

# Romps with Ransom's King: Fans, Collectors, Academics, and the M. P. Shiel Archives

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**H**OUSING THE ARCHIVES OF SUCH NOTABLE LITERARY FIGURES AS Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, E. E. Cummings, and Oscar Wilde, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas is a Mecca for academic researchers from all over the world. At the same time, it is a Mecca for a very different kind of researcher attracted to a very different kind of archive. Take Alex, for example, a self-professed “goth” who describes his pilgrimage to the Ransom Center to view the Aleister Crowley archives in his “blog,” “Alex’s Journal.”<sup>1</sup> Among his other interests cited on the “user info” page, Alex lists “death metal,” “body piercing,” “drinking,” “comics” “hurting peoples brains [sic],” “debauchery,” “subdural haematomas,” and “weirding out weird people.” The sheer eccentricity of the Ransom’s collections—which include high literary, mass cultural, and even counter-cultural material—make it a place where a professor earnestly poring over a Joyce manuscript might rub shoulders with a fan like Alex who describes

1 The full account of Alex’s research trip reads as follows: “Went to the Harry Ransom Centre and looked at rare Aleister Crowley manuscripts which was lots of fun. I filled out all these request tags and they’re like ‘are you for real or are you playing around?!?’ and I said ‘I’m very serious’ and they said ‘this might take a while’ and I said ‘I can wait.’ So eventually they brought me out 3 boxes of stuff, he he, and I spent several hours poring over the stuff and taking some cool notes.”

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his research on Crowley as having “fun” and “taking some cool notes.” In other words, it is a place where the academic and the fan come face to face. The essay that follows discusses this confrontation between the academic and the fan in the archive—not in a literal way—but through the story of the archive of M. P. Shiel, an obscure writer of mystery, detective, horror, science fiction and other popular genres. His archives at the Ransom Center owe their existence entirely to a select few fans of Shiel—namely, a drunken bibliophile and a right-wing millionaire plastics manufacturer—figures who, like Alex, present a stark contrast to the earnest academics we normally associate with archives. In telling the story of this archive, the essay considers the differing discourses of the academic and the fan and how these discourses come into conflict when fans become implicated with archives, when fans engage in scholarship, and when the academic confronts the fan inside him- or herself. At the same time, it reveals how the Ransom Center became the kind of eclectic research institution that would consider creating archives devoted not only to renowned literary and cultural figures, but also to popular and mass cultural figures, from the more enduring and notorious of these—such as Crowley—to the most obscure and forgotten—such as Shiel.

### **Academic, Fan, and Collector Discourse**

One of the reasons the image of the earnest Joyce scholar rubbing shoulders with the “goth” fan of Crowley in the Ransom Center is so amusing is that implicitly we recognize the stark contrast between the ethos of the academic and that of the fan. Before going on to discuss how the Shiel archives bring academics and fans into conflict, I will briefly summarize the discourses that define the academic and the fan. I will also describe the discourse of another figure central to the existence of archives, one who bears a close relationship to the fan—the collector. While academics, fans, and collectors may be broadly characterized as having in common a deep investment in culture, there are great differences in what Matt Hills calls the “imagined subjectivities” of these distinct groups or, the “guiding discourses and ideals of subjectivity” they adopt (8).<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, academic culture is founded on Enlightenment principles which value reason over emotion, objectivity over subjectivity (Jensen 21, Frith 581). An academic would never, for example, describe his or her archival experi-

2 Though Hills deals specifically with the clash between fan and academic culture, his theory can easily incorporate “collectors” as a group with another possible “imagined subjectivity.”

ence as “taking cool notes,” as Alex, the fan, does. Fans, who have a strong emotional engagement with and who express enthusiasm for their areas of interest, do not fare well under such a discourse.<sup>3</sup> The term “fan” itself, a term derived from the word fanatic, suggests a form of engagement with culture antithetical to that of the reasoning and objective academic. Fandom, as Joli Jensen, Lawrence Grossberg, Matt Hills, and others have argued, has tended to be pathologized by academics and this practice has served to uphold an élitist “us/them” dichotomy between forms of engagement with cultural life. Under academic discourse, fans are characterized in their worst form as deranged, obsessive, potentially violent, and unbalanced (Jensen 13). At the very least, as Hills argues, “‘fan’ status” is “devalued and taken as a sign of ‘inappropriate’ learning and uncritical engagement” (xi–xii). It does not help matters that what the culture fans are engaged with, namely “popular” culture, has traditionally had a low status within academic communities that value “high” culture. Though cultural studies has brought popular culture increasingly into the realm of academic study in recent years, this interest has done little, as many cultural critics argue, to change the way fandom and popular culture are perceived in academia.<sup>4</sup> Even scholars who identify themselves as hybrid “scholar-fans” inevitably resort to academic discourse, which insists that they curb their enthusiasm and remain detached and rational about their interest in popular culture (Hills 11, 12).

