Satire and the Folk Horror Revival

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Scarfolk manages to be disturbing whilst also being very funny (Paciorek 2018,14).

In the above observation Andy Paciorek is describing an ongoing transmedia project in which artist and author Richard Littler produces information and ephemera pertaining to 'Scarfolk', a fictional North-west town forever locked in the 1970s. Paciorek's praise for the project, which he describes as a 'blending [of] Folk Horror and hauntology [with] witty and macabre effect', is indicative of a broader trend in recent decades for artists and practitioners to capitalise on the comic potential of Folk Horror (Paciorek 2018, 14). As Paciorek continues:

> Other acts that also integrated Folk Horror into dark comedy shows include *The League of Gentleman* (not surprisingly, as Mark Gattis is countered amongst their number) and, to a lesser extent, *The Mighty Boosh* and also Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer in their guise of Mulligan and O'Hare (Paciorek 2018, 14).

We can also add to this list *Inside No. 9* (2014-present), a sequel-of-sorts to *The League of Gentleman* (1999-2017) penned by Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith. Unlike *League of Gentleman*, *Inside No. 9*'s anthology format moves away from a permanent Folk Horror setting, but occasionally standalone stories do draw on the staple components of Folk Horror. The 2022 episode 'Mr King', for example, is impeccable in its folk horror credentials, hitting each of Adam Scovell's criteria for a work within the genre:

> Folk Horror in all kinds of media can be considered in a channelling of any of the following formal ideas: A work that uses folklore, either aesthetically or thematically,

> to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes; a Work that presents a clash between such arcana and its presence within close proximity to some form of modernity, often within social parameters; a work which creates its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory, even when it is young in comparison to more typical folkloric and antiquarian artefacts (Scovel 2017. 7).

Reece Shearsmith portrays Mr Curtis, a teacher who, when we meet him, is journeying through fields of gently swaying wheat to accept an appointment at a primary school in an isolated Welsh community untouched by modernity. Mr Curtis's contemporary teaching sensibilities jar violently with the antiquated approaches and attitudes of his colleagues, his students and their parents. Here is your clash between modernity and the arcane. As Mr Curtis learns more about his predecessor, Mr King, he begins to suspect the school is masking a culture of child sex abuse and, as he gets closer to discovering the truth, apparently falls foul of being framed for such abuse himself. However, it transpires that these adults are not abusing the children. Instead, the children are preparing to sacrifice Mr Curtis as part of an ancient tradition rooted in Pagan folklore. Like Police Sergeant Neil Howie before him, Mr Curtis is to be sacrificed on May Day, but rather than being burned alive in a gigantic wicker effigy, our hero is attached to a chair with PVA glue as a procession of cheerful infants assault him with scissors, crepe paper and Pritt Stick. The jingle of a Morris Dancer's bell rings out as the episode fades to black, the implication being that serious bloodshed will follow. Again, closely following Scovel's schema, folk lore is put to horrific use, and a new folk lore is born of the blending of modernity and antiquity.

Mr Rich is undeniably a work of Folk Horror. It is also a work of comedy. The upending of our expectations that this school, coded as it is as a relic of the 1970s, a period now associated in the popular imagination with horrifying revelations about the crimes of

such figures as Jimmy Saville and high profile inquires like Operation Yewtree, is rife with child abuse, packs a comic punch. It comes as both a relief and a surprise, setting up the parodic effect of the episode's finale which mirrors the final act of Robin Hardy's *The Wicker Man* (1973) so closely that the bathos created is not only unavoidable but hysterically funny. The oeuvre of Shearsmith and Pemberton amply demonstrates that Folk Horror can be comedic. The extent to which Folk Horror can serve a *satirical* purpose, however, is less often observed. Though sometimes erroneously used as synonyms, satire and comedy are far from identical. As Gilbert Highet once memorably put it:

> Comedy and farce are rich with liking, and want to preserve, to appreciate, to enjoy. […] The satirist always asserts that he would be happy if he heard his victim had, in tears and self-abasement, permanently reformed; but he would in fact be rather better pleased if the fellow were pelted with garbage and ridden from town (1972, 155).

Unlike comedy, satire always attacks something 'real.' The tools with which it makes this critique are ridicule and exaggeration:

> Like polemic rhetoric, [satire] seeks to persuade an audience than something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous; unlike pure rhetoric, it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction. But satire does not forsake the "real world"' (Griffin 1995, 1).

