



Article

'The Swallowed Beloved': Corporeality and Incorporation in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*

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Abstract: In keeping with the focus of this special edition of *Humanities* on the political child, this article builds on investigations into constructions of the child body in literature and society to examine how portrayals of the child body in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* repeatedly slip under the varying perspectives of the adults; that is, how adult politics are always at play in understandings of children and childhood both within and outside of the text. In taking this approach, this article focuses on two key texts in literary discussions of spectrality, bodies, and signification—*Hamlet* and 'Fors'—to consider how the paradoxical child body in Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* is both constructed within the adult perspective and constantly slips from it, and how Gaiman approaches the issue at the heart of this analysis: that of who gets to decide who or what a child is, should be, or can be.

Keywords: ghost; body; corporeality; childhood; Derrida; crypt; graveyard; Gaiman; *Hamlet*; perspective

1. Introduction: The 'Paradox of the Ghost'

The body of the child in Western culture, society and literature has long been a battleground on which ideological conflicts over political issues by adult critics, writers and politicians (among others) have been staged. Historical and anthropological explorations of the factors that are constructed as constituting childhood and the boundaries within which it is, or should be, constrained; the child's necessary relationship with the adults that consider such questions and definitions; and the ongoing debates over race, sex, gender, class and disability have all been grist to this particular mill. But nowhere is the debate over the politics of the child body stranger—its terms more unsettled and unsettling—than in Neil Gaiman's 2008 Gothic fantasy novel for children, *The Graveyard Book* (Gaiman 2008), a coming-of-age tale that is also deeply invested in narratives of life, death, and the tenuous and uncertain boundaries between these seemingly binary states. In considering the political child within and in relation to this text, I will not attempt to resolve this unsettling in a quest for a fixed and knowable child body or identity. Rather, this essay will trace what Margrit Shildrick terms 'not only the categorical integrity of bodies that matter but also the hitherto taken for granted stability of a body whose integrity is so unquestioned that it may be forgotten, transcended' (Shildrick 2020, p. 303). Via an analysis of the uncertain boundaries of corporeality, the construction of the child body through adult perspective(s), and the child's body as signifier in Gaiman's text, I will consider how the child body's status has become unsettled and how the lasting political implications of its study by adult constructs reflect and trouble each other.

When debating corporeality in Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*—a text that, by its very title, indicates dealings with ghosts, revenants, and the borders between the living and the dead body—there is nowhere more apt to begin a reading of the child body and its politicisation than Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The Ghost of Hamlet's father is frequently employed in texts other than *Hamlet* as a cultural and critical shorthand: Susan Owens describes it as 'the most representative ghost of its era' (Owens 2017, p. 51), while for Slavoj Žižek, it represents the repeated deferral of the Oedipus myth in psychoanalysis, with 'the



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spectre of the dead father [...] the projection of Hamlet's own guilt about his death-wish' (Žižek 2001, p. 9). Across literary criticism more widely, the ghost both stands in for all literary ghosts and subverts any understanding of what a ghost is or should be, even within works of fiction (although the class of ghosts necessarily disturbs any boundaries between fact and fiction too). The Ghost of Hamlet's father unsettles assumed binary divisions between ghost and not-ghost, living and dead, parent and child, and literal and signifier within its own text, in those texts that attempt to grapple with it, and between texts, including *The Graveyard Book*. In considering the political child in Gaiman's work, I will explore similar notions of slippage and consider how the fractured, slipped and relative identities of the ghost in *Hamlet* also come into play here.

Within *Hamlet*, notions of identity and the split between living and dead are troubled when the ghost-father named Hamlet comes face-to-face with his son, also Hamlet. The uncanny doubling of father and son might be argued to pre-exist the father's death, especially given that this doubling is doubled further by the Hamlets' antagonists, the pair of Fortinbras father and son (a link that will prove particularly relevant to explorations of the child body in *The Graveyard Book*). However, the natural line of son taking over after his father's death is disrupted by the dead father's refusal to stay dead, insisting on a life after death that positions this ghost within the French term, 'revenant' (returned, usually from the dead), rather than the English terms, 'ghost', 'phantom' and 'spectre', which have broader implications. The return of the father as a ghost also then has implications for the son, still under the command of his father even after death and therefore refused his place as an adult. The living son is thereby ghosted in his turn, existing as a pale reflection of the father who refuses to let go, and displaced twice from his expected inheritance by the ghost-father and the uncle who has taken his father's place in life. Further, although the debate between Hamlet, Horatio and their friends over whether the Ghost of Hamlet's father is a revenant or a spirit sent from hell to confuse and torment in the shape of someone previously known to inhabit such a shape, is resolved within the play when the ghost speaks, this appeal to the senses does not provide the guarantees it is leveraged to assure. The characters do not trust their sight, even when their collective vision appears to yield the same results, but do trust Hamlet's report of his hearing; a second-hand singular sense is thereby privileged over a different but collective sensory experience of this ghost.

