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## Cross-Cultural Othering Through Metamorphosis

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Kristi M. Wilson

In her 1995 book, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Judith Halberstam calls for an historic reading of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and twentieth-century horror cinema in terms of their shared participation in the process of "Othering." In both genres, monsters function as technological subjects which contain and reveal (*monstrare*) social anxieties about race, class, sexuality and gender. In this paper I will be comparing the narrative structures of Clive Barker's 1987 film, *Hellraiser* and Apuleius's second-century story, *The Golden Ass*, to provide evidence for pre-nineteenth-century "othering machines" and to argue against Halberstam's assertion that the monsters of modernity are unique in their proximity to humans (which I assume refers to their presence in or around the domestic sphere) and unique in their tendency to indicate the collapsible nature of boundaries.

According to Halberstam, Gothic fiction gave nineteenth-century readers the excitement of reading about perverse physical activity while situating the Other (sexually, racially, etc.) in the foreign body of the monster. Nineteenth-century authors sought answers to political questions concerning race, class and sexuality, and Gothic writing reflected an urge to discuss these themes in terms of biological separation. Similarly, horror cinema functions as a "technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known"(2). Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's essay, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" (1986), Halberstam identifies skin as one of the key signifiers of cultural and racial differences which functions similarly in Gothic fiction and contemporary horror films. Skin, a motif which will serve as one of the important links between my discussions of *The Golden Ass* and *Hellraiser*, enforces a stereotype in the genres of Gothic fiction and horror cinema which simultaneously stabilizes the Other within a discourse of racist representation and acknowledges their power as a threat to notions of racial purity.

The spectacle of skin in horror films (especially those of the slasher variety) often complicates representations of sex and race, taking the spectator beyond the realm of what he or she might normally consider human. Gothic technologies of subjectivity then, be they literary or filmic, have the capacity to blur gender, class, race and sexual boundaries.

According to Halberstam, new categories for contemplation are created in Gothic fiction which do not, especially in the case of horror cinema, lend themselves to strict, traditional, psychoanalytic interpretation in terms of a male/female binary. What is needed instead, is a "queer" reading of these genres in which improperly configured bodies represent the limit of the human and project this limit in terms of social mores. Halberstam uses Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection located within a familiar but foreign body to bridge the gap between the genres of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and horror cinema. In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva characterizes "the abject" as an indescribable Other that blurs one's system of identity, clarity and order. Abolishing boundaries and rules, this nondescript entity torments the subject with the threat of a return to a chaotic and fluid existence. In both genres, according to Halberstam, the monster functions as an economic othering machine reflecting a plurality of social fears and anxieties and linking the realm of the psychological to the process of the political.

Clive Barker's 1987 film, *Hellraiser*, is just one of many horror films obsessed with skin, class, race, sexuality and monstrosity. But Barker's film is inextricably linked to a literary tradition which made its appearance much earlier than Gothic fiction. I would like to compare *Hellraiser* with Apuleius's second-century narrative about metamorphosis, *The Golden Ass*, not to challenge Halberstam's notions about the Gothic literary connection to contemporary horror cinema, but to add another layer to her eclectic reading of horror films and perhaps to trace at least some of the functions of the monstrous narrative to early metamorphic literary subjectivities. *The Golden Ass* and *Hellraiser* bear striking similarities to one another with respect to their narrative structures and ideological concerns. Both tend to present discourses around cultural differences and societal boundaries in terms of a metamorphic transformation, the central event shared by both narratives. I hope to explore some of the shared ideological concerns of both narratives

illuminated in the figure of the metamorphic Other, such as the threat of the foreign to the familiar, the relationship between master and slave, the relationship between pleasure and pain, skin as a narrative signifier, and curiosity and the consequences of its fulfillment.

Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, also known as *Metamorphoses*, is a narrative about the misadventures of a young, "cultured," Greek businessman traveling in foreign lands. On his trip, our hero, Lucius, is overcome by his own curiosity about the local customs of sorcery. While experimenting with a magic potion, he accidentally turns himself into an ass. Having witnessed a witch rub magic ointment over her body and turn into a bird, Lucius, eager to do the same and satisfy his wild desire to fly around and spy on people unobserved, unknowingly applies the wrong ointment. Instead of attaining what he imagined would be a new sense of freedom, he winds up imprisoned by his curiosity in the body of an ass. As a beast of burden he is forced to endure a slave-like existence and suffers continual violent beatings at the hands of his masters. Eventually, Lucius is metamorphosed back into his human form. But this occurs only after he has been purified of his base curiosity and initiated into the mysteries of the cult of the goddess Isis, known for her chaste powers in the areas of motherhood, marital devotion and healing. Isis was also famous for her talent for magic spells and charms, hence her significance later in the novel as Lucius's savior.

