

Monstrous Distractions from That which should Shock and Appall Us:

In Response to Marchal's *Appalling Bodies*

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Abstract

Throughout *Appalling Bodies* Marchal seeks, without over-identifying present-day identity categories with ancient ones, to ask how we might reread Paul's letters in conversation with those whose sexual identities and gender presentations continue to be understood as threatening today. How can sex- and gender-expansive people in today's world – actively as readers and implicitly as cultural touchpoints – influence how readers interpret those in Paul's world? In this response article I reflect on Marchal's key themes of monstrosity, consent, and testimonial injustice, holding that, like Paul, present-day Christian commentators on sex and sexuality often seek to deflect attention away from sexual abuse and toxic underexamined norms and onto those unjustly figured as deviant or transgressive.

Keywords: Trans people, sexual abuse, testimonial injustice, monstrosity, consent

Introduction

Marchal's *Appalling Bodies* is one of the most original recent contributions to scholarship on the confluences of the New Testament, first-century Middle Eastern/West Asian studies, and critical theory. Marchal is always excellent at a punning title or subtitle, and he does not disappoint here: "queer figures" is a collective noun that also functions as a description. There *are* queer characters, queer individuals here, to be sure. But in addition, queer (queerness, the act of queering) figures: that is, it signifies. ("That figures," we might say resignedly or wryly, meaning "that new information makes sense, given what I already understood of the situation").

When and how does queer *figure*, for Marchal? Both *before* and *after* Paul. "After," of course, also carries multiple significance: it hints at both a temporal relationship and a relationship which betrays loyalties. Those who write *after* a particular figure often emulate their style, their convictions or both: or else they are able to take for granted the foundations already laid for their own ideas. Those scholars – especially New Testament scholars – who come after Paul cannot help, then, but to be working in his shadow even if they do not pledge allegiance to him as such. Queer readings of and engagements with Paul and his work have existed for some time, among the best of them those by Eugene Rogers (on Romans – e.g. Rogers 1999, 2011), Gillian

Townsley (on the letters to the Corinthians – Townsley 2017), and of course the various contributors to Marchal’s 2019 edited volume *Bodies on the Verge: Queering Pauline Epistles*. The somewhat less explored angle thus far has been what queerness looks like *prior* to Paul – yet that is a seam Marchal mines to great effect here in *Appalling Bodies*. There are plenty of figures contemporaneous with Paul’s communities who speak to a greater diversity of accounts of sex and gender identity (if we can use such terms) than Christianity has often wanted to acknowledge hereafter. Paul himself, of course, and his erstwhile transmitters and apologists, must bear responsibility for the ways in which some of those erasures of diversity have been imposed within Christian communities until very recent times.

Marchal is not interested in just comparing obviously androgynous or otherwise excessive figures in the Pauline corpus with obviously androgynous or otherwise cognate figures today (Marchal 2020, 66). Rather, he shows that figures represented in the text can help us rethink our own constructions of gender today (not just vice versa), and not only in immediately evident ways. What is remarkable here is, for Marchal, less (as in the focus of many readings of Paul’s letters) whether queer figures are seen (in the texts or in their histories of reception) as morally or ethically *acceptable*, then or now, and more why interpreters ask these kinds of questions about moral acceptability in the first place, and what is at stake in projects of condemnations of or justifications for “atypical” sex-gender identities and behaviours as based on the New Testament.

Questions about moral acceptability function, hints Marchal, as a distraction, a diversion from what lies behind what interpreters do and do not take for granted, and what they do and do not seek to impose on their reading communities. Such diversion is insidious but potent. In this essay, in conversation with Marchal’s book, I will interrogate another form of distraction, namely the deflection of attention by Christian and other commentators from things which should actually shock and trouble people of conscience (such as sexual abuse) onto scapegoated groups, notably trans people (and especially transfeminine women).

Marchal’s Project

Throughout *Appalling Bodies* Marchal seeks, without over-identifying present-day identity categories with ancient ones, to ask how we might reread Paul’s letters in conversation with those whose sexual identities and gender presentations continue to be understood as threatening today. How can sex- and gender-expansive people in today’s world – actively as readers and implicitly as cultural touchpoints – influence how readers interpret those in Paul’s world? Marchal, who in some of his other work (e.g. Marchal 2018; Moore, Brintnall, and Marchal 2018) has sought to explicate the elastic and non-linear nature of time in queer perspective, shows here, too, that time is a palimpsest. The fact that many centuries appear to divide the *then* and the *now* is less significant than the fact that these times continue to touch and

fold each other (cf. Dinshaw 1999 and 2012, both works particularly important touchstones for Marchal across the book): or, we might say, to haunt each other (cf. Freccero 2007, MacKendrick 2018). In this way, studying Paul's context and world through the lens of phenomena such as drag and gender diversity should not be dismissed as anachronistic. Or, rather, it is *intentionally* anachronistic (Marchal 2020: 10), and serves as a reminder of the disparate and diffuse moments in which the concerns of Paul's communities, and of communities of textual interpretation now and in the intervening years, may also touch one another.

