On Mapping a Marketing Monstrosity:
Barbie, Barbara and the Reorientation of Literary Criticism

ABSTRACT

Aiming to enrage as well as enlighten, this paper proffers an empirical study of the Barbie doll, which we construe as a marketplace monstrosity. Our contention continues with the claim that, despite being devoured by the big beasts of Big Data, conventional Barbara Stern-style literary criticism still offers food for thought. Especially in a world where unconventional types and styles of marketing communication are on the menu once more. A monstrous *omnium gatherum*, our study recounts the story of Mattel's undead brand, entombed in its lit-crit coffin, that's been brought back to life of late. It's a tale of two Barbaras that seeks to strike fear, and some fun, into contemporary marketing scholarship.

Keywords: Barbie; Branding; Mattel; Monsters; Literary Criticism; Introspection; Barbara Stern

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Follow that Barbie!

—Gerwig and Baumbach 2023, p.60

A group of little girls, dressed in frilly 1950s' outfits, play with their dolls in a windswept desert landscape. Accompanied by the stentorian strains of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, the voiceover intones: 'Since the beginning of time there have been dolls…But the dolls were always and forever baby dolls. Until…' A monstrous figure materialises from nowhere. 'It's a giant BARBIE doll', the screenplay records, 'with her black and white swimsuit and lipstick' (Gerwig and Baumbach, 2023, p.1). Awestruck by this superhuman vision of womanhood, who winks at them conspiratorially, the little girls respond – 'not unlike the apes in that Kubrick masterpiece' (op cit, p.2) – by smashing their baby dolls, one of which is hurled into the air, defiantly. Thus speaks *Barbie*.

Rapturously received, *Barbie*'s teaser trailed generated 15m YouTube views in no time at all. These were as nothing, however, beside the movie itself, which made $636m in North America alone. And whose $150m marketing budget, some 200 tie-in products and clever social media campaign ('Hi, I'm Barbie') not only persuaded millions to invade the multiplexes but reanimated a brand deemed doomed beforehand (Haines, 2023; Steafel, 2023). As did the concomitant, if fleeting, 'Barbiecore' fashion trend (Guerra, 2024). Ditto a coincidental clash – dubbed 'Barbenheimer' – in the release dates of two blockbuster summer movies, both of which benefitted from the face-off (Cain, 2023; The Economist, 2023).

Numerous consumers, to be sure, refused to fall for the hype. For some, it was Mattel's marketing overkill that triggered their antipathy (Ross, 2023). For others, the corporation's long and unsavoury history of unethical activities fuelled their ire (Jamison, 2023). For yet others, it was the figurine's record of regressively reinforcing racist, sexist, sizeist, ageist, ableist and heteronormative stereotypes that her co-option of the DEI agenda didn't assuage (Walter, 2023). These issues, indeed, were specifically addressed in a deeply-emotional scene, which sought to defang their force by facing up to them:

> Look at yourself! You've been making women feel bad about themselves since you were invented…You represent everything wrong with our culture: sexualised capitalism, unrealistic physical ideals…You set the feminist movement back fifty years, you destroy girls' innate sense of worth and you're killing the planet with your glorification of rampant consumerism…you FASCIST. (Gerwig and Baumbach, 2023, pp.47-8)

Gerwig's trigger warning notwithstanding, it's hard to argue with *Barbie*'s global box office returns ($1.44bn); or Mattel Inc's 35% rise in stock market value (to $6.6bn); or the doll's multitudinous admirers on Twitter (14m. followers), YouTube (11.4m. subscribers), and TikTok (13.3m. likes); or the fact that in a constantly changing, consistently cutthroat industry, Barbie remains Toyland's queen bee (*The Economist*, 2023); or, for that matter, the marketing profession's consensus that Mattel's promotional tactics for the Warner Brothers movie – everything from a Barbie selfie generator on Instagram (2.4 million followers) to building a full-size replica Dreamhouse in Malibu, then making it available on Airbnb – were

second to none (McLaren, 2023). As Margot Robbie put it at the time, 'the Barbie name is more globally recognized than practically everything else other than Coca-Cola' (*The Economist*, 2023, pp.69-70). And while Apple, Google (and Disney) might beg to differ with Robbie, the prodigious doll is a marketing monstrosity, we believe. In every sense of the word.

Contention

Whatever else is said about Barbie, one thing is incontestable: sixty-five years on from the mighty mannequin's first appearance, Barbara Millicent Roberts is 'more popular now…than ever' (Gerber, 2024, p.153). According to Dederer's (2023, p.43) definition of what constitutes contemporary monstrosity – 'something huge, something terrifying, something successful (a box office monster)', the doll ticks all three boxes. Plus a few more Dederer doesn't mention. Specifically, a creature of abnormal form or structure; to criticize, reprimand or destroy; and, in its earliest incarnation, something that is put on display (Botting, 1991). The widely displayed, frequently criticized, and allegedly abnormally formed doll covers them all:

> Barbie represents the feminine beauty ideal, if your concept of a beautiful female is one who is six feet, nine inches tall and weighs 52 pounds (37 of which are in the bust area), and has a rigidly perky smile and eyeballs the size of beer coasters and a one-molecule nose and enough hair to clog the Lincoln Tunnel (Dave Barry, quoted in Rogers, 1999, p.24).

Such irreverence is not irrelevant, as this article shall show. Its purpose is threefold: firstly, to map what Mattel's miraculous marketing monstrosity means to modern consumers; secondly, to do so with some of the tools and techniques of literary criticism – legendary monsters are mostly literary in origin (Asma, 2009) – introduced by the great, gone-but-not-forgotten marketing guru, Barbara B. Stern; and thirdly ponder the prospects for Stern-style scholarship in an increasingly monstrous marketing milieu where Big Data is the Big Brother of thought (Thompson, 2019). It's a world where, on the one hand, bibliometrics (aka stylometrics) loom larger than ever before and, on the other, where concerned scholars are calling for more adventurous modes of academic communication (Coffin & Hill, 2022; Kravets & Karababa, 2022; Rose, 2020; Södergren, Vallström & de Monthoux, 2024), especially now that traditionally-written articles are threatened by the Grendels of AI (Pantano, Serravalle & Priporas, 2024; Puntoni, Ensing & Bowers, 2024; The Economist, 2024a).

Drawing upon literary tradition, we take our cue from William Blake's (1803, p.490) 'world in a grain of sand' by offering the world in a grain of brand. That is a microcosmic map of a macrocosmic marketing issue.[1] Namely, literary criticism and its place in the pantheon. We begin with a consideration of Barbara B. Stern's many and varied contributions to the Hydra of marketing scholarship. An overview of the Godzilla-like growth of 'monster theory' in general and its marketing manifestations in particular, follows thereafter. This lurches into our sizeable empirical study of Barbie doll consumption – undertaken before, during and after the release of Greta Gerwig's 'box-office monster' – which is then 'mapped' with the aid of three totemic tools of Stern-style literary criticism. Following that, we pause to ponder what manner of monster, what category of creature, Barbara Millicent Roberts actually is. Three petrifying possibilities are posited, all of which are worth pursuing, albeit from a safe distance. We turn finally to the current state of literary criticism in marketing research, which

is becoming ever more monstrous – in good and bad ways both – then attempt to summarise what it all means for PS (post-Stern) scholarship. BARBIE, we conclude, is more than a MAP, it's an aspirational acronym…

Our study, in short, not only seeks to complement prior analyses of Barbie doll consumption (Abolenien & Ngoyen, 2024; Belk & Wallendorf, 1994; Cross, 2017; Knudsen & Andersen, 2024; McGrath, Sherry & Diamond, 2013), but show how Stern's pioneering approach remains pertinent to contemporary concerns. More than that, it aims to address and better understand marketing scholars' mounting interest in teratology, what one critic calls 'monsters of the market' (McNally, 2012). We offer a *metaphor*-enriched study of an eminent *anthropomorphic* brand whose ostensibly *paradoxical*, love-hate allure is testament to Neil Gaiman's (2015, p.xxxvii) contention that 'where there's a monster, there's also a miracle'.

Our ultimate objective, however, is to unsettle the conventions of CCT-schooled marketing scholarship; its abstract theorising, formulaic form and flatpack prose. Predicated on the long-established literary assumption that the manner should reflect the matter, the style the substance (Holbrook, 1995; Stern 1989), we present a monstrous manuscript about a monstrous brand. It's a Frankenpaper, frankly, that aims to divide opinion, a Dracularticle that endeavours to infuriate and, ideally, inspire JMM's discerning readership. Just as 'monsters are creatures that go against the laws of nature' (Dell, 2016, p.8), so too we go against he laws of style and form and 'good writing' that govern marketing and consumer research (Figueiredo, Gopaldas & Fischer, 2017). Just as Barbie doll is adored and abominated, we seek opprobrium and approbation both.[2]

Contribution

'When people see the word monster', Nina Allan (2020, p.193) notes in *The Dollmaker*, 'they want to know more'. The same is true of Stern's stupendous academic output. Her contribution comprised '74 articles in first-class refereed journals, 21 book chapters, three edited books and any number of conference presentations', according to her obituarist and close friend of long standing, Morris B. Holbrook (2009). So moreish is her work that, in a recent stylometric study of Stern's scholarly influence, eighteen of her articles are identified as significant contributions to marketing scholarship, both 'theoretical' and 'methodological' (Fowler, Das & Fowler, 2022).

Methodologically, Stern's preferred approach comprised 'close reading' as espoused by the so-called New Critics (Eagleton, 1996).[3] That is, careful, punctilious line-by-line, clause-by-clause scrutiny of the 'texts' under scrutiny. True, she occasionally co-authored quantitative articles (Escalas & Stern, 2006; Gould & Stern, 1989; Stern, Zinkhan & Holbrook, 2002), but her personal methodological practice was that of the twentieth-century's predominant school of literary criticism (Stern 1988, 1989, 1990a). When Stern (1996) wrote about deconstruction, she didn't do so in a deconstructive manner. When she wrote about allegory (or imagery or symbolism or dramaturgy or whatever), the same principle applied (Stern, 1990b, 1994b). Her approach was prosaic even when the poetry of advertising and promotion was the subject under consideration (Stern, 1998a). Although she wasn't averse to efflorescent prose – her doctorate was on James Joyce and she collaborated on copious occasions with marketing's foremost word wrangler, the aforementioned Morris Holbrook – her personal approach was under- rather than over-stated.