Mr Rich approaches the realm of satire as the final twist invites us to reflect on the ease with which we assumed this rural Welsh school was riddled with paedophiles. If we view ourselves as the target, our own assumptions the subject of the episode's ridicule, we might plausibly reflect afterwards on why we were so quick to fear we were watching a representation of systematic child abuse. In this sense, *Mr Rich* has a satirical effect.

The remainder of this chapter will argue that the core satirical potential of Folk Horror is rooted in its staging of encounters with difference which recall the structure of the satirical voyage. Wayne Johnson and Keith McDonald describe Folk Horror as centring primarily on 'the collision of rival, but equally hubristic world views' arguing that:

> Folk horror [is] a vehicle for exploring fears about travel and encounters with unfamiliar, archaic and sinister forces. [The] journey [leads] the protagonists to encounter the physically abject, psychotically monstrous and the realization that beyond various borders lie dangers which deconstruct and indeed decimate the habitus that the voyagers have come to view as secure and natural (2021, 2 and 59).

Both examples examined in this chapter see a character journeying to a remote, rural area of Britain, where an encounter with the arcane prompts reflection on the world they have left, leaving them either changed, deranged, dead or disturbed. In the case of Alex Garland's film *Men* (2022), our protagonist is Harper Marlowe (play by Jessie Buckley), who has booked a country house in the remote village of Cotson following the recent suicide of her abusive partner. Instead of rest and recovery, however, Harper finds herself besieged by a community of men, all portrayed by Roy Kinnear, each representing a different manifestation of the male violence, both physical and psychological, that have underpinned patriarchal society since, the film's thesis suggests, at least the time of the Garden of Eden. These men, it transpires, are at once both a shape-changing creature whose default form is the Green Man, a medieval symbol of rebirth, and some kind of revenant manifestation of Harper's late partner.

In David Hine and Mark Stafford's graphic novel *Lip Hook* (2018), we follow two fugitives – a beautiful woman and a wounded man - as they drive their bullet-ridden car into the titular town of Lip Hook. Lip Hook is a remote, rural locale shrouded in a perpetual hallucinogenic fog ('the murk') spewed out by the town's main source of employment, a

large insect factory. Lip Hook is owned entirely by the aristocratic Lord Huxley, except for one small estate belonging to an outcast family known as the Isherwoods who have 'owned Murdy End for seventeen generations' (Hine and Stafford 2018, 28). Whilst Scarfolk is locked in the 1970s, both Cotson and Lip Hook feel almost feudal in their systems, structures and aesthetic. Unlike Garland's Harper, the visitors with whom we first enter Lip Hook, the outlaws Sophia and Vince, are not our heroes. As their presence disrupts and disturbs the status quo in Lip Hook we learn that the town was once home to a benevolent coven of sapphic witches who were violently all but annihilated by the ancestors of Lord Huxley, but not before they charged the land with a shamanic, pagan energy that Sophia is now harnessing for evil and destructive purposes. It is the children of the Huxleys and the Isherwoods who emerge as the tale's protagonists, learning of Lip Hook's historical witches and using this arcane knowledge, blended with their own slightly more modern outlook, to defeat Sophia, overthrow Lord Huxley, destroy the factory and liberate Lip Hook from the oppressive murk.

In addition to proving immaculate works of Folk Horror in both their representations of Cotson and Lip Hook and the interactions of outsiders who wilfully venture into these local towns populated with local people, *Men* and *Lip Hook* also share the structure and effect of two prominent types of satirical voyage. Highet has argued that such voyages usually function by either 'showing an apparently factual but really ludicrous and debased picture of the world, or by showing a picture of another world, with which our world is contrasted' (1972, 158). In *Men*, Harper does not find an antiquated society radically alien to her own, but instead an explicit, heightened manifestation of the patriarchal violence she suffered before leaving her London apartment and driving into rural Hertfordshire. She finds a 'ludicrous and debased' picture of her own world. In contrast, despite greeting us with all the familiar trappings of Folk Horror, *Lip Hook* resolves with the settling of an apparent utopia,

blending old and new to spawn a community founded in egalitarian public-spirited openness and an appreciation and respect for, simultaneously, the subtlety, vulnerability and power of the female body. The inference as the graphic novel closes is that rather than representing a backwards nightmare, Lip Hook has it better than we do.

