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THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

GASTON LEROUX

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Gaston Leroux

With a New Introduction by
Dr. John L. Flynn

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GASTON LEROUX, born in Paris in 1868, was a French journalist, playwright, and detective/thriller writer. After beginning his career as a crime reporter and war correspondent, he lived an adventurous life that took him to Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and even into North Africa disguised as an Arab. His high-spirited, often dangerous, escapades and questioning nature provided much of the background and plot material for his sensational mystery and adventure stories, particularly those starring his reporter/sleuth Joseph Rouletabille. One of his most famous detective novels, *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, was published in 1907. His works have been called "among the finest examples of the detective stories we possess." But Leroux's best-known story is *The Phantom of the Opera* (1911), whose macabre hero has been played in films by classic horror film stars Lon Chaney and Claude Rains. Gaston Leroux died in Nice in 1927.

DR. JOHN L. FLYNN is a Chicago-born author, university professor, psychologist, and science-fiction enthusiast. In 1977, he received the M. Carolyn Parker Award for outstanding journalism, and in 1987, he was listed in *Who's Who Men of Achievement*. He sold his first book, *Future Threads*, in 1985, and he has subsequently had several other books published, including *Cinematic Vampires, The Films of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Dissecting Aliens, Visions in Light and Shadow*, and *Phantoms of the Opera*. A lifelong fan of Gaston Leroux, Dr. Flynn was inspired to write his definitive study of the Opera Ghost after seeing Michael Crawford on Broadway in Andrew Lloyd Webber's Tony Award–winning musical. In 1997, he switched gears from writing and literature to study clinical psychology. His study, *The Etiology of Sexual Addiction: Childhood Trauma as a Primary Determinant*, has broken new ground in the diagnosis and treatment of sexual addiction. Today, he lives in Baltimore with his wife and son and teaches courses on writing at Towson University in Towson, Maryland.

INTRODUCTION

Mention *The Phantom of the Opera* at a dinner party or other social gathering, and each guest will have his or her own vivid, almost visceral recollection of the tale of a disfigured musical genius and his unrequited love for a beautiful young singer. Someone will undoubtedly pantomime the famous scene from the silent-era film in which Mary Philbin (as Christine Daaé) sneaks up behind the Phantom, while he is playing the organ in his subterranean lair, and unmasks the great Lon Chaney, revealing his horribly disfigured face to the audience and her. Another guest is likely to burst into song, recalling "the music of the night" from the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. Still another guest will strike the pose of Erik as the Masque of the Red Death at the masked ball, while yet another may describe the scene in which the Phantom cuts the cables free and sends the magnificent chandelier crashing down upon the patrons of the Paris Opera House. The original story contains so many richly textured scenes that each of us, at one time or another, has been seduced by the Phantom, and embraced the dark, labyrinthine world of author Gaston Leroux.

For many, the love affair with Erik—that masked "phantom" of the Paris Opera House—began in 1925, with the first of many imaginative thrillers Carl Laemmle produced for Universal Studios; for others, it was less than a decade ago when a youthful Michael Crawford emerged from behind the mirror, swept Sarah Brightman (as Christine Daaé) off her feet, and carried her down into his lair below the playhouse. Few others have actually encountered the Phantom in print, and yet *Le Fantome de L'Opera* (*The Phantom of*

the Opera) has inspired more than a dozen films, two television movies, one miniseries, several stage productions, and a Tony Award–winning musical. The question of the ninety-year-old novel's popularity provides many elusive answers. Why would the tragic tale of a disfigured composer and his love for a young opera singer—a story clearly rooted in the annals of Victorian melodrama—continue to remain such a favorite subject for adaptation? Perhaps the reason for its longevity and prolificacy has to do with a message that is universal: the beauty or darkness of the human soul should not be measured by outward appearances or deformities. Or perhaps it has something to do with myth and our collective unconscious. Though the original classic by Frenchman Monsieur Gaston Leroux is a fairly recent entry (published in 1911), the origins of the Phantom's story may be traced directly back to much earlier forms in legend and folklore. Or perhaps it has more to do with our love of creative individualists who, though they are often portrayed as villains, reflect our inner desire to rebel against conformity. Whichever the case, we have embraced "the Phantom of the Opera" and allowed his deeply rooted, mythic tale to be a ubiquitous part of our popular culture.

