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A Monster Course and a Course of Monsters

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Although I identify myself as a budding scholar of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, adaptation studies is increasingly infiltrating my academic psyche. Even though adaptations are usually associated with film and other new media, and thus with the popular culture of our century, issues of adaptation predate film studies by several hundred years. Thinkers at the turn of the eighteenth century were concerned about the repercussions of representations and the difficulties of moving stories from one medium to another. For example, in his short essay on Henry Fielding, Sir Walter Scott endeavors to account for Fielding's huge success in writing fiction and his equally huge failure in writing drama. Scott looks for essential differences between novels and plays and creates a sort of rubric outlining the different aims of the dramatic author as opposed to the author of fiction, as well as the distinctive representational capacities of two seemingly similar genres.[1] These are familiar frustrations to contemporary theorists of literature and film, and the parallel suggests to me that adaptation could become a mode (and maybe an essential mode) for approaching literary studies across traditional boundaries of genre and period.

In September of 2008 the Center for Digital Humanities at the University of South Carolina created a new computerized and networked classroom for the specific use of the English department. During that fall semester I took a graduate course piloting the new space. Among other things, we each needed to develop several syllabi for different courses that would use the room's unique resources. I worked up one syllabus for a literature

and film course entitled Monsters, Villains and Freaks. As I created that class, I found myself working to find a balance between several central ideas with which the course itself would have to grapple: the novels and the films, of course, but also adaptation theory, film theory, Victorian culture and criticism, all of which (as I thought more) seemed to beg for an infinite number of other areas of research (new technologies and networks, gender roles then and now, economics, etc.), not to mention thinking through the ramifications of the new classroom space and what it could do and mean for all of the above-mentioned issues. Wrestling with these different components gave me cause to think about pedagogy as regards literature and film. I began thinking about the types of things that happen (or could happen) in a classroom that studies both literature and film, about why we might study the two together, and what such a course could do for the understanding of both media. And, after working through this course, I would like to suggest that studying the two media together forces and facilitates exactly what we (I) hope happens in every literature course: examining literature and film in conjunction with each other helps us think differently. By connecting ideas that do not usually come in contact, a literature and film class creates new avenues of analysis and alters how we read all sorts of texts in ways that aren't as accessible, or that aren't even possible, in a class with a single focus. I'd like to take the course I created during that semester as a case study for how a literature and film class facilitates this kind of reading and analysis.

My literature and film course, as seems usual, juggles two seemingly disparate lines of inquiry. First, this class starts from what has perhaps become a moot point in adaptation studies, but what is often still central for students: the relationship between the two media. Brian McFarlane tells us that the large majority of films that have won best picture since the 1920s have been adaptations.[2] Despite the obvious popularity of film adaptations, however, literature and film have a notoriously stormy relationship. Transition from one medium to the other is unexpectedly difficult and controversial. Though in high demand, film versions of novels often fail to please novel readers (as much as we novel readers seem to hanker after films). One of the most common misconceptions about film adaptation that film theorists fight, and probably the misconception that bothers them the most, is the insistence that successful adaptations must be "faithful" to the book. Many, many theorists have argued persuasively against such analyses. In fact, the problems surrounding fidelity in adaptation is one of the main topics in several books and essays on film adaptation, from George Bluestone's *Novels into Film*, to Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film*, to Robert Stam's introduction to his book *Literature through Film: Realism, Magic, and the Art of Adaptation*. In this course, we begin with this critical pet peeve. Our analyses of texts develop through questions

like these: If "fidelity" is a problematic term as regards the relationship between literature and film (which is still, of course, up for debate), are there ways in which studying the two together can be more useful? What is (are) the relationship(s) between these two media? If fidelity between the media cannot define the relationship between literature and film, then what can? Questioning fidelity in this way helps this class to see that the relationship between literature and film is much more complex and much more interesting than mere questions of whether or not the movie follows the book. This isn't to say that we abandon fidelity—I'm not sure that's possible; we are looking at adaptations, after all—but I hope that loosening our hold on fidelity helps the class to allow the connections between the two media to yield other sorts of questions and lines of inquiry.

