

Violence, Women, and Disability in Tod Browning's

Freaks and

By **MARTIN F. NORDEN**
and **MADELEINE A. CAHILL**

Filmmakers who have populated their films with disabled characters have occasionally endowed them with violent behavior, and it should come as no surprise to learn that the vast majority of such characters have been coded as male. Indeed, the early history of disability depictions in the movies can be characterized in terms of a conspicuous gender-based dichotomy: male characters were often designed as castrated Captain Ahab types who destroy all in their wake in the name of revenge, while female characters were infantilized as docile, sexless, godly young things usually rewarded for their enduring purity with a miracle cure.

These "obsessive avengers" and "sweet innocents" anchored the ends of the disability stereotype spectrum for decades, but Tod Browning, a filmmaker who frequently linked men, violence, and disability in his movies during the 1920s, disrupted the pattern with the release of two films the following decade, *Freaks* (1932) and *The Devil Doll* (1936).¹ In *Freaks* disabled women participate in the slaying of a man and the crippling of a woman who had attempted to murder one of their friends. In *The Devil Doll* a disabled woman tries to stab an accomplice, then threatens him with a vial of explosive fluid, and finally blows up a laboratory after her plans to shrink the world's population go terribly awry. Browning's decision to inscribe disabled women as violent—to place them on the opposite end of the stereotype spectrum—was virtually without precedent in the movies and violated one of mainstream society's most deeply held beliefs about women with disabilities.² This article investigates the circumstances surrounding the making of these anomalous movies and Browning's strategies for representing the women and their actions.



The Devil Doll



Freaks features an entire colony of obsessive avengers, male and female, who act as one when outsiders violate their moral code.



Malita (Rafaella Ottiano) assists Paul Lavond (Lionel Barrymore) on his vengeful quest before pursuing her own in *The Devil Doll*.

Freaks and *The Devil Doll* owe their existence at least in part to the eagerness of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, one of the most powerful studios in Hollywood, to cash in on a genre captivating the country during the early 1930s, the horror film. In 1931 one of the lesser players in the studio system, Universal, scored a major box-office hit with its adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Earning more than 17 times its production costs during its first run alone, *Frankenstein* sent the other Hollywood movie companies scurrying to develop their own horror movies. In the case of MGM, production head Irving Thalberg turned to Tod Browning, one of his premiere directors, and allegedly said, "I want something that out-horrors *Frankenstein*" (qtd. in Wheeler 144). Browning, whose earlier work included such horror films as *London after Midnight* (1927) and *Dracula* (1931), responded by creating *Freaks*, which remains one of the most notorious disability-related films ever made, and the lesser-known but still disturbing *The Devil Doll*.

Freaks tells the story of a traveling circus currently encamped in a remote part of France. Hans (Harry Earles), a nattily dressed midget, is engaged to another short-statured performer

named Frieda (played by Harry Earles's real-life sister Daisy) but develops an immense fascination with an able-bodied trapeze artist named Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova). He is little more than a joke to her until she learns that he stands to inherit a fortune. With the help of her new paramour, Hercules the circus strongman (Henry Victor), Cleopatra plans to marry Hans and then fatally poison him. The other disabled performers, including several women with microcephaly, female Siamese twins joined at the hip, and a woman with no arms, catch wind of the plan, and after Hans recovers from the poisoning, they do not hesitate to exact a cold-blooded revenge. In a nightmarish sequence replete with thunder and lightning, the title characters literally slither through the mud before slaying Hercules and mutilating Cleopatra to such an extent that she becomes a "freak," too: a grotesque "chicken woman."

The idea for *Freaks* initially came from Harry Earles, the short-statured actor who played Hans and with whom Browning had worked previously. He suggested Browning read "Spurs," a short story by Tod Robbins published in a 1923 issue of *Munsey's Magazine*. Browning, who as a teenager had fulfilled many a schoolchild's

dream by running away and joining a circus, was immediately intrigued by the tale: a circus dwarf named Jacques Courbé turns vindictive after able-bodied co-workers try to bilk him out of an inheritance.³ Using "Spurs" as their starting point, Browning and his screenwriters (a group that eventually included Willis Goldbeck, Leon Gordon, Elliott Clawson, Edgar Allan Woolf, Al Boasberg, and Charles MacArthur) set to work crafting the narrative details of the film.

