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Monstrous Gender in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*

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I. Introduction

<1>Arthur Machen's literature transgressed Victorian epistemic and gender norms. His first major publication, *The Great God Pan* (1894), combines occultism, Welsh identity and non-normative approaches to gender. Critics claimed the novella had "undeniably an evil influence over literature," counting among the "worst exponents" of fiction in the 1890s (Comins). Some reviewers were scandalised by the unspeakable and "incoherent nightmare of sex" (Worth xiv). At best, the literary establishment found his subversive work incomprehensible. Yet as Aaron Worth's introduction to *The Great God Pan* (2017) explains, Machen "treasured [...] the abuse of critics" (xiv).

<2>In *The Great God Pan*, Machen developed his antimaterialist metaphysics, proclaiming the existence of another plane of reality "beyond the veil" of material life. This paper explores how Machen challenges the conventional boundaries of his time through his protagonist's hybrid physiognomy and gender nonconformity. Whereas contemporary society in Machen's literature perceives non-normative gender as monstrous and perverse, Machen views marginalised characters as better attuned to higher, hidden truth.

<3>I will thus highlight the novella's three major leitmotifs. Firstly, Machen disparages Victorian scientism, the rationalist effort to understand or prove the existence of the otherworldly. Secondly, he reclaims his Welsh identity, transforming Wales into a liminal landscape through which his characters access the occult. He then relates Welsh location and culture to such other traditions, legends and religions as Greco-Roman mythology, the medieval Arthurian world and the

Cabala. Thirdly, in this novella Machen displays how gender beyond the binary categories of male/female may indicate or facilitate congress with the otherworldly.

II. Men of Science and the Occult

<4>The novella opens with Dr Raymond performing brain surgery on his ward, Mary, in an effort to access the otherworldly. Mary is lobotomised and dies nine months later. The first narrator, Clarke, Dr Raymond's friend, witnessed the operation and is thereafter haunted by the experience. In his effort to understand the events that transpired, he contacts fellow intellectuals, educated gentlemen. Machen thereby illustrates how men with a mastery of medical fields or who otherwise rely on scientific methodology find themselves unable to describe the occult and its enigmatic symbol, Pan.

<5>Clarke interviews a Dr Phillips, who tells of the young Helen, an orphan adopted and sent to the Welsh border town of Caermaen to live with a farmer. During her childhood, a seven year-old boy, Trevor, encounters her with a strange man in the woods and, terrified by something he cannot describe, is incapacitated by seizures. Trevor identifies the bust of a faun, an archaeological find from Caermaen's Roman period, as the man in the woods, suggesting the god Pan. Helen's friend, Rachel, after a visit with her to the Roman ruins near the woods, disappears in broad daylight by the hand of a shadowy and unnamed figure. Only at the novella's end do we discover Helen is Mary's daughter, and the mysterious events that surround her are the result of forces accessed during Mary's surgery.

<6>As an adult, Helen marries Charles Herbert, later found by his friend Villiers of Wadham destitute and ruined, eventually dying of sheer terror. The story's new character, Villiers, recruits another friend, Austin, to seek out further information, ultimately lighting upon Clarke. The three men (Villiers, Austin and Clarke) link the death of a painter, Arthur Meyrick, in Argentina, along with a series of gentlemen's suicides in London's West End, to Helen and confront her. They threaten to go to the police should she refuse to end her life, and she opts for the noose, decomposing magically before a medical examiner's eyes. In the end, Clarke continues his investigation by returning to the Welsh town where Dr Raymond performed Mary's operation. The novella's circular narrative closes with Raymond, who reveals Helen's birthright and confesses that his experimental surgery and quest for "the great truth" (5) led him to "[play] with energies which [he] did not understand" (108).

<7>The men of *The Great God Pan* rely on scientific language and research common to Victorian occultism. When Raymond, a devotee of transcendental medicine, describes the origin of his interest, he cites sixteenth-century alchemist Oswald Crollius as “one of the first to show me the way” (8).⁽¹⁾ Machen uses Raymond's allusion to Crollius to call upon the history of ‘scientific’ occult research. Following in Crollius’ footsteps, German chemist and physician George Ernst Stahl’s writing on animism-vitalism in the first half of the eighteenth century, in turn, directly influenced Franz Anton Mesmer’s research on animal magnetism, also known as mesmerism.⁽²⁾ Mesmerism became a topic of Victorian medical and cultural interest throughout the 1840s and 1850s.⁽³⁾ Occultism reinforced by science later shifted into what Alex Owen (2004) terms ‘new occultism’: between 1880 and 1914 occultists who saw reliance on scientific methodology as a hindrance to the magical experience and spiritual development pulled away from epistemic institutions. Occult research at the end of the century accorded renewed primacy to the heritage of magical traditions and mythologies. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (of which Machen was a member) founded its practices on the CIPHER Manuscripts, an amalgamation of astrology, tarot and Cabalistic magic. Machen’s preference for cultural and historical study of the occult colours his literature.

<8>Welsh historian Fred Hando (1944) traces Machen’s fascination with the occult to an article on alchemy in Charles Dickens’ periodical *Household Words*, which he read at age eight (57). Machen’s interests evolved from literary uses of occultism through an anthropological study of magic to scholarship on mystic texts. He expresses frustration with scientific materialism in his *1890s Notebook*:⁽⁴⁾

In the eighteenth century a little knowledge, a quiet self-satisfaction, & a huge love of material comfort produced a race of rationalists [...] who think that Darwinism “accounts for everything” [...] it may be predicted that as knowledge grows, as the dark films of 18th century rationalism vanish away, as the faults & errors, & blemishes of civilization become more apparent that materialism as an explanation of the universe will vanish also, that mysticism will hold the field alone. (183-84)

Wonder stands in for the experience of accessing the occult, and thus men educated in the sciences can have knowledge of the material world but remain ignorant of otherworldly truth. While new occultists still depend on rationalism to control the unknown, Machen distinguishes himself even from this group in arguing the occult cannot be known or possessed, only experienced.