These central concerns with and troublings of spectrality are explored within Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* too, in what might seem to be simpler terms than in *Hamlet*. Ghosts, here, appear to be constructed as revenants, spectral forms tied to the graveyard where their bodies are buried and bearing the names that are inscribed on their tombstones, despite Buse and Stott's argument that 'a ghost is clearly not the same thing as the person who shares its proper name' (Buse and Stott 1999, p. 11). However, Gaiman shakes the apparent certainty and simplicity of his own characterisation of the ghost from the outset. In what is seemingly the first description of a ghost, in that it apparently describes the revenant later characterised as Mrs Owens, Gaiman troubles both place and ghost via the directed gaze of the reader in a sensory passage reminiscent of Hamlet et al.'s own early ghostly encounters. Using imperatives, Gaiman appeals to the assumed reader's sight while simultaneously undermining its efficacy:

'Look. You could see the abandoned funeral chapel [...] You could see stones and tombs and vaults and memorial plaques. You could see the occasional dash or scuttle of a rabbit or a vole or a weasel [...] You would have seen these things, in the moonlight, if you had been there that night.' (Gaiman 2008, p. 7)

The reader is therefore directed to participate in this sensory experience of the graveyard with the introductory imperative, but in such a way that the existence of the graveyard's components is called into question, with the elective deferrals of 'dash or scuttle' and 'a rabbit or a vole or a weasel'—the conjunctions linking with the definite articles to construct a present absence—and by the conditionals applied to the assumed reader's sight: 'you could see [...] you would have seen'. And the seemingly first description of a ghost is presented within a similar linguistic slippage:

‘You might not have seen a pale, plump woman, who walked the path near the front gates, and if you had seen her, with a second, more careful glance you would have realized that she was only moonlight, mist and shadow. The pale, plump woman was there, though.’ (Gaiman 2008, p. 7)

The conditionals of the previous description continue with the addressed readers’ gaze, positioned here in the past, both directed and misdirected, whilst the presence of the woman is likewise both denied and confirmed while also described in terms of multiple other elements which she both is and is not. As such, the body of the adult woman is troubled as much as the problematised presence of the ghost, with the boundaries between living and dead and between body, ghost and other elements slipping just as the gaze of the reader slips, while still necessarily presented in the binary opposites that create the paradox. As in *Hamlet*, both presence and the sensory experience of that elided presence combine to trouble the truth or reality of what is being seen, while also positioning the body within the perspective of the viewer: an uncanny perspective that will be replicated in constructions of the child body throughout this text.

Yet, in the troubling of ghost and body in this portrayal, we realise that this is not the first appearance of a ghost in *The Graveyard Book* after all; it begins, in a beginning that has already slipped, with the ghostly presence of a child. The story commences with the murder of a father, mother, and daughter by a character named throughout as ‘the man Jack’ (Gaiman 2008, p. 3), and the man Jack’s search for a second, very young child whose additional murder will complete his assigned or assumed task. During the man Jack’s search of the house: ‘He could make out the shape of the child in the cot, head, limbs and torso.’ But it turns out: ‘The shape in the cot was a teddy bear. There was no child’ (Gaiman 2008, p. 4). The ‘shape of the child’—its seemingly physical form—is therefore both known and not known, present and absent. Its component parts are listed as that which constitutes ‘child’ but the designation misses, with the very fragmentation of the body into its parts. However, this fragmentation slips further with its simultaneous reassembly, in a sly reversal of Frankenstein’s creature, to form not a child but a cuddly toy, with the ghost thereby summoned of the child body that should have been there but is not. This comment—‘There was no child’—one that sits between the perspective of the man Jack and the narrator, somehow unmoored, nevertheless shapes representations of the child body throughout the text: present and absent, bodied and disembodied, expected but missing, living and ghost.

It also places the child body, whatever and wherever it may be, in disturbing relation to that of the adult, for Jack has summoned the child-ghost himself through his expectations and the apparent confirmation of his sensory experience, creating a link between the child body and the man that decides its shape and its presence, no matter that he is ultimately proved wrong. As such, this description, along with the following section in which the man Jack attempts to track the child by smell, relying on senses other than sight now that it has failed him like Hamlet and his friends but with less success than they, further troubles the boundaries of corporeality and of ghostliness, and the expected division between life and death. Such divisions—if we can grasp them at all—are seemingly at the mercy of the adult perspective on the child. The child body, at this point in the text, therefore exists solely within the perspective of the adult male, already presenting as what I see as the key issue at play in Gaiman’s work in terms of analysing the political child: that of who gets to decide the form and status of the child body.

When attempting to secure the uncertain presence of the child body and trying to negotiate the line between body and spirit in this text, we are then inevitably confronted by what Ruth Parkin-Gounelas terms ‘the many paradoxes of the ghost’ (Parkin-Gounelas 1999, p. 129); for the revenant ghosts of the graveyard and the ghost-body of the child are not the only iterations or examples of a slippage between living and dead. For example, revenants appear in other states than the misty form of Mrs Owens and her companions: the ghosts of the child’s father, mother and sister also appear briefly, but as ‘a raw, flickering, startling shape the grey colour of television static, all panic and naked emotion’ and ‘only

one of them was in focus' (Gaiman 2008, p. 10). As such, the expected iteration of the revenant-ghost is disrupted almost from the outset, with Mrs Owens' embodied integrity—plumpness, paleness, legs that walk, arms that hold the child—replaced by something much less recognisably human. Again, however, the judgement of it against an expected norm is subjective and of the senses, particularly sight in the claim to 'in focus'. It is the seeing and interpretation of a removed perspective that renders these ghosts as something other than they should be.

