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## CHAPTER 39

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# “PITIFUL CREATURE OF DARKNESS”

## *The Subhuman and the Superhuman in The Phantom of the Opera*

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JESSICA STERNFELD

MEGAMUSICALS tackle grand, seemingly universal issues. The term “megamusical” began to circulate in the 1980s, when Andrew Lloyd Webber’s several record-breaking hits had an enormous impact on the culture of Broadway, and although the term implied derision by many critics who found these musicals overblown and annoying, for scholars it (usually) simply describes a genre focused on bigness. The stories told in *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, *Wicked*, *Ragtime*, *Chess*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, and *Aida*, to name a few megamusicals, might sweep generations or might focus on a handful of characters involved in personal conflicts. But either way, the presentation of their circumstances features at least some elements of grandness: complicated, mobile, spectacular sets; a sung-through opera-like score delivered with big voices; a dramatic or tragic plot full of noble, pitiable victims of political circumstance. The genre therefore seems an unlikely one in which to explore the personal and social implications of disability, and yet many of these stories do just that. Like virtually every musical—or movie, television series, novel, play, ballet, or other narrative art form—these shows feature an Other, an outsider who must eventually be welcomed into the community or be banned from it. If the Other is our main heroic character, the most likely outcome is a noble, tragic death; cheerful acceptance is more likely in a musical comedy, not a megamusical. This tear-jerking death is meant to teach the community (and the audience) a lesson about understanding and acceptance, without actually demonstrating the acceptance that would allow the character to become a member of the community. Elphaba in *Wicked* is misunderstood by her community thanks to her green skin (her race? her disability?) and eventually embraces her outsider status, taking on a new identity and disappearing. *Aida* and Radames, in *Aida*, choose death rather than separate lives divided

by politics (which is a stand-in for racism). Coalhouse Walker sacrifices himself in the name of racial tolerance in *Ragtime*. In other words, these grand musicals, some with dazzling sets, others with huge production numbers and lofty messages about humanity, nevertheless intend to teach lessons about what it means to be outside the community.

And a remarkable number of them feature an outsider with a disability or a disfigurement. How does the megamusical deal with a disabled hero or villain? Some send clear messages of sympathy, painting the disability as noble and admirable, while nevertheless excluding the disabled character; others allow the character to heal and reintegrate, in a rather too neat narrative of overcoming; still others both romanticize the disability as a demonstration of the character's inherent goodness while simultaneously fetishizing the disability, tantalizing the audience with its features. This chapter focuses on *The Phantom of the Opera*, the megamusical that perhaps most boldly faces the idea of disability head-on, as it stars a character whose face, as one journalist described it, looks "like melted cheese" (Smith, 1995). The musical's approach to the Phantom's disability is remarkably layered and inconsistent; the Phantom is portrayed in numerous ways (monster, criminal, genius, god, ghost) and his physical disability blurs regularly with his "soul," which is where numerous characters locate the origin of his problems. His face and its famous mask covering are both feared and thrilled over, but with a reassuring dose of pity that allows the audience to feel comfortable leaning forward to catch a glimpse. How, in the supposedly more enlightened culture of the 1980s (and today, as the show continues to thrive), can we justify what is, at base, a modern version of a circus freak show? And how does the musical shield the audience from feeling that it is? The musical's atmosphere, style, music, and lyrics create such a seductive sense of romance and tragic inevitability—cushioned with an extra layer of "historical" distance—that the discomfort we should feel is swept away by megamusical momentum.

## THE PHANTOM'S STORY

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*The Phantom of the Opera*, Broadway's current longest-running musical, opened in 1988. It had already been a massive success in London in 1986, becoming Andrew Lloyd Webber's fourth major international megamusical hit, after *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971, something of an accidental hit by a very young composer and his lyricist partner Tim Rice), *Evita* (1979, also with Rice), and *Cats* (1982, with a libretto provided by poet T.S. Eliot's collection from 1939). Lloyd Webber and Rice's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* (Broadway 1982, although originally written for children in a fifteen-minute version in 1968) is far too humble and comedic to be a megamusical, and his *Starlight Express* (Broadway 1987) is the rare example of a megamusical flop. It was after the failure of *Starlight Express* in New York (it ran far longer in London) that Lloyd Webber turned his attention to the mysterious figure who lives in the basement of the Paris Opéra. He teamed with librettist and co-bookwriter Richard Stilgoe (there are a

few lyrics by Charles Hart as well), and the influential director Harold Prince, whose vision greatly shaped the show.

The audience is meant to see the story of the Phantom through Raoul's eyes, although many critics have noted that Raoul remains a rather two-dimensional character, manly and earnest and bland. He is the suitor of our heroine, young Christine, and therefore caught in a love triangle with the Phantom. Instead of feeling as if we are journeying into this strange world as Raoul's ally, the story makes it much easier to relate either to Christine, to whom odd things are already happening when we meet her (she may be mentally unstable, even hysterical), or to the Phantom, who manages to be sympathetic despite being a cruel kidnapper and murderer. Nevertheless, the tale is framed by Raoul, and opens in the "future," with an aged Raoul at an auction of the Paris Opéra in 1905, setting up the story for us. He sees the Phantom's music box featuring a toy monkey playing the cymbals, as well as the chandelier that so famously falls to the ground during the show. When the dilapidated chandelier springs to life and the overture begins, we flash back to the present of 1861, where we remain for the rest of the story. Aged Raoul never returns to reframe the show. He also never fully understands the Phantom, despite learning about the man's life and challenges, and he remains the Phantom's adversary (although an ineffectual one) throughout, whereas both Christine and the audience come to feel for him.