To foreground the structural and thematic similarities between these Folk Horror narratives and the satirical voyage, and to empathise the proximity of satire and horror, this chapter will discuss Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the most famous of those 'satiric tales in the form of visits to strange lands and other worlds' (Highet 1972, 159). A consideration of the format of *Gulliver's Travels*, and the horror it evokes, will equip us to read *Men* and *Lip Hook* as exemplars of the two main types of satiric voyage, showcasing the satirical potential of Folk Horror. At the same time, this chapter argues that in the cases of Garland's film and Hine and Stafford's graphic novel their use of both satire and Folk Horror align to offer similar though discrete commentaries on the place of women in contemporary society, and the threats that besiege them. In *Men*, the subjugation of women is the consequence of an often veiled but perennially persistent threat of male violence. In *Lip Hook*, a community of women who derive solidarity from their shared sacred status as mothers are almost destroyed by a newly arrived woman who harnesses their sororal power source to conquer the town using sex and seduction, unleashing a hedonistic and nihilistic cacophony of violence. And in each case the reader is left both perturbed and disturbed, invited to reflect on the world around them and their place in the oppressive systems laid bare through this engagement with the Folk Horror imagination.

The Horror of Satire

In Swift's original telling of *Gulliver's Travels*, when Lemuel Gulliver finally returns home having visited the fantastical worlds of Lilliput, Brobingnag, Laputa, Balnibarbi, Luggnagg, Glubbdubdrib, Japan and the country of the Houyhnhms, he is not at all pleased to see his wife:

> As soon as I entered the house, my wife took me in her arms, and kissed me; at which, having not been used to the touch of that odious animal for so many years, I fell into a swoon for almost an hour. At the time I am writing, it is five years since my last return to England. During the first year, I could not endure my wife or children in my presence; the very smell of them was intolerable; much less could I suffer them to eat in the same room (Swift 1994, 282).

Upon being reunited with his estranged wife, he greets her not as a lover – nor even as a person – but as an 'odious animal'. He in repulsed by the stench of both his wife and his son and, as we learn later, is only able to tolerate their company at the dinner table by stuffing leaves up each nostril. The grounds for Gulliver's revulsion provide the last satirical lash of Swift's novel. During his final voyage, Gulliver became acquainted with a species known as Houyhnhms, a utopian community of highly intelligent and highly empathic horses. Gulliver quickly falls into a state of tremendous admiration for the Houyhnhms, and longs for their acceptance, but they are increasingly reticent about interacting with him because they recognise his physical similarity to a neighbouring species they have learnt to avoid, the Yahoos. The Yahoos are bi-pedal humanoid creatures who live in filth and are motivated by an individualist, insatiable need for acquisition. They have very little language or civilisation, living a violent, feral life. As Gulliver tries to convince the Houyhnhms that he is not a Yahoo he slowly comes to realise that he in fact is, and so are all his countrymen back home.

When Gulliver is greeted by his wife and son, he sees only Yahoos: living in their own filth, driven by greed and self-interest. He realises he would rather live in the stable than his own house, completing the comic inversion Swift first introduces when casting the Houyhnhms as horses: 'My horses understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four hours every day […] they live in great amity with me and friendship to each other' (Swift 1994, 282). Suffice it to say, Swift's novel does not have a happy ending. Gulliver is irreversibly changed by his travels, and now doomed to live a life trapped in a society he finds repugnant.

Gulliver's Travels is not folk horror. It is, however, an archetypical example of the satirical voyage, a form of narrative that the Folk Horror revival has embraced with compelling effect. *Gulliver's Travels* is also a useful example in that it demonstrates that, though often funny, satire does not share comedy's tendency towards resolution. It is important to the impact of Swift's novel that Gulliver learns absolutely nothing at all that might help him to live a more contented life. Satire attacks stupidity and vice, but it does not offer solutions:

> Satire tends towards open-endedness, irresolution, and thus chaos. Closure, in most cases, would turn a narrative satire into either comedy or tragedy and thus contradict the satirist's representation of evil as a present and continuing danger (Connery and Combe 1995, 5).

Satire therefore often lurches towards fatalism, a bleak prognosis that things can only get worse. Though often grouped with comedy, satire owes as much, if not more, to tragedy and, as this chapter suggests, to horror. Satire and horror share a fascination with representing abjection. What is gore for one, is scatology for the other. They are also each affective modes, bound up with the stimulating in audiences the experiences of contempt, anger and disgust (Phiddian 2019, 18). And finally, they are both often figured as genres which do not

'forsake the real world' but are both a response to it and a vehicle through which readers and views can find catharsis in imagining (and to some extent experiencing) situations which may be, for a variety of reasons, unfeasible (Griffin 1995, 1). It is just as unlikely for a viewer to survive an evening of harassment from a knife-wielding maniac as it is that they might get the opportunity to hold up a sign informing the leader of the free world that he is a cunt, but horror and satire provide a brief simulation in which audiences can imagine such sensations.