As well as having interlocutors in queer and affect studies, Marchal's book is rooted in a growing field of work in New Testament studies which shows how the New Testament must be read in decolonizing perspective with an awareness of the impacts of imperial accounts of power and hierarchy on the development of politics and social subjectivity.¹ Marchal's conversation partners range from those working in ancient history and antiquity studies to historical-critical New Testament studies to queer, affect, postcolonial/decolonial and other critical theory. The book adeptly shows how figures marginalized and scapegoated in the Pauline corpus on account of their perceived sexual and gender transgressions are also rendered objects of anxiety for other reasons, notably their perceived ethnic and cultural otherness. This comparison is highly germane given the ways in which stereotypes of sexual and racial "transgression" still frequently go hand in hand. In the north Atlantic, people of colour often find themselves painted as sexually predatory, or exoticized as particularly sexually voracious. Sexual "continence" may be out of fashion socially and politically (except, perhaps, in immediate pre-election season where there is a substantial conservative element among the electorate), but where it comes to judgements about more and less "appropriate" arenas for the expression of sexual desire, there is a racialized overlay which means people of colour are more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than victims of abuse. And for Marchal, practices of (re)interpretation are a collective task (2020, 28), which Paul's lone-wolf status (even if he is a lone wolf whose howls have been taken up and amplified by a whole lupine chorus since) has obscured. In this way, communities of interpretation can hold one another accountable for the implications and legacies of their teachings.

Thus, for Marchal, these Pauline bodies and present-day bodies meet and confront one another, thereby epitomizing what Elizabeth Freeman calls "the messiest thing about being queer: the actual meeting of bodies with other bodies and with objects" (Freeman 2010, xxi). Like Freeman, Marchal points to the possibility

¹ His conversation-partners include Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Neil Elliott, Diana Swancutt, Sheila Briggs, James N. Hoke, Stephen D. Moore, Tat-siong Benny Liew, Richard Horsley, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and others well aware of the looming presence of empire in the New Testament texts. While he does not engage them specifically, in this way Marchal's book also chimes with work by Ched Myers, Joerg Rieger, Mark G. Brett, Fernando F. Segovia, and others. David Horrell's more recent work on the racialized construction of New Testament interpretation as a discipline is also highly relevant here, particularly his typology of New Testament studies' construction of Judaism as particular, exclusivist, and legalistic, and Christianity by contrast as open, inclusive, trans-ethnic, and no respecter of past histories (Horrell 2020).

of practices of “sociability ... with the dead” (Freeman 2010, xxii). The dead are never really dead, especially not when they continue to be incited, invoked, or appealed to as authorities (as Paul himself is). But not all the dead (to say the least) get lionized in this way by New Testament readers and scholars of first-century West Asia and the Mediterranean, so Marchal hopes to redraw those links between then and now to trace a new table of kindred and affinity.

Yet, Marchal is also aware, ideological critique of the circumstances and histories through which certain texts including toxic ones have come down to interpreters today can leave readers adrift, aware of how horrifying it all is but not knowing where to go next (Marchal 2020, 152). This despair can be stultifying. That is part of the reason why a wholesale abandonment of troubling texts and readings, however tempting it might seem, may not be a good way forward (especially given that worldviews based on inequity, sometimes perpetuated by the kinds of readings of texts Marchal highlights here, still persist). Rather, he calls for a *confrontation* rather than an *erasure* of this troubling legacy, so as to “disrupt the oppressive impacts of this biblical heritage without forgetting, without slipping into a seductive, but falsely comforting amnesia” (Marchal 2020, 153). In this way, a figure like Onesimus the slave in the book of Philemon cannot be reduced to his utility or otherwise for Paul or Philemon: he may come, rather, to make his own conceptual and even normative demands on interpreters, standing alongside a host of other figures from the past calling the present to account.

Unmen and Testimonial Injustice

Building on the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Antoinette Clark Wire, Marchal explores how Paul’s writings seek to set their own agenda and establish Paul’s self-understanding of his status as an authority. Relativizing Paul’s voice and perspective among others historically makes space for this to happen in contemporary interpretation too, despite all the layers of significance that have accreted to Paul (and the New Testament more generally) in the intervening years. So Marchal tries to take the perspective of those whose authority Paul would have found questionable – that is, all those “unmen” constructed as less than fully human (where “human” implies adult ruling-class male) in the Roman imperial project. Marchal reminds us that such prime maleness is simultaneously unassailable and oddly frail:

Masculinity is (almost) entirely the exclusive purview of the “real” (read: elite, free, Roman imperial) man; it belongs naturally to him, even if he has to (paradoxically) work to achieve and maintain it. The flipside of this system requires kyriarchal masculinity to have its Others, its inferiors, including women; this system needs there to be significant differences between those at the apex and the many varieties of people below them (Marchal 2020, 41).