In Gaston Leroux's original 1911 novel, the Phantom (whose name is Erik) was born with a disfigured face, and although many popular movie versions changed this circumstance to later traumas like having acid thrown in his face, Lloyd Webber's Phantom was also born with his disability. His Phantom, like Leroux's, is also naturally—indeed, the musical suggests, supernaturally—brilliant, and is a composer, architect, magician, and mastermind of many schemes and feats. He is also angry, cruel, socially maladjusted, and eventually murderous. He has failed to integrate into society, and the story suggests that this is mostly or even entirely society's fault; the community having shunned him, he has learned no other way to deal with people than to scare, manipulate, kidnap, and kill them. Film scholar Martin Norden would label this character an Obsessive Avenger type; referring mostly to early films, among them Lon Chaney's version of *The Phantom of the Opera*, he describes the Obsessive Avenger in terms easily applied to Lloyd Webber's Phantom: "an egomaniacal sort, almost always an adult male, who does not rest until he has had his revenge on those he holds responsible for his disablement and/or violating his moral code in some other way" (Norden 1994, 52). Thus, this Phantom terrorizes the community and kills two annoying secondary characters who dare to doubt or defy him. He has taken up residence in the underground lair of the Paris opera house, where there are (in fact actually) cavernous spaces, rivers, and metal grates. There he becomes obsessed with young opera singer Christine Daaé, whom he coaches for some time without actually revealing himself to her; he uses tricks, like optical illusions and throwing his voice, to come to her as if he were a phantom or angel.

As I have noted elsewhere, the story can be thought of as a take on a beauty and the beast tale; a frightening-looking monster-like man tries to win the love of a beautiful girl, in inappropriate ways because he knows no other. Eventually in such a tale, either

the girl kisses the beast and gets a prince, or he sacrifices himself so that she may have a normal life with a man who looks and behaves normally. In this instance, there is both the kiss and the sacrifice, the Phantom never becoming a prince but instead a martyr, so that Christine and Raoul can have a normal above-ground life (Sternfeld 2006, 227). Like countless "beast" figures before and after him, the Phantom chooses death (if a symbolic one) rather than any attempted assimilation, relieving both himself and his community of the pressure to accept him and instead nobly removing himself from the conflict.

The Phantom's story—or that of any "beast" and his beauty—can be read through the lens of identity studies, with the Other being differentiated by race, culture, class, disability, or any number of other identities that do not fit in with the story's community. But using disability as the driving conflict of the plot is actually more pervasive than spectators, or even scholars in identity studies, might realize; in their study *Narrative Prosthesis*, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue for the "primacy of disability as narrative prosthesis in representational discourses" (2000, 29). While a few classic examples—Richard III, Tiny Tim, Ahab—might spring to mind, Mitchell and Snyder find that many hundreds of authors in various cultures employ the tool of the different body as a catalyst for their plots. The entrance of someone who looks or acts differently can upset any community; Mitchell and Snyder note the "visceral potential in the disruption caused by the disabled body" that makes this sort of character a "primary tool for writers" (2000, 36).

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson frames the concept of Other versus community in slightly different terms, still using disability as her lens; she argues that a character, or a real person figuring in a narrative, can arrive at one of two outcomes: he or she can either be cured, or at least suggest hope for a cure; or he or she can die or be killed. American culture, she explains, rarely accepts disability as a satisfactory state of being. We prefer to strive for a cure, a solution, or we pity the "victim" of the disability with misguided compassion such that death becomes a viable option. Our rhetoric, even our laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, promote accommodation, but Garland-Thomson suggests that such laws do not reflect our cultural approach: "We agree to accommodate disability, but we prefer to eliminate it" (2004, 780). She calls this acceptance of killing the disabled body/person the "cultural logic of euthanasia." Held up in contrast to some undefined ideal of what a body should be, the "unfit" body offends American sensibilities of progress and perfection (781). While various subgroups of the disabled communities may simply ask for various accommodations, we offer instead a condescending "benevolence" (784) that implies we know better what's right for the "sufferer" and for society. The Phantom, then, will never be allowed into society; his death is, in fact, what is best for him and for the entire community, and it is presented as a transcendent, magical disappearance. Although the nature of this benevolence has changed since the 1911 novel, the result in the musical is the same, and just as satisfying to an unquestioning audience.

Literary scholar Lennard Davis goes one step further in his approach to this much-used narrative device, arguing that any story with an outsider who disrupts a

community or who leaves his/her community can be fundamentally explained as a story about disability. Every story, no matter what category of identity studies may be invoked, is fundamentally about "normal/abnormal." We can call this the community and the Other, or the normal-bodied versus the disabled/disfigured, and so on. "This dialectic works in a fundamental way to produce plots," Davis explains. "Often a 'normal' character is made 'abnormal' by circumstance" (Davis 1998, 329). The community surrounding this abnormal character serves to teach the reader or the viewer what "normal" is, thus defining society and its expectations. The goal is to "cure" the story, make the society normal again; so the Other, the disabled character, must be eliminated or assimilated. Davis summarizes: "The narrative, at its end, is no longer disabled by its lack of conformity to imagined social norms" (331). Can there be any doubt that Christine will never take up residence in the Phantom's cold underground lair? That plot would not stand. All of these variations of how the narrative "must" work agree that Christine must love Raoul and that the Phantom must die.