Collectors fare somewhat better under academic discourse, generally falling somewhere between fans and academics. Collectors, like ideal scholars, may be considered “dedicated [and] serious” (Muensterberger 3). They are “connoisseurs” in their realm of collecting (Baudrillard 10). Collecting, likewise, may be regarded as “a positive intellectual act designed to demonstrate a point” (Pearce “Collecting” 202). By academic standards,

3 Neither Jensen nor Hills denies that academics may, indeed often do, have strong emotional attachments either to their work or to subjects outside their work that might be characterized as fannish. Hills calls these academics “scholar-fans.” Yet both would argue that institutional structures and contexts do not easily allow for an academic to embody both identities simultaneously. Within the institution, academics must “present an identity which conforms to institutional expectations” and cater their language and writing to these expectations (Hills 20). See also Jensen 21–23.

4 Grossberg, for example, argues that, while popular culture has now come into the university curriculum, there is still a denigration of fan status (50). See also Frith who argues that “the aesthetics of popular culture” are neglected in academia and that many studies of popular culture take a “patronizing” attitude towards their subject (571, 573). Andrew Ross has dedicated a whole book to the subject, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*.

collecting is an activity that “generat[es] knowledge, preserv[es] fragile [objects], and “provid[es] a richer sense of history” (Belk 320). Collecting, however, can also have negative connotations. Collecting has been described, for example, as “obsession organized,” a description that points to the ambivalent status of the collector (N. Aristides, qtd. in Pearce, “The Urge to Collect” 158). While organization is a positive quality within academic discourse, “obsession” links the collector with the fan, as does the collector’s potential to become “infatuated” with or excessively attached to his/her collection (Muensterberger 3). In such cases, “the emotion and often the ardour attached to the collected object or objects is not necessarily commensurate with its specialness or commercial value, nor does it relate to any kind of usefulness”—at least from the point of view of academics and others outside the collecting community (Muensterberger 4). Collecting, then, like fandom, has been largely pathologized. Indeed, collectors themselves often characterize their practices in pathological terms as addictions, obsessions, and compulsions (Belk 319). Of all the forms of collecting, there is perhaps no form more pathologized than that of book collecting, the only form of collecting, as Basbanes notes, “to have a disease named after it”—i.e., “bibliomania” (dustjacket of *A Gentle Madness*).

If fans and collectors are marginalised as “other” within academic discourse, fans and collectors likewise marginalize academics in their own discourses. Fan discourse, for example, privileges emotion and even a certain degree of irrationality regarding the object of fandom. As Hills explains, fans’ accounts of their interests are typically “self-absent”:

Exactly at the point where we might—in the terms of an academic imagined subjectivity—expect a rational explanation of the self’s devotion and fandom—we are instead presented with a moment of self-suspension and radical hesitancy. We are confronted by a moment where the subject *cannot* discursively and “rationally” account for its own fan experience, and where no discourse seems to be available which can meaningfully capture the fan’s [experience]. (7)

Instead, as many studies of the origins of fan attachments have shown, fans resort to mystified explanations: “I sensed from the beginning that there was something incomprehensibly significant ...”; “I felt from the beginning it had something to say to *me* about *my* life”; “it completely took me away ...” etc. (qtd. in Hills 7). Within fan discourse, then, academics’ so-called rationality and objectivity become negative attributes. Under this discourse, academics are perceived as “passionless, hyper-rational,

[and] intellectualising” and academic jargon is held in contempt as false and artificial (Hills 7).

Like fans, collectors often view academics with distaste and stress their own importance in the development of scholarship. This is particularly true of book collectors. Bibliophile Vincent Starrett, for example, celebrated “the simple, book-loving collectors” as “greater than the professional critics ... and of more lasting value to the art of literature” (352). A. S. W. Rosenbach more concretely identified book collectors’ contributions to scholarship, noting that they were responsible for the existence of the world’s great libraries (qtd. in Basbanes 17). John Carter claimed even further credit for book collectors arguing that they “anticipate the scholar and the historian” by “find[ing] some interest where none was recognized before,” by “rescu[ing] books from obscurity,” and by “pioneer[ing] a subject or an author by seeking out and assembling the raw material for study” (25). Book collectors often pride themselves on their ability to discriminate, to find books of value or potential value amidst a mass of worthless trash. Collectors’ sense of importance regarding their role in directing future scholarship makes them feel superior to academics but they, like fans, feel marginalized in relation to this community and other non-collecting communities. They “suffer,” Carter claims, “from the consciousness of being a minority, even a persecuted minority and ... this causes them to adopt ... a generally defensive attitude toward the rest of the world” (21). As with the fan community, this sense of marginalization from outside communities creates a strong bond among book collectors.