Discussing the affective function of horror Gina Wisker observes that:

> Horror has its roots in the Gothic, historically both an entertaining form – Gothic romances – and a culturally and psychologically disturbing form – socially engaged; a location for exposing undersides, alternatives, and contradictions; and an outlet for paradoxical forces and disturbances of the safety of the routine, the normal. Gothic destabilises, offers and dramatizes alternatives that can be terrifying, but which tend also to shine a powerful light into the cracks and fissures of what we smugly take for granted or that which is imposed upon us as natural, to be obeyed. It provides, emotional, psychic and energetic release (Wisker 2005, 7).

Gothic, and by extension horror, are 'socially engaged' and destabilising. They rarely suggest solutions, but they do offer an 'emotional, psychic and energetic release' in drawing attention to the paradoxes and inconsistencies of our social world. Satire, similarly, is addressed to what Ashley Marshall terms 'historical particulars' (2013, 2). It is also associated with offering audiences a 'release', or, as Robert Phiddian describes it, an 'outlet': 'satire provides an outlet for public passions and dispute short of actual violence' (2019, 9). In the cases of both satire and horror, the 'violence' they enact is both figurative and intellectual:

> One of the key features of Gothic and horror cinema is an intellectual violence that results in a rational entropy which is a rich source of entertainment. Collision is

> exciting, and that collision results in change or transformation, and this is one of the key factors which feed the appeal of horror cinema. It is the audio-visual quality of change, made furious, beautiful and poetic, which fuels creative minds and keeps horror on screen (McDonald and Johnson 2021, 8).

Satire and horror both share deconstructive tendencies, and they both promise an affective, though often fleeting, release from the pressures and paradoxes of social life. It is for these reasons that *Gulliver's Travels* does not conclude with a scene of familiar reconciliation but of irreconcilable angst. Swift's readers may laugh at the extremity of their author's misanthropy, but the joke is fleeting, and the final message, horrifically bleak. Satire can be comic but more often its projections skew closer to horror.

The Satire of *Men* (2022)

The opening montage of Garland's *Men* quickly establishes the film's positioning as a work of Folk Horror. We see Harper driving down the motorway, besides green fields, smiling as she turns off down a quieter road, eventually arriving at the village of Cotson where her new, bright blue Ford Fiesta stands in marked contrast to the muted, damp and leafy surroundings, the medieval church, traditional green and quaint old village pub. Harper cuts a lonesome figure as she gets out of her car at the large country pile that we later learn will be her holiday let. Before checking-in, her attention is caught be an apple tree. Tentatively she picks and bites into an apple. The imagery is not subtle and is quickly corroborated when the owner of the house, Geoffrey, emerges to explain that scrumping apples will not be tolerated. "Forbidden fruit," he explains gravely, before laughing and reassuring Harper this is a joke. Harper, like the audience, are left to wonder whether it really was. In these opening five minutes Garland has gestured to the first three of the four key

happenstances of the Folk Horror as defined by Packiorek, which are: landscape, isolation, skewed moral beliefs and a form of summoning (2018, 13).

On a second viewing an astute viewer will even detect the fourth, a summoning, foreshadowed in this sequence. Interwoven in this montage is a fleeting shot of the abandoned farmhouse where Harper will later spot her naked stalker - who we later come to recognise as the Green Man - after apparently awakening him by singing in an abandoned railway tunnel. This montage also, however, foreshadows the film's ultimate subversion of the Folk Horror genre, and the premise of its satirical effect. Alongside Harper's journey, and the proleptic glimpses of scenes that will later stage the film's various set pieces, we also see the first of a series of analeptic fragments that reoccur throughout the first half of the film, taking place in Harper's London flat in the moments before her partner's suicide. The effect of this montage is not to juxtapose Harper's metropolitan life in the 'real' world with the Folk Horror nightmare she encounters in the remote, rural provinces, but to suggest their similarity. The skewed belief system she finds is Cotson is not horrifying because it is different to that which she knows at home. She is not to be sacrificed to ensure a successful harvest, for instance. It is horrifying because it is not different. The violence she endures and overcomes at the hands of Cotson's residents, either as individuals or in their final form as the Green Man, is no different to that inflicted by her late, abusive partner, James. The skewed belief system is our own, the film suggests. It is patriarchy.

