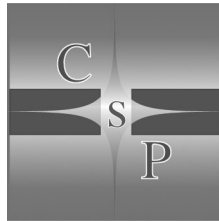


The X-Files and Literature

The X-Files and Literature
Unweaving the Story, Unraveling the Lie to Find
the Truth

Edited by

Sharon R. Yang



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The X-Files and Literature: Unweaving the Story, Unraveling the Lie to Find the Truth, edited by
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“...to weave her story, to tell her tale, to make them believe the lie.”

“A lie to find the truth.”—Mulder, “Redux,” *The X-Files*.

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INTRODUCTION:

WEAVING AND UNWEAVING THE STORY

SHARON R. YANG

I

It bears repeating that *The X-Files* came not only to reflect the concerns of but to pervade Western culture in the turn from the twentieth into the twenty-first century. Simon Irvine and Natasha Beattie wrote in 1998 that:

The structure of a conspiracy epistemology in its present, popularised form is embodied by the three central slogans of *The X-Files*—"I want to believe," "The truth is out there," and "Trust no one." These statements are catch cries that concisely capture the zeitgeist. The end of the century is privy to the hyper-acceleration, deconstruction and re-imagining of the social, the cultural and the political....¹

Thus, the program's sinister government conspiracies, alien infiltrations and abductions, religious fanatics, and monstrosities lurking within the darker avenues of the city, the countryside, and the human mind gave voice to contemporary social, spiritual, and psychological angst over a lack of individual control arising from our dis-ease after Watergate, Viet Nam, revelations of Cold War depredations by our own governments, economic and military globalization, the clout of religious fundamentalism, and the hijacking of the 2000 American presidential elections—to name but a few examples. In fact, *X-Files* creator Chris Carter observed the mutual relationship between his program and the world at large:

The show's original spirit has become kind of the spirit of the country—if not the world....There is a growing paranoia, because as somebody once said, there are no easy villains any more....The world is run by selfish people whose motives are selfish—and as we all buy into the money culture, it is only going to get worse.²

The X-Files so pervades the American psyche that Madison Avenue has even exploited the laconic authority of Fox Mulder, drawing on this personae to

hawk Milky Way bars during the program's run. And long after the series ended, a cell-phone carrier used as its fictional investigator and huckster a black-trench-coated young man with a delivery somewhere between David Duchovny's Mulder and Jack Webb's Joe Friday. In its heyday, tie-ins to *The X-Files* have included novelizations, comic books, mugs, jackets and caps, and even a disco version of the haunting theme song by DJ Dado. Three soundtracks have been released (two from the film and one from the series), as well as an *X-Files*-inspired album by various artists, *Songs in the Key of X*. Even the Bare Naked Ladies felt obliged to refer to the program and the Cigarette Smoking Man in "One Week." *The Nanny* invoked Scully and Mulder to denote the bizarre newly formed friendship of perpetual antagonists Ms. Babcock and Niles the Butler, while *The Simpsons*, itself an influential, incisive popular cultural icon, devoted an entire episode to an *X-Files* send-up, "The Springfield Files." And *The X-Files* still remains verbal shorthand in our cultural vocabulary for searching out hidden truths or dealing with the inexplicable. On *Without a Trace*, when searching for a lost person whom evidence seemed to indicate was abducted by aliens, two detectives found themselves dubbed Scully and Mulder.³ Recently, combining poplar and high culture, Gordon A. Craig titled his reviews of books on previously undisclosed F.B.I. and Army Intelligence surveillance of "outsiders" during World War II "*The X-Files*."⁴ Found everywhere from advertising ploys to inclusion in college classes and academic conferences, *The X-Files* reveals its pervasiveness by continuing to cut across "low" and "high" culture even after its cancellation. As Jan Delasara writes, "the series is a unique cultural product which [*sic*] offers both escape and engagement, but it is not *only* popular. It is also complex, powerful and artistically conceived."⁵

