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The Punishment of Marjorie Lindon in *The Beetle*

Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) is an all but forgotten Victorian monster novel, doomed to be outshined by the likes of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Though it initially outsold Bram Stoker's vampire classic, its popularity has substantially faded. Despite this, it offers an interesting view into the fears of Victorian society in the light of Britain's colonial power and growing social movements. One of the varied fears it addresses is the growing movement for female independence in a society that heavily restricted women's rights. The character of Marjorie Lindon becomes a catch-all for the many characteristics of this so-called "New Woman." In an effort to criticize this movement Marsh uses Marjorie Lindon's kidnapping and humiliating disguise as a punishment for her refusal to conform to societal expectations and obey men.

Marjorie strongly exhibits feminist qualities both in the views of others and her own narration. Throughout the story there is clear emphasis on her independence, perceptiveness, and bravery. These attributes are shown mostly through her relationships with the men in the novel. When dealing with men such as Sydney Atherton or her father, Marjorie appears calm and collected when they are angry and melodramatic. Whereas in many narratives of the time, women are portrayed as emotional and men are considered rational, Marjorie flips this perspective. When Sydney attempts to propose to Marjorie she sees right through his

declarations of love stating, “I believe that you yourself have only discovered the state of your own mind within the last half-hour” (Marsh 63). In a single sentence, she exposes the erratic nature of Sydney’s proposal as he thinks, “I had no notion if her words were uttered at random, but they came so near the truth they held me breathless. It was a fact that only during the last few minutes had I really realised how things were with me” (Marsh 63). This scene exemplifies both her intelligence and her rationality. The contrast between her cool refusal and Sydney’s emotional outburst separates her from the traditional image of a sensitive and sentimental woman often shown in literature of the same period. Instead, she remains unaffected while allowing the man, Sydney, makes a fool of himself.

Along with her perceptiveness, Marjorie constantly asserts her independence through her bold, defiant actions. Most of Marjorie's independence is tied to her fiance, Paul Lessingham, as by pursuing him, she goes directly against her father’s wishes. She refuses to allow anyone to control her marriage despite it still being common for marriages to be decided by one’s family. With Paul, she instead finds a relationship based on love and shared morals. This is most prominent in the beginning of her narration as Paul proposes right after they have both spoken at a meeting of the Working Women’s Club—an organization which goes against her father’s politics. Speaking at such an event may sound small, but it is a huge act for a young woman of her time: “A formal resolution had been been proposed, and I seconded it,—in perhaps a couple of hundred words; but that would have been quite enough for papa to have regarded me as an Abandoned Wretch… Papa regards a speechifying woman as a thing of horror” (Marsh 175). Her relationship with Paul therefore becomes an act of defiance. In her narration, she depicts her father as short-tempered and controlling in comparison to her own cool composure. Mr Lindon

becomes a laughable figure as he makes exaggerated demands, ordering her to never even look at Paul again. Marjorie asserts her independence first by mocking his speech: “when papa wishes to be impressive he repeats his own words three or four times over, I don’t know if he imagines that they are improved by repetition; if he does, he is wrong” (Marsh 189). Her mocking tone defies the expectation that a young woman should listen to her father without complaint. Rather than show him respect, she purposely portrays him as an old fool, showing that she has no regard for his commands. Marjorie therefore breaks from tradition as she refuses to have her life be ruled by a man.

Marjorie’s bold feminism may first suggest that Marsh is in support of growing independence for women. However, as the story progresses, Marjorie finds herself to be the target of the Beetle every time she has done something defiant. Her first encounter with the Beetle comes directly after two important scenes: her fight with her father and secretly taking a strange man into her father’s house without telling him. After these significant events, the Beetle attacks her in her bedroom and in doing so, humiliates her. Marjorie has steadily built up her bravery and rationality, but when she is attacked all of that is stripped away. She is angry with herself for being afraid saying, “If you don’t want to be self-branded as a contemptible idiot, Marjorie Lindon, you will call up your courage and these foolish fears will fly” (Marsh 195). As her fear instead grows, it is therefore implied that she really must be “a contemptible idiot” and exposes a weakness in her normally rational perspective—she is terrified of beetles. Such a fear of bugs is often considered irrational and traditionally tied to women. If Marjorie has this fear, then she is not quite as rational as she insists. Rather than supporting feminist views, this scene begins to show Marsh’s true opposition to them.