Second, this class focuses on a particular, and peculiar, figure in nineteenth-century literature: that of the villain, the freak, and the monster. Nineteenth-century novels are seriously fruitful in this regard. They positively crawl with the weird—from the more obvious candidates like the monsters of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, to Dickensian freaks like Miss Havisham or Uriah Heep, to less obvious characters like Jane Austen's odd heroine, Fanny Price. This focus brings with it its own questions about the ways that Victorians represent their monsters, what roles these freaks play in nineteenth-century novels, and what those representations and roles might mean to a variety of audiences. Combining these issues with issues of adaptation obliges the class to make connections that they wouldn't be making (as easily, at any rate) in a class only about Victorian monsters: say, connections between *Frankenstein* and our twenty-first century economy or between Jane Austen and the 1990s. (What is the deal with the rash of Jane Austen film adaptations during that decade?)

Thus, bringing these two major themes into contact requires the class to research several different bodies of thought and knowledge: adaptation theory and criticism, the rhetoric of film and of novels, contemporary scholarship on the Victorian period, as well as reviews and essays on particular film adaptations. It asks students (and instructors) to dive into unfamiliar intellectual territory and to see what happens to ideas and texts. This scholarly experimentation is perhaps best illustrated in the major assignment of this course: a creative adaptation. Each student (or perhaps group of students) needs to produce a screenplay of a scene from a novel that deals with the grotesque, complete with storyboards and a list of shots. Creating their own adaptation makes students think about what sorts of things they want to convey through their characters and scenes and what meanings they highlight and why. It forces them, in other words, to interpret the text while also opening the range of interpretation. I would like to briefly note that this assignment isn't unique

for adaptation courses. It is heavily influenced by courses I've taken in literature and film, and I don't offer the idea as original. I outline it here, rather, as a representative and specific example of what teaching literature and film together can do more generally. Creating a course like this is something of a monstrous act itself—a crazy scientific experiment that links the appendages of different canons, technologies, and media to create an entirely new entity. It's a Franken-Course. And, in fact, monstrousness ends up being an apt metaphor for what this type of course does.

Take, for example, Dr. Frankenstein's monster. Combining questions about the relationship between literature and film with questions about representations in Romantic and Victorian novels takes the ideas of the course both upward and outward. So, we're not only looking at how novels and films relate to each other, or only how Victorians represent the grotesque, but rather we're looking at very different and diverse connections between politics, cultures, technologies, and ideas in several historical moments. Looking at literature and film together unhinges both from primary questions of authenticity. By studying both together, interpretations of novels and movies are not limited by how they relate to some sort of "primary" text, whether historical or otherwise. In other words, films are no longer just about how they relate to the novel, and the novels are not only about what freaks meant for Victorian culture. Although a sum of human parts, Frankenstein's monster breaks the bounds of human strength and size. In the same way, questions about literature combined with questions about adaptation make up more than the sum of their parts. Thus, for example, looking at the texts surrounding Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* does more than just reveal interpretations about the heroine, Fanny Price, but also suggests interpretations of the several cultures that created those interpretations. The 1983 BBC version of the film portrays a meek and sensitive Fanny who sticks to her principles.[3] Patricia Rozema's more recent *Mansfield Park* film creates a bolder, sassier Fanny Price who is supposedly a conglomeration of the character and her creator, Jane Austen.[4] Nina Auerbach, in her critical essay about *Mansfield Park* the novel, compares Fanny to Dr. Frankenstein's monster.[5] These different interpretations of Fanny can lead the class to analyze the stakes of these different interpretations, to think about the audiences of these different adaptations and why they might connect or not to such a Fanny Price.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* also offers an analogy for how a literature and film course works. That novel is laced with the fear of contagion. Dracula threatens to infect the entire population of London with his curse of the undead, as Dr. Van Helsing and his crew race to destroy the source of this incurable disease. Bringing adaptation into contact with literature is similarly vampyric. The ideas and components of adaptation studies leak into