The casting of Buckley as Harper signals the film's feminist interests and its self-conscious indebtedness to the Female Gothic, recalling Buckley's casting in the BBC adaptation of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (2018). Emerging from the late eighteenth-century gothic boom, the Female Gothic used the tropes, traits, scenarios and settings of popular gothic fiction to explore, allegorically, the situation of women in eighteenth-century social and domestic life. As Sue Chaplin writes, the Female Gothic sought

to ‘represent the extent to which the law in various ways facilitates the incapacitation and maltreatment of the female subject’ (2016, 135). Eugenia C. DeLamotte similarly that:

> [Female] Gothic shows women suffering from institutions they feel to be profoundly alien to them and their concerns: […] the patriarchal family, the patriarchal marriage, and a patriarchal class, legal, educational, and economic system (1990, 152).

In the works of Ann Radcliffe, the murderous pursuit of young women by tyrannical patriarchs stands allegorically for the courtship of women by men who, upon marrying, will condemn their partners to what Chaplin damningly terms ‘a kind of civil death’ (2016, 139). Any monetary or legal transactions would be signed in their husband’s name, just as their vote would be subsumed into his. Similarly, narratives of women kidnapped and imprisoned in great gothic houses or castles become allegories for women’s confinement to the domestic sphere. The scenarios of Female Gothic are fantastical, but their implications were a lived reality.

Writing two generations later, Wilkie Collins sensationalist serialised novel *Women in White* (1859) went further in giving name to the very real anxieties that underpinned the Female Gothic. As the novel sees its female characters kidnapped, drugged and, famously, wrongfully committed to a mental asylum, Collins uses the character of Marian Halcolme – an unmarried female adventuress with no interest in matrimony who, alongside the novel’s male narrator Walter Harkright, takes on at least half of the novel’s sleuthing - to remind readers that these transgressions were all too common in their own society. It is Marian who Buckley was cast to play in the 2018 adaptation, written by Fiona Seres, which added new dialogue to alert viewers at home that the poor treatment of women represented on screen is still experienced by women today: notably, the persistence of male violence against women. At one point, for instance, Buckley’s Marian memorably retorts: “How is it that men can

crush women time and time again and go unpunished? If men were held accountable, they'd hang every hour of the day, every day of the year." *Men* covers similar ground, Buckley once again portraying a heroine who must endure and resist the worst excesses of patriarchal violence.

Just as Radcliffe drew upon the Gothic as established by earlier writers, such as Horace Walpole or Clara Reeve, to stage terrifying scenarios with clearly discernible analogues to her readers' own lives, Garland's shapeshifting Green Man creature is deployed to stage a series of recognisable ways in which women are subjected to sexist or patriarchal practices in the twenty-first century. For instance, after first rousing the creature, we see him standing naked outside the house in which Harper is staying. The room she is in is dominated by large patio windows, through which she is the object of his gaze. The prominent presence of his phallus, as he watches, draws further attention (as if any more were needed) to the fact that we are witnessing a literalisation of what Laura Mulvey famously named the 'male gaze' (Mulvey 2019, 14). This is the voyeuristic, scopophilia and erotic pleasure upon which much of culture (and cinema) is constituted, in which men derive sexual pleasure from looking at women, entrenching the notion that women are to be looked at (as passive object) whilst men are the bearers of the look (as active consumer). Incidentally, this is also how pornography works. Elsewhere in the film, before the final act in which she is repeatedly physically assaulted, Harper is subjected to gaslighting by a unsympathetic priest who tries to convince her that she is responsible for her partner's suicide (whilst also abusing his role to touch her inappropriately), a victim-blaming police officer who tells her it is her own fault she is being stalked by an aggressive naked man and the verbal abuse of a violent anti-social teenaged boy whose slurs are laced with demeaning, derogatory, sexual language. These are just a few of examples from a much longer list of infractions. Crucially, all these men are portrayed by Rory Kinnear.

At no point in the film does Harper seem to notice that every man she has met since arriving in Cotson bears an uncanny resemblance to the last, suggesting that this device is for our benefit rather than the characters within the film's text-world. On the one hand, it foreshadows the film's final act, in which the men of Cotson are revealed to be one creature who has the ability to either shape-shift or reproduce itself in a range of slightly different forms (during the film's finale the creature is seen graphically giving birth to itself, raising questions – for those who wish to dwell upon such things - about how many of the characters Harper encounters exist simultaneously). On the other hand, this casting choice serves to imply that all these men are literally the same and, perhaps, that all men are the same (or, at least, have the potential to be). In the creature's final transformation it becomes James, Harper's late lover who we see committing suicide in the film's opening montage. The creature's injuries, inflicted by Harper in her attempts to escape and evade its murderous advances, we realise, perfectly reproduce those sustained by James in his descent from the flat window and his final resting place on the spiked fence below. The creature speaks as James, insinuating once again that it is Harper's fault: he killed himself, he claims, because she tried to break up with him. It seems in this scene that the creature is not merely imitating James but that this is James, a revenant returned to haunt Harper. The Green Man, perhaps, was James all along. Or, perhaps more damningly, the Green Man and James are the same because the entity Harper is fighting is simply *men*, as the film's title suggests: the patriarchy.