### **M. P. Shiel’s Fan and Collector Appeal**

I have mapped out fan, collector, and academic discourses in order to draw attention to the attitudes and values that come into conflict in the story of the Ransom Center archive of M. P. Shiel. Most important to keep in mind in this context are the distinctions, the antagonisms even, between fan and academic discourse and collector and academic discourse and the similarities between fans and collectors. Indeed, in the case of Shiel, fan and collector identity go hand in hand. Most of his fans are collectors of Shiel, but also more broadly of books in general, while his collectors tend also to be enthusiastic fans. For the purposes of this paper, then, I make virtually no distinction between fans and collectors and use the term collector-fan to refer to the hybrid nature of Shiel enthusiasts, all of whom employ both the discourse of fandom and the discourse of the collector.

At this point, you may well be asking, “Who on earth is M. P. Shiel?” And indeed, at first glance, there seems to be no reason why Shiel would

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merit an archive at a major research institution, even one with as eclectic an acquisition policy as the Ransom Center. Shiel is one of those whom Clive Bloom calls “entirely marginal writers who earned a living or a part living through writing, whose work sold regularly, who themselves were neither merely eccentric nor spurred on by simple vanity” but who have been “excluded in *all* accounts of literature’s history, disregarded by critics and usually unknown to academics” (24). Moreover, Shiel does not even have the kind of broad popular or cultish appeal that characterizes some of the Ransom Center’s more outré collections, such as its Crowley collection. So what then is this marginal writer who has been excluded from literary history, disregarded by critics, largely ignored by academics, and who lacks even a mass-cultural or counter-cultural popular appeal doing in the Ransom Center—especially when so many other thousands of “entirely marginal” writers have no archives at all and have consequently been truly lost to history? Basically, Shiel’s presence in the Ransom Center is the result of a number of contingencies that brought the collections of Shiel fans—namely, the aforementioned drunken bibliophile and right-wing millionaire plastics manufacturer—to the attention of a University of Texas librarian at a time when the University was afflicted with what Nicholas Basbanes has called “institutional bibliomania” (dustjacket of *A Gentle Madness*).

Though Shiel is almost entirely neglected today, he has a strong potential interest for fans of popular culture, collectors and, to a certain extent, academics. In other words, his fans and collectors, though few, are not crazy. Born in Montserrat in 1865, of Irish ancestry on his father’s side and unacknowledged slave ancestry on his mother’s, Shiel moved to England in 1885 where he became involved with decadent writers such as Ernest Dowson, Arthur Machen, and George Egerton, writers who congregated around publisher John Lane of the Bodley Head. Shiel’s association with British decadence and the Bodley Head makes him a subject of interest for 1890s enthusiasts and book collectors even though, strangely, Shiel has been almost entirely ignored in scholarship on British decadence.<sup>5</sup> To collector-fans of Shiel, however, this period of Shiel’s career is of immense interest. Shiel’s first book, *Prince Zaleski*, is one of the most “collectible” of the Bodley Head Keynotes series books because it is sought after not only by Shiel fans, but by 1890s enthusiasts, collectors of fantasy and detec-

5 Even Ian Fletcher, scholar of decadence, friend of Shiel collector-fan John Gawsworth, and member of Shiel’s “intellectual aristocracy,” the Kingdom of Redonda, does not mention Shiel in his scholarship on decadence.

tive fiction, and bibliophiles more broadly (Locke 162). In this early work, the stories involving the decadent detective, Prince Zaleski, and his next work, the Poesque tales of *Shapes in the Fire*, Shiel adopted the elaborate, esoteric, and florid writing style of the decadents. After the Wilde trial, however, a trial which created in the public mind an association of decadence with sexual immortality, Shiel, like many decadents, felt it necessary to distance himself from the movement in order to save his career.

It was at this point that Shiel abandoned his attempts to establish himself as an avant-garde literary “artist” and took up the more profitable, if less prestigious, occupation of hack writer of popular fiction. Shiel made lots of money in this period, writing stories and serials for mass-circulated magazines and newspapers. Still, though Shiel’s stories may have been read by the hundreds of thousands of readers such publications claimed were their audiences, Shiel did not achieve literary fame in this medium. By this I mean to say that Shiel’s name did not drive sales of the magazines or newspapers he wrote for in the way that serials by famous writers like H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett did, for example. In this period, many readers of popular fiction were attracted to fiction more by genre than by author. Or, they might be attracted by a “house name,” regularly buying a particular newspaper or magazine and picking and choosing from the literary content offered without giving much attention to authorship. Shiel’s work sold mostly in these latter two fashions. While the magazines and newspapers he appeared in sold well and while cheap “sixpenny” reprints of these works also sold reasonably well, his works sold poorly when published by more highbrow enterprises such as Grant Richards’s publishing firm.<sup>6</sup> Shiel may have sold well at sixpence but he did not at six shillings—the standard price for a hardback novel in this period. As many copies as his serial fiction may have sold, Shiel was never a well-known literary figure. Instead, he was always a hack, one of thousands of writers who made a decent living by, but who received little recognition and no literary prestige for, the mass-produced fiction he churned out. Shiel dabbled in nearly all the emerging forms of twentieth-century popular fiction that would come to be associated with “fan” readerships, including detective stories, science fiction, romance, historical novels, war novels,

6 That Grant Richards had something of a fannish devotion for Shiel is the only explanation for his repeated dealings with a writer who was extremely unprofitable for his firm and who was also quite troublesome. Their correspondence can be found in the Grant Richards archives (available in the Chadwyck-Healy Archive of British Publishers on Microfilm) and in the M. P. Shiel Archives, Harry Ransom Center, Austin.