2. No/bod/y

In *Hamlet*, the corporeality of ghosts is also up for grabs, not just through sensory experience—that is, living perspective on the ghost—but through claims to Hamlet's father's ghost and the revenants of others still existing as and of body. Horatio recalls: 'A little ere the mightiest Julius fell/The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead/Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets' (Shakespeare 1604–1605, p. 189), while Hamlet asks the Ghost of his father to 'tell why thy canonised bones hearsed in death/Hath burst their cerements, why the sepulchre/wherein we saw thee quietly interred/Hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws/To cast thee up again' (Shakespeare 1604–1605, p. 46). As such, ghosts in *Hamlet* have an embodied form: the grave must open, or be opened, to let them out. While Owens argues that such embodied portrayals of ghosts 'are mirrors of the times' with the medieval ghost 'more likely to break the door down and beat you to death with the broken planks' (Owens 2017, p. 9)—that is, have a corporeal form, not to mention a propensity for violence against the living—Gaiman's ghosts necessarily slip between their dual creation as ghosts at the time of their deaths and under Gaiman's imagination. So, while the revenant ghosts in Gaiman's graveyard have no need to bodily escape their graves (their ability to touch and hold within the graveyard fails to confer a physical body, though it continues to unsettle the boundaries), the child body seems to shift between embodied and disembodied without the transformative properties of death.

From his arrival in the graveyard, the child is both given and takes on characteristics of his environment and its inhabitants. Followed and finally seen by the man Jack, but also seen by the revenant ghosts and Silas, the adult look and perspective of Mrs Owens transforms the child from 'something on the ground' being 'peered at' to the embodied form of 'a baby', but a baby who, it seems, can also see Mrs Owens as 'it reached out a small, chubby fist, as if it were trying [...] to hold on to Mrs Owens' pale fingers' (Gaiman 2008, p. 8). As such, it takes a perspective that is simultaneously adult and revenant ghost to finally see and thus create the child as a child, but this seeing seemingly also relies upon or is replicated by the child seeing the adult revenant ghost. The directed, conditional and misleading seeing of the reader did not produce Mrs Owens, but something that was 'mist and shadow', although it 'was there'. But as her seeing produces the child—a child that has been absent so far from the living adult perspective—the child body becomes sufficiently present to see in its turn. In both cases, then, the seeing of that which is constituted as other from that perspective—child-adult, living-dead—is necessary to create the body that is being seen. For it is only when Mrs Owens has seen the child that the man Jack can see it too, if not for long, for only a few short sentences separate 'He could see the baby' (Gaiman 2008, p. 11) from 'it seemed as if a swirl of mist had curled around the child [...] and that the boy was no longer there' (Gaiman 2008, p. 12). The shift between being seen by the ghosts and becoming an inhabitant of the graveyard has returned the child to the ghost-state from where it began, at least from the living adult perspective of the man Jack; to the ghosts, the child remains living.

As the ghosts decide to raise the child in the graveyard until he comes of age, the disturbing terms of the adult engagement with the child body are laid out: the living adult wants the child's body dead, while the non-living are committed to keeping it alive. Yet, the terms of the opposition are the same: as the child body has been placed in uneasy relation with that of the man Jack, who determines the child's bodily shape by his interaction with it, so the child body is placed in uncomfortable relation with the adults in the graveyard.

The Owens, who elect to become the child's parents, are instantly disqualified from one of the main roles of parenthood in that they are unable to provide food to fulfil their stated aim of keeping the child alive, as their ability to exist in an embodied form and to touch solid things (including the child) does not extend beyond the boundaries of the graveyard, thus troubling the integrity of their embodied status in relation to their assumed role as parents and caregivers. It falls to vampire-guardian Silas—a third, or even fifth parent after the Owens and the child's birth parents—to find and deliver food *in loco matris*; a phrase which, of course, signifies the displacement and the replacement of the mother, thereby confirming her rightful place; a move that always, therefore, fails. But, of course, this assumed role challenges the imperatives of Silas' own parasitic body in terms of food, with the paradoxical child body the only available 'food' in the graveyard, but one that the child cannot be fed to stay alive and which the vampire cannot consume if the child is to live. As such, the designation of food—the naming of something as food—is as problematic as the location of the child body.

This act of naming is also key to Gaiman's construction of the child body in or as a constant state of slippage. Silas, the mother-guardian, raises the issue of what to call the child and the ghosts debate it, with their suggestions of names from their past showing both their set status, in that they can only suggest names of other dead and unchanging people, and the slippage between bodies that has characterised the child so far. Mrs Owens finally claims: "He looks like nobody but himself [. . .] He looks like nobody". "Then Nobody it is," says Silas. "Nobody Owens" (Gaiman 2008, p. 19). And by the start of Chapter 2, 'Nobody' has been abbreviated to 'Bod'. Of course, the repeated elision of the child's body is constructed through Gaiman's linguistic play between nobody (absence), no body (a bodily absence that also produces a return), Nobody (a claim to an identity via the proper name which is also concerned with obscuring that identity), and Bod (the return of the child body and of body as identity). Even the choice of Owens as a surname seems an ironic intertextual nod to Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, in which the murderer goes by the name of U. N. Owen or 'unknown' (Christie 1939, p. 3), thereby slipping still further as a marker of identity. Gaiman's surrounding language choices also work to qualify these problematic claims to naming: in Mrs Owens' assertion above, the child body slips between the comparison of 'like', the 'nobody' to whom the child is being compared, and the conjunction 'but' that introduces the contrasting clause. This chain of deferrals also serves to obscure two other factors in the production of the child body here: 1. the claim to 'looks', which again introduces the child body as both viewed via and constructed by the adult perspective in order to create an identity; and 2. the one piece of information that constructs the child body simultaneously outside of perspective, used as it is throughout by both characters and narrator: the pronoun 'he' which, despite the repeated elision of the child body and its status as endlessly deferred, signals a gender that is never up for question but seems to pre-exist its own construction. Silas' appropriation of one of these linguistic deferrals to name the child serves little better in any attempt to locate the body of the child in this exchange. In naming the child for a deferral, he both attempts to pin the child down as that which can be named and thus known, but yet again creates him solely within the adult perspective of himself and Mrs. Owens, despite the seemingly factual claim to 'it is' that attempts to locate the child outside of perspective.