Unmen, including women (especially so-called “mannish” women who seem to usurp some of that frail masculinity), become the scapegoat for imperial Roman anxiety about the erosion of power all told.

It seems to me that this is a strikingly similar situation to the one faced by trans people, particularly transfeminine women, today. They are made to bear the burden of a huge weight of anxiety from a range of quarters, notably including conservative evangelical Christians (mainly men) and self-styled gender-critical radical feminists (usually cis women). But this anxiety is, I take it, actually about a range of things not directly to do with gender transition itself. The anxiety stems from the way that individuals’ autonomy seems to conflict with taken-for-granted power structures, in churches and beyond; the nature of gender as supervening on biological sex rather than being more thoroughly constructed (and thus relativizable) than that; broader questions about the licit limits of human technologies for shaping bodies; and the effects of the imposition of (disproportionately male) violence and discrimination against women and children. As in Marchal’s discussion of “mannish women,” part of the trans-suspicious anxiety about trans people today, especially transfeminine women, is that they draw attention to the arbitrary and constructed nature of qualities which patriarchal and kyriarchal structures of power have been invested in saying are irreducible. Per Marchal, building on J. Halberstam, “Masculinity is far more mobile and mutable than many assume” (Marchal 2020, 53); and “it takes a great deal of effort to pose and then maintain something as ‘natural’” (Marchal 2020, 62). By seeming to push at one kind of limit (namely how far gender identity and expression “should” supervene in particular ways on binary biological sex), trans people become a focus for those who are anxious about the erosion of limits of other kinds too. Trans people’s journeys and expressions function to challenge assumptions about what is desirable and an aspect of the common good: bodily integrity, reproductive capacity, permanence of identity, “readability” as a member of a given sex, and so on.

As Marchal notes, this leads to yet more disquiet: it means that even cis women who had previously thought themselves incontrovertibly women, or cis men who had previously thought themselves incontrovertibly men, are prompted to reconsider quite what that signifies. If we take seriously “the impossibility of anyone ever being adequately or fully male or female” (Marchal 2020, 53) then we come to realize that it is not only trans people whose identities are “in doubt,” but everyone’s. There is in fact no such thing as a simple or stable form of gender identity which maps in a single or stable way onto sex. Trans people become the focus for worry about this, when actually they are simply the ones who draw attention to what was already the case (cf. Stryker 1994). Or, in a slightly different political context, trans people are held up as harbingers of genderqueerness, expected to be the ones who show up and break down the inadequacies of a binary sex-gender system even if it is they who potentially have most to lose by visibly resisting it. Yet, shows Marchal in conversation with Susan Stryker (1994) and with Halberstam

(2011) (particularly in Marchal's chapter on the Corinthian women prophets), a quality such as masculinity already is multiple and contested. Masculinity "belongs" to all those who claim and use it, not only to those males whose maleness is uncontested: just as a widely-spoken language such as Spanish or English belongs to all who employ it, in a wide variety of contexts and situations, not only to those who have it as their sole or mother tongue.

Furthermore, of course, like the Pauline "unmen" with whom Marchal converses, trans people have also been the frequent casualties of epistemic and testimonial injustices (cf. Fricker 2007). Trans young people, in particular, are regularly depicted as being unable to really know their own minds or to consent to transition-related medical care. They are held up as hapless victims of gender ideologues pushing an agenda on them and rushing them through treatment (see e.g. Brunskell-Evans and Moore 2018, Davies-Arai 2018, Congregation for Catholic Education 2019) – even if, in reality, access to transition-related healthcare is patchy, sometimes expensive, and subject to years-long waiting times.² This was the logic behind the England and Wales High Court's findings in the landmark judicial review *Bell v. Tavistock* (Judiciary of England and Wales 2020), which concluded that young people aged 15 and under were very unlikely to be able to consent to treatment by puberty blockers since they could not appreciate the full implications of what puberty blockers might lead to, namely the use of cross-sex hormones, a full medical transition, and the likelihood of a concomitant inability to have biological children in adulthood (para 145, 151). Despite being presumed able to give consent, it was held in the same ruling that young people aged 16 and 17 would still probably require court authorization before beginning a course of puberty blockers (para 152). Significantly, the ruling was predicated not on concerns about the impacts of puberty blockers themselves, but about the likelihood that, in consenting to puberty blockers, young people were in effect consenting to a raft of other treatments whose impacts they could not understand.³ Trans adults, too, suffer epistemic and testimonial injustice (Bettcher 2009). In particular, their representation in gender-critical and trans-suspicious conservative Christian literature (e.g. Walker 2017, Lynas 2018) has frequently been as people who are self-deluded, confused, inevitably distressed, and unable or unwilling to accept the truth of how God made them: objects of sympathy, certainly, but not people whose self-testimony can be trusted.

