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Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897): a late-Victorian popular novel

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This paper deals with the publication history and popular appeal of a novel which, when first published in 1897, was characterised by contemporary readers and reviewers as “surprising and ingenious”, “weird”, “thrilling”, “really exciting”, “full of mystery” and “extremely powerful”. According to reviewers, this “well-written” story was “narrated with a clearness of style and a fullness of incident which hold the reader’s attention from first to last”. Compared favourably to the work of Wilkie Collins and Bram Stoker, this novel was presented “with hideous actuality”, was “difficult, if not impossible, to lay down... when once begun” and succeeded “in producing that sensation of horror which should make the flesh of even the least susceptible reader creep” (“Opinions of the Press”). Given the recent scholarly interest in late-nineteenth-century popular fiction, one would expect to find such a thrilling novel the subject of ample academic attention. Yet Richard Marsh’s popular potboiler *The Beetle: A Mystery* is now only known to readers of cult fiction and collectors of rare books. First published in 1897, almost simultaneously with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* with which it makes a remarkable comparison, Marsh’s bestselling shocker has been sadly neglected by post-war readers. This paper examines its immense initial popularity, critical history and slow decline, locating the novel within a specific context of time and readership.

The Beetle, though but little-known, is the only novel for which its author is now remembered at all. Always secretive, the late-Victorian popular novelist Richard Marsh has largely escaped biographical detection, just as his literary work has defied scholarly analysis.¹ Yet during his thirty-five-year career, this popular writer published over eighty volumes of fiction, as well as countless short stories, under at least two names. “Richard Marsh” was in fact a penname adopted for reasons which remain unclear by Richard Bernard Heldmann (1857-1915), a writer of boys’ stories in the early 1880s and one-time journalistic collaborator of G.A. Henty. Heldmann’s career was closely tied to the *Union Jack*, Henty’s quality boys’ weekly, for which Heldmann began to write school and adventure stories in the late summer of 1880. He quickly made himself one of the most trusted contributors to the magazine and learnt many of the tricks of his trade in the process. By 1882, the youthful Heldmann had made himself so useful to Henty that he was promoted to co-editor of the *Union Jack*, which underwent many commercially-inspired changes in the first, and final, volume of its short-lived New Series (1882-3). Heldmann’s promising career as a boys’ author, however, came to an abrupt end in 1883: first his final

serial for the *Union Jack*, entitled “A Couple of Scamps”, was unaccountably dropped after the story had taken a surprising, and, for the *Union Jack*, unsuitable turn towards the violent and the supernatural. Heldmann then disappeared from the public eye after an apparent disagreement with Henty, who sternly announced that “Mr Heldmann has ceased to be connected in any way with the *Union Jack*” (“Notice”). Although Heldmann’s books continued to appear and sell well into the twentieth century, he never published any further work in his own name.

If it was not for *The Attempted Rescue*, the 1966 autobiography of Heldmann’s grandson Robert Aickman, himself a writer of horror stories, we would not know that Heldmann in 1888 revived his literary career under the penname “Richard Marsh”.² “Richard” was his own first name, while Marsh was the maiden name of his mother Emma, a Nottingham lace merchant’s daughter who had in the mid-1850s married Joseph Heldmann, a German immigrant.³ Few records exist on Bernard Heldmann’s activities between his disappearance in 1883 and his re-emergence as “Richard Marsh” in 1888, though he may well have written anonymously before 1888. While Marsh appears to have wished to keep his real identity a secret, his cynical, streetwise and decidedly up-to-date genre fiction stands in stark contrast to Heldmann’s religiously-inspired juvenile fiction. This radical change of outlook has led some critics to speculate that he may have been involved in a financial or sexual disgrace of some kind (Dalby, “Richard Marsh”, 81).

Until his early death from heart disease in 1915, “Richard Marsh” produced popular novels and short stories in the genres of horror, crime and romance at the average rate of three volumes per year. So prolific was he that he never found a home with a single publisher but instead published his fiction through at least sixteen different publishing houses in Britain. His consistent popularity suggests that his work tapped a significant current of popular opinion, and like other contemporary popular novels, his extensive literary output readily lends itself to cultural and social readings which are important exactly because of the author’s popularity. A thoroughly professional writer and journalist, Marsh appears to have been quick to identify the topical issues of his day, using them to earn his living. Through his work, twenty-first-century readers can have access to many of the key issues of the turn of the nineteenth century, especially various forms of social deviance, including the New Woman, the “undesirable” foreign “alien”, the criminal, the anarchist and the London outcast. These were, of course, topical questions in late-Victorian popular fiction, and were also addressed by Marsh’s better known contemporaries in the fields of the fantastic (Bram Stoker, Marie Corelli and George Du Maurier), crime fiction (Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur Morrison), New Woman writing (Grant Allen, Sarah Grand) and slum fiction (Arthur Morrison, George Gissing). However, while the work of these authors is at least in print, and much of it firmly established in the academic world, Marsh’s fiction is practically out of print and remains outside the late-Victorian canon of popular fiction.