## THE PHANTOM FACE

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When the story opens after the overture, we meet the company of the opera and discover that troubling things have been happening, which is news both to the opera's new patron Raoul, Vicomte de Changy, and the new owner/managers, Monsieur André and Monsieur Firmin. Some of the company dismisses the strange events as a prank, but Madame Girya, the ballet mistress, knows the entire story, although it takes her most of the musical to reveal it: there is not a ghost but indeed a man—a powerful and magical man who terrifies her—living in the underground lair and controlling the opera's productions through threats and tricks. Her mysterious belief in the man she insists on calling the Phantom or "Opera Ghost" has spread to the ballet corps, a twittering group of young girls, among them her daughter Meg. Over the course of the first act, the rest of the group—Raoul, the managers, the diva Carlotta—come to understand there is indeed someone down there, as he can make himself heard throughout the house and sends letters with demands about casting, but they remain steadfast in their view that he is neither magical nor harmful. They have no idea what he looks like. At the end of the first act, when it is revealed that he has killed the stagehand Buquet and has sent the chandelier crashing to the stage floor at Christine's feet, the group can no longer deny the fact that this man may be more than man; he has powers they can't explain. When he kills again in the second act (eliminating the tenor Piangi so that he may take over the man's role as a lascivious and masked Don Juan in the opera *Don Juan Triumphant*, which he himself has composed), then kidnaps Christine (again), the company becomes a hunting party and tracks him down.

Madame Girya's role in the portrayal of the Phantom to the others is crucial and quite odd, because she is the only one who knew him before his current life in the opera house, yet she is the most adamant that he is a ghost or a magical creature, to be both feared

and worshipped. It is she who delivers notes from the Opera Ghost, and when Christine shows off her newly improved vocal talent for the new managers, Madame Giry praises her as if Christine has offered up a prayer to God: "Yes, you did well. He will be pleased."<sup>1</sup>

The Phantom's face, normally hidden behind the famous diagonally-cut half-mask, is revealed only twice. In the first act, the Phantom has lured Christine from her dressing room to his lair, pulling her via a magic trick through her full-length mirror and down many ramps to his gondola, which he rows into his home. She pulls the mask from his face when she is down there alone with him, but the audience does not see it. His mask covers the right side of his face, which is angled upstage. This delay is tantalizing; the audience is primed now to see what's beneath that mask, thanks to Christine's reaction of shock and the Phantom's surprisingly violent and angry response to her fear. In the second act, when she comes to understand that it is he with whom she is performing in *Don Juan Triumphant*, she pulls the mask off again, revealing his face to both the opera company and the audience. Finally, then, his face is revealed, and it remains uncovered in the final scene down in his lair. Lloyd Webber and his team calculated this reveal for maximum effect, since despite a liberal amount of make-up, it would not be easy to see the Phantom's face beyond the first few rows. Unlike in film versions, when the Phantom's terrifying face can fill the screen, there had to be a way to convey horror and shock from a distance. Thus, the reveal occurs in front of the entire cast, and their reaction—screaming, gasping, running away—indicates to the audience that we should react similarly. (Incidentally, the 2004 film version goes in the opposite direction, giving the Phantom not much more than a rakish scar and coloring the entire musical with far more sex appeal and less terror.)

At the second unmasking, the audience can finally inspect the mysterious long-hidden disfigurement; we find deep gouges in the right side of the Phantom's face, in his cheek and temple. His lips on that side are too big, as if covered in swollen sores or tumors. He has streaks like exaggerated veins emerging from his hairline down his right temple. His right eye is a too-pale ice blue. He has a large three-dimensional crater on the right side of his skull, normally covered not by the mask but by a hairpiece attached to it. (To add insult to injury, as it were, when his face is revealed to the audience his hair comes with it, revealing that he is mostly bald, with unhealthy-looking wisps of hair stuck tentatively to his scalp.) Without his mask, the elegant ghostly genius becomes the monster.

## FREAK AND PRODIGY, SUBHUMAN AND SUPERHUMAN

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At the moment of this long-awaited second reveal that finally shows the audience the Phantom's face, the Phantom grabs Christine and disappears, and the rest of the cast instantly becomes a posse. This tense juncture is the inconvenient moment Raoul

chooses finally to learn something about his enemy, frantically questioning Madame Giry in an exchange that is crucial for the purposes of understanding the Phantom's disability but happens so quickly and so chaotically in the production that it largely goes unnoticed or unremembered; this sequence is spoken, not sung, thus rendering it less important than the rest of the material in the nearly all-sung show, and it does not appear on the original cast recording, so the many, many fans at home are largely unfamiliar with this information as well. The scene which could have finally explained who this man is gets such a quick, scattered treatment that it barely sinks in, and his confusing status as monster or god remains unclear. But the scene reveals his true nature. Raoul demands information from Madame Giry, in case it might help him and his team of avengers "track down this murderer," as they all chant. She finally fills him in.

GIRY: Very well. It was years ago. There was a travelling fair in the city. Tumblers, conjurors, human oddities . . .

R: Go on.

GIRY (*trance-like as she retraces the past*): And there was . . . I shall never forget him: a man . . . locked in a cage . . .

R: In a cage?

GIRY: A prodigy, monsieur! Scholar, architect, musician . . .

R (*piecing together the jigsaw*): A composer.

GIRY: And an inventor, too, monsieur. They boasted he had once built for the Shah of Persia, a maze of mirrors.

RAOUL (*mystified and impatient, cuts in*): Who was this man?

GIRY (*with a shudder*): A freak of nature . . . more monster than man . . .

RAOUL (*a murmur*): Deformed?

GIRY: From birth, it seemed.

RAOUL: My God.

GIRY: And then . . . he went missing. He escaped.