Appalling Bodies is a salient reminder of the non-immaculate nature of the weight given to different groups' self-testimonies and self-understandings – especially when, as in the Pauline corpus (notably in Romans 11), these have to be reframed and

² GIDS (Gender Identity Development Service), hosted by the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, the only English NHS service for gender-variant under-18s, currently has a waiting time of around three years from referral to first appointment. <https://gids.nhs.uk/how-long-wait-first-appointment-gids>. GIDS is due to close in early 2023, to be replaced by two new NHS services in London and Manchester.

³ In September 2021, *Bell v. Tavistock* was overturned at the Court of Appeal. In the meantime, however, it had led to a hiatus in appropriate care for gender-variant under-18s in most of Britain.

reimagined as aspects of grafts into an existing salvation history, as well as being rendered precarious by the threat that what God has once granted, God might yet choose to withdraw or withhold. Paul must reframe and relativize identity such that it makes sense within the new story he is constructing; he therefore purports to be able to tell and interpret others' stories better than they can do themselves – something heightened, of course, by the fact that as readers we are only party to one side of a set of correspondence and have to surmise or reconstruct the missing perspectives from the hints that Paul himself betrays. We only have Paul's side of the story: we do not know what those figures whom he discusses thought about his account, or whether they would recognize themselves in Paul's characterization of them, such as it is. There are multiple figures of whom we only catch sideways glimpses: there are many others, of course, whom we cannot access at all. Paul's letters capture something of what is most important to *him* about a given figure or group: the things about which they need to be chastened or for which they deserve praise, and their capacity to (be perceived to) threaten or disrupt a set of assumptions. But that is not necessarily what these figures would have considered the most important or salient thing about *themselves*. When, as readers, we seize on a Paul-sanctioned characteristic to identify someone, we fall into the trap of reducing them to only a removed, filtered understanding.

This continues to be true of people with problematized identities today. What is most interesting or noteworthy about them to their detractors, or those who are suspicious of them, is probably not what is most interesting or noteworthy about them to themselves. In our own times, threatening to the status quo in their own particular ways are the body-identities of those that refuse even to try to “pass” as “natural” (cf. Marchal 2020, 62-63). In this way, trans women who have chosen not to have bottom surgery become particular objects of ire for gender-critical radical feminists, who suspect that in retaining their penises, such trans women are seeking also to retain certain privileges of maleness, rather than “following through” properly. Trans men attract opprobrium of another kind: those who have chosen to retain their reproductive systems, sometimes to leave open the possibility of conception and pregnancy, may be accused of being inadequately committed to masculinity; while those who do have hysterectomies are vilified for willingly and wantonly giving up their capacity to reproduce and to fulfil their vocation for motherhood. Those trans people who choose to style and present themselves in a less binary way (or to deliberately contravene certain gender conventions) are, like those cis women who do not remove their facial hair or those cis men who do not disguise it when their body fat happens to be laid down in a feminine-associated way around the breasts and hips, often figures of sympathy or disdain. J. Halberstam (2011) has taught us well of the queer art of artful failure, and what some might figure the prophetic nature of refusal to play a game by the rules of those whose moral authority as umpire and pundit one rejects.

Deflection in Questions of Monstrosity

Anxieties about trans people that stem from concerns about the erosion of reproductive capacity, like those we have already touched upon, chime with concerns in the ancient world. However, Roman stories about eunuchs, and their popularity as sexual partners among some elite women because there was no risk of becoming pregnant by them, also serve as reminders of the nature of sexual activity as being about more than procreation. In his chapter “Uncut Galatians” (Marchal 2020, 68ff), focused on intersex people and eunuchs, Marchal notes that eunuchs in the ancient world were considered not fully men because they were unable to reproduce. But, he notes, precisely one of the ambiguities of eunuchs’ bodies is how authentic they are: people castrated after puberty might appear to all intents and purposes to be like “normal” adult men: “Capitalizing on such ambiguities is also a recurrent plot point in stories of this period [the first-century Roman empire], where nonaltered males disguise themselves as eunuchs in order to get access to women they are pursuing” (Marchal 2020, 83).

This also sounds very much like what gets said about the risks of “allowing” people to self-identify in terms of their gender (as, in practice, they do in many, many everyday contexts already). Gender-critical radical feminists will say that they are afraid not of all trans women, or even of trans women per se; rather, they claim, they worry that predatory (cis) men will take advantage of the situation to infiltrate their way into women’s toilets and changing rooms, effectively “disguising” themselves as trans. “Eunuchs could be anywhere ... Eunuchs evoked anxiety precisely because of how imprecise a threat they represented”), says Marchal of the ancient world (2020, 85). Later in his discussion of eunuchs, Marchal shows how in ancient texts they signal figures ripe to be mocked and held up in disgust, even as they also remain figures of fascination and figures held to have their own power (Marchal 2020, 89) – not least because they often live and work cheek by jowl with sex elites even as they are contrasted with them. This is one reason why it is ironic that transmasculine people receive far less ire from gender-critics than transfeminine people do, despite the fact that those trans men inclined to go “stealth” are generally well able to do so and therefore likely to be able to move in masculine spaces without comment than trans women can in feminine ones.