ideas of representation in Victorian literature and vice versa. We begin to see the ideas of each analogously through the other. In other words, and for example, the nineteenth-century history and culture of Stoker's *Dracula* helps reveal the historical and cultural roots of its film adaptations, and the cultural inflections of the films help reveal the cultural situation of the novel. In the same way that several adaptations of Fanny Price reveal just as much about the audience of the adaptations as it does about the character Fanny Price, looking at adaptations of *Dracula* highlights the stakes (pardon the pun) of those adaptations. Examining several together allows the class to think about what sorts of things our culture has to say about the Victorian period and what the Victorian period has to say for our culture. Thus, looking at films and novels together reveals that neither is the urtext of the other, but rather that all are representations and cultural interpretations.

To say this in a different way, teaching literature and film together frees the course's texts somewhat from the constraints of history and culture. This means that we are able to sidestep questions of origin and authenticity, which has several consequences. For one, instead of merely, or mainly, thinking about the ways that novels do or do not look like the film; and instead of merely, or mainly, looking at how representations of villains in Victorian novels reflect and form Victorian culture, students can begin to engage with texts on a much deeper level. They can think about how texts deal with technology, what Mary Shelley has to do with the Internet, or what Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992) says about contemporary American culture and the ways that it reflects backward onto our understandings of Stoker's novel.[6] The double focus facilitates thinking about texts as touch points for myriad different contexts and myriad different ideas. In other words, to borrow another analogy, this time from the beginning of this chapter, the ideas and information in a literature and film class work like a network—the combination of the two ideologies destabilizes hierarchies and forms instead a web of connected ideas. Instead of always needing to connect the film or the novel to its own historical context, we can connect it, as I have shown, to multiple other contexts. This isn't to say that we do away with history and culture in such a class, or that these are no longer important approaches to texts. Rather, this approach makes it so that those ideas are no longer the primary means of interpretation. They become nodes in a web of texts and interpretations. This freeing of texts also diffuses the question of fidelity. It isn't even central enough to be a moot point—rather, it too becomes one node among many in the web of literature and film. Finally, and perhaps obviously, this kind of course allows students to ask new kinds of questions of texts and to make new answers. For example, as I mention above, students can ask what twenty-first century films have to do with nineteenth-century cultures and can

make connections between ideas and texts from disparate areas of inquiry. In this way, by connecting texts that have not been connected before, students must create new interpretations, and even new ways of interpretation (like the creative screenplay). Thus, class discussion could potentially and profitably go just about anywhere within the large confines of literary studies, with its surrounding texts and theories, and film studies, with its surrounding texts and theories.

To see how this monstrous dynamic might play out in a classroom, I'd like to turn to another, different Victorian monster: Mr. Rochester's mad wife from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. First I'd like to refer to a clip from the most recent Masterpiece Theatre film version: the first scene in which we actually see Bertha Mason (Claudia Coulter).[7] It begins with Mr. Rochester (Toby Stephens), Jane (Ruth Wilson), and Adele (Cosima Littlewood) sitting together outside. Adele begs Mr. Rochester for another story about the Caribbean, saying that Sophie, her maid, taught her a song from there. Adele sings this song until Mr. Rochester finally agrees to tell her a story. Mr. Rochester takes a deep breath and the film cuts to the Caribbean scene he begins to describe. His narration stays general. He tells Adele (and Jane) that they

> must imagine a restaurant. No, let's say a meeting place. Where many people come . . . at night to socialize. You must imagine brilliant reds, pinks, the most exotic perfumed flowers, delightful, passionate music. The women, of course, are very beautiful. They wear bright silks, ambers, sapphires, emeralds. They are very seductive, but they are also mysterious, tantalizing, dangerous.[8]