And it is not only the naming of Bod that matters in any analysis of the child body in this text. The ghost-child, Fortinbras Bartleby, is another intertextual linguistic joke containing the paradox of the Hamlets' parallel father-son enemy duo along with the disclaimer of any copying creating the further-paradoxical surname borrowed from Herman Melville's writer character, Bartleby. As such, the child body is eclipsed by the imposition of both names borrowed from others (a choice rejected earlier by Mrs Owens for Bod, despite its ironic slippage on her own surname) and by the literary allusion and linguistic play that both create and annihilate the child body and identity they should theoretically impose. Likewise, the living child who takes a dislike to Bod when he ventures outside the graveyard to school is named Nick Farthing, which is less of a literary name (though it would not be

out of place in Dickens) than one suggestive of this child's dominant personality trait as a thief, once again returning to notions of slippage and the spaces between.

The naming and therefore controlling of others, and the relationship between naming and identity, remain in play throughout this text, with the absence in and of Bod set up to be resolved with the revelation of his 'true name' by the man Jack towards the end of the text. However, this promised resolution slips just as every other seeming instance of the imposition of identity or bodily integrity on Bod slips, with Jack's taunting refusal to reveal Bod's birth name resulting in his decision to retain the name given to him by his two adoptive mother figures, thereby refusing the chance to forge his own identity and move forward as an adult, preferring instead to retain the identity imposed upon him as a child. And in keeping the identity that elides his bodily status—Nobody Owens—rather than the return of the body in the informal 'Bod', his adult body is as subject to slippage as that of his child body, particularly given this name is written on his passport, a document that both proves an identity and signifies transition and change. The folkloric tradition of a 'true' name either conferring or fixing identity, often in a problematic fashion that grants power over the named and thus reveals itself as a political act—as in versions of *Rumplestiltskin* and in Egyptian mythology—slips once more to leave the absence of the child body forever unfulfilled.

3. 'To Shelter from Any Penetration'

In considering the status of the child body in this text, we must consider further the dichotomy at its heart: that the living adults wish Bod dead, with the Jacks of all Trades' actions designed to achieve this end and generations of Jacks behind them committed to ensuring Bod's death while he is still a child, while those who are long dead or not living fight to keep him alive, with even the ghouls offering him long life as one of them in preference to making him their next meal. And at both ends of this spectrum, we are confronted with an adult and a specifically male desire to penetrate the child body, one that Jacqueline Rose recognises throughout children's fiction via her analysis of *Peter Pan*, claiming 'what is at stake [...] is the adult desire for the child' (Rose 1984, p. 3) in response to her earlier analysis of child sexual abuse and its relevance to children's literature. The man Jack, his adulthood and male gender reiterated throughout the text not just as an appendage to his name but as his name, desires to stab Bod with his silver knife, an act of penetration that he intends to settle the child's bodily status as dead. Silas, characterised through male pronouns but taking the place of the mother in his assumed responsibility for feeding the child, brings Bod a banana to consume, with the opposing aim of keeping the child's human body alive. And later in the text, the living child, Nick Farthing, stabs Bod with a pencil, not to kill him but to assert domination, later telling him during Bod's Dreamwalk: 'You've still got my pencil in the back of your hand' (Gaiman 2008, p. 181). Each of these characters either attempts to or succeeds in penetrating the child body with an undoubtedly phallic object, albeit with differing intentions. However, this is not as naively pop-Freudian as it might appear, for the reading of a desire or action to penetrate the child's body constructs that body as pre-existing its penetration by the other; that is, it renders the child body real in opposition to its elision throughout the text so far and my reading of it as a construct of each adult perspective that precludes its independent existence and unsettles the related adult body in its turn. The reading of a desire for and/or an act of penetration is necessarily a reading of intent, one that renders Bod here as body, and as a body that is passive beneath the desires of others. As a baby, he does not consciously resist the desire of the man Jack, although at this point, he is unaware of it. Once in the graveyard, it is the non-living that protect Bod from that penetrative desire while supplanting it with their own: Bod shows no desire for food prior to its supply. And in his foray to school and the attack from Nick Farthing, Bod does not respond to the other boy's aggressive action other than to observe its effects or to acknowledge Nick's assertion about the longevity of this forced penetration within the Dreamwalk, rather continuing with his own pre-planned agenda.

As such, the seeming dichotomy between the construction of the child body through the adult gaze and Bod's lack of agency appears, once more, resolved.