Paul’s own status as member of the elite is also, of course, not incontrovertible. Part of Paul’s project of delineating licit and illicit modes of behaviour is, I suggest, also a form of self-justification on his part. If we take Paul at face value, then he seems self-effacing: despite his biographical rundown in Philippians 3 – circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, law-abiding, zealous – he knows he is in the kingdom thanks to grace rather than any kind of “natural” desert, and shows he is well aware of his precarious, contested status. Furthermore, in some contexts – notably Galatians 3:26-28 – Paul seems to push back at divisions of sex, ethnicity and class, or at least hierarchies rooted in them. But, as is clear from other texts, and as is not uncommon for those whose safety and security have been under threat, rather than eliminate boundaries of

righteousness all told Paul simply shifts the goalposts. Romans 1:18-32 is, for Marchal, a key example of a text where Paul scapegoats figures on sundry grounds, related not only to sexuality but to ethnicity and moral laxity, yet – as Marchal suggests – risks highlighting the paper-thin moral safety of himself and his own in-group (Marchal 2020, 170). Could it be that Paul’s belief in his having been made righteous is less secure than it seems – making him reluctant to fling open the gates to all comers? If so, I wonder if there is an element of distraction at play here. In order to deflect attention from himself and the precarity of his own situation, Paul scapegoats others (in Romans 1, as we have seen, as well as in texts like 1 Corinthians 6) whose situation is already even less certain than his own, picking out what seem like obviously egregious vices. He notes he must continue to press on towards the goal, straining forward to what lies ahead (Philippians 3: 12-13) – even he has not yet “arrived” – but himself pronounces on what is and is not acceptable in the new Christian communities. Something of this kind of deflection also happens when present-day Christian commentators spend so much time talking about the identities and practices of those they most strongly disavow – gay people, trans people and so on – that they do not stop and reflect properly on what is going on in their own identities and practices (as I will discuss further below), lest it turns out that their own situations are less secure and unassailable than they want to admit.

The sheer wealth of scholarship on Paul’s letters, as well as the letters’ habituation from inclusion within lectionaries and Bible study materials, makes it hard to engage with them as texts which are culturally other, distant, somehow beyond us. This is particularly the case for those reading in church contexts which consider themselves most directly the legacy of the early Christian congregations that Paul planted or mentored. Paul and his world seem so familiar, and the dynamics he describes so relatable (and his injunctions have in fact continued to be things on which such “New Testament” churches still consciously model themselves), that those who hear and read the texts in such settings are sometimes hard pushed to articulate the things about Paul and his context that are perplexing and inexplicable to us. Yet over-familiarity is dangerous when it means we become desensitized to things that should, in fact, shock and appal us. Indeed, it makes us more likely to allow ourselves to be deflected into being shocked and appalled by quite other things, lured to find certain people, identities, and ideas abhorrent.

Marchal is particularly interested in images of monstrosity – of those body-selves cast as deviant or excessive – and also in those of abjection. He is aware that the reclamation of categories of abjection by those so abjected *can* function as an effective form of political resistance and social claiming of anti-normative space. Yet he is also well aware that this is complex: that such moves *can*, conversely, end up looking dangerously indistinguishable from more conservative and normalizing forms of identity-policing. “Queer” itself, for example, remains a freighted and contested term precisely because many of those who organize around the term are well aware that not everyone has received the memo that it now signifies

empowerment rather than insult. The use of imagery of monstrosity with regard to the gender-diverse and sexually adventurous is particularly loaded, given that, as Anson Koch-Rein notes,

In a world where the monster is circulating as metaphoric violence against trans* people, reclaiming such a figure faces the difficulty of formulating resistance in the same metaphorical language as the transphobic attack. Moreover, as a figure of difference, the monster appears in racist, ableist, homophobic, and sexist discourses, making its use especially fraught (Koch-Rein 2014, 134-135).

The same kinds of issues arise with likening gender-diverse people to monsters as they do with likening gender-diverse people to cyborgs (see e.g. Midson 2017, 180): despite the wealth of conceptual, theoretical work done in this arena (such as Haraway 1991, Latour 1993, Graham 2002, Thweatt-Bates 2012), such associations are unpopular with many trans people and likely to be experienced as distressing. Neither monsters nor cyborgs get a good press in everyday parlance. In habitual understanding, after all, monsters and cyborgs are mired in unreality – or are assumed to be extra-human (possessing some human characteristics deficiently and others grotesquely). Thus, people who are already at risk because others interpret aspects of their lives or bodies as deviant, excessive, lacking, unreal and so on are unlikely to be comforted or liberated by being conflated with other, mythic beings *also* caricatured as other than ordinarily human.