At the turn of the century, however, Marsh was very popular. He began publishing novels again only in 1893, and by 1897, when *The Beetle* appeared, had produced work in his stock genres of the supernatural, crime and romance. As Bernard Heldmann, he had already

shown considerable business acumen and an ability to tailor his fiction to the wishes of his readers, the socially aspiring lower-middle classes and higher-class artisans; as Marsh, his popular success was intimately related to his ability to cater for this readership, now rapidly expanding after the introduction of compulsory education by the Education Acts of the 1870s. The newly literate lower-middle classes gathered in the cities, where the employment market was creating unprecedented opportunities for clerks and office boys with basic literacy and numeracy. In the process, they created a growing market for reading material, especially cheap fiction and light journalism (Altick 83-4). From the 1880s, the publishing industry began to respond to the challenge of catering for these newly-literate consumers. In practice, this meant the introduction of cheaper and lighter reading material, including popular journalism such as Alfred Harmsworth's *Daily Mail* and *Answers*, fiction magazines such as George Newnes's *Strand Magazine*, and cheaper novels in a variety of new genres, ranging from the detective story to the imperial romance, from science fiction to occult horror.

Marsh was very aware of these developments in the publishing industry, and wrote short fiction for most of the popular fiction magazines of the turn of the century, including the *Strand*, the *Grand*, the *Windsor*, the *Idler*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Blackwood's* and *Gentleman's Magazine*. However, contrary to existing accounts of his publishing history, Marsh also serialised novels in magazines. *The Beetle*, his most popular novel, first appeared as a serial in *Answers*, Alfred Harmsworth's penny weekly miscellany which had since 1888 reached a readership of half a million (Altick 396). Essentially marketed as a family paper, *Answers* was, according to its editor, read "everywhere":

As home journals [the issues] go into the homes, and they enter the houses, of every grade of society. It is always a gratifying thought that no harm can come from the reading of any of our publications, and that by encouraging the taste for pure literature we are rendering a service to the times in which we live. ("Small Beginnings")

Such claims for a family audience seem strangely amiss considering the sensational subject matter of *The Beetle*.

The serialisation of *The Beetle* began in *Answers* on 13 March, 1897 under the title *The Peril of Paul Lessingham: The Story of a Haunted Man*. The novel appeared over fifteen weeks, with substantial instalments averaging three pages but occasionally extending to as many as six; highly effective cliff-hanger endings guaranteed reader bonding. If, as it claimed, the magazine did indeed "pay £1 1s. (one Guinea) per column for original articles" ("WHY LITERARY PEOPLE LIKE 'ANSWERS'"), Marsh would have earned well over a hundred guineas for the serial. The editor's investment in the novel showed in his strong encouragement for readers to follow the serial, extolled in the page margins as "one of the finest stories he ha[d] ever read" (13 March 1897, 319) and "a novel of entrancing interest" (20 March 1897, 341). Plot summaries were frequently given for the benefit of new readers, who were also advised that back numbers would be available through newsagents. Despite the supposed family readership of *Answers*, these summaries emphasised the frightening, occult and titillating aspects of this "strange drama of modern life" (20 March 1897, 339), which introduced readers to "a vision of a creeping horror, a kind of gigantic BEETLE" (27 March 1897, 357). In the weekly instalments, readers were treated to a breathless adventure through the streets of a Gothic, largely nocturnal London,

an imperial metropolis about to be engulfed by occult forces. Lurid details of crime, sexual corruption, rape, human sacrifice, New Women, crossdressing, foreign others, hidden pasts and dangerous outcast elements mingled freely with the mundane advice, banal jokes and reader correspondence which filled the rest of the paper.