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mystery, tales of the fantastic, horror, weird tales, and supernatural fiction. His most enduring work to date has been his "last man" novel, *The Purple Cloud* (1901, revised 1929), now recognized as a classic by knowledgeable fans in the science fiction and fantasy writing community. Other than this small recognition, Shiel is largely neglected by the many contemporary fans of these early mass cultural popular genres.

Even as he moved from the fringes of the artistic literary avant-garde to the realm of mass-market fiction, however, Shiel retained a certain amount of the "high art" esotericism that had characterized his decadent output. These aspects of Shiel's writing help to explain his relative lack of mass appeal and also why he did eventually gain the following of collector-fans, especially those of the type whose interests incline towards the cultish and outré and who pride themselves on being connoisseurs of the byways of literature.<sup>7</sup> Shiel remained in relative obscurity until the 1920s when, at the age of about sixty, he achieved a strongly identifiable status as the object of cultish appeal to British and American collector-fans. Most of Shiel's collector-fans of this period, at least the known ones, came from the literary community. These collector-fans worked hard on Shiel's behalf to try to enhance his reputation and to draw greater attention to one they regarded as a neglected literary figure. On the urging of Carl Van Vechten, who had been introduced to Shiel's work by Hugh Walpole, Alfred Knopf published two Shiel titles in 1923 and 1924. In Britain, Victor Gollancz, responding to a small but fervent burst of interest in Shiel, brought out a series of five of Shiel's early works. At the same time, collectors and fans began eagerly seeking out Shiel material. Spurred on by the renewed interest in his work, Shiel, who had published nothing between 1913 and 1923, began to write again.

The praise bestowed upon Shiel by these collector-fans is characteristic of the hyperbolic and impassioned discourse of the fan. Hugh Walpole, writer and bibliophile, called Shiel "a flaming genius" (qtd. in Billings, "Matthew Phipps Shiel" 34). The even more effusive novelist L. P. Hartley described Shiel's novels thus: "[L]ike Mount Everest, or the River Amazon, or the Eiffel Tower, or the Woolworth Building, they are not to be contained in the positive or the comparative degree; they set a standard, they break a record, they aim at the absolute" (qtd. in Billings, "Matthew Phipps

7 Grossberg characterizes these types of fans as an "élite fraction" who distinguish themselves from "the larger audience of passive consumers" and who claim an ability "to discriminate between those forms of popular culture which are 'authentic' (that is which really are art, which really do represent their experience, etc.) and those which are ... of the commercial mainstream" (52).

Shiel” 35). American critic, novelist, and bibliophile, Carl Van Vechten, said he “cried aloud with the morning stars” upon first reading Shiel’s *Purple Cloud* (*Excavations* 151). This was the same novel that French critic, Jules Claretie, would declare as great a production as Homer’s *Odyssey* and likely to endure as long (Shiel, *Purple Cloud* dustjacket). These effusions over Shiel are the effusions of the over-enthusiastic fan and excessively attached collector whose interests are not commensurate with the value of the object of their enthusiasm outside their community. If Shiel’s works were the Eiffel Towers of the literary world and Shiel the new Homer to his collector-fans, these were not the opinions of those outside this community who had either never heard of this new Homer or thought, like Oxford scholar W. P. Ker, that Shiel’s works were “very poor ... absurd nonsense” (letter to Llewellyn Roberts). Despite the efforts of these fans and collectors, Shiel has not yet been recognized by the wider literary and critical community, by the academic community, or by a broad popular readership. He still continues, however, to be an object of cultish interest to a very select few fan connoisseurs in the realms of fantasy fiction, science fiction, horror and supernatural fiction, and mystery and detective fiction.<sup>8</sup>

Another factor in Shiel’s cultish appeal to fans and collectors is his role in the history of the Kingdom of Redonda, an “intellectual aristocracy” that continues to bestow royal titles to this day under the leadership of Spanish novelist and current King of Redonda, Javier Marías.<sup>9</sup> Shiel was the first King of Redonda, crowned King of this island off the coast of Montserrat at the age of fifteen by his father. Legally, this uninhabited island was under the control of the British government, who were exploiting it for its vast phosphate resources. The Colonial Office allowed Shiel to keep the title of king as an honorary one, however, and he passed it on to his literary executor John Gawsorth. It was in Gawsorth’s hands that the Kingdom became the quirky and cultish society that it is and it was he who initiated the practice of conferring titles. Initially those titles were reserved for admirers or supporters of Shiel and his work, though gradually the criteria

8 Some of M. P. Shiel’s books are still being published by small independent publishing houses like Tartarus Press which recently issued *Prince Zaleski* and *The Purple Cloud* with introductions by science fiction writer Brian Stableford. Hippocampus Press will issue *The House of Sounds and Others* next year, edited by American academic S. T. Joshi.