<9>His protagonist in *The Great God Pan*, Clarke, struggles to reconcile his rationalism with an urge for the otherworldly, which Machen deems an error. Clarke aims to “analyse” his sensations and finds himself desperate for “some explanation, some way out of the terror” (10, 28). He reviews his former “Memoirs to Prove the Existence of the Devil” with a morbid interest and rekindles “strange curiosity,” as he mulls over various “cases” (18, 45). Clarke insists on his distaste for the occult, repressing his “old passion” while internally “pin[ing] for the unseen.” His rationalism is juxtaposed with a “lust” for the occult which he yearns for “like a boy before a jam-closet” (17-18). When he returns to Caermaen, where he had witnessed Mary’s lobotomy, he converts from sceptic to occult scholar, visiting the Roman ruins and adjacent museum while posing as an occult antiquarian. He never renounces his firm rationalism.

<10>Clarke reaches out to a list of medical professionals for testimony. When Dr Phillips describes Helen’s childhood, he assures Clarke that “all the facts related therein are strictly and wholly True” (19). Another unnamed doctor who examines an unidentified corpse found near Helen’s residence declares he “know[s] perfectly well what caused death. Blank died of fright, of sheer, awful terror” (42). He identifies the physiological cause of death but lacks insight as to what evoked that terror. Dr Harding, an “English doctor practising in Buenos Ayres” who treated the painter Arthur Meyrick before his death, writes similarly of nervous shock, including “all the information” he can of Meyrick’s encounter with Helen in South America (64, 97). Finally, Dr Robert Matheson witnesses the disintegration of Helen’s body and signs his testimony, “declaring all that I have set on this paper to be true” (101). Matheson reports that the instant decomposition of Helen’s body was caused by “some internal force, of which I knew nothing” and doubts that “science would benefit from these brief notes” (100, 98). The perpetual reliance on medical truth and fact ultimately fails to shed light on the supernatural.

<11>While Machen introduces several doctors, the men who unearth the five West End “suicides” are instead gentleman detectives. Villiers, Oxford-educated and a “practised explorer [...] of London life,” resembles the gentlemen who appear dead (31). He and his friend Austin track down eyewitnesses, write letters to anyone who might be in a position to inform them further, cite newspaper articles, and Villiers even chases Helen through London like a private eye. Though Villiers observes the “authorities at Scotland Yard are unable to suggest any explanation of these terrible occurrences,” he and his fellow protagonists find themselves in a similar position (79). Clarke, about to read Dr Phillips’ account of what happened to Rachel (presumably an encounter with Pan), suddenly stops, depriving both himself and the

reader of that information (28). These omissions highlight how rationalist men cannot process the indescribable occult, as Villiers admits:

We know what happened to those who chanced to meet the Great God Pan, [...] Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint, poetic fancy, to some a foolish, silly tale. (92-93)

The stark contrast between the certainty of his declarative sentences and his repeated use of “cannot” underscores his anxiety and impotence; he can only be certain of a lack of concrete knowledge.

<12>The novella’s principal scientist, Dr Raymond, illustrates a darker aspect of self-assured knowledge and control: patriarchal power. At first he is confident he will discover “the great truth” and “complete the communication between this world of sense and—we shall be able to finish the sentence later on” (5, 7). His experiment requires a victim, and Mary, whom he “rescued [...] from the gutter,” is, in his mind, “mine, to use as I see fit” (8). The girl consents with a passive “Yes, dear,” mechanically repeated, but it remains unclear whether she understands the dangers. She is clad in white, innocent and sacrificial, and crosses her arms before her chest like a “little child about to say her prayers.” When Raymond presents her with a strange anaesthetic ether, her “submission” is complete (13-14). Raymond functions in this scene as a patriarchal figure in every respect: father to the childlike Mary, husband when he kisses her on the lips and surgically desecrates her intact body, and master when he asserts his unquestioned possession of and control over Mary’s body and fate. Raymond explains at the end of the novella that he “knew what [he] had done the moment [Helen] was born.” Raymond adopts her, but during her early childhood, he finds her repeatedly with “a playmate” the reader may only “guess” to be an otherworldly presence (109). Horrified, he sends her away, and Helen is raised free to “do as she chose” (21). In other words, he fails both as a man of science and as a father to Mary and Helen. The patriarchal scientist is not only unhelpful but destructive.

<13>Helen’s connection to the various men’s deaths is nebulous. They dine with her, return home and change out of their evening clothes into travel suits intended for the countryside. When Villiers happens on Sidney Crashaw, the last of these victims, he is re-emerging from Helen’s residence at two in the morning. He describes Crashaw’s countenance as passionate, overcome with “lust, and hate that was like fire” and depicts him as a “lost soul” who “no longer belonged to this world.” Crashaw fails to recognise Villiers: “he saw nothing that you or I can see,

but what he saw I hope we never shall” (83). While Machen seems to imply a sexual liaison, he maintains the mystery, offering details that point to a more mystical interpretation: the description of men’s travel clothing implies a journey into the woods, beyond the veil. Helen’s body may offer a portal into Pan’s otherworldly realm, a sight that exceeds the rational parameters of their minds. Critical interpretations have posited diverse sources, most often attributing the terror to ineffable supernatural elements.⁽⁵⁾ Geoffrey Reiter (2019), meanwhile, has argued the opposite: that there is “no fundamental reality beneath Helen’s transformation,” only a horrifying antimetaphysical darkness (277). Eduardo Valls Oyarzun (2023) takes this further, tracing the influences of Friedrich Nietzsche and proposing that Helen’s revelations offer a view of “the Dionysian abyss, with a nature devoid of transcendental or metaphysical meaning” (697). For Valls Oyarzun, this chaotic lack of stable meaning produces an “uncontrollable transfiguration, creation and annihilation of Appollonian illusions (identity, society, and culture)” (696). Indeed, the narrators perceive Helen as an inherently monstrous hybrid, and find themselves incapable of deriving meaning from their encounter. Machen, however, seems to suggest that terror results from the men’s impotent efforts to interpret and explain the ineffable otherworld.

<14>The gentlemen who interact with Helen invariably face death through terror while the rationalist investigators safeguard their lives but are unable to explain the phenomena they have so arduously investigated. Even the doctors’ reports amount to little more than physical descriptions of external fact. Raymond, who attempts to penetrate the skin of the matter, both physically and theoretically, through his patriarchal abuse of Mary, unleashes tragedy and death by trifling with forces beyond his comprehension. In the end, Machen’s collection of rationalist men acts, on the one hand, as a critique of the epistemic institutions of power tied to masculinity and, on the other, as a negative example of how to approach Pan. Machen thus denounces Mary’s medical abuse, anticipating broader debates over women’s bodily autonomy.

