

## Lost in Transmission: Literary *Fragmenta* in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

Much has been made of the labyrinthine structure of Mark Z. Danielewski's highly postmodern novel *House of Leaves* (2000), most recently by Huber (2014). But the novel's use of the literary *fragmentum* as a formal conceit has largely gone unremarked. This paper will argue that *House of Leaves* can be read as a collection of fragments of real and fictive texts, intentionally constructed in a series of nods to the fragmentary texts of Greco-Roman antiquity. The fragmentation of Danielewski's text illuminates the inherent complications of textual transmission, particularly the difficulty of expressing ideas in a way which resists misinterpretation, whether due to the passage of time (as with the Classical tradition) or to the bias of the reader (as with the narrator Johnny's attempts to interpret a manuscript by the enigmatic Zampanò).

Danielewski incorporates *fragmenta* into his novel in three ways: through the fragmentary nature of the novel itself; through the creation of new *fragmenta* by repeatedly removing Greek and Latin lines from their contexts (e.g. Verg. *A.* 6.27, Longus 3.23.3); and through engagement with the content of certain extant *fragmenta*, such as Pasiphaë's monologue in Euripides' *Cretans* (fr. 472e). This fragment of Euripides, which has alternately been identified as a defense which evokes sympathy for Pasiphaë and as an "*adikos logos*" which fails to prove Pasiphaë's innocence (Armstrong 2006, Reckford 1974), finds resonances in both the Whalestoe letters that comprise Appendix II-E of *House of Leaves* and in *The Minotaur*, a fictive play summarized in passages which are struck by Zampanò and restored by Johnny.

The struck passages, in particular, are set apart as fragments; they can neither be wholly accepted into nor wholly separated from the rest of the text. Their content, too, is paradoxical. The Minotaur that lurks within them is present in the text, which provides Johnny with an

opportunity to understand and identify with him, yet is clearly marked as inhuman and potentially dangerous to the several narrators and commentators (Cox 2006; Hamilton 2008). The same type of paradox is at work with Pelafina, the author of the Whalestoe letters, whose voice is present in her letters but alienated from the text, by virtue of being relegated to an appendix.

This paper will conclude that by engaging with both the content and the form of fragmented Classical texts, Danielewski recalls the loss of much ancient literature to time, but also makes it clear that chronology is not the only obstacle which affects the author-audience relationship. Johnny is contemporary with Zampanò, and readers at the time of *House of Leaves*' publication were Johnny's contemporaries. But in both cases, there are barriers to communication, due not only to the fragmentation of the text, but to the complex and often personal nature of its content. In creating a labyrinthine, fragmented text, Danielewski highlights the fraught relationship between author and audience, bringing issues of textual transmission to the fore.

#### Bibliography

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