Browning then took a major step beyond his horror film colleagues at other studios by assembling a group of developmentally and physically disabled side show performers from around the world to appear in his film as themselves. For example, two recruits were Frances O'Connor, an armless woman known professionally as "The Living Venus de Milo," and Minnie Woolsey, whose body is believed to have been affected by a rare disorder that causes premature aging and who was billed as "Koo Koo, the Bird Girl from Mars." Though *Freaks* shares some general similarities with other horror films of the period—most notably, its revenge theme, the plurality of "Others" coded as aberrant if not outright abhorrent, and exotic/foreign settings—Browning's use of performers with actual disabilities constituted a major difference. Audiences viewing films such as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1932), *King Kong* (1933), *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1933), and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) could reassure themselves that the freakish beings who appeared on the screen were played by heavily obscured able-bodied actors and/or rendered by special-effects technology. No such assurances were possible with *Freaks*, however, and the MGM publicity department, far from retreating on this point, repeatedly underscored the performers' "authentic" quality in its promotional campaign. For example, its advertisements proclaimed that *Freaks* starred "humans and half-humans" and that the film itself was "a mystery drama [set] behind the scenes in a sideshow with

strange and grotesque freaks and monstrosities playing principal roles" (*Freaks* pressbook).

MGM's production and marketing strategies backfired mightily; *Freaks* was a disaster at the box office and a heavy blow to the studio's reputation. Indeed, the film drew many highly negative reviews, prompted civic groups across the country to renew calls for movie censorship, and was banned outright in the United Kingdom.⁴ For reasons that to this day remain unclear, however, MGM allowed Browning to continue making movies. Irving Thalberg, the film's patron, went on medical leave shortly after the *Freaks* debacle (his congenitally deformed heart already weakened by rheumatic fever and the stresses of a high-profile job, Thalberg suffered a heart attack late in 1932), and Browning took advantage of the vicissitudes surrounding his boss's departure by convincing other MGM authorities he could revert to his old box office form, especially in the horror genre.

After directing two other films, Browning returned to the obsessive avenger theme with *The Devil-Doll*. His principal screenwriters bore impeccable horror film credentials: Garrett Fort was one of the *Frankenstein* scenarists, and Guy Endore had developed a reputation for horror writing as a result of his work on 1935's *Mark of the Vampire*, *Mad Love*, and *The Raven*.⁵ Using Abraham Merritt's 1933 novel *Burn Witch Burn!* as their basis, Browning, Fort, and Endore developed a script they called *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, a name that also served as the film's working title. MGM added numerous uncredited writers to the project at various stages, however, and the written-by-committee movie that eventually resulted, retitled *The Devil Doll*, told the story of Paul Lavond (Lionel Barrymore), a Parisian banker wrongly convicted of embezzlement and murder. He escapes from Devil's Island with an elderly scientist named Marcel (Henry B. Walthall) who, prior to his incarceration, had been experimenting with a method of reducing humans to doll size and commanding them to do his

will. The two link up with Marcel's wife Malita (Rafaella Ottiano), who uses a crutch, a saucer-eyed woman who has maintained the laboratory in her husband's absence. Intrigued by the possibilities of creating tiny humans with no will of their own, Lavond moves to Paris with Malita to continue their work after Marcel dies of a heart attack, and they set up a toy store there as the front for their experiments. Using the guise of an old woman named "Madame Mandilip," Lavond orders the "dolls" to seek revenge on the bankers who framed him.