<15>In his semiautobiographical novel, *The Hill of Dreams*, written at the same time as *The Great God Pan* but published later in 1907, Machen’s protagonist, Lucian Taylor, is a writer less dependent on rationalism. This novel centres on the same fictional Welsh town of Caermaen, based on Machen’s childhood home, Caerleon. Lucian begins his lifelong quest for the occult fascinated by medieval rhymed Latin verse, Roman history in Britain and “Celtic magic still brooding on the wild hills” (8). Though unable to afford an Oxford education, like Machen, his intellectual curiosity is nonetheless evident from his early student days:

He dived deeper and deeper into his books; he had taken all obsolescence to be his province; in his disgust at the stupid usual questions, “Will it pay?” “What good is it?” and so forth, he would only read what was uncouth and useless. The strange pomp and symbolism of the Cabala [...] the Rosicrucian mysteries [...] the enigmas of Vaughan, dreams of alchemists—all these were his delight. (42-43)

Taylor’s antimaterialist scholarship focuses on the ritualism and pleasure of knowledge rather than its functionality. While the male characters in *The Great God Pan* view Pan as an unintelligible, demonic threat, Lucian has a mystical experience as an adolescent when he falls asleep in the Roman ruins atop a hill and pictures himself as the “vision of a strayed faun” (21). He differs from scientists, who see only “the geological formation of the hills” or “the chemical analysis of the water,” likening himself instead to an “artist entranced by a beautiful landscape,” a lover of the “coloured and complex life displayed before” him, “enraptured at the spectacle.” Rather than condemn what others view as immorality or “corruption,” Lucian is ruled by curiosity and enchantment (160).

<16>Lucian devotes the remainder of his life to the “strange stories of those who had longed to speak but knew not the word of the enigma,” and seeks, as a writer, to describe the unknowable (161). Yet his attempts leave him in “periods of despair,” unable “to translate” his “mystic fancies” into words (45). At the end, Lucian is discovered dead beside his manuscript, which amounts to “illegible hopeless scribblings” that “nobody could read” (308). Near his body, his servants spot an empty blue bottle and recall having overheard a Dr Manning’s warnings to Lucian, all of which suggests a desperate use of opiates to access the otherworldly. Just as science cannot explain the strange phenomena of *The Great God Pan*, Lucian errs in relying on self-medication. Machen thus repeatedly denies his male characters access to the occult through science, rationalism or, indeed, even art when aided by drug use.

III. Women in Nature

<17>Machen portrays women, however, as directly linked to Pan through spatial-temporal coordinates: nature becomes the liminal space through which they can encounter otherworldly forces, eschewing masculine rationalism. In *The Great God Pan* the rural Mary, Helen and Rachel, lacking a formal education, are peripheral to the dominant rationalist discourses and thus sidestep the male error of relying on their intellect to unveil occult reality. Furthermore, Machen breaks with linear time by summoning a rich web of occult mythological references connected to his feminine characters.

<18>Machen began drafting his novella with Helen as its central protagonist. In his *1890s Notebook*, he imagines Mary dying in labour, “in terror pointing to a strange shadow.” Under the heading “The Story of Helen,” Machen notes how, in childhood, Helen “sees the Fauns & gets presents from them” and “play[s] with a strange man.” She is “fond of wandering [...] by herself” through the woods and takes “her girl friends by discredited paths where they see discreditable things” (as she does with Rachel). He later decides to “make the ‘Investigation of Gregg’ [renamed Clarke] the framework of the story; an investigation into the ‘overworld’” (109-16), with Helen’s connection to the occult the ever-elusive tale that the male characters seek to uncover.

<19>At the time, Victorian culture positioned women as sentimentally attuned to the otherworldly by virtue of a biological predisposition to emotions and the irrational.⁽⁶⁾ Nonetheless, Machen in his *1890s Notebook* devotes an entry to his frustration at sexist analyses of female emotions as “eccentric” or “incomprehensible,” terming them “humbug” and arguing that women are “worldly” and “practical,” albeit controlled by what they are “conventionally supposed to” do and feel. He exhibits awareness of patriarchal “convention,” while opposing biologically essentialist claims that women share an inherent connection to the occult via irrational emotions (*1890s Notebook* 75). Rather, excluded from centres of male epistemic and academic power, they escape rationalist thought, which allows them access to the occult. This is heightened in rural spaces. When Dr Raymond leaves Helen on the farm, he instructs her new guardian to raise her with “no trouble in the matter of education.” Her freedom to “find her own occupations and to spend her time almost as she liked” allows her “rambles in the forest, for this was her amusement” (*The Great God Pan* 20). Her close friend Rachel, with whom she enters into the forest in the mornings, “remaining in the wood until dusk,” is seen disappearing into the otherworld in a meadow (27).

<20>Machen insists on the Welsh town of Caermaen and its secluded woods as liminal spaces in both *The Great God Pan* and *The Hill of Dreams*. Beyond nostalgia for his childhood home, his focus on Welsh landscape seeks to reclaim the Celtic occult. In *Welsh Gothic*, Jane Aaron argues that views of Wales as inherently Gothic, marginal and exotic are inextricably tied to English imperialism:

The history that an imperialist, colonizing culture needs to tell itself often involves representing the indigenous people of a conquered domain as darkly ‘other’ and barbaric in order to rationalize their domination. The colonized can, however, retaliate by themselves making use of the Gothic mode to protest against the barbarities of their subordination. (4)

Colonial views of Celtic people as racially less evolved, and especially of Wales as rural and less industrialised, hence less civilised or modern, produced two interlinked discourses, Aaron argues: first, that Welsh culture was inherently atavistic, savage and in need of English colonial control; second, that Wales preserved some primitive connection to an occult pre-Christian past that could furnish exotic material for English occultists.(7)