Yet, this latter incident is particularly interesting in that it allows us to look backwards to the earlier attempts at penetration through a different lens. Bod and Nick are both children, both boys, both human and both living in the text's own claims, despite the frequent unsettling of Bod as bodied/nobody; in a sense, they are equals, lacking the power imperative of the two adult-child relationships. Nick's attempt to penetrate the child body by force succeeds where the man Jack's repeatedly fails, and although the action does not result in the body's death—and neither is it suggested that this is Nick's desire or intention—it results in a lasting impact as the pencil 'is still in' Bod's hand. Is this, then, the result of a claim to equality between the two boys? Can Nick harm Bod because, to him, the child body is not a construct but a fact? Is this a point in the text where the child body therefore becomes real, albeit in textual terms? Yes—and no; because while the act of penetration may seemingly take place between two equals, the lasting impact—Nick's statement and Bod's tacit acknowledgement of the forced act of penetration and its ongoing presence—takes place while Bod is Dreamwalking; that is, sliding into the other child's dream to control the narrative and gain the upper hand in what is still a struggle for power and supremacy. The abilities granted to Bod by his being given 'the Freedom of the Graveyard' (Gaiman 2008, p. 39) and his education in ghostly pursuits including 'Slipping and Fading' (Gaiman 2008, p. 96) as well as Dreamwalking allow Bod to elide the embodied status assumed by Nick to attack him in return and upset or redress the power balance. As such, this act of violence and unsolicited penetration has become mutual: Bod is 'in' Nick just as much as Nick is 'in' Bod, and the perspective has become muddled, for if Bod is controlling Nick's dream from the inside, whose perspective is marking or remarking Nick's continued presence inside Bod? Is it Nick's or Bod's perspective that figures the continued presence of a pencil, or pencil mark, in his hand in this way? And it is also worth noting that Bod has not come by the ability to Dreamwalk, or to slip and fade, naturally or by his own devices, but by adult permission and education; as such, we might argue that this seeming moment of agency is merely another instance of adult control of the child body: Bod performs what he has been created to do and be by adults.

Neither is Nick's body entirely stable: although lacking the ghostly influences and abilities of Bod, the dream-threat of Bod that Nick will be consumed by the hungry 'things in the cellar' (Gaiman 2008, p. 181) is the threat of the consumption of his child body to become, like the food of the ghouls, something other: not penetration but dissipation of one's own body in the service of constructing or maintaining another. Meanwhile, Bod's ability to harm or even influence Nick's body is both imaginary and real: Bod 'had been all too aware that there was nothing else in the dream but Nick and himself, and that all Nick had been scared of was a noise'; yet 'He [Nick] woke up screaming' (Gaiman 2008, p. 182). Bod's own claim to be unable to harm Nick therefore slips as soon as it is made, as his haunting produces the bodily effects of terror. And the intended effects of Bod's 'haunting' also impact the bodies of other, unspecified children in that Bod's actions are taken to dissuade Nick from a continued campaign of bullying and torture of smaller children. He therefore prevents Nick's forced penetration of other child bodies, thereby impacting the bodies of these other unnamed children (if only by default) and the bodily actions of Nick. In Bod's slipping, sliding and fading, however, surely corporeality returns: even though it is a ghost ability, revenants such as Mrs Owens are 'there', and one must slip and fade from something to become something other, just as the ghosts' abilities have slipped here to the living child. This recurrent slippage of Bod's and Nick's child bodies again troubles notions of bodies and boundaries, with the seemingly settled status of the two child bodies when placed in relation to each other disrupted by Bod's appeal to the liminal status of dream that seems beyond boundaries while also remaining necessarily subject to the boundaries of the graveyard and to Bod's prior penetration by its adult inhabitants. As such, this instance of the penetration of the child body does not escape the claims to the child body as perspective made earlier, but neither does it fully ratify those claims. It acts

rather to trouble the status of the child body still further, thereby reiterating rather than resolving its status as aporia: as both occupying and failing to occupy unsettled, multiple and irresolvable positions in the text.

4. 'We Can Keep It in the Crypt'

To consider the political status of the child body further, we might turn to constructions and readings of the crypt in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (Abraham and Torok 1986), although my reading will also involve itself in notions of linguistic and structural slippage as I intend to focus, rather, on Jacques Derrida's Foreword to the book (also known as 'Fors'). For while Derrida opens with the question I intend to pose here of *The Graveyard Book* in relation to portrayals of the child's body and its political status—'What is a crypt?' (Derrida and Johnson 1977, p. xi)—he also engages (as does the book's subtitle: 'A Cryptonymy') with his own writing and its position as both outside and part of the text to which it is, ostensibly, a part and a precursor. But, to take a step back: why ask this question of Gaiman's book at all? The position of Derrida's text as foreword, as sur-text, as extratextual but still as in and of the text, raises questions that are reflected and refracted in *The Graveyard Book*: not only what does the crypt consist of, but where are the boundaries between one thing and another; what do those boundaries consist of; crucially, what do they enclose and what do they exclude; and, perhaps most importantly, how do we know and how do we interrelate with the crypt in our explorations? Both Abraham and Torok's and Derrida's explorations of the crypt within their texts are concerned with questions not just of identity and identifying—'What is a crypt?'—but with how we come to our conclusions, what such conclusions might signify, and where the slippages occur.

In 'Fors', Derrida claims that '[t]he crypt keeps an undiscoverable place, with reason' (Derrida 1994, p. xii). As such, in the very act of determining its location, the crypt slips between knowledge that it has a place and the inability to discover that place, yet it retains the place it is said to inhabit in that it is situated within perspective: after all, it is not 'undiscoverable' to itself and it keeps its place 'with reason' (although this might also be read as a supplement—'with'—thus disturbing the claimed settled status of place). The crypt, at this point in Derrida's exploration, is that which is sealed and therefore impermeable but equally that which must be, and is, concurrently permeable. Within Gaiman's text, the crypt keeps what appears to be a known place: a physical one with its presence in the graveyard and in a place that can be found by anyone. But, as is the case with Derrida's text, claims to place, to boundaries, to an inside and an outside, to the signifiatory status of language, and to perspective are troubled as the child body is similarly troubled, as the analysis below will explore.