9 “Intellectual aristocracy” was Gawsorth’s term for the Kingdom in the First proclamation of Juan R., King of Redonda (Morse, *Works of M. P. Shiel*, illustration facing page 11).

expanded to represent the interests of Gawsworth and succeeding Kings. Gawsworth granted titles to a number of people, including writers Carl Van Vechten, Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, Dylan Thomas, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Rebecca West; actors Dirk Bogarde, Diana Dors, Joan Crawford, and Vincent Price; and publishers Alfred Knopf, Victor Gollancz, and Grant Richards. More recently, Mariás has conferred royal status upon A. S. Byatt, Pierre Bourdieu, J. M. Coetzee, Pedro Almodóvar, John Ashbery, and Francis Ford Coppola.<sup>10</sup> Though admittedly the Redondans are no longer a group whose main purpose is the support of M. P. Shiel (I doubt that Coppola, Almodóvar, and the other high-profile new Redondans have read Shiel), his role as first King of this “intellectual aristocracy” in the history of the Kingdom ensures him a continued cult status.

### John Gawsworth and Shiel: “Intoxicating” Fandom

That Shiel has even the most tenuous of links to the rather unlikely grouping of such people as Henry Miller, Diana Dors, Francis Ford Coppola, and Pierre Bourdieu is a tribute to John Gawsworth, the first important figure in the story of the Ransom Center Shiel archives. Born in 1912, Gawsworth was a collector-fan of Shiel from his teens, an interest which fit in more broadly with Gawsworth’s activities as a bibliophile with particular interests in writers of the fin-de-siècle, Edwardian, and Georgian periods. Gawsworth’s interests in writers who were unfashionable in the literary world of the 1920s and 1930s made him something of an anachronism in this community. Dylan Thomas, for example, described Gawsworth derisively as “that leftover yellow towelbrain of the nineties soaked in stale periods” (qtd. in de Fortis “History” 25). Gawsworth established a relationship with Shiel and worked devotedly on his behalf, helping him revive his career, trying to obtain for him a Civil List Pension, and attempting to preserve for future archives what little Shiel had left with regard to personal papers, manuscripts, and editions of his works. Appointed literary executor upon Shiel’s death in 1947, Gawsworth planned a biography of the writer and attempted to get many of his works re-published in order to make Shiel available outside the community of “fanatical first-edition collectors” (Gawsworth 5).

10 For a full list of Redondan Royalty see <<http://www.javiermarias.es/redondiana/bruma2.html>>. This “intellectual aristocracy” continues to grow. As recently as February 24, 2004 Polly Curtis of the *Guardian Unlimited* reported on the nomination of Dr Alexis Grohmann, a Scottish academic, to the Redondan community.

Gawsworth's fannish devotion waned, however, in the 1950s and 1960s in the face of his growing alcoholism and he began to sell off his precious Shiel material. During this period, London booksellers such as Anthony Rota became accustomed to Gawsworth's "petulant and hectic Friday afternoon suicide threats" by means of which he pressured booksellers to purchase material from him so he could subsidize his weekend debauches (Morse *Shielography* 542). Gawsworth was savvy and still devoted enough to Shiel, however, to make sure that he made copies of the letters he sold. Sometimes he even sold those copies. Timothy d'Arch Smith claimed, for example, that "an impoverished Gawsworth tr[ie]d to sell him manuscripts on which the ink was not yet dry" (de Fortis "History" 27). Gawsworth's Shiel material, including his copies, ended up being dispersed among a handful of Shiel collectors. Much of this material found its way to the Ransom Center. From all perspectives—that of fan, collector, and academic alike—Gawsworth's selling of copies of Shiel material is reprehensible and clearly compromises the value and integrity of the Ransom's Shiel archives. One wonders how seriously copies would be taken if the literary figure in question were T. S. Eliot, for example? What kind of claims can a researcher make on the basis of copies of letters copied by a known drunk? Fortunately, some originals of the copied letters have begun to turn up and it appears that, whatever other faults he may have had, Gawsworth seems at least to have been an accurate copyist. Still, does Gawsworth's accuracy as a copyist exculpate him from his crime of selling copies of Shiel material to collectors? Furthermore, does Gawsworth's accuracy as a copyist justify the purchasing of what were known to be copies by a major North American research institution such as the Harry Ransom Center? Before turning to this question, I would like first to focus on another of Shiel's collector-fans, one whose Shiel material is also partly housed in the Harry Ransom Center, and one who poses different kinds of problems for the academic researcher of Shiel.