Though his actions and subsequent guilt make the able-bodied Lavond the primary avenging figure of *The Devil*

stiletto. As she whispers to the miniaturized assassin: "We've served his purpose, Radin—now he'll serve ours, reduced to your size. I'll control him as easily as I control you." Lavond eludes Radin and then says to her, "Why, you poor insane wretch! I should destroy you with all the rest of this horror!" He starts wrecking the lab, and in response Malita threatens to throw a vial of explosive fluid at him. Lavond tries to stop her, but she indeed throws the bottle and blows up the lab. In the tradition of such gothic literary figures as Edward and Bertha Rochester of *Jane Eyre* and Max de Winter and Mrs. Danvers of *Rebecca*, Lavond escapes the inferno but Malita does not. Lavond seals his morality in

In a departure from his previous work, Browning does not show his obsessive avengers receiving any form of punishment for their actions in the two films.

Doll, the orthopedically and morally impaired Malita offers him stiff competition. Malita, described by a *Variety* reviewer as "the scientist's wacky widow . . . with a white streak in her hair and hobbling on a crutch" (18), shares a distinct quality with many other disabled characters in literature, theater, and the movies: she bears a disability that quickly takes on negative symbolic overtones. It does not take the audience long to learn that she and her husband are insane, but Browning pushed Malita's characterization one step further; she is not only crazy but malevolent as well. She plans to avenge Marcel's death by maniacally insisting on shrinking the entire world's population, with or without Lavond's cooperation. When Lavond refuses to put up with her obsession, she decides to shrink him to doll size, too, and orders one of the dolls to stab him with a tiny poisoned

a gesture that recalls Edward Rochester; he calls out to the woman who would kill him, but he cannot save her from her own self-destructive compulsion.⁶

What are we to make of the violent women with disabilities who appear in *Freaks* and *The Devil Doll*? What were the forces that led to their creation? And what do the films say about gender roles, disability, and violence?

Let's start by examining the place of the films within the context of Browning's earlier works. Browning had his greatest success as a filmmaker during the mid-to-late 1920s, and much of that success had to do with the actor with whom he was frequently paired: Lon Chaney, the legendary "Man of a Thousand Faces." Browning developed a fondness for revenge-driven disability drama, and the protean Chaney offered him the perfect vehicle for expressing those ideas. Indeed,

Browning, who had admired Chaney's work as a criminal who pretends to be disabled in *The Miracle Man* (1919) and as a vengeful gangster with no legs in *The Penalty* (1920), had been slated to direct the actor in what became one of Chaney's most famous films, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923). Alcohol-related problems forced Browning off that project, but he did go on to direct Chaney in such films as *The Unholy Three* (1925), *The Blackbird* (1926), *The Road to Mandalay* (1926), *The Unknown* (1927), and *West of Zanzibar* (1928), all of which featured disabled men (or men feigning disabled status) in revenge-minded situations.⁷

Chaney died of cancer in 1930, ending a collaboration that had shown no signs of declining (for example, Chaney had been Browning's choice to star in *Dracula*, the director's most famous film after *Freaks*). Chaney's death forced Browning to move his career in a new direction and prompted him to reassess the obsessive avenger type that he had spent years cultivating. Perhaps believing he could go no further with the avenger in its lone-male characterization, and mindful of Irving Thalberg's call for a competitive horror movie, he decided that the 1930s were an auspicious time to create new variations.

Browning began that short-lived tradition with *Freaks*, a project that had been simmering on the back burner since the late 1920s. As we have seen, the film features an entire colony of obsessive avengers, male and female, who act as one when outsiders violate their moral code. Their sheer number is a major difference from Browning's other disability films (the earlier incarnation of the obsessive avenger had always spun his malevolent plans in solitude), and the director and his scriptwriters went to extreme lengths to create a sense of community among them—a quality conspicuously absent in the source material. "Spurs" Jacques Courbé "had no friends among the other freaks," wrote Robbins, "he loathed them" (146), and during the wedding feast—an otherwise perfect opportunity to reinforce

the idea of community—a major brawl erupts among them. The story's vengeful male loner would ordinarily have fit in perfectly with Browning's preoccupations, but the director, perhaps believing that no single actor could fill Chaney's shoes, wanted something else for *Freaks*.