<21>Machen values “Primitive man” as more connected to “elements of religion, magic, mysticism, superstition” (*1890s Notebook* 180-81, 184). His historical occultism similarly allows him to invert the colonial evolutionary narrative and champion Wales as source of a rich mystic history through which his characters connect with a greater truth. Machen’s reclamation of Welsh antiquity hinges on the primitive as being out of reach to English imperialists who wish to study and catalogue it. The peripheral Welsh landscape becomes, instead, a natural meeting ground for women and the occult. For instance, the short story “The Red Hand” (1895) concerns the investigation of a murder in London presumably committed by a primitive man. The story’s two rationalist, English protagonists, Phillipps and Dyson, interview a Mr Selby, who comes from “a remote part of the west of England” and traces the primitive man to Wales (214).(8) Selby tells of a Welsh occult treasure still guarded by ancient “keepers” and also speaks mysteriously in Welsh, which contains a sound nonexistent in English (the voiceless alveolar lateral fricative [ɬ]). Phillipps and Dyson remain unable to uncover the untranslatable mystery, as they are equally disgusted by the “revolting obscenity” of the “hissing” Welsh language and the occult treasure connected to “the Goat” Pan (220). Machen deploys these English characters as investigators who collect the stories of *The Three Imposters* (1895). The distance between the antimaterialist Welsh author and a slew of rationalist English narrators permits a critique of English colonialism as the narrator’s failure to experience the Welsh occult is compounded by his attitudes of epistemic and cultural superiority.

<22>In the “Novel of The Black Seal,” Machen further depicts imperialist Englishmen engaging with the Welsh occult world: Professor William Gregg (the name originally planned for Clarke in *The Great God Pan*), an ethnographer, is “determined” to meet the Little People of Celtic mythology and learn the secrets of the Black Seal (121). Once more in Machen’s beloved Caermaen, Gregg seeks out the Tyllwydd Têg, or Fair Kinfolk, of Welsh legend. Machen refers to them as Little People in *The Hill of Dreams* when Lucian Taylor is walking with a country girl, Annie Morgan:

Caermaen that night, a city with moldering walls beset by the ghostly legion. Life and the world and the laws of the sunlight had passed away, and the resurrection and kingdom of the dead began. The Celt assailed him, becoming from the weird wood he called the world, and his far-off ancestors, the “little people,” crept out of their caves, muttering charms and incantations in hissing inhuman speech; he was beleaguered by desires that had slept in his race for ages. (72-73)

Machen converts the beings of Welsh antiquity into protectors of the otherworldly and grants a magical quality to the Welsh language. Once Lucian’s tie to “the Celt” is awakened, he appreciates Welsh as sounding “beautiful” on Annie’s lips when she sings to him in “wonderful words” he does not understand (74).⁽⁹⁾ From this moment onwards, Lucian “worships” Annie, and the two share an intimate embrace in the woods. Machen connects his reclaimed Celtic ancestry, which can be accessed only through nature, with Annie’s “nonsense” children’s songs, ostensibly in Welsh (75). Her explicit alliance with peripheral Welsh language elevates her in Lucian’s esteem. Annie Morgan becomes a symbol of mystic access to the otherworld. After Lucian climbs the twyn, or hill, and falls asleep in the Roman ruins, he awakes from a feverish dream with a kiss on the lips, and afterwards speculates “it was only Annie Morgan” (5).⁽¹⁰⁾ Lucian later claims that “it was for her that he sought strange secrets and tried to penetrate the mysteries of sensation” (145). Again a woman tied to nature reaches that which so eludes Lucian’s literary aims. He writes: “Only in the garden of Avallaunius [...] is the true and exquisite science to be found,” the irrational and immaterial “science” of the occult (143). Avallaunius is a Latinised reference to Avalon (Machen in Danielson’s *Bibliography* 39), the island to which King Arthur is taken on his deathbed. Jane Aaron traces Avalon to its Welsh etymon, “Afallon, ‘the place of apples’” (74). Therefore, this garden combines the Celtic-Christian Garden of Eden with its Celtic connotations and the fairies or Little People, and Annie Morgan becomes the Arthurian enchantress, Morgan le Fay, integrated into the magical Welsh landscape.⁽¹¹⁾ Later on, Machen writes that Annie died “in her farm in Utter Gwent,” referring to Monmouthshire by its medieval, post-Roman name, the Kingdom of Gwent (177).⁽¹²⁾ In this way, Annie embodies the Welsh landscape and access to the Welsh occult across all time.

<23>Machen describes Lucian’s sexual and mystical congress with Annie as her “drink[ing] his soul beneath the hill” (303), which recalls Cabalistic theology. Pinchas Giller’s *Reading the Zohar* describes how, in the Cabalistic canon’s central text, the pure energy of the Unknowable contains two parts: “the transcendent *Ein Sof* and the more accessible *sefirah Keter*,” which allows the unattainable spirit to “emerg[e] into the phenomenal world” (72). With their roots feeding from the

Unknowable God, ten sefirotic branches convert Keter into increasingly accessible forms, symbolically flowing like water from its source (Giller 125-138).⁽¹³⁾ The similar image of Annie drinking Lucian's soul is hardly surprising if we consider that Machen was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Alison Butler (2011) discusses the Golden Dawn in relation to both speculative Cabala and practical Cabalistic magic (19-21). The Golden Dawn's ten grades or angelic spheres also reflect the ten Cabalistic "sefirotic" branches. Machen's familiarity with the Cabalistic image of the Unknowable leaves its mark on his fiction.