Her degradation and punishment culminates when she is kidnapped by the Beetle and forced to dress in a man's old rags. The lead up shows Marjorie having regained her confidence and attempting to reassert her independence by accompanying Sydney and the strange man, Robert Holt, to the Beetle's house. Sydney tries to dissuade her by warning her of possible danger. However, Marjorie once again shows her defiant nature sarcastically saying, "I will undertake to do my utmost to guard your spotless reputation; I should be sorry that anyone should hold you responsible for anything I either said or did" (Marsh 209). In an attempt to stand up for herself, Marjorie unknowingly claims all responsibility for her eventual kidnapping and torture. The suggestion that she only has her own willful nature to blame is built up by Sydney's ominous final warning: "Understand that, when the time for regret comes—as it will come!—you are not to blame me for having done what I advised you not to do… Your blood will be on your own head" (Marsh 209).

When Marjorie is finally kidnapped by the Beetle, the degradation she is subjected to serves as punishment for her defiant feminist personality. The Beetle humiliates her by forcing her to remove all her clothing in exchange for a man's tattered rags. Even more, she has her hair violently chopped off which is reminiscent of Sydney's warning. When the men (Sydney, Paul, and the detective Augustus Champnell) find the hair, Augustus describes, "It had been cut off at the roots,—so close to the head in one place that the scalp itself had been cut, so that the hair was clotted with blood" (Marsh 267). By disguising her this way, the Beetle is symbolically stripping Marjorie of her femininity. Marjorie's behavior throughout the novel has been progressive and therefore she did not fit into the traditional role of a woman. She treated men as at best equals and otherwise—in the case of her father—fools. Forcing to her to dress as a man equates to

saying that if she insists upon being equal with men and disrespecting her father, then she is not worthy of womanhood and femininity.

As such the entire kidnapping becomes Marjorie's punishment for pursuing Paul against her father's and Sydney's commands. Similar to how she is first attacked after fighting with her father, she is kidnapped after continuing to disobey him by going out on a quest to aid Paul. Before she goes, Marjorie tells Sydney that she must support Paul, saying "I propose to show you that although I am not yet Paul's wife, I can make his interests my own as completely as though I were" (Marsh 208). She essentially follows Paul to her doom, a fate which—as the narrative suggests—would have been avoided if she only listened to her father.

After the ordeal has ended and Marjorie is safely recovered by Paul, Sydney, and Augustus, she remains permanently scarred. Augustus explains that it took her years to recover including "three years under medical supervision as a lunatic" (Marsh 335). Marjorie has been so traumatized that she has blocked out the incident completely. This allows everyone to disregard her experience: "With the return of reason the affair seems to have passed from her memory as wholly as if it had never been, which, although she may not know it, is not the least cause she has for thankfulness" (Marsh 335). The dismissal of her kidnapping suggests that she has learned her lesson and should somehow be thankful that she has been traumatized to the point of amnesia. There is also significance in her eventual marriage to Paul. Once she has become scarred in a way that only Paul can understand (due to his own torture at the hands of the Beetle) she is no longer pursued by Sydney. He marries his own admirer, Dora Grayling, who he had previously shown no interest in, after Marjorie has been rendered undesirable by trauma.

Marjorie Lindon begins her story as a perceptive, independent young woman who knows exactly what she wants. She demands respect and follows her own morals in the face of those who try to rule her. Rather than these qualities helping her, they lead her to being kidnapped and nearly killed by a mysterious creature seeking revenge. As a result of the cruel treatment of Marjorie, Marsh's novel becomes, among other things, a criticism of any woman who dares to break free from the degradation of society and a threat of what may happen if she tries. (1657 words)