The casting of Rory Kinnear as all the men in the film except James, however, is also undeniably comic. Whether Kinnear is portraying the wealthy landowner, Geoffrey, with his cartoonish prosthetic teeth, the camp, creepy priest, or, most absurdly, a teenaged boy onto whose face his own has been added using CGI, the effect is as comic as it is unsettling. It is also an effect which serves to amplify the film's thesis and deliver its most satirical resonance. This is because Harper cannot see that all these men are caricatures performed by

Rory Kinnear. Instead, Buckley plays it straight, and both her performance and the film's structure invite a further allegorical reading. Harper retreats to the country, seeking isolation, to reconcile the trauma experienced both from her abusive relationship with James and its violent conclusion, for which, in his dying moments, he ensured she felt responsible. Not long after arriving at Cotson, Harper begins to recover, experiencing a cathartic euphoria culminating in her singing joyfully in an abandoned railway tunnel. It is this, however, which attracts the attention of the naked stalker and which, we can later infer, awakes (or 'summons') the Green Man creature. Allegorically, however, what this scene perhaps truly represents is the way in which Harper's recovery from male violence is frustrated by more of the same, since this is the violence with which women are regularly bombarded in a systemically patriarchal society. In this reading Harper's eventual triumph over the creature in its final form as James is not only a temporary victory of patriarchy but a victory over her own male-inflicted trauma. Having all of this play out against Kinnear's rogues gallery of caricatures implies that though the tactics with which patriarchy seeks to subjugate women are pervasive, insidious and even lethal, according to this film, they are deployed so viciously and so extensively to compensate for the fact that when viewed objectively, such men are weak and pathetic. Scratch the surface, Garland suggests, and patriarchy is Rory Kinnear with funny teeth all the way down.

Viewers are left to speculate about how Harper ultimately defeats the creature/Green Man/Revenant James, as their final confrontation takes place off screen. We see Harper and James having a conversation in the house, James once again implying that his death is Harper's fault. Then the scene cuts to Harper's female friend Riley arriving at the house to discover Harper sitting outside, the last shot of the film Harper's enigmatic smile. It is perhaps fitting that the film's final confrontation largely takes the form of a conversation, particularly given that one reading sees it as the story of how Harper overcomes her trauma,

articulating in these final moments the fact that she was abused, and her partner's suicide was not her fault. It also means, however, that the film avoids telling us how Harper defeats the creature and, according to this chapter's allegorical reading, how we can overcome systemic patriarchal violence. Again, this irresolution – a trait, as noted above, of both satire and horror – completes the film's satirical endeavour. Harper may have survived Cotson, but how are we to survive patriarchy?

Witches and Whores: The Satire of *Lip Hook*

Like *Men*, *Lip Hook* opens with a car on a motorway taking an obscure turn down a county road, this time signposted 'Lip Hook, Dead End' (Hine and Stafford, 8). Unlike *Men*, this car is speeding, full of bullet holes, and its occupants – Sophia and Vince – are far from calm and composed. We never learn what they are running from, though Vince is wounded and clutching a suitcase full of treasure. Also, unlike *Men's* village Cotson, the small town of Lip Hook is in no way portrayed naturalistically. In addition to being swamped in a poisonous fog pluming out of an enormous gothic factory, its residents all wear masks – somewhere between World War II gas masks and the masks worn by plague doctors. The local aesthetic, both in terms of attire and architecture, recalls the heyday of Hammer Horror, that is to say: some non-specific point between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century, but as imagined in the 1960s and filmed on a thriftily constructed, heavily recycled sound stage at Pinewood studios. Lip Hook is very different from our world and, we learn, the world that Sophia and Vince are fleeing. Immediately, once again, we are in classic Folk Horror territory.

However, as noted earlier in this chapter, the generic inversion of this text comes in the rapid revelation that Sophia and Vince are not in danger from Lip Hook, but vice versa.

