particular delineations of the tail’.²⁶ The tone of the article is mocking, but its specific fascination with the *tail* of the imagined ancestor is revealing, suggesting not a creature as taxonomically distant as the lancelet, but a being recognisably ‘human’ enough for its possession of a tail to be noteworthy.

More than a decade earlier, in 1860, Darwin had speculated in a letter to Charles Lyell that ‘[o]ur ancestor was an animal which breathed water, had a swim bladder, a great

²² Wilkin, pp. 143-144.

²³ Ibid, p. 143.

²⁴ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 248.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 249.

²⁶ *The Descent of Man*, Review, *The Athenaeum*, 2262 (1871), pp. 275-277 (p. 276).

swimming tail [and] an imperfect skull'.²⁷ When this correspondence was published in 1887, five years after Darwin's death, it attracted significant interest, again centering particularly on the idea of a human progenitor in ownership of a tail. *Punch* published a satirical response, directly quoting these lines, and attaching them to a comic illustration of a 'Darwinian Ancestor' by George du Maurier: a bizarre, lobster-like creature with an anthropomorphic face and a fishy tail (Figure 14).²⁸ The creature is playing happily on a kind of recorder; the caption informs us that it is 'Composing the Song, "For O it is such a Horrible Tail!!!"'²⁹ As with the earlier response of the *Athenaeum*, Du Maurier's cartoon foregrounds the strangeness of the idea that our forebears possessed tails. While *Punch*'s response to Darwin's speculation is humorous, it is demonstrative of the way in which evolutionary thought could be employed to give 'scientific' weight to improbable forms.

Laurent argues that 'Darwin's writings about aquatic [species] which were the ancestors of mankind enable the reader to visualise these [...] creatures as sirens'.³⁰ This seems to have been true: an 1865 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* asserts that 'Mr. Darwin's theory appears to involve something like Mermaids as inevitable links, existing or extinct, in the chain of universal life'.³¹ Given the late nineteenth-century fascination with the idea of the evolutionary 'throwback' or 'living fossil', it presumably took little imagination to move from the belief that a siren-like species had *once* existed, to the hope that one might be discovered *still* to be in existence. In 1871, a Scottish anthropologist by the name of Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Forbes-Leslie stated at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science that he 'had heard gentlemen quote the belief of intelligent persons, incapable of deception, who asserted that they had distinctly seen and watched mermaids'.³² As late as 1877, an article entitled 'Strange Sea Creatures' in *The Gentleman's Magazine* is skeptical of the existence of mermaids, but does not entirely discount the possibility that 'the northern seas may hold forms of life as yet uncatalogued by science'.³³

²⁷ Darwin Correspondence Project, "Letter no. 2647," accessed on 22 July 2020, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/DCP-LETT-2647.xml>

²⁸ George du Maurier, 'Darwinian Ancestor', *Punch*, 93 (1887), p. 265.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Laurent.

³¹ G. W. Hosmer, 'Deep Sea Damsels', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 16 (1865), 77-83 (83).

³² Forbes-Leslie, quoted in Laurent.

³³ Richard A. Proctor, 'Strange Sea Creatures', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 240 (1877), 300-333 (p. 316).

By the final years of the century, hopes that a mermaid or mermaid-like creature would be discovered to exist or have existed seem to have faded. Yet the thought of such a being remained potent. Heather Brink-Roby makes the argument that, through the very act of dismissing the siren as a mythological fancy, its detractors lent it further legitimacy:

[T]hose who most vociferously asserted the impossibility of mythological creatures contributed to these creatures' re-emergence in scientific discourse. Even an author's explicit rejection of mermaids constituted an engagement with such creatures, granting them a certain immediacy and contradicting any claims that science had "banished" the beasts.³⁴

Repeated references to sirens in scientific literature cemented the link between sirens and evolutionary theory. Even as they employed the siren as an embodiment of the impossible dreams of our scientifically unenlightened ancestors – dreams that had been swept away by the growing tide of contemporary knowledge – writers inadvertently created a closer tie between the creature and evolutionary thought. Despite the increasing skepticism of most scientific minds, then, the siren remained a tantalisingly evocative prospect during the latter years of the nineteenth century.

The title of Wells' novel (and the epithet by which the siren is referred to throughout the text) seems to be a deliberate nod to scientific interest in mermaids as a potentially extant species. The name 'Sea Lady' has a taxonomic ring to it; it places this mythical being alongside such real and classifiable creatures as sealions and seahorses. Kingsley had employed a similar approach in his 1863 children's novel *The Water-Babies*: 'There are land-babies – then why not water-babies? *Are there not water-rats, water-flies, water-crickets, [...] sea-lions and sea-bears, sea-horses and sea-elephants, [...] and so on, without end?*'³⁵ Zoe Jaques observes that here, Kingsley is not only 'play[ing] a linguistic game', but also 'engaging with contemporary scientific issues and evolutionary debates'.³⁶

³⁴ Heather Brink-Roby, 'Siren Canora: the mermaid and the mythical in late nineteenth-century science', *Archives of Natural History*, 35 (2008), 1-14 (12).

³⁵ Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies* (London: Macmillan, 1863), pp. 75-76.

³⁶ Zoe Jaques, *Children's Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 153.

Similarly, Wells' choice to refer to his siren as a 'Sea Lady' establishes her existence as a plausible evolutionary possibility, laying the foundations for the novel's Darwinian concerns.

A siren in Kent: ordinary and extraordinary in *The Sea Lady*

Many of H. G. Wells' writings can be described as responses, whether direct or indirect, to the popularisation of evolutionary theory during the latter half of the nineteenth century. As we have seen in Chapter 3, he had previously produced a novel with explicitly evolutionary interests, centering upon the heavily symbolic figure of the sphinx (*The Time Machine*, 1895). In *The Sea Lady* (first serialised in *Pearson's Magazine* in 1901, later published as a single volume in 1902), Wells turns his attention to the siren, chief among the female hybrid forms occupying the cultural imagination of the *fin de siècle*. Ostensibly, however, *The Sea Lady* is a very different text from *The Time Machine*. It has none of the earlier novel's obvious interest in scientific innovation; its characters are holidaymakers, not academics, and rather than the intense intellectual discussion of *The Time Machine*'s frame narrative, *The Sea Lady* begins with what Adam Roberts describes as 'lightweight comedy-of-manners stuff': a gently satirical take on the often absurd social mores of the English middle class.³⁷ Wells' son, Anthony West, referred to it as his father's 'least Wellsian book'.³⁸

Despite this disparity, I will argue that *The Sea Lady* is intensely concerned with questions of evolution, even if it is not as obvious about the fact as many of Wells' other writings. What is more, Wells' decision to ground his narrative of mythic temptation in an unremarkable middle-class circle of acquaintances allows him to explore the effects of the Sea Lady's supernatural incursion upon contemporary gender dynamics in a way that would not have been possible in the male-dominated academic enclave of *The Time Machine*.

The novel opens by acknowledging the existing tradition of siren sightings: 'Such previous landings of mermaids as have left a record, have always a flavour of doubt' (p.

³⁷ Adam Roberts, *H. G. Wells: A Literary Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 135.

³⁸ Anthony West, *Aspects of a Life* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 259.

1). Wells' anonymous narrator admits that he himself had always been inclined to disbelieve such tales, until coming 'face to face with indisputable facts in my own immediate neighbourhood' (p. 1). He goes on to observe that, had he himself not gone to the effort of preserving the tale in writing, 'I am certain it would have become as doubtful as those older legends in a couple of score of years' (p. 2). In these first lines, he establishes himself as a rational sceptic: a man who would never believe in such a fanciful account without good reason. His assertion that, having heard the tale of the Sea Lady, 'I see these old legends [of sirens] in a very different light' (p. 1) implies that, if even this skeptical narrator has been convinced by the story he is about to communicate, then perhaps the reader will be similarly persuaded.

Within the first page of the novel, then, Wells has both gestured to the long history of reported human encounters with sirens, and grounded his fantastical story in an everyday rationalism. The narrator assures us that his knowledge of the Sea Lady comes from a reliable (although significantly named) source: '[M]y own second cousin Melville (of Seaton Carew)' (p. 1). The majority of Wells' narrative takes place in and around the Kentish town of Folkestone, a popular seaside resort during the nineteenth century. The narrator begins by laying out the class credentials of the key human players in the story: there are the Buntings, who, while 'not Aristocrats, or indeed what an unpaid herald would freely call "gentle"' (pp. 4-5), are nonetheless 'delicate and nice' in their manners and thoughts (p. 4). There are the Glendower sisters, guests of the Buntings, who are 'gentle beyond dispute, a county family race that had only for a generation stooped to trade, and then risen, Antæus-like, refreshed and enriched' (p. 6). The elder Glendower sister, Adeline, is engaged to Harry Chatteris, 'the nephew of an earl and the hero of a scandal, and quite a possible Liberal candidate for the Hythe division of Kent' (p. 7). All are staying in Kent over the summer.

Into this respectable Home Counties world arrives the Sea Lady, who makes her first appearance in the guise of an ordinary woman having difficulties in the water. Upon her rescue by the men of the Bunting family, she is discovered, beneath her red bathing costume, to possess a fish's tail. She introduces herself as Miss Doris Thalassia Waters – another humorously symbolic name, as Doris is a sea goddess in Greek mythology, and 'thalassa' is the ancient Greek word for 'sea' – and appeals to Mrs Bunting's maternal

nature, claiming that she “never had a mother” (p. 46). She admits to having faked her swimming difficulties, and requests to be allowed to stay with the Buntings in the hope that she will eventually develop a human soul of her own.

The Buntings accept her request, despite Adeline Glendower’s misgivings, and the Sea Lady is installed in their household as ‘a credible human invalid’ (p. 71). She quickly adjusts to life on land: travelling around in a bath-chair, taking an apparent interest in local politics, and charming nearly everyone she encounters. However, she soon confesses to the narrator’s cousin Melville that her true reason for venturing from the sea was something other than she led the Buntings to believe: she had, years previously, glimpsed the handsome Chatteris, Adeline’s fiancé, during his travels “[i]n the South Seas – near Tonga”, and has followed him now to England in the hope of winning his affections. Chatteris rapidly falls under the Sea Lady’s spell, ultimately leaving his engagement to pursue her. Unsurprisingly, the novel ends tragically: Chatteris is last seen carrying the Sea Lady down towards the water, where, presumably, he meets his death. The Sea Lady’s siren-call has tempted him into her element, from which there can be no return.

The siren as unevolved *femme fatale*

Chatteris’ ultimate fate is in no way unexpected; one need only glance at the visual art of the late nineteenth century to see how the story will end. Dijkstra has described the preponderance of rapacious sirens in *fin-de-siècle* painting: ‘These daughters of the sea seemed to be virtually everywhere [...] [a]ggressive and predatory, driven by the ceaseless sexual hunger of the nymphomaniac’.³⁹ To yield to their attentions inevitably meant death for men. In fact, Melville’s own understanding of the Sea Lady’s dangerous potential draws directly upon contemporary art, as evidenced by one of the most chilling passages of the novel:

The Sea Lady alleged she had come to the world that lives on land, for Chatteris.
And then——?

He had not hitherto looked ahead to see precisely what would happen to Chatteris, to Miss Glendower, to the Buntings or any one when, as seemed highly

³⁹ Dijkstra, p. 258.

probable, Chatteris was “got.” [...] [It] came into Melville’s mind with a quite disproportionate force and vividness that once, long ago, he had seen a picture of a man and a mermaid, rushing downward through deep water.... (pp. 172-173)

Melville is referencing a specific painting: Edward Burne-Jones’ *The Depths of the Sea* (1887), in which a silver-tailed siren pulls a lifeless man down towards the sandy ocean floor (Figure 15). Her eyes are fixed knowingly upon the viewer, and she wears an enigmatic smile reminiscent of that of the Mona Lisa; indeed, a contemporary review praised the siren’s mien as ‘a look of triumph that is neither human nor diabolic, but just what one would expect to see in a half-human, half animal, [and] almost worthy of Leonardo da Vinci himself’.⁴⁰ I have discussed in Chapter 2 the popular Paterian image of the Mona Lisa as an evolutionary figure, adapting imperceptibly to her experiences through time. There is also an echo here of the Wildean sphinx, with her indifferent regard for the ravages of history.

Wells’ Sea Lady shares features with these *fin-de-siècle femmes fatales*. Yet she is rather more *active* than any of them. Pater’s Mona Lisa, Wells’ White Sphinx, and even Wilde’s sphinx are all, ultimately, artworks, imbued with meaning and inner life only by the ekphrastic responses of the men who view them. The Sea Lady, while she may evoke for those who encounter her the impression of a painting – Chatteris, like Melville, responds to his first meeting with Miss Waters by suggesting that she is “like a picture or something that’s – imaginary’ (p. 140) – is, in fact, dangerously real, and perfectly capable of causing actual harm. She is most similar to Machen’s Helen Vaughan, who similarly leads unsuspecting gentlemen to their doom in *The Great God Pan*.

James Eli Adams has written that the development of evolutionary theory ‘rendered newly problematic a deeply traditional and comforting archetype of womanhood’.⁴¹ In positing a reality in which the natural world was stripped of any sense of benevolence or positive agency, evolutionary thought attacked an enduring anthropomorphic view of Nature as motivated by an essentially feminine, and specifically motherly, animus, to the extent that, for nineteenth-century writers, ‘[t]o question the nature of Nature [...] is

⁴⁰ *Times* review, quoted in ‘Studio Talk’, *The Photographic News*, 30 (1886), 335-336 (336).

⁴¹ James Eli Adams, ‘Woman Red in Tooth and Claw: Nature and the Feminine in Tennyson and Darwin’, *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1989), 7-27 (p. 7).

inescapably to question the nature of woman'.⁴² Adams ultimately suggests that the motif of the *femme fatale* – so prevalent in art and literature during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and so often directly associated with hybrid bodies – developed in part as a response to this destabilisation of an archetype: 'When Nature's maternal solicitude gives way to indifference', it is interpreted as 'an act of open hostility towards mankind'.⁴³ Adams characterises the *fin-de-siècle* idea of the *femme fatale* as

a woman who repudiates the nurturing, maternal qualities of the domestic ideal of femininity ("the angel in the house") and thereby strikes the male observer as enigmatic and profoundly "unnatural" but also hostile; moreover, her hostility betrays a powerful erotic fascination she exerts on the male observer.⁴⁴

This analysis is readily applicable to Wells' narrative. Questions of mothering and motherliness are central to *The Sea Lady*: we are told in the opening pages that Mrs Bunting has been 'something of a mother' to the Glendower sisters ever since Mrs Glendower died (p. 5), and upon her arrival on shore, the Sea Lady, as we have already seen, appeals to the Buntings by emphasising her own motherless state, insisting that she wishes to 'be one of [the] family' (p. 51). Yet, in truth, Miss Waters has no interest whatsoever in gaining a mother. Instead, she was driven to Folkestone by her desire to win Chatteris. "Why shouldn't I," she says to Melville, referring to her pursuit of a man who is already spoken for, "if I want to?" (p. 162). She brushes off Melville's protests that there are "obstacles" to their union (p. 162), insisting that she will claim Chatteris regardless, "[if] he pleases me" (p. 166). Miss Waters' casual references to her wants and pleasures imply a thoroughly un-Victorian frankness regarding her own sexuality. Despite her sinister aspect – like Machen's Helen Vaughan, the Sea Lady strikes those who encounter her as both beautiful and inexplicably unnerving – she is compelling enough to lead Chatteris away not only from his fiancée, but from all his dreams and plans for a life on land.

Adams has argued that the image of the hostile, sexually rapacious woman proliferated at the *fin de siècle* partly in response to Darwinism's refutation of the image of a maternal, benevolent natural force. In a circularity of argument, evolutionary theory

⁴² Adams, p. 8.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

could also be employed to explain female behaviours perceived as sexually inappropriate or voracious, despite the fact that Darwin himself had actually argued *against* an active female sexuality. His theory in *The Descent of Man* rests upon a belief that male sexuality is aggressive and pursuing, while females almost universally remain passive in matters of courtship: he notes that many male animals are imbued with ‘size, strength and pugnacity [...] weapons of offence or means of defence against rivals, [...] gaudy colouring and various ornaments’, all of which indicate that their role in sexual selection is more active than that of their female counterparts.⁴⁵ Darwin concludes that ‘[it] is certain that with almost all animals there is a struggle between males for the possession of the female. This fact is so notorious that it would be superfluous to give instances.’⁴⁶ The job of the female is, at most, that of selecting a mate from among her jostling crowd of suitors; in other cases, even that degree of agency may be denied her, as Darwin notes that many male animals have evolved ‘special organs of prehension’ with which to forcibly restrain the female during mating.⁴⁷

Instances of animal relationships that contradict this dynamic are treated as aberrant, despite the fact that, as Darwin acknowledges, they occur in ‘various classes of animals’.⁴⁸ He writes, for instance, that among certain species of bird, ‘there has sometimes been a complete transposition of the ordinary characters proper to each sex; the females having become the more eager in courtship, the males remaining comparatively passive’.⁴⁹ The language employed here – its emphasis upon the ‘ordinary’ and ‘proper’ order of things – is reflective of the degree to which any active female sexuality was regarded as deviant and alarming.

Yet Darwin’s portrayal of natural selection by sex, castigated in more recent years for regarding female sexuality as passive, in fact received criticism at the time of its publication for doing just the opposite. An anonymous response now known to have been written by the geologist William Boyd Dawkins in the *Edinburgh Review* argued that

⁴⁵ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 320.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

we do [Darwin] no injustice in ascribing to him the theory of Lucretius – that Venus is the creative power of the world, and that the mysterious law of reproduction, with the passions which belong to it, is the dominant force of life. He appears to see nothing above or beyond it. In a heathen poet such doctrines appear gross and degrading, if not vicious. We know not how to characterise them in an English naturalist, well known for the purity and elevation of his own life and character.⁵⁰

For Dawkins, Darwin's suggestion that sex and its attendant passions are 'the dominant force of life' – his failure to look beyond them to something loftier – places a worrying emphasis on these base parts of human and animal nature.

Furthermore, Gowan Dawson argues convincingly that Dawkins' mention of 'a heathen poet', while superficially referring to Lucretius, may also be seen to link Darwin's approach to sexuality with the decadent hellenophilic poetry of Algernon Swinburne, a scathing review of whose collection *Songs Before Sunrise* had appeared earlier in the same volume of the quarterly. Dawson notes that Thomas Spencer Baynes, the man who had reviewed *Songs Before Sunrise*, went on to review for the same publication Darwin's subsequent book *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872), in which Baynes 'identified various shortcomings in Darwin's work which were almost identical to the moral and intellectual lapses in Swinburne's work that he had already derided in the pages of the *Edinburgh*'.⁵¹ In this review, in fact, Baynes drew an explicit connection between Darwin and Swinburne, writing dismissively of pseudo-intellectuals 'whose literary culture hardly goes deeper than a slight knowledge of Mr. Swinburne's poetry, and whose scientific and philosophical training is restricted to a desultory acquaintance with some of Mr. Darwin's more popular works'.⁵² These comparisons implied that Darwin and Swinburne were 'equally guilty of denying the vital distinction between right and wrong, and of valorizing mere lustful desires as the highest form of love'.⁵³

I have emphasised this link between contemporary reviews of Darwin and Swinburne because Swinburne was, of course, notorious for his literary portraits of predatory women: deadly and fatally indifferent women abound in his poetry. Despite

⁵⁰ William Boyd Dawkins, 'Darwin on the Descent of Man', *The Edinburgh Review*, 134 (1871), 195-235 (235).

⁵¹ Gowan Dawson, *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 47-48.

⁵² Thomas Spencer Baynes, 'Darwin on Expression', *The Edinburgh Review*, 137 (1873), 492-528 (503).

⁵³ Dawson, p. 49.

Darwin's efforts to the contrary, Dawson notes that '[l]ingering fears over the possibility of such [Swinburnean] female dominance were evident throughout the *Descent*'.⁵⁴ Perhaps the most notable instance of this is Darwin's description of a female spider who devours her male suitor after "enveloping" him in her web; here, he writes that 'the female carries her coyness to a dangerous pitch'.⁵⁵ Numerous critics have commented on the peculiarity of this phrasing; *coyness* seems a strange word to employ when describing a creature's consumption of its living mate. In Dawson's words, while superficially signifying a kind of shy modesty, 'coyness' also implies that the spider might be 'self-consciously affecting such shyness or reserve in order to gain an advantage, and even of deliberately coaxing, enticing and alluring a potential partner'.⁵⁶ Even as he denies the prevalence of the sexually aggressive female, Darwin's writing anxiously evokes the possibility of just such a being.