<24>Machen's literature reassembles the Welsh landscape alongside mythologies of different cultures to provide liminal access to the otherworld. In his notes for *The Hill of Dreams*, he writes that Welsh names are "fluent," and first names were often historically interchanged with surnames (*1890s Notebook* 15). In this way, Annie Morgan is also Morgan Le Fay, a liminal twinning of the rural real world and the otherworld. She symbolises a history of Wales from its Celtic ancestry, to post-Roman Gwent to Arthurian myth in her surname. Helen in *The Great God Pan* also changes identity with surnames. She begins as Helen Vaughan, her maternal grandfather's surname, then Helen Herbert through marriage, but ultimately sheds both, imposed through patriarchy, and gives herself a new name associated with nature —Beaumont, beautiful hill. Helen's Greco-Roman name tied to the liminal Welsh landscape signals her connection to a universal occult heritage. Machen, in an article on Manorbier Castle in Pembrokeshire and its connection to Grail lore titled "A Castle in Celtic Mists" (1925), discusses the historic princess Nest ferch Rhys by her nickname, "Helen of Wales" and claims the history of Manorbier "always captured me" (5).⁽¹⁴⁾ Helen in *The Great God Pan* also travels not only between the here and otherworldly realms, but also throughout the world, from Wales to Florence to Argentina and back to London. Machen constructs a pan-occultism in which worldwide mythologies jointly point to a universal occult domain. While in Florence, she claims to be "the child of an English father and an Italian mother," an inversion of British Mary and "Italian" or Roman Pan (34). Much as Machen's characters have fluent, reversible names, Helen's origins are similarly interchangeable. Her claims to Italian heritage alongside her "clear, olive skin and almost Italian appearance" (26) further support her parentage as daughter of Mary and Pan. The significantly named Mary conceives a child through a metaphysical pregnancy, placing her in a Christian cultural context. However, her sacrificial white attire calls to mind the infula of Roman Vestal Virgins, and her conjoining with Pan transfers her body physically and historically into the Greco-Roman mythological canon. Machen's allusions to diverse mythologies underscore their common bond with the otherworld. Similarly, Rachel's name connects her to the Old Testament but is also the Hebrew word for "ewe" (רָחֵל), a reference back to rural Wales. The

women's names may stem from diverse historical origins, but they all access the otherworld through Welsh landscape, their liminal door to the unknown.

<25>The forces of Machen's occult are thus universal, emerging in various cultures, for which Pan is merely one possible name. When Clarke visits the Roman ruins of the twyn (Twmbarlwm) in Caermaen, he finds a Latin inscription:

To the great god Nodens (the god of the Great Deep or Abyss) Flavius Senilis has erected this pillar on account of the marriage which he saw beneath the shade. (106)

Senilis (a name connoting 'senility' or madness and thus distance from rationalism) witnesses a 'marriage' between human and occult in one of those "cool shaded places, deep in the green depths" of the Welsh forest (11). Yet he identifies the god as Nodens rather than Pan. The Celtic god Nodens betokens the abyss, the Unknowable depths of the otherworld, but in the Welsh legends of *The Mabinogion* (Bartrum 507) his name becomes Nudd Llaw Ereint or Lludd Llaw Ereint, whose children also feature in Welsh Arthurian legend.⁽¹⁵⁾ An earlier text, the fourteenth-century *Llyfr Taliesin* or *Book of Taliesin*, names Gwyn, son of Nudd/Llud, as the ruler of the Otherworld (Haycock 433-51). Machen takes Pan, the god of a Roman invader, and reclaims him as Nodens, whose mythology melds Welsh literature from its early Celtic origin to medieval traditions. The conjoining of Celtic Nodens/Roman Pan/Cabalistic Unknowable represents access to the universal (cross-temporal, spatial and cultural) occult through nature.

<26>Machen links women with Pan through Welsh nature, but this hardly means he sees womanhood or the female body as inherently in communion with the occult. In "The White People," a short story published in Machen's collection *The House of Souls* (1906), a young woman attempts desperately to recover her childhood link with the White People.⁽¹⁶⁾ One day her nurse takes her to the woods and leaves her unattended in a "dark and shady" place. There, the girl sees two white beings emerge from "out of the water and out of the wood," flowing like the Cabbalistic Keter or emerging from the woods like Pan (269). The language in which she describes the White People recalls, once more, the Tyllwydd Têg. However, these White People speak the "Xu language," an African Khoisan "click" language, which illustrates Machen's assemblage of different peripheral languages to describe a common occult speech (269).⁽¹⁷⁾ In the end, we learn whiteness is associated with a Roman statue (293), like Senilis' white pillar in *The Great God Pan*. Machen creates, once again, a universal, cross-cultural occult force that a woman accesses through nature. Yet her insistence on learning and trying to articulate her childhood memories aligns her

with Lucian Taylor, both drawn to the occult after a life-changing mystic experience but doomed by dependence on rationalism. When she sees “some little animal run into the woods,” possibly one of the Little White People, she is afraid and immediately “[goes] home and think[s] of it” (275-76). In the end, she is found dead, and the story’s epilogue describes her “search” for occult knowledge as taking “virulent poisons” (292). Like Lucian, she is consumed by her desire for rational knowledge and man-made science over raw occult experience.

<27>“The White People” shows, therefore, that Machen criticises men and women equally when they depend on rationalism in their quest for the otherworldly, even if they could briefly access the occult at an earlier time in their lives. Not all women, by virtue of their gender, can conjoin with the supernatural. Machen chooses rural women peripheral to English centres of epistemic power and unimpeded by the need to know and control through logic and scientific methodology. Only they can enter the otherworld through nature and commune with Pan or Nodens. The unnamed and Unknowable occult manifests itself through different time periods and cultures, a universal reality existing around the material.

IV. Gender Transmutation

<28>The protagonist of *The Great God Pan*, Helen, does not enter the occult world, but rather belongs to it. Her birth is the direct result of Mary’s unnatural—that is, medically induced—encounter with Pan. Her physical appearance is identical to her mother’s: Clarke confuses a drawing of Helen for Mary and, on Helen’s deathbed, feels it was “Mary’s eyes” that “looked into mine” (54, 102). Yet, for reasons baffling and indefinable, he finds Helen “repulsive,” noting “there was something else, something he had not seen on Mary’s features” (43, 54). When gazing at the drawing, Clarke experiences the same horror Dr Phillips had described before the Roman faun bust of Caermaen, “a vivid presentment of intense evil” (25, 55). Both statue and drawing contain symbols of the unknowable otherworldly that trouble and frighten the rationalist men, and thus Machen presents Helen as both a physical double of Mary and a supernatural being. Rather than simply Mary’s child, Villiers theorises that Helen is the otherworldly “manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking to itself a form” (93).