In the earlier films, the Chaney character typically begins as able-bodied, undergoes a traumatic incident, and then seeks revenge; in the case of *Freaks*, the females and males are already disabled at the start (the vast majority with genetic disorders). Because so many of them have missing limbs, stunted growth, or microcephaly, the film seems to imply that individually they are "incomplete" (i.e., ineffective) but collectively they can form a whole quite capable of committing the most unspeakable atrocities.

The revenge scene in *Freaks* was the most conspicuous departure from the Robbins short story, in terms of both the number of assailants involved and the extent of their retribution. In "Spurs," only Courbé, with the help of his trained dog, exacts any retaliation, and though they do kill the Hercules character, they significantly do not slay or permanently disfigure the able-bodied woman who attempted to swindle him. Instead, she is enslaved and exhausted until she is reduced to a worn-out beast of burden: the antithesis of her formerly glamorous, purely decorative existence. Browning and his writers transferred Courbé's spiteful quality to an entire community of disabled performers, and unlike Robbins's vengeful dwarf, the title characters resort to mutilation. (Indeed, Browning and his writers initially planned to have the "freaks" mutilate both Cleopatra and Hercules but dumped the idea of his mutilation—castration, specifically—in the face of heavy censor opposition.) In a conspicuous departure from Browning's previous work, the director did not show his obsessive avengers receiving any form of punishment for their actions. Most critics have denounced the vengeful deeds as a significant miscalculation by Browning and his



Tod Browning spent years cultivating the darker reaches of film depictions of people with disabilities.

scenarists. John Brosnan represented the views of many when he wrote:

This retaliation by the freaks, though partly justified, is a major flaw in the picture. Up to then Browning had effectively presented them as basically "normal" people, despite their physical handicaps . . . and much more likeable than the two physically perfect people. But by resorting finally to the popular image of circus freaks as being strange and sinister creatures he destroyed all his previous good work, laying himself open, at the same time, to the charge of exploitation—though to be fair to Browning the idea for the story came from the midget, Harry Earles, himself. (65–66)

As for *The Devil Doll's* Malita, she bears more resemblance to the Chaney characters than do the disabled folk who populate *Freaks* in that she pays for her obsessive behavior with her life. Though Lavond and Malita are jointly engaged in illegal and immoral activities, *The Devil Doll* makes clear distinctions between the quality of their characters. Lavond's vengeance is bounded by a sense of rationality. The audience can understand his motivations: he wants to avenge himself on only the three people who caused direct harm to him and his family. Lavond's anger is actually shown to have a positive side: "Without my

hatred, I never could have lived," he explains to Marcel as they escape from Devil's Island. Furthermore, Lavond is humanized by his love for his estranged daughter (she grew up believing him guilty of the crimes) and his blind mother, a wise and gentle woman who embodies Hollywood's "saintly sage" disability stereotype.⁸ "I only wanted to vindicate my name . . . because of my family," he explains to Malita after quitting their devil-doll experiments. When she threatens to kill him, he tells her, "Death doesn't frighten me . . . but I still have something to do for my child."

Malita, on the other hand, is bound by no such rational motivations—a point illustrated by her desire to manipulate the fate not of three people

traceable to adaptation issues that arose during the film's production process. No such figure exists in the Abraham Merritt novel, but Malita does coincide with its main character, Madame Mandilip (who in the book is actually female, not a disguised male), in terms of her ability to create miniaturized beings who can be controlled by her will. The similarities end there, however; she neither physically resembles Mandilip (whom Merritt described as an elderly woman with a commanding presence, rough-hewn but with surprisingly dainty hands and a mellifluous voice—qualities that do not readily apply to Malita) nor shares her overwhelming desire to command the dolls to wreak violence. Though she orders a doll to stab Lavond, she is

mother, Nyleta, travels with Duval to Paris to help exact revenge on the three conspirators who contrived his downfall. Duval disguises himself as an old woman and opens a doll shop to cover his and Nyleta's operations. The two then abduct a small crew of gypsy-like criminals from a low-class dive and shrink them, arm them with tiny poison-tipped swords, and manipulate them through mind control" (53).