By serialising his novel in *Answers*, Marsh was aiming at a large, uneducated audience, the lower end of his literary marketplace. When the novel was published in volume form in late September or early October 1897 by the religious publishing house of Skeffington, it was arguably aimed at an audience of a slightly higher social standing: the price of 6s., though standard for one-volume novels in this period, would have made the novel too expensive for the average reader of *Answers*. Significantly, its title, too, had changed from the clumsy *The Peril of Paul Lessingham: The Story of a Haunted Man* to the much more effective *The Beetle: A Mystery*. The new title could be seen as an indication of a new target audience or an attempt to secure higher sales, but it also emphasises the importance of the supernatural element within the story. This message was reinforced by the cover design of the first edition: across a blood-red background scampers a striking black beetle, tailored to attract buyers at railway bookstalls, where purchasing decisions could be rushed and easily swayed by attractive cover art (figure 1). Interestingly, the artwork on Marsh's horror fiction, including *The Beetle*, appears to have been particularly attractive compared to many other similarly successful popular novels of the time, including the rather plainer covers of *Dracula*, *Trilby* and *The Sorrows of Satan*. Significantly, given Marsh's earlier career as a provider of boys' fiction, the cover design of *The Beetle* rather resembled those meant for the booming juvenile market, and could thus be seen as a form of cross-over fiction appealing to youths and adults alike. In recent years, it is this cover art that has made Marsh particularly attractive to book collectors.

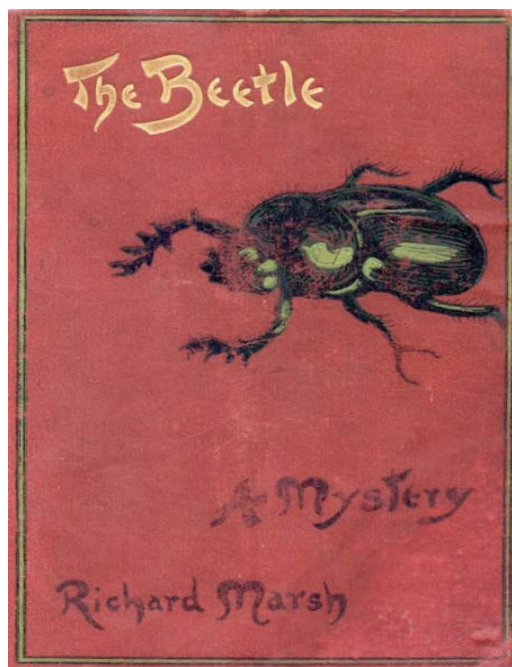


Figure 1: The cover of the eighth edition of *The Beetle* (London: Skeffington, 1901), identical to the first edition of 1897 (author's private collection).

The attractiveness of the first edition was further enhanced by the inclusion of four greyscale illustrations by John Williamson, illuminating occult, criminal and romantic developments in the novel and thus appealing to different reader interests (figures 2-5).



Figure 2: John Williamson's frontispiece to *The Beetle*: the tramp and the mesmerist (author's private collection).



Figure 3: John Williamson's second illustration to *The Beetle*: outcast London and fashionable London meet (author's private collection).



Figure 4: John Williamson's third illustration: the romantic element against the Westminster backdrop (author's private collection).



Figure 5: John Williamson's fourth illustration: the detective element (author's private collection).

The Beetle was Marsh's eighth volume-form novel under this pseudonym and belongs to his major phase of stories of the supernatural and crime. It proved his most successful piece of writing in every respect, and he tried in vain to recapture its success throughout his later career. However, for the rest of his writing career, Marsh would always be remembered as the author of *The Beetle*; the novel's initial serialisation under another title was never mentioned. *The Beetle* cannot compete with the forty or more editions that some of Marie Corelli's novels, for example, reached at the same time, but it did achieve immediate high sales. The first volume-form edition was an instant sell-out, with three more impressions following in October, November and December 1897 (Dalby, "Richard Marsh" 82). The novel continued to sell steadily well into the twentieth century, with the fifteenth impression out in 1913, the twentieth in 1917 and the twenty-fourth in 1927 (Wolfreys 11), thirty years after it was first published. By the end of the 1920s, the novel had also been translated into several European languages, filmed by Alexander Butler, with a screenplay by Helen Blizzard, and dramatised on the London stage at the Strand Theatre (Dalby, "Richard Marsh" 87).