Raoul understands from this exchange that the enemy below is this former freak show attraction, one of the "human oddities" in a fair. He expresses his one moment of potential pity for the Phantom when he reacts in shock to Madame Giry's statement that the man was locked in a cage. But seconds later—and understandably, since this man, however pitiful, has killed two men and kidnapped his fiancée—he runs boldly into the lair, ready to fight.

This exchange also ties together two concepts that used to be linked, but are no longer often thought of as related: the prodigy and the freak. As Leonard Cassuto points out, it was only a few hundred years ago that "prodigy" was a term tied to anything inexplicable: "The category of 'prodigy' dates from the early modern period, when it encompassed 'monstrous' births and people with odd bodies (the 'freaks' of later generations) along with then-inexplicable natural phenomena such as earthquakes and comets" (Cassuto 2002, 126–127; see also Straus 2011, 125). Thus a child with a deformity and a child with a seemingly magical talent for, say, music, would both have been called prodigies due to their otherworldly qualities. In the Phantom, we find both the prodigy, in his



remarkable proficiency at a dizzying range of skills, and the freak, not only because of his deformity but because he was *actually* a member of a freak show.

From this rather throwaway exchange between Madame Giry and Raoul, then, we know that the Phantom had been a player in a freak show, though it's unclear whether this was by choice or due to lack of any other options at the time. Along the way he has, either by natural gift or much study, mastered all sorts of scholarly and magical skills. This revelation about his origins opens up a new lens through which to view the entire musical: while it is neatly read as an Other versus community story using various models of the disability analogy as mentioned earlier, it can also be read very simply as a freak show, a very specific kind of Other-based scenario. The audience is there to see the intriguing, grotesque, frightening Phantom, just as spectators went to see side shows and other novelty displays or performances in many different times and cultures. Garland-Thomson explains that the "differently formed body" draws the eye, and has done so since the earliest recorded human history; not only does it make us curious but also it invites explanation. The unusual body is "always an interpretive occasion" (Garland-Thomson 1996, 1).<sup>2</sup> Whether the explanation is religious, social, or medical, any given culture will use the mystery of the unusual body as a place to locate anxieties and questions. Robert Bogdan notes that people who performed in freak shows were given elaborate back stories, and a recurring character type was the "aggrandized" freak, who had a back story boasting that he or she was "highly educated, spoke many languages, and had aristocratic hobbies such as writing poetry or painting" (Bogdan, 1996, 29)—or architecture, magic, and composition, like the Phantom. Clearly Gaston Leroux, even if not immersed in the American culture that so readily embraced the freak show, was aware of this imagery and used it to build his Phantom's back story.

The freak show largely died out in this country about a hundred years ago; why, then, does this modern musical still lure spectators? Why would a supposedly enlightened society, willing to accept accommodations and equality for the disabled, still thrill at the sight of a man with an unusual head? Because the freak show did not actually end, it morphed into other forms of entertainment. Today, the freak show is couched in the guise of education, pity, and acceptance, but remains a way for people to stare at what's unusual. Andrea Stulman Dennett argues that the freak show, especially the attraction known as the dime museum, has been resurrected in the modern television talk show. The dime museum featured a host, or "lecturer," who would offer up the players' back stories, in a sheen of being educational; ostensibly, the spectators were there to learn about the freaks' conditions, and the dime museums even employed "doctors," but the real draw was simply to have a justifiable opportunity to stare. The parallels to talk shows abound, especially with recurring subjects like taboo couples (ones with radical age differences or body types, especially), unusual sexual habits, or noticeable bodies (tattoos and piercings in the dime museum days; often obese people today) (Dennett, 1996; see also Hughes 2012). Writing in 1996, Dennett had not yet seen—but certainly hinted at—the onslaught of freak-show-like television programs far beyond what appears on talk shows. Now, there are entire networks such as The Learning Channel and Discovery Fit & Health devoted to seemingly educational programming that offer us the chance to see graphic displays of injuries in emergency rooms, obese people and their weight-loss

surgeries, people with dwarfism, people plagued by the psychological disorder of hoarding (with lingering camera shots of every filthy corner of their homes), people addicted to freak-like habits such as eating metal or detergent, and conjoined twins, among other "freaks," all stories narrated by authoritative voices "teaching" viewers about their conditions and featuring scenes with doctors or therapists attempting to treat or cure. Perhaps the most blatantly freak-show-like title on the air must be: "The Man with the 132-lb. Scrotum."

In other words, the freak show lives on, and despite the great strides made in our society to accept those with disabilities, the urge to stare at the unusual remains strong; in fact it may even be growing, thanks to current television programming (not to mention the Internet and all it can display). It's certainly possible that those who are exposed to these unusual bodies may in fact become more tolerant, and understand that acceptance (as opposed to kill or cure) is a viable option, but the urge to display and the urge to look go unchecked. It's no wonder, then, that when Christine rips off the Phantom's mask, the audience leans forward in expectation; the music is lovely, the voices soar, the sets are remarkable, but this is what we came to see.

When Christine removes his mask in Act One, he rounds on her, singing in a loud, frantic line, "Is this what you wanted to see?" He suggests, as he repeats "Damn you! Curse you!" that her action has doomed her forever, that by seeing his face, she now belongs to a small and unhappy club. "Now you cannot ever be free," he scolds. He is certainly not wrong to be furious; she invaded his privacy and ignored his obvious desire to hide his face, taking from him any sense of agency or safety he had. But he pivots his very brief loss of self-determination into a power play, wresting the control back. He next sings a section of the score called "Stranger Than You Dreamt It," in which his quick, hot anger becomes a sarcastic, controlled, and superior tone. Over music that steps quietly and carefully from beat to beat, he needles her, revealing how he feels about himself, or perhaps how he has been taught to feel about himself based on the reactions of previous viewers of his face.