That said, as Marchal notes (Marchal 2020, 57ff), some commentators do manage it: Susan Stryker famously characterizes trans bodies as explicitly unnatural, constructed, and consciously produced by medical science, reclaiming such terminology from trans-suspicious feminists such as Mary Daly (1978, 69-72) and Janice Raymond (1979, 178). “I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself,” says Stryker (1994, 240): it is precisely in their anomalous nature, she holds, that monsters can be figured as portents, showing up where something particularly significant and noteworthy is taking place. Glossing this account, Karen Barad adds, “Materiality in its entangled psychic and physical manifestations is always already a patchwork, a suturing of disparate parts” (Barad 2015, 393): that is, it is *all* creatures, not just the evidently monstrous ones, whose nature – even when apparently unremarkable – is constructed and subject to the machinations of social and cultural power. Donna Haraway’s picture of cyborgs is, similarly, of beings with potential to resist demarcation between binaries of various kinds: male and female, human and non-human, so-called reality and so-called artifice, self and other among them (Haraway 1991). Evidently, plenty of trans people nonetheless just plain *do not want* to be portentous or noteworthy, or to carry the responsibility of reminding others of the contested, precarious status of systems which only

function by ongoing common consent. However, reclaiming some of this work in monstrosity offers one way through the tendency of many theological accounts to weaponize trans bodies and identities precisely because they are at once figured as “unreal” and as all-too-real (with a perception of threat).

Marchal’s appeals to monstrosity should prompt readers and users of Paul to reflect on the monstrosity of certain very familiar texts and stories: those which exhort slaves to obey their masters as they would the Lord, remind women to be silent and subordinate, and so on. That Paul’s teachings here are in line with, or even more liberal than, those familiar from contemporaneous Greco-Roman society, accentuates their monstrosity rather than letting Paul off the hook: for many readers, Paul will be their way into a whole first-century world they would not otherwise have entered. As it is, however, many readers never do push at that door. These hidden forms of monstrosity – there in plain sight so that it often does not occur to readers to interrogate them, especially when veiled with a sense of ongoing religious authority and justification – are more damaging than those monstrosities that cannot but be recognized as such, or which get condensed onto certain kinds of scapegoated bodies.

Constructions of monstrosity are, then, of course, also always political. As Marchal notes in conversation with work by Iain Morland on the medicalized subduing of “excessive” intersex anatomy, there are some kinds of bodies whose autonomy and possibility are severely curtailed via the imposition of norms which seek to stamp out all ambiguity and uncertainty (see e.g. Morland 2009). Not all bodies are allowed to carry forward with them limitless possibility, or to stand as symbols of the prospect of life otherwise.

Deflection in Questions of Consent

Those whom Paul discusses and characterizes have not always obviously consented to being invoked in this way, let alone to having been made objects of discussion and justifications for a wealth of religious and academic wrangling in the intervening millennia. But, Marchal shows, consent is in any case a slippery concept, and to make too-quick analogies between Paul’s world and our own means that we may miss some of the nuances.

The contested nature of consent, as well as sex’s more-than-procreative status, is reinforced by Marchal’s chapter on “Use” (Marchal 2020, 113ff), focused on Paul’s discussion of the slave, Onesimus, in the book of Philemon. Onesimus’ name is, Marchal points out, recognized widely within Pauline scholarship as being a pun, since the Greek term *onēsis* is almost cognate with *chrēsis*, a term denoting something useful, beneficial, or enjoyable – and the term Paul uses to describe Onesimus to Philemon in verse 11. Yet scholars to date have not, continues Marchal, reflected on the specifically *sexual* use or enjoyment to which Onesimus might be understood as having been put, as putative social “bottom” to a privileged slave owner’s top. Marchal’s discussion of how slaves’ bodies were understood in antiquity as objects

of sexual desire and use by both men and women of the slave-owner class is well-made, and he goes on to note that it is so commonplace for *chrēsis* to be translated as sexual intercourse – even within the NRSV itself – that it would be odd if there were *not* a connotation that at least part of the “use” to which Paul is thinking Onesimus might be put is sexual (2020, 124).

Marchal can therefore (playfully, but also in deadly earnest) press further into the implications of the letter’s appeal to consent (albeit Philemon’s consent, rather than Onesimus’s own, since the slave’s agency, or capacity to be violated in his own right rather than as an injury against his master’s property, does not of course figure here). Marchal figures Paul’s own glib, flippant description of Onesimus as “useful” to be troubling given its Roman imperial context, holding that it reflects “Roman imperial tendencies to demean and deploy perversely gendered and strangely embodied figures ... to target other members of these ancient assembly communities” (Marchal 2020, 133). This does not mean the figure of Onesimus needs to be desexed, but rather calls for a queerer ethic, one more informed by interrogations of power and submission.