While many have argued that Apuleius's *Golden Ass* may be read as a rite of passage story or conversion tale, I tend to agree with William Fitzgerald's assessment of the text as valuable in terms of its inclination to attest to the anxieties and fantasies created by the presence of institutionalized slavery in the ancient imagination. In his unpublished paper, "The Metamorphosis of Slavery: Apuleius's *Golden Ass*," Fitzgerald argues that Lucius's fantastical metamorphosis into a domesticated beast of burden is an allusion to slavery. He cites frequent associations between the beast (especially the ass) and the slave in ancient texts, and the popularity of deracination and loss of status as themes in the Greek novel. Apuleius's narrative, like nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and twentieth-century horror films, provides its audience with titillating and often perverse entertainment centered around unspoken social anxieties (in this case slavery) while locating the

origin of these disturbing fantasies in the foreign body of the metamorphosed (monstrous) creature. Unlike most monsters, however, Lucius has the conscience of a human. As in the case of Gothic fiction and horror films, skin, as we shall see later, occupies a special place in *The Golden Ass*, signifying cultural difference and representing the threat of the Other. Lucius's status as a foreigner in the narrative also plays a crucial role in establishing his asinine form as Other. Along with the fact that his metamorphosis occurs in foreign lands, Lucius's early admission of his foreign social status establishes a distance between the free members of a Roman audience and the actions of Lucius as narrator or ass. In Book I, Lucius begins his exotic tale with a disclaimer which reflects upon the difficulties of translating the accounts of his metamorphic journey (itself an adaptation from an earlier Greek story) into Latin:

So at the outset I beg your indulgence for my mistakes which I make as a novice in the foreign language in use at the Roman bar. This switch of languages in fact accords with the technique of composition which I have adopted, much as a circus-rider leaps from one horse to another, for the romance on which I am embarking is adapted from the Greek. Give it your attention, dear reader, and it will delight you. (I.1)

As in *The Golden Ass*, the concept of foreignness as a signifier of otherness plays an important role in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*, itself a story about a man whose reckless curiosity about the unknown gets him into trouble. In the opening scene of the movie, Frank, a first-world thrill seeker, is in what appears to be a "third-world" country on the verge of purchasing a magic box, rumored to reveal all of the pleasurable secrets of the universe. The impoverished state of affairs in the foreign country is characterized in a racist and stereotypical manner by the dirty fingernails of the merchant and the sound of buzzing flies in the background, suggesting right away that the narrative is concerned with issues of xenophobia and economic power.

Frank, like Lucius, is something of a hybrid creature compared to the other characters in the film even before his metamorphosis. As well-off travelers and adventurers, Frank and Lucius have the ability to move freely from one realm to another. Though he holds a considerable amount of economic power in the foreign country,

a close-up shot of Frank's hand pushing a stack of dollar bills toward the merchant reveals that his fingernails are dirty as well. Frank is thus unafraid to delve into the third-world and get his hands dirty if it gets him what he wants.

Like Lucius, Frank's insatiable curiosity about the mysteries of those who are different from himself is the main reason that he ventures out of his native country and into an unknown realm. The result of Frank's experiences with those who are different from himself is the most disturbing element of *Hellraiser* and the most distinct marker of the film's ideological point of departure. Early in the film, we learn from alternating shots of Frank's room back home (seen from his brother Larry's terrified point of view) that he is fascinated with what Larry considers "abnormal" behavior. Explicit pornographic photos of Frank with a woman of color, a sexual statuette and various strange religious icons left behind in the house soon to be occupied by Larry and his new wife Julia, reveal that Frank, in Larry's view, is a sexual and social deviant. Upon discovering the paraphernalia, Larry reassures Julia that he, unlike his brother, is normal when he says, disgusted by the discovery of Frank's belongings, "this means nothing to me." Thus, the relationship between Frank and his brother Larry, characterized early on as one of conflicting interests, unveils a discourse in the film which pits inquisitiveness against rationality and resonates strongly with what Fitzgerald sees as the theme of Lucius's "slavish" curiosity found throughout *The Golden Ass*. Fitzgerald cites Plutarch's *De Curiositate*, in which the relation between a master and a slave to be controlled serves as a metaphor for the relation between reason and the senses. Apuleius himself distinguished between healthy and debased forms of curiosity in his Apology.

