

## Arthur Machen's Weird Reputation

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In this week's Dispatches from The Secret Library, Dr Oliver Tearle salutes the Welsh wizard of horror fiction

Arthur Machen (1863-1947) is one of those writers who seem destined to fall in and out of fashion. Having attained fame, swiftly followed by notoriety, in 1895 when his book *The Three Impostors* scandalised the London literary world with its account of debauched pagan rituals, Machen had to wait twelve years to get his next novel, *The Hill of Dreams*, published. During the First World War, his short story 'The Bowmen', in which English soldiers are aided on the battlefield by the ghosts of English archers from the battle of Agincourt 500 years before, caused a sensation when Machen's entirely fictional account was taken up as fact. Then, again, he disappeared from view. Interest in Arthur Machen has been sporadic ever since. It's delightful to see that, with the publication of this glorious (and gloriously yellow) new edition of Machen's horror fiction, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* (Oxford World's Classics Hardback Collection), he's getting another push towards greater recognition once again.

The furore caused by *The Three Impostors* in 1895 signalled a decline in Machen's popularity for a while, but it also demonstrates his power as a writer of horror fiction. When John Lane approached Machen about toning down some of the more inflammatory content of the novella – which is a collection of inset stories strongly influenced by Robert Louis Stevenson's work – Machen initially refused to excise any offending word from his text, but after a while he reconsidered and agreed to the removal of one word from the final scene of the novel. The word? 'Entrails'.

1895, of course, was also the year that another writer achieved far greater notoriety, although for his private life rather than his work: it was the year of Oscar Wilde's downfall. It was also the year that H. G. Wells's landmark novella, *The Time Machine*, was published. In his illuminating introduction to this new edition of Machen's horror fiction, Aaron Worth observes it's tempting to see the two men as complements to each other: Machen was interested in the deep past and the horrors that might be found there, while Wells liked to speculate about the far future and what horrors might await us in the years, and centuries, to come. Worth notes that such a binary is overly simplistic, but what is curious about Machen is how many other writers of the time he reminds us of, without striking us as hopelessly derivative or overly indebted to his better-known contemporaries.

Take Machen's parallels with Robert Louis Stevenson, for instance. It's true that he was influenced by Stevenson, and the stamp of the *New Arabian Nights* and *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* can be observed in *The Three Impostors* in particular: the inset story structure, the descriptions of dark and foggy London, the emphasis on

scientific experimentation. Yet Machen was far more interested in the occult and more open to the supernatural than Stevenson (indeed, he would later be a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, alongside Aleister Crowley and W. B. Yeats), and decried that modern audiences called for science and realism in their horror fiction rather than out-and-out flirtations with the otherworldly: Dr Jekyll has to send to Bond Street for some ‘rare drugs’ rather than making a Faustian pact with the devil. Similarly, the influence of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes can be glimpsed in Dyson, a recurring character in Machen’s fiction who has Holmes’s scientific turn of mind, but Dyson is far more open to the supernatural than the hyper-rational Holmes (he’s also far less effective a ‘sleuth’ than Conan Doyle’s detective). If Machen owed a debt to these authors, as he surely did, then he had the alchemical gift to turn his myriad influences into something new. This is one of the many reasons why this new selection of his work is worth reading.

Machen’s most famous work, included here as the title story, is probably *The Great God Pan* (1894), a monstrous tale of horror and suspense which Stephen King thinks is ‘maybe the best [horror story] in the English language’. In this novella, which again bears the stamp of Stevenson’s influence, a scientist performs a dangerous experiment in order to ‘see the great god Pan’, the pagan god of nature and the woods among other things. Machen, knowing the scientific turn which Gothic horror has taken in the fin de siècle, fuses the idea of lifting the veil with a sort of late Victorian neuroscience or brain surgery, and his scientist figure, Dr Raymond, performs his experiment on a young girl named Mary – an experiment that will have terrible and far-reaching consequences. One can see why some Victorians were scandalised by this: Pan was associated with sexual lust, and Mary’s ‘encounter’ with the god supposedly results in a bastard offspring, a mysterious woman named Helen (whose name suggests the Greek world of Pan, both through the enchanting but destructive beauty of Helen of Troy and a suggestion of the Hellenic) who will figure later in the story...

Arthur Machen remains a figure on the fringes of horror fiction. Perhaps, in a sense, that’s where he belongs. But he deserves a wider readership. His work influenced H. P. Lovecraft and he is now seen as one of the founding fathers of that peculiar hybrid form known as ‘the Weird’. This beautiful edition of his work is the perfect way to begin exploring his classic horror fiction.

*The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* (Oxford World’s Classics Hardback Collection) is out next week from Oxford University Press.

Oliver Tearle is the author of *Britain by the Book: A Curious Tour of Our Literary Landscape*, published by John Murray.

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