### A. Reynolds Morse: The Fan as Critic

One of the collector-fans who was profiting from Gawsworth's selling off of his Shiel material in the 1950s and 1960s was A. Reynolds Morse, a millionaire plastics machinery designer whose passion for M. P. Shiel was matched only by his passion for Salvador Dali.<sup>11</sup> Morse became a collector of Shieliana in the early 1940s and, in 1949, two years after Shiel's death,

11 Morse's collection of Dali is housed at the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida.

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he produced a Shiel bibliography which he referred to as the Shielography. Morse is interesting because, from the very first, he conceived of himself as a fan or, what he called, “a devoted disciple,” and his writing on Shiel fully employs the hyperbolic and irrational mystico-religious language found in much fan discourse (Morse *Shielography Updated* 442):

He was something of a mystic, and held us in his spell so completely that the word of his passing was like the severing of a link with G-O-D. We know an unusual F-O-R-C-E *had* existed, and that now some mysterious bond with the Universe was gone. The realization is slowly spreading that M. P. Shiel was more than a novelist, more than a philosopher—indeed more than a man, and that the measure of a soul as vibrant as his has yet to be provided. (Morse *Shielography Updated* 442)

Morse’s hyperbolic praise of Shiel and his unconventional bibliographic procedures in the Shielography garnered him harsh criticism from academics. E. F. Bleiler, a scholar of supernatural, detective, mystery, and fantasy literature, called the bibliography “jejune, too doting ... and unscholarly,” and suggested it might have been better if Morse “had had less enthusiasm and more technique” (qtd. in Morse *Shielography* 442, 443). Bleiler’s criticisms are typical of the anti-fan academic discourse that privileges a disinterested and objective approach to the object of study over a subjective and emotional one.

Even thirty years later, Morse was still feeling the sting of Bleiler’s remarks. At this time, Morse produced an updated Shielography in which he responded to the criticism of the earlier volume, his bitterness still in evidence, his defence of his fandom and his complete distaste for academic scholarship clear:

Despite this beautiful opportunity to retract or back down from my youthful Shielian enthusiasms, inconsistencies and erratic “bibliographic procedures,” I stand by my still unpaid position. I will not dry up a labour of love just to satisfy any purists. There are just too many damn “professional” and “scholarly” books which by their very consistency quickly become dry as a mummy precisely because they are injected with the elixir of academia and commerciality. That’s one reason I said to hell with the chance to use the recent recast collations some fellow in Texas made from those in the original Shielography [Morse’s Shielography was redone in proper bibliographic form at the Ransom Center].... So you’ve got in your hand a study by a guy who was honestly too busy to write

it, but who at least admits his hero-worship on the one hand, and then on the other actually collected, and then took the books in his aging paw and putting down, not what some rule book said, but what he actually saw—and loving it! Mr. Bleiler concluded his review by saying that the Shielography “might have been improved if Mr. Morse had had less enthusiasm and more technique.” After more than 35 years, I can only say to Mr. Bleiler, Thank God **SOMEBODY** had the enthusiasm, for those with the technique did not. (442–43)

Academics might well take issue with Morse’s association of academic writing with commerciality—don’t we all wish we could inject our works with this “magic elixir of academia and commerciality”? Still, his rant clearly articulates, from the collector-fan perspective, the divide between academic and fan and collector discourse. “Enthusiasm,” “love,” “hero-worship,” and the love of books as physical objects distinguish him as a collector-fan from the “professional,” scholarly, detached “purists” that represent to him the academics who create traditional, “dry as a mummy” scholarship.

The updated Shielography was part of a broader labour of love on the part of Morse that took up much of his spare time in the late 1970s and early 1980s: a four-volume, 1800-page tribute to Shiel—one volume of novels and stories by Shiel, two volumes comprising the updated Shielography, and a volume of essays on Shiel. These four volumes constitute the major source of information about and evaluation of Shiel available outside the Shiel archives and indeed function as a kind of archive of their own. In fact, the material involved in the creation of these volumes constitutes its own set of archives at Rollins University in Florida: The A. Reynolds Morse Collection of M. P. Shiel. The volume of essays consists of contributions by Shiel enthusiasts, collectors, book sellers, experts in the various realms of popular fiction that Shiel engaged with, and a few scholars, mostly amateur. I say amateur not to devalue their contributions or their knowledge, but to describe these contributors as they themselves would probably prefer to be described. Many of them are as suspicious of “professional” academics as Morse. Indeed, the overall tone of the volume of critical essays is defiantly anti-academic. George Locke, for example, employing the anti-academic discourse of the collector, exalts the bibliographical work of collectors over “coldly (and often disinterestedly) composed” doctoral theses (169). Anticipating a broad revival of interest in Shiel, Locke says that this revival will be due to “that enthusiastic collector [i.e., Morse] and his Shiel col-

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not to  
devalue their  
contributions  
or their  
knowledge, but  
to describe these  
contributors as  
they themselves  
would probably  
prefer to be  
described.

lector friends, and not to those academics seeking to please each other in terminology that only they can understand” (169).