<29>Helen exhibits, therefore, an outwardly human appearance, but embodies an internal and nonhuman aspect of the otherworldly. Such a fusion of elements opens the possibility of a modern reading of this character. Studies in transgender theory applied to Gothic genre, especially following Susan Stryker’s article on *Frankenstein* and trans experience (1994), have focused largely on either the

figure of the monstrous transgender “other,” a societal outcast, or else celebrated the idea of transformation in Gothic literature as metaphorical gender transition, as in the work of Ardel Haefele-Thomas (2012) and Jolene Zigarovich (2018). I believe that transgender theory yields new insight into Machen’s protagonist, Helen, by positing a crucial difference between her body, perceived as female, and her occult components. The transmutation of Helen’s body at the end of the novella betrays these occult aspects, liberating her “Pan” (Greek for “all”) gender essence. Contemporary to Machen, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’ work in sexology between 1864 and 1880 emphasised the “spirit temperament” or soul as the true gender of the queer individual, even when at odds with the male/female gendering of their body (Ulrichs cited in Leck 40). Though Machen may not have read Ulrichs, he evinces an interest in androgyny in his *1890s Notebook* when he notes the word “Hermaphrodite” (136, 220) and writes “Woman Female / Man male > ‘J’” under the heading “The Human Trinity” (61), possibly considering Jesus (J?) intersex or otherwise androgynous. For Machen, the spiritual world requires a spirit temperament that transcends normative binary gender.

<30>Machen hints that alterations in the brain facilitate a metaphysical union with the otherworld. Dr Raymond explains to Clarke that Mary’s “spirit,” her soul, will “see the god Pan” through the following surgical methodology:

[A] slight lesion in the grey matter, that is all; a trifling rearrangement of certain cells, a microscopical alteration that would escape the attention of ninety-nine brain specialists out of a hundred. [...] You may look in Browne Faber’s book, if you like, and you will find that to the present day men of science are unable to account for the presence, or to specify the functions of a certain group of nerve-cells in the brain. (4)

Raymond adds that his beliefs are based on “Digby’s theory” as well as the cited book by “Browne Faber” (4). Roger Luckhurst (2009) conjectures that these two fictional scientists refer to Sir Kenelm Digby, a natural philosopher whose varied interests included astrology and alchemy, and Charles Édouard Brown-Séquard, a neurologist renowned for his work on the spinal cord and epilepsy (279). The allusion to Digby reinforces Machen’s attraction to alchemy, which crops up repeatedly throughout his *1890s Notebook*.⁽¹⁸⁾ Raymond etherises Mary with an “oily fluid,” which, as Clarke remarks, seems to come neither from “the chemist’s shop [n]or the surgery.” Its odour sends him into a dream state in which he remembers a woodland walk on a hot summer day when “he stood face to face there with a presence, that was neither man nor beast, neither the living nor the dead, but

all things mingled” (12). The reference to Digby and Clarke’s oneiric state suggests the ether is truly alchemical in nature.

<31>Regarding the second scientist, neurologist Brown-Séquard’s research included a series of papers in the 1850s on epilepsy that bear a striking resemblance to Raymond’s medical experiment. Raymond claims to have discovered the purpose of the specific “nerve-cells in the brain” as well as the methodology by which to rearrange them (4). His application of the knife to Mary’s head and her subsequent “struggling and shuddering [...] as she fell shrieking to the floor” with her face “hideously convulsed” are reminiscent of the epileptiform seizures studied in Brown-Séquard’s work (15). Michael Aminoff (2010) describes the scientist’s observations of guinea pigs with sectioned sciatic nerves that suffered epileptiform seizures and developed trophic changes, passing on these traits to offspring (Aminoff 192).

<32>Raymond thus induces the encounter between Mary and Pan through his transcendental medicine, resulting in her pregnancy. I propose that Mary’s daughter inherits her mother’s body along with a metaphysical trophic change: the pan-gender essence of the occult. Robert Mighall (2003) argues that

Ultimately there is no sexual secret at the heart of Machen’s text. It cannot be named because it doesn’t exist. At the heart of the text stands *The Great God Pan*. There is no secret at all, for all (Pan) is the secret. (207)

Raymond’s neurological operation precipitates a metaphysical, rather than purely sexual, encounter. The occult, symbolised by Pan, is not explicitly male or female, but as Mighall reminds us, “all.”

<33>This interpretation appears corroborated by Machen’s “The Inmost Light,” paired with *The Great God Pan* in its original 1894 edition. In this short story, two men investigate the death of Agnes Black and ultimately discover how her husband, Dr Black, an occult scientist desperate to “bridge [...] the gulf between the world of consciousness and the world of matter,” had trapped her soul in an opal gem (164-65). After her body is emptied of its soul, an otherworldly force possesses her, and Dr Black ends her mortal life. When Agnes is found dead, the medical examiners note some “brain disease” in which “the tissues of the brain and the molecules of the grey matter had undergone a most extraordinary series of changes.” One medical examiner declares that the new brain matter was neither human nor animal but had “a nervous organization of a wholly different character” (124-25). Agnes’ body now devoid of the “essence which men call the soul,” the occult “enter[s]” “in its place,”

altering her neurologically (165-66). In this story, the entrance of the occult into the soul modifies Agnes' brain. Aaron Worth, in his introduction to *The Great God Pan* (2017), notes that

Without question Machen's interest in, and treatment of, the brain in both of these stories draws upon contemporary developments in neuroscience; at the same time, however, he suggests that such modern disciplines are only catching up with the 'sciences' of a bygone age. (xiv)

The similarities between the two narratives support the idea that Machen locates the soul within the brain, or, at least, that an occult change in the essence or soul of a person produces a neurological transformation, just as a neurological alteration permits a metaphysical encounter in *The Great God Pan*. At first glance, Machen seems to distinguish between the realm of the material and the otherworld. Adrian Eckersley (1992) has argued that the source of horror lies "more in biology than in spirituality" (285).⁽¹⁹⁾ I suggest however, that this may be a false duality for Machen, as the brain physiologically contains and materially represents the soul in both *The Great God Pan* and "The Inmost Light." As the material and spiritual are interwoven, Machen distinguishes only between what can be epistemically understood and what can be mystically experienced, which Emily Alder (2020) terms a "participatory" form of cognition (143).