Theoretically, moreover, Stern was more of a literary critic than a literary theorist. She didn't so much create or concoct new conceptualisations as apply or adapt extant constructs to marketing phenomena, advertising treatments for the most part but also, on occasion, qualitative interview transcripts (Stern, 1995) and questionnaire survey data (Escalas & Stern, 2003). Barbara, for the most part, treated literary theories as tools, devices, viewpoints, perspectives, 'schools of thought' – a veritable 'menu of possibilities' (Stern, 1989, p.323) – that could be applied in marketing, advertising, branding and consumer research contexts. Her preferred font of knowledge and inspiration was not Abrams' (1989) singular study of literary *theory* but his massive, multi-edition glossary of literary *terms* (Abrams, 1991), which included everything from absurdity to zeugma (a literary device where the same word links two very different ideas, ordinarily for comic or absurd effect).[4]

In the present, intermittently absurd, occasionally zeugmatic article, we employ a triad of empirically-sourced literary devices, which when combined comprise a chart of marketing's teratological territory (Stern, 1994). Some readers, to be sure, may be perturbed by the parallels we are positing and the prose we employ to express them. But we believe that lit-crit-inclined contributions should perturb, raise questions, challenge conventions, overturn assumptions and, ideally, accord with the tenets of old-school, new-critical tradition, where the manner reflects the matter (Holbrook, 1995), the style the content (Stern, 1989) or, as Sherry (2025) terms it, the message and medium. It is also worth recalling that when Stern started publishing literary criticism-led articles, her work was doubly monstrous. Aligned with the post-positivist community, an heretical cult that eschewed the sacrosanct canons of marketing 'science', she must have seemed from a mainstream perspective, like the devil incarnate. Her a priori, literary device-driven approach was no less antithetical to the extant interpretive research tradition, where *enabled* perspectives ran counter to the then widespread assumption – evident in classic contributions like 'River Magic', 'Mountain Men', 'New Bikers' and the 'Odyssey' itself – that concepts *emerged* spontaneously, like great white whales, from the empirical data's vasty deeps (Stern, 1998b).

That was then. Nowadays, a priori-predicated, essentially impositional approaches – taking a tool, idea, concept or school of thought then applying it to marketplace practices – are regular occurrences (Lucarelli et al, 2024, Table 4). But it wasn't like that in the 1990s (Stern, 1998b). Consider the treatment meted out to mavericks like Stephen Gould, who had the temerity to stray from the path prescribed by prominent post-positivists (Brown & Patterson, 2021). Ever astute, Stern intimated that she was going back to basics, the beginning, the prehistory of postmodern and modern marketing both (studies of medieval allegory (Stern, 1988), the *fin de siècle* effect (Stern, 1992a), a 1928 newspaper ad in her first JCR (Stern, 1989) and, perhaps most powerfully, the archetypal, myth-lit movement (Stern, 1995) predicated on Frye's (1957) primordial *Anatomy of Criticism*).

Context

Stern's modus operandi, in a nutshell, took account of the context of the context (Askegaard & Linnet, 2001). Today's context is nothing if not teratological. We live in a world where 'monsters of every stripe' abound (Asma, 2009, p.14); where an authoritative encyclopaedia lists more than one thousand types of monsters from Angels to Zombies (Weinstock, 2014); where everywhere, in effect, is the 'here be dragons' domain of early map-makers (Garfield, 2013, pp.72-4); where marketing scholars are trying to orient themselves in a teratological landscape that 'teems with monsters' (Warner, 1994, p.17).

Drawn from the empirical centrepiece of the current chronicle, a conceptual MAP is ready to hand, the cardinal points of which are *Metaphorical monstrosities*, *Anthropomorphism abounding* and *Paradoxical pleasures* (Stern, 1989, 1994). Like all maps, however, it is a projection that's subject to biases and blind spots (Bushell, 2012; Harley, 1989; Monmonier, 2012), yet remains useful for charting the course of our lit-crit-led trek through Barbie territory.

Metaphorical monstrosities

Much as marketing has achieved, or failed to achieve, it cannot be condemned for metaphorical shortcomings (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003). The discipline's ability to construct indigenous conceits, from 'myopia' to 'segmentation', and exploit exogenous coinages, be they 'ANT', 'assemblages' or, latterly, 'liquidity', has never been less than impressive (Hirschman, 2007). Ditto our willingness to debate, develop and deploy such creations. Marketing's tropes, Kitchen (2008) contends, not only include warfare, relationships, portfolios, dramaturgy and many more, but, as the 'atmospheres' allusion (Steadman & Coffin, 2024), 'customer journeys' conceit (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and 'marketing-is-magic' metaphor (Heath & Heath, 2016; Miles, 2013) bear witness, they grow like Triffids.

The same is true of heinous creatures. Recent years have seen the rise of 'shock-horror scholarship', adaptations of B-movie monstrosities to marketplace matters. These include doppelgänger brands (Giesler, 2012; Knudsen & Andersen, 2024; Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006), Frankenbrands (Clerval & Walton, 2023; Kushner, 2011), revenant brands (Cantone, Cova & Testa, 2020), spirit possessions (Dean, 2019; Ozanne & Appau, 2019), ouroboros strategies (Chen, 2019), tales from the crypt (Södergren, Hietanen & Vallström, 2022), telepathic communications (Tadajewski, 2022), consumer zombification (Cronin & Cocker, 2019), consuming vampirism (Buchanan-Oliver & Schau, 2013), hauntological witchcraft (James, Cronin & Patterson, 2024), cookie monsters (Mellet & Beauvisage, 2020), videographic monsters (Hietanen & Rokka, 2018), shapeshifter brands (Ashman, Beach & Patterson, 2023), and those that 'go bump in the night' (Brown, Patterson & Ashman, 2021). Some scholars, such as sociologist Don Slater (2011, p.37), maintain that marketing is monstrous, full stop. An unholy amalgam of economic and cultural components, the practice, the pursuit, the 'aberrant' profession shouldn't exist. But it does and, as Holbrook (2024a) observes in his trademark, tongue-in-cheek manner, it fascinates and frightens simultaneously.

That said, this Gremlins-like efflorescence of marketing scholarship is a mere bagatelle beside the rapidly-growing, multi-headed Hydra that is 'monster theory' . As Weinstock's (2020) 900-page anthology, his 640-page encyclopaedia (Weinstock, 2014) and Kröger and Anderson's (2019) feminist genealogy of the genre, *Monsters She Wrote,* bear spine-tingling witness, the subdiscipline involves scholars from all points of the academic compass. Predicated on myriad mythical, legendary, folktale and fairy story sources (Lerer, 2008; Warner, 2016), its exponents apply Jung's archetypes, Freud's unheimlich, Derrida's hauntology, Kristeva's abjection and so on to the heinous creations of contemporary consumer society (Weinstock, 2020). From Marx's mouldering spectres to Creed's (2012) 'monstrous feminine', the depredations of the modern world are being laid, more often than not, at the door of those who truck and barter, buy and sell (Steven, 2022; Wolf, 2023; Zuboff, 2019). 'Capitalist monsters', Newitz (2006, p.2) contends, not only 'embody the

contradictions of a culture where making a living often feels like dying' but they are 'monsters who want to kill you'. The business school is their lair (Law, 1991; Thanem, 2011; Tourish, 2019).

Anthropomorphism Abounding

Allegories, Stern (1988) shows, say one thing but mean another. And this 'saying' often involves anthropomorphism, where passions, such as the Seven Deadly Sins, are personified, as is evil itself in the form of Lucifer, Beelzebub the Prince of Darkness and so forth. Monsters, in other words, are 'aways alive' (Derrida, 1992, p.385). They may be imaginary, for the most part, but that doesn't stop mermaids, mutants, manticores, and more being construed, portrayed, and treated as living and/or undead things. Consider the jinn, Nephilim, and hungry ghosts of Asian folklore (Hackley & Hackley, 2015). Take the Krampus, an anti-Santa abomination that stalks central Europe (Belanger, 2023). Or, what about All Hallows Eve/Día de los Muertos (Morton, 2019), where the undead rise from their graves as one and help fill the coffers of western capitalism?

Long regarded as a category error by literary critics (Brown, 2010), a stylistic solecism of the first order, prosopopoeia is impossible to eradicate. Whether it be Romantic poet William Wordsworth's 'dancing daffodils', Margery Williams' much-loved 'velveteen rabbit', or the advice disbursing yew tree in *A Monster Calls*, anthropomorphism abounds in both literature and life.[5] According to Guthrie (1993), people's personifying predisposition goes back to the dawn of time, when the ancients saw astrological creatures in the constellations, advancing armies in the clouds, and wrathful deities in wild weather. As our beliefs about demonic digital assistants (Schweitzer et al, 2019), and fears for our AI-enabled future, when creepily companionable chatbots inherit the earth (Blut et al, 2021; Hannigan, McCarthy & Spicer, 2024; Keitzmann & Park, 2024), we moderns aren't much different.

Marketers too, as the cavalcade of monstrous brand mascots from the Green Giant to Bibendum remind us, aren't averse to anthropomorphizing (Phillips, 1996). Recent years, furthermore, have seen a steady stream of scholarly studies on prosopopoeia from both positive and negative perspectives. These range from 'Hey, Alexa!' (Bahmani, Bhatnagar & Gauri, 2022), 'It's Got the Look' (Landwehr, McGill & Herrman, 2011) and 'Bringing With us the Plague' (Bradshaw, 2013) to sagacious advice about anthropomorphic brand mascots (Patterson, Khogeer & Hodgson, 2013). And then there's Arnould's (2022) latter-day attempts to reanimate animism, a belief system that attributes life to the non-living. Analyses of dead metaphors (Cheded, Lui & Hopkinson, 2022) and brand personae (Dion & Arnould, 2016) also abound.

