"Pitiful Creature of Darkness": The Subhuman and the Superhuman in *The Phantom of the Opera*

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Description

“This chapter focuses on The Phantom of the Opera, the megamusical that perhaps most boldly faces the idea of disability head-on, as it stars a character whose face, as one journalist described it, looks ‘like melted cheese’ (Smith, 1995). The musical’s approach to the Phantom’s disability is remarkably layered and inconsistent; the Phantom is portrayed in numerous ways (monster, criminal, genius, god, ghost) and his physical disability blurs regularly with his ‘soul’; which is where numerous characters locate the origin of his problems. His face and its famous mask covering are both feared and thrilled over, but with a reassuring dose of pity that allows the audience to feel comfortable leaning forward to catch a glimpse. How, in the supposedly more enlightened culture of the 1980s (and today, as the show continues to thrive), can we justify what is, at base, a modern version of a circus freak show? And how does the musical shield the audience from feeling that it is? The musical’s atmosphere, style, music, and lyrics create such a seductive sense of romance and tragic inevitability—cushioned with an extra layer of ‘historical’ distance—that the discomfort we should feel is swept away by megamusical momentum.”

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Comments

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