<34>Dr Black and Dr Raymond both treat their female patients as property on which to experiment. In both stories, the woman allegedly consents, and the doctor kisses his patient on the lips, entering a dark laboratory and pouring a mysterious liquid into a crucible. Machen once more illustrates patriarchal abuses by male scientists against women under their control, a topic particularly salient for readers today. Black removes Agnes' soul completely, allowing her body to be inhabited and her brain neurologically changed by the occult symbol of "a satyr" (123). In *The Great God Pan*, Mary's brain suffers a transformation that renders her "a hopeless idiot" (15). While Raymond does not kill her, her death is caused indirectly through childbirth. Agnes and Mary both represent the consequences of patriarchal men forcing occult science on women, affecting their respective souls through neurological changes. Meanwhile, Mary's daughter, Helen, though apparently seen as physically female, embodies a hybrid, occult aspect in her essence, in equal parts seductive and repulsive or monstrous to the men she later encounters.

<35>While Luckhurst's hypothesis that the scientist "Browne Faber" in *The Great God Pan* alludes to Brown-Séguard is certainly insightful, it fails to account for the other half of the fictional scientist's name, Faber, which I argue alludes to the

comparative theology developed by Jacob Bryant and later added to by George Faber. While deeming Christianity the purest version, they proposed that all world mythologies interpret the same historical events, a notion consistent with Machen's historical and cross-cultural approach to occultism. Furthermore, according to Ronald Hutton (2009), the Bryant-Faber theory, ground-breaking for its time, led to future publications connecting Druidry with Judeo-Christian theology, especially in interpretations of *The Book of Taliesin*, "the single most important source for those seeking evidence of the Druidic doctrine of transmigration" (220, 262).⁽²⁰⁾ Machen reveals an interest in Druidry in his *1890s Notebook* when he mentions the "druidic circle" as "a hint for [...] transforming [one]self into other existences" (82). The idea that Druids believed in the transmigration of the immortal soul into different mortal bodies traces back to Greco-Roman writings on Druids (Hutton 20-21). Machen's understanding of Druidic metaphysics would therefore have involved a belief in transmigration. Interest in Druidry led to a series of Druidic Orders, which Hutton catalogues through the long nineteenth century (215-27). The late-Victorian publications of Owen "Morien" Morgan, Archdruid of Wrexham, conflate Taliesin with King Arthur, Christ and Pan, linking them all to Druidry (Hutton 274-80). Machen's reclamation of this Welsh Druidry is probably related to the Bryant-Faber image of the universal legend. His use of interconnected mythologies reinforces and explains the allusion to Bryant-Faber in the name of the fictional scientist/occultist Browne Faber.

<36>Raymond, influenced by "Browne Faber," rather than slicing open Mary's head, cuts a neat circle into her cranium (reminiscent of Machen's notes on the "druidic circle") (14). He facilitates the transmigration of the occult soul, the trophic change that Helen inherits. Although Helen's body is coded as female, she may be interpreted as a queer, peripheral other, containing an otherworldly essence that integrates multiple historic and legendary characters all rolled into one. In death, her form transmutes, revealing her occult essence. Dr Matheson describes how she turns "black like ink," until "the firm structure of the human body [...] began to melt and dissolve" (99). Helen's decomposition into black slime recalls two other Machen stories. In "The Novel of the White Powder," an antisocial law student named Francis resorts to taking a mysterious medicine to improve his mood. While the drug seems to work at first, it eventually begins to transform him into a formless, black liquid. First his hand turns into a "black stump" with the "clumsy movement as of a beast's paw," and finally his voice becomes "the roar of a monster" and his body "a putrid mass [...] neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes, and bubbling" until only two "points like eyes" remain among "a writhing and stirring as of limbs" (170-73). Similarly, in the "Black Seal," Professor Gregg discovers the workings of a magic seal, with which he then experiments on a Welsh

boy (“the blood of the ‘Little People’” [141]) who speaks “hissing” the “secrets of the underworld.” Gregg interprets the boy’s Welsh language as a link to the otherworldly and, as “a man of science,” uses the Black Seal on him, reducing the boy’s body to “a slimy, wavering tentacle” (142). In the “Black Seal” the “awful transmutation of the hills” draws magic from a Celtic occult object, while in the “White Powder” medicine prepared by an unconventional chemist causes “a transmutation of [Francis’s] character” and, later, of his body (141, 165). Yet Helen’s transformation goes well beyond the alchemical transmutations of either the “Black Seal” or “White Powder.”

<37>While Machen’s other stories feature the degeneration of the body through science, *The Great God Pan* presents an image of the ascending occult. At first, according to Dr Matheson’s account, she changes “from sex to sex” then “descend[s]” into a beast and finally into “jelly,” going “down to [...] the abyss of all being.” The order of this transformation mirrors that of Francis in “White Powder,” but here Matheson notes that, subsequently, “the ladder was ascended again” (100). Aaron Worth argues that this transformation “calls to mind less the evolutionary ideas of Darwin or Haeckel than the theories of the seventeenth-century alchemist Thomas Vaughan” (xiv), the possible source for Helen’s first surname, which Worth traces back to Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton’s biography of Machen (1963). I would add that Vaughan’s name repeats in *The Hill of Dreams* among Lucian Taylor’s occult readings (43). At the novella’s close, Dr Raymond lists the exact steps of Helen’s descent, changing “from woman to man, from man to beast, and from beast to worse than beast” (108). When Helen ascends, she reverses this process, changing finally from man to woman and from woman to what Matheson describes as becoming pure “Form [... an] unspeakable shape, neither man nor beast” (101). Jolene Zigarovich (2018) briefly cites *The Great God Pan* as a Victorian “sex-change stor[y]” given Helen’s “ability to transform shape, including sex” (xiv). While Zigarovich adds Machen’s novella to a transgender canon, her reading requires greater contextualisation. Machen’s use of neurology positions Ulrichs’ spirit temperament in the occult, transmuted brain. Helen transforms not from one conventional binary gender into another but alters her physical form to reflect a nonbinary occult essence that is her true self, transcending the bodily restraints of womanhood.