MGM was forced to make radical changes in the story, however, in response to censorship pressures brought to bear by both the movie industry's internal regulatory agency—the Production Code Administration, then known colloquially as the "Breen office" after its current head, Joseph Breen—and its counterpart in Great Britain. In the 1930s, it was standard practice for movie studios to submit every script to the Breen office for approval prior to production, and in the case of the *Witch of Timbuctoo* screenplay, Joseph Breen ordered many changes centering mostly on issues of morality and criminal activity unrelated to Malita. The British censors, however, had much stronger objections and made suggestions that would affect the film's entire narrative structure. Concerned that the actions of Nyleta and Ba-oola would incite black people in the British Empire, they demanded the removal of all black characters and all references to voodoo and witchcraft.

Because Great Britain represented an important market for MGM's films, the studio said it would oblige, thus sending the writers scrambling to revise their story. Following a suggestion by MGM story editor Samuel Marx, they turned the voodoo/witchcraft angle into a more traditional "mad scientist" one along the lines of *Frankenstein* and converted the black African mother and son Nyleta and Ba-oola into the white European wife and husband Malita and Marcel. The writers transformed Nyleta, characterized by Wood as a "threatening, exotic voodoo priestess whose black art is used for curses and vengeance" (55) and presumably the title character of *The Witch of Timbuctoo*, into the minor

by no rational motivations—a point illustrated by her desire to manipulate the fate not of three people but the entire world.

but of the entire world. When a police officer comes to the toy store to question them, Malita wants to shrink him as well and must be reined in by Lavond. The implication is clearly that she is indiscriminate and ultimately insane. Although her participation in Lavond's scheme is less active than his own, it appears more morally suspect because of her lack of direct motivation for harming three men she has never met. Malita's delight in the strange results of their work (underscored with frequent close-ups of her wide, staring eyes and perpetually raised eyebrows) gives the appearance of criminal insanity. And, significantly, once Marcel has died, no loving connection to other people functions to humanize Malita or encourage audience identification with her.

Malita's rudimentary and fragmented character development is partly

far more interested, in the words of Bret Wood, in treating "them as playthings, ordering them to dance on a tabletop to the chimes of a music box" (55). Indeed, she and Marcel originally wanted to shrink people to doll size to allow the world's dwindling supply of food and natural resources to go farther.

Malita evolved primarily from a character that Browning, Fort, and Endore created in their original script for *The Witch of Timbuctoo* but later abandoned: Nyleta, a black woman from the Belgian Congo who practices voodoo and witchcraft and who happens to be the mother of Ba-oola, the man who escapes with the Lavond character (named "Duval" in this draft of the screenplay) from Devil's Island. According to Wood, who conducted a thorough examination of *The Devil Doll's* production history, "Ba-oola's

figure of Malita. MGM forced Browning to accept the changes, but in an echo of his previous work, he decided to make Malita disabled. In so doing, he put her on the same level with such infamous literary figures as Richard III, Captain Hook, Long John Silver, Captain Ahab, and his own many disabled male characters in the sense that her physical disability comes to symbolize a moral disability. In an article in *TV Guide* Joanmarie Kalter describes how this symbolic link comes to stereotype characters with disabilities: "Deformity of the body is a sure sign of deformity of the soul" (42). This link finds ample expression in both *The Devil Doll* and *Freaks*.

What messages related to violence, disability, and gender may be distilled from the films? It seems obvious to state that *The Devil Doll* and *Freaks* helped weaken, if not outright shatter, the prevailing dichotomy of disabled male and female constructions in the movies: the male-inscribed obsessive avenger and the female-inscribed sweet innocent. This development, however, hardly represented an improvement in depictions of those with disabilities; disabled women, the films seem to say, are now to be feared as much as disabled men.