Paradoxical Pleasure

If paradox, as a leading literary critic once proclaimed, is the 'fundamental element of poetic language' (Brooks, 1947, p.1), then marketing is a poetic pursuit. Inherently incongruous (Stern, 1994), marketing straddles the gulf between production and consumption, art and science, qual and quants, philosophy and practice. It is a force for the good, societal marketers say, and a fiend that feeds on fear and suffering, critical marketers contend (Ellis et al., 2010).

Poetic or otherwise, paradoxes are part and parcel of everyday discourse, as is marketing (Hewer, 2024; Napoli, Nichols & Ouschan, 2024; Rauf, Prasad & Ahmed, 2019). Alongside analogous literary devices like antithesis, antimony and oxymoron, they comprise ostensibly contradictory expressions that are, in fact, 'well founded and essentially true' (Mosley, 1990, p.55). Milton's 'darkness visible', Thoreau's 'companionable solitude', and Schumpeter's 'creative destruction' are classic examples (Abrams, 1993, pp.140-41), as are commonplace platitudes like 'passive aggressive', 'less is more', 'love to hate', and, courtesy of Cronin and Fitchett (2018) 'contented discontent'.

The epitome of incongruity, paradox attains its apogee in the Gothic, which is replete with 'guilty pleasure' tales of terror (Groom, 2012). The seemingly insatiable appeal of the grisly genre is often explained in paradoxical terms like 'exquisite horror', 'horrible delight', 'attractively repellent', and 'fun fear' (Twitchell, 1985). A leading philosopher of horror, Noël Carroll (1990), calls them 'paradoxes of the heart'. The seemingly inexplicable allure of unattractive dolls (Furbies, Trolls, Cabbage Patch), movie monsters (Shrek, Sulley, Hagrid), and gaming grotesques (Space Invaders, Moshi Monsters, Pokémon Go) lend weight to such assertions (Allison, 2006). The incongruous yet ineradicable connection between horror and humour does likewise (Carroll, 1999) . Ditto studies of extreme experiences, such as free solo climbing, cold water swimming, and ultra marathon running, where participants get pleasure through pain (Cova, 2021; Cowart, 2023: Scott, Cayla & Cova, 2017). Marketing, arguably, is growing ever more Gothic and, although the discipline's 'dark side' has often been explored (Daunt & Greer, 2017), the light side of the dark side is ripe for further exploration.

Conception

In order to do so, we take a proleptic leap into the case study to come, then project our MAP on to the Barbie doll's dominion. Read east to west, as it were, it reveals that Mattel's miraculous monstrosity is and always has been a 'plastic *paradox*' (Fleming, 1996, p.42). Apart from being fully-grown on the day of her birth, albeit unable to stand up unaided, not the least of the creature's qualities is statuesqueness. Infamously equipped with disproportionate proportions (Hart, 2022), the doll's initial success was due to the fact that it was smaller than the big 'baby dolls' that then dominated the market (Miller, 1998). Barbie was much less expensive than the competition, what is more, because Mattel employed the seemingly counterintuitive Gillette tactic – cheap razor/expensive blades – to begin with (Lord, 2024). The interchangeable outfits and accessories were where the corporation made its money, except that a spate of production problems resulted in series of stock shortages for the first three years of Barbie's existence (Oppenheimer, 2009). Paradoxically, the very unavailability of product served to increase consumer demand (Cialdini, 2001). This demand was denounced and demonized by second-wave feminists (Rand, 1995), even though the doll was, and remains, the epitome of independent, ambitious, untrammelled womankind that Friedan, Steinem, and Millet fought for.

Sixty years on, Greta Gerwig's blockbuster movie is likewise replete with paradoxes. These include its tagline, 'Even if you hate Barbie, you'll love Barbie'; Mattel's claim that it was 'comfortable about being uncomfortable' with the corporation's cinematic representation; Dame Helen Mirren's droll, debunking commentary as the film unfolded; and the general critical consensus that patriarchy-proselytizing Ken was the star of the show (who, perversely, received an Oscar nomination when Gerwig and Robbie were ignored). Ditto Gloria's climactic monologue, which comprises a profusion of paradoxes that save the day

for Barbie Land's inhabitants (Knudsen & Andersen, 2024). And then there's the 'happy ending' scene featuring the ghost of Ruth Handler, who brazenly claims she and she alone 'created' Barbie. The Bild Lilli doll might demur (Lobel, 2018).[6]

Anthropomorphise is what dolls do, their very essence, their purpose in life, so to speak (Peers, 2004). They are more than mere playthings. They are second selves. They are friends, confidents, guides, mentors for their owners, figurative yet literal role models. They are designed, Roland Barthes (1957, p.60) famously mansplained, 'to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to condition her to her future role as a mother'. Except in Barbie's case babies don't come into it and the very idea of parenthood is eschewed, as is the doll's inferred future role. Far from being an attentive mother, let alone a solicitous parent, the figurine has demonstrated 'her' prowess in innumerable professions; actress, architect, astronaut, art teacher, alpine skier and Avon representative among them. More than that, the doll is and always has been sold as a 'real person' (Gerber, 2009). She appears as 'herself' in countless commercials, cartoons, computer games and, as the blockbuster movie brilliantly depicts, multiple manifestations of her 'Hi, Barbie' self. These include President Barbie, Physicist Barbie, Doctor Barbie, Diplomat Barbie, Weird Barbie, Stereotypical Barbie and so on.

This is not a recent development. On the contrary, Barbie was given biographical backstory from the very beginning, 'a story that proved paramount to Mattel's success' (Stone, 2010, p.29). Created with the assistance of Carson/Roberts ad agency (Rand, 1995), Mattel's never-ending brand yarn maintains that Barbara Millicent Roberts was the firstborn child of George and Margaret Roberts from the little midwestern town of Willows, Wisconsin. Before long, 'Barbie' was joined by sisters Skipper, Stacy and Kelly – Krissy and Chelsea came later – as well as an ever-growing entourage of friends, relations and companion animals, not least the human lapdog Kenneth Sean Carson (aka Ken). Coupled with the classic 'handwritten' logo, and numerous early 'novels', such as *Barbie Solves a Mystery* (Rand, 1995, p.47), the figurine's latter-day reinvention as a vlogger and of course Margot Robbie's 'perfectly cast' embodiment of the brand (Ross, 2023, p.148), Mattel's not-a-doll doll is the ne plus ultra of 'brandthropomorphism' (which is a terminological monstrosity in itself).

According to Joe '*Gremlins*' Dante (2011, p.2), 'monsters are metaphors'. Stephen King (2012) concurs. And Mattel's beastly beauty is as monstrous as they come (Ashman, Beach & Patterson, 2023). As demon dolls go, admittedly, Barbie's not as unsettling as some, such as Annabelle (*The Conjuring*), Chucky (*Child's Play*), and Megan (*M3gan*), albeit her cinematic metamorphosis into a flat-footed figurine (with cellulite!) horrifies a fair few onlookers. Her often brutal treatment of Ken – mocking his sexual shortcomings in the Gerwig movie, dismissing him with the disparaging tagline 'just Ken', thrashing him to within an inch of his life in *Toy Story 3*, cheating on him with 'Derek' during her Rock Star phase (Stern & Schoenhaus, 1990) – is likewise less than angelic. The same can be said about the monster brand's obliteration of all the rival dolls, such as Sindy, Tressy, Tammy, Leggy, Maxie and Mitzy, that had the temerity to challenge Barbie's authority (Shapiro, 2023). Only the Bratz doll, itself a 'Frankenbarbie', has defeated the 'queen bitch' of Toytown (Lobel, 2018, p.28). Though that took a decade-long court case, which cost Mattel $1.1 bn in legal fees and fines (Lepore, 2018) and shredded the monstrous corporation's customer-friendly reputation for good measure (Haines, 2021).

Some of Barbie's behaviour, furthermore, falls not far short of frightful (Rand, 1995). The infamous Slumber Party Barbie of 1965, which included a set of bathroom scales fixed at

110lb. – as well as a diet book that declared, ‘don’t eat’ – didn’t exactly endear the dainty doll to fuller-figured fans. Fifty years later, the Hello Barbie figurine, which was AI activated and secretly recorded children’s conversations during doll-play, understandably outraged parents and guardians everywhere (Lord, 2024). And as for the Frankensteinian 1975 experiment on little sister Skipper – the breasts of whose ‘adolescent’ doll were inflated by pumping an arm – even Victor at his most demonic wouldn’t go that far. But Jack Ryan, Barbie’s original designer, whose claims to fame include filing off the figurine’s nipples by hand, was ready, willing and able to do so.[7]

Conduct

There is Creed (1993, p.xvi) contends, ‘something immensely attractive about creatures at home in the heart of darkness’. And in order to better understand Barbie’s ability to ‘charm and repel’ …‘terrify yet seduce’ … ‘fascinate and disgust’ (Warner 1998, p.6, 167, 254) we conducted some empirical research. Summarised in Table 1, it draws upon young people’s memories of their Barbie-related behaviours, both good and bad. It does so by means of a research method that has itself divided opinion. Once excoriated as an affront to marketing science, introspection’s stock has risen rapidly in recent years (Brown & Patterson, 2021). It is the Barbie of methodology, inasmuch as there are almost as many named variants as there are Barbies in *Barbie*: autoethnography, me-search, personal narrative, netnography, self-reflection, impressionistic essay, intraceptive intuition, autofiction, subjective personal introspection, critical-praxis research and many more. ‘Introspection’, for the sake of convenience, is our ‘Stereotypical’ equivalent.

In accordance with standard interpretive practice, the present inquiry commenced with the abundant Barbie literature (Google Scholar reports 15,000 items since 2020 and 177,000 in total); continued with observations of numerous in-store doll displays, assorted artworks and short stories inspired by the icon, plus a clutch of Mattel-created Barbie videos, if not all 43 of them; culminated with personal visits to toy museums in London, Nuremberg, Edinburgh and Sudbury, as well as exhibitions of Barbie dolls in Southampton and London’s Design Museum; and, concluded with an invigorating plunge into the ‘vortex’ of ‘paratextual’ media coverage that accompanied Barbie’s barnstorming biopic (Hackley & Hackley 2019, p.206).