Although Rochester's description is hypothetical, the scene depicted is specific. A younger Mr. Rochester sits in the crowded meeting place, and we see him note Bertha Mason as she slips sinuously through the crowd, eyeing Mr. Rochester seductively. Adele stops singing as the story starts, but her song continues through instrumentals in the Caribbean scene, identifying itself with Bertha. Bertha leaves the meeting place with one last glance at Mr. Rochester just as the narrating Rochester says "dangerous." The scene immediately cuts back to Mr. Rochester in the present and the song continues in a woman's voice. Rochester looks up at the north tower where Bertha is kept and then over at Jane. He snaps back into the present to find Adele singing. He freaks out at her and then calms down, saying apologetically, "The Caribbean is not as beautiful as it seems, Adele. I came back to escape."[9] He looks over at Jane and opens his mouth to say more, but then turns back to his book. The scene then pans out and we're looking down on Mr. Rochester, Jane, and Adele through a window inside the house. A woman's voice (Bertha's, we presume) sings the last refrain of Adele's song.

There are several things members of a class could notice and analyze here. I might begin, for example, by talking about how the film portrays Bertha. As a class, we could analyze color. From the time Jane first arrives at Thornfield Hall she periodically sees a red scarf hanging out of the attic window. Red shows up in the Caribbean scene several times. Also, Jane herself begins to wear a red scarf. Perhaps this indicates a connection between Jane and Bertha, which is exciting because of the seeming incongruity of their characters. Jane is sane, English, moral, and restrained. Bertha is crazy, Creole, immoral, and passionate. However, because of this connection, we might question some of these characteristics. Maybe Bertha isn't totally a monster. And maybe Jane is more passionate than she seems at first.

We might consider the language Rochester uses to describe Bertha and her setting—"seductive, passionate, sensual"[10]—and try to figure out what sort of connotation these words are meant to have. At first we might think that all things connected to Bertha are meant to be evil. However, the film itself, as mentioned above, ties Jane to Bertha, which complicates the good/evil dichotomy. We might notice how the sensuality of Bertha is accentuated by the other shots in the scene—the way the camera pans slowly by exotic flowers and the way that several of the frames cut off parts of human figures and capture others. Music is also central to this scene and to the theme of sensuality. The song that Adele sings and that continues on into the Caribbean setting is haunting and exotic. It recurs in conjunction with Bertha as well as Adele's mother. However, this musical theme is also complicated—it cannot only be related to seductresses when it is sung by innocent Adele. We might discuss how several of these elements tend to focus on and illustrate Bertha's race and background. Finally, we might focus on how the setup of the voice-over affects our perception of Bertha. By contrasting Rochester's general narration (which we hear) with the specific events on the screen (which we see), the film fabricates Mr. Rochester's point of view. This is Mr. Rochester's idea of Bertha, highlighting the fact that we never hear from Bertha herself. And this lists only some of the lines of inquiry we could pursue in conjunction with this scene, as portrayed solely by this particular film.

We could analyze entirely different things from the corresponding scene in the novel. We first see Bertha when she comes to Jane in the middle of the night and tears Jane's wedding veil in half. Jane later describes this strange woman to Mr. Rochester. I quote at length to imitate what we would look at as a class:

> "It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell."

"Did you see her face?"

"Not at first, But presently she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass . . . oh, sir! I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blacked inflation of the lineaments. . . . This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eye-brows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?"

"You may."

"Of the foul German Spectre—the Vampyre."[11]

When we meet Bertha Mason again, after the disastrous wedding, Jane describes her as animal-like with the same purple face and bloated features.[12] Separately from the film we might talk about the Gothic conventions at work here—Jane comparing Bertha to a vampire, for instance, or Bertha's shroudlike clothing. Students might be made to wonder why Brontë would make Bertha reflect a Gothic convention. We might root some of our analysis in historical or cultural contexts. For example, we could compare this scene to Charlotte Brontë's juvenilia and her fascination with Gothic tales from popular magazines. Jane also compares Bertha to an animal and a savage, which could lead the class to examine the imperial issues possibly at work here. On that topic, we might note that the text does not mention Bertha's race or beauty until later, and when it does, we find that Bertha is from the West Indies. This might allow us to bring up transatlanticism and what might happen if we think of this book in relation to a larger, global setting.