Despite their resemblance to the male obsessive avengers of earlier times, Browning's avenging females retain certain vestiges of stereotypes associated with women in general and women with disabilities in particular. One is the basic issue of infantilization, which is especially pronounced in the case of *Freaks*. The women (and, unusually, the men as well) of *Freaks* are initially portrayed as benign and childlike. An able-bodied woman who oversees them refers to them as children, for example, and one of the phrases that MGM used to characterize them in prerelease publicity was "strange children of the shadows" (*Freaks* pressbook). In the case of *The Devil Doll*, a woman whose name translates as "bad little one" obediently follows the directives of the men in her life, like an unquestioning child; when she finally disobeys one of them, she dies moments thereafter in an

explosion and fire. Audiences then and now could not help finding such characters unsettling, since the women, coded as infantilized "Others," were hardly expected to be violent.

Another distinction among female and male obsessive avengers concerns the reasons that they indeed become vengeful. Female avengers, unlike their many male literary and filmic counterparts, become violent only for the sake of others. In other words, the male obsessive avengers typically seek revenge for wrongs (whether real or imagined) committed against *them*, while the female ones do so for wrongs committed against others.⁹ The title characters of *Freaks* are in general an other-oriented, peaceable lot. As Mary Russo has pointed out (91), their community is a model of tolerance but only up to a point; when someone tries to exploit one of them, their transformation from "children" to cold-blooded killers and mutilators is swift, unexpected, and chilling. "Their code is a law unto themselves," a carny barker observes near the beginning of the film. "Offend one and you offend them all!" Malita, too, harbors the "other-oriented" trait frequently associated with women; she views her vengeful acts as not so much for her own sake but on behalf of her late husband. She says to Lavond while threatening him with the explosive fluid, "You've had your vengeance. Now Marcel will have his!"

In addition, the female avengers in both films are not major characters. Unlike the many Browning-Chaney collaborations of the 1920s, which featured the male obsessive avengers dominating almost every scene, *Freaks* and *The Devil Doll* relegate their figures with disabilities to backseat status and focus instead on the able-bodied characters who wrong them (Cleopatra and Hercules in *Freaks*, Lavond in *The Devil Doll*).

Similarly, the women's obsessive and violent behaviors are not all-consuming, as the men's are, but are limited to several brief scenes. The censorship matters that plagued both films are clearly related to those narrative

differences: topics that filmmakers could get away with in the 1920s were suddenly forbidden in the 1930s as a result of forces exerted by the Production Code Administration and other regulatory bodies. As we have already seen, *The Devil Doll* underwent major changes to conform to censor demands, with its writers changing the able-bodied Nyleta into the disabled Malita and significantly reducing her prominence in the process. In the case of *Freaks*, the scenes of violence were greatly toned down for the censors. Several females may be glimpsed among the figures crawling through the mud in the final version of the film, but most of their violent acts ended up on the cutting-room floor. David Skal and Elias Savada, who conducted extensive research into the production of *Freaks*, noted that "the truncated version [of the film] jettisoned the horrifying details of the mud-dripping freaks swarming over the tree-pinned Olga Baclanova and pouring into a circus wagon to castrate her lover" (174).

Freaks and *The Devil Doll* paradoxically both rupture and reinforce traditional views of female roles in films. While the disabled women of the films violate expectations of appearance and behavior established by decades of cinematic portrayals of sweet innocents, they simultaneously reinforce Hollywood's patterns of punishment of historically marginalized women: those women coded as unattractive, older women, women of color, poor women, and women unattached to men or children.¹⁰

As the prologue to *Freaks* points out, anything that deviates from the norm has traditionally been considered an omen of ill luck or a representation of evil.¹¹ Although the prologue purports to expose and challenge such superstitious thought, it does little to disguise the fact that Browning's film actually perpetuates the pattern in many ways. Browning's films create a distinction between "acceptable" women with disabilities (Lavond's blind mother and Hans's fiancée Frieda, who are models of maternal and feminine virtues) and "unacceptable" ones (Malita, many of the nameless

"freaks," and ultimately Cleopatra), who are often used as spectacles of horror.