It is obvious from the beginning of *Hellraiser* that Larry and Julia are trapped in a passionless marriage. A move from Brooklyn to the family house in the country is the final attempt to salvage what is left of their relationship. A series of flashbacks inform us that unbeknownst to Larry, Frank and Julia became lovers on the eve of their wedding and that Julia is still in love with Frank. Their affair took the form of a highly erotic master-servant relationship in which Frank was in charge. Here the film comments on an incompatibility between the realm of pure sexuality and the institution of marriage as we see Frank and Julia make love on top of

her wedding gown. We are shown that after buying the small wooden puzzle-box, Frank returned to his country, enacted a quick homemade ritual in the attic of the house and unlocked the box. In his haste, Frank failed to realize that the ultimate pleasure he expected to discover can only be found through pain. Upon opening the box, Frank, like Lucius, becomes literally enslaved by his desires when, by curiosity, he sets free a group of creatures called the "sadomites." Although they rip apart his flesh to the point of total physical disintegration, Frank is not dead. He is temporarily metamorphosed into a primordial slime which lurks below the floorboards in the attic and can be restored to human form only with the blood of sacrificial victims. When Julia discovers Frank in the attic, midway between slime and human form, her feelings for him are rekindled and she reclaims her position as his love-slave, ready to kill for him.

Frank's relationship with and power over Julia calls to mind Apuleius's ancient discourse concerning gender and the slave's sexual function apparent in Lucius's pre-metamorphosis relationship with the slave-girl, Photis. Photis serves a combination of purposes in the household of Lucius's host, Milo. As Milo's only servant, she is in charge of his financial affairs, screening visitors at the front door, keeping up the house, cooking and serving the meals, and, of course, sexually pleasing his guests which include Lucius. As a guest in Milo's home, Lucius enjoys many wild sexual encounters with Photis in which the boundaries between the slave and the freeborn are blurred as the two individuals are described alternately as love-slaves of each other. Boundaries with respect to the slave's sexual function in terms of gender are complicated in the encounters between Lucius and Photis. In one lovemaking scene, Lucius states that "when I was wearied with her feminine generosity, Photis offered me a boy's (*puerile*) pleasure" (3.20). The allusion to Photis giving Lucius a boy's pleasure (*puerile*) and his sexual liaison in his asinine form with a woman (toward the end of the story) suggest a threatening polymorphous quality with respect to Lucius's sexuality somewhat akin to Frank's homoerotic desire reflected in his relationship with the mythic but clearly male sadomites in *Hellraiser*.

In her book, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Sarah Pomeroy states that the slave's sexual function was, like the institution of slavery as a whole, ambiguous

and complex in the ancient world. Despite various attempts by ancient authors to define the slave, the state of slavery in Roman antiquity was one of fluidity in which people were continually being enslaved and manumitted. According to Pomeroy, "a woman might gain more prestige by marrying a slave than a free person, and...slaves and ex-slaves might be more highly educated and enjoy greater economic security than the freeborn poor" (191). The female slave was always available for sexual purposes with the master of the house, his guests, or other slaves with his permission. Though Lucius's status as a free gentleman officially establishes him as master in the relationship, Photis's sexual assertiveness in these encounters suggests a more ambiguous power relation which foreshadows the literal inversion of the master/slave hierarchy in which Photis will later appear to be Lucius the Ass's only hope for salvation. Having been her metaphoric love-slave, Lucius is literally enslaved to Photis for survival. It is important to keep in mind that Apuleius's depiction of these wild sexual encounters stands in opposition to the virtuous discipline required by the cult of Isis, the real key to Lucius's passage back to his human form. Prior to his eventual initiation into the cult, Lucius is chastised by the priest of Isis for participating in what he considers base and improper behavior: "...on the slippery path of headlong youth you plunged into slavish pleasures and reaped the perverse reward of your ill-starred curiosity" (11.15). Similarly, Julia's affair with Frank is depicted as sordid and set against the backdrop of her boring but sanctioned marriage. In a flashback, Julia remembers that, after making love to her for the first time, Frank was frustrated and unfulfilled by the experience: "It's not enough," he said to her. Later in the film, after his metamorphosis and partial reconstruction, Frank tells her about the magic box which opened "doors to the pleasures of heaven or hell." The sadomites, he explains, taught him pleasure and pain as one ecstasy: "pleasure and pain indivisible."