Upon immediately being exposed to the insect-swarming fog on the outskirts of town, it soon becomes clear that Sophia has tapped into an arcane power source which enables her to seduce any man and, through the act of sex, enslave him as her loyal servant. Meanwhile, we are introduced to teenaged children Falcon and Cal. Whilst exploring this chapter's second abandoned railway tunnel one day, Falcon, who has only recently had her first period, tells Cal that the town librarian Rosie and her wife Margot have disclosed to her the town's secret history. Lip Hook once had its own religion, worshipping a goddess called Ellen of the Ways:

> Margot: All the priests were... Well... priestesses.
>
> Falcon:What about the men?
>
> Margot: They had their uses.
>
> Rosie: Women and men were regarded as equal.
>
> Margot: Equal but different.
>
> Rosie: Women were better at understanding how humans fit into the world. How to work with nature instead of battling against it
>
> (Hine and Stafford 2019, 48-49).

Rosie and Margot explain to Falcon that their belief system is built on an appreciation of the difference between men and woman, and in celebrating menstruation and the female capacity for childbirth as symbols of women's creativity and their 'connection with our Mother Earth' (52). In a later scene at the church, we see both a mural of Ellen of the Ways and a highly prominent Sheela na gig: a medieval architectural grotesque of a female figure displaying her exaggerated vulva. According to Jørgen Andersen, Sheelas have been thought to be, variously, fertility figures, warnings against lust or protections against evil (1977). In more recent feminist reinterpretations, Sheela's unapologetic erotic display has been read as 'a

message about her body, its power and significance—a gesture of rebellion against misogyny, rather than an endorsement of it' (Rhodes 2020. 167). These questions of whether Sheela represents the power of fertility, or the power and potential of sexual empowerment, maps neatly onto the conflict that plays out in the second half of *Lip Hook*.

Sophia slowly moves through Lip Hook, copulating with and enslaving the men of the town and amassing more and more power. Her progress reads like a literal representation of what Catherine Hakim has termed 'erotic capital', the suggestion that beauty, sexual attractiveness, physical fitness, social presentation and the promise of sexual satisfaction are all traits that can be traded in exchange for economic, social and cultural capital (2010, 540). At first, as Sophia uses her power to overthrow, undermine and enthral a string of casually sexist local patriarchs, the implication seems to be that this ability to harness supercharged erotic capital may be a positive force for female empowerment. In one sequence, as Sophie hoists up her dress to mount the vicar - a scene we see from his point of view – her pose explicitly recalls the Sheela na gig. Her domination at this point is coded as an act of successful rebellion, her exploitation of male sexual appetites the key to overthrowing the local patriarchal regime. However, as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that she is herself physically and mentally compromised by this activity, Hine and Stafford subtly gesturing to the question of who is exploiting who. Worse still, as her influence spreads she finds herself the figurehead of a growing cult born of insatiable carnal appetites. When she invites the whole town to church to participate in what becomes a violent, sexual orgy, Vince asks her what she hopes to achieve. 'Honestly,' she replies, grinning manically whilst standing naked, painted in sacrificial human blood 'I don't know what I wanted' (153).

Sofia is ultimately defeated thanks to the intervention of the young Falcon and Cal, acting with the knowledge they learned from the lesbian witches Rosie and Margot and in league with Cal's elderly, blind grandma, who, we learn, along with Cal's late mother, was

once part of a witches' coven dedicated to the worship of Ellen of the Ways. The final battle is an ideological one over whose interpretation of the significance of the Goddess Ellen and the Sheela na gig is most accurate. Should the sacred shamanic power that pulses through the town be deployed as erotic capital, a means of temporarily exerting influence over local patriarchal systems, or be used to connect women to mother nature, celebrating and capitalising on the female body's inherent capacity to nurture create life? On this occasion it is the latter, and, as Sophia loses her power she is slain by Vince, who is both afraid and appalled by all he has seen. Beyond the rules of *Lip Hook*'s Folk Horror text-world, one need not look too hard to see Hine and Stafford's text addressing itself to our own world, and the difference between second-wave feminism and the liberal feminism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The clash between these varying modes of feminism is especially visible on such topics as pornography and prostitution, with the former arguing that each are grounded in the exploitation of female bodies whilst the latter sees in them the potential for female empowerment. Hine and Stafford's ultimate satirical swipe, however, comes in the final pages, which invert the novel's opening to see Falcon and Cal now driving out of Lip Hook down the same road and in the same car as Sophia and Vince. Like circus children running away to join society, these children born in the Folk Horror imaginary are off to join real life and, the closing panels suggest, what they find there may prove far more horrific than the life they are leaving behind.