The women with disabilities in *Freaks* and *The Devil Doll* are clearly categorized by appearance and behavior. Frieda, for example, is normalized both in relative appearance and in adherence to gender expectations. "Disabled" only in the sense of her small size, she is not shown to be "malformed" in any physical or social way. Frieda and her able-bodied friend Venus are shown doing laundry and talking about their men—highly gender-coded and normalized activities that, in the world of Hollywood film, signal the audience that a character conforms to sex-role expectations. In *Freaks* Frieda and Hans, in fact, form a parallel couple to Venus and Phroso

end, journeying from her role as "peacock of the air" to that of a "chicken woman."

The contrasting disabled women in *The Devil Doll* provide a similar duality in terms of reinforcing and rupturing gender-related expectations. Lavond's mother is blind, but having followed Freud's suggested path to feminine fulfillment by bearing a son, she is calm and loving. Her maternal nature continues to be evident in her protective relationships with both her son and her granddaughter. The character contrasts sharply with the decidedly unmaternal and therefore "unacceptable" Malita, all the way down to their physical representations in the movie; the "faded" look of Lavond's mother bears little resemblance to the generally stark appearance of Malita,

film now represents her as newly infantilized; uttering nonverbal sounds in a fenced-off pen with side show gawkers looking down on her, she resembles a prelingual child in a playpen watched by adults. The implications of the violence against her, however, are far from clear: members of a traditionally disempowered minority use their collective force to disempower a majority member. Browning's ambiguity on the point only enhances the film's unsettling properties.

It is difficult to assess the impact of Browning's highly unusual movies. *Freaks* was a critical and financial disaster but since the 1960s has developed a cult following; *The Devil Doll*, though it turned a modest profit for MGM, is barely remembered today due to the studio's extensive interference that greatly vitiated its horror-genre aspects. A significant development arising from *Freaks* and *The Devil Doll* was, without a doubt, Tod Browning's early retirement from the movies. His career ended shortly after these two, and it is highly likely that their controversial (and heavily censored) imagery, mixed receptions, and mediocre-to-poor box office performances helped push Browning, who had spent years cultivating the darker reaches of movie disability depictions, into retirement at age 57. Though 1939 marked his last film, his legacy, for good or ill, continues to be felt.

NOTES

We wish to thank the Center for Teaching and the Writing Program of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst for giving us the time and space to work on this essay at a Faculty Writing Retreat, held at the Bullard Farm Conference Center, N. New Salem, MA, May 1997.

1. For discussions of these and other disability-related stereotypes, see Norden, *Cinema*. An in-depth study of the obsessive avenger may be found in Norden, "Uncanny."

2. We have discovered only two films prior to *Freaks* that contained avenging disabled women. One is a 1908, one-reel film called *The Sailor's Sweetheart*, in which a disabled woman strangles a man who had been tormenting her daughter. The other is *Stella Maris*, a 1918 silent feature film that starred Mary Pickford as

Though ostensibly challenging it, *Freaks* reinforces the cultural link between evil and disability/ugliness. In the end, the cruel, beautiful woman is made hideous.

(an able-bodied male circus performer) in terms of audience identification. Significantly, neither Frieda nor Hans is anywhere to be seen during the film's mutilation scene.

Cleopatra is much more active and powerful than either Frieda or Venus, and the narrative moment that crystallizes her evil is when she demonstrates her physical power by carrying Hans around on her shoulders at their wedding feast. Although a groom carrying the bride across the threshold on their wedding night might be regarded as the apogee of romance, the reversal of this heterosexual custom signals the nadir of Hans's humiliation. Though ostensibly challenging it, *Freaks* reinforces the cultural link between evil and disability/ugliness: the cruel woman who early in the film is a beautiful spectacle is made hideous by the

epitomized by the stripes of white in her dark hair, like the bride in the *Bride of Frankenstein*.