The film and the book, separate from each other, both yield fruit for analysis. However, combining what happens in the film and what the film can do and does do with this character, with the representation of Bertha in the book, opens both texts up to new questions. It encourages students to question (as Jacques Derrida[13] and others have suggested) and mix up the contexts of both texts. Things from the book or from the Victorian period in general might take on different meanings when thought about in relation to the film, or vice versa. Most obviously, we might explore the ways these texts deal with Bertha's background. We might wonder why the film focuses on and eroticizes that aspect of her. We could compare the film version of the West Indies with how it was perceived in the novel, or even in the nineteenth century through a variety of different texts from that period on slavery, trade, and empire. We might then hypothesize what this might say about Victorian England, or twenty-first-century America. For example, we could analyze the adaptation choices made by screenwriter Sandy Welch in her film version of *Jane Eyre* (which we quoted above) and

how her particular version of the West Indies, and the use to which she puts the West Indies, speaks to a twenty-first-century audience; and how her portrayal of the West Indies is as influenced by her audience as by the nineteenth-century context of the novel. We could also take the discussion in less obvious directions as well. Perhaps we would examine gender roles and how they're portrayed in these characters in the film, the novel, or in either historical context. We might look at Gothic elements in the film and how the meanings of Gothic conventions change in different contexts, for instance, the difference between Brontë's vampires and vampires today.

Finally, we could (and will) add another layer to the discussion by constructing our own screenplay of the scenes with Bertha. In fact, for a project as an undergraduate I actually wrote a screenplay of *Jane Eyre* and revisited it while thinking through this course. I wanted to see what I did with Bertha. I was, sadly, incredibly uncreative and didn't even give her a decent description. When she visits Jane, my meager portrayal makes her look more like a vampire in the tradition of Bram Stoker—pale with really red lips—than the purple monster Brontë's text describes. However, even my uninspired adaptation of Bertha yields analysis: Why might I focus less on Bertha? What does that do for my version of *Jane Eyre*? If my screenplay is less interested in Bertha, then in what is it interested? And how does that compare with what the novel is doing and with what other film adaptations try to do? As we create our own Bertha as a class, we would consider what kind of Bertha we will make and why, and what that kind of Bertha means for her many other contexts.

In this way, bringing together ideas and texts from different centuries, different media, and different historical and cultural moments allows for unusual and exciting connections. Merging literature and film into one course creates a space that spills or oozes or bursts beyond the boundaries of traditional literary studies. And there, at least temporarily, we can more easily imagine the possibility of thinking about texts in new ways. We, like Dr. Frankenstein, can experiment with ideas and then see if they can survive outside of the literature and film laboratory. Whether those ideas thrive, however, or run off into the arctic after killing lots of people, reading literature and film together will change, hopefully forever, the way we read either one.

NOTES

1. Sir Walter Scott, "Henry Fielding" in *On Novelists and Fiction*, ed. Ioan M. Williams (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 46–56.

2. Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 8.

3. *Mansfield Park* [1983], dir. David Giles, perf. Nicholas Farrell, Sylvestra Le Touzel, The Jane Austen Collection (DVD B000244FFU: Warner Home Video/ BBC, 2004).

4. *Mansfield Park* [1999], dir. Patricia Rozema, perf. Frances O'Connor, Jonny Lee Miller, James Purefoy (DVD B000065K5G: Miramax Home Entertainment, 2005).

5. Nina Auerbach, "Jane Austen's Dangerous Charm: Feeling as One Ought about Fanny Price," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983), 208–23.

6. *Bram Stoker's Dracula* [1992], dir. Francis Ford Coppola, perf. Winona Ryder, Gary Oldman, Anthony Hopkins (DVD B000TGJ805: Sony Pictures, 2007).

7. *Jane Eyre* [2006], dir. Susanna White, perf. Toby Stephens, Ruth Wilson, Pam Ferris (DVD B000LPQ6DE: WGBH, 2007)

8. *Jane Eyre* [2006].

9. *Jane Eyre* [2006].

10. *Jane Eyre* [2006].

11. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 317.

12. Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 328.

13. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), 278–94.