Stranger than you dreamt it.  
Can you even dare too look  
or bear to think of me?  
This loathsome gargoye, who  
burns in hell, but secretly  
yearns for heaven,  
secretly . . .  
secretly . . .

But, Christine,  
Fear can turn to love.  
You'll learn to see, to  
find the man behind the monster, this  
repulsive carcass who  
seems a beast but secretly  
dreams of beauty,  
secretly . . .  
secretly . . .

He calls himself an impressive host of cruel names—loathsome gargoyle, monster, repulsive carcass—but also reveals that he yearns for heaven and dreams of beauty. Most tellingly, he suggests that she could learn to love him, through the surely unhealthy notion that her fear could become love, coupled with the much more socially aware notion that she might learn to know the man without being put off by his appearance.

This notion, that she might love him and become his lover, is touched on many times throughout the show. Despite his mastery of many skills, and his ability to terrify everyone in the opera house, romance is clearly far beyond his understanding. It was director Hal Prince who emphasized the sexual—not just the romantic—angle of the Phantom's struggle. He felt that sex was largely missing from the score and set out to infuse it in several ways, especially visually and in terms of the actors' interpretations of the material. Around the time he began working on the production, he had seen a documentary about the daily lives of disabled people, including their sex lives. He wove a thread through the show highlighting the Phantom's longing for sexual connection, and emphasized the eroticism in many visual ways including lush fabrics, numerous candles and dark areas, and especially the proscenium arch. "If you look carefully," he pointed out, you will realize that the sculpted arch framing the stage is a strange collection of tangled partial bodies (which can be read as disabled or disfigured, limbs missing, faces distorted) that are "in various stages of ecstasy" (Nightingale, 1988). Prince's choice to sexualize the whole production, especially the Phantom, was an oddly groundbreaking move in a show that otherwise rests on old-fashioned and distasteful notions about the disabled. Often, disabled people are portrayed as asexual, unable or uninterested in sex, undesirable to others; but the Phantom is sexy, seductive, very desirable, as is the lush velvet-draped and fog-filled world he creates. The Phantom's sexual side is a front, though; Christine quickly sees the desperation and naïveté beneath.

Christine tries to explain the conflict to Raoul—the conflict between the Phantom's gruesome exterior and his pathetic lovelorn personality—after she has seen the Phantom's face and is recounting the experience to Raoul. "Raoul, I've seen him!" she insists. "So distorted, deformed, it was hardly a face." But she goes on to explain the contradiction: "Yet in his eyes, all the sadness of the world. / Those pleading eyes, that both threaten and adore." Raoul, steadfastly refusing to believe this vision can be real, insists it was a dream and that there is no Phantom; the suggestion here is that Christine herself is suffering from some sort of madness.

The melody that sets this couplet about his eyes, demonstrating Christine's understanding of the Phantom's sadness and desperation for human contact, will recur in the climactic scene, just before she shocks him, Raoul, and the audience by kissing the Phantom. The second couplet, calm and tonal and ending in a tidy major-key resolution, perhaps explains best the Phantom's true disability: "This haunted face holds no horror for me now. / It's in your soul that the true distortion lies." See Track 39.1 on the Companion Website.

Ultimately, then, his face becomes simply a distraction from—or more accurately a manifestation of—his evilness. Paul Longmore presented this concept and it has been taken up by many; he notes that the "association of disability with malevolence" has a

long history in literature; he even mentions the Phantom of the Opera and other arts (2001, 2). Longmore explains that disabilities or deformities associated with "monster" characters are linked in the tales to their inherent evilness. He notes that "these visible traits express disfigurement of personality and deformity of the soul. Once again, disability may be represented as the cause of evil-doing, punishment for it, or both" (4-5). In the case of the Phantom, his disfigurement and its resulting social ramifications seem to have driven him to his evil acts, but somehow his face reflects his inner malevolence even if it predates that malevolence. Certainly Madame Giry and the others who know of him never separate his acts from his appearance.

Longmore goes on to propose that in many stories, disability is associated with a loss of some aspect of the character's humanity, which leads in turn to a loss of self-control and therefore a turn to violence—a perfect description of the Phantom's journey from disfigured loner to murderer. The Phantom reflects both the sympathetic and the monstrous representations of disability; he is clearly feared both for his appearance and his acts, but he is also eventually pitied because of the seemingly unavoidable life of criminal isolation imposed on him by an entirely unfeeling society. Jeffrey Weinstock notes that there is a distinction between the freak and the monster: freaks are one of us, fundamentally human despite their oddities; monsters are "superhuman or nonhuman" and much more removed from us (1996, 328). Weinstock notes that the line between the two is marked clearly by the threat of physical violence; a freak is a curiosity, but a monster will kill you. The Phantom of Leroux or of Lon Chaney lies squarely in the monster category, but in Lloyd Webber's musical, he visits both categories.

Thus the musical displays a confusing ambivalence about whether or not the Phantom is human. And if he is not, is he more than human, or less? The stage directions imply that this missing element of his humanness may be represented by literal cold-bloodedness. In the moment of transition between "Angel of Music" (when Christine begs to be visited by the spirit) and "The Phantom of the Opera" (when he complies, arrives, and carries her to his lair below), he appears in her dressing room mirror and grabs her arm to pull her through it. The stage directions inform us: "His touch is cold, and CHRISTINE gasps." Is he simply chilly from living in the basement? Or does he lack warm blood in his body, like a corpse, or a vampire, or other not-quite-human monster?