This was complemented by a three-year programme of empirical research, part of which comprised 135 introspective accounts of female consumers’ recollections of their childhood encounters with Barbie and how they feel about the figurine in retrospect. These were gathered in three tranches from first-year female undergraduates (average age nineteen): one three years before the blockbuster movie; another six-months prior to its release; and a third several months later when *Barbie* mania had waned somewhat. Transcribed, shared and read separately, a dataset totalling approximately 500 pages of double-spaced text – plus copious accompanying photographs – were discussed together by the research team until its literary device-devised compass became clear.

That is to say, having embraced the Barbara Stern school of close reading, we poured over the transcripts repeatedly, their tropes were tilled and milled, and thereafter triangulated into a topographical acronym comprising three cardinal points of literary analysis: *Metaphor*, *Anthropomorphism* and *Paradox*. Closely related, as Stern (1994) records, the devices are sufficiently different for present purposes, insofar as metaphors aren’t necessarily anthropomorphic (brands as icebergs, onions, pyramids, cogs, ladders and the like) nor

inherently paradoxical (there's nothing odd about an onion, let alone a ladder),[8] though monsters usually are. Barbie more than most…

Table 1: Data Collection Overview

Data Collection Method	Purpose	Sources
Ancillary Materials	Understanding Barbie brand presentation and meanings.	Short Story Anthologies, Artworks, 43 Mattel Created Barbie Videos
Ancillary Activities	Generating firsthand experience and observation of the social and cultural context being studied.	Store Visits (including Galeries Lafayette in Paris, Hamleys in London, and Cleary's in Dublin), Toy Museum visits (in London, Edinburgh, and Suffolk (UK) and Nuremberg (Germany).
Consumer Introspections	Understanding young women's past and present experiences with and perceptions of the Barbie brand.	135 introspective accounts collected in three tranches, before, during and after Gerwig's *Barbie* movie (first round, 55; second round, 28, third round, 52).
Mainstream Media Observations	Understanding the media framing of the Barbie brand before and after the release of the Barbie movie.	198 Broadsheet newspaper and reputable magazine articles including film reviews and special issues devoted to Barbie in outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Business Insider*, *People Magazine*, and BBC News.

Case

Although our anthropic pairing of Barbara B. Stern (a much-missed scholar with impeccable feminist credentials) and Barbara Millicent Roberts (an affront to the feminist cause bent on commodifying its critical credentials) may strike some readers as paradoxical, not to say a monstrous affront, there is nonetheless an intriguing connection. Namely, Dr Ernest Dichter. One of Barbara Stern's (1990) earliest publications reclaimed and redeemed the infamous Freudian psychologist whose hyperbolic, shock-horror book *Consumer Desire* scandalised mainstream marketing scholars in the early 1960s, especially those who aspired to scientific respectability (Stern, 2004). Much-admired on Madison Avenue, with a thriving marketing consultancy (Tadajewski, 2006, 2010), the demon Dr Dichter contributed greatly to the development of Barbie. Such was his implacable self-belief, he even overruled Ruth

Handler, insisting that the doll be imbued with personality, pizzaz and, above all, pulchritude (Gerber, 2009). He helped create the miraculous monstrosity our empirical research endeavours to navigate.

Metaphor Matters

Marketing feeds on figures of speech. Its appetite for analogies is insatiable. And healthy, what is more. Once considered conceptual junk food – 'a pleasant but essentially useless embellishment to normal thought' (Geary, 2011, p.3) – metaphors are increasingly seen as haute cuisine for high achievers (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). They're the nutrition of innovation, wholesome sources of creativity and, if marketing's tropologists are to be believed, the staple diet of scholars and students both (e.g., Fillis & Rentschler, 2008; Hirschman, 2007; Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008).

That is certainly the case with our Barbie dataset, which is replete with conceits. They include *metaphors of religiosity*, adoration, veneration, consecration, idolization, iconicity, and worship, where 'running through the Barbie aisle in Toys R Us was like heaven' (Clio); *metaphors of addiction* filled with loss of control, obsession, compulsion, needs not wants, and being 'unhinged by desire for Mermaid Barbie' (Yara); *metaphors of enchantment*, magic, mesmerism, transformation, fated to follow fashion, finding oneself 'starstruck, stunned, spellbound by the doll' (Polly); and *metaphors of oppression*, when unavoidable, inescapable, irresistible Barbie is bait for 'the marketing trap set by Mattel' (Mel) and 'tall intimidating shelves in Toys R Us tower over me' (Juna).

Many of these comparisons, to be sure, are everyday expressions or timeworn clichés – 'over the moon' (Lavinia), 'sky's the limit' (Lyra), 'warms my heart' (Yara), 'waves of nostalgia' (Frieda), 'playroom as bombsite' (Isadora), 'toyshop as candy store' (Elspeth) – but, even when mixed, informants' metaphors can pack a punch. Combining four figures of speech, for instance, Anouk refers to Mattel's 'collaborations popping up everywhere, new dolls for new kids to relate to, and holding their target market in their pink plastic hands'.

Scintillating or shopworn, the sheer number of analogies in the dataset is striking. But just as many owners of multiple Barbies have personal favourites – Princess (Polly), Ballerina (Andreea), Dreamtopia (Amelia) – so too some metaphors are more fertile than others. The most bounteous, by some distance, are *wonderland* and *warzone*. The former is a happy place, a joyful space, the blissful imaginary world that Barbie owners occupy when playing with their fantastic plastic possessions. It's a world where they, and those they're playing with, have total creative control of the narrative, what it concerns, where it goes, how it ends. Typically, these narratives revolve around special occasions like wedding ceremonies, royal coronations, fashion shows, film premieres (complete with facecloth as red carpet). They also include stories of adventure and excitement, riding the range, rescuing lost children, going on safari, and swimming with sea creatures, mermaids especially. On top of that, there are soap opera-style stories of day-to-day activities like grooming the dolls, changing their outfits and doing Barbie's dirty laundry. Taken together, they offer an escape from real-world anxieties and animosities, provide temporary therapy for the trials and tribulations of growing up, and, best of all, foster informants' imagination, creativity, ambition and personal growth:

> I have strong memories of playing with my friends with different Barbies, brushing their hair, putting them in their Barbie car and creating these fantasy trips from the beach to Mars…Playing with Barbies helped me go into imaginary worlds and create

> a dream lifestyle and live it through the dolls…until my mum would call me back home for dinner. (Callie)

The warzone, by contrast, is a world of trouble and strife and, not infrequently, fighting for the right to play and pretend in peace, without interruption or disruption by irritating others. Such states are more often found in the breach than the observance. Fighting with mother over playtime's duration or whether they're allowed Barbies in the first place; barneys with brothers, big and small, over the ownership and control of their 'shared' playspace; pressganging without permission Transformers, Ninja Turtles, G.I. Joes and similar boys' toys into Barbie's latest adventure; raging against friends and relatives whose toy stash in general and Barbie army in particular is bigger and better than their own paltry selection; forcing a smile when psycho-killer cousins – mostly bad-to-the-bone little boys – pay a visit with mayhem in mind; and endeavouring to remain polite when granny generously makes clothes for the figurines that are rather less than fashion-forward. Or, trying and failing to bite her tongue, as Ginny did, when her schoolteacher asked that age-old question, 'what do you want to be when you grow up?'. Then laughed out loud when Ginny said, 'I want to be Barbie':

> I remember my teacher's face so well as she said to me, 'Gin, *how* are you going to be Barbie?'. I replied, 'I'm going to be who I want to be, just like Barbie!'. The snigger and sarcastic look quickly disappeared off her face…

Those who have watched the Margot Robbie movie will recognize the foregoing scenarios. Wonderland and warzone are similar to those that featured in the film. Such parallels are unsurprising however and almost certainly reflect Mattel's in-house research (see Stern & Schoenhaus, 1990).[9] But there are significant differences as well. Whereas the screenplay is predicated on a gals-are-good, guys-are-gross, matriarchy rocks, patriarchy sucks, Ken's dumb, Barbie's driven scenario, the reality of dollplay is rather less dichotomous. Some brothers not only participate in and contribute to sisters' recreational activities but volunteer their G.I. Joes and Action Men for the call of Barbie duty. Many mothers take delight in doll-devoted daughters' absorption, if only because it keeps them occupied, out of their hair, and entangled in Barbie's tresses instead. Big sisters and grown-up cousins often donate their doll collections to younger relatives, with appropriate pomp and ceremony, and give advice on grooming and maintenance. Squabbling sisters sometimes make allowance for their personal playtime propensities, where one is a punctilious 'curator' of their Barbie collection, whereas the other is a profligate 'customizer' (which is a polite word for 'persecutor').

The Barbie movie, furthermore, confines itself to Mattel's infinitely metamorphic monster, its entourage and accessories. Real life doll-play is closer to a *Toy Story* scenario, where all sorts of creatures, characters and components from far-flung franchises – Buzz Lightyears, Polly Pockets, Transylvanian Families, Hot Wheels racing cars, Dreamhouses made of Lego, and pretty much any figurine who's ready to hand – are recruited as necessary. Even badass Bratz, Barbie's notorious nemesis (Lobel, 2018), is pressed into service by Nancy. But then again, her recollections continue, 'the Bratz girls' clothing blew Barbie's bikinis out of the water'.

Anthropomorphic Aspects

In a modern interpretation of the ancient art of rhetoric, Leith (2011, p.273) personifies the principal figures of speech, simile and metaphor. Both serving officers in the linguistic police force, the first is compared to a beat cop, highly visible because the words 'like' or 'as' always accompany them. The second is a plain-clothes operative who gets everywhere, blends into the crowd, and whose life is often cut short.

Police Officer Barbie has been in the force for thirty years. But plain clothes are not her thing and she's far from pushing up daisies. The figurine is regarded as a *real person*, irrespective of profession, be it acrobat or zookeeper. Informants, admittedly, routinely reiterate that 'she's just a doll', but the very fact that they feel the need to stress the doll's dollness is testament to its sentience.