<38>Machen offers in *The Great God Pan* a glimpse of the occult fully combined with human flesh. Helen’s unique ability to ascend, to surpass her material reality, is directly tied to her supernatural soul. Her body not only decomposes but recomposes itself, unveiling her essence, neither man nor woman but fluid, formless and occult. Helen emerges as an untimely historical hybrid: at once a syncretic

manifestation of religions past and a prophetic being her unenlightened contemporaries can only perceive as criminal. The narrative's rationalist men view her soul as demonic and repulsive, incongruous with her beautiful, charming, externally gendered "female" form. Machen's reclamation of a Welsh heritage and his lifelong association with occult and bohemian circles all reflect his core identification with the periphery. His familiarity with neurology, references to alchemy and insistence on the human essence or soul invite a reading of Helen as a pan-gender subject, beyond cisnormative gender, only regarded as monstrous by the male narrators. Machen's *The Great God Pan* aligns marginalisation with a liberatory otherworldly power, posing a significant challenge to the conventions of his contemporary Victorian culture.

Notes

(1) See Aaron Worth's note in the *The Great God Pan* (2018) on Machen's reading of and interest in Oswald Crollius (353). (△)

(2) For more on the relationship of alchemy and chemistry to animism-vitalism see Allen Debus (1977), Piyo Rattansi and Antonio Clericuzio (1994) and Edwin Wallace and John Gach (2010). (△)

(3) On mesmerism, see Alan Gauld (1992), Derek William Forrest (1999), John Warne Monroe (2008) and Alison Winter (2000). (△)

(4) Machen's decision not to publish these notes should not be taken as renunciation of his antimaterialist occultism as he expresses similar views in *Hieroglyphics* (1902), "Stuff—and Science" in the nonfiction collection *Dog and Duck* (1924) and "Farewell to Materialism" in *The American Mercury* (1935), reprinted in *Avallaunius* (1997). (△)

(5) See, for instance, Marco Pasi (2007), Kostas Boyiopoulos (2009), Emily Alder (2020) and Jonathan Newell (2020). Recently, Aaron Worth (2021) has argued that the cause of terror may represent Victorian anxieties over retrogressive temporality and atavism (16). (△)

(6) See Alex Owen (2004), Amy Lehman (2009) and Tatiana Kontou (2013) on the "feminine link" to the spiritual. (△)

(7) See Ieuan Gwynedd Jones (1992) on industrialisation and perceptions of Wales and William Hughes' (2012) entry for Wales, which notes Machen's importance and highlights how non-Welsh authors (e.g. Algernon Blackwood and L.T.C. Rolt) use

Wales as an “evocative backdrop” (255). A decade earlier, Kelly Hurley (2002) groups Machen under “British Authors” without mentioning his Welsh origin. Aaron (2013) addresses this as well (9).(^)

(8) Aaron establishes “West England” as a euphemism for Wales in Machen’s work (72, 78).(^)

(9) Aaron (2013) interprets Annie’s singing as “presumably speaking Welsh” (74). Yet Machen originally planned to use “the ancient witch-speech—Turanian in origin” (*1890s Notebook* 10). The reference to Celtic Fair Folk and their hissing speech directly before this passage supports Aaron’s claim that Annie is speaking Welsh, but his original plan suggests that Machen interprets Annie’s speech as a universal language of the irrational occult, whether it manifests as Welsh, Turanian or another ancient speech.(^)

(10) The twyn in *The Hill of Dreams* is, in Fred Hando’s history of *The Pleasant Land of Gwent*, listed as Twyn Barllwm, which refers to present-day Twmbarlwm.(^)

(11) See also Peter C. Bartrum’s entry in *Welsh Classical Dictionary* for “Morgen,” one of the sisters who receive Arthur in Avalon (487).(^)

(12) Machen stipulates that the Arthurian Holy Grail is located in Wales, publishing nonfiction on the topic in “The Secret of the Sangraal” (1925) and imagining its discovery in Wales in both *The Great Return* (1915) and *The Secret Glory* (1922), earning mention in Roger Sherman Loomis’ seminal book on *The Grail* (1963) (1). See also Geoffrey Reiter’s article in *Welsh Mythology and Folklore* on the connection between Machen’s Arthurian novels and the Welsh Revival.(^)

(13) See also Gershom Gerhard Scholem (1991).(^)

(14) This article, published originally in *The Graphic*, has been reprinted in *Faunus* (2001).(^)

(15) Lady Charlotte Guest translated *The Mabinogion* into English between 1838 and 1849 (Davies ix), making it legible to Machen, who did not speak Welsh fluently. Nudd/Lludd’s three sons (Gwyn, Edern and Owain) and daughter (Creyddylad) appear in the last three chapters of *The Mabinogion*. See Sioned Davies’ “Index of Personal Names” for more on each (*Mabinogion* 282-83, 285-87).(^)

(16)*The Great God Pan* was reprinted alongside other short stories in *The House of Souls* (1906).(^)

(17)Angela Elisa Schoch-Davidson (2018) has similarly read “The White People” as an anticolonialist vindication of both women and Welsh culture “against a backdrop of materialism and cultural homogeneity dominated by the English language” (93).(^)

(18)In his *1890s Notebook*, Machen mentions alchemy repeatedly (24, 93, 103, 126, 132-33, 137, 158, 235, 245, 333) and also notes that he read W.B. Yeats’ “Rosa Alchemica” (37).(^)

(19)For an alternate reading of neuroscience itself as an abusive source of horror in *The Great God Pan* and “The Inmost Light,” see Natasha Rebyr Coulthard (2016) and Clayton Carlyle Tarr (2023). For Gabriel Lovatt (2016), the neuroscientific abuse and metaphors of contagion in these texts upend the Cartesian distinction between body and mind.(^)

(20)Marged Haycock’s scholarship on the *Book of Taliesin* makes a significant contribution to rediscovering the text’s source. Haycock in her editions (1-5) and Patrick Ford in the introduction to *Ystoria Taliesin* (1-10) discuss the history of *Taliesin* scholarship and its misattribution to druidic sources by Edward Davies at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Davies, armed with the Bryant-Faber theory of a universal mythology, produced an erroneous conflation of Welsh Druids with Christianity alongside various mythologies (Hutton 176-79). This claim, though refuted by D.W. Nash in 1858, survived into the twentieth century. Nash critiqued the association between Druids and the theory of transmigration, but his re-reading of the *Book of Taliesin* was not widely accepted (Hutton 262). Machen would thus most likely have read the *Taliesin* poems as a druidic text.(^)

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