The Phantom is simultaneously superhuman (an angel, a god, a ghost, a genius) and subhuman (a monster, a remorseless killer, a half-dead creature). He is virtually never portrayed as a maladjusted human who happens to have a physical disability. In Anthony Burgess's novel *Napoleon Symphony*, a strange pseudobiographical novel of Napoleon with a structure based on the form of Beethoven's third symphony, many characters delight in colorfully describing Napoleon who, like the Phantom, is sometimes seen as all powerful, other times seen as a freak or animal or monster. Characters often compare Napoleon to a monkey, or even a toy monkey like the animated music box from the Phantom's lair, describing him as an animal and a machine. One speaker summarizes the view of Napoleon that echoes what *The Phantom of the Opera* proposes about the Phantom: "The subhuman and the superhuman are alike in that neither is human" (Burgess 1974, 224).

## FETISHIZING THE MASK

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During “The Music of the Night,” the Phantom encourages Christine to make music—a euphemism if ever there was one—with him, and the song becomes something of an exercise in hypnosis. He embraces and caresses her, and she appears to be dazed but calm. The stage directions remind us of his literal coldness: “During all this, the PHANTOM has conditioned CHRISTINE to the coldness of his touch and her fingers are brave enough to stray to his mask and caress it, with no hint of removing it.”

By having Christine caress his mask in a way that shows comfort, affection, or romantic attraction, the Phantom seems to be doing more than just teaching her to get used to it. He seduces her in “The Music of the Night,” with his lush melody, his seductive words (“Touch me, trust me, / savour each sensation”), and his caresses, and by encouraging her to touch his mask during these other seductions, he is teaching her to be attracted to the mask itself. In other words, he shows her how to fetishize the mask, how to make it part of their sexual encounter. One could interpret this as an example of the Phantom’s alluring sexuality, but it may also be read as a demonstration of his twisted magical powers, coupled with his violent streak; she seems to be hypnotized, unwilling, even a victim of assault despite her calm demeanor. We get the sense that she has no choice but to obey him—she is drugged, not seduced. She develops a fascination for the mask, as much as, if not more than, her interest in the face that lies beneath it. This song is also the audience’s first opportunity to get a good look at the Phantom, so we too become accustomed to his mask. Only she removes his mask; he never does, at least in view of anyone else, and the only other person ever to touch it is Meg, who finds it sitting abandoned on his throne in the final seconds of the show. In that closing scene, as the music moves toward its final cadence—using the unusual set of chords found at the end of “The Music of the Night,” the song in which we all learned to feel attracted to the mask—Meg holds it up and a spotlight slowly narrows on it. The rest of the stage becomes invisible, and only a tiny pinpoint spotlight remains, causing the mask to glow in magical midair. The mask, therefore, has become its own character, one that is sexy, alluring, mysterious, coveted—fetishized.

It’s certainly understandable that the musical features imagery that focuses on the mask, as it is the Phantom’s most distinguishable characteristic and a central theme of the show. Masks in general, in fact, play a recurring role, especially in the second-act opener “Masquerade,” which takes place at a masked ball and which dwells on the concept of how no one can see behind anyone’s “mask” to know the person beneath. The Phantom appears, interrupting the end of this number, dressed himself in a masquerade costume: an entirely red ensemble with a sweeping cape, a large hat with a huge feather, and a full-face mask depicting a skull. In this alarming costume, he feels comfortable walking among the others, which he otherwise never does, except when on stage during his opera. The full mask and complicated costume cover every inch of his body, making

him entirely unrecognizable and distancing himself from his usual look (formal tuxedo and white half-mask with attached slicked-back hair).

The marketing campaign for *The Phantom of the Opera* picked up on the recognizability and effectiveness of the mask image, using a version of the Phantom's white mask in its logo and marketing materials, making it an object so well-known that it could appear without words and be understood—a kind of fetish marketing. The mask in the logo is never worn by the Phantom but is a more typical masquerade-style mask, covering both eyes and the nose symmetrically. It resembles a comedy/tragedy theatrical mask more than the one the Phantom actually wears, which cuts from one temple diagonally across his face, including one eye (for which there is a hole) and most of his nose, and ending in a rounded point on the opposite lower jaw. Thus the marketing version of the mask, although iconic, actually erases the Phantom's asymmetrical disfigurement and suggests something more predictable and less frightening than his shockingly lopsided face.

## BLAMING SOCIETY FOR A DISTORTED SOUL: THE FINAL CONFRONTATION AND THE KISS

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The Phantom's disabilities—internal and external—become the focus of the final scene in his lair, after Christine has removed his mask during *Don Juan Triumphant* and he has dragged her below once again. The Phantom himself is aware of the interpretation of his life proposed by this and many other monster stories, that his face and his crimes are somehow linked, that his face reflects his distorted soul. But he denies this link, in a harsh, dissonant melody borrowed from the music of his own opera:

Why, you ask, was I bound and chained  
in this cold and dismal place?  
Not for any mortal sin,  
but the wickedness of my abhorrent face!

He screams this accusation at Christine, blaming her for society's mistreatment of him, denying that his own actions have had any role to play in his outsider status. His tirade continues and the music here perseverates, circular in melody, in a breathless meter of seven, one syllable per beat:

Hounded out by everyone!  
Met with hatred everywhere!  
No kind word from anyone!  
No compassion anywhere!