Swinburne's review of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1867 painting *Lady Lilith* evokes an impassivity that may be linked with nineteenth-century anxieties surrounding the prospect of an indifferent Nature:

Clothed in soft white garments, she draws out through a comb the heavy mass of hair like thick spun gold to fullest length; her head leans back half sleepily, superb and satiate with its own beauty; the eyes are languid, without love in them or hate[.] [...] Of evil desire or evil impulse she has nothing; and nothing of good. She is indifferent, equable, magnetic; she charms and draws down the souls of men by pure force of absorption, in no wise wilful or malignant; outside herself she cannot live, she cannot even see: and because of this she attracts and subdues all men at once in body and in spirit. Beyond the mirror she cares not to look, and could not.⁵⁷

This coolly uncaring beauty is explicitly referred to by Swinburne as 'the siren', and his reference to her 'draw[ing] down' the souls of men seems to anticipate Burne-Jones' abovementioned *The Depths of the Sea*, in which a serenely smiling siren pulls a man down to a watery death.⁵⁸ Another of Swinburne's dangerous sirens is that of the poem *Chastelard* (1865), who, caught in a fishing net, proves fatally attractive to men:

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 49.

⁵⁵ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 419.

⁵⁶ Dawson, p. 50.

⁵⁷ Algernon Charles Swinburne, in *Notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition, 1868*, by Swinburne and William Michael Rossetti (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868), p. 46.

⁵⁸ Swinburne, p. 46.

...men seeing her face
And how she sighed out little Ahs of pain
And soft cries sobbing sideways from her mouth,
Fell in hot love, and having lain with her
Died soon[.]⁵⁹

Here, the siren's seeming vulnerability conceals her true power to ensnare and kill the men who pursue her. This passage would in fact go on to inspire Herbert James Draper's previously discussed painting *The Sea Maiden* (1894).⁶⁰ Dijkstra observes that 'Swinburne [...] indicates that it was a characteristic siren's trick to be caught in such a manner, because this made it all the easier for her to destroy the men beset by her in this apparently passive fashion'.⁶¹ There is an obvious parallel here with Darwin's 'coy' female spider (even down to the curious similarity of the fishing net to the spider's web), but also with Wells' *Sea Lady*, who first inveigles her way into the Buntings' household by pretending to be imperilled by cramp in the water, and then apparently swooning in Fred Bunting's arms, 'her lips against [his] cheek' (p. 20). Later, the narrator of *The Sea Lady* reflects that

There can be no doubt that the whole affair was a deliberately planned intrusion on her part. She never had cramp, she couldn't have cramp, and as for drowning, nobody was near drowning for a moment except Mr. Bunting, whose valuable life she very nearly sacrificed at the outset of her adventure. (p. 30)

Miss Waters exhibits the same Darwinian 'coyness' as Swinburne's siren: a performative passivity that masks her true predatory nature. Ultimately, she will tempt the hapless Chatteris to a fate quite as dark as that of the devoured spider.

In both Swinburne's and Wells' texts, the *femme fatale* figure takes the form of a mythical being. Yet, for artists and writers of the late nineteenth century, siren-like qualities were frequently found to be evident in human women, too (in fact, Swinburne's *Chastelard* only references the story of the netted merwoman in order to liken it to his own relationship with the mortal, but equally formidable, Mary Stuart). An 1868 cartoon in *Punch* by

⁵⁹ Swinburne, *Chastelard: A Tragedy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878), III.i.

⁶⁰ Simon Toll, *Herbert Draper, 1863-1920: A Life Study* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2003), p. 68.

⁶¹ Dijkstra, p. 266.

Edward Linley Sambourne depicts a bearded man gazing warily at an apparent upright mermaid, who smiles knowingly sideways at the viewer, clutching the customary accessories of mirror and comb (Figure 16).⁶² It is only upon closer inspection that her human feet become visible, peeping out from beneath what is revealed to be an elaborate skirt, rather than a true tail. The implication is clear: there is only a thin line between mermaid and mortal woman, and the latter can be quite as dangerous as the former.

The idea of human women as closely linked with the figure of the siren can, unsurprisingly, be connected with concepts popular in the evolutionary thought of the time. Herbert Spencer, widely credited with the creation of so-called ‘Social Darwinism’, wrote in 1873 that there is ‘a somewhat earlier arrest of individual evolution in women than in men, necessitated by the reservation of vital power to meet the cost of reproduction’⁶³. Women, in short, were believed to be less evolutionarily refined than men, their perceived lack of development resulting from the diversion of energy into childbearing. This inferiority showed itself both physically and mentally – in Spencer’s words, ‘both the limbs which act and the brain which makes them act are somewhat less’.⁶⁴ Nor was Spencer’s view uncommon; Cynthia Eagle Russett writes that, during the late nineteenth century, ‘[s]cientists in England and America [agreed] [...] that woman was a developmental anomaly [who] stopped growing too soon’.⁶⁵

The popular contemporary theory of recapitulation offered a mechanism by which the perceived disparity between male and female levels of evolutionary attainment could be explained. If each living being was believed to undergo a process of evolution across its own lifespan – a microcosm of the species phylogeny – then it was possible to argue that the individual development of women simply halted sooner than that of men, leaving them closer to a non-human ancestor. Some biologists went so far as to suggest that the evolutionary disparity between men and women was great enough to classify them as two distinct species: men being referred to as *homo frontalis*, reflecting the supposedly greater degree of development in the male frontal lobe (where, as Havelock Ellis writes, ‘all lofty

⁶² Edward Linley Sambourne, ‘Mr Punch’s Designs From Nature: Toilette du Soir à la Sirène’, *Punch*, 55 (1868), p. 11.

⁶³ Spencer, ‘Psychology of the Sexes’, *The Popular Science Monthly*, 4 (1873-4), 30-38 (32).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (London: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 74.

intellectual processes' had long been thought to take place), and women as *homo parietalis*.⁶⁶ As less evolved beings, women were believed not only to be of lower intelligence than men, but also at risk of regressive behaviours particular to their sex. Cesare Lombroso, whose racist theories of physiognomy were examined in Chapter 2, writes in his work *The Female Offender* (1895, co-authored with William Ferrero) that female criminals were usually 'excessively erotic, weak in maternal feeling, inclined to dissipation, astute and audacious, and [would dominate] weaker beings sometimes by suggestion, sometimes by muscular force'.⁶⁷ While men could also fall into regressive behaviours, the fact that women were already regarded as comparatively 'unevolved' meant that the female regressive possessed, in Sandra Walklate's words, 'a double helping' of degeneracy.⁶⁸

When we consider this late nineteenth-century view of women as beings less evolved than their male counterparts, prone to atavistic regression and animalistic behaviours, the contemporary fascination with the siren comes into clearer focus. Dijkstra refers to the siren's popularity in *fin-de-siècle* culture as the 'expression of a heady mixture of wish-fulfilment fantasies, fear, horror, hope, and revulsion crowding the nineteenth-century male mind', and certainly late Victorian and Edwardian receptions of the siren mythos frequently display attraction and repulsion in equal measure.⁶⁹ Combining an attractive human face and upper body with the lower half of a fish, the siren encapsulates the fear that women, however visually appealing they might be, were already beneath men on the evolutionary scale, and might at any time begin to slip further down it.

Evolutionary depths in *The Sea Lady*

While Wells' *Sea Lady*, with her genteel looks and charming manners, is able to blend in with the humans around her, much of the imagery and language used to describe both her and the watery depths from which she originates confirms that she is in fact a dangerously

⁶⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman: a Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characteristics*, 5th edn. (London: A & C Black, 1914), p. 132.

⁶⁷ Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero, *The Female Offender* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1897), p. 187.

⁶⁸ Sandra Walklate, *Gender, Crime and Criminal Justice* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2001), p. 22.

⁶⁹ Dijkstra, p. 250.

unevolved being. When Mr. Bunting and his son Fred first rush to ‘save’ Miss Waters from her fictitious cramp, they take from a neighbour’s garden ‘a long wooden ladder’ (p. 14) with which they hope to pull her to shore. However, this attempt does not go to plan:

Fred Bunting was engaged in swimming hard against the long side of the ladder, and so causing it to rotate slowly on its axis, [while] Mr. Bunting had already swallowed a very considerable amount of seawater and was kicking Fred in the chest with aimless vigour. This he did, as he explains, “to get my legs down, you know. Something about that ladder, you know, and they *would* go up!”
(p. 15)

By the time they have reemerged from the water with the Sea Lady in tow, the ladder has been forgotten, and is ‘drifting quietly out to sea’ (p. 23), prompting its owner to emerge from his house in a rage. Yet ‘[n]obody thought of his silly ladder, or took any trouble about it, naturally’ (p. 24).

The lost ladder seems at first glance to be no more than a comical prop, part of the gentle humour of the early part of the novel. But there is an undercurrent of evolutionary anxiety in the image of the ladder drifting away into the waves. Ladders had long been employed as a visual embodiment of the natural structure by which, it was believed, all living things were ordered. In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle had famously written that

Nature proceeds little by little from things lifeless to animal life [...]. Thus, next after lifeless things in the upward scale comes the plant, and of plants one will differ from another as to its amount of apparent vitality; and, in a word, the whole genus of plants, whilst it is devoid of life as compared with an animal, is endowed with life as compared with other corporeal entities. Indeed, as we just remarked, there is observed in plants a continuous scale of ascent towards the animal.⁷⁰

J. David Archibald writes that these lines represent ‘the first surviving attempts in the Western world to arrange inanimate and animate objects in some ordered sense based on their level of complexity’.⁷¹ Aristotle’s conception of nature as existing on a continuum from simple to complex remained favoured for millennia, and was often referred to as the *scala naturae* – the natural ladder – or else as the Great Chain of Being. Visual

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, trans. D. W. Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 588b4-14.

⁷¹ J. David Archibald, *Aristotle’s Ladder, Darwin’s Tree: The Evolution of Visual Metaphors for Biological Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 2.

representations of a literal ladder or set of steps, often with each ‘rung’ marked with the name of a group or class of being, appear from the mediaeval period to the nineteenth century; humanity, of course, sat near to or at the very top, only ever placed lower than God or the angels.⁷²

Although the image of a ladder-like hierarchy of nature has since gradually been eclipsed by the Darwinian ‘Tree of Life’ design – the branching, coral-like structure which constituted the only illustration in the first edition of the *Origin of Species* – the idea of a fixed scale of natural life still held considerable sway at the *fin de siècle*. A ladder or ladder-like structure was an obvious way to visualise a progression from simple to complex through gradations of change, which, while not in fact the model Darwin had argued for, was often how Darwinian evolution was mistakenly conceptualised. It was not unusual for contemporary texts to refer explicitly to an ‘evolutionary ladder’, or else, in the words of a critical 1871 review of *The Descent of Man*, to a ‘ladder of life by which Nature mounted from the lowest to the highest’.⁷³ In his 1891 essay ‘Zoological Retrogression’, which I previously discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Wells himself notes the persistence of belief in such a structure:

It is no libel to say that three-quarters of people who use the phrase, “organic evolution,” interpret it very much this way: — Life began with the amoeba, and then came jelly-fish, shell-fish, and all those miscellaneous invertebrate things, and then *real* fishes and amphibia, reptiles, birds, mammals and man, the last and first of creation.⁷⁴

Yet, while many people assumed it to imply a steady and linear progression towards greater sophistication, evolutionary theory in fact threatened the *scala naturae* far more than it affirmed it: as Wells goes on to argue in ‘Zoological Retrogression’, evolutionary development is in fact unfixed, branching, and as likely to trend ‘downward’ as up.⁷⁵

In the first pages of *The Sea Lady*, Wells’ human characters trip and stumble over themselves in their efforts to drag the ladder out to sea; they spin it around on its axis, and finally abandon it to the waves. Beneath the comedy of the Bunting men’s ineptitude, the

⁷² Archibald, pp. 7-11.

⁷³ Edward Newman, ‘Notices of New Books: *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*’, *The Zoologist*, 29 (1871), 2613-24 (2621).

⁷⁴ Wells, ‘Zoological Retrogression’, pp. 246-7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 247.

loss of the ladder has a deeper and more troubling significance: the Sea Lady's appearance in the midst of a human family upends the *scala naturae*. Her unclassifiable body is impossible to accommodate on any ordered continuum of natural life; her presence throws taxonomy into doubt, and the ladder is subsumed by a sea that is, as I will go on to argue, presented within the novel as a kind of evolutionary chasm or void. In its disappearance, we see a visual repudiation of the false idea that, as Wells writes in 'Zoological Retrogression', 'the great scroll of nature has been steadily unfolding to reveal [...] successively higher grades of being'.⁷⁶

As noted above, the sea itself is significant in establishing the siren as a dangerously unevolved being. The novel's title – and the epithet by which the Lady is referred to throughout most of the novel – lays a heavy emphasis on her watery origins, making it impossible to forget whence she emerged, even as she conceals her tail and departs herself as an ordinary young lady. The sea is described as a place of faintly sinister mystery; it is referred to frequently as 'the abyss' (p. 32) or "the deeps" (p. 239), and the Sea Lady admits to hailing from deep waters. The depths of the sea had long been a site of fascination for Wells, who produced several fiction works centering upon the discovery of previously unknown deep sea species: 'The Sea Raiders' (1896) describes an attack by violent octopus-like creatures on an English beach, while 'In the Abyss' (1897) involves the discovery by a diver of an intelligent bipedal race that occupies the seabed. 'In no department of zoological science [...] are we quite so much in the dark as with regard to the deep-sea cephalopods', Wells writes at the beginning of 'The Sea Raiders', before describing this new and fearful species.⁷⁷ As a vast and largely unexplorable topography, the deep sea might contain any number of creatures as-yet unknown, making it a fertile locus for speculative evolutionary fictions. From this submerged space of possibility emerges The Sea Lady. Describing her home to Melville, the Lady evokes a world of gentle passivity:

[A] green luminous fluidity in which these beings float, a world lit by great shining monsters that drift athwart it, and by waving forests of nebulous luminosity amidst

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 246.

⁷⁷ Wells, 'The Sea Raiders', in *The Country of the Blind and Other Stories*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder, Penguin Classics edn. (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 153-163 (153).

which the little fishes drift like netted stars. It is a world with neither sitting, nor standing, nor coming, nor going, through which its inhabitants drift and float as one drifts and floats in dreams. (p. 41)

No sooner has he related this account, however, than the novel's narrator casts it into doubt: 'I do not even feel certain that it is in the sea particularly that this world of the Sea Lady is to be found. [...] Things are not always what they seem' (pp. 41-42). It seems possible to the narrator that Miss Waters' pleasant description of 'the abyss' is inaccurate, perhaps that it is obscuring some less palatable truth. The narrator goes on to observe that '[t]here are wider seas than ever keel sailed upon, and deeps that no lead of human casting will ever plumb. When it is all summed up, I have to admit, I do not know, I cannot tell' (pp. 42-43).

In previous chapters, I have examined how chasmic spaces function as a manifestation of 'deep' or evolutionary time in *fin-de-siècle* literature. Gillian Beer describes how the deep sea in particular occupied a significant place in nineteenth-century thought about evolutionary origins: 'Evolutionary theory implied a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea'.⁷⁸ A posthumously published proto-evolutionary poem by Erasmus Darwin (grandfather to Charles) dating from as early as 1803 describes life as having begun in the sea: 'Then, whilst the sea at their coeval birth, / Surge over surge, involved the shoreless earth; / Nursed by warm sunbeams in primeval caves / Organic Life began beneath the waves'.⁷⁹ In Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863), a novel openly suffused with evolutionary thought, the sea is referred to as 'the mother of all living things'.⁸⁰ In 1868, it seemed briefly as if theories of a primordial 'urschleim' originating in the deep sea were to be scientifically vindicated when T. H. Huxley observed, among sediment samples collected from the Atlantic seabed, a gelatinous substance that he believed to represent the basic matter out of which all life had arisen, and which, he speculated, coated much of the ocean floor all over the world.⁸¹ He named it *Bathybius haeckelii*, in honour of Ernst Haeckel's research on protoplasm.

⁷⁸ Beer, p. 118.

⁷⁹ Erasmus Darwin, quoted in Bondeson, p. 242.

⁸⁰ Kingsley, *The Water-Babies*, p. 139.

⁸¹ Eric Mills, 'Problems of Deep Sea Biology: An Historical Perspective', in *The Sea: The Global Coastal Ocean: Multiscale Interdisciplinary Processes*, ed. by Gilbert T. Rowe, 16 vols (London: Harvard University Press, 1983), VIII, pp. 1-80 (p. 25).

While Huxley's theory had been disproved by 1875 (when *Bathybius* was discovered, anticlimactically, to be 'merely an inorganic precipitate caused by adding alcohol to seawater') the idea of an 'urmatter' that had begun in the depths of the sea remained potent, and the belief persisted that it was from the water that life had first emerged.⁸² This belief is reflected in contemporary fiction. Anna Budziak, writing about Oscar Wilde's 1891 mermaid story 'The Fisherman and his Soul', observes that the primal origin of life 'is contained by the unfathomably deep ocean which, in the logic of metonymy, becomes its representation'.⁸³ Indeed, Wells' *Sea Lady* herself seems to confirm this reading, telling Adeline and Mrs. Bunting that "[t]here are no nights and days [in the deep sea], you know. No time nor anything of that sort" (p. 67). Time as we understand it does not exist in the depths of the sea, and this timelessness collapses the evolutionary distance between prehistory and modernity, so that the materialisation of the unevolved *Sea Lady* from the water into the nineteenth-century world becomes narratively plausible.

If the deep sea is the primordial fount of life, then the *Sea Lady*'s appearance from it is, in a sense, the re-enactment of that first, much-imagined movement of a distant human ancestor from water onto dry land. A similar re-staging of the moment of evolutionary emergence from the water is seen in John Collier's 1909 painting *The Land Baby*. Collier (who was in fact the son-in-law of T. H. Huxley) depicts a fish-tailed siren who sits with the human portion of her body protruding from the shallows, staring in apparent interest at a naked human child on the foreshore, who gazes calmly back at her (Figure 17). The composition of the image – with the child to the right of the siren – implies an evolutionary progression from sea to land, from fish-tailed mermaid to full humanity.

Beer has described the Victorian ambivalence at the prospect of the "single form" of one 'remote progenitor' from which all life descended: a combination of 'powerful nostalgia' for this lost antecedent, and a conflicting desire to distance humanity from 'the primitive and the barbaric which could never quite be left behind'.⁸⁴ The *Sea Lady*'s arrival provokes a similar unease; after the initial 'general horror' of the realisation that she is not

⁸² Mills, p. 26.

⁸³ Anna Budziak, *Text, Body and Indeterminacy: Doppelgänger Selves in Pater and Wilde* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 228.

⁸⁴ Beer, p. 119.

human (p. 22), Mrs. Bunting briefly glances at the water, wondering, in a moment of abjection, if it would be possible to simply ‘put the mermaid back’ (p. 26). Yet, when Melville visits her shortly afterwards, Mrs. Bunting’s response to the Sea Lady’s aberrant, unevolved form reveals as much fascination as horror:

“But really, you know,” said my cousin Melville, protesting in the name of reason and the nineteenth century — “A tail!”
“I patted it,” said Mrs. Bunting. (p. 54)

Mrs. Bunting’s response to the siren follows exactly Hurley’s description of human confrontation with the abhuman. Faced with the uncanny form of the Sea Lady, Mrs. Bunting ‘on the one hand, labors to maintain (the illusion of) an autonomous and discrete self-identity, responding to any threat to that self-conception with emphatic, sometimes violent, denial’: she desires to cast the Sea Lady back into the evolutionary abyss from which she emerged, erasing this disturbing evidence of the not-quite-human.⁸⁵ Yet simultaneously, she ‘welcomes the event or confrontation that breaches the boundaries of the ego and casts the self down into the vertiginous pleasures of indifferentiation’.⁸⁶ Despite her horror at the Sea Lady’s abhuman body, she is simultaneously drawn to it, to the point of touching it.