Marchal remarks, for example, on how BDSM play rehearses, subverts, and turns social, sexual, and gender roles, often rendering the goals frequently associated with sex – orgasm, procreation, and the reinforcing of monogamous heterosexual pair-bonding among them – far from the main event. In BDSM, language and imagery of slavery and submission is common, but the stability of their meanings rarely taken for granted. That said, Marchal is also well aware that sexual slavery (actual and metaphorical) is far from over, and often continues to have a racialized dynamic even beyond the context of literal empire. And he suspects that many of those scholars who seek to interpret BDSM as subversive often evade BDSM’s resonances with, and uses of, racial and gender slavery in its symbolism (Marchal 2020, 142). This echoes BDSM players’ own sometime reluctance to repeat, rather than reverse, histories of racial dominance in interracial scenes. Following Elizabeth Freeman, however, Marchal hints that interrogating how histories of slavery impact on sexualities and sexual desires (including fantasies about racial domination) today does not entail pretending that such desires do not exist (Marchal 2020, 151).

I welcomed Marchal’s reflections here on the category of *catachrēsis*, improper use or more literally “against-use,” a term frequently used in postcolonial and other literary discourse to refer to something that has been deliberately “turned” or subverted (see e.g. Spivak 1993, 13, 162), or otherwise put to a purpose for which it was not intended: utilized rather than used, we might say. The concept of utility is relevant here: as Marchal hints, a slave is useful (sexually and in other ways) due to their propinquity to the agent with power to use. They are a ready utility: they are close, right on hand, *there*. Master-slave sex thereby also, Marchal notes, becomes utilitarian in another sense: everyday, conventional, too-easy. Yet it also has its own uses, namely reinforcing the social norms and patterns of social status in which the slave-owner has access to non-elite bodies by right.

Marchal's observation that nonetheless, in much of the literature contemporaneous with the New Testament texts, "such activities do not 'count' as ethically or socially significant, showing in turn the lesser significance of enslaved people in general" (Marchal 2020, 120), puts me in mind of the odd elision of some types of sexual activity that takes place in Christian theological discourse on sex. Some types of sex – including sex between heterosexual married people – are hardly spoken about within theological ethics,⁴ in comparison with types of sex considered illicit in various ways (premarital sex; adulterous sex; same-sex activity). Yet, at the same time, precisely *because* of the consequent absence of an ability to recognize that such "illicit" sex could also be meaningful, significant, or grace-bearing, there is a dearth of vocabulary or opportunity to discuss it. This means that (for example) a young woman who finds herself in a coercive sexual relationship with her boyfriend may find herself unable to turn for help to her church leaders, who might be of the view that all sexual activity outside of marriage is equally wrong and that anyone whose premarital sexual relationship turned sour therefore got what they deserved. Or a same-sex couple living and working in a residential seminary or theological college may find that their relationship is tolerated on a "don't ask, don't tell" basis, but never recognized publicly, so that they are never encouraged to reflect with accountability on how it intersects with their respective spiritualities and vocations, and certainly not celebrated. There is a particular danger to not "counting" such activities as ethically significant: they cannot be properly interrogated, examined, integrated into the other aspects of a morally reflective life.

The recent IICSA (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse) investigation in England and Wales noted that, within the Church of England, one of the focal institutions of its work, there had been an inability for priests and others in the church who identify as gay to speak openly about it, or, in some cases, publicly acknowledge their same-sex partners. (The Church of England officially allows its clergy to be in civil partnerships, but not same-sex marriages: those in civil partnerships must remain celibate.) This, held IICSA, had led to a culture of secrecy around same-sex relationships in particular, and, concomitantly, an absence of proper interrogation of or accountability for how such relationships are conducted. This, in turn, made it less likely that sexual impulses more universally understood as ethically problematic – such as the desire to rape and abuse, or the desire to have sex with young children – could be appropriately distinguished and addressed. Lord Williams of Oystermouth – Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury – told the inquiry,

⁴ Those few counsels on heterosexual sex that do take place in Christian theological circles are often grounded in Paul's own injunction that husbands have control over their wives' bodies and vice versa, such that they should not withhold sex from one another "except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote [themselves] to prayer" (1 Corinthians 7:5). While the mutuality of this arrangement is striking, and does not set up wives as cock-blockers or strip them of their own sexual agency and desires, even mutual giving-over of consent to another raises its own issues, particularly given that present-day egalitarian accounts of marriage have been far from the norm across Christian history.

Where sexuality is not discussed or dealt with openly and honestly, there is always a risk of displacement of emotions, denial and evasion of emotions, and thus a lack of any way of dealing effectively with troubling, transgressive feelings and sometimes a dangerous spiritualising of sexual attraction under the guise of pastoral concern, with inadequate self-understanding (Williams quoted in Jay et al 2019, 91).

Rosalind Hunt, a Church of England priest with professional expertise in social work and domestic violence, added that a culture of secrecy and “discretion” regarding sexuality, especially homosexuality, in the Church of England has led to a situation which endangers victims of sexual abuse and “has enabled those who wish to abuse to do so with some impunity” (Hunt quoted in Jay et al 2019, 92).