To appreciate the success of *The Beetle*, it is useful to compare the novel with Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, another Gothic horror novel issued in 1897, and dealing with largely similar issues. Existing accounts of Marsh's publication record generally assume that Marsh was imitating Stoker, but *The Beetle* in its serial format in fact precedes *Dracula*, which was published in June 1897 as the *Answers* serial was drawing to its close. The similarities between the two novels are, however, striking, and were recognised by contemporary critics, some of whom appeared to prefer *The Beetle*: "The weird horror of this Being grows upon the reader," wrote the critic of the *Glasgow Herald*, "It is difficult, if not impossible, to lay down this book when once begun. Mr Bram Stoker's effort of the imagination was not easy to beat, but Mr Marsh has, so to speak, out-Heroded Herod". The *Academy* agreed: "*Dracula*, by Mr Bram Stoker, was creepy, but Mr Marsh goes one, oh! many more than one better" ("Opinions of the Press"). Skeffington's advertisements of *The Beetle* were eager to emphasise the similarities between *Dracula* and *The Beetle*, suggesting that the publishers were hoping to benefit from a vogue for occult horror fiction by placing *The Beetle* within this context. Perhaps surprisingly to the modern reader, however, *The Beetle* achieved substantially higher sales than Stoker's vampire classic: in 1913, when the fifteenth impression of *The Beetle* was issued, *Dracula* was only in its tenth (Dalby, "Richard Marsh", 82).

Marsh was a journalist as well as a popular novelist, and the sustained volume and popularity of his literary output indicate that he was able to tap into the tastes of the turn-of-the-century mass market, often freely borrowing from other writers. *The Beetle*, perhaps more than any other of his writings, reflects its time. The novel is a fantastic concoction of Gothic horror, romantic melodrama, detective fiction and occult mesmerism, and certainly benefited from the recent successes of Arthur Conan Doyle, Marie Corelli, George Du Maurier and Robert Louis Stevenson. Told through several narrators in the manner of sensation fiction, it relates the tale of a strange revenge on a rising politician harbouring a hidden past, the Paul Lessingham of the title of the serial. In his youth, the adventurous

Lessingham had been kidnapped in Egypt and subjected to the sexual advances of a priestess of Isis in a temple where he had to witness pagan orgies and human sacrifices, the main protagonists of which appear to have been young Englishwomen. Finally he manages to strangle his captor, who, however, turns into a giant beetle before his very eyes. This “very objectionable scarabaeus”, as the *Daily Mail* termed it (“The Beetle”), years later follows him to London and provides the reader with what the *Saturday Review* described as “a new thing in ‘creeps’ in the way of an old man with a woman’s body, a chinless and hairless face, and a knack of turning, when convenient, into a monstrous beetle, and walking up his acquaintances with gluey feet that stick at every step” (“The Beetle”). Once in London, the archaic creature proceeds to terrorise Lessingham, his fiancée Marjorie Lindon, her friend Sydney Atherton and a hapless tramp, Robert Holt, not only by metamorphosing into a monstrous beetle in moments of clearly erotic agitation, but also by sexually assaulting men as well as women, coveting their white skin, feeding off them in some strange vampiric way and generally subverting social order through the exercise of its remarkable mesmeric powers. Finally, this avatar of occult barbarism is let down by modern technology as the train she is travelling on crashes, possibly killing her.

The Beetle is set in *fin-de-siècle* London, a giant city which at the turn of the century was the site of rapid social change and, as a result, many anxieties over the shifting boundaries of race, gender and class. Some of these topical questions surface in the novel, where they are articulated in the language of popular fiction and eventually seemingly contained by the narrative. The British protagonists of the novel, all somehow figures representative of modernity, have to face, outwit and destroy the barbaric beetle-figure, in whom anxieties over race, gender, degeneration and crime are fused. Paul Lessingham, a reformist politician campaigning in favour of social causes, is indicative of the political changes following the extension of the franchise throughout the nineteenth century, and yet suffers from attacks of hysteria. His fiancée Marjorie Lindon, a potential New Woman figure, advocates female suffrage and education, and openly defies her father; in the course of the novel, she is deprived of her femininity as her hair is cut short and her dainty costume discarded in favour of the rags of a male tramp. Sidney Atherton, the gentleman scientist, represents the forces of modern technology and knowledge, and yet fails to read his own mind and wallows in self-doubt. Robert Holt, the impoverished clerk figure, reminds the reader of the emergence of the lower-middle classes at the turn of the century, but also hints at the problems of poverty and unemployment. Finally, Augustus Champnell, the aristocratic detective introduced at the end of the novel to defeat the beetle-creature and the chaos she brings about, represents Marsh’s attempt to produce detective fiction in the style of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, which similarly appealed to lower-middle-class audiences.