As established earlier in this chapter, the siren’s regressive evolutionary traits link her with, in Barbara Larson’s words, ‘the threat of [...] unbridled sexuality’.⁸⁷ This is borne out by the novel’s ending, which marries together the themes of degeneracy and aggressive female sexuality. Chatteris’ fatal elopement with Miss Waters is presented as the consummation of their strange relationship; the description of his last walk down to the beach with the Sea Lady in his arms is freighted with sensuality. A hotel porter who observed their departure reports that “[s]he had one hand holding his hair — yes, holding his hair, with her fingers in among it...And when she saw my face she threw her head back laughing at me. As much as to say, ‘got ’im!’” (p. 294). Lacking any witnesses to the couple’s final moments on land, the narrator pictures a scene of intense physical connection

⁸⁵ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 4.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Barbara Larson, ‘Evolution and Victorian Art’, in *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, pp. 121-148 (p. 142).

that seems intended to evoke a sexual act, rather than the night-time walk he is ostensibly describing:

They went down through the soft moonlight, tall and white and splendid, interlocked, with his arms about her, his brow to her white shoulder and her hair about his face. And she, I suppose, smiled above him and caressed him and whispered to him. (pp. 296-297)

Not only are these lines transparently sexual, but it is the triumphant Sea Lady who occupies the dominant position, both physically and in terms of the power she wields over Chatteris. Again, the species order is upended, with the unevolved siren holding sway over the ‘really very brilliant and promising’ young man (p. 7), who ought to occupy the topmost rung of the *scala naturae*. Only hours earlier, Chatteris had assured Melville that he intends to leave Miss Waters, and “to fall in — with the species; [...] to take my place in the ranks in that great battle for the future which is the meaning of life” (pp. 279-280). Instead, the Sea Lady’s atavistic, animal sexuality prevails. The drowning itself is imagined by the narrator as a quasi-orgasmic experience:

And of the end I can only guess and dream. Did there come a sudden horror upon him at the last, a sudden perception of infinite error, and was he drawn down, swiftly and terribly, a bubbling repentance, into those unknown deeps? Or was she tender and wonderful to the last, and did she wrap her arms around him and draw him down, down until the soft waters closed above him into a gentle ecstasy of death?

(p. 298)

Just as Fred Bunting carried Miss Waters out of the sea at the beginning of the novel, enacting an evolutionary emergence, so she returns to it in the arms of Chatteris, in a scene of regression, drawing him down with her into the primordial depths.

The siren as sexless elemental

I have spent the last portion of this chapter discussing the siren as an unevolved figure of aggressive female sexuality. Now I will turn to an apparently conflicting reading, and one that exists in uncomfortable tandem with the Sea Lady’s role as seductress: her apparent lack of sexual or reproductive capability. Peculiarly for a character so marked by her erotic

appeal, Miss Waters is repeatedly implied to be a physically asexual being. The first suggestion of this comes when she tearfully informs Mrs. Bunting of her own motherless state: she “confess[es] she had been born ages and ages ago in some dreadful miraculous way in some terrible place near Cyprus” (p. 46). The mention of Miss Waters having been born ‘near Cyprus’ is presumably intended to connect her with the classical goddess of love, Venus, who was purported to have been born from the sea-foam off the coast of the island. Melville later refers to her as ‘Venus Anadyomene’ (p. 279) – ‘Venus rising from the sea’ – which seems to confirm this reading. Importantly, the birth of Venus is an instance of male parthenogenesis: according to myth, the goddess sprang fully-formed from the water after the severed genitals of the titan Uranus were dropped into the sea. Mrs. Bunting goes on to claim that “these poor creatures are Immortal, Mr. Melville — at least within limits — creatures born of the elements and resolved into the elements again” (p. 48). Thus the Sea Lady appears to have come into being without the need for sexual reproduction.

A second and more obvious hint is dropped when Adeline Glendower suggests that, in order to truly understand deep-sea life, “[o]ne needs to be born a mer-child” (p. 68). The Sea Lady’s response is telling:

“A mer-child?” asked the Sea Lady.

“Yes — don’t you call your little ones —?”

“*What* little ones?” asked the Sea Lady.

She regarded them for a moment with a frank wonder, the undying wonder of the Immortals at that perpetual decay and death and replacement which is the gist of human life. Then at the expression of their faces she seemed to recollect. “Of course,” She said[.] (pp. 68-69)

Wells’ bleak characterisation of human existence as a perpetual cycle of ‘decay and death and replacement’ is deeply evolutionary; an 1883 work on evolutionary theology by William Forsell Kirby uses almost precisely the same phrasing, referring to the ‘appointed cycle of birth, growth, decay, and death’ undergone by both species and individuals in the course of evolutionary change.⁸⁸ But the Sea Lady’s confusion at the idea of ‘mer-children’ reveals that no such being exists. There are no ‘little ones’ where she comes from, because

⁸⁸ W. F. Kirby, *Evolution and Natural Theology* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1883), p. 158.

creatures like her do not come into being through ordinary reproductive processes; she is outside of the mortal cycle. Adeline Glendower is one of the few characters to appear discomfited by this conversation, later complaining to Mrs Bunting: “How do we know what she is? Down there, out there, she may be anything” (p. 106). The Sea Lady’s ignorance of babies sets her apart as something disturbingly inhuman; in Adeline’s words, she is “out of harmony” with the mortals around her (p. 103).

Then there is the simple fact of the Sea Lady’s anatomy, which, we must assume, would preclude any attempt at penetrative sexual intercourse. For, as Adam Roberts bluntly but accurately puts it, the novel ‘very obviously dances around the most patent difference between [Chatteris’ two love interests]: that one has a vagina and the other doesn’t’.⁸⁹ The question of the sexual anatomy of the fish-tailed siren is not a new one, and exists at the heart of the siren mythos, as Pamela Norris observes:

What is so extraordinary about the mermaid’s reputation for sexual allure is that her anatomy actually implies the baulking of lust: what phallus could penetrate that slippery scaly surface? Where is the mermaid’s vagina and how does she reproduce?⁹⁰

Some mediaeval and early modern representations get around the issue by depicting the siren with a split or forked tail, each end of which she holds up by her own head, thus creating a similar effect to two parted legs; Milliken speculates that this pose represents lustfulness, and can be traced back to the grotesque mediaeval carvings known as ‘Sheela-Na-Gigs’, which take the form of a female figure displaying its genitalia.⁹¹ In the case of single-tailed sirens like the Sea Lady, however, there is something stranger at play. Her presumed anatomical ‘lack’ is the source of much unspoken tension throughout Wells’ novel. At one point, a comic disagreement arises between Chatteris’ wealthy aunt, Lady Poynting Mallow, and Melville, as to why the match is considered to be unsuitable:

‘I want to get to the bottom of all this,’ said Lady Poynting Mallow. “Who is this other woman?” [...]
‘Mermaid, I gather,’ said Melville.

⁸⁹ Roberts, p. 139.

⁹⁰ Pamela Norris, *Eve: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 328.

⁹¹ Milliken, p. 130.

‘What’s the objection to her?’
‘Tail.’
‘Fin and all?’
‘Complete.’
‘You’re sure of it?’
‘Certain.’
‘How do you know?’
‘I’m certain,’ repeated Melville with a quite unusual testiness.
The lady reflected.
‘Well, there are worse things in the world than a fishy tail,’ she said at last.
(pp. 249-250)

Untroubled by the knowledge of Miss Waters’ ‘deformity’ (p. 44), Lady Poynting Mallow offers various far-fetched suggestions as to how this interspecies marriage might be navigated – “a yacht and a diving bell” for Chatteris (p. 256); a seawater tank for the Sea Lady (p. 257) – yet neither she nor Melville directly addresses the question of how exactly such a union could ever be consummated. The closest they come to the subject is Melville’s tentative question: “You understand clearly she is a properly constituted mermaid with a real physical tail?” (p. 252). The Sea Lady’s possession of a tail is presented as the chief impediment to their marriage, but nobody ever explicitly states why that is.

Roberts offers a compelling analysis of the peculiar sexual dynamics within the novel:

Perhaps the big joke of *The Sea Lady* is not that everybody thinks about sex but nobody is allowed to talk openly about it, but the rather different notion that everybody thinks about sex all the time, but nobody is actually allowed to have it. All we can ever do is access symbols for sex, stand-ins for sex, with the twist that actual sex (as, for example, between handsome Chatteris and beautiful Adeline) becomes itself only a sort of stand-in for sex, a mere symbol, a sex that doesn’t satisfy the yearning that wanting-to-have-sex represents. The Sea Lady is about that search for the other kind of sex, the sex that isn’t actual in-the-world sex.⁹²

Wells claimed to have written *The Sea Lady* in response to ‘[a] craving for some lovelier experience than life had yet given me’.⁹³ Although it seems an odd choice of words to describe a novel that culminates with the drowning of its male lead, this statement arguably lends weight to Roberts’ argument. Wells, a notorious philanderer, was certainly not

⁹² Roberts, p. 135.

⁹³ Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1967), p. 393.

unacquainted with ‘actual sex’, as Roberts puts it. And yet the figure of Miss Waters, who exists outside of human sexuality, seems to have embodied something ‘lovelier’ than anything Wells had encountered in his actual life. So is it, too, for Chatteris, who exclaims in frustration “[w]hy should her smile be so sweet to me, why should her voice move me! Why her’s [sic] and not Adeline’s? Adeline has straight eyes and clear eyes and fine eyes” (p. 273). Adeline Glendower is beautiful, and yet she is missing an essential *something* that marks the Sea Lady out.

Roberts suggests that the especial allure of the Sea Lady lies, in fact, in her *lack* of a physical sexuality. Her fundamental unattainability – the smooth blankness of that impregnable tail – makes her not less, but more attractive to the men around her. Why should this be? Again, it is perhaps best explained through reference to evolutionary theory. As we have already seen, with the growth of Darwinism had come arguments by the likes of Lombroso that women were arrested at a lower grade of evolution than men. But this approach clashed uncomfortably with the mid-nineteenth-century view of women as creatures so ethereal as to be, in Hurley’s words, almost ‘disembodied’.⁹⁴ An 1858 review of the poetry of Coventry Patmore – famously the originator of the phrase ‘the Angel in the House’, which is to this day employed as a byword for Victorian ideals of tender and docile femininity – praises him for being ‘so open to the most delicate impressions, in order to be able to delineate the ethereal essence of feminine influence’.⁹⁵ The idea that this same gentle womankind was in fact descended from animals was troubling to many. An 1871 *Punch* cartoon entitled ‘A Logical Refutation of Mr. Darwin’s Theory’ shows a bearded husband crouching in front of his elegant wife, who holds their young daughter on his lap (Figure 18). The caption reads:

Jack (Who has been reading passages from the ‘Descent of Man’ to the Wife whom he adores, but loves to tease): ‘So you see, Mary, Baby is Descended from a Hairy Quadruped, with Pointed Ears, and a Tail. We *all* are!’

Mary: ‘Speak for *yourself*, Jack! *I’m* not descended from Anything of the Kind, I beg to say; and Baby takes after me. So there!’⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 10.

⁹⁵ ‘Poems by Coventry Patmore’, *The North British Review*, 27 (1858), 529-45 (537).

⁹⁶ George du Maurier, ‘A Logical Refutation of Mr. Darwin’s Theory’, *Punch*, 60 (1871), 130.

Despite its humorous tone, the illustration implies that there is a particular horror in the thought of a *woman* having evolved from a ‘hairy quadruped’. There is also the now oft-repeated (and likely apocryphal) late-Victorian story of ‘[a] timid and decorous lady who, on hearing an exposition of the Darwinian theory that men are descended from apes, said “Let us hope that it is not true, or if it is, let us hush it up!”’.⁹⁷ The popularity of this tale (it is reported in various sources from 1894 onwards) suggests that it was obvious that any ‘decorous’ woman would have wished to suppress the knowledge of such a lineage.

We have seen, in Machen’s *The Great God Pan*, the *fin-de-siècle* dread of the woman whose beauty conceals her true bestial heritage. The abovementioned *Punch* cartoon, in which the mother anxiously insists that *her* baby cannot be descended from animals, demonstrates that similar anxieties existed around reproduction: in spite of her protests, her husband’s claim that ‘we *all* are’ the products of evolution emphasises the inability of humanity to escape its animal origins through procreation. A comparable fear is evident in contemporary accounts of ‘hereditary taint[s]’ like those described by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his influential work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886); the book describes how traits perceived as ‘degenerate’ are endlessly passed down through the generations.⁹⁸ Krafft-Ebing regarded the sexual and procreative drive as essentially base and animalistic, writing that ‘[i]n coarse, sensual love, in the lustful impulse to satisfy this natural instinct, man stands on a level with the animal’.⁹⁹ While Krafft-Ebing believed it was possible to temper this animalism with morality, the fear of a degenerate procreative drive remains, in Karschay’s words, ‘a disconcerting prospect that looms large in *Psychopathia Sexualis*’.¹⁰⁰ Rather than a teleological progression towards a more perfect future, human reproduction could be seen merely as a futile perpetuation of the same eternal, meaningless cycle of ‘decay and death and replacement’ that so intrigues the immortal Sea Lady.

Chatteris, who openly admits that he has lost his belief in “progress [and the] good of humanity” (p. 183), seems to have experienced an existential awakening to these ideas. During his final conversation with Melville, he refers reluctantly to the necessity of

⁹⁷ Henry R. Rose, *Good Sense in Religion: Eleven Lectures* (Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1894), p. 80.

⁹⁸ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. by Charles Gilbert Chaddock (London: F. A. Davis, 1892), p. 38.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Karschay, p. 65.

“[falling in] with the species” (p. 279), by which he means going ahead with his marriage to Adeline. In describing his engagement thus, Chatteris reveals that he has come to regard human relations through a coldly Darwinian lens. To him, marriage to Adeline represents nothing more than the fulfilment of the evolutionary requirement to pair off with a suitable mate and produce suitable offspring, as any other animal would do.

Perhaps it is not entirely surprising, then, that the sexless Sea Lady holds such a sway over Chatteris, to whom the scientific facts of life appear so dispiriting. Her appeal is precisely that she exists *outside* of the realm of evolutionary truths, even as she simultaneously and contradictorily represents a restoration to primordial indifferenciation. Again, we see a prelude of the Freudian death drive in Chatteris’ willingness to return to nonentity; his desire to subsume himself in the unevolved space of the deep sea is a refusal of the Darwinian imperative to survive and procreate.

The only time, in fact, that evolution is directly mentioned within *The Sea Lady*, it is in the context of Chatteris’ certainty that evolutionary theory would be unable to account for the intensity of his attraction to Miss Waters: “Imagine [...] Spencer in the light of Evolution and the Environment explaining it away!” he laughs (p. 273). The Sea Lady is not comprehensible in scientific terms; she is, as Beer writes of all mermaids, an ‘evolutionary dead-end’.¹⁰¹ In picking her over Adeline, Chatteris rejects the demands of ‘the species’. He opts out of the perpetuation of the birth-death cycle, and chooses for himself instead an eroticised death in the Sea Lady’s arms.

Conflicting femininities

I have presented two seemingly conflicting arguments in the course of this chapter. Firstly, that the Sea Lady is an atavistic sexual presence: a rapacious being from the evolutionary depths, come to lure unsuspecting English gentlemen to a watery death. Secondly, that the Sea Lady is a fundamentally sexless being, an elemental removed from the evolutionary cycle of reproduction and decay. I do not offer these two lines of argument as incompatible alternative readings; instead, I suggest that they are equally and simultaneously true. Miss

¹⁰¹ Beer, *Forging the Missing Link: Interdisciplinary Stories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 30.

Waters is at once a fearfully unevolved *femme fatale*, and a coolly unattainable immortal. The fact that her character is marked by such polarised traits is demonstrative of the degree to which post-Darwinian constructions of femininity were riven with oppositions.

Late Victorian gender ideology, Hurley writes, was ‘a site of internal contradiction [...] identifying women as dangerously defined by their bodies on the one hand and ethereal, essentially disembodied creatures on the other’.¹⁰² As a result,

Victorian representations of women tend to polar extremes: women are [...] spiritual or bodily, asexual or ravenously sexed [...]. These two incompatible perceptions of femininity are often found side by side within the same text, for instance in *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911), where Stoker juxtaposes the pellucid innocence of Mimi Watford with the lustful cruelty of Arabella the snake-woman.¹⁰³

Hurley offers an instance of a text in which two separate female characters embody two opposing modes of femininity: the hypersexual, quasi-bestial *femme fatale*, and the woman whose innocence keeps her appealingly distant from disconcerting evolutionary possibilities. In Wells’ novel, more strangely still, these two contradictory femininities coexist within a single character. This is made possible by the divided nature of the hybrid: the siren’s bodily constitution is inherently antithetical, combining an indivisible and sexless tail with the attractive face and breasts of a woman. Thus the Sea Lady – whose very being is impossibly contradictory – is able to incorporate and embody these apparently irreconcilable tropes.

Of course, there are also interesting and complex parallels to be found between the Sea Lady and Adeline Glendower. If, as Simon Goldhill writes, ‘the representation of Victorian femininity is polarized around opposed categories of [...] “angel in the house” [and] “siren on the street”’, it seems initially obvious which of the two women belongs to which category.¹⁰⁴ Chatteris seems to concur, stating resignedly when he plans to return to Adeline that “if there’s to be no Venus Anadyomene, at any rate there will be a Pallas Athene” (p. 280): the goddess of wisdom and handicraft, rather than the goddess of love.

¹⁰² Hurley, *The Gothic Body*, p. 10.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁴ Simon Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 54.

Serious, high-minded Adeline is clearly the ‘respectable’ choice – “the best of all possible helpers”, as Melville describes her (p. 201) – while the Sea Lady represents ‘exotic sexual fantasy’, in Roberts’ words.¹⁰⁵ Yet, as I have discussed above, Chatteris’ decision to elope with the Sea Lady is as much a *rejection* of sexuality as an engagement with it. Adeline is ultimately spurned in part due to her status as merely a member of ‘the species’, while the Sea Lady is elevated by her sexual unattainability.

And, while the loyal, sensible Adeline is in many ways the more suitable wifely candidate of the two, in another sense, it is the Sea Lady who best fits into certain Victorian archetypes of appealing femininity, at least on the face of it. She is, as Stephen McLean observes, ‘in many senses a parody of the “Womanly Woman” – a passive, domesticated and altogether proper specimen of womanhood’.¹⁰⁶ In disguising herself as a human, she ‘purposefully adopts the role of another idealized Victorian femininity, the invalid’, thus appealing to men through ‘the ultra-feminine weakness and passivity generated by her “illness”’; Chatteris notes admiringly that “[h]er illness [...] makes a passive thing of her” (p. 140).¹⁰⁷ Adeline, meanwhile, displays various traits associated with the nascent ‘New Woman’ archetype of the 1890s: she is politically active, has a ‘capable’ mind, ‘an accumulated fund of energy and much ambition’ (p. 7), and quotes from Sarah Grand, the novelist who is believed to have coined the phrase ‘New Woman’ in 1894 (p. 228).¹⁰⁸ Yet even in this respect, the line between Adeline and the siren is oddly blurred; at one point, the Sea Lady is shown to have taken up smoking cigarettes, a habit directly associated with the New Woman paradigm. Simon J. James writes that the Sea Lady is ultimately ‘a more successful freethinking New Woman than Adeline’; certainly she is more able than Adeline to look beyond societal conventions, and to prioritise her own agency and enjoyment.¹⁰⁹

There are other likenesses between the two. The Sea Lady accuses Adeline of “[getting] everything out of books. She gets herself out of a book” (p. 162), but earlier in the novel she herself admits to having ‘derived her ideas of human life and sentiment’ from

¹⁰⁵ Roberts, p. 133.

¹⁰⁶ Steven McLean, “‘A Fantastic, Unwholesome Little Dream’: The Illusion of Reality and Sexual Politics in H. G. Wells’s *The Sea Lady*”, *PLL*, 49 (2013), 70-85 (72).

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72, 73.

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Robbins, *Pater to Forster, 1873-1924* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 159.

¹⁰⁹ Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity & the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 50.

books thrown overboard at sea (p. 40). In Melville's final conversation with Adeline before Chatteris' death, he sees 'something in her eyes that he had never seen before' (p. 243), and she seems to take on something of her rival's decisive demeanour: "Tell him I want him." she says of Chatteris (p. 244), unknowingly echoing the Sea Lady's earlier declaration that she will pursue Chatteris "if I want to" (p. 162). Perhaps most striking is Wells' choice of words in an early scene when describing Adeline's arrival at a social occasion: 'Adeline swam forward to Mrs. Bunting' (p. 126). This surely is not an incidental phrase. While in many senses the two characters are opposites, in others they are repeatedly shown to be peculiarly alike. Though the Sea Lady herself is an obviously unreal figure, we see glimpses of her in the human Adeline. This may be a narrative of fantasy, but the question at the heart of it – what is it to be a woman at the *fin de siècle*? – is perfectly real.

Uncertain waters

Having raised this thorny mass of questions, *The Sea Lady* seems disinclined to offer any possible resolution to them. The novel closes with an ambiguous and rather beautiful passage in which the narrator imagines the aftermath of Chatteris' disappearance into the sea:

For the tailpiece to that, let us put that policeman who in the small hours before dawn came upon the wrap the Sea Lady had been wearing just as the tide overtook it. It was not the sort of garment low people sometimes throw away — it was a soft and costly wrap. I seem to see him perplexed and dubious, wrap in charge over his arm and lantern in hand, scanning first the white beach and black bushes behind him and then staring out to sea. It was the inexplicable abandonment of a thoroughly comfortable and desirable thing.