The sadomites, mystic creatures who live hidden inside the puzzle-box until they are called forth, resemble the physical embodiment of pain. With human-like bodies severely mutilated and pierced, they are both the victims and inflictors of torture. With a touch of the magic box, these leather-clad creatures transform any ordinary space into a world of pleasure and pain characterized by the sudden appearance of their tools: medieval torture wheels,



chains and hooks. When asked who they are, the leader of the sadomites replies: "explorers in the further regions of experience; demons to some, angels to others." Though Frank spends most of his time in the film trying to escape from being caught and tortured by the sadomites, he shows no signs of regret about his sadomasochistic history with them and harbors a certain amount of delight with respect to the erotic memories of his torturous experiences: "some things have to be endured and that's what makes the pleasure so sweet." Similarly, Lucius, even after a hard day's labor as a beast of burden harnessed to the mill, values nothing more than the fact that his eyes are unblindfolded. The joy brought on by the prospects of satisfying his curiosity about the people around him often outweighs his physical needs for nourishment and rest (9.22).

Though she is willing to take certain sexual risks with Frank, Julia is visibly repulsed by what she sees when she gazes into the puzzle box and catches a glimpse of Frank's past activities with the sadomites. She reinforces her commitment to do whatever it takes to keep Frank safely by her side, away from their strange sexual powers. Here Julia can be seen as aligned ideologically with the priest of Isis in *The Golden Ass* as the symbol of salvation through "correct" behavior (in this case, heterosexuality). Julia, in her symbolic role as a savior, bears a similarity to Photis as well, as both women attempt to bring the men who were previously their masters back to human form after they are left helpless by their metamorphoses. Julia and Photis experience reversals of position and status in their households when they find that they are the only ones who know about their lovers' transformations and the only ones who can help them return to the human realm. In the meantime, Frank and Lucius lurk undetected as voyeurs in their respective domestic spheres. The reversals of fortune of Julia and Photis, and Frank and Lucius, reflect similar anxieties in both narratives about shifting power relations. According to Fitzgerald, the institution of Roman slavery, with its ironies and contradictions in terms of who held what type of power within the household and society, had a paradoxical and uncanny aspect akin to Halberstam's discussion of the uncanny in Gothic fiction:

In fact, Roman slavery might well be described as an institution through which human nature was metamorphosed, for although,

to the ancient mind, the slave was a different order of being than the free person, there was a constant passage between the two statuses as slaves were manumitted and the free enslaved. This paradox made a hybrid of both the free and the slave. (7)

Halberstam suggests that "identity itself is uncanny" (75). Bodies in monstrous Gothic narratives, like haunted houses, hide or enslave secret selves. Bodies function similarly in *The Golden Ass* and *Hellraiser*, as the advent of metamorphosis establishes a haunted feeling in the domestic sphere. In Book IX of *The Golden Ass*, the uncanny expression on Lucius's face frightens the baker's abusive wife, in whose house he is living, as it does not accord with that of a beast. The hybridization of his identity as an ass/slave/nobleman allows Lucius to provoke fear and anxiety in his oppressors. In the case of the baker's wife, Lucius actually does take action and exacts revenge for being continually abused by exposing her adulterous behavior:

As I passed the tub I noticed the tips of the adulterer's fingers protruding through a narrow opening in his hollow cover. With a fierce sideways thrust of my hoof I stamped on them until they were thoroughly squashed, and the unbearable pain finally forced him to raise a tearful shout. He pushed the bin off him, and cast it aside; being thus restored to the gaze of the uninitiated, he revealed the character of that infamous woman. (9.27)

In his metamorphosed state, Frank too has the ability to haunt Julia and Larry's domestic sphere. Before reemerging from the realm of the sadomites, his slimy presence throbs menacingly in an embryonic sack under the floorboards of the attic, promising one day to burst forth. Frank's metamorphosis literally takes the shape of a birth suggesting that he is somehow the deformed offspring of Larry and Julia's failing relationship which lurks enslaved in the attic of the house at all times. Once the process of metamorphosis has begun, the fluidity of Frank's identity allows him to pass through the house unnoticed. He watches Larry and Julia make love and listens in on conversations, waiting for the right moment to perform the final necessary step in his metamorphosis: the acquisition of a new skin.

Returning for a moment to Halberstam's discussion of contemporary horror cinema, we see that skin is described as a visual pun not only to signify one as other but to show horror and its

permeability on the screen. She defines the pun as "the production of difference through playful repetition" (178). Once Frank puts on the skin of another, his transformation should be complete and he should be able to cross over into the realm of the human. As we discover, however, Frank's transformation does not close the door on his hybrid existence. Having murdered his brother and put on his skin, Frank discovers to his dismay that his new hide, bursting at the seams and easily torn, is hardly sufficient to hide his oozing inner identity. Frank is not destined to escape the sadomites whose magic has the power to reach beyond and rip apart any surface including skin, and as we see in the film, brick walls and television screens.