IICSA, and other exposés of sexual abuse and exploitation by clergy and other religious authority figures, prompts a recognition of the appalling abuses perpetuated when institutional bodies do not hold themselves and their members to appropriate account. Such reports expose a deeply-engrained culture of reputational management, a desire to privilege the goods of abusers over the goods of those abused, and (in many cases) a machinery and hierarchy which baffle and bemuse those who seek to navigate it in order to push back at it. Recent texts such as Fife and Gilo 2019 point to the perceived lack of transparency that has attended much church treatment of those abused by clergy and church leaders, and the ways in which church institutions have closed ranks. It is not insignificant that similar dynamics are identified in critiques directed at the church’s institutional racism (e.g. France-Williams 2020), nor that particular opprobrium attends those who are marginalized on the grounds of both their sexuality and their race and who speak up about religious bodies’ troubling collusions with power (Robinson-Brown 2021). Are the *really* appalling bodies not the institutional bodies which fail to protect those made most vulnerable, and which perpetuate systemic sin via their own hierarchies?

Conclusion

Of course, the point (or a point) of individual “appalling bodies” as constructed by Paul, or those who have followed him, is that there is not something inherently objectionable about the bodies themselves. Rather, they provoke an appalled response in others: others who have the capacity to *be* appalled. To be scandalized is, after all, to be caused to stumble: it implies something about *us* and our propensity to falter as much as about the thing we have failed to navigate. We all know that the things that perhaps *should* appal us – injustice, abuse and so on – frequently do not. Sometimes this is because we have become inured to them, via the phenomenon of what is sometimes known as “compassion fatigue”. Sometimes we do not allow ourselves to know about them, whether as a function of necessary self-protection or because we choose to remain oblivious for less justifiable reasons. But sometimes

we have simply become distracted by other things: things that have come to stand not only for themselves, but for a broader cultural and political set of norms and allegiances. If everyone is looking at (and being appalled by the supposed excesses and transgressions of) trans women, for example, then there is less energy and will available to challenge the structures that mean trans and cis women alike continue to suffer disproportionate sexual and gendered violence and abuse. So when we ask about appalling bodies, our gaze should be turned onto the bodies and subjectivities that allow themselves to be appalled – that allow themselves to be caused to stumble. What predisposes these bodies and subjectivities to scapegoat that which they do not understand?

For those who continue to be interested and invested in biblical texts this will also, of course, include those religious and other institutional bodies that claim biblical texts as authorities. Paul's significance is not going to dissipate any time soon. But Marchal's tactic of holding up these diverse appalling bodies as their own challenges and authorities *alongside* Paul himself functions to effectively dilute the monolithic nature of the way Paul has often been read and regarded.

Marchal concludes,

It is my anachronistic aspiration ... that these chapters have pulled together a counterassembly: one in which twenty-first-century bodies reach back in order to critically reflect on which monsters, which perversities, which pariahs, which Others do we continue to create. This series of juxtapositions might offer different conditions for queer as coalitional, for anachronism as a form of assembly: gender-variant females, Corinthian women prophets, and drag kings, eunuchs, circumcised and other effeminized peoples, alongside people with intersex conditions, enslaved and freed people, including Onesimus, and those they haunt, even in their sexual practices ... All of these 'barbarians' of one kind or another coalesce, crashing gates together across time, not transgressively, but contingently, temporarily, not building new gates, but turning around to see who else has been targeted, and reaching (Marchal 2020: 198).

Reaching is, of course, as Marchal well realizes, also a pun, also a term that contains its own contradiction. After all, when I reach out my hand in the hope of touching something, that act is arrested, terminated, as soon as I make contact. Yet, when I have made contact, I have (as satellite navigation devices announce triumphantly) reached my destination: I have arrived. It is not for nothing that Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel Creation of Adam captures the fingertips of God and the human in the moment of not-quite-touching: God, hints Michelangelo, acts in the world so as to overcome alienation, generating a creature profoundly like God, and profoundly beloved; yet an epistemic distance remains between them, an unlikeness, a

difference, in this realm a mystery, always reaching out but never reaching their destination.

We also sometimes use reaching synonymously with *over-reaching*: making claims that are implausible, insufficiently justified, too speculative, or otherwise forming commitments that we do not have the energy or capacity to sustain. Is Marchal doing that kind of (over-)reaching here? As one would expect from him, this work is playful, teasing, and sometimes arch, to be sure. But in this way it stands in a proud (anti-)tradition of queer-inflected and queer-informed work that consciously refuses to be hidebound by the expected or normative when it comes to what is a proper topic for academic enquiry. That is not to undermine the robustness of the work or on his academic credentials, of course. The point is more that, where Marchal does push at the boundaries, he does so in artful, conscious awareness that doing something which seems unexpected or out of line with the weight of a discussion can be just what is needed to shake it out of its doldrums. Just as Halberstam's low theory functions to disrupt what makes for a plausible academic intertext, so Marchal's omnivorous approach here leads not to superficiality but its reverse: a sense of deep-rooted and profound connection between what might have been assumed to be disparate areas. In this way he shows compellingly how ancient and modern dynamics of power and authority in religious terms cannot be conceived of without interrogating their associations with sexology, politics, medicine, class and more.

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