"What were people up to?" one figures him asking, this simple citizen of a plain and observed world. "What do such things mean?"

"To throw away such an excellent wrap...!"

In all the southward heaven there were only a planet and the sinking moon, and from his feet a path of quivering light must have started and run up to the extreme dark edge before him of the sky. Ever and again the darkness east and west of that glory would be lit by a momentary gleam of phosphorescence; and far out the lights of ships were shining bright and yellow. Across its shimmer a black fishing smack was gliding out of mystery into mystery. Dungeness shone from the west a pin-point of red light, and in the east the tireless glare of that great beacon on Gris-nez wheeled athwart the sky and vanished and came again.

I picture the interrogation of his lantern going out for a little way, a stain of faint pink curiosity upon the mysterious vast serenity of night. (p. 299)

Sky and sea seem to blur together, becoming a homogeneous and opaque space of uncertainty, like the evolutionary abyss from which the Sea Lady emerged, and into which she has now retreated. There is something of Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' about this final section, with its unknowable dark sea, and the gleam of the Gris-nez beacon from the distant French coast. Though Arnold's poem – thought to have been written in the early 1850s, several years prior to the publication of the *Origin of Species* – is the product of a very different cultural context, the two pieces of literature share a sense of deep existential disquiet, centering upon a feeling of human insignificance in the face of an indifferent or incomprehensible world.

Wells' inclusion of the Sea Lady's discarded wrap is significant. The wrap is a symbol of feminine gentility, a covering garment intended to ensure modesty and warmth; its 'inexplicable abandonment' speaks to broader uncertainties about what direction is to be taken by womankind in the impending twentieth century. Wells' references to the 'interrogation' and 'curiosity' of the policeman's lantern, as he searches for the vanished owner of the wrap, bring to mind the looming 'woman question' of the age. Yet as with the riddle of *The Time Machine*, it is a question that seems likely to go unanswered. A story that began as an ostensibly lighthearted, low fantasy narrative of a man torn between his respectable fiancée and a magical sea-being ends in darkness and uncertainty, with traditions overthrown and conventional gender roles upended. The policeman and his lantern constitute only a 'faint' glimmer of illumination in the 'mysterious vast[ness]' of the post-Darwinian night.

Chapter 5

Golden Ages: The Threatened Centaur and Homoerotic Possibility

Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur* (1911) is a strange work. Much like its titular figure, it is peculiarly dual: as much a philosophical treatise as it is a novel. There is little sense of a driving plot. Instead, the text's meandering narrative is motivated by an intense, yet only vaguely realised, desire. Superficially, this desire is one of reunion with the 'Urwelt': the primal state of being in which the Earth apparently once existed, where nature was free and untrammelled, and the living planet able to body forth fragments of its own spirit in the form of 'Urmenschen' such as the centaurs.¹ The novel's protagonist – the Irish mystic Terence O'Malley, who is on his way to the wilds of the Caucasus to work as a foreign correspondent – longs to find a way back into this prelapsarian state, and out of a modern world he regards as stultifying and oppressive.

The Centaur, then, is on the face of it a text dealing with contemporary anxieties surrounding encroaching civilisation, and the loss of truly 'wild' spaces in the world. Mark Payne identifies it as 'a book length fable about [...] the interlinked fates of poetry, Nature and the past at the threshold of modernity'.² Yet, while this reading is certainly valid, I believe there is another preoccupation at play in Blackwood's novel. In O'Malley's intense fascination with one of his fellow travellers on the Caucasus-bound steamer – a silent and mysterious Russian, whose appearance communicates to the protagonist 'a loneliness that must be whispered' (p. 22), and who is ultimately revealed to be a centaur disguised in human form – there is an intimation of homoerotic desire.

In this chapter, I will offer a reading of *The Centaur* that both acknowledges this queer undercurrent, and links it with the Darwinian themes which, as we shall see, are equally significant to the narrative. I will begin by examining the centaur mythos as a whole, before turning to its late nineteenth-century receptions in art and literature in order to establish a link between the centaur and Darwinian theory – in particular, with the idea of the centaur as a relict species threatened with extinction. I will then turn to *The Centaur*

¹ Algernon Blackwood, *The Centaur* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911), p. 59. All further references will be to this edition.

² Mark Payne, 'Relic|Channel|Ghost: Centaurs in Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur*', in *Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception*, ed. by Shane Butler (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 239-254 (pp. 239-240).

to argue that Blackwood, whether consciously or not, adapts this existing Darwinian vision of the centaur to fit the latent homoeroticism of his narrative – an aspect of the text that has been critically neglected. Blackwood layers mythic and evolutionary timescales to characterise O'Malley as a being out of time, both in terms of sexuality and of species. Ultimately, however, I will argue that Blackwood's message is one of evolutionary hope.

Brutality and nobility in the centaur mythos

Blackwood, like most of the other *fin-de-siècle* writers who employ the figure of the hybrid, draws heavily upon the classical lore surrounding the centaur. I will therefore include a brief account of the centaur's classical pedigree, and its reception in post-antique literature. Where precisely the myth arose is uncertain. G. S. Kirk contends that the idea of the centaur may have originated entirely with the Greeks, observing that 'Centaur in their developed mythical form look like a peculiarly Greek phenomenon'.³ Padgett, however, notes that 'the general indebtedness to longstanding [Near Eastern] antecedents such as sphinxes, lion-centaurs, and human-headed bulls [seems] too obvious to ignore.'⁴ Wherever its image first developed, it is certainly true that the centaur enjoyed the greatest degree of attention in classical culture, where it was believed that the race was descended from the Lapith king Ixion. Ixion was shunned by mortals after murdering his father-in-law to avoid having to give payment for his bride. When Zeus took pity on him, and brought him to Mount Olympus to live alongside the gods, the ungrateful Ixion planned to assault the goddess Hera. Knowing this, Zeus replaced his wife with Nephele, a cloud shaped into her likeness. Ixion attacked the cloud instead, and this peculiar union produced a son named Centaurus. According to some versions of the myth, Centaurus was himself the first centaur. According to others, Centaurus was human in form, but he in turn bred with wild mares upon Mount Pelion, and thus were born the centaurs. Either way, the centaurs drew their lineage from Ixion's assault upon Nephele.

Perhaps due to the violence of their origins, the centaurs are generally represented in classical sources as brutal, uncivilised and sexually voracious. A notable exception to

³ G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 157.

⁴ Padgett, *Horse Men*, p. 5.

the type, however, is Chiron, most famous of the centaurs, who did not share the lineage of the others. Born when the Titan Cronos disguised himself as a horse to mate with the Oceanid Philyra, Chiron, unlike most of his fellows, was wise, humane and noble. He appears in classical mythology as a mentor or tutor to many of the greatest human and demigod heroes; Xenophon, in his fourth Century BCE treatise ‘On Hunting’, lists some twenty-one famous students of the centaur, including Achilles and Odysseus.⁵ Interestingly, Chiron’s difference from his fellows is made evident in some visual depictions. While most centaurs are represented as a human head and torso connected to the body and legs of a horse, Chiron is often shown in early Attic art to have the legs of a human in place of the equine forelegs, making him appear, in Page duBois’ words, to possess ‘a normal human body, draped like a Greek’s, with the addition of a horse’s back, hind legs, and tail’.⁶ In later art, however, Chiron becomes visually indistinguishable from the descendants of Ixion.

By far the most well-known classical myth involving the centaurs is that of their conflict with the Lapiths, made most famous by its description in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This occurred when Peirithous, Ixion’s son and inheritor, invited the centaurs to his wedding. After drinking the wine, the centaurs became violent, and began assaulting the Lapith women, even attempting to attack the bride. A brutal battle between centaurs and human heroes ensued. Ultimately, the Lapiths triumphed, and the surviving centaurs were driven out of Thessaly. But the scene of carnage – first mentioned in Homer, and referenced, too, in Pindar’s odes – proved a popular subject for visual artists of antiquity and beyond; the ‘centauromachy’, as it is commonly known, is perhaps most famously portrayed on the Parthenon Marbles. duBois references this conflict, as well as Ixion’s refusal to pay his wife’s bride-price, as evidence that ‘the Centaurs from their very origins were associated with the negation of marriage’ – an idea to which I will return later in this chapter.⁷

⁵ Xenophon, ‘On Hunting’, *Xenophon’s Minor Works*, trans. by J. S. Watson (London: George Bell & Sons, 1878), pp. 330-373 (p. 330).

⁶ Page duBois, *Centaur and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1991), p. 30.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 28.

Another famous myth involving the centaurs also centres upon their conflict with a human hero. The civilised Peloponnesian centaur Pholus, entertaining Heracles, opened a vat of wine. Once again, the wine sent his fellows into a violent frenzy, and Heracles fought and killed many of them, driving the rest away. Pholus, meanwhile, died after he accidentally injured himself with one of Heracles' poisoned arrows. One of the centaurs exiled by Heracles was Nessus, who would go on to prove the hero's downfall. Heracles and his new bride Deianeira encountered Nessus by the side of a river, where he offered to carry Deianeira across. In the middle of the river, Nessus attempted to assault her, and Heracles shot him. Before he died, however, Nessus told Deianeira to take some of his blood, and use it as a love potion if her husband ever strayed. When, many years later, Heracles planned to take up a concubine, Deianeira gave him a cloak imbued with the blood of Nessus, not realising that the blood had been poisoned by Heracles' own arrow. The bloodied cloak caused Heracles agonising pain, and he took his own life by burning himself on a funeral pyre. Once again the centaur functions as, in duBois' words, 'the intervention of the barbaric, the bestial, in the marriage exchange'.⁸

Krin Gabbard suggests that, from the mid fifth century BCE onwards, it is possible to observe a shift in Athenian art and literature towards a more nuanced understanding of the centaur. He cites the comparatively sympathetic portrayal of Nessus in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (fifth century BCE, exact date unknown), as well as the surprisingly noble, human features of many of the centaurs depicted on the aforementioned Parthenon metopes, as evidence that, by the mature classical period, it was possible to conceive of the descendants of Ixion as representing not merely savage barbarism, but 'that necessary Dionysian counterpart to the Apollonian impulse which directs so much of the architectural and sculptural ideas of the Parthenon', and therefore 'an equally serious part of the human spirit which the Greeks of this time were beginning to place alongside its traditionally Greek virtues of order and moderation'.⁹

In post-antiquity, the centaur underwent several metamorphoses of its own. Gabbard argues that, while Roman art and literature did little to alter the Greek

⁸ duBois, p. 103.

⁹ Krin Gabbard, *From Hubris to Virtù: Centaurs in the Art and Literature of Fifth-Century Greece and Renaissance Florence* (Unpublished doctoral thesis, Indiana University, 1978), pp. 86-87.

understanding of the centaur, ‘[i]n the Middle Ages the centaur falls once and for all from the special place assigned to him by the Greeks. Often he is placed indiscriminately with other creatures who possess human and animal characteristics’.¹⁰ Dante, Gabbard notes, appears to entirely disregard the division between the noble and the base centaurs, since he names Chiron as one of several centaurs confined to the seventh circle of hell – the circle punishing violence.¹¹ For the most part, centaurs during the mediaeval period were depicted as ‘pagans and heretics’, whose ‘bestial qualities [...] came to symbolize lust and adultery’.¹²

By the Renaissance, while it was still not uncommon to represent the centaur as an embodiment of ‘sensuality and barbarism in contrast to reason and civilization’ (as seen in Botticelli’s *Pallas and the Centaur* (c. 1482), in which a solemn young woman most often identified as Athena subdues a wild-looking centaur by gripping his hair), other works acknowledge a greater complexity.¹³ A case in point is Piero di Cosimo’s 1510 painting *The Fight Between the Centaurs and the Lapiths*. The majority of Cosimo’s painting is occupied by the violent details of the battle, but in the central foreground of the image a female centaur kneels to embrace her fatally wounded lover. The scene appears to be drawn directly from lines of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which tells of the doomed love affair between the centaurs Cyralus and Hylonome. The tenderness of Cosimo’s representation suggests a renewal of the later classical understanding of the centaur as a creature of nuance: capable of both great violence and great humanity.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, visual artists in particular were increasingly sympathetic towards the centaur, with the kindly Chiron being a particularly popular subject. Painted only ten years apart, James Barry’s *The Education of Achilles* (1772) and Jean-Baptiste Regnault’s *The Education of Achilles by Chiron* (1782) each emphasise the nobility and humanity of the centaur, while still acknowledging his essential otherness. In Barry’s painting, the young Achilles sits at the foot of a monumental marble bust, while Chiron stands over him (Figure 19). The centaur is captured mid-gesture, his

¹⁰ Gabbard, p. 98.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 98.

¹² Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, Salvator Sattis, eds., *The Classical Tradition* (London: Belknap Press, 2010), s. v. ‘Centaur’.

¹³ Ibid.

hands moving expressively as Achilles looks up at him. This Chiron is bearded, and dressed in rough furs rather than the white drapery worn by his young charge. But his bearing and expression are humane, and, most significantly, he is depicted tutoring Achilles in the lyre – the emblem of poetry, and an instrument associated with Apollo, god of light and learning, whose likeness (the ‘Apollo Belvedere’) had famously been praised by Winckelmann in 1755 as the paragon of human beauty and nobility.

In Regnault’s painting, the beardless Chiron looks more youthful, and wears a billowing green cloak (Figure 20). He is standing behind Achilles to instruct him in archery; their poses deliberately mirror one another, with Chiron’s equine forelegs echoing the pose of Achilles’ human ones. A slain lion lies behind the centaur and his pupil, while, again, a lyre is visible in the foreground of the image, placed carefully upon a cloth so as to keep it clear of the dusty ground. The implication is clear: the bestial is eliminated in favour of the civilised; teacher and pupil are united in their humanity. Yet Regnault’s Chiron has the same pointed, satyr-like ears seen in many of his appearances on Greek vases, and on some of the centaurs in the Parthenon Centauromachy. Like Barry’s choice to depict Chiron as wearing animal skins, this seems a conscious decision – a nod to the fact that, while Chiron may be civilised, even his human half is not entirely homologous to that of Achilles.

The Romantic period saw a partial return to the brutish centaur; Carl Woodring observes that both Shelley’s *The Witch of Atlas* (written 1820, published 1824) and Keats’ *Endymion* (1818) seem to relegate centaurs to the realm of the bestial, including them in lists of uncivilised woodland beings – a reversion, then, to something like the mediaeval conception of the centaur as undistinguished amongst monsters.¹⁴ Woodring notes that Byron and Coleridge, however, each make more positive references to Chiron, and that by the mid nineteenth century, ‘properly educated Englishmen began to regard centaurs with less emphasis upon inebriation and violence’.¹⁵ He notes the ‘markedly even-handed’ representation of centaurs in Matthew Arnold’s ‘Empedocles on Etna’ and George Meredith’s ‘The Woods of Westermain’, and suggests that the centaur ultimately came to function as ‘the paragon for instruction and accomplishment in the arts, distinctive,

¹⁴ Carl Woodring, ‘Centaur Unnaturally Fabulous’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 38 (2007), 4-12 (p. 4)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

differentiated [...] emblem of the creative persistently rejected and despised by conformists and uncultured Philistines'.¹⁶ By the fin de siècle, centaurs were, as we shall see, an increasingly popular subject for artists and writers alike. No longer regarded simply as creatures of violence and lust, they could be called upon to embody more complex ideas and anxieties.

The centaur and Darwinism at the fin de siècle

I have included this brief history of the centaur mythos and its varying receptions in order to demonstrate two things. Firstly, that the centaur has long been a being of contradictions: having always the potential for both nobility and brutality, as its divided form might suggest. Even within classical antiquity, as we have seen, the clear distinction between Chiron the 'good' centaur and his more bestial fellows had begun to erode, giving way to a more ambivalent understanding of the centaur. Secondly, that culture surrounding the centaur frequently draws upon the idea of a tension between centaurs and humans. It is these aspects of the centaur mythos that make it a particularly relevant symbol for anxieties surrounding evolutionary theory.

While Woodring is right to note that the centaur functioned briefly as a kind of patron-symbol of the arts at the fin de siècle, I believe that the creature's popularity during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth may also be explained with reference to the burgeoning popular interest in evolutionary theory at this time. As with the other mythic hybrids examined in this thesis, the centaur's physical mingling of human and animal made it an obvious vessel for concerns surrounding evolution. As we have seen, it was for the faun and the centaur that Huxley reached in 1863 when describing humanity's prehistoric antecedents. Centaurs in the visual art and literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often appear in settings which seem deliberately to gesture towards ideas of Darwinian evolution.

A particularly striking example of this phenomenon is Andre Lichtenberger's French language novella *Les Centaures* (1904). Lichtenberger's novella takes place in a fictionalised prehistoric world, presided over by three mythic species: the fauns, the tritons,

¹⁶ Woodring, p. 8.

and the centaurs, the latter of which uphold the rule of law over the ‘lower’ beasts. As the narrative progresses, however, their reign is threatened both by the gradual arrival of what appears to be an ice age, and by the encroachment of humanity, which is presented as a brutal and degenerate new species.

A contemporary review in the *Athenaeum* immediately identifies *The Centaurs* as focusing upon ‘the struggle for life’ – a phrase by this point inextricably associated with Darwin, who employs it no less than twenty times in the *Origin of Species* (even leaving aside the book’s full title).¹⁷ Lichtenberger’s world, although occupied by the creatures of myth, is indisputably one in which the principles of Darwinism may be observed in action. Early in the novella, the male centaurs are seen competing over Kadilda, the most beautiful female, while the other centaresses vie for their attention. We are told that it is not unusual for males to ‘come to grips’ during the mating season, and, later in the text, an elderly centaress recalls how, in her youth, the males would often assault the females if their advances were rejected.¹⁸ The brutality seen around the centaurs’ coupling reflects Darwin’s claim in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that human courtship, like that of animals, is and has always been based upon violent competition:

With savages [...] the women are the constant cause of war both between the individuals of the same tribe and between distinct tribes. So no doubt it was in ancient times[.] [...] [W]e might feel almost sure, from the analogy of the higher Quadrumana, that the law of battle had prevailed with men during the early stages of his development.¹⁹

While careful to restrict this observation to ancient peoples and modern day ‘savages’, Darwin’s open comparison between human and animal mating practises – for indeed *The Descent of Man* as a whole may be described, as Rachel Teukolsky observes, as ‘one long catalogue of comparative behaviours between humans and animals’ – consciously took his argument a step further than it had dared to go in *The Origin of Species*.²⁰ Lichtenberger’s centaurs, human and animal both, embody this connection.

¹⁷ ‘Two French Novels’, *The Athenaeum*, 4029 (1905), 46-47 (p. 46).

¹⁸ Andre Lichtenberger, *The Centaurs*, trans. by Brian Stableford (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2013), p. 22. All further references will be to this edition.

¹⁹ Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 854-855.

²⁰ Rachel Teukolsky, *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 158.

Lichtenberger's world shows evidence of Darwinian thinking, too, in its awareness of the ephemerality of species, and the significance of epochal environmental change. His centaurs live alongside real prehistoric species such as aurochs and mammoths, and, in the early pages of the novella, the narrator reflects on the decline of these creatures:

Only a few years ago there had been sightings of the Mammoth with the rounded tusks [...]. Now, their tracks are scarcely ever seen anymore on damp ground. What has become of the monsters of old? [...] Many have killed one another in furious combats, or had recoiled before [the centaurs]. And when, from time to time, a wandering faun happened to glimpse them in the woods, he noticed before fleeing how much difficulty the giants had moving their weary limbs. Their breasts were heaving as if the air were drying them out; they sniffed the fruit and foliage wearily, and, as if Nature herself had rejected them, one often discovered their whitened skeletons among dry leaves or in the densest thickets – gigantic bones like those of fully-grown birch trees.

(p. 32)

Lichtenberger describes a visible evolutionary process: the waning of a species as a result of changing environmental conditions. His centaurs in turn are affected by the slow arrival of 'terrible masses of snow' from the East (p. 42). Once, we are told, 'innumerable tribes' of them occupied 'the distant lands of the Orient' (p. 42). As the Earth cools, however, they are continually driven further west, in ever-depleting numbers, seeking warmer climates and more plentiful food. By the end of the novella, they have reached 'the occidental extremity of the earth', and can evade death no longer (p. 170). While their extinction is hastened by their conflict with the humans, Lichtenberger is careful to remind us that 'it is Nature herself who has struck them down. For years, the fecundity of the centaurs has been diminishing; for years, the rain and the cold have pursued them' (p. 170).