In particular, however, the confusion over shifting social boundaries is focused upon the body and dwelling of the beetle-creature itself. Marsh’s change of title between the serialisation and the volume-form edition of the novel acknowledges the importance of the monster at the heart of the novel. The creature inhabits a suburban district entering which feels like “leaving civilisation behind” (7), and her den is also squalid: “an uncomfortable odour greeted our nostrils, which was suggestive of some evil-smelling animal... There was not a table in the place, – no chair or couch, nothing to sit down upon

except the bed” (228-9, 237). The creature itself seems hardly human, yet possesses an uncanny mesmeric power that quite unmans the male narrators:

There was not a hair upon his face or head, but, to make up for it, the skin, which was a saffron yellow, was an amazing mass of wrinkles. The cranium, and, indeed, the whole skull, was so small as to be disagreeably suggestive of something animal. The nose, on the other hand, was abnormally large; so extravagant were its dimensions, and so peculiar its shape, it resembled the beak of some bird of prey.... The mouth, with its blubber lips, came immediately underneath the nose, and chin, to all intents and purposes, there was none. This deformity... gave the face the appearance of something not human, - that, and the eyes. For so marked a feature of the man were his eyes, that, ere long, it seemed to me that he was nothing but eyes.... They were long, and they looked out of narrow windows, and they seemed to be lighted by some internal radiance, for they shone out like lamps in a lighthouse tower... They held me enchained, helpless, spell-bound. (18-19)

The combination of degeneracy, racial stereotyping and animal characteristics in the passage is disturbing. The beetle-creature clearly reflects contemporary thinking on the physiognomy of criminals, confirming her both as a murderer with a beak-like nose and as a sexual offender with Negroid blubber lips. Like the hapless narrator Robert Holt, contemporary readers, too, would have been alarmed at the spectacle the creature presents. Indeed, even the creature’s gender is uncertain, as her body shifts and changes:

Some astonishing alteration had taken place... about the face there was something which was essentially feminine; so feminine, indeed, that I wondered if I could by any possibility have blundered, and mistaken a woman for a man; some ghoulish example of her sex, who had so yielded to her instincts as to have become nothing but a ghastly reminiscence of womanhood... after all, I told myself that it was impossible that I could have been such a simpleton as to have been mistaken on such a question as gender. (28)

In fact, the narrator is proven wrong as Marsh later proceeds to strip the creature of its clothing to titillate the reader with the revelation of “not a man, but a woman, and, judging from the brief glimpse which I had of her body, by no means old or ill-shaped either” (139). Finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, the beetle exerts an uncanny hypnotic influence on the English characters with whom she comes into contact: lower-middle-class clerks become burglars, retiring young ladies don male costumes in public and are subjected to implied sexual acts on trains and in hotel rooms, eminent politicians are reduced to unmanned sex toys, and well-trained butlers forget their manners. The creature’s challenge to social order is contagious, suggesting the possibility of social change on a revolutionary scale.

The characterisation of the beetle-woman clearly reflects the social debates of the turn of the century. In London, a monster city of six million people, a third of the population lived on or beneath the poverty line in conditions which were characterised as squalid and insalubrious. In current sociological discourse, the people inhabiting the slums were described in terminology reminiscent of animals or savages, their lives led in crime and immorality. In the 1890s, an analogy was commonly drawn between Darkest Africa

and Darkest London. "As there is a Darkest Africa is there not also a Darkest England?", enquired General Booth of the Salvation Army:

Civilisation, which can breed its own barbarians, does it not also breed its own pygmies? ...What a satire it is upon our Christianity and our civilisation, that the existence of these colonies of heathens and savages in the heart of our capital should attract so little attention! (11, 16)

The Beetle links urban crime and poverty with the fear of racial degeneration, literally placing the North African Other in the heart of London. By evoking memories of colonial trouble in Egypt, the novel also hints at the threat of class war in London.

However, the beetle-creature is not only a representative of racial degeneration, paganism, squalor and disregard of law and order but also of deviant sexuality. *Fin-de-siècle* London was a site of shifting gender boundaries, and at the turn of the century witnessed the arrival in public consciousness of two threatening presences, the New Woman and the homosexual. In their rejection of reproductive sexuality, both were often portrayed as serious threats to the British race, and the uncertainty over the beetle-creature's gender and sexual preferences in the novel reflects these anxieties. Whatever the creature's sex, it is certainly sexually predatory towards both men and women, and thus the novel develops a theme of same-sex desire. However, the representation of the beetle-woman also reads very much like a contemporary condemnation of the New Woman as an advocate of free love. In *The Beetle*, the creature, at times in masculine guise, subjects Robert Holt and Paul Lessingham to her unwanted advances which they cannot resist, but also influences Marjorie, a retiring maiden with feminist sympathies, to abandon the traditional role she is beginning to resent for a radical alternative involving short hair and male costume.