Many moreover consider themselves to *be* Barbie when playing with the icon, inhabiting its character, speaking on its behalf and, on occasion, while wearing full-sized replicas of the outfit (during showings of the Gerwig movie, for instance). A couple of our informants made a conscious effort to look like Barbie and suffered the emotional consequences (catcalls, condescension, snide comments), though they resisted the surgical procedures that some 'professional Barbies' undergo (Ditum, 2023). For the most part, however, being possessed by Barbie is a temporary state of mind, an endlessly enjoyable state of mind: 'I have to say I was a big fan of everything Barbie when I was younger…Much like myself, Barbie always had blonde hair and blue eyes so I felt as though she was a mini-me' (Bronte).

Although, for some such as blonde-haired, blue-eyed Amelia, Barbie is a dead-ringer – albeit a decent, honest and delightful dead-ringer that 'everyone wants to look like' – the majority of our informants regard the figurine as a big sister, a close cousin, an imaginary, fashion-conscious friend. More than that, 'she' is a practically perfect role model who's not only living the dream but owns a Dreamhouse as well: 'When I was a little girl I used to leave all my Barbie dolls together in my Barbie house at night time believing they would all come alive just like the movie…To me she wasn't a little doll she was my sister' (Amelia).

Set against this, there is a dark, demonic side to the mannequin. There is a dialectical dimension to the relationship between owner and icon. Both in what the dolls do and what is done to them. Barbie, numerous informants maintain – citing the familiar charge-sheet of Mattel's crimes and misdemeanours (Rand, 1995) – has done deep psychological damage to women's self-esteem. This is usually prefaced, however, by 'doll disclaimers', where informants admit that Barbie's 'bad influence' never bothered them as children. It took adolescence and adulthood to burst their bubble:

> One negative thing about Barbie when I was a child was the fact that every doll had the same appearance – blonde, thin, long legs – basically just a perfect model image. I didn't realise it at such a young age, but when I think about it now, this was such a toxic image to be promoting to young children. (Niamh)

What they *do* acknowledge is the deep-seated, almost obsessive hold the doll had on the psyches of many. Consider penurious Isadora whose fervour not only put pressure on her personal wellbeing but the parental purse-strings:

> My mother was a very strong advocate against Barbie, mainly because of the cost that came with it, which was not only money but an addiction. The brand influenced you to believe that Barbie needed a friend and these friends needed a Dreamhouse and a

> car to drive them to it and so on. Now looking back, I do see how this can be addictive…But I took the bait and came to believe that nothing else mattered…I put my mother under financial strain.

Regardless of what they believe about Barbie, the psychological damage done by the brand pales beside the physical damage done to the dolls. Copious informants report instances of maltreatment including dismemberment, decapitation and drowning (mostly in the bath or down the toilet, though a swimming pool was pressed into service by Catherine). In addition to crimes that carry a capital sentence, all sorts of everyday aggravated assaults are evident. These include stabbing, strangling, sexual abuse, biting, beating, battering, being savaged by irate companion animals, and the ever-popular tricological torture. This comprises cruel and unusual hair treatments ranging from scalping and shearing to snipping and shampooing, all of which inflict irreparable damage on the doll, as do dye-jobs involving sharpies, felt-tip pens and, every so often, nail varnish. Weird Barbie's maltreatments in the Gerwig movie are inconsequential compared to the realities of dollplay:

> I can't even try to think of how many Barbies I went through over the years, taking into consideration that my dog demolished 60% of them. But I also fried their hair off with the straighteners or completely butchered their hair giving them a new trim, or simply left them at the park. (Zara)

Such abominations, it must be stressed, are not evidence of informants' psychopathic inclinations.[10] Most of them consider 'curiosity' the cause; it seemed like a good idea at the time. Or, as often as not, attribute it to 'revenge'. Getting their own back on a sister/brother/cousin who wouldn't share or didn't care for the icon. Or report that it was 'easier' to dress the doll by wrenching its head off beforehand. The essential point is that Barbie is simultaneously monstered and monstrous. And like many monsters – Frankenstein, King Kong, Freddy Krueger – is both abhorred and adored, loved and loathed, feared and revered.

Paradoxical Perspectives

'A combination of voluptuous body and wholesome image' (Lord, 2024, p.208) that is 'simultaneously regarded as unreal yet ideal' (Ockman, 1999, p.76), Mattel's miraculous monstrosity is incongruously irresistible. Not only to Barbie-minded academicians, marketers among them (Aboelenien & Nguyen, 2024; Belk & Wallendorf, 1994; Cross, 2017; Knudsen & Andersen, 2024; McGrath, Sherry & Diamond, 2013), but also to innumerable installation artists, poets, painters and storytellers who find themselves drawn to the beastly beauty everybody loves to hate (Heinecken, 2006). If that's not contradictory, nothing is.

Magnificent or maleficent, perhaps the biggest paradox of Barbie's lifetime is that, despite a dramatic loss of popularity in the wake of the Bratz debacle (Lord, 2024) – and widespread predictions the wonder-woman from Willows, Wisconsin, was all washed up (Jamison, 2023) – the doll is still going strong and more successful than ever (Gerber, 2024). More paradoxical still is that the icon's latter-day success is not due to the actual doll itself or Mattel's more 'inclusive' range of figurines (though the corporation's commitment to EDI is universally welcomed). It was occasioned by Gerwig's Oscar-winning movie. Indeed, the corporation has since stated that it is in the IP business nowadays, not the doll-making industry. Like a ghostly echo of its original Gillette strategy, Mattel increasingly sells the idea of their monster seller instead of its embodiment (Boles, 2022).

Another noteworthy ancillary-accessory is Ken. And his comeback is no less incongruous (Ditum, 2023). Because Ken hardly features in the transcripts. More than a few informants, even those with the biggest collections of dolls, such as Ellie, Aylin, Diana, and Evelyn, didn't consider it necessary to acquire Ken. And those that did sometimes replaced him in their playtime story scenarios with whatever was ready to hand. Akin to a failed actor, Ken's part was given to a more macho understudy like Action Man, Ninja Turtles or, in Eleanor's reenactment of a high-society wedding ceremony, her teddy bear. Most considered Ken too bland, too nondescript, too unprepossessing, too lacking in pizzaz or personality, albeit Andreea reckoned he had the cold, dead expression of a serial killer (though it's Barbie who tortures Ken unmercifully in *Toy Story 3*).

Irrespective of Ken's psychopathic propensities, the salient point is that the physical figurine is less integral to Barbie's latter-day appeal than the intangible ancillaries. And while this 'paratextual' tendency may be attributable to today's app-driven, touch-screened milieu of 'media convergence' (Hackley & Hackley 2019) or the alleged 'liquidity' of 21st-century consumer society (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Thompson & Kumar, 2020), the fact is that informants frequently refer to their memories of Mattel's sub-Disney movies. They linger a lot longer than the 'ice queen' herself (Lobel, 2018, p.xvii), and although very few intend to play with the doll anytime soon, many seem keen to rewatch the old movies, despite their clunky CGI and clichéd storylines. 'Every time I'm feeling really nostalgic or homesick', Gabriela says, 'I tend to watch Barbie films'. Aoife agrees:

> The dolls weren't my favourite Barbie product. The Barbie movies are what really brings me nostalgia…Till this day I remember the scenes in my favourite Barbie movies and rewatch the old classics as soon as they come out on Netflix…The waves of happy, carefree nostalgia take over my brain.

The songs too strike a 'paratextual' chord, not least Aqua's imperishable 'Barbie Girl'. Aylin speaks for many when recalling 'listening and listening and listening' to its empowering lyrics, 'I'm a Barbie girl in a Barbie world'. Most, however, seem unaware that Mattel's IP police force relentlessly pursued the band for breach of copyright and, after losing the case, adopted the plastic fantastic pop song for their TV commercials (Hunter & Lastowka, 2019). And *then*, to add insult to injury, the doll's overlords remixed Aqua's unforgettable earworm for the *Barbie* movie soundtrack. The 'national anthem for all teenage girls' (Callie), 'Barbie Girl' occupies a incongruous place in the figurine's hall of fame. If ancillaries are considered paratexts, the global chart-topper is a paradoxical paratext, simultaneously a celebration (bouncy tune) and critique (belittling lyrics) of latter-day Barbie culture.

That's not the case, though, with yet another ancillary, the titanic tagline, 'You can do anything'. Adopted in 1985, it has become a mantra for many informants. The Toytown equivalent of a magical incantation or biblical commandment, it is a self-help slogan of Emile Coué calibre, 'Every day in every way I am getting Barbier and Barbier'. Judging by the number of allusions to 'do anything' in the introspective essays, Mattel's message has not only been *absorbed* but is being *enacted* on a daily basis. The very idea that Barbie, of all people, could become the Gloria Steinem of Generation Z is more than paradoxical – or indeed paratextual – it is preposterous. But true. For Lyra, and 'millions' more:

> Barbie helped encourage myself and millions of other young ladies…She empowered us and let us configure our own outfits and build our own persona and essentially,

> helped us break away from some social constructs…She planted stars in our little young eyes and allowed us to believe that we could work to achieve whatever we wanted to achieve, no matter how crazy it appeared…The sky was the limit for our innocent minds.

A final incongruity, one which came as a shock to those who hadn't given much thought to the figurine until required to do so, is the extent of their personal culpability. *They* were the creatures who pestered their parents incessantly, even though the family couldn't afford more figurines. *They* were the banshees who screeched 'Barbie Girl' incessantly, to their guardians' chagrin. *They* were the demons who played Barbie DVDs day-in-day-out, to the irritation of the siblings who shared the playroom and whose toys were shanghaied for unfolding story scenarios. For all the brand's iniquities, the doll is an angel compared to some of its worshippers. The real monster is within.