Lichtenberger's representation of the science itself may have been less than accurate – it seems odd, for instance, that his mammoths are dying out as the ice age approaches, rather than as it wanes – but his text nonetheless reflects nineteenth-century developments in evolutionary climatology. In 1837, the Swiss zoologist and geologist Louis Agassiz had first proposed to the Helvetic Society the idea of a previous epoch of intense cold, during which time a vast ice sheet had covered much of Europe. While

initially disputed by other leading geologists, Agassiz's theory gradually gained traction.²¹ By the mid 1860s, as John Imbrie and Katherine Palmer Imbrie observe, 'William Buckland and Charles Lyell had been won over by Agassiz, [and] the ice-age concept had been almost universally accepted'.²² At the time of Lichtenberger's writing in the early twentieth century, then, the idea of an ice-age was both well-established, and closely connected with evolutionary theory – it was widely understood that epochal environmental changes must necessarily impact upon species distribution and survival.

Lichtenberger's approach appears to draw upon other contemporary works in which the centaur is directly linked with harsh prehistoric conditions. The German writer Paul Heyse produced a humorous short story in 1873 entitled 'The Last Centaur', in which an ancient centaur thaws out and emerges from the Alpine glacier in which he has been preserved, only to find that nineteenth-century human society is far more brutal and inhumane than his own was. Ultimately, he retreats back into the mountains in disgust. Meanwhile, Max Klinger – whose work I have touched upon in Chapter 2 of this thesis – produced a series of etchings in which centaurs struggle for survival within a glacial world. In *Battling Centaurs* (1881), two of the creatures are shown engaged in a fierce fight over the body of a rabbit on a snowy mountain ridge (Figure 21), while *Landslide* (1879) shows a group of centaurs running through a mountainous landscape of loose rocks and scree. In the foreground, a centaur aims a rock at a snake which is preparing to strike at him. Morton has observed that these images show the clear influence of Arnold Böcklin's own centaur paintings, most notably *Battle of the Centaurs* (1873), in which a group of centaurs are depicted in fierce combat, with one preparing to bring down a boulder upon the head of his felled opponent (Figure 22). Klinger's and Böcklin's centaur works alike demonstrate 'the aimless indifference of nature [...] and the truths of animal and human behaviour'.²³ Their centaurs are at the mercy of deep and uncaring geological processes.

In the final pages of Lichtenberger's novella, centaurs and humans come face-to-face for a last battle that will eradicate the centaur race. Lichtenberger describes how the

²¹ Tobias Krüger, *Discovering the Ice Ages: International Reception and Consequences for a Historical Understanding of Climate*, trans. by Ann M. Hentschel (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 271.

²² John Imbrie and Katherine Palmer Imbrie, *Ice Ages: Solving the Mystery* (London: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 86.

²³ Morton, p. 117.

centaurs are startled to see the humans on horseback, mistaking them initially for hybrids like themselves. Here, again, we see a parallel with contemporary representations of centaurs within a brutally Darwinian world. Klinger's etching *Pursued Centaur* (1881), described by Morton as depicting 'an evolutionary saga of adaptation, survival and extinction', shows a centaur in desperate flight from several mounted men, who are armed with spears (Figure 23).²⁴ The centaur has succeeded in hitting one of the horses with an arrow, but its agony only 'presages the demise of the centaur and encapsulates the brutality of primitive existence', for it seems inevitable that the centaur, outnumbered as it is, will soon be caught and killed.²⁵ Morton notes that the human hunters' 'helmets and village home in the background indicate an increased level of civilisation which, significantly, is not accompanied by a reduction in aggression'.²⁶ Similarly, the primitive humans of Lichtenberger's story are intelligent and resourceful (during the course of the narrative, we see them devise clothing, archery, and horse-taming), and yet no less vicious for these qualities.

In nearly all of these Darwin-inflected representations, then, centaurs are depicted as creatures struggling against a harsh natural world. Often, they are on the brink of extinction, or else existing as a relict species: a 'survival' of a previously widespread race, now persisting only in isolated pockets. Frequently, humans and centaurs are shown to be in direct evolutionary competition, resulting in violent conflict.²⁷ Relations between the two species in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature are, for the most part, distinctly unfriendly – and, most significantly, the centaurs are frequently represented with greater sympathy than the humans. Heyse's short story sees the noble alpine centaur driven back out of society by an uncivilised mob of villagers; Lichtenberger's narrative presents the human tribe as bloodthirsty and aggressive; Klinger's sympathy, in *Pursued Centaur*, clearly rests with the quarry rather than the hunters. The ancient narrative of the centauro-machy is revised to tell a distinctly nineteenth-century tale, with the battle between humans and centaurs

²⁴ Morton, p. 113.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ There are a few exceptions to this tendency: Böcklin's 1888 painting *Centaur at the Village Blacksmith's Shop* (surely inspired by Heyse's story, in which a curious blacksmith picks up one of the hooves of the centaur to examine it) shows a centaur and a smith in apparently friendly conversation, as he prepares to re-shoe the centaur's hoof.

becoming a Darwinian fable of evolutionary competition and extinction. Gabbard detects the beginnings of humanity in the depiction of the Parthenon centaurs; in these *fin-de-siècle* receptions, we see not only clear sympathy towards the creatures, but a deep ambivalence towards their human combatants.

In some of the most memorable lines of the *Origin of Species*, Darwin seems to acknowledge the significance of his argument that the natural world is characterised by a constant struggle for survival:

All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometrical ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.²⁸

Darwin is here characteristically understated and cautious, at pains to mitigate any anxieties that might be provoked by his hypothesis, and careful not to explicitly include humanity in his statement. But the dubious comfort afforded by this passage did not prevent others from stating more baldly the disturbing implications of evolutionary theory. Ernst Haeckel's *The History of Creation* (1868; first translated into English 1875-6) takes a much dimmer view of nature:

If we contemplate the common life and the mutual relations between plants and animals (humans included), we shall find everywhere, and at all times, the exact opposite of that kindly and peaceful social life which the goodness of the Creator ought to have prepared for his creatures – we shall rather find everywhere a pitiless, most embittered *Struggle of All against All*. Nowhere in nature, no matter where we turn our eyes, does that idyllic peace, celebrated by the poets, exist; we find everywhere a struggle and a striving to annihilate neighbours and competitors. Passion and selfishness – conscious or unconscious – is everywhere the motive force of life. Man in this respect certainly forms no exception to the rest of the animal world.²⁹

²⁸ Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (2009), p. 69.

²⁹ Ernst Haeckel, *The History of Creation*, trans. by E. Ray Lankester, 2 vols (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1883), pp. 19-20.

Not only does Haeckel reject Darwin's assertion that 'the war of nature is not incessant', he also goes out of his way to emphasise that the human race cannot consider itself any kind of exception to the unrelenting brutality of natural life. Haeckel's insistence on this point demonstrates the significance afforded to the question of humanity's role in, and proximity to, the life-struggle. *Modern Science and Modern Thought*, an 1885 book by the Scottish writer Samuel Laing, reveals similar fears:

[T]he demonstration of the 'struggle for life' and 'survival of the fittest' has raised anew, and with vastly augmented force, those questions as to the moral constitution of the universe and the origin of evil[...]. Is it true that "love" is "Creation's final law," when we find this enormous and apparently prodigal waste of life going on; these cruel internecine battles between individuals and species in the struggle for existence; this cynical indifference of Nature to suffering?³⁰

It is these anxieties, I believe, that constitute the basis of the evolutionary receptions of the centaur mythos discussed above, in which we can observe an intense fascination with both the harshness of the natural world, and the harshness of the creatures that live and strive within it – humans, notably, being no exception. The centaur, a being whose form incorporates both human and animal elements, functions as the space in which these concerns play themselves out. Blackwood's *The Centaur*, as we shall see, builds upon these existing narratives of a Darwinian struggle between human and centaur. His narrative, however, is further complicated by the presence of a queer subtext, which itself both draws upon and informs the text's evolutionary concerns.

'Strangeness' in *The Centaur*

In his extended essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927; revised 1933-4), H. P. Lovecraft praises Blackwood as a 'master' of uncanny literature, and stresses the *oddness* of his work as key to its brilliance:³¹

³⁰ Samuel Laing, *Modern Science and Modern Thought* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), pp. 220-221.

³¹ Lovecraft, p. 129.

Of the quality of Mr. Blackwood's genius there can be no dispute; for no one has even approached the skill, seriousness, and minute fidelity with which he records the overtones of strangeness in ordinary things and experiences, or the preternatural insight with which he builds up detail by detail the complete sensations and perceptions leading from reality into super-normal life or vision.³²

Both of the ideas highlighted by Lovecraft in this passage as characteristic of Blackwood's work – that of 'strangeness', and that of a shift from mundane perception into an awareness of a heightened, 'super-normal' reality – are deeply significant to my argument surrounding the queer ecologies of *The Centaur*.

Perhaps the first instance of 'strangeness' in the novel is the fact that we know so little about its narrator. Like the frame narrator of Wells' *The Time Machine*, he remains unnamed throughout, and his precise relationship to O'Malley is never made clear. The narrative is composed of a combination of the narrator's own recollections of his conversations with O'Malley, and a series of semi-incoherent notebooks left by O'Malley after his death – another form of uncanniness, since the reader is constantly distanced from the events of the narrative.³³ As we have already seen, the central theme of O'Malley's story is his steamer-voyage to the Caucasus, during which he encounters the mysterious man known only as 'the Russian' or 'the big Russian' (p. 34). Initially, the man is accompanied by a young boy, presumed by O'Malley to be his son, who dies during the journey. Against the warnings of the ship's doctor, the skeptical but curious Heinrich Stahl (who, it is later revealed, had previously been tempted by the call of the *Urwelt* himself), O'Malley befriends the Russian, gradually coming to realise that both he and his boy companion represent a 'survival' from an earlier stage of life – a time when the Earth-spirit 'projected portions of herself' into bodily form, which have 'long since [been] withdrawn before the tide of advancing humanity' (p. 68). While currently trapped in a human body, the Russian is on his way to recovering his true identity as an *Urmensch*.

O'Malley becomes separated from his new acquaintance when Stahl drugs him with a sleeping draught to prevent him from following the Russian ashore at Batoum. However, they reunite a month later in a remote part of Georgia, and O'Malley follows the Russian into an Edenic valley in which the remaining centaurs live. For an unknown period

³² Lovecraft, p. 129.

³³ See *The Great God Pan*, in which strange or transgressive evolutionary forms are similarly made available to the reader only through secondhand written accounts.

of time, he lives amongst them, as one of them: a ‘cosmic experience’ (p. 273) of dazzling transcendence, characterised by an intense sense of oneness between the centaurs:

They turned and circulated as by a common consent, wheeling suddenly together as if a single desire actuated the entire mass. One instinct spread, as it were, among the lot, shared instantly, conveying to each at once the general impulse. Their movements in this were like those of birds whose flight in coveys obeys the order of a collective consciousness of which each single one is an item[...]. To do as they did was the greatest pleasure[.] (p. 269)

After realising that he must return to civilisation and spread the word of the *Urwelt*, O’Malley reawakens into his everyday life, and finds himself still standing in the yard where had been when the Russian reappeared. The whole episode is revealed to have taken place within “a fraction of a second” (p. 284). He returns to Batoum, where Dr. Stahl informs him that the mysterious Russian died some time previously – the same day, in fact, that he appeared to O’Malley in his true form. Realising that death is the release that will transport him permanently to the *Urwelt*, O’Malley returns to England, where he attempts to spread his message of Earth-love to those around him. When this fails, he descends slowly into consumptive disease, confident to the last that death will mean a return “[i]nto myself, my real and deeper self” (p. 344). As O’Malley finally dies, the narrator witnesses Pan, in the guise of a penny-whistle playing vagrant, appear outside the house to accompany his disciple’s spirit to the *Urwelt*.

The novel is, superficially, one motivated by ideas of spirituality, rather than science: its characters talk repeatedly of ‘spirits’, ‘powers’, even ‘gods’ (p. 139), and O’Malley openly dismisses scientific study, telling Stahl that ‘[i]f you had your way, you’d take away my beliefs and put in their place some wretched little formula of science that the next generation will prove all wrong again’ (p. 100). Yet beneath this preference for the supernatural over the scientific, the text shows the clear influence of evolutionary thought. There is an obvious connection between Blackwood’s novel and the Darwinian representations of centaurs discussed above. It seems likely that Blackwood had read Lichtenberger’s novella: he spoke and read French, having spent some time in French-speaking Switzerland as a teenager, and his focus on the idea of a relict tribe of centaurs,

increasingly encroached upon by humanity, seems too similar for coincidence.³⁴ Even if he had not encountered Lichtenberger's work, however, we know for certain that Blackwood was influenced by Böcklin's artworks, because he mentions the artist by name in *The Centaur*. Dr. Stahl tells O'Malley that he once overheard two Georgian men "talking together as they examined a reproduction of a modern picture – Böcklin's 'Centaur'" (p. 189). Stahl reports that one of the men told the other:

“[T]hey still live in the big valley of rhododendrons beyond -----” mentioning some lonely uninhabited region towards Daghestan; “they come in the spring, and they are very swift and roaring.... You must always hide. To see them is to die. But *they* cannot die; they are of the mountains. They are older, older than the stones.” (p. 190)

These lines inevitably evoke another piece of ekphrastic writing – Pater's description of the Mona Lisa, who is 'older than the rocks'.³⁵ These centaurs are products of the deep past, and are apparently accurately evoked by the sight of Böcklin's artworks. We cannot be sure to which painting Dr. Stahl refers – Böcklin has no completed work entitled simply 'Centaur' – but it seems most likely that he is describing *Battle of the Centaurs*, the most famous of Böcklin's centaur images. Blackwood's centaurs are recognisable from Böcklin's scenes of violent evolutionary struggle; they are 'swift and roaring', displaying the curious mixture of brutality and nobility that characterises so many depictions of the centaur. Later, when O'Malley first encounters the beings in person, they are described as possessing 'rippling muscles upon massive limbs [...] that held defiant strength and softness in exquisite combination' (p. 255).

These centaurs, like Lichtenberger's, like Böcklin's, Heyse's, and Klinger's, are not merely the fanciful daydreams of earlier civilisations, but a real and once-plentiful species, threatened and reduced by a changing world. Earlier in the novel, Stahl suggests that the centaurs are “a survival of a hugely remote period [...] forms of which poetry and legend alone have caught a flying memory and called them gods, monsters, mythical beings of all sorts and kinds” (p. 68). Not only does Blackwood employ Tylorian phrasing, but

³⁴ Mike Ashley, *Starlight Man: The Extraordinary Life of Algernon Blackwood*, revised edn. (Eureka, CA: Stark House Press, 2019), p. 44.

³⁵ Pater, *The Renaissance*, p. 80.

Stahl's explanation for the centaur's appearance in myth is strikingly reminiscent of Charles Kingsley's letter to Charles Darwin, which I quoted in Chapter 1 of this thesis: might the hybrids of ancient mythology represent, not simple imaginings, but beings which really once populated the earth, and which have now been lost, or all but lost? This reading is further evidenced by the following exchange between Stahl and O'Malley:

‘An *Urmensch* in the world to-day must suggest a survival of an almost incredible kind [...].’

‘Paganistic?’ interrupted the other sharply, joy and fright rising over him.

‘Older, older by far.’ was the rejoinder, given with a curious hush and lowering of the voice. (p. 59)

Here, Blackwood explicitly links his centaurs with evolutionary, rather than historical, time. Payne observes that Blackwood's centaurs evoke ‘historical ecology, for which all forms of life are to be experienced as vestiges of the scene of their emergence’.³⁶ Blackwood's text is acutely aware of the possibilities suggested by evolutionary science: that in moving through the world, we are, as Payne writes, ‘*moving through a ruin*: our ordinary life world is the ruin of that other, more real, more life-like life world to which the relic invites us. The book of life is [...] a palimpsest underwritten by its erasures and spoilage’.³⁷ Darwinism proposes to us the idea of a world in which our currently extant species are vastly outnumbered by those that have lived and vanished before them. *The Centaur* turns this unsettling idea into a narrative of hauntology, where the evolutionary relic ultimately becomes *more real*, in Payne's words, than the present life world.

The Centaur, then, is a text strongly influenced by contemporary depictions of centaurs as a relict primordial species, threatened by modernity. Surviving centaurs like the Russian, even while they occupy a superficially human form, cannot exist comfortably alongside true humans: they betray a quality “that is essentially [...] *unheimlich*” (p. 58), and that “[repels] human beings” (p. 61), leaving the centaur “in the midst of humanity thus absolutely alone” (pp. 61-62). This may be compared to Helen Vaughan, the demigod villain of *The Great God Pan*, whose subtly uncanny appearance also betrays her evolutionary abhumanity.

³⁶ Payne, p. 241.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 243.

O'Malley, susceptible as he is to the call of the *Urwelt*, finds himself similarly choked and oppressed by 'the thick suffocating civilization of to-day' (p. 43). Much is made, too, of his difference from those around him. Blackwood repeatedly draws attention to O'Malley's otherness: he has a 'strange passion of [...] temperament' (p. 11) and is described by Stahl as "a very rare and curious [type]" (p. 56). Hardly a page goes by in which O'Malley's temperament or behaviour is not at some point described as 'strange' or 'curious'. At one point, Blackwood refers, particularly strikingly, to 'that queer heart of his wherein had ever burned [a] strange desire' (p. 85). For the twenty-first-century reader, such descriptions inevitably evoke connotations of coded homosexuality. As Paul Hammond notes, there is a danger of overinterpreting the use of such language: 'words such as 'strange', 'odd', 'curious' or 'queer' had a wide semantic range [...] we need to recognise that many Victorian evocations of secrecy and strangeness have nothing to do with homosexuality'.³⁸ Yet he also allows that 'the dark places of the Victorian literary imagination did come, towards the end of the nineteenth century, to include homosexual relationships amongst their possibilities', citing the much-publicised Wilde trials of 1895 as a significant factor in this.³⁹

Even leaving aside the numerous references to O'Malley's 'strangeness', it is difficult to read *The Centaur* without entertaining the possibility of a homoerotic subtext. Certainly it is a novel intensely concerned with homosociality. The reader is told early on that 'with women [O'Malley's] intercourse was of the slightest; in a sense he did not know the need of them much' (p. 13). The narrator speculates that 'the feminine element in his own nature was too strong' to allow for any involvement with women (p. 13). This sentiment tallies closely with the contemporary concept of 'inversion' first popularised in the mid nineteenth century by the German writer Karl Ulrichs: the idea, in Havelock Ellis' words, that 'a female soul [could] become united with a male body'.⁴⁰ This would lead to a lack of interest in the opposite gender, as seen in O'Malley, and a sexuality instead focused upon those of one's own gender. There is not a single female character of any

³⁸ Paul Hammond, *Love Between Men in English Literature* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Inversion*, 6 vols (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1901), II, p. 34.

significance throughout *The Centaur*; instead, its narrative rests upon the close, often emotionally charged, relationships of its male characters.

First, there is the undefined bond between O'Malley and the novel's narrator. The reader knows, as noted above, next to nothing about the unnamed narrator – the man who claims to have pieced the story together from O'Malley's notebooks and verbal accounts. It becomes apparent through the course of the novel that the two were close friends: the narrator speaks of them lying on the grass together in London parks, talking for hours, returning to O'Malley's flat to cook shared meals together, and reminiscing about past camping trips taken together (p. 106). When O'Malley descends into his final illness, the narrator nurses him, confessing that O'Malley is 'a close and deeply admired intimate, a man who gave me genuine love and held my own' (p. 335). There is an intimacy to his descriptions of his friend: his 'delicate' build; his hands which were 'more like a girl's than a man's' (p. 13). Some scenes edge into a more open eroticism:

I stole a glance at my companion. His light blue eyes shone [...]. The untidy hair escaped from beneath the broad-brimmed old hat [...]. I noticed the set of his ears, and how the upper points of them ran so sharply into the hair. His walk was springy, light, very quiet, suggesting that he moved on open turf where a sudden running jump would land him, not into a motor-bus, but into a mossy covert where ferns grew. [...] Some fancy, wild and sweet, caught me of a faun passing down through underbrush of woodland glades to drink at a forest pool; and chance giving back to me a little verse of Alice Corbin's, I turned and murmured it while watching him:

What dim Arcadian pastures
Have I known
That suddenly, out of nothing,
A wind is blown
Lifting a veil and a darkness,
Showing a purple sea,
And under your hair, the faun's eyes,
Look out on me?

[...] Again, it was the spell of my companion's personality that turned all this paraphernalia of the busy, modern existence into the counters in some grotesque and rather sordid game. Tomorrow, of course, it would all turn real and earnest again, O'Malley's story a mere poetic fancy. But for the moment I lived it with him, and found it magnificent. (pp. 106-108)

There is a definite sensuousness to this description; the narrator appears intensely aware of O'Malley's appearance and bearing, and his recitation of a romantic verse as he observes his friend only adds to the impression of latent homoerotic desire.