Part horror story, part historical romance, and part detective thriller, the story of the masked musical genius who lives beneath the Paris Opera House is certainly a familiar one to millions of readers and moviegoers. But in all fairness to Gaston Leroux's classic tale, the terms "horror" story or "monster" story are largely inappropriate. Alone, misunderstood, shunned by those who see him, Erik the Phantom is certainly no monster; his acts of violence are committed solely for the woman he loves and to protect his world of anonymity. In fact, this much more contemporary version of the "Beauty and the Beast" fable rightly belongs in a class by itself or, at the very least, with the select group of imaginative Victorian masterpieces that includes *Dracula*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

Because *The Phantom of the Opera* draws from such a rich literary heritage, questions about the nature of

beauty and ugliness, good and evil, creativity and conformity elevate most of our recollections of the book or its many other incarnations above the commonplace. Joseph Campbell, in his treatise on the power of myth in literature (*The Hero With a Thousand Faces*), recognized that men chose certain archetypes and symbols to deal with those questions. Clearly, several archetypal or symbolic characters from the last two hundred years have provided the mythopoetic basis (and are forerunners) of Leroux's doomed, musical genius.

Aylmer, the alchemist in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," is the archetype for the first mad scientist and a symbol for those misguided individuals who equate beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil. Shocked by his wife's "visible mark of earthly imperfection"—a symbol in his mind of mankind's fallen nature—he takes drastic steps to remove the ugliness. Tragically, he fails to recognize that her beauty extends beyond the physical plane, and his experiments contribute only to her death.

The Beast, in the classic children's fable, is visually repulsive; he is described as a creature "so frightful to look upon that men would faint in fear." But inwardly, his soul reflects kindness, gentility, and unselfish devotion to the woman he loves. By sharp contrast, Beauty's two sisters, who are both very pretty, have cold hearts and cruel dispositions. In fact, when Beauty agrees to live with the Beast in order to spare her father's life, they berate and torment her with the knowledge that they have married handsome, clever husbands. Befittingly, Beauty's love breaks the old curse and transforms the Beast into a handsome prince, reminding all of us "a true heart is better than either good looks or clever brains."

Erik the Phantom believes that fantasy and goes to great lengths to ensure that he will live "happily ever after" with the woman of his dreams. Unfortunately, his idealistic, fairy-tale vision of love is out of place in the real world. No matter how kind, gentle, and well intentioned the great composer and musical tutor may be, he fails to consider Christine's feelings. Later, distraught over her decision to love another man, the

Phantom abandons all traditional avenues of courtship to pursue his own maniacal desires for her. Erik is, after all, a product of his own environment. His "birthmark" represents an outward manifestation of evil to all those who behold him, and he becomes the monster that they all believe him to be. After abducting the young opera singer, he demands that she remain in his labyrinthine world below the Paris Opera House as his wife in exchange for her lover's life. Christine accepts his unholy bargain and, in doing so, transforms Erik. Although he does not change into a "handsome prince," he begins to understand the real meaning of love. Still outwardly hideous, Erik reveals the true beauty of his soul by allowing the woman he loves to go off with his rival.

Thematically, the Phantom story also concerns the struggle of the individual to express creativity in a world that rejects his passion for life. Those roots of nonconformity lie not only in the "Beauty and the Beast" fable and the classic novel by Gaston Leroux, but also in older, literary conventions and attitudes from Greco-Roman mythology and medieval folklore.

Both the legend of Orpheus and the story of Phineus (Caliban in some traditions) are parables of human presumption—about artists who struggle against the will of god for the love of a woman—that predate the Phantom story by some five thousand years. Orpheus, the Thracian poet whose music moved even inanimate objects, descends into the subterranean regions of Hades to parlay with the god of the underworld for the release of his wife at the cost of great suffering and eternal damnation. But when he fails to comply with all of the underworld god's conditions, he loses his wife again. Phineus loses his betrothed Andromeda to the handsome Perseus because he cannot invoke the muse of lyric poetry (Euterpe) to save her from the sea monster. Both acts challenge the natural order of things, and both individuals suffer similar punishment from the gods for their arrogance.

Similarly, the medieval story of Dr. Faustus (or Faust)—which is often fused (or confused) with Leroux's novel in cinematic traditions—portrays a man

who is willing to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for the answers to the mysteries of the universe. Faust, like Orpheus and Phineus, defies the gods (or, in this case, a Judeo-Christian god), and only the love of Helen (the woman "whose face launched a thousand ships") can save him from eternal damnation. These familiar stories of struggling, passionate artists and their demonic pacts contribute much to our understanding of the circumstances behind Erik's tragic tale.

Like their mythological, legendary, or literary precursors, the theatrical translations of the last ninety years have relied heavily upon many of the same traditions and themes for inspiration. This continued use of common elements, familiar archetypes, and set symbols has certainly not diminished the audience's enduring affection for Leroux's story; rather, it has enriched the material with a variety of ingenious and imaginative narrative approaches. After all, how many times can the same story be told if the focal point remains unchanged? Much can be learned about the Phantom, his personality traits, and origins by considering each adaptation as a separate facet or interpretation.