Consideration

Barbie may be a miraculous monster, per Gaiman's (2015) incongruous juxtaposition, but is the catch-all category 'monstrosity' sufficient for scholarly purposes? What manner of monster is Barbara Millicent Roberts? Although doppelgängers are marketing's go-to ghouls (Giesler, 2012; Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel 2006), and although the demon double trope has been deemed applicable to *Barbie* already (Ashman, Beach & Patterson, 2023; Knudsen & Andersen, 2024), it's not easy to decide. Because there are way too many heinous creatures to choose from. Weinstock's (2014) selective abecedarium of literary and cinematic monsters lists 200 teratological types (albeit his long-list was five times that total). This 'choice overload' issue is compounded by the fact that the word 'monster' in the complier's cornucopian classification variously refers to specific *characters* (Chucky, Godzilla, Pinhead), circumscribed *categories* (werewolves, dragons, ghosts), encompassing *cultures* (North American, South Asian, Classical World), and those associated with a particular *creator* (Lovecraftian, Tolkienian, Rowlingian).

With more than 250 variations on the original 'teenage fashion model' (Shapiro, 2024), Mattel's mutable doll can be considered from any or all three perspectives. When it comes to *character*, Medusa springs immediately to mind. The myth of the greatest of the gorgons dates from at least 800 BCE, as do some of the earliest dolls (Lord, 2024). The petrifying creature's apotropaic head not only features in numerous works of art, including Versace's legendary logo (Leeming, 2013), but it is echoed today in Mattel's supersized styling head and, it's all-time bestseller, Totally Hair Barbie (Gerber, 2024). For most of its history furthermore Medusa has been regarded negatively – as the quintessential 'she-monster' decapitated by mighty, manly Perseus (Kaleta, 2014; Warner, 1994) – and the same is true of Barbie. Consider the early-career attacks by second-wave feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, as well as the brand name's unsavoury association with allegedly addle-headed 'dumb blondes'. Ever since Cixous' (1975) *cri de coeur*, however, the women's movement has taken ever-increasing pride in the laugh, gaze and serpentine tresses of the Ancient Greek icon (Beard 2018; Burton 2021; Haynes 2022) and, of late, the think pink phenomenon that is Barbie.

One of three monstrous sisters, the scion of sea-gods Phorcys and Ceto, Medusa's maritime credentials are impeccable. That being the case, it's not much of a stretch to *categorise* Mattel's marvellous monstrosity as a mermaid of sorts. Mermaid Barbies, not least those

with lenticular tail lights that illuminate when wet, are amongst the most popular forms of the figurine. They feature in eleven CGI Barbie movies, as well as numerous episodes of *Life in the Dreamhouse*, and help further the latter-day 'mermaiding' phenomenon, where professional merfolk ply their trade at children's parties (Stradvad, Davis & Dunn, 2022) and reinforce the belief – held by 33% of the US population – that 'mermaids are real' (Dawson, Brewer & Cuddy, 2024, p.476). It's a trend that's in tune with the widely discussed, if disputed, contention that contemporary consumer society is becoming increasingly 'liquid' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017; Caldwell & Henry, 2020; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020; Thompson & Kumar, 2020). The present-day popularity of mermaids is a comparatively recent development, however, one that owes much to Disney's saccharine interpretation of Andersen's *Little Mermaid*. As Warner (1998) records in her cultural histories of what Lerer (2008, p.2) calls 'monstrous brilliance', merpersons embody the dichotomy of darkness and light, being both 'desirable and dangerous…benevolent or malevolent…fascinating yet frightening' (Alexander, 2012, p.65, 17, 23). With their enchanting voices, spellbinding songs, long, flowing hair and preoccupation with personal grooming (Lao, 2007), they 'signify a resurgence of feminine power' (Alexander, 2012, p.23). Not unlike Barbie.

When it comes to encompassing *culture*, Barbie is indelibly associated with the USA and, for more than a few of our informants, its quintessentially Caucasian, blonde-is-beautiful, SoCal sentiment. But is origins are European. The Barbie doll is based on Germany's Bild Lilli, which was not only spotted in Geneva by Ruth Handler, but seized, subjugated and sucked dry by Mattel's vampiric chief executive (Gerber 2009; Lord, 2024). Jack Ryan, the doll's all-powerful designer, was an ebullient Irish-American who had more besotted brides than Count Dracula himself (Leonard, 2023). Ernest Dichter, the Freud-fuelled market researcher responsible for the figurine's hypnotic personality, hailed from Vienna (Stern, 2004). The vampire myth is rooted in central Europe (Butler, 2013; Groom, 2020). The first work of fiction featuring the fabled bloodsucker, Polidori's *The Vampyre*, was written near Geneva (Frayling, 2016) and the genre attained its exhilarating apogee in Dracula by Bram Stoker, an Irishman inspired by his county's Lamia-laden folktales (Gallagher, 2017). The figurine, furthermore, is a fixture of latter-day Halloween celebrations. It is no accident that Mattel unleashed a range of Haunted Beauty Barbies to cash in on the occasion, one of which is a toothsome blood-sucker. With her pale skin, crimson lips, white fangs, raven-hued tresses and gothic-a-go-go outfit (black chiffon gown, bejewelled chocker, red shantung coat with full-sleeves and face-framing collar), Vampire Barbie's well worth $1,500 of any collector's money. It is no accident either that a prominent anti-Barbie critic, Pulitzer Prize-winner Anna Quindlen (1999, p.117), once noted that the doll, 'like Dracula can appear in disguises that mask her true nature' and expressed a deep-seated desire to 'drive a silver lamé stake through her pink plastic heart'.

The fourth, undeniably quirky yet incontestably intriguing analogue concerns the singular creature whose *creator* created the contemporary monster genre, Mary Shelley (Billington, 2016; Sampson, 2018; Tropp, 1977). Apart from the obvious parallels between Barbie's famously inhuman dimensions (which would cause her to topple over and crawl on all fours, if she were real) and of course the fact that the figurine's body parts are routinely removed, 'remodelled' and reassembled by Barbie owners, brothers and companion animals, Mattel's imperishable icon was specifically described in Franken terms by the creator of Bratz, Barbie's principal rival (a Mattel employee at the time, Carter Bryant's prototype was constructed from Barbie body parts). Mattel, moreover, responded to Bryant's Bratz threat with Monster High, whose central character is Frankie Stein, the only daughter of the monster and its badger-haired bride. Frankenstein, furthermore, is the one of most famous monsters

in western culture – second only to Big Brother (Lazar, Karlan & Salter, 2006) – and, as Hitchcock's (2008) cultural history shows, one of the most beloved (if homages like *Rocky Horror*, *Young Frankenstein* and *The Munsters* are anything to go by). Initially abhorred, latterly adored, it occupies a similar position in its category as Barbie does in hers. If any brand has earned the 'Franken' accolade – Frankenberry breakfast cereal included – surely it is Mattel's immortal beloved, Barbara Millicent Roberts (Hanes, 2014).

In this regard, it could be contended that Barbara Stern is the Mary Shelley of marketing. Although the scholar's academic career was comparatively short (less than twenty years), as was the novelist's literary career (1818-1837), both were widely published, and heavily influenced by the tenets of feminism. Mary's mother was an early advocate of women's rights (Gordon, 2016) and Barbara's empirical research often focused on the representation of women in advertising (Stern, 1992b, 1993, 1999). The duo, what's more, were closely associated with collectives of radical thinkers: in Shelley's case, the 'regency revolutionaries' inspired by Lord Byron, who spent long spells touring Europe in the post-Napoleonic aftermath of the French Revolution (Morrison, 2020); in Stern's, the countercultural scholars led by Russell Belk (1991) who supported the peripatetic Consumer Odyssey in the post-positivist wake of the '80s paradigm wars (Tadajewski, 2014). More than that, their respective reputations rest on singular achievements, massive monstrous mashups that resonate to this day: Mary's landmark novel, *Frankenstein*; and Barbara's compelling congeries of lit-crit constructs.

As if that weren't enough, their breakthrough publications employed the 'mad scientist' trope (metaphor), where the crazed creator of a living, breathing monster (anthropomorphism) is destroyed in due course by their demonic creation (paradox). Victor Frankenstein was the precursor of all the demented Doctors Jekyll, Moreau, Caligari, Evil, Crake and so on that populate popular culture (Tudor, 1989). Dr Ernest Dichter, modern marketing's Mephistopheles, was defended by Stern (1990, 2001, 2004) on several occasions. The prime mover of 'motivation research', which flourished in the late 1950s, he triggered a moral panic courtesy of Vance Packard's (1957) *Hidden Persuaders*, horrified more than a few marketing scholars (Tadajewski, 2006) and remains relevant to this day (Tadajewski, 2010). His striking literary style in particular is pertinent to contemporary scholarly concerns re. creatively written academic articles (Holbrook, 2024b).

Contemplation

Barbara B. Stern, according to her co-author, close friend and obituarist Morris B. Holbrook (2024c) was 'the antithesis of Barbie'. In a good way. Antithesis or otherwise, Holbrook's comparison encapsulates the chasm at the core of contemporary literary criticism. Once the wild west of thought, it's a place that Stern helped tame for the marketing and consumer research community. Although it remains a marvellous land of opportunity, lit-crit country has latterly been settled by scholars with polarised paradigmatic perspectives: Stylometrics and Stylistics. The former refers to Big Data-driven analyses of 'the literature' be it consumer rituals (Sreekumar, et al., 2023), contemporary nostalgia (Pichierri, 2024), narrative transportation (Thomas & Grigsby, 2024) or customer journeys (Tueanrat, Papagiannidis & Alamanos, 2021). The latter pertains to mounting calls for more creative, contrarian and unconventional approaches to communicating the field's facts, findings, concepts and outcomes (Coffin & Hill, 2022; Kravets & Karababa, 2022; Rose, 2020; Södergren, Vallström & de Monthoux, 2024).

Inaugurated, ironically, by literary critics in the aftermath of the postmodern moment (Moretti, 1998; Moretti & Piazza, 2005), stylometrics (aka biblometrics) is in the ascendent across the social sciences (Tenen, 2024). And while most would agree that stylometric 'scoping' reviews save significant amounts of academic time and effort – almost every article on the chosen topic, inventoried! – traditionalists, such as ourselves, tend to consider them a regressive step, a situation where the *enumeration* of published papers is superseding their *evaluation*. Histograms are par for the course, pie-charts can't be far away, inferential statistics are waiting in the wings. They represent nothing less than a return to the drear days before interpretive researchers cast off the shackles of marketing science. Literature reviews, we believe, aren't just about collecting, collating and categorising every article on a specific topic, let alone citation scores or the rankings of the journals where they're published. Literature reviews, surely, are about selecting and summarising the most significant studies of prior scholars (Baker, 2000) and, more importantly perhaps, identifying, interrogating and interpreting what the corpus of contributions *means*.

