

## Gender as Construction: Monsters and Others

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Whether cartoonish, terrifying or mesmeric, the monstrous has inhabited our world and psyche since the beginnings of humanity. We have loved and hated them, from classical mythologies in the bodies of the Hydra and the Kraken to B-grade offerings such as ‘The Blob’ [dir. Yeaworth, 1958; Russell, 1988] and through to 21<sup>st</sup> century representation of the ‘Pale Man’ in ‘Pan’s Labyrinth’ [dir. del Toro; 2006] and ‘The Babadook’ [dir. Kent; 2014]. In apostrophising the monster, the intention is to dissolve sexual and gender stereotyping and counteract narrowly confined gender definitions. Far from being a reductive approach, the non-human beings discussed here are representative of archetype. Their forms are recognisable as part of a trans-cultural monster canon, a lineage that has followed humans throughout history. They are ‘other’ in as much as they are related to us, and though they can be ‘physically’ separated from us, contextually they are. In this way, despite local referencing they are read as universal figures. Intended as a precis to a longer paper, an example of monster typology, specifically via Japanese mythology and contemporary anime, will be discussed in examining gender, its limitations and potential.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender, ‘The Other’, Monster

### INTRODUCTION

Often referred to as alien, abject or indecipherable, the ‘other’ sits uncomfortably in the limina of our lives. When we identify the ‘other’ it is in opposition to us, apart from us and in fact expelled by us. This, however, is mitigated by the phenomenological standpoint that posits that we are in fact or could not exist without the ‘other’ (Alweiss, 2010). Further, according to Han and Hoban (2018), as we reposition ourselves in the contemporary discourse of the globalised community, where communication is a-spatial and a-temporal in

which “[t]he transparent space of hypercommunication is a space without secrets, foreignness or mysteries” the concept of ‘the other’ as aliens disappear. Whether we believe theories of the other as present and essential to our condition of existence or that we have negated its existence via our globalised, consumer society, our interest in ‘the other’ has not waned.

First, we can look to language. Gender and sexual fluidity have changed the way we name each other and with terms such as cis-gender and a-fluid permeating our language we begin to break the boundaries of our gender and sexual identities in an attempt to flatten the dominant hierarchies. Masculinity and femininity become potentially outmoded as classifications for description as we weave through alternate ideas of who we are. Language itself is not the driver. However, of these new ways of being or self-perception. The finding of research psychologists and the efforts of individuals and community are manifesting these changes by challenging conceptions of gender through their finding and lived experience (Richards et al., 2015).

Fantasy and science fiction, it has been identified, is a filter allowing for the deconstruction and questioning of gender and sexuality: “What if there were no sexes and everybody was androgynous? What if there were three sexes rather than two? What if society was dominated by a matriarchy rather than by a patriarchy?” (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 2001). The monster is known in all cultures and exists in mimesis of natural phenomena. Humans have literally created them to be an expression of our darkness; our extremes, our fears but in some cases even our desires.

To demonise is to actively associate others with the monstrous and to relegate them to a subclass of humanity. The monster is often gendered, however, to be monster is to be ‘other’ and this has served human creativity drawing “on the imaginal and the material sexual possibilities provided by the diversity of living creatures”(Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 2001). The gender dynamic, then, is a creative platform for interrogation as psychological patterning, physiological stereotype and philosophical debate, via the exploration of the idea of the monster and other.

Gender and gender roles is a theme, inextricable, from classical Japanese mythology, manga and anime. It has found its way into popular research and critical theory in identifying, deconstructing and reconstructing societal mores. For instance, gender bending is explored by Suter (2013) in her work on shōjo manga where cross-dressing, female knights and androgynous beautiful young men are “a refuge from contemporary social norms and a platform for critical reflection”. Papp (2011) expounds that much of the research that is undertaken on manga and anime focuses on “gender dynamics, feminism in anime, or representations of certain social and cultural phenomena.”

#### NO FACE- THE MATERIAL IN THE SPIRIT WORLD

“We see... curious scenes from the life of No Face, a violent lonely god desperate to be loved” (Clements and McCarthy, 2015). The scene is one of comedy, eeriness and pathos. The story’s protagonist, Chihiro, crosses the bridge to what will soon become her home, a bath-house of the spirits. She is led by a determined character, dressed in Edo period clothes who looks ahead but whispers for Chihiro to hold her breath in order to assist the glamour of invisibility over her. She briefly betrays herself with a gasp when a frog demon surprises her but is again rescued by the boy who en-spells the frog to cause amnesia. This bridge is where she first sights a mysterious, translucent figure, seemingly seven-foot tall – hovering above the ground – in a black robe with a striking white mask. In this place of the dead and transformation, the figure will become an important part of Chihiro’s quest.

In discussing *Spirited Away* and *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* [dir. Miyazaki, 2001], Napier (2006), characterises No Face as a “disturbing figure”, a symbol of grotesquery and excess. The loneliness and emptiness experienced by the monster/god are a reflection the Postmodern experience for which the answer is conspicuous consumption. According to various fan sites, this particular reading of the god and monster follows the explanation of Miyazaki, in which No Face is a representation of the libido and that the bath-house is a brothel and the film an exploration of child prostitution and contemporary consumerism.