Christine, angry and bitter for the only time in the entire musical, defends her honor, turning on him and demanding if his “lust for blood” (because he has killed his second victim) will become sexual assault. “Am I now to be prey to your lust for flesh?” she spits. His response reveals another layer to the effects of his disability, only hinted at before now; his “fate,” which he equates with his disfigured face and which, he suggests, causes his violent behavior, has also caused him to have remained inexperienced in sexual matters—and, even before that, to have lost his mother’s love.

That fate, which condemns me to wallow in blood,  
has also denied me the joys of the flesh.  
This face, the infection which poisons our love,  
This face, which earned a mother’s fear and loathing.  
A mask, my first unfeeling scrap of clothing.  
Pity comes too late –  
turn around and face your fate:  
an eternity of *this* before your eyes!

The implication is that his mother both rejected him and put the mask over his face at a young age, teaching him that he was to feel shame and to expect disgust from society. He plays to the sympathy he knows Christine likely feels, even if she is currently angry; in the middle of the stanza above, he pivots his melody from an angular, recitative-like line to a quotation from “The Music of the Night” on the line about his mother. Using his seduction song, he surely hopes to evoke pity that he can then transform into love. Here she offers up the crucial couplet, explaining that the “true distortion” is in his soul.

Raoul arrives to confront the Phantom, but is caught in his magical Punjab Lasso, which holds Raoul by the neck without its other end seeming to be connected to anything. He remains, as he has been throughout, largely useless in the battle with this enemy. Out of the trio comes Christine’s revelation: that all the Phantom really needs is sympathy, human contact, understanding. Quoting the sweet, soothing melody, “Angel of Music,” reminding us that in her eyes he is a fallen angel now, she approaches him:

Pitiful creature of darkness,  
What kind of life have you known?  
God give me courage to show you  
You are not alone.

The stage directions in the libretto explain the all-important action she takes next: “Now calmly facing him, she kisses him long and full on the lips. The embrace lasts a long time, RAOUL watches in horror and wonder.” In this instant, the Phantom is undone. He immediately gives up his fight to win Christine’s love, his desire to hurt or kill Raoul, his role as the Opera Ghost, and everything else about his life. As soon as the crucial kiss ends, he urges, “Go now—go now and leave me!” freeing Raoul and shooing them both quickly out of his lair.

It seems, then, that this one act of kindness, the only he has ever experienced, destroys his life and reveals to him that Christine is too good for him—so good that he must do the noble thing, removing himself from this unhappy love triangle, and freeing her to be with Raoul. His anger that society has forced him to be alone becomes resignation that this isolation is the only option for him. He no longer imagines he can persuade her or woo her, nor anyone else. Instead, he quotes his anthem, with a twist—"It's over now, the music of the night"—then sits on his trick throne, wraps his cape around his entire body, and vanishes, never to be seen again by anyone at the opera. Having fought the notion throughout the story that death is the only option for a disabled, enfreaked, othered character, he resigns himself to this inevitability now and removes himself from the world.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, narratives of disability so often end with tragic, noble deaths that the audience does not question that the disfigured character must suffer this fate; indeed, we admire him for realizing he has made the "right" choice and we weep pitifully as we also celebrate the relationship Christine can now have with Raoul. Disability once again becomes a death sentence.

## EVILNESS OF FACE, SOUL, . . . AND MUSIC

The Phantom has a distinctive compositional voice, provided by Lloyd Webber and made distinct from the rest of the music. His opera *Don Juan Triumphant* stands apart from the rest of the score in several ways, although many themes and melodic fragments of it do appear elsewhere in the score, both before and after the excerpts we hear from his opera. Despite the fact that the Phantom borrows music that exists only in the world of the musical (that is, nondiegetic themes that only we in the audience hear as music), he makes them largely unrecognizable in their new context. The main way in which he makes the material his own is through dissonance—in short, the Phantom's opera is very, very hard to sing. We see the cast attempting to rehearse a boisterous choral number, and they struggle mightily; the music director Reyer attempts to coach the tenor Piangi to sing the phrase "those who tangle with Don Juan" correctly, but the strange nature of the line (mostly based on a whole-tone scale) baffles Piangi, who fails to make large enough melodic leaps several times. "His way is better," snaps Carlotta. "At least he makes it sound like music!" Reyer cues Piangi for his next attempt, which reveals that this passage not only has a dissonant and unpredictable melody, but an unusual meter as well: "So, once again—after seven," says Reyer, counting in, "Five, six, seven." Carlotta notes that no one will know or care if the music is right or wrong, while Christine—who, not surprisingly, has an affinity for the Phantom's compositional style, or perhaps just a better ear than the others (thanks to her lessons with him?)—attempts to show Piangi the augmented fourth he's failing to complete. Chaos ensues, the chorus shouting and trying to practice, until Reyer bangs on the piano. At this point one of the Phantom's magic tricks kicks in: the piano plays by itself, with "great force and rhythm," as the stage directions note, and the cast freezes. Then they all begin to sing the music "robotically



and accurately.” Apparently the Phantom has cast some sort of hypnotic spell on them all, and they now simply know the music for reasons never explained. They deliver a homorhythmic but very dissonant, angular passage, previewing the theme of creepy seduction that will be revisited in the actual performance (see Tracks 39.2 and 39.3 on the Companion Website).