The meaning of meaning has long been a core component of old-school literary criticism (Eagleton, 1996), a component that coincided with the rise of New Criticism and its principal proponent, I.A. Richards (of 'close reading' fame), who identified twenty-two different dimensions of the noun (Ogden & Richards, 1923). Meaning is no less meaningful for marketing researchers with literary leanings (Ahuvia 1998; Fowler, Das & Fowler, 2022; Hackley & Hackley, 2019, 2022; Knudsen & Andersen 2024), nothing less than 'the key to understanding consumer motivation and understanding' (Hackley, 2020, p.126). Although meaning mining can be challenging in a Big Data-driven context (Knudsen & Kjellgaard, 2014),[11] such is its salience, Cron (2012, p.14) claims, 'people can go forty days without food, three days without water and about thirty-five seconds without finding meaning in something…we are always on the hunt for meaning…looking for the *why* beneath what's happening on the surface'. Or, as Stereotypical Barbie similarly observes at the climax of Warner Brothers' blockbuster biopic when making the irreversible decision to become human with all its faults and foibles, 'I want to be part of the people that make meaning, not the thing that's made' (Gerwig and Baumbach, 2023, p.114).

Stylistics too is manna from heaven for many marketing scholars, those who bridle under the sacrosanct conventions of academic communication (Coffin & Hill, 2022), conventions that have been criticised on many occasions (Belk, 1987; Hackley, 2020; Holbrook, 1985, 2024b; Sherry 2025) yet remain all-but inviolate. Little wonder, after conducting a longitudinal study of 347,000 PhD abstracts published between 1812 and 2023, the *Economist* magazine (2024b, pp.58-59) concluded that:

> Research has become harder to read, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Though authors may argue that their work is written for expert audiences, much of the general public suspects that some academics use gobbledygook to disguise the fact that they have nothing useful to say. The trend towards more opaque prose hardly allays this suspicion…We found that in every discipline the abstracts have become harder to read over the past eighty years…Other studies of academic writing have similar findings: scientific jargon and acronyms are on the rise…The trend towards illegible writing stinks. Clear prose would be a breath of fresh air.

Although business and management isn't singled out, *The Economist* reiterates and reinforces Dennis Tourish's (2019, p.133) remarks about the 'formulaic, cautious, dull and unreadable'

nature of many academic articles, which come across like 'English translated into Esperanto and then back again, in both cases by a malfunctioning software program'. The situation is likely to further deteriorate, since our published research is relatively easy to replicate by the Large Language Models that already write approximately 10% of scientific research papers, rising to 20% in certain disciplines (The Economist 2024b). And while the convenience of such contrivances is incontestable (Kietzmann & Park, 2024), LLMs are 'particularly susceptible to biases' (The Economist 2024b, p.71) and can crank out all sorts of 'botshit' (Hannigan, McCarthy & Spicer, 2024, p.471).

The regrettable reality right now is that despite innumerable calls for more adventurous forms of academic writing, scholars' conventional, seemingly deeply-engrained beliefs about what constitutes a 'proper contribution' are not simply hard to set aside but near enough set in stone. It's a setting that's cemented by the long, arduous, often brutal and unfailingly debilitating review process that papers go through before publication, which consistently errs on the side of caution (Brown, 2024). It's a monstrous immovable object that appears capable of resisting any irresistible force, short of a Great Flood. But if we live, as some suggest, in an increasingly fluid society (Bardhi & Eckhardt 2017; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020), that intrepid prospect, if not inconceivable, is decidedly fanciful…

It's especially fanciful, furthermore, since there's nothing remotely 'fluid' about the hard-and-fast form – the almost immutable structure – of our academic articles. If anything, they are becoming increasingly rigid, as stereotyped as the most formulaic 'genre fiction'. Their step-by-step linearity runs counter to the 'literary fiction' tradition, whether it be the blurring of boundaries that typified postmodern 'dedifferentiation' (*Infinite Jest*), the 'streams of consciousness' that characterised high modernism (*Ulysses*), the analepsis and prolepsis (flash forward and backward) often associated with windswept romanticism (*Wuthering Heights*), the visions and prophetic dreams found in medieval allegories (*Piers Plowman*) or indeed the *in media res* beginnings (i.e. in the middle of the action) that obtained in ancient epics like the *Illiad* and *Odyssey*.

Indeed, our own Odysseans' dalliance with literary experiments, their noble attempts to alter the form of academic articles didn't fare particularly well (Joy, 1991). Condemned from the outset, according to Morris Holbrook (1995), they were crushed in due course by the constrictive CCT template that currently prevails, and which elevates inflexible forms and frameworks over the fantasies, feelings and fun that once took precedence. It's not that change is impossible – research methods sections in particular could be decanted, with no loss of insight, to online appendices alongside the raw data – or that experimental forms of academic writing don't exist. They do (e.g. Belk, 1987; Bode & Østergaard, 2013; Bradshaw & Hietanen, 2020; Hackley, 2013; Holbrook,1994; Maclaran, 2003; Schau, 2006; Schouten, 2009; Sherry, 1998). But they rarely appear in high-ranking, 3- or 4-star journals, those that are the principal focus of stylometric 'scoping reviews'. At best, they are considered 'fun reading' (Brown, 2024), which is an academic euphemism for 'self-indulgent' (Holbrook, 1995, p.201).

Indulgent or not, contemporary marketing and consumer research is characterised by an ever-rising tide of ever-more articles in ever-more journals with ever-more issues and pages per annum. Fluidity of form is conspicuous by its absence, however. The Barbie figurine, frankly, changes its physical form more often than our academic articles (cf. Shapiro, 2024). Mattel's Fashionistas range alone includes 9 body types, 35 skin tones and 94 unique

hairstyles, as well as wheelchair Barbie, amputee Barbie, ear-implant Barbie and vitiligo-afflicted Barbie (Gerber, 2024). There's a lesson in there somewhere…

Challenge

A bone-fide cultural phenomenon, *Barbie*'s box office success may be a hard act to follow. Mattel's grand plans to do likewise with its other long-established, globally-recognised toy brands, including Polly Pocket, Hot Wheels and Barney the Purple Dinosaur, are currently in development (Farber, 2023), as is a Mattel Adventure Park that's due to open 'sometime soon' in Glendale, Arizona (Lascala, 2024). How many of these come to fruition, let alone replicate *Barbie*'s barnstorming performance, remains to be seen.

When it comes to research, however, there is ample scope for additional marketing scholarship. Already thriving, the monstrosity metaphor remains ripe for further investigation. From doppelgängers to revenants, there's no lack of extant studies. But such is the range and variety of heinous creatures (Cyclops, Chimera, Cerberus, Creatures from the brand lagoon et al.), a cornucopian array of ostensibly applicable abominable options is ready to hand. When coupled with critical marketing scholars' continuing concerns about commercialism, commodification and capitalism more generally (memorably described by Marx as vampiric) there's plenty of beastly, brutal, bloodsucking brands to get our teeth into: Google as Godzilla; Glencore as Grendel; Chat GPT as Ghoul (which famously gather in graveyards and feed on the dead).

All sorts of research opportunities likewise lurk in the lit-crit crypt. Several schools of literary thought, including humanism, ecocriticism, ethical criticism, genre criticism and new materialism have come to prominence since Barbara Stern's passing (Upstone, 2017), every one worth investigating from a marketing perspective. Abrams' (1993) inventory of literary devices contains any number of comparatively neglected tools of the trade (alazon, apostrophe, aphorism, anachronism, etc.). Sunderland's (2010) list of literary 'ideas you need to know' (blasphemy, closure, critical authority, the double bind and more besides) is equally ripe for the plucking. Ditto David Lodge's (1992) repertoire of fifty 'art-forms' in works of fiction (suspense, surprise, mystery and epiphany, to name but four). As for acronyms (SWOT, PEST, ANT), initialisms (STP, PLC, FMCG) and alphanumerics (4Ps, 7Ss, B2B), marketing's ostensible obsession with such eminently literary creations is sorely in need of serious scholarly study. Neologisms and *enumeratio* also.[12]

Indeed, if our Barbie data are in any way indicative, the repertoire of literary devices running wild in the transcripts afford many reasons to be optimistic. They are replete with instances of *hyperbole*, when informants recount their Barbie encounters in an exaggerated fashion; *hypotyposis*, evocative, vividly-written passages about receiving the figurine for Christmas or their birthday; *symbolism*, the fact that the iconic doll is considered an encapsulation of, say, success, achievement, adulthood or, on occasion, idiocy (per the derogatory 'bimbo' descriptor); and, *satire*, where the doll is mocked unmercifully, as in the Barbie movie, which uses ridicule to make political points about patriarchy, commodification, consumer society and so on (Jamison, 2023). As Knudsen & Andersen's (2024) use of 'irony' and 'sincerity' bear witness, there's no shortage of constructs in lit-crit's repertoire.

Whatever else is said about literary criticism, it didn't sink without trace after Stern's untimely passing. Yes, it wallowed in her wake, as did the postmodern project more

generally.[13] But it didn't do a *Titanic* (Brown, 2015). On the contrary, it produced admirable attempts to extract lessons from individual novels like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Canavan, 2018), *The Great Gatsby* (Patsiaouras, Fitchett & Davies, 2016) and J.G. Ballard's *High Rise* (Bradshaw & Brown, 2018). It applied literary theory to the oeuvres of marketing-minded writers, not least Big Brother's biographer, George Orwell (Södergren, 2022; Stern, 1998a). It delivered articles that have filled in some of the blanks left behind by the subdiscipline's late, great leading light (Hackley & Hackley, 2019; Lanier, Rader & Fowler, 2013; Miles, 2013; Rose, 2020). And as long as popular culture proselytisers like Södergren, Vallström and Guillet de Monthoux (2024) continue to make the case for lit-crit, the good ship Stern will continue to ply its trade around the blessed isles of literary plenty.