Morse himself sets this anti-academic tone for the collection of essays. As editor, he ensured, as he said, that there would be no “cloying academic assessment” in the collection (*Shiel in Diverse Hands* 401). Though most of the contributions are creditable and full of useful research on Shiel, Morse undermines the scholarly value of the collection with intrusive editorial notes that append each essay. Sometimes, for example, Morse injects into these notes his right-wing political and social viewpoints and asks us to read Shiel as a proponent of these views even when such readings are not always accurate. For example, commenting on one contributor’s representation of Shiel’s socialist leanings, Morse writes:

[Shiel] foresaw ... the industrial and moral inadequacies of white men, and what this white minority race so badly believes. That is NOT rule by the people as Shiel SEEMS to aver, but instead rule by a strong—and moral—leader.... Our own 20th century experiments with cancerous political bureaucracies have now quite clearly shown that Shiel’s socialism would fail. That is, The State, men collectively, the people, through politicians, cannot act either fairly or cohesively vis-à-vis the redistribution either of property or resources.” (*Shiel in Diverse Hands* 54, 55)<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, from the academic’s point of view, Morse the fan has slipped over into Morse the fanatic. Morse’s editorial commentary even made some of the non-academic contributors uneasy. Shiel enthusiast John D. Squires, as Morse himself admitted, “expressed considerable concern about some of [these] Notes and asseverations” (*Shiel in Diverse Hands* 402).

It is perhaps not surprising that Morse’s four-volume tribute to Shiel was self-published. After all, what press would publish a four-volume, 1800-page collection on an unknown author? Morse himself thought the publication a massive achievement and declared, in his characteristic anti-academic fashion, “[t]hese four books are the most unlikely of all 20th

12 It is certainly true that Shiel’s works exhibit some of the racist viewpoints that Morse credits him with though, at the same time, Shiel had some strong socialist beliefs that Morse ignores. Sam Moskowitz has written at great length about Shiel’s anti-Semitism, while C. J. Keep believes that Shiel’s misogyny and racism have prevented Shiel from being taken up more widely by academics and critics. Keep argues, however, that Shiel’s work offers a “complex” and “cultural[lly] rich” treatment of a vast range of modernist ideas—everything from socialism, evolution, Nietzscheism, spiritualism, eugenics, revolution, insanity, miscegenation, etc.—“the ideas that propelled the West into modernism” (277).

century projects to achieve actual publication, especially in the face of the dry, stodgy sort of academic ‘Professionalism’ that is now stereotyping modern literary and doctoral research” (*Shiel in Diverse Hands* 491). Celebrating the collection of essays in the language of the true fan, Morse characterizes its genesis in the following terms: “the fascination of M. P. Shiel is a lodestone out of time and space. It was a mystical and mysterious force that drew so many diverse hands—and minds—all together in an overdue tribute to one of the most ... enigmatic writers of the last one hundred years” (*Shiel in Diverse Hands* 491).

### “Institutional Bibliomania” and the Creation of the Shiel Archives in Austin

Having examined Shiel’s literary status, his source of fascination for collector-fans, and Shiel’s most important collector-fans, we come now to the question of how Shiel came to have an archive in one of the foremost research institutions in North America. Certainly none of the story to this point has provided compelling reasons for Shiel’s inclusion in such an institution. Though Shiel’s popularity among a small coterie of literary men from the 1920s through the 1940s grants him some cultural status, he has never been of interest to the larger literary community, to the academic community, or to the community of science fiction, horror, and detective story enthusiasts who have embraced other writers in his stead—writers such as H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, and Arthur Conan Doyle. In addition, one would think that the rather alarming personal eccentricities of Shiel’s major collector-fans might make any institution searching for worthy additions to their archival holdings somewhat uneasy. Furthermore, why would a serious research institution invest in “copies” of original documents—copies, in Shiel’s case, made by a known drunk?

It requires knowledge of the origins of the Ransom Center to see that its acquisition of the Shiel archives, which would have been strange in the case of institutions like Yale or Harvard, was perfectly in character for the University of Texas at Austin in the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> In 1957, when Harry Ransom set about creating a research center that would rival the collections held by major American universities, his approach was pragmatic yet controversial. Pragmatic, in that Ransom decided to focus on collecting in fields neglected by other university libraries; hence the Center’s focus on

13 For more on the conception and creation of the Harry Ransom Center see Basbanes.

the twentieth century. Controversial and indeed eccentric and certainly non-traditional was Ransom's belief that people did not have to be dead or famous to be worthy of inclusion in the collections of a major research institution. Guided by this belief, Ransom set about acquiring a collection of archives that included many figures who were unknown at the time he purchased their works, many of whom remain unknown today. The acquisition of Shiel material, the first of which was made in 1958 when the library bought over one hundred Shiel novels from Morse, makes sense considering Ransom's ideas about the Center. One can see, too, how buying "copies" of original material was not extraordinary under such a mandate, given the University's aggressive and, what seemed to some, rather cavalier acquisition policy. Those who purchased the material for the University probably felt that there was a strong chance that the originals would eventually find their way to the institution, as many, in fact, did.