In the 1925 version starring the great Lon Chaney, the Phantom is an escapee from Devil's Island who has been tortured in the dungeons below the playhouse. His motives for revenge and notoriety overshadow all other *rationale de compri*. Both the 1943 and the 1962 versions portray the Phantom as a wholly sympathetic character whose face has been scarred by acid thrown by a rival composer. While he secretly desires to have his musical talents recognized by the owners of the theater, he works selflessly (behind the scenes) so that the young diva can ascend to greater glory. In 1974's *Phantom of the Paradise*—Brian DePalma's satiric rock opera that fuses the legends of Faust and the Phantom—Winslow Leach (as the titular character) must contend not only with exploitative record promoters but also with demonic pacts. The Phantom in Andrew Lloyd Webber's Tony Award–winning musical is part Valentino and part mad musical genius. Charming, confident, and seductive, Erik proves more than a match for the lovesick Raoul and nearly succeeds in

winning Christine with his "music of the night." His incarnation in the 1989 version (with Robert Englund as the Phantom) is a cold-blooded assassin who dispatches street ruffians like a Victorian "caped crusader." When Erik fails to win Christine's hand in his own era, he time travels into the present in order to try again. Other Phantoms have included a bloodsucking vampire (in a 1963 film), a disfigured actor haunting a movie studio (in 1974), a classically trained conductor (in 1983), and an impresario whose terrible secret is guarded by his father (in 1990).

And even though the Phantom has worn the same guise (with subtle variations) for seventy years, the face behind the mask has provided audiences with a diversity of characterizations. Lon Chaney, the legendary "man of a thousand faces," evokes pity and fear with a repulsive, macabre, and entirely believable makeover (which the actor alone devised). In fact, the unmasking of Chaney's Phantom by Mary Philbin—considered one of the great moments of the silent cinema—caused many moviegoers in 1925 to faint at the horrible sight. Claude Rains, a soft-spoken and distinguished British actor, brought much pathos to the role as a shy, middle-aged Phantom. A fellow countryman of Rains, Herbert Lom gave the Phantom a distinctly British flavor with his Shakespearean training and gentlemanly reserve. More recently, Michael Crawford's youthful exuberance and romantic charms have added much to his interpretation, while Robert Englund's Erik walks the psychological tightrope between manic depression and ultraviolence. Maximilian Schell, Charles Dance, Jack Cassidy, Julian Sands, and others have also contributed their own special acting talents to create other interesting portraits of the Phantom.

However, with the exception of the 1925 version and the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, most adaptations have strayed far from the original story as authored by Gaston Leroux. Erik was born with a physical deformity, much like the Elephant Man, and developed a highly intelligent, resourceful, and creative personality in order to compete with "normal" men. Filmmakers have chosen instead to portray the Phantom as a nor-

mal man who has suffered an unjust yet accidental disfigurement. Thus, his obsession with Christine and his desire for anonymity could be simplified into a single motive—revenge.

The Phantom of the novel was also a master mason and architect who contracted for work on the Paris Opera House and built his world of mazes, trap doors, and secret chambers. Most cinematic and theatrical adaptations, which have focused on the more horrific aspects, have completely failed to explain how Erik became custodian of such a wondrous lair. Leroux's Phantom was also a master of disguise, and he traveled beyond his sanctuary into the streets of Paris. Only one version (made in 1989) has permitted him to venture out beyond the cellars of the playhouse. Other attempts in the last few years to return the romance and mystery of the original story have proven to be less than successful. Regrettably, the definitive version of *The Phantom of the Opera* has yet to be made; perhaps it never will be. Perhaps the definitive version is the one that we create in our own minds each time we read Gaston Leroux's words and imagine, just for a moment, that we are the Phantom or Christine alone in the Paris Opera House.

Gaston Leroux's novel opens thirty years after the death of the Phantom when workmen, digging in the cellars below the Paris Opera House, unearth a skeleton. Leroux, a noted drama critic and journalist of the time, had learned about a real-life discovery excavators had made of a skeleton below the famous playhouse, and he speculated in his introduction to the novel that the discovery was the final piece of evidence to prove the existence of the "phantom." For several years, he had studied documents and letters and diaries that had attested to the existence of a "ghost." He had searched through the archives of the National Academy of Music for evidence, and he had interviewed people who had seen things that were out of the ordinary. But the skeleton was positive proof. For Monsieur Leroux, "the Opera Ghost really did exist!" Little did the author realize that his reputation as a storyteller would be for-

ever assured by these famous lines (and the ones that followed). Certainly, growing up in the last decades of the nineteenth century, he could never have dreamed that audiences one hundred years later would continue to read and enjoy his most famous work.