In addition to the initial claim above, Derrida asserts variously in his text that the crypt's function is 'to shelter from any penetration, from anything that can filter in from outside' (Derrida 1994, p. xiv); that it is 'a hidden place, a disguise hiding the traces of the act of disguising, a place of silence' (Derrida 1994, p. xvii), and that while we must 'turn our minds to the break-in technique that will allow us to penetrate into a crypt (it consists of locating the crack or the lock, choosing the angle of a partition and forcing entry), we have to know that the crypt itself is *built* by violence' (Derrida 1994, p. xv); [emphasis in text]. In the first of these three quotes, Derrida assigns the crypt, or reads the crypt as having assigned itself, a function or a purpose: that of a 'shelter', one that protects against both the ambiguously perceived 'penetration'—here, a movement from an outside to an inside without either a claim to or denial of intent—and the passive 'filter in'. As such, the crypt is neither the inside nor the outside, collapsing the boundaries it delineates while still existing as, maintaining, or even signifying a division between the two. In Gaiman's text, the crypt also appears to delineate an inside from an outside and serve a function of protection as Silas, on being confronted with the problem of where to house the infant child, says: 'We can keep it in the crypt' (Gaiman 2008, p. 21). However, Gaiman's crypt is seemingly permeable in that Silas and Bod can come and go as they please, and its status as the division between in and outside is also troubled in that it is the boundaries of the

graveyard rather than the crypt itself that serve this function; although, as will be the case in Derrida's text, this boundary is permeable too, if not by everyone or at all times. And Silas' attempted designation of the place of safekeeping for Bod's body also fails as Mrs Owens rejects it out of hand, housing Bod instead within her own tomb. The assignation of the crypt as the marker between inside and outside and the place of safekeeping therefore both fails and succeeds. For in designating the crypt, as in Derrida's text, as that place but then allowing or choosing to let it to slip, Gaiman's crypt more than ever fulfils its function. It appears as the 'shelter' in an assumption that the child body will be inside, but actually performs far more effectively as a shelter in misdirecting the gaze from the child's actual location. Further, Bod's given name also acts as the crypt: as discussed above, 'Nobody Owens' signifies, hides, and slips. As such, the second quote from Derrida's text, in which he claims that the crypt hides 'the traces of an act of disguising' is also fulfilled in Gaiman's: the crypt is both crypt and illusion, seeming to sit at the centre of the graveyard and as the place of safekeeping, but hiding its uncanny double (and further hidden doubles) from any attempted act of penetration. And the crypt fulfils its designated function: the man Jack is never able to penetrate the interlocking boxes that form Bod's crypt, requiring instead to create his own disguised location and lure Bod in, inverting failed penetration for attempted consumption.

But in the third of the above quotes, Derrida turns his attention to the inevitable result of any act of hiding, for without 'turn[ing] our minds to the break-in technique', there is no crypt: its function of safekeeping, its disguise without a trace of disguising, even its presence cannot be determined without their concurrent failure; that is, they do not and cannot exist without the perspective on them. Much like the child body and like the ghost in Gaiman's text, creation occurs in the gap between perceiving and existing. As Elizabeth Edwards argues: 'To say "what is" is already to imply that the poem or crypt in question 'is'—it exists. But a spectre, more than these, really isn't. Insofar as it is anything, it is an equivocation on whether it exists or not' (Edwards 2008, p. 109). And this equivocation, this troubling of existence, concurrently troubles any analysis of the last claim of Derrida's third quote: that the crypt is both opened by and 'built by violence'. Violence has been thematic to this analysis in its consideration of the forced penetration of the child body in Gaiman's text, but Derrida's claim here is a curious one: in order to be violated, as we have already discussed, the body becomes in some sense real in that it must pre-exist its own violation. Here, too, if the signifiatory crypt is built by violence, we are confronted with the same problem and must ask who or what is therefore the subject, who or what the object? For if the crypt is the target of the violence, it must pre-exist the violence that creates it; but if it is built by violence, it must pre-exist its own creation to allow the violence—that which by its nature must have a target—to occur and to create. As such, we might argue that Derrida's formulation returns us to the seeing and/or the experience of the senses with which both Shakespeare and Gaiman concern themselves in their construction of ghosts, with the violence by which the crypt is built actually the perspective on it that creates it, just as the child body is created by the multiple adult perspectives in Gaiman's text; for there is a violence in such creations and recreations of the child body, a violence that is predicated on the assumed adult privilege of deciding and imposing, one that is too often ignored. Despite Derrida's formulation of 'locating the crack or the lock, choosing the angle of a partition and forcing entry'—thereby insisting upon the pre-existence of the crypt (that is, the reality of the crypt outside of perspective)—it is concurrently the case, as already shown, that the crypt cannot exist without the perspective on it. This, then, is exactly the aporia in Derridean terms that defines both of these texts. Of course, we can also argue that the violence that creates the crypt is the violence of incorporation—here, a polite way of saying body snatching (although I will discuss this further below)—but, with the signifiatory body by necessity already dead and beyond the effects of violence, the violence can only be against the self. This is not to negate incorporation as a viable argument but to explore further the irresolution of the aporia, that is, to settle this Derridean violence as unsettled.