Conclusion

The Folk Horror revival, so far, has proven alert to the subversive and satirical potential of the genre's staple elements, and of the encounter with difference in remote rural

locales in particular. However, where traditionally this encounter has seen a protagonist who shares the values of the audience violently clash with the skewed morality of dangerously peculiar village folk, the texts examined in this chapter each use the vantage point of a Folk Horror setting to look askance at our own moral systems, suggesting that perhaps it is our morality that has become skewed. *Men* and *Lip Hook* find in the arcane roots of Folk Horror both the source of and solution to the problems their satire seeks to target. In Garland's film, the worst excesses of contemporary patriarchal violence are connected to and readily interchangeable with ancient pagan legends that inform subsequent folkloric practices. The Green Man, in this film, becomes a transcendental signifier for a dangerous male energy biologically destined to pursue and attempt to dominate the female form and its reproductive potential. At various points the events of the film are interrupted by the appearance of a steady shot of a Green Man carving, etched into the font of the village church. Only in the second half of the film does an extended shot reveal that on the opposite side of the font sits a vulva-bearing Sheela na gig. The implication is that Harper's problems are not hers alone but have been shared by women throughout the history of human civilization (and perhaps even longer than that). The final confrontation, in which the creature becomes her abusive partner, seemingly sharing all of his memories, makes this point even more explicitly: James and the Green Man are literally one and the same.

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In contrast, where Garland uses folklore to situate a contemporary phenomenon in a very long view, *Lip Hook* sees arcane knowledge revived and deployed to resolve a contemporary issue. Sophia, who is marked out from the other inhabitants of Lip Hook by her obviously modern attire, is a signifier of our world and, when tapping into an intrinsically female power source, goes on a carnal rampage which ultimately destroys her and very nearly everybody else. She is only defeated when Falcon, Cal and Pearl channel this female power source for what we are told is its true purpose: the protection and empowerment of women as

women, rather than adjuncts to or objects of male domination. These women celebrate the female reproductive system, menstruation and even onanistic pleasure as manifestations of an intrinsic female creativity and, it is this belief, presented as an archaic religion worthy of restoration, which ultimately wins the day. Where Garland finds in Folk Horror a means of articulating an ancient lineage for the fault he attacks in contemporary society, Hine and Stafford's tale suggests that ancient wisdom may provide the solution for present woes. In each case, however, the audience is left to reflect on their role and complicity in the horror they have just witnessed, both on the screen and on the page.

The plot and structure of *Men* recalls Gulliver's adventures in Lilliput in the first volume of Swift's archetypical satiric voyage narrative. In depicting the society of the diminutive Lilliputians – their politics, wars and peculiar practices – Swift was in fact caricaturing his own contemporaries in town and court. As Paul Turner's catalogue of Swift's characters and their living analogues makes clear, some of these were extraordinarily specific. To name just a few, 'the anti-Gulliver cabal in Lilliput represents the Whigs […] Skyresh Bolgolam is probably the Earl of Nottingham […] Filmnap is Walpole and the "King's Cushion" [is] the Duchess of Kendal' (1994, xxviii). In this version of the fantastic voyage, the far-off lands described are satirical precisely because they are recognisable. *Men* is satirical because the monstrous assault of pagan-infused patriarchal violence Harper finds in Cotson is horrifically interchangeable with her usual life in contemporary London. Gulliver's adventures in the land of the Houyhnhms, on the other hand, is satirical because their world is different from Swift's own. Not only is it different, but it is also better, despite being populated almost entirely by sensitive, hyper-intelligent horses. Lip Hook is closer to this model of satirical voyage. In a playful inversion of generic expectations, the residents of the Folk Horror town of Lip Hook are terrorised by an outsider from our world and, in vanquishing her, they find an even better way to live together away from us.

As works of satire *Men* and *Lip Hook* see their creators attacking what they perceive to be vice and stupidity in our world, be that the pervasive and persistent threat of patriarchal violence itself, or the ways in which some might try to manage this relationship with patriarchy. However, as works of satire their function is only to identify a problem. Satire, as we have seen, stages an intervention but always stops short of providing solutions. As such, both *Men* and *Lip Hook* end on similar notes of ambiguity. Garland does not show us how Harper escaped the Green Man/James, or even establish that the creature has been defeated. Given that the creature is a personification of the male instinct towards violence and domination, it seems unlikely. *Lip Hook*, meanwhile, shows the town restored, but finishes with Falcon and Cal driving down the motorway and into our own modernity for the first time in their lives. Our world: the world that spawned Sophia and Vinnie, the world that invaded their home and almost killed their entire town. In both cases, the viewer is invited to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviours and consider their own resemblance to villains of each text. It is this, more than any other device, that makes these Folk Horror texts works of satire. Like Gulliver, who is horrified to realise that he and all his countrymen are Yahoos, the audience is invited to realise that in each of these Folk Horror scenarios, we are the monsters.

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