Though Ransom's eclectic and broad-ranging acquisition policy would be enough to admit a writer like Shiel to the library's collections, it will probably not come as a surprise to find that there was a Shiel fan lurking in the shadows at the University of Texas. This fan, more properly an academic-fan, was Harold Billings who, as chief acquisitions librarian in the late 1950s, purchased Gawsworth's and Morse's Shieliana on behalf of the University.<sup>14</sup> In 1960, Billings even began a biography of Shiel of which he completed four chapters before abandoning it to pursue his interest in the writer Edward Dahlberg. These chapters of the unfinished biography are included in Morse's essay collection. Of all the fans described so far, Billings, as I have suggested, is the most "academic." His ties to an academic institution structure his writings on Shiel so that, in his public writings on Shiel, Billings always employs academic discourse over fan discourse. Even so, Billings was reluctant to include chapters from his unfinished biography of Shiel in Morse's collection because, according to Morse, Billings felt that it "lack[ed] polish [and] professionalism" (*Shiel in Diverse Hands* 106). Nevertheless, the unfinished biography and his article about the University of Texas's acquisition of Shiel material are markedly different in tone from his personal letters to Morse, in which he discusses Shiel with all the enthusiasm of a fan—a fan in conflict with his academic self: "I can't read it [his Shiel biography] without hurting a little; too many years and too much feeling went into even this much for me not to still feel, when I let it all roil up over me again ... what writing

14 Billings was with the University of Texas at Austin for fifty years before retiring in August 2003.

[Shiel] represented in those days! What it all meant to me in those days!" (qtd. in *Shiel in Diverse Hands* 107).

### Coming Out of the Closet: The Academic-Fan

You might be wondering by now how I, the academic lurking in the shadows, fit into this narrative. Billings's divided identity as both academic and fan who is unable to integrate these two identities brings me to this topic. I am not a fan of Shiel per se. I came to study Shiel as part of a larger project on British decadent fiction writers of the 1890s. Before I ever set foot in the Ransom Center, I had acquainted myself with the existing scholarship on Shiel, namely the epic four-volume Morse work. I had what might be called a typical academic reaction to Morse's "fannish" collection of scholarship. I was suspicious of his enthusiasm and what I thought of as his uncritical engagement with Shiel. Moreover, I was disturbed by his politically incorrect editorial commentary, the kind of commentary not popular in the largely politically-correct world of academia. I was not only disturbed but uncomfortable because, as a graduate student, I worried how I might be judged for working on a writer whose views were sometimes admittedly quite in tune with Morse's. Still, I found Shiel fascinating and determined he was essential to my project. When my opportunity to view the Shiel archives at the Ransom Center came, I entered the building a scholar. As my two weeks in the archives passed, however, I quickly became a fan—not of Shiel, particularly—but of his archives. There was something so sad and pathetic about these thousand or so items—almost all that was left of an entire life: desperate letters of a writer who was almost always poor and struggling but who had grand visions of his work; letters of a hurt Shiel, betrayed by his first wife; intense and passionate correspondence with a married woman, who would later become his second wife; equally passionate correspondence with a married American fan he never met (he would leave his house to her son—their "spiritual son"—upon his death); letters that expose Shiel's lies but also how he was betrayed by others. Even the Gawsworth copies had an aura about them—sad scrawls on bits of paper. Edward Bishop has remembered holding and reading Virginia Woolf's suicide note to Leonard Woolf, a letter he had read many, many times on the printed page, and how different it was to be in the presence of the letter as physical object (see this issue's introduction, pages 1–2). Archives, I think, can bring out intense feelings and enthusiasms in the academic—fannish enthusiasms even. In these moments, I find myself thinking of my times in the archives as Morse thinks of Shiel—"the fascination of [the archives] is a lodestone out of time and space. It [is] a mystical and mysterious force."

You might be wondering by now how I, the academic lurking in the shadows, fit into this narrative.

I agree with Morse that there is something wonderful about “taking books [and manuscripts] in one’s paw” and “loving it,” and I agree with him that this fannish enthusiasm does not find its way into “professional” academic work—not, however, because academics don’t feel it. I often feel, like Alex, for example, that archival research is a “fun” activity in which I get to “take cool notes.” Following academic protocol, however, like Billings, I make distinctions between when academic discourse is appropriate and when fan discourse is appropriate. Even so, like Billings, I can be moved even by my own reasoned, objective, and academic scholarship to recall strong fannish feelings associated with the research that went into my academic work on Shiel. And yet that passion is necessarily, but sadly, I think, “absent” from the work.

Recently, cultural critics have been calling for “a more open dialogue between academic writing and other modes of criticism” (Green, Jenkins and Jenkins 14). Pamela Church Gibson urges academics “to acknowledge the activities of fans—and ... learn” from them (50). Those of us who claim both fan and academic status must seek ways of bringing these opposing discourses into harmony. This chance for more “open dialogue” is available in the case of a figure like Shiel, in whose archives the academic comes face to face with the fan—the fan as “other” but also the fan inside him- or herself.

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