The fact that the music is clearly hard for the opera company points to several implications about the Phantom. The most superficial suggestion is simply that the Phantom is a modern, living composer, writing in the less functionally tonal language of the 1860s, when the company is mostly used to the classics. (Their earlier opera scenes, one from an imaginary Mozart-era opera and the other seemingly of the French grand opera tradition, are tonal, predictable, and catchy.) But the challenges in the music are surely also a result of the Phantom’s peculiar mind; it doesn’t sound like other contemporary music. His precocious genius combined with his mischievous enjoyment in watching the opera company suffer have inspired him to write for them what is nearly unsingable. We can argue one more reason even beyond the Phantom’s conscious efforts to be difficult, though, and read his music as an inevitable manifestation of his disability. That is, he writes this way because of his social (more than his physical) dysfunction. L. Poundie Burstein has noted that the disabled composer Alkan wrote extremely challenging piano music: “The most notorious aspect of his music is its extraordinary demand for virtuosity” (Burstein 2006, 188).<sup>4</sup> Burstein cautions against linking the demands of the music with the disability of its creator, noting that this association is a much-repeated narrative rather than something that can ever be proven, but in the case of the Phantom, Lloyd Webber clearly intends to convey exactly this narrative. The Phantom’s twisted mind, incapable of “normal” or comprehensible music, spits out this twisted, confusing, unpleasant, harsh, loud stuff instead.

## REASSURING DISTANCE

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Christine calls the Phantom an angel, then a creature; this mysterious and fundamentally unknowable figure never truly becomes human or real to the audience. There are two reasons that this central character is ultimately an enigma: the first is that, as we have seen, he is so variously and changeably defined that we are never sure how to feel about him. He is monster and god, cold creature and angel, criminal and ghost. There is always something off with him, he is never normal, healthy, or human. The other reason that it’s difficult to understand how to feel about this character is that he is virtually never alone on stage. He never sings what musical theatre scholars call an “I want” song, in which he expresses his goal and reveals his basic personality traits. (Interestingly, Mozart’s Don Giovanni is likewise never alone, never self-reflective; he is always defined in response to those around him—a flirtatious servant girl, a resistant noblewoman—and is damned to hell for his monstrous but charming ways.) The first and last time the Phantom is alone on stage is in the final seconds of Act One, when he sings a small fragment of a

verse in which he vows to retaliate against Christine (and everyone else) for daring to love another, while revealing his broken heart. This moment, like so much of the rest of this story, is confusing in terms of who or what this being is. He has overheard Christine and Raoul's love song and after they exit, comes out of hiding, crestfallen. "I gave you my music," he sings softly and pitifully, "made your song take wing. / And now, how you've repaid me. / Denied me and betrayed me." The audience gasps and sighs in sympathy. But instantly he becomes a criminal mastermind again, belting "You will curse the day you did not do / all that the Phantom asked of you!" If we have been moved by his sadness over losing his girl, then are we now meant to root for his scheme of vengeance? Are we happy when he almost kills Christine by throwing the chandelier down at her? Surely we can't support his violent actions, but we can be impressed by the cleverness with which he pulls them off—he is again, simultaneously, monster and ghost, but not a man, not a real or relatable person. Almost never do Lloyd Webber or Prince allow the Phantom to simply be a person with a disfigured face.

The distance between him and the audience, then, is built into the score and is a direct result of the story's ambiguity over what he is—that is, over how to interpret his disabilities. We struggle to see his face, we recoil when we do and are grateful for the distance between him and us. We justify his anger at society, but cannot condone the murders he commits. We pity him but never accept him, because even if we agree that society's rejection of him drove him to be as he is, his soul remains incurably distorted. Because of the distance that Lloyd Webber and Prince place between the Phantom and the audience—a distance created by the remote historical setting, the lush romanticism of the music and the visuals, Lloyd Webber's commitment to never allowing the Phantom a realistic moment of self-expression—we accept this interpretation of the Phantom as incurable and permanently ostracized. The musical never humanizes him, forcing him always to be a subhuman freak or a superhuman monster, and this status as nonhuman means that we become unwitting supporters of an entirely avoidable death. To Lloyd Webber, Prince, and the audience, his death is both inevitable and glorious, a cause for cathartic weeping rather than political outrage over a society's treatment of a disfigured and ill-treated man. He remains subhuman and superhuman, but not human, and not one of us.

## NOTES

1. This and all quotations of lyrics or dialogue from *The Phantom of the Opera* are taken from the complete libretto contained in Perry 1987, 140–167. I have taken the liberty of altering the punctuation of some of the lines, as the libretto in this book is often confusingly punctuated.
2. See also Garland-Thomson's book *Staring* (2009), in which she writes at length about why people stare: "we both crave and dread unpredictable sights" (19). She explains in a range of scenarios how staring becomes an interaction between starrer and staree, which is certainly the case when Christine can finally clearly see (and stare at) the Phantom's face.

3. The Phantom has much in common with Grizabella from Lloyd Webber's earlier mega-musical hit, *Cats*. Like the Phantom, Grizabella is both deformed ("You see the corner of her eye twist like a crooked pin," sings an observer cat in "Grizabella the Glamour Cat") and an outcast from society. In her case, it is not just her appearance but her former life that makes her an Other; Eliot's poem implies she led a fast life in her youth ("She haunted many a low resort") and that her current scars are the price she paid. Like so many monsters in stories before her, the community simultaneously comes to know her and agrees to cast her out; she is "reborn" into the next of her nine cat lives. Her ending is meant to be uplifting (literally, as she is lifted to the Heaviseide Layer, a kind of cat heaven or rebirthing center, on a floating tire) but can be read as quite harsh, since just moments after the community has taken the time to understand her and has chosen to embrace and honor her, they send her away.
4. See also Rodgers 2006, in which the author describes how Berlioz intentionally broke the rules of the symphony (especially in terms of form) to demonstrate that his artist-protagonist was mentally unbalanced.

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