The Latin word for skin, *corium*, synonymous with hide, strap, and leather, plays an important role in the creation of the identity of Lucius the Ass. *Corium* signifies his metamorphosis in that it marks him as a slave, indicates the means of his torture, and serves as a cover for Lucius's real identity. At one point in the story, Lucius is almost literally reduced to a *corium* when bandits threaten to skin him and sew a girl into his hide to torture her. Lucius's exchange of his skin for a hide turns him into a hybrid creature. The pun on *corium* is used in *The Golden Ass* to establish Lucius the Ass visually as Other and to illustrate comically the threatening aspects of the membrane-thin permeability of the boundary between the slave and the freeborn.

In both *Hellraiser* and *The Golden Ass*, skin is referred to in so many different ways that the texts become permeable with respect to meaning and fail, as in the case of Gothic fiction, to be rendered readable in terms of any single interpretation. Instead, the narratives present historically specific heterogeneous cultural discourses around the social functions of class, sexuality, and gender which hinge on the advent of metamorphosis. In a sense, the metamorphosed human, by the sheer force of its fluid existence, shares almost all of the nineteenth-century monster's ideological functions and may be seen as a more threatening literary and filmic device in its capacity to cross cultural boundaries and return to tell about the experience. This is not to say that Frank and Lucius return unscathed from their journeys, however. Once they have lived on the border between upper-class male and Other, neither hero can ever be completely stable in his recovered human state. Almost as soon as he becomes a mortal again, Frank is caught and

contained by the sadomites who once more reduce him to slime and remind him that the price for his type of curious pleasure is a heavy dose of pain. Lucius's return to human existence through initiation into the cult of Isis is precarious as well. In the first place, he is transformed by Isis only under the condition that he renounce the very curiosity that gave him so much pleasure, even as a slave. Secondly, the actual initiation takes three attempts and if that isn't comical enough, Apuleius adds a note of irony to the scene of Lucius's metamorphosis as the onlookers mention that he must have led an extremely pure life [clearly not the case] to be favored so by the goddess. Roman audience members would have known that Lucius's past activity had been anything but pure. Thus, if the first metamorphosis makes a hybrid of the man in these narratives, the second restores him to a human form forever insecure in its stability, reinforcing an ideology which implies that once a man has had contact with the Other he will never be "normal" again.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See also Eric White, "The Erotics of Becoming: Xenogenesis and *The Thing*," *Science-Fiction Studies* 20 (1993): 394-408.

<sup>2</sup> Professor William Fitzgerald's 1995 unpublished article, "The Metamorphoses of Slavery: Apuleius's Golden Ass," is part of a larger project he is currently working on at the University of California, San Diego.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by P. G. Walsh, *The Golden Ass* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Aristotle's *Politics* (1254b) for his theory about the body of the slave; and M.I. Finley's discussion on Demosthenes's descriptions of the slave in *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*.

<sup>5</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*. Translation by J. Arthur Hanson.

<sup>6</sup> Photis's role as the savior is eventually taken over by Isis who actually makes possible Lucius's return to his human body.

<sup>7</sup> Translation by P. G. Walsh.

<sup>8</sup> "Hunc omnipotentis hodie deae numen augustum reformavit ad homines: felix Hercule et ter beatus qui vitae scilicet praecedentis innocentia fideque meruerit tam praeclarum de caelo patrocinium, ut renatus quodam modo statim sacrorum obsequio desponderetur." (11.16)

"Today the venerable power of the almighty goddess has restored him to the ranks of men. How happy, how blessed three times over he is! Doubtless through the purity and faith of his

former life he has deserved such sovereign protection from heaven, and in consequence he has been in a manner reborn, and has at once pledged himself to the service of her cult." (Walsh)

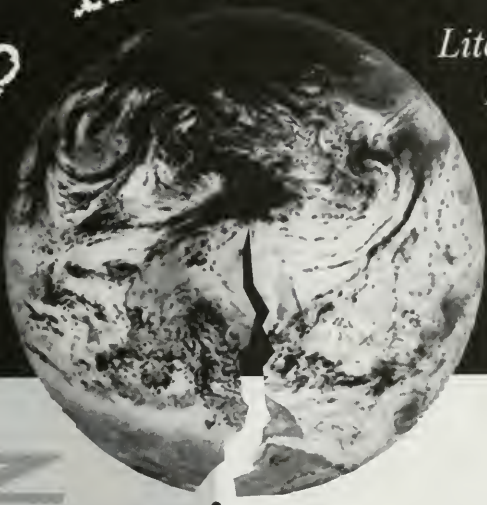
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End of the Millenium*

RISK & RESOLUTION

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# PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

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rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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