These darker undertones have appalled many fans, however given that many fairy tales hold a moral or a dark heart reflecting more adult concerns, this should hardly be surprising. The subconscious play on light and dark is aptly reflected in the world of the spirit, and where the actions and personas are complex and not easy to divine or judge, as circumstance has lead most of the inhabitants of the bath-house to exist in a marginal state. No Face is perhaps the most marginalised – a lost soul in a world of spirits – and rather than a sexualised reading of his interest in Chihiro/Sen, it may be her acknowledgment of him and her invitation to enter the bath-house that draws him to her (MWH1980, 2012). For this reason, an alternate view of the character of No Face is also possible.

If we take the theory suggested by a fan site that No Face was perhaps also once human, his relationship to Chihiro/Sen, takes on further, extended meaning. This alternative posits that No Face is actually a human who, unlike Chihiro/Sen, did not have guidance in the spirit world, and has therefore succumbed to the pitfalls of alienation and otherness in a world of other (r/FanTheories, 2013). No Face parallels Chihiro/Sen, as an outsider and unwanted inhabitant of the bath-house and in this the character acts as a cypher of growth. He also exhibits childish and child-like behaviour, again, as an extreme reflection of Chihiro. Looked at in this way, his obsession with Chihiro can be understood in the context of Freudian psychology as alter-ego or even as the Id (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973).

Validity of my experience of the other requires my acceptance that the other has an experience of his own with which I can empathise but which remains inaccessible to me. I can see your pain. Your pain may indeed remind me of a pain I had in the past, but my empathy will never lead me to confuse your pain with mine ... I can draw analogies between my perspective and the perspective of the alter ego, however this analogy, as Husserl puts it, is never complete, I can never take over another person's perspective (Alweiss, 2010).

This relational standpoint, in turn, highlights the importance of identity in the film. Chihiro as pre-pubescent, quickly takes on adult responsibilities as she is introduced to the other world. Satoshi (2008) promotes the view that the confusion and transitional angst that the character

goes through, is allied to not wanting to let go of the past and embrace change. Her coming of age in the realm of the spirits sees her move from passivity, as a young girl dependent on her parents, to an agent of change, influencing and acting on those around her and that it “isn’t obvious that she’s a girl; she has no obvious signs of class; what marks her more is her way of thinking and not her physical appearance, going against the grain... (Marta’s reading of *Spirited Away*)” (Rifa-Valls, 2011). This reversal is in contrast to women idealising “the man who represented and gave them vicarious access to transcendence” (Benjamin, 1986). Without her guidance and example, No Face, would as yet be a latent and lonely figure, stranded on the bridge.

Over the course of the film *No Face* is gendered as a ‘he’. Despite this gendering, he is presented as physically neuter, and other than a pivotal episode of violence and domination in the bath-house – itself questionable as characteristic masculine behaviour as he was in fact ‘possessed’ by a greedy, frog spirit – he mostly exhibits gender neutral traits. Though physically imposing, *No Face* is mostly silent and meek, merely gesturing or making a quiet ‘ah-ah’ sound in response to questions or in trying to gain attention from Chihiro. The character’s striking white mask and long trailing robes hide what lies beneath, until exposed as having neither male nor female genitalia, again in the scene in which he has ‘embodied’ the frog by swallowing him.

The mask has been presented as suggestive of ritual, performance practices such as Noh theatre; Ando Masashi writes that,

"No-face is basically expressionless, but I ended up adding just a tiny bit of expression. It might have been better to make his mask more Noh-like without any expression at all, conveying his expressions through lighting. No-Face swallows the bathhouse workers, and I thought it might have been interesting if he acquired their personalities and ability to reason. This way he might become more human and appealing." (Yu, 109) (Reider, 2005)

Noh is traditional and ritualistic and male performers play both male and female roles. His humanity as invoked above is also characterised by androgyny and his ability to take on the traits of others, much like the actors in Noh. Ritual and tradition is also reflected in ‘Spirited Away’ in referencing Shinto “a religion that believes in the interconnected and creative life force of humans, animals and nature. This “generative, immanent force” (kami) exists within everything ... to experience the presence of any one of these aspects of nature, an individual is required to have a pure and cheerful heart/mind (kokoro)” (Harrington, 2013).

No Face takes on a series of traits throughout the film and it is with his relationship with Chihiro, that the god/monster gains purpose and acceptance. He is redeemed by Chihiro, who embodies the state of kokoro, and is given purpose in following in his association with her. Being ‘employed’ by Zeniba the good witch to remain as an assistant, further asserts a reversal of roles, as it is Chihiro who will return to complete her quest at the bath house while No Face stays behind and fashions a magical token. This token is communally created by spinning, knitting and weaving – traditional female crafts – and the bestowing of this token, brings to mind the courtly favours bestowed on knights in medieval times to ward off danger.

## CONCLUSION

In this preliminary paper one particular example is the jump off point for examining how fantasy film and the representation of ‘other’ in the form of monster, can stretch the idea of binary gender. ‘Spirited Away’ and the broader anime canon is a rich resource for psychological, critical and philosophical discovery, with ‘gender bending’ creatures, complex heroes that counter the status quo and narrative arcs that defy stagnant realities.

Contested gender and the ‘other’ has a long history and most fictional accounts of the iconoclasy of stereotypes and narrowly bound traits have some basis in the real. In a proposed future work, a series of monsters will become totemic representation of fluid gender association and the basis for interrogating in depth, the significance of limitations and freedoms that exploring ‘otherness’ can provide.

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