5. 'Protecting, Sheltering, Living, Mourning'

In considering both Gaiman's and Derrida's formulations of the crypt (although, of course, Derrida's is never Derrida's any more than Gaiman's is his own, with both necessarily caught in an endless chain of deferral and signification), their status as signifiers seems manifestly different. Derrida's crypt both is and performs a psychoanalytic function in its exploration of introjection and incorporation, and the burial of a traumatic event or experience within the psyche. However, Gaiman's crypt-as-place necessarily proclaims itself in contrast to Derrida's elided and signifiatory crypt, while his child-body-as-crypt and the child-name-as-crypt perform the function of 'hiding the act of disguising', rendering the physical crypt itself, then, a phantom. But to consider Derrida's work on the crypt-as-signifier further and to consider the relationship I have read between 'Fors' and *The Graveyard Book*, we must acknowledge what the crypt is said (by Derrida and others) to signify: that is, the failed work of mourning, the state whereby *introjection*—the successful work of mourning, whereby the libidinal investment in the love object is slowly withdrawn—is supplanted by *incorporation*, in which the lost 'beloved' is instead internalised. Edwards defines the term thus:

'Contrasted to [introjection] is the one who, deprived of a love object before introjection is complete, rushes towards that internalisation and accomplishes it by swallowing the object whole: incorporation. But this incorporation is without digestion, so to speak; it leaves the subject now formed around an internal alien.'
(Edwards 2008, p. 111)

An initial point to consider here is the place of this opposition in psychoanalysis as a pathological stage in the work of mourning (although Derrida troubles this claim to an opposition in 'Fors'), for one aspect of Bod's presence in the graveyard that I have not yet considered here is its status as a place for housing and remembering the dead; that is, as a place of and for mourning. While, like Gaiman's bodies and his ghosts, the function of this graveyard slips in that the predominant perspective upon it is that of the dead or non-living who are, by definition, not in mourning or at least not for one figured as other, there is no doubt that, in some senses, Gaiman's text is a meditation on death as it is experienced by the living. But is it a text about mourning, either failed or successful? If so, it is far more invested in notions of incorporation than in the successful work of introjection. While Bod's whole family—his living family—are murdered, he shows no signs of mourning them in the immediate wake of the murders, potentially because the loss occurred while he was just a baby, although any such suppositional reading must elicit questions about young children's capability to grieve 'successfully' that are not addressed in Gaiman's text and which I do not intend to explore here. Yet, there does come a point later in the book, when Bod expresses a desire to revenge himself upon the man Jack, that expression suggesting a prior incorporation moving into the beginning stages of introjection and thereby resolution, at which point the crypt—and, therefore, the text—can be resolved and closure seems to be achieved. However, of more interest and relevance to this exploration is the effect that such incorporation has on the child body in Gaiman's text. For if we argue that this is a work about mourning, and that Bod has 'swallowed the object whole', as Edwards claims 'it leaves the subject now formed around an internal alien'. As such, the child body is created, changed, and/or inhabited by something other throughout this text: not just by the adults who fight over Bod, teach him, and penetrate him in various ways, but by the family who remain unknown to him but yet inhabit his child body as Edwards' aliens. As such, in reading Bod's revenge against the man Jack as the successful resolution of mourning, the child body that has been the focus of so much struggle throughout this text cannot exist without its inhabitants; the continuing outside adult perspective is not sufficient in and of itself. In this consideration of the child body and death, then, Bod disrupts and unsettles everything except, perhaps, perspective itself: each of the characters experiences his body differently depending on their status (revenant ghost, vampire, living adult human, living child, dead family) and on what they want and/or need from him. The

child body disappears beneath this argument, but it is right that it does so: as Carol Mavor argues, ‘being boy eternal is its own kind of labour’ (Mavor 2007, p. 174). For, at each turn of Gaiman’s narrative, any attempt to fix the child body or the child as body fails: it is that which cannot and should not be fixed, for to fix it means death. As such, the child body returns only at the moment of its annihilation as that which must be subsumed, conquered, lost, left behind. It should die, but only at the proper time and with the consent (if only implicit) of its owner.

But can this be a resolution for Bod, of the child body, and of deferred mourning after all? And is the signifiatory crypt finally destroyed with the departure of the man Jack? Bod’s revenge consists of luring Jack down to the underground tomb inhabited by the Sleer: an invisible creature that winds, snake-like, around the walls and which has been looking for a new master ‘to protect him until the end of time’ (Gaiman 2008, p. 265). This so-called protection consists of pulling the man Jack through a wall—a seemingly impermeable boundary—to keep him against his wishes, thereby, one might argue, reinstating the crypt in the ambiguously framed death/not-death of the man Jack, who is now held, in stasis and between boundaries, forever. While Jack’s cryptic presence is not that of the ‘swallowed beloved’ as such, the encryption of such a malevolent entity is no less powerful.

Yet, Bod’s ultimate departure from the graveyard in the wake of his victory over the man Jack, differently framed, might be read as an escape from the confinement of the crypt, and from adult direction and oversight if not from adult perspective. His peripatetic future lifestyle, built on the passport that signifies movement, rejects the incorporation of the crypt and speaks of mourning fulfilled. However, this argument might impact my reading of the continued adult investment in the child body. Such investment changes, perhaps, within the text on Bod’s departure—the graveyard can go back to what it was before he came along with the work of mourning complete—but the perspective on and investment in the child body does not change outside of the text, with continued adult (reader, critic, analyst) constructions of the textual child body through our very analysis and perspective on what it is and should be. The fictional adults—living, non-living and dead—may let Bod go, but we do not. In reconsidering Derrida’s question above of how we interrelate with the crypt in our own explorations, perhaps Gaiman’s ultimate joke in this text is on us, the critics, who operate by default in collusion with the operations of the crypt, therefore keeping the crypt intact. Our finding and opening are always complicit with its hiding.