The violence committed against Cleopatra resulting in her mutilation is worthy of further consideration, if only for its contradictory qualities that go beyond issues of gender.¹² Earlier in the film, during the infamous wedding feast sequence, Cleopatra watches in horror as the "freaks" stage a bizarre welcoming ceremony for her in which they chant, "Gooble gobble, gooble gobble, we accept her, one of us." She is revolted at the thought and throws a proffered loving cup of wine at them. "Dirty, slimy freaks!" she says. "Make me one of you, will you?" The offended characters remember her words, of course, and during the storm-drenched revenge scene they literally do make her one of them. The

Unity Blake, a woman with a malformed shoulder and hip who kills another woman and then herself to avenge the beatings of the title character, also played by Pickford. For discussions of these films, see Cahill (41–51) and Norden, *Cinema* (28, 65–66).

3. *Munsey's* is a difficult magazine to access today, but fortunately "Spurs" has been reprinted in at least three anthologies: see Haining, Kittredge and Krauzer, and Wheeler. Our references to "Spurs" come from the Wheeler edition.

4. For a brief history of this film's censorship history, see Norden, "Freaks."

5. Hollywood's legendary misfit, Erich von Stroheim, also received screen credit, but little of his work found its way into the final film. See Wood.

6. Hollywood produced like-titled movies based on *Rebecca* and *Jane Eyre* in 1940 and 1944, respectively.

7. Chaney also acted in many other revenge-driven disability dramas directed by others. See Norden, *Cinema* (84–99).

8. A definition of this stereotype may be found in Norden, *Cinema* (131–33).

9. This important distinction is also true for the films' two silent-era predecessors, *The Sailor's Sweetheart* and *Stella Maris*, noted above.

10. See Cahill for an extended study of the Hollywood representation of "unattractive" women.

11. Attached to most prints of *Freaks* in circulation today, the prologue was actual-

ly added after *Freaks's* initial run in an ill-considered effort to add a sociological spin to the film.

12. Indeed, Russo (77–79) argues that Cleopatra's mutilation is the film's most important issue.

WORKS CITED

- Brosnan, John. *The Horror People*. New York: St. Martin's, 1976.
- Cahill, Madeleine A. "'A Bad Time of It in This World': The Construction of the 'Unattractive' Woman in American Film of the 1940's." Diss. U of Massachusetts-Amherst, 1995.
- . Rev. of *The Devil-Doll*. *Variety* 12 Aug. 1936: 18.
- Freaks* pressbook. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Library for the Performing Arts, New York City.
- Haining, Peter, ed. *The Ghouls*. New York: Stein and Day, 1971.
- Kalter, Joanmarie. "The Disabled Get More TV Exposure, but There's Still Too Much Stereotyping." *TV Guide* 31 May 1986: 42–44.
- Kittredge, William, and Steven M. Krauzer, ed. *Stories into Film*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Merritt, Abraham. *Burn Witch Burn!* New York: Liveright, 1933.
- Norden, Martin F. *The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1994.
- . "Freaks." *Ready Reference: Censorship*. Vol. 1. Ed. Kent Rasmussen. Pasadena: Salem, 1997.
- . "The Uncanny Film Image of the Obsessive Avenger." *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 3.3–4 (1997): 367–78.
- Robbins, Tod. "Spurs." *No, but I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film*. Ed. David Wheeler. New York: Penguin, 1989: 144–61.
- Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Skal, David J., and Elias Savada. *Dark Carnival: The Secret World of Tod Browning, Hollywood's Master of the Macabre*. New York: Anchor, 1995.
- Wheeler, David, ed. *No, but I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made into Film*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Wood, Bret. "The Witch, the Devil, and the Code." *Film Comment* Nov.–Dec. 1992: 52–56.

MARTIN F. NORDEN is a professor of communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and MADELEINE A. CAHILL is an assistant professor of communication at Westfield State College in Massachusetts. © 1998 by Martin F. Norden and Madeleine A. Cahill.