The most obvious example of latent queerness within the novel, however, occurs between O'Malley and the Russian (and, to a lesser degree, the Russian's boy companion). From their first encounter, their relationship is characterised by an electrifying intensity of fellow-feeling, expressed through looks rather than words:

[T]he father abruptly turned and faced him. Their gaze met. O'Malley started.

'Whew...!' ran some silent expression like fire through his brain.

Out of a massive visage, placid for all its ruggedness, shone eyes large and timid as those of an animal or child bewildered among so many people. There was an expression in them not so much cowed or dismayed as "un-refuged"—the eyes of the hunted creature. That, at least, was the first thing they betrayed; for the same second the quick-blooded Celt caught another look: the look of a hunted creature that at last knows shelter and has found it. The first expression had emerged, then withdrawn again swiftly like an animal into its hole where safety lay. Before disappearing, it had flashed a wireless message of warning, of welcome, of explanation—he knew not what term to use—to another of its own kind, to himself.

O'Malley, utterly arrested, would have spoken, for the invitation seemed obvious enough, but there came an odd catch in his breath, and words failed altogether. The boy, peering at him sideways, clung to his great parent's side. For perhaps ten seconds there was this interchange of staring, intimate staring, between the three of them. (pp. 20-21)

Blackwood's use of the word 'kind' implies not only a likeness in terms of sexuality, but also of evolutionary type. His use of a metaphor involving an animal – the image of the creature peering out from its burrow – prefigures O'Malley's eventual realisation of the true forms of the Russian and his boy companion. The interaction is striking in its representation of a *recognition* between the two men, and this sentiment persists throughout the novel. Their relationship, from that point onwards, is described in terms startlingly reminiscent of a proscribed love affair. Within days of this first meeting, O'Malley has agreed to share a room with the Russian and his boy, feeling that 'he [had] accepted a friendship which concealed in its immense attraction – danger' (p. 53). Dr. Stahl, who knows O'Malley from previous voyages, warns him that he has observed in his person 'certain latent characteristics' which might, 'under the stress of certain temptations',

become more readily apparent (p. 56). While the doctor is ostensibly referring to the danger that O'Malley might be driven to madness or death by following the call of the centaur, these words are equally suggestive of the 'male homosexual panic' that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued was 'endemic' at the *fin de siècle*.⁴¹

O'Malley maintains an intense, though largely unspoken, connection with the Russian and his young companion throughout the rest of the steamer voyage. When the three are at last united as centaurs in the Caucasian mountains, he finds that their bond has endured: 'He felt he knew them and had been with them before. Their big brown eyes continually sought his own with pleasure' (pp. 269-70). On his return to Batoum, Dr. Stahl takes O'Malley to the Russian's grave, where occurs perhaps the most notable instance of homoeroticism within the text:

There grew no flowers on that grave, but O'Malley stooped down and picked a strand of the withered grass. He put it carefully between the pages of his note-book; and then, lying flat against the ground where the sunshine fell in a patch of white and burning glory, he pressed his lips to the crumbling soil. He kissed the Earth. Oblivious of Stahl's presence, or at least ignoring it, he worshipped. (pp. 296-297)

O'Malley's final act towards the Russian – lying on top of his grave and kissing the ground beneath which his friend lies – is the only point at which his love for the man is expressed in overtly physical terms. This scene of death and mourning links the narrative with a long tradition of male memorialisation and elegy that frequently touches upon homoeroticism; later in the novel, O'Malley himself quotes from *Adonais*, Shelley's famous lament for a beautiful male youth.

It is perhaps necessary here to touch briefly upon the question of Blackwood's own sexuality, if only because the author seems to have had much in common with his protagonist. He, like O'Malley, never married, and seems to have been shy and uncomfortable around women – although, as his biographer Mike Ashley notes, he did maintain several friendships with women in his later life.⁴² Ashley also highlights a brief and disastrous close male friendship, which Blackwood describes at length in his memoir

⁴¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 186.

⁴² Ashley, p. 101.

Episodes Before Thirty, and which Ashley argues ‘reads like an affair and breakup between two lovers’.⁴³ Whether or not the author ever consciously entertained sexual or romantic feelings towards his male friends, then, his sexuality seems to have been a matter of some uncertainty – for him as much as for anyone else.

I do not mean to suggest that Blackwood intended *The Centaur* to be a homoerotic narrative. He may have done; or else these dormant aspects of the text may never have consciously suggested themselves to him. The latter appears more likely, given what we know of Blackwood’s complex, perhaps self-denying, relationship to his own sexuality. But whether or not Blackwood intended it, a homoerotic tension exists at the heart of the novel, in uncomfortable tandem with its Darwinian preoccupations.

Overlapping pasts: Darwinism and queer Hellenism

I have discussed the latent homoeroticism of *The Centaur*, and the ways in which the novel conforms to the *fin-de-siècle* literary tendency to present centaurs as a relict species struggling under harsh evolutionary conditions. I will now examine the ways in which these two facets of the text interact.

Firstly, it is important to note that sexuality and evolutionary thought were already regarded as closely connected by the late nineteenth century. Bert Bender observes that *fin-de-siècle* studies of sexuality were heavily influenced by Darwinism: ‘Not only Havelock Ellis’ *Sexual Inversion* or Edward Carpenter’s *The Intermediate Sex* but also virtually every other work on the evolution of sex at that time began by acknowledging Darwin’s theory of sexual selection’.⁴⁴ He highlights as particularly significant Darwin’s argument in *The Descent of Man* that the sexual indifferenciation of human embryos early in their development suggests the existence of a hermaphroditic or androgynous ancestor-species, and thus a latent human predisposition to bisexuality.⁴⁵ Again, this theory employs the contemporary belief in recapitulation: ontogeny as mimicking phylogeny. Thus ‘inversion’ could be explained by the idea, as Havelock Ellis writes, that ‘[h]aving succeeded in

⁴³ Ashley, p. 100.

⁴⁴ Bert Bender, *Evolution and ‘The Sex Problem’: American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism* (London: The Kent State University Press, 2004), p. 77.

⁴⁵ Bender, p. 77.

differentiating a male with full-formed sexual organs from the undecided fetus, [Nature] does not always effect the proper differentiation of that portion of the psychical being in which resides the sexual appetite'.⁴⁶ The existence of 'inverts' was believed to be the result of an evolutionary error by which the body of one sex was paired with the psyche of the other.

It is clear that homosexuality was commonly regarded as an evolutionary issue at the dawn of the twentieth century. Havelock Ellis' assertion that, in the case of the male 'invert', '[t]here remains a female soul in a male body' is reminiscent of Stahl's words when describing the disparity between the outward appearance and inner essence of the Russian:⁴⁷ "His inner being is not shaped [...] as his outer body" (p. 66). The Russian possesses the external semblance of an ordinary man, but his soul is that of a centaur. Similarly, O'Malley reflects of himself that 'his own spirit, by virtue of its peculiar and primitive yearnings, was involved in the same mystery and included in the same hidden passion' as that of the Russian (p. 30). We see, then, that the subtextual dichotomy of heteronormative/homoerotic that exists within the novel may be usefully superimposed on the more explicit species dichotomy of human/centaur. This connection is seen most clearly in the idea of a vanished 'golden age', a phrase used more than once within the novel, and which I here employ to mean at once a fictionalised earlier evolutionary period in which centaurs were plentiful and unthreatened, and an idealised classical past, in which homoerotic or homosexual relationships would be sanctioned.

These two real-unreal pasts come together in the figure of the centaur: a creature embodying at once evolutionary time, and the myths and culture of Greek antiquity. Blackwood makes it perfectly clear that the centaurs of his narrative are the same centaurs that populate Greek mythology. Despite his insistence that these creatures hail from 'long before the days of Greece' (p. 128), he makes numerous references to classical myth throughout the novel, and myth is presented as significant to the centaurs themselves. As the steamer passes Greece, the three men – O'Malley, the Russian and the boy – hear a strange cry coming from the shore. This seems to be a reference to the famous passage from Plutarch in which an Egyptian sailor passing by the isle of Paxi hears a voice crying

⁴⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (1901), p. 229-30.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 230.

out from the shore that the god Pan is dead. In *The Centaur*, however, the cry is one of joy, and prompts to boy to exclaim “it is his voice! Chiron calls--- !” (p. 157). For O’Malley, the name Chiron functions as a ‘clue of explanation’ as to ‘the type of cosmic life to which his companions, and himself with them, inwardly approximated’ (p. 158). A further link with Greece is drawn when O’Malley joins the centaurs in their hidden valley in the Caucasus: his first response to the sight of his friend’s true form is to cry out “Lapithæ...! [...] Lapithæ...!”, referencing ‘that old battle [which was] but one of the scenes of ancient splendour lying pigeon-holed in his mighty Mother’s consciousness’ (p. 257).

Payne has written about the overlaying of evolutionary and classical time within the novel, suggesting that ‘[i]n a sublime act of literary haunting, *The Centaur* is possessed by the Greeks’ own sense of the loss of the primordial’.⁴⁸ Even within classical antiquity, there was an abiding belief in a vanished past epoch during which life had been notably different. Perhaps most famously, Hesiod writes in his *Works and Days* (c. 700 BCE) of the earlier races of men created and destroyed by the gods before our own. The fourth race was that of ‘the godly race of the heroes who are called demigods, our predecessors on the boundless earth’.⁴⁹ This glorious age was followed by our own, inferior in all ways. Dag Øistein Endsjø observes that

How Hesiod operated with various wondrous ages before the present era of toil and grief remained a widespread understanding of man’s origins all through the Greek and Hellenistic era, and even beyond. [...] [T]hinkers as chronologically dispersed as Theognis, Empedocles, Aratus, Pausanias and Dio Chrysostom all confessed their belief in a most wonderful primordial past.⁵⁰

This ‘heroic age’ was traditionally associated with the creatures of myth: it was then that Bellerophon had slain the chimaera; that Oedipus had solved the riddle of the sphinx; that Achilles had received his education from Chiron. The Greek idea of a lost time in which ancient humans lived alongside strange beasts meshes well with evolutionary thought, as Payne suggests. This overlaying of the Darwinian with the mythic is evident in many *fin-de-siècle* centaur stories: as we have seen, Blackwood, Lichtenberger and Heyse all evoke

⁴⁸ Payne, p. 249.

⁴⁹ Hesiod, p. 41.

⁵⁰ Dag Øistein Endsjø, *Primordial Landscapes, Incorruptible Bodies* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 46.

a prior mythic/evolutionary age in which nature was kind and the centaurs lived easily, before shifting environmental conditions, and the development of the human race, reduced their numbers.

However, I suggest that there is a further layer of significance to Blackwood's emphasis on the Greek identity of the centaurs. Linda Dowling has written of the importance of Victorian Hellenism in preparing the ground for the establishment of homosexuality as 'a positive social identity', suggesting that 'Greek studies operated as a "homosexual code"' during the mid-nineteenth century.⁵¹ In 1873, the English critic John Addington Symonds produced a long essay entitled *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, in which he argues that '[v]ery early [...] in Greek history, boy-love, as a form of sensual passion, became a national institution'.⁵² While Symonds did not publish his essay until ten years after it was first written, and then only in a limited edition of ten copies, it gained further attention when it was published as an appendix to Havelock Ellis' influential abovementioned work, *Sexual Inversion* (1897).⁵³ Commenting on Winckelmann, who 'lies under [...] a well grounded suspicion of sexual inversion', Havelock Ellis himself observes that '[i]t is noteworthy that sexual inversion should so often be found associated with the study of antiquity', demonstrating the degree to which Hellenism and homoeroticism were by that time perceived as interrelated.⁵⁴ He concludes that 'the subject of congenital sexual inversion is attracted to the study of Greek antiquity because he finds there the explanation and apotheosis of his own obscure impulses. Undoubtedly that study tends to develop these impulses'.⁵⁵ In employing the centaur – a product of the Greek imagination – as the focus of his homosocial narrative, Blackwood, whether knowingly or otherwise, evokes the possibility of coded homoeroticism.

DuBois draws a link between the centaur's position as an evolutionary relic, and its potential to disrupt heteronormative social structures. She notes that the centaur was regarded by some even within antiquity as a relict species: 'If their mythical origins are

⁵¹ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Preface (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. xiii.

⁵² John Addington Symonds, *A Problem in Greek Ethics: Studies in Sexual Inversion* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2002), p. 15.

⁵³ Shane Butler, 'Homer's Deep', in *Deep Classics*, pp. 21-48 (p. 30).

⁵⁴ Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (1901), p. 21.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 21.

forgotten, the Centaurs represent a species belonging to a stage prior to human evolution [...] a vestigial race, anachronistically present at a historical stage which had superseded them'.⁵⁶ Empedocles, she notes, is said to have developed a proto-evolutionary theory which accounted for mythic hybrids by claiming that the earliest forms of life were physically undifferentiated, appearing like creatures from a dream.⁵⁷ As a pre-human life form persisting alongside humanity, the centaur is contrasted with the ideal of 'the Greek male youth', who represents 'the *telos*, the proper end of both phylogenetic and ontogenetic evolution'.⁵⁸ The centaur is a bizarre primordial 'survival', and as such poses a threat to civic order, as demonstrated by the various myths in which centaurs appear hostile or indifferent towards marriage.⁵⁹ While the threat here is not specifically associated with homosexual desire – centaurs within classical myth largely pursue women – the centaur's ontological otherness sets it against heteronormativity. For, while same-gender relationships were permitted and even encouraged under specific circumstances in Ancient Greece, heterosexual marriage was still regarded as a foundational aspect of society: as duBois writes, 'the exchange of women between men of the same kind [...] was culture for the Greeks'.⁶⁰

In Blackwood's novel, the relict centaur similarly functions as a queerly disruptive force. The centaur's influence is repeatedly set against that of 'civilisation', with O'Malley believing that 'denial of so-called civilization' was 'the first step' towards enlightenment (p. 291). The civilisation that O'Malley so despises is explicitly associated with heterosexual relationships when, aboard the steamer, he recalls his friends back in London: 'He pictured his friends and acquaintances there; the men at his club, at dinner-parties, in the parks, at theatres; he heard their talk – shooting [...]; horses, politics, women, and the rest [...]. But how did they breathe in such a world at all?' (p. 167). An interest in 'women' is regarded as merely one facet of the society that appears so suffocating to O'Malley. In another notable scene, O'Malley remembers an exchange that occurred between himself and two acquaintances in the English countryside:

⁵⁶ duBois, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 69.

⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 28.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 41.

He was there, he remembered, with two persons, a man and woman whose name and face, however, he could not summon, and he recalled that the woman smiled incredulously when he spoke of the exquisite perfume of those folded corn-sheaves in the air. She told him he imagined it. He saw again the pretty woman's smile of incomprehension; he saw the puzzled expression in the eyes of the man; he heard him murmur something prosaic about the soul, about birds, too, and the prospects of killing hundreds later—sport! He even saw the woman picking her way with caution as though the touch of earth could stain or injure her. He especially recalled the silence that had followed on his words that sought to show them—Beauty.... He remembered, too, above all, the sense of loneliness among men that it induced in himself. (p. 275)

The man and the woman – both insensitive to the beauty of the earth – seem to represent not only the superficiality of ‘civilised’ society, but also the heteronormative structures existing at its heart. The pair are united in their conventionality. Watching them, O’Malley feels alienated and lonely; a loneliness only alleviated by contact with the centaur, whose ‘primitive’ otherness offers a queer escape from societal convention.

O’Malley’s cry of “Lapithae!” upon first seeing the centaur in his true form is significant not only in tethering the creature to a classical identity. The centaur’s response to his words is also notable in evolutionary terms:

The stalwart figure turned with an awful spring as though it would trample him to the ground. A moment the brown eyes flamed with the light of battle. Then, with another roar, and a gesture that was somehow at once both huge and simple, he seemed to rise and paw the air. The next second this figure of the *Urwelt*, come once more into its own, bent down and forward, leaped wonderfully – then, cantering, raced away across the slopes to join his kind. [...] The heritage of racial memory was his, and certain words remained still vividly evocative. (p. 257)

Blackwood’s reference to ‘racial memory’ is relevant here. Cannon Schmitt has written convincingly of the ways in which Darwinism, with its focus on evolutionary change as ‘[i]nsensible, gradual, continuous’, gave rise to new ways of thinking about memory.⁶¹ In positing ‘a continuum between present and past’, evolutionary theory – and in particular recapitulationism – allowed people to conceptualise a kind of ‘species memory’.⁶² Thus ‘understanding themselves as subjects of evolution [meant] being capable of repeating and, more staggeringly, revisiting in memory a range of pasts [including] that of humans

⁶¹ Schmitt, pp. 25-26.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 26.

conceived of as a species'.⁶³ Blackwood's centaur contains within itself the history of its race – as, in one sense, do all of us.

In his evocation of the centaur's 'racial memory', Blackwood once again draws attention to the preoccupation with internality that pervades the novel as a whole. From the beginning of the text, O'Malley is intensely concerned with questions of inwardness. He is disturbed by a 'sense of disunion between his outer and his inner self', and believes that the revelation he craves 'would mean the complete and final transfer of his consciousness from the "without" to the "within"' (p. 229). His journey is largely an interior one: while he finds the centaurs in the Caucasus, his actual interactions with them seem to take place entirely within his own mind, since when his otherworldly sojourn ends he finds himself in the same spot where he stood as it began, with no time having passed. Ultimately, he comes to the realisation that

'the Garden's everywhere! You needn't go to the distant Caucasus to find it. It's all about this old London town, and in these foggy streets and dingy pavements. [...] The gates of horn and ivory are here,' he tapped his breast. 'And here the flowers, the long, clean open hills, the giant herd, the nymphs, the sunshine, and the gods!' (p. 339)

The Garden is to be attained through introspection, rather than physical travel; there is no need to engage with the outer world, when revelation can be found within.

Again, a connection may be drawn here with the text's homoerotic undertones. The term 'inversion' can mean a reversal – the idea that a person's sexual drive is the reverse of what would usually have been 'expected' – but it can also refer to a turning *inwards*. Inversion was often understood as the inward movement of sexual desire: away from the dissimilar, and towards that which is similar to oneself. In 1895, the critic Hugh Stutfield wrote disapprovingly that '[r]ecent events' (namely the Wilde trials) had made apparent 'the true inwardness of modern aesthetic Hellenism'.⁶⁴ The same year, having reviewed the manuscript of *Sexual Inversion*, Edward Carpenter – himself an early champion of gay rights – wrote to Havelock Ellis 'I think it [...] will be a first-rate book altogether – tho' I

⁶³ Schmitt, p. 26.

⁶⁴ Hugh Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics', in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 157 (1895), 833-845 (p. 835).

doubt whether you quite appreciate the “true inwardness” of this kind of love’.⁶⁵ This idea of ‘inwardness’ is evident, too, in a written account apparently given to Havelock Ellis by one of his subjects: “Inverts are, I think, naturally more liable to indulge in self-gratification than normal people, partly [...] because of the fact that they actually possess in themselves the desired form of the male”.⁶⁶ Havelock Ellis’ correspondent suggests that the ‘invert’ is in some sense attracted *to himself*: his desire for the homogeneous leads to a turning inwards towards self-attraction.

Similarly, O’Malley’s interest in the Russian and his boy is based upon a sense that the three of them are, in some deep and inexplicable sense, alike. He is aware that ‘something in his soul was so akin to a similar passion in these strangers’ (p. 32); that “we belonged to the same forgotten place and time” (p. 49); that “this man [is] of my kind” (p. 62). There is an almost autoerotic quality to his fascination with the pair, drawing as it does upon his recognition of himself within them. Jonathan Loesberg draws a connection between the *fin-de-siècle* conception of homosexuality as inward and self-regarding, and its lack of reproductive possibility: homosexual love was believed to represent ‘a turning inward away from the world, [...] away from outwardly productive and reproductive sexuality’.⁶⁷ *The Centaur* ends, of course, with O’Malley’s complete refusal to engage with the outside world, and his resulting death of a mysterious wasting disease. His doctor describes his condition as ‘[a]cute and vehement nostalgia, [...] sometimes called a broken heart, [...] in which the entire stream of a man’s life flows to some distant place, or person, or – or to some imagined yearning that he craves to satisfy’ (p. 340). O’Malley has turned inwards again, rejecting any external stimulus in favour of solipsism. His desire to reach the centaurs through introspection reflects the contemporary idea of the individual as able to traverse evolutionary history by way of memory, returning to an earlier stage of development that is latent within the body.

Martha Vicinus observes that many *fin-de-siècle* narratives of same-gender desire culminate in the death of their protagonist, ‘[s]ince love cannot lead to marriage or

⁶⁵ Edward Carpenter, quoted in Ivan Crozier, Introduction, Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion: A Critical Edition* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 55.