In *The Beetle*, the shifting, changing body of the beetle-creature acts as a site where all these issues can be externalised, discussed in terms of monstrosity, and destroyed. This is the case with many other turn-of-the-century popular novels, most notably *Dracula*. It is, however, important to realise that these social anxieties were such a frequent topic of popular fiction not only because of the fears they generated at the time but also because they made for entertaining reading. No reader would have been bored by Marsh's novel, which dashes on breathlessly from event to event, outrage to outrage. The popularity of the *The Beetle* was due to Marsh's skill in stirring his readers' fears but also his ability to titillate their fantasies. Contemporary reviews testify to this: "The pursuit of the kidnapped Marjorie [who is being sexually tortured all along] is *really exciting*," opined the critic of the *Daily Chronicle*, "and the Beetle is *as horrid as one could wish*" (my emphases). The *Daily Graphic* seems to agree:

It is a book to be read, not, maybe, when alone, or just before going to bed, because it is the kind of book which you put down only for the purpose of turning up the gas and making sure that no person or thing is standing behind your chair – and it is a book which no one will put down until finished except for the reason above described" ("Opinions of the Press").

Late-Victorian Gothic shockers address social anxieties in a distorted way, but the reading experience itself is one of pleasurable horror. Readers could fantasise about the sadistic

sexuality of the novel; female readers, in particular, may also have seen the characters of the beetle and Marjorie as socially liberating, though both are brought back to line by the end of the novel.

The Beetle needs to be read as a novel essentially of its time, typical of the fears and fantasies of the *fin de siècle*. It can be located within a body of popular fiction dealing with similar themes, articulated by writers such as George Du Maurier, Bram Stoker, Marie Corelli, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, and undoubtedly numerous other, now-forgotten authors such as Guy Boothby, Robert Barr, William Le Queux and Fergus Hume. However, the novel continued to sell well into the twentieth century. During the First World War, *The Beetle* was issued in Newnes's Trench Library at the very low price of 7d.; indeed, it could be seen as highly relevant reading matter in times of war when the invading foreign Other was vilified. By the 1960s, however, while *Dracula* was being reinterpreted for new audiences by Hammer, *The Beetle* was becoming an anachronism: the horrendously ugly beetle-creature could not be sexy or sympathetic in the same way as the vampire, and the novel began to fall out of print. Hugh and Graham Greene included it in their 1984 collection of four popular Victorian novels, *Victorian Villainies*, with a note that they had "long felt that *The Beetle* [was] a book which should not be out of print" (9). Ten years later, the University of Luton reissued the novel in its Pocket Classics series, with a brief introduction by William Baker. Finally, the first annotated, scholarly edition of *The Beetle* was published in 2004 by the Canadian Broadview Press, edited with an extensive introduction, notes and a contexts section by Julian Wolfreys.

This gradual comeback reflects a shift in scholarly interests in the last twenty-five years. The initial strength of *The Beetle*, that it was so closely tied to its day, became its weakness in the post-war world and led to its falling out of print. With the advent of "Cultural Studies" and more positive responses towards popular culture, that initial strength has again become an advantage. With more and more attention being paid to popular culture as an indication of mainstream perceptions and values, Marsh's shocker has become highly relevant again.

Endnotes:

¹ On Marsh, see Aickman, Baker, Richard Dalby's three accounts, and Taylor. On *The Beetle*, see Garnett, Halberstam, Hurley, Luckhurst, Vuohelainen and Wolfreys.

² However, Marsh later republished three Heldmann stories, "In the Lion's Jaws", "A Memorable Night" and "A Fortune at a Find", which had originally appeared in the *Union Jack*, in his short story collection *The Drama of the Telephone* (Digby, Long & Co.: London, 1911). This securely identifies Heldmann and Marsh as the same person.

³ Joseph Heldmann's crooked business habits proved an embarrassment to his in-laws and provoked a good deal of xenophobic comment in *The Times*, at least partly related to his probable Jewish origins. At the time of Marsh's birth, Heldmann was embroiled in bitter bankruptcy proceedings against his wife's relatives – his employers and business partners – whom he had been swindling. ("In Re Joseph Heldmann" 1857-8). Baker suggests that anti-Semitism may have been one reason for Bernard Heldmann to opt for the penname "Richard Marsh" (viii).

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