Although the future shape of the subdiscipline is uncertain, what we *can* conclude for the meantime is that Mattel's Barbie doll is a metaphor for the paradoxical place of literary criticism in the massive, monstrous organism that is marketing thought. Just as Barbie wasn't Mattel's first blockbuster product – that honour went to its 1955 'Burp Gun' (Gerber, 2009), so too Stern wasn't the first marketing scholar to take novels and imaginative literature seriously. In addition to Friedman's (1985) content analyses of brand names in popular fiction, both Holbrook (1985) and Belk (1987) employed fairy tales, comic books and so forth to monster the marketing mainstream. Ancient myth also materialized early (Levy, 1974), most notably as a framing device for the immemorial Consumer Odyssey (Belk, 1991).

But it was Stern who put literary criticism on the map and, as such, stands alongside contemporaries like Linda Scott and Elizabeth Hirschman in the discipline's professional pantheon. Not unlike Mattel, with its manifold fissiparous forms of the iconic doll – 250 and counting – Stern produced copious academic articles, each adopting and adapting a different school of literary criticism to marketplace matters, mostly advertising. There is no reason why this can't continue. Granted the focus, the fervour, the fast-forward feeling that both Barbie and Barbara engendered in their respective domains, was lost for a while. But both are back in the game and, if the ogre of AI is the cause of this comeback, so much the better. It gives traditionalists something to fight for.

A reminder of the utility of Stern-style close reading, as well as the value of literary criticism, the present, purposely provocative paper-cum-commentary-cum-creative writing exercise further reminds us that fracking the landscape of the literature with the diggers of Big Data isn't the only way to uncover its riches. Panning for gold may be old fashioned but the environment is better for it. Or less damaged at least. Metaphors like 'mining' literary texts can distort as well as enlighten. Worse, they can overwhelm academic disciplines in very short order. Think 'relationships', 'segmentation', 'globalisation' or, for that matter, 'liquidity'. They are the intellectual equivalent of gold rushes, not least in the case of the 'textual' trope that swept all before it during the heyday of postmodernism, when there was 'nothing outside the text', courtesy of Derrida, and everything from all-in wrestling (Barthes 1957) to Los Angeles' Bonaventure Hotel (Jameson 1991) was treated as a 'text' and analysed accordingly. Indeed, it is showing new signs of life in today's post-postmodern epoch, albeit in the persuasive guise of 'paratext' (Hackley & Hackley 2019). Drawing the line between 'text' and 'paratext' won't be easy, however, nor will sifting through the latter's para-paratexts ('epitexts', 'peritexts', 'intertexts', 'primary texts', 'silent intertexts', 'parodic para-epitexts', etc.). Lots of papers-in-waiting, presumably, will ponder such profundities.[14]

That said, it's highly likely the 'monstrosity' metaphor will suffer the same rising-star-to-fallen-idol trajectory that typifies so many big-hope marketing tropes and buzzwords.[15] It is already happening to some extent, as numerous 'monster theory' anthologies attest and marketers' rapidly-growing interest in teratological matters suggests. But at least we are forewarned, if not forearmed. And if *Barbie* is anything to go by, it'll be fun while it lasts. If BARBIE, as we believe, stands for Brand-Activated Research, Both Insightful and Energising, there is a lot to look forward to from those with literary leanings like those of the late, lamented Barbara B. Stern.

Conclusion

'Every map', Sobel states (2012, p.13), 'tells a story'. The foregoing article tells a story of the Brobdingnagian Barbie brand, recently revivified by Mattel. Arguing that the world-famous figurine is a monstrosity, simultaneously loved and loathed, we have navigated the marketing icon's many and varied manifestations with the aid of a literary criticism-inspired acronym, MAP. In accordance with Romantic poet William Blake's all-in-each ethos, the idea that the microcosm and macrocosm reflect and refract one another, we have drawn admittedly ambitious, occasionally extravagant parallels between the empirical realities of Mattel's Barbie doll's rise and fall and rise again, with the scholarly trajectory of literary approaches to marketing and its monstrosities. Whether our Blakean 'marriage of heaven and hell' is 'of the devil's party (without knowing it)', is for the reader to decide. Follow that BARBIE!

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Footnotes

1. To be clear, this article does not adhere to the classical literary convention of *docere et delectare* (Lerer, 2008). It espouses *diabolisme et detournement* instead. Contra St Bernard of Clairvaux, we celebrate rather than condemn 'monstrous deformities and deformed monstrosities' (Dell, 2016, p.11).

2. Although The literary *locus classicus* of the present paper – its Blakean world in a grain of sand – is Stern's (1994) postmodern combination of a religious/spiritual *metaphor* with the advertising industry's *anthropomorphic* propensities and a plethora of *paradoxical* antitheses (real/fiction, revelation/concealment, originality/reproducibility) in order to better understand 'authenticity'. However our ostentatiously inauthentic version of MAP isn't so much 'heaven in a wild flower', à la William Blake, as 'hell in a handcart'.

3. Stern was trained in the New Criticism and taught its principles as a schoolteacher before turning her talents to consumer research (Holbrook, 2009).

4. M.H. Abrams (1989) did indeed write about literary theory. Later editions of his *Glossary* include an appendix on 'Modern Theories of Literature and Criticism'. However, as Fischer (1989, p.viii) reports, he regarded theories as 'metaphors…serviceable analogues for dealing with literature'. 'Wit and creativity ' were Abrams' watchwords (Fischer, 1989, p.xii), nowhere better illustrated than in his classic critical text, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, metaphors both.

5. A bestselling, award-winning young adult novel, Patrick Ness's (2011) *A Monster Calls* inadvertently illustrates the MAP approach to marketing understanding. The monster is a *metaphor* for the teenage protagonist's anguish over his mother's terminal illness. The creature is an *anthropomorphic* yew tree that is not only sentient and ambulatory but a storyteller as well. And the three stories it tells young Conor are profoundly *paradoxical* inasmuch as they are morality tales based on the 'cruel to be kind' truism (O'Donohoe, 2018).

6. No less than four ghosts feature in Gerwig's film, which is more than enough monstrosities to be getting along with. But Ruth Handler's ludicrous claim must have frightened the life out of Bild Lilli. Peers (2004) recounts the full Barbie-Bild Lilli story in her history of dolls.

7. An Irish-American rocket scientist whose sybaritic lifestyle made Hugh Heffner look like Huckleberry Finn, Jack Ryan has been all-but airbrushed from the brand's official narrative (Leonard, 2023). But he held all the patents, which numbered in their hundreds, and made more money from Mattel's mannequin than most, Elliott and Ruth Handler included.

8. That said, see Watney's (2023) Heideggerian 'parable' of an onion in *Philosophy Now*.

9. Inspired by Dichter's 'motivation research' (Tadajewski, 2006, 2010), Mattel established the first dedicated market research department in the toy industry. Within three years of its creation in 1963, it employed 60 people (Straus and Schoenhaus, 1990) and rules the roost to this day. Its influence is evident in *Barbie*, the screenplay of which caused considerable corporate consternation (Paskin, 2023).

10. Numerous studies of Barbie dollplay reveal that ruination is the norm (Jones, 2002; Lobel 2018; Mayo and Nairn 2009; Rogers 1999). The 'Weird Barbie' character in Gerwig's film reflects this fact and struck a chord with several informants ('That was me!', 'I did that, too', I thought I was the only one', etc.).

11. Stylometrics, it must be stressed, is a fairly small region of Big Data country. A 'here be dragons' region, arguably (cf. Sobel, 2012; van Duzer, 2013).

12. Marketing scholars, and management researchers more generally, are hopelessly in love with neologisms. Apart from botshit and paratext (no relation), these include netnography, hauntology, presumption, demarketing, metaphoria, postpostmodern, Draculartícle and, lest we forget, servuction. Marketing's premier poet, John F. Sherry (2013, 2025), is particularly partial to them, 'vestaval' and its variants most recently (Bradford & Sherry, 2015). *Enumeratio*, meanwhile, is the technical rhetorical term for lists and listing. A staple of every marketing textbook, *enumeratio* attained its apotheosis in Service-dominant Logic, when any number of 'foundational premises' and 'axioms' came and went in quick succession. The 'magic number' of items in a list is much debated by literary critics and commentators (Leith, 2018, p.178). Anything over ten is considered excessive. SDL went all the way up to eleven at one stage (Miles, 2023).

13. Extrapolating from Fowler, Das & Fowler's (2022) selective literature review, a decline of approximately 20% appears to have occurred after the figurehead of the field passed away. Postmodernism's rise and fall is recounted at length by Jeffries (2021).

14. The 'paratext' trope is gaining traction in marketing scholarship (Hackley & Hackley, 2019, 2022; Knudsen & Andersen, 2024). Epitomised by the Alexander Orlov phenomenon (Miles & Ibrahim, 2013), the device figured prominently in the media campaign surrounding *Barbie*. Paratexts, by and large, are considered 'very good things' by marketing managers and academicians alike (Hackley & Hackley, 2019, 2022). However, the down side of paratexts – media clutter, marketing hype, consumer antipathy, which were evident in both the Orlov and *Barbie* campaigns – remains an open question. This adore/abhor aspect is not dissimilar to the loathe/love response to monsters like King Kong, Godzilla, Frankenstein and so forth. Philosopher Noël Carroll (1990) contends that one of the three primal forms of monster propagation is *fissiparity*, where the creature doubles and redoubles itself uncontrollably (zombie hordes, seething swarms of malevolent bees, spiders, ants, parasites and so on). Rather than rely on Genette's (2010, p.261) 'threshold' trope, paratexts could be construed as parasites per the 2019 movie. Further research might prove fruitful.

15. The changing socio-cultural context, clearly, is crucial (Ahuvia, 1998). Viral marketing, we imagine, is unlikely to make a comeback in the wake of coronavirus interruptus. Ditto relationship marketing in today's Tinderised, swipe-right society. Marketing warfare might have few takers, moreover, in our politically unstable world, where the prospect of nuclear war may not loom large but it's definitely on the radar.