Gaston Louis Alfred was born in Paris, France, on May 6, 1868, to Julien Leroux, a public works contractor, and Marie-Alphonsine, the daughter of a shipbuilder. He was raised in St. Valery-en-Caux, a small coastal village in Normandy, near his grandparents' shipbuilding company. As a boy, he developed a love for sailing, swimming, and deep-sea fishing. Educated at the College of Eu, Gaston excelled in all disciplines. Especially proficient in literature, he embraced the works of Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo and began writing pastiches of their work while in school. His dream was to become a writer, but in order to please his father, he studied law in Paris instead, acquiring a law degree in 1889. When his father died later that same year, he was left a sizable fortune. Unfortunately, young Leroux squandered his money on wine, women, and song in less than six months.

Still uninterested in the law, he began work as a freelance author writing verse for several newspapers. His breakthrough came when *L'Echo de Paris* published a sonnet he had written about a local actress. Other publications eventually followed and led to a position as a drama critic for the paper. By 1890, he had become a courtroom reporter, then a full-time journalist, and from 1894 to 1906, he traveled around the world as a correspondent, sending features back about various international events (including the Russian Revolution of 1905). In the early 1900s, he began writing novels, his first success being *The Seeking of the Morning Treasures* (in 1903).

Leroux then wrote a series of mystery novels about an amateur detective, starting with *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (in 1907). In this novel, he created the character of Joseph Rouletabille, a French detective who appeared with a head "like a billiard ball," the antithesis of Sherlock Holmes. Said Leroux, "When I sat down to pen that story, I decided to go 'one better' than

Conan Doyle, and make my 'mystery' more complete than even Edgar Allan Poe had ever done in his stories of *Mystery and Imagination*. The problem which I set myself was exactly the same as theirs—that is, I assumed that a crime had been committed in a room which, as far as exits and entrances were concerned, was hermetically closed. That room opened; all the evidence of the murder is there, but the murderer has mysteriously disappeared." In addition to the detective novels, he published several horror novels, including *The Queen of the Sabbath* (in 1909), and produced a handful of theatrical plays, but never achieved wide fame, except among mystery aficionados.

In 1910, he began work on the novel that would guarantee his fame for years and generations to come—*The Phantom of the Opera*. At first, the manuscript was nothing more than a collection of notes gathered together over the years by the journalist Leroux had become. For example, he had written a complete account of the 1896 disaster at the Paris Opera House in which one of the chandelier's heavy counterweights had fallen from the ceiling and killed a patron of the playhouse. He possessed the architectural plans of Charles Garnier's 1860 playhouse and knew about the secret passageways and mysterious subterranean lake. But it wasn't until the discovery of the skeleton that the novel fell into place. By making use of diaries, journal entries, and alternating first-person narratives, Leroux was able to execute a chilling tale that cleverly walks the fine line between truth and fiction. A less experienced author might have produced a modest thriller, which would have been quickly dismissed as fantasy, but Monsieur Leroux's vivid, journalistic style provides the reader with a kind of verisimilitude that makes the characters and settings seem borrowed from the headlines of the daily post. Indeed, as Gaston Leroux contends in the introduction, many of the events of the novel are real.

The Phantom of the Opera was published in book form in 1911 and somewhat surprisingly did very little business in the first weeks. Reviews of the book were lukewarm, and readers who had enjoyed his mystery

stories dismissed the material outright. However, when newspapers in Great Britain and the United States began to carry a serialized version of the story (with graphic images of the Phantom), popularity of the tale increased. The silent film version in 1925 with Lon Chaney generated renewed enthusiasm, and soon not a bookstore in Paris could keep up with the demand for the novel. Today, Leroux's name is forever linked with the tragic tale of the disfigured composer and his love for a young opera singer.

Gaston Leroux went on to write a dozen other novels and even saw several of them made into short films, but not one would capture the imagination of future generations like *The Phantom of the Opera*. Shortly before his death, the portly author confessed a special affinity for his reworking of the "Beauty and the Beast" fable and hoped that cinema would do his story justice. Because of health problems related to his obesity, Leroux never had the opportunity to see the silent-film version. He died unrepentantly from a urinary infection on April 15, 1927, at the age of fifty-nine and was buried in Nice, France. Even on his deathbed, Leroux maintained that his "Opera Ghost really did exist!"

Whether you've read *The Phantom of the Opera* once or a hundred times or are encountering him for the first time, prepare to be seduced by the darkly romantic tale of a disfigured musical genius and his unrequited love for a beautiful young singer. Those richly textured scenes that portray Erik's secret lair, Christine's unmasking of the Phantom, the luscious music of the night, the masked ball, and the crashing chandelier are all here within these pages, and so much more. Just turn the page, and get ready to fall in love with Erik and Christine, Raoul, the Persian, and all of the other characters who inhabit Gaston Leroux's classic story.

—Dr. John L. Flynn
Towson University

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