⁶⁶ Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion* (1901), p. 162.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Loesberg, *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida and de Man* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 187.

reproduction'.⁶⁸ Such narratives imply that death is the logical terminus for homosexual or sexually ambiguous characters; *The Centaur* is no exception. Each of the characters who are drawn to the *Urwelt* – with the exception of Dr. Stahl, who claims to have “saved myself just in time” by ceasing his acquaintance with the Russian (p. 312) – is dead by the end of the novel. We see here, too, a parallel with the *fin-de-siècle* extinction narratives examined earlier in the chapter. These are antiquated beings unable to thrive in the harshness of early twentieth-century civilisation, just as Lichtenberger’s centaurs are gradually obliterated by species competition and a changing world.

O’Malley and the Russian represent at once primordial evolutionary ‘survivals’, and Hellenes adrift in modernity. The intensity of their relationship, and of O’Malley’s longing for his dead companion, cannot persist in a post-antique world. *The Centaur* is, as Payne has suggested, a text ‘sublimely’ haunted by impossible memories of both classical and prehistoric time; even prior to their deaths, its characters are already ghosts of a kind.⁶⁹

‘Forward and not back’: evolutionary hope in *The Centaur*

It is tempting to read *The Centaur* as a dispiriting fable, whose ultimate conclusion – that there is no place in the world for sexually and taxonomically ambiguous ‘outcast[s]’ like O’Malley and the Russian (p. 11) – is sadly familiar from *fin-de-siècle* literature. Yet the text also leaves open the possibility of a more optimistic reading. The tragedy of the narrative is the fact that O’Malley is a man out of time – a being too archaic to survive in the present day. But as much as O’Malley’s ‘primitive’ nature is stressed throughout the novel, the narrative also suggests that he and the Russian are, in another sense, *ahead* of their time.

Early in the novel, Blackwood begins a chapter with a translated quotation from the eighteenth-century German poet and mystic Novalis: ‘Mythology contains the history of the archetypal world. It comprehends Past, Present, and Future.’ (p. 34). Despite the novel’s focus on overlaid historic, prehistoric and mythic pasts, Blackwood appears almost as preoccupied with questions of futurity. O’Malley, the narrator tells us, ‘looked forwards

⁶⁸ Martha Vicinus, ‘The Adolescent Boy: Fin de Siècle Femme Fatale?’, in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 83-108 (p. 89).

⁶⁹ Payne, p. 249.

[...] to a state when Man, with the best results of Reason in his pocket, might return to a more instinctive life' (p. 10). At one point, O'Malley recalls a poem by Edward Carpenter envisaging a more natural future:

Gathering itself around a new centre – or rather round the world –
old centre once more revealed –
I saw a new life, a new society, arise.
Man I saw arising once more to dwell with Nature[.] (p. 195)

O'Malley claims that Carpenter 'looked ahead [...], whereas he [O'Malley] looked back', (p. 195), yet he, too, spends much of the novel 'looking ahead'. He and Stahl envisage a coming 'perfect man' who will unite 'what the race has discarded [and] what it reaches out to in the future' (p. 169). By the time he returns from his time with the centaurs, O'Malley is convinced that, in bringing the message of the *Urwelt* back with him to the outer world, he will be able to bring about 'a new Utopia' (p. 286) – a return to the state in which the world previously existed, with humans living in harmony with the sentient planet.

O'Malley's references to Carpenter are pertinent to my argument within this chapter. As well as being an advocate for a more natural lifestyle, Carpenter was, as noted above, a prominent early campaigner for gay rights, and wrote repeatedly of homosexuality as innate, organic and not, as had previously been believed by many, symptomatic of any kind of defect or degeneracy. His work *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) went further, suggesting that not only was same-gender attraction natural, it actually represented a positive evolutionary development:

Though these gradations of human type have always, and among all peoples, been more or less known and recognised, yet their frequency to-day, or even the concentration of attention on them, may be the indication of some important change actually in progress. We do *not* know, in fact, what possible evolutions are to come, or what new forms, of permanent place and value, are being slowly differentiated from the surrounding mass of humanity. It may be that, as at some past period of evolution the worker-bee was without doubt differentiated from the two ordinary bee-sexes, so at the present time certain new types of human kind may be emerging, which will have an important part to play in the societies of the future[.]⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1908), p. 11.

Rather than representing a regression, homosexuality potentially signalled a *progression*. Carpenter argues that the ‘homogenic’ temperament – which he believed to be less sensual, more sensitive, and more emotional than that of a heterosexual person – would lead to same-gender attracted people becoming ‘to a large extent the teachers of future society’.⁷¹ This would in turn produce a society less invested in sensual and material pleasures, and more spiritually pure. He highlights, too, the idea of Greek antiquity as a time when same-gender love fruitfully informed the national temperament, and, like Havelock Ellis, draws a link between contemporary neo-Hellenism and homosexuality, observing that ‘those of the modern artist-writers and poets who have done the greatest service in the way of interpreting and reconstructing *Greek* life and ideals [...] have had a marked strain of this temperament in them’.⁷²

Carpenter’s emphasis on the idea of a future in which those currently marginalised and misunderstood will come to function as our ‘teachers’ is echoed in *The Centaur*, where O’Malley believes that “[i]f only I can get this [message] back to them [...] I’ll save the world by bringing it again to simple things! I’ve only got to tell it and all will understand at once – and follow!” (p. 281). He, too, wishes to lead humanity towards a future that is less sensual and more spiritual, believing ‘that the true knowledge and the true reason are within, that they both pertain to the inner being and have no chief concern with external things’ (p. 335). It seems almost certain that Blackwood had read *The Intermediate Sex*; we know that he was heavily influenced by Carpenter’s work, even claiming in a letter to Carpenter in 1924 that ‘yourself, in the framework of the Caucasus, were the inspiration [for *The Centaur*]’.⁷³ Carpenter himself had initiated their acquaintance, writing to Blackwood in 1912 to praise *The Centaur*, and asking to meet with Blackwood; the two met and continued to correspond over the following decades.⁷⁴

The language employed in describing O’Malley’s metamorphosis into a centaur also evokes the idea of a positive evolutionary development. When, aboard the steamer, he first feels the change begin to take hold, it is described in terms of forward motion:

⁷¹ Carpenter, p. 14.

⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 68, 111.

⁷³ Algernon Blackwood, quoted in Ashley, p. 229.

⁷⁴ Ashley, p. 229.

[N]eck and shoulders, as it were, urged forward; there came a singular pricking in the loins; a rising of the back; a thrusting up and outwards of the chest. He felt that something grew behind him with a power that sought to impel or drive him in advance and out across the world at a terrific gait[.] (p. 148)

When the full transformation finally occurs in the Caucasian wilderness, it is depicted in similar language: ‘he stood there, grandly outlined, pushing the wind before him’ (p. 256); ‘he found himself shot forwards through the air’ (p. 258). In the image of O’Malley’s body bursting forwards into greater speed and power, we see an accelerated evolutionary development. It is a counterpoint to literary scenes of accelerated ‘devolution’ such as the one experienced by Helen Vaughan in *The Great God Pan*, where the language is that of *downward*, rather than forward, change: “I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being.” (Machen, p. 100). While O’Malley, too, is returning to a shape associated with the deep past, Blackwood’s repeated references to advancement make it clear that this is a progression, rather than a regression.

Of course, O’Malley’s message is not heeded by the world. The narrator tells us sadly of the ‘inevitable disaster’ (p. 334) of his campaign: ‘Those jeering audiences in the park; those empty benches in a public hall; those brief, ignoring paragraphs in the few newspapers that filled a vacant corner by calling him crank and long-haired prophet’ (p. 335). Yet Carpenter writes that ‘[i]t seems almost a law of Nature that new and important movements should be misunderstood and vilified – even though afterwards they may be widely approved or admitted to honour’.⁷⁵ O’Malley’s apparent failure does not prove that his mission was fruitless, only that he was, perhaps, a harbinger for a coming societal change. To the end, he remains hopeful that he will reach people ‘from the other side’ after his death: affecting them through the beauty of the natural world, of which he will by then have become a part (p. 337). Even the skeptical Dr. Stahl believes that “the world is not *yet* ready to listen” [emphasis mine], suggesting that there may yet come a time when it is ready (p. 331). For now, the public’s ignorance is merely a symptom of “the stage they’re at” (p. 332) – again, Blackwood employs the language of evolutionary development.

⁷⁵ Carpenter, p. 12.

In his own death, O'Malley believes himself to be "going home" to "escape and freedom" (p. 295), a theory seemingly confirmed by the narrator's description of the moment of his demise. As his friend dies, the narrator experiences 'a feeling that something came out rushing past me through the air [that] whirled and shouted as it went', and then glimpses two 'vast and spreading' figures, moving away through the London fog (p. 347). The second shape is that of the penny-whistle playing Pan, but it seems also to represent the Russian – the two men finally reunited, and travelling together to the *Urwelt*.

Carpenter writes optimistically that same-gender love 'has had its place as a recognised and guarded institution in the elder and more primitive societies; and it seems quite probable that a similar place will be accorded to it in the societies of the future'.⁷⁶ We have seen that homosexuality was frequently cast as an evolutionary 'regression' at the *fin de siècle*: a return to a 'primordial' form of sexuality. Carpenter subverts this idea by suggesting that earlier civilisations were in fact more enlightened than his own in their approach to homosexuality. In acknowledging and honouring same-gender attraction, future societies would not be regressing, but returning to a superior condition. In *The Centaur*, Blackwood similarly envisages a return to 'primitive' values that will simultaneously represent a moving forward.

The complexity of this dynamic – where progress means a return to a past that is at once more 'primitive' and more sophisticated than the present – mirrors the ambivalence of the centaur mythos more generally. The centaur, from its earliest inception, has been a being associated with contradictory extremes, and therefore able to embody conflicting human preoccupations. In the evolutionary narratives of the *fin de siècle*, the hunted and relict centaur expresses contemporary anxieties surrounding what it means to be human in a post-Darwinian world. In Blackwood's *The Centaur*, these concerns are layered onto a narrative of latent homoerotic desire, with the centaur threatened by societal alienation and suppression, as well as dwindling numbers. Yet while *The Centaur* is a story of archaic 'survivals' struggling to endure in an indifferent modernity, it is also a narrative of social and evolutionary hope. O'Malley and the Russian represent both a vanished past, and the promise of a future renewal.

⁷⁶ Carpenter, p. 82.

Conclusion

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a profound and unnerving shift in the popular understanding of what it was to be human. The implications of evolutionary theory shook the foundations of the Victorian worldview, destabilised ideas of human specificity, and thus opened the door to new ways of thinking about both humanity and animality. At this time of intense anxiety, the mythic hybrid became an unlikely locus for a range of interconnected concerns centering upon the question of humanity's place within, and relationship to, the natural world and other species. The hybrid in late-Victorian and Edwardian culture is as much an engine for the generation of cultural anxieties as it is a mirror of them; in straddling the boundary between the scientific and the imaginative, it allows for the development and expression of new evolutionary fears and fantasies. Despite the preponderance of mythic animal-human hybrids in *fin-de-siècle* culture, however, the phenomenon of their popularity during this period has been critically underexamined. This study has sought to address that lack, establishing that the mythic therianthrope played a significant role in the cultural expression of evolutionary unease during the final decades of the nineteenth century, and the early years of the twentieth.

In Chapter 1, I argue that the popularity of the hybrid during this time can be attributed in part to the close ties that existed between myth-studies and the natural sciences during the nineteenth century. Not only did myth scholars draw upon the language of evolutionary science, but evolution itself was regarded as an innately narrative, and specifically mythic, process. Different hybrid beings embody different aspects of evolutionary anxiety in *fin-de-siècle* culture, and therefore I dedicate each of the subsequent chapters to one of the hybrids I examine. Chapter 2 argues that the faun or Pan is utilised to express concerns surrounding the potential for human evolutionary degeneration in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*, with the god's traditional traits reappropriated to embody contemporary fears of degeneracy. Chapter 3 observes that the sphinx frequently appears as a kind of witness to, and embodiment of, evolutionary timescales in *fin-de-siècle* literature, focusing on Wilde's 'The Sphinx' and Wells' *The Time Machine*. Ultimately, however, the sphinx offers no answer to the questions of deep time. In Chapter 4, I focus on the depiction of the siren as simultaneously an unevolved

femme fatale and a sexless elemental in Wells' *The Sea Lady*, ultimately arguing that this contradictory portrayal reflects conflicted post-Darwinian conceptions of femininity. Finally, in Chapter 5, I explore the portrayal of the centaur as a relict and threatened species in Algernon Blackwood's *The Centaur*, arguing that Blackwood's depiction of overlaid mythic and evolutionary pasts allows for the expression of anxieties surrounding homosexuality and societal alienation.

Through these five chapters, I have demonstrated that the mythic therianthrope was called upon to embody a wide range of evolution-adjacent concerns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the *fin de siècle*, the extensive nature of the implications of evolutionary theory had been fully recognised; in 1888, the writer Grant Allen commented sardonically that

[e]verybody nowadays talks about evolution. Like electricity, the cholera germ, woman's rights, the great mining boom, and the Eastern Question, it is 'in the air'. It pervades society everywhere with its subtle essence; it infects small-talk with its familiar catchwords and its slang phrases[.]¹

Evolution was everywhere by the end of the nineteenth century, its ramifications so vast as to resonate far beyond the realm of the scientific. This is reflected in the spectrum of themes explored within the chapters of this thesis: I do not only consider the hybrid's relationship to evolutionary theory, but also, through the lens of evolutionary theory, issues ranging from linguistic history, to homosexual attraction, to Victorian ideals of femininity. The mythic therianthrope proved surprisingly versatile in its use as a site for the expression of post-Darwinian anxieties.

There is room for further research on the subject of the evolutionary hybrid, and I hope this study has opened up possible directions for future work. As I mention in my introduction, it was necessary, in order to prevent this thesis from expanding impossibly in length and scope, to limit the beings examined. I did so by focusing solely on hybrids whose bodily forms combine integral human and animal body parts, and who have human faces; the four beings I chose to examine were also, my research suggested, the most frequently depicted in *fin-de-siècle* literature and art. There would, however, be much merit

¹ Grant Allen, *Falling in Love: With Other Essays on More Exact Branches of Science* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1889), p. 31.

in an examination of the evolutionary significance of animal-headed hybrids such as the Minotaur, of quasi-hybrids such as the Gorgon Medusa.

I have also been limited to the examination of a few central texts. The sheer number of literary works in which these beings appear at the *fin de siècle* means that I have inevitably had to omit, or only briefly mention, relevant pieces of literature. In particular, the Pan of E. F. Benson's short story 'The Man Who Went Too Far', who is evoked in connection with nature's innate cruelty, seems ripe for an evolutionary reading. Other relevant texts fell beyond the temporal bounds of this thesis: W. B. Yeats' much-referenced 1919 poem 'The Second Coming', for instance, in which the appearance of a monstrous sphinx-like figure in the desert heralds the arrival of a new phase of history, representing, in Hurley's words, 'a post-Darwinian [...] nightmare, a man made in the image of a beast'.²

Looking further beyond the *fin de siècle*, there is much to be said about the relevance of the mythic animal-human hybrid to our current moment. Hybrid beings feature frequently in contemporary popular culture. In literature, they are most often confined to children's writing: centaurs, merpeople and sphinxes appear in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, while numerous hybrids are depicted in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* books, in which classical gods and monsters live in secret in the twenty-first-century world. In cinema, the hybrid's range is more varied. Therianthropes regularly appear in children's films – Pixar's recent offerings *Onward* (2020) and *Luca* (2021) both feature such beings – but they can also be called upon to embody darker themes. The ambiguous faun of Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and the sinisterly tempting siren of Robert Eggers' *The Lighthouse* (2019) are two examples of hybrid beings in recent films aimed at adults (del Toro has since contributed the foreword to a collection of Arthur Machen's short stories).

While we are now more than a century and a half on from the publication of the *Origin of Species*, the hybrid is arguably as apt a symbol for the existential anxieties of the early twenty-first century as it was for those of the *fin de siècle*. In the epoch christened the Anthropocene, as we are forced to reckon with human-made environmental destruction and large-scale species extinction, the image of the animal-human hybrid is a powerful

² Hurley, 'The Modernist Abominations of William Hope Hodgson', in *Gothic Modernisms*, ed. by Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 129-149 (p. 132).

reminder that we are inextricably connected to, and reliant upon, the natural world. Many of the texts examined within this thesis are strikingly well-suited to retrospective ecocritical analysis; Blackwood's nature writings in particular seem, as Elizabeth Parker observes, 'almost to portend environmental disaster', while Wells' *The Time Machine*, in which humanity has inadvertently engineered its own evolutionary downfall, has seen numerous recent ecocritical readings.³ However, these have not, for the most part, focused upon the figure of the hybrid specifically, and this is undoubtedly an area with rich potential for further investigation.

Beyond specifically ecological issues, the idea of the therianthrope continues to exist at the intersection of science and imagination, and to inspire fear and interest in equal measure. This is a point neatly demonstrated by the regular appearance of news articles, often anxious in tone, reporting on the creation of embryos containing both animal and human cells for the purposes of scientific research (usually with the aim of establishing whether it might be possible to grow human organs within animals for transplantation).⁴ These 'chimeras', as they are known, are inevitably destroyed at an early stage of development, yet the fact of their existence for any length of time is troubling to many, and raises a host of ethical imbroglios. An *Observer* article dating from May 2021, and reporting on the creation of embryos containing human and monkey cells, begins with a set of images strikingly familiar from nineteenth-century responses to evolutionary theory:

When King Minos of Crete was given a magnificent bull by the sea god Poseidon for a sacrifice, he could not bring himself to kill it. In anger, Poseidon enchanted Minos's wife Pasiphaë to be filled with lust for the creature. The result of their trans-species mating was the bull-headed monster the Minotaur.

Hybrids of humans and animals throng within myth and legend: centaurs, mermaids, goat-footed Pan. We're both fascinated and uneasy about the boundary that separates us from other animals – and whether it is leaky.

³ Elizabeth Parker, *The Forest and the EcoGothic: The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (London: Palgrave, 2020), p. 29.

For ecocritical responses to *The Time Machine*, see Allen MacDuffie, 'Charles Darwin and the Victorian Pre-History of Climate Denial', *Victorian Studies*, 60 (2018), 543-564, and Aaron Rosenberg, 'Romancing the Anthropocene: H. G. Wells and the Genre of the Future', *Novel*, 51 (2018), 79-100.

⁴ Sara Reardon, 'Hybrid zoo: Introducing pig-human embryos and a rat-mouse', *Nature*, 26 January 2017, <<https://www.nature.com/articles/nature.2017.21378>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

So the recent report by a team in the US and China of embryos that contain a mixture of human and monkey cells mines an ancient seam of anxiety. What strange hybrids are we creating, and why?⁵

Like the 1863 quotation from T. H. Huxley with which I began this thesis, this 2021 article responds to contemporary scientific developments concerning the unnerving biological proximity of humans to animals – in this case, the deliberate combining of human and animal components, rather than the realisation of humanity’s animal ancestry – by referencing the mythic therianthrope. There could be no clearer demonstration of the hybrid’s abiding symbolic power than the fact that it continues to be employed in the expression of cultural anxieties in a way so similar to its nineteenth-century use. It is evident from the classical sources examined in the introduction to this thesis that the potentially ‘leaky’ boundary between human and beast has been a troubling and absorbing subject for millennia, and that, since at least antiquity, it has found expression in the form of imagined composite beings. The birth of evolutionary theory gave new fuel to these long-standing anxieties, and thus prompted a fresh surge of interest in hybrid forms. For as long as humans live alongside animals – our ‘constant other’, to return to Pramod Nayar’s words – these fears will persist, accumulating new resonances as science, technology and understanding develop and progress.⁶ It seems certain that the mythic hybrid will endure alongside them, its uncanny, intermediate form adapting to reflect whatever shifting fears and fantasies preoccupy the current moment.

This thesis has addressed a gap in existing scholarship, and shed light upon a rich yet underexamined aspect of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature. It has explored the ways in which therianthropic forms were utilised as imaginative spaces for the expression and development of fears which, despite having their roots in evolutionary thought, were wide-ranging and varied in scope. In offering a cohesive and focused account of this cultural phenomenon, I hope this study has gone some way towards unriddling the significance of the evolutionary hybrid at the *fin de siècle*.

⁵ Philip Ball, ‘Mixed messages: is research into human-monkey embryos ethical?’, *Observer*, 15 May 2021, < <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/may/15/mixed-messages-is-research-into-human-animal-hybrids-ethical-chimera>>, accessed 12 November 2021.

⁶ Nayar, p. 80.

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Appendix of Images



Figure 1. Carvings from the Parthenon depicting a Lapith warrior in combat with a centaur, 5th century BCE, marble, British Museum.