6. ‘They Cannot Not Spook’

To return at the end, if I may briefly, to the beginning, if we consider Bod once again as ghost, then who or what is he haunting? As Edwards argues regarding the incompatibility of fear and mourning work: ‘spectres cannot be eradicated, and they cannot not spook’ (Edwards 2008, p. 109). Bod does not haunt children either within or outside of the text, with the exception of Nick Farthing: there is no fear of ghosts and death is rendered natural, friendly even (although one might argue that Bod haunts in the sense of frequenting a particular place, particularly one where one does not, or should not, belong: as Derrida claims, ‘haunting implies places’ (Derrida 1995, p. 86)). But in Gaiman’s refusal to decide, to resolve the contradictions and let Bod live—or die—happily ever after, it seems that it is the adult (writer, reader, critic) who insists on constructing the child body via their own perspective. As such, the adult, who is situated ostensibly outside the text, is constantly haunted by a child body that exists somehow in spite of them, rendering them as ghost too, haunting and haunted by their own insufficiency, their inability to construct the child body beyond narrative when that narrative position ensures that the child body will always escape them because others have narrative positions too. In keeping the child body liminal, Gaiman ensures that it does and will always haunt. It is in this spooking and in its very slippage that the child body is adopted as the political battleground by the adults who—like Gaiman’s man Jack in his disguise/elision as the aged Mr. Frost—often appear invested in its care.

After all, the debate over the child's body—or even over ghostliness and corporeality—is never about the subject at all but rather about who gets to decide its status; and, outside the text, 'how [...] our society see[s] and position childhood and the child' (Lesnik-Oberstein 1998, p. 1). Bod's seeming passivity exists because his status as subject is rarely in doubt; even as he goes out into the world, at the end, he goes as a product of the graveyard and there is little sense in which he will become a part of or find a home in the wider world. He remains Nobody. Only in the Dreamwalk does he appear to be exerting his own will, in defiance of his guardian's advice, but he remains subject to the adult perspective even while seeming to militate against it. And the fact that Bod bleeds when Nick stabs him matters. 'Bod looked at the back of his hand. A small drop of blood welled up where the point of the pencil had punctured it' (Gaiman 2008, p. 178): it is observing the drop of blood that wells from the wound—evidence of Nick's attempt to fix him as bodied—that prompts Bod's retreat to the slipped perspective of the graveyard from which his counterattack is launched and the balance redressed, with Bod returning as subject, any will, autonomy, or identity once more absorbed. Even the resolution of his relationship with the man Jack is passive, with the Sleer fulfilling its role by protecting a new 'master' by pulling him through the seemingly impermeable boundary of the wall to produce a new crypt with another body 'swallowed whole', thereby suggesting this less as an ending than the replacement of one incorporation with another.

However, perhaps *The Graveyard Book* is not just a work of and about death, mourning, and resolution, but also a textual commentary on what childhood is: on parenting, education, and the inherent badness of the big, bad world. If so, Gaiman appears to return us to the early Romantic child body of Rousseau's *Emile* (Rousseau 1762) and Locke's conception of the child as a *tabula rasa*. Yet despite this apparent regression—this haunting by a child long dead in both literary and political terms—the text is no less a commentary on modern child-rearing, education and the valuing of the child body that Viviana A. Zelizer figures as 'economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless"' (Zelizer 1994, p. 3), and to current and ongoing debates over who or what a child should be, particularly in terms of the child body. Bod's signification might then be argued both to pre-date and ante-date him, to sit outside the text. As Judith Butler comments:

'[A]s the critique of gender normativity, able-ism, and racist perception have made clear, there is no singular human form [...] [C]ertain kinds of bodies will appear more precariously than others, depending on which version of the body, or of morphology in general, support or underwrite the idea of the human life that is worth protecting, sheltering, living, mourning.' (Butler 2010, pp. 52–53)

While Butler is not speaking specifically about the child body here, focusing rather on the status of the body in war, the child body is necessarily implicated in such a study both in Butler's own terms and in my argument concerning the political status of the child both inside and outside of the text, the outside slipping to include both political debate apart from the text and the political investment of the adult reading or analysing the text. After all, Butler's argument is exactly about perspective, about how the body is never simply body but always created and recreated by a narrative that decides what it is, that assigns a value, that includes or excludes, and so on.

And such politicisation of the child body is always about mourning a perceived loss: that which it should be but is not. This may not be incorporation in the sense of a rushed introjection—that is, the adult does not perceive this as a loss, or at least not a loss to be mourned—but the choice not to accept it, to try to overturn it even, is what figures this as incorporation. The child body as it should be, in the construction of the adult perspective, is swallowed whole, and the crypt guarded fiercely against any possible incursion. Consider the current debate over trans children: gender-critical feminists, in particular, have so much invested in the notion of the binarily sexed and gendered child body (and frequently its heterosexuality and asexuality concurrently) that they cannot grieve the loss of that which they thought existed, but must keep that fantasy entombed and militate against any other conception of the child body as a lie. But this is the ultimate irony: in debating Bod's

significance—that is, his status as signifier—at all, the critic is caught up in that which she also attempts to criticise, the endless refiguring of the child body for political ends. As with the maintenance and guarding of the crypt, complicity cannot be avoided.

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