Figure 2. The Centaur of Vulci, Etruscan statue, 6th century BCE, National Etruscan Museum of Italy.



Figure 3. The Lion Man, a carved figurine believed to be between 35,000 - 40,000 years old, ivory, Museum Ulm.

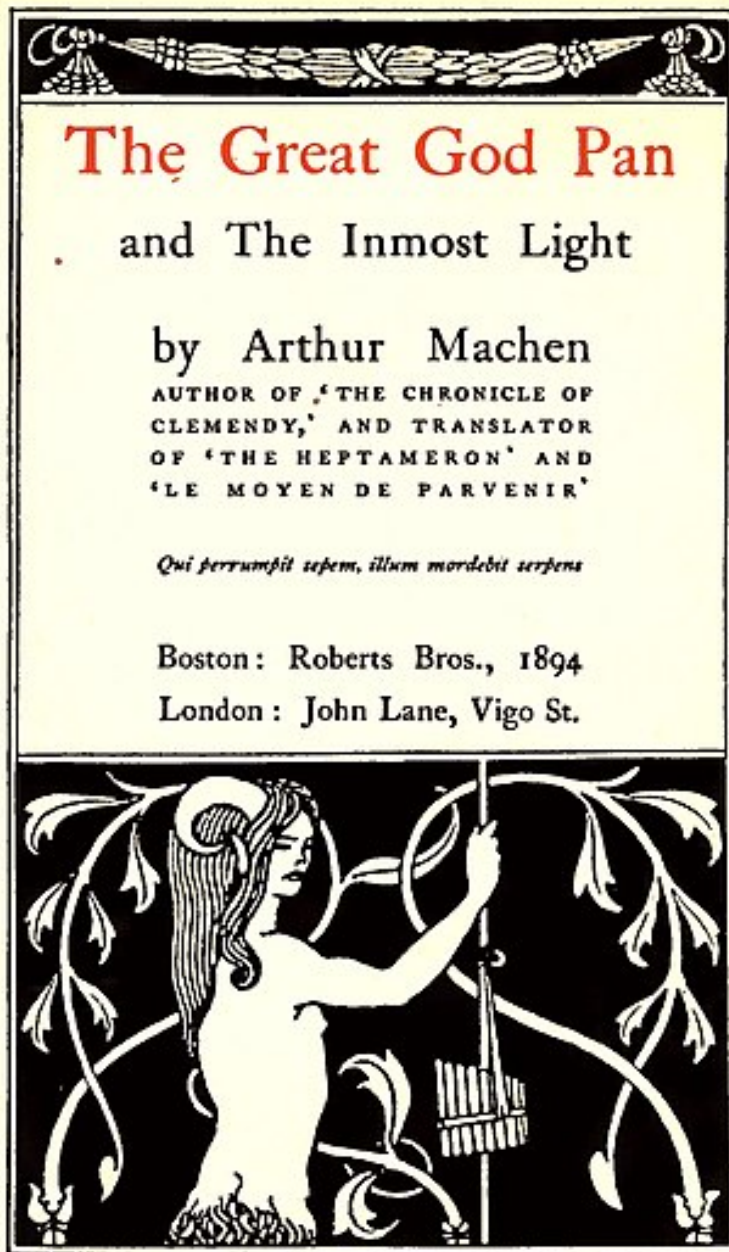


Figure 4. Illustration by Aubrey Beardsley, frontispiece in Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light* (London: John Lane, 1894).

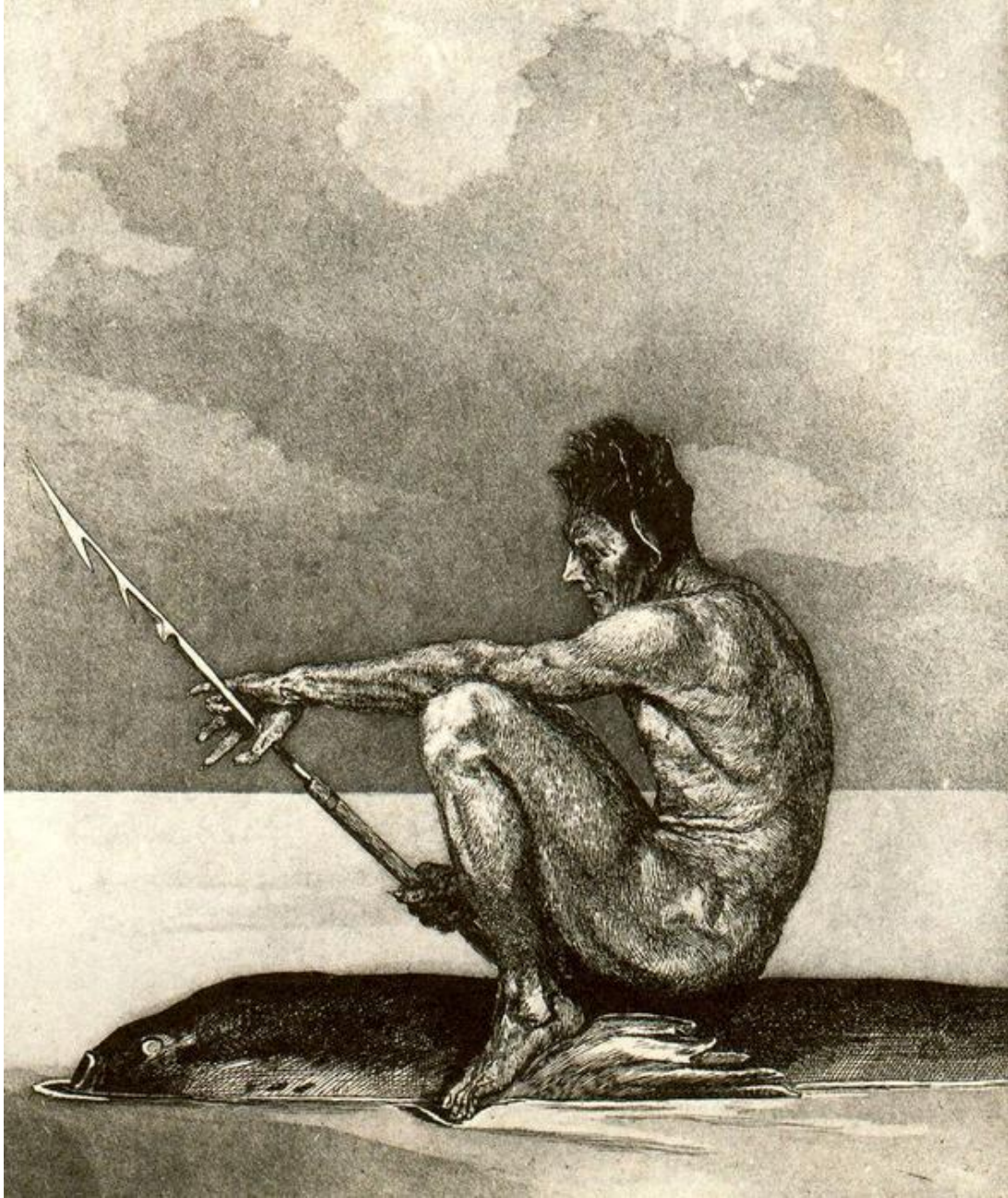


Figure 5. Max Klinger, *Second Future* (1880), etching and aquatint, Minneapolis Institute of Art.



Figure 6. Elihu Vedder, *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863), oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



THE EFFECTS OF A HEARTY DINNER AFTER VISITING THE ANTEDILUVIAN DEPARTMENT AT THE CRYSTAL PALACE.

Figure 7. *The Effects of a Hearty Dinner after Visiting the Antediluvian Department at the Crystal Palace, Punch, 28 (1855), p. 50.*

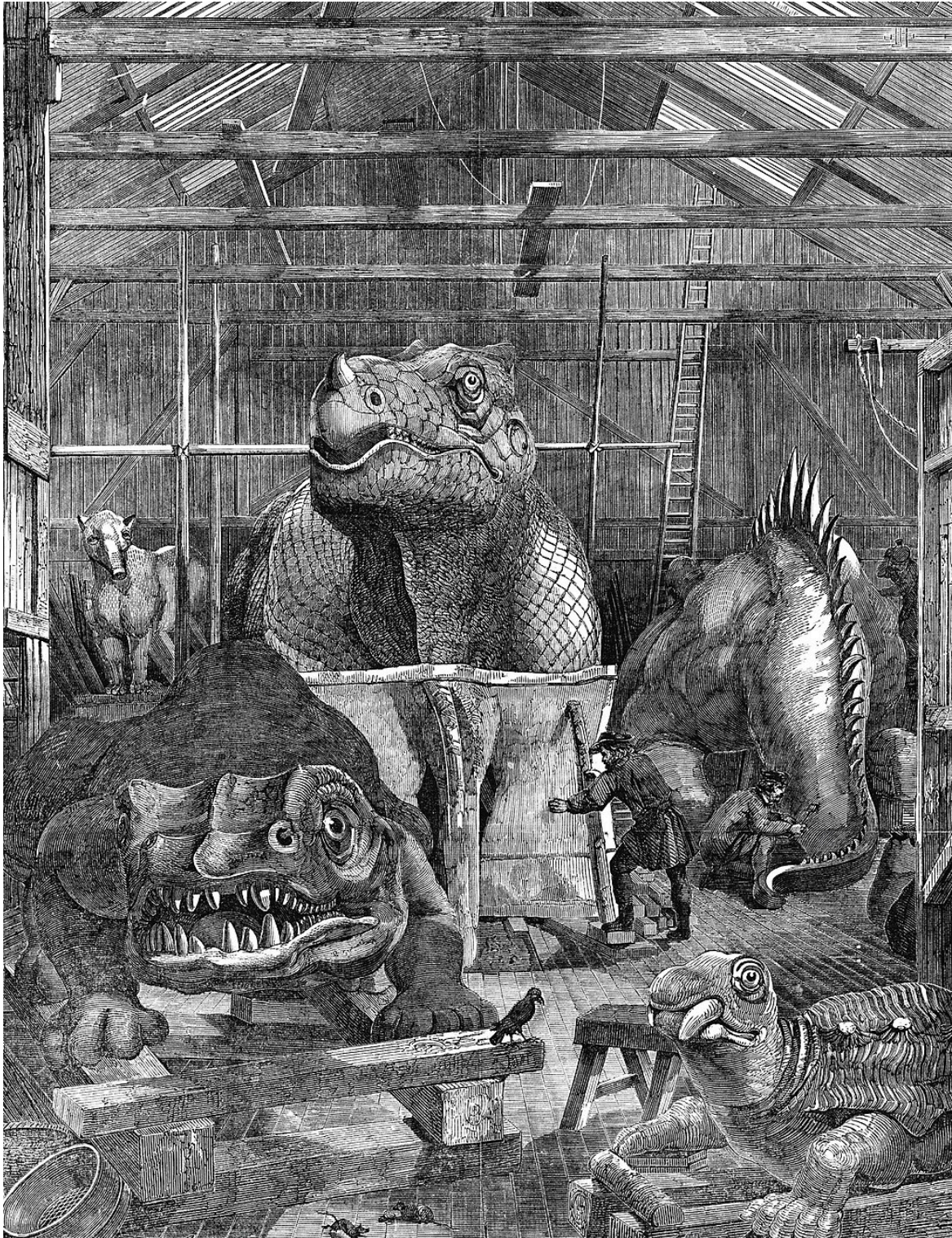


Figure 8. The Crystal Palace dinosaurs under construction. Philip Henry Delamotte, “*The Extinct Animals*” Model-Room, at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, *The Illustrated London News*, 23 (1853), p. 600.



Figure 9. The White Sphinx as seen on the cover of *The Time Machine*'s first edition. Title page in H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Heinemann, 1895).



Figure 10. Gustave Doré, *The Enigma* (1871), oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 11. The 'Siren Vase'. Attic red-figure vase depicting Odysseus passing the sirens, British Museum.



Figure 12. Herbert James Draper, *The Sea Maiden* (1894), oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 13. Frederic Leighton, *The Fisherman and the Syren* (1856-8), oil on canvas, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery.

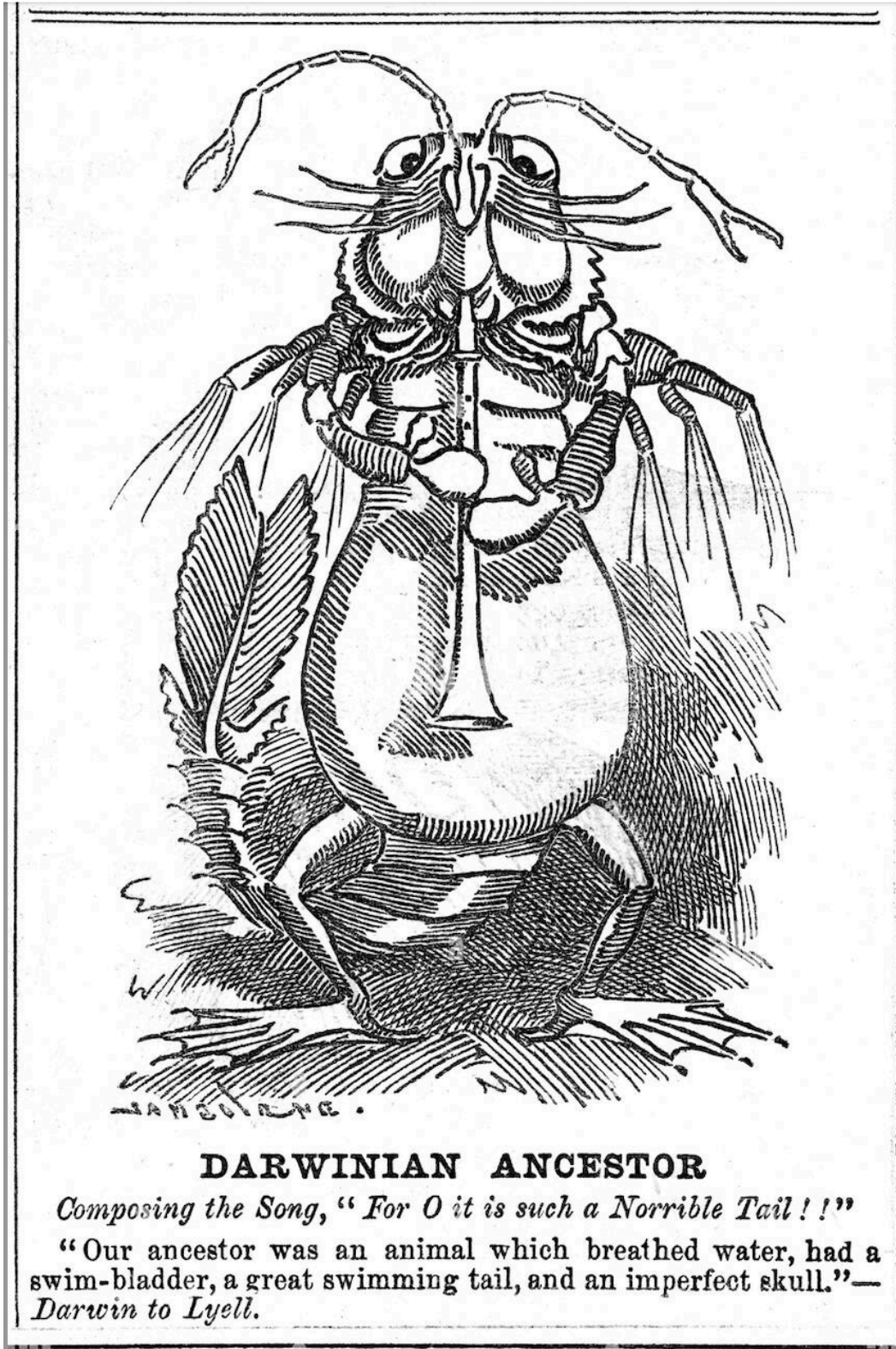


Figure 14. George du Maurier, 'Darwinian Ancestor', *Punch*, 93 (1887), p. 265.



Figure 15. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea* (1887), oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum.



Figure 16. Edward Linley Sambourne, 'Mr Punch's Designs From Nature: Toilette du Soir à la Sirène', *Punch*, 55 (1868), p. 11.



Figure 17. John Collier, *The Land Baby* (1909), oil on canvas.



Figure 18. George du Maurier, 'A Logical Refutation of Mr. Darwin's Theory', *Punch*, 60 (1871), p. 130.



Figure 19. James Barry, *The Education of Achilles* (1772), oil on canvas, Yale Centre for British Art.



Figure 20. Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *The Education of Achilles by Chiron* (1782), oil on canvas, Louvre Museum.

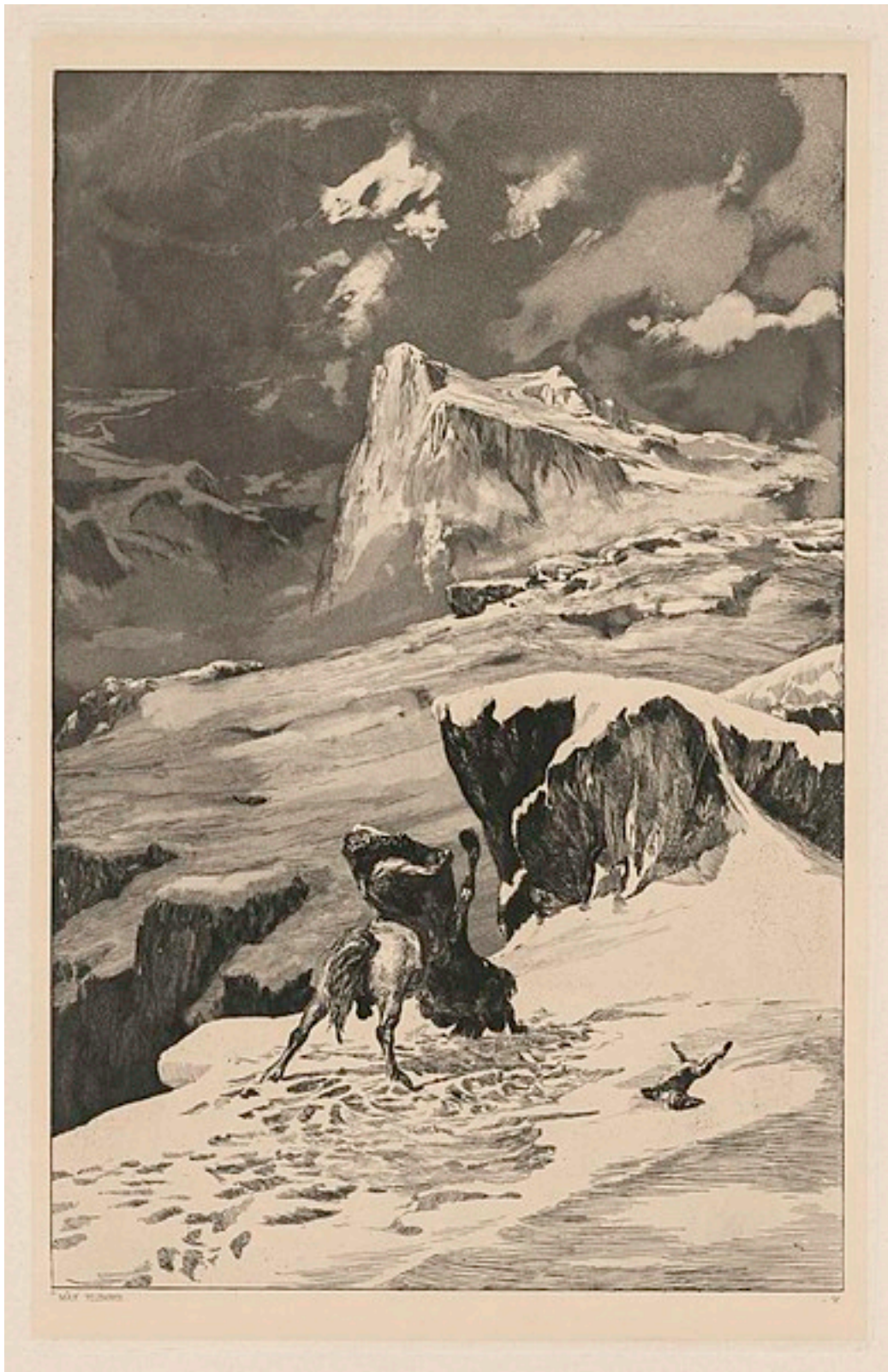


Figure 21. Max Klinger, *Battling Centaurs* (1881), etching and aquatint, Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 22. Arnold Böcklin, *Battle of the Centaurs* (1872-3), oil on canvas, Kunstmuseum Basel.



Figure 23. Max Klinger, *Pursued Centaur* (1881), etching and aquatint, Metropolitan Museum of Art.