Perhaps most remarkable about *The X-Files*' blurring high/low cultural distinctions is the way in which it absorbs, revises, or questions a bastion of high culture: literature in all its forms. Perusing the nine seasons of *The X-Files*, one finds that poetry, drama, novels, and short stories of a broad span of eras intertwine with the program's depiction of conspiracy and other popular culture tropes not only to challenge what truth is out there but *how* we decide what truths we accept. Late eighteenth-century poet William Blake pervades one episode, its title, "Fearful Symmetry," taken from his poem "The Tyger" and one setting taking place, as Jan Delasara notes, before *Blake Towers*.⁶ In this episode, the lack of clarity over the beneficence of aliens abducting animals to propagate various species from our environmentally degenerating planet matches the poem's own ambiguity over whether the tiger is threatening or incomprehensibly beautiful. In another episode, Mulder cites one of the "Proverbs of Hell" from the visionary Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to justify his passionate dedication to questing for knowledge in arcane

areas scorned by mainstream intellectual authority: “The road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom.”⁷ Earlier in the series, “The Post-Modern Prometheus” challenges our distinctions of high and low culture in evaluating art and our fellow humans by exploring how Jerry Springer, graphic novels/comics, and Universal horror films share not only a subtitle but the philosophical considerations on beauty, virtue, and justice in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. Through *Moby-Dick*, Scully’s loyalty and purity are suggested by her father’s nicknaming her Starbuck, while Mulder’s obsessive, even destructive drive for the great white Truth is evoked in Scully’s musing on his likeness to Ahab in “Quagmire.”⁸

Oddly enough, although much academic work has been devoted to the social, psychological, and spiritual significance of *The X-Files*, until this collection none has fully addressed the program’s rich adaptation of literature to interrogate our perception, definition, or recounting of the “truth.” A recent MLA search of the topics “X-Files” “literature” only brought up two entries: “‘Have I Got a Monster for You!’: Some Thoughts on the Golem, *The X-Files* and the Jewish Horror Movie” (Mikel J. Koven, *Folklore*) and “The Truth Is Out There in Elsinore: Mulder and Scully as Hamlet and Horatio (Sharon Yang, *Literature and Film Quarterly*). Not surprisingly, both writers are involved in this project. Although several prominent books have studied *The X-Files*, none have given the program’s connections to literature its due. The introduction of *Deny All Knowledge* gives a good overview of various factors creating a new zeitgeist for epistemological and ontological authority informing *The X-Files*, but only tangentially touches on literary connections, most notably in the reference to *Pale Fire* through the name Lord Kinbote in “José Chung’s ‘From Outer Space’.” Among the essays of *Deny All Knowledge* are an insightful Lacanian analysis of *The X-Files* and another of the show as a purveyor of folklore, but neither one directly or profoundly addresses specific interconnections that the program shares with literature. Peter Knight’s *Conspiracy Culture* is a fascinating exploration of how the conception of conspiracies has evolved into mainstream thought to give meaning to the individual’s suffering and frustrations created by amorphous, globalized, and indifferent industrial, military, and political powers. Knight sees *The X-Files*, like the works of Thomas Pinchon and Don DeLillo, expressing such views permeating society; however, he merely sets the television program and novels alongside each other as examples without exploring how literature and video/film influence each other. Finally, Jan Delasara’s *PopLit, PopCult and The X-Files* does state that *The X-Files* contains variations on literary motifs and genres: Holmes/Watson, the psychic detective, Gothic, the Grail Quest, and magical realism. However, Delasara’s book, geared for a nonacademic audience, is limited to stating that similarities or influences exist, without

probing how or to what end the television program adapts or re-envision literary form or content. The goal of our collection is to go precisely where others have stopped short, to interrogate the significance of *The X-Files* imbuing itself with the varied manifestations of literature. For *The X-Files* plays with our interactions with and perception of literature as a cultural authority to force us to rethink how we define and articulate truth/reality. Thus, the subject of this collection is a unique and long overdue illumination of a television series that has deeply influenced modern Western culture.

II

Why should literature prove such a rich resource for the cultural interrogations of *The X-Files*? Defining the term “literature” provides some, perhaps, unexpected but still apt answers to this question. Coming up with a definition for literature that would satisfy every reader is as slippery a task as pinning down Eugene Tooms or at least the second-season Fluke Creature. To a Renaissance writer, literature, most notably poetry, gives an audience the real or the true by, as Philip Sidney puts it, showing us a “golden” world rather than a “brazen” one: its beauty derives from Christian Neoplatonic “reality” of God or Good versus the fallen realm in which we eke out our confused lives.⁹ To a Romantic writer like William Wordsworth, literature, again particularly poetry, enables us to “see into the heart of things”¹⁰ and illuminates reality through the imaginations of both readers and writers. Because “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” and their work “the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth,” Percy Shelley asserts that poetry enables the audience to partake of the writer’s insights because this art “strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and the sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms.”¹¹ But Modernist and Postmodernist critics of literature would insist on literature’s possessing less omniscient qualities, being a product of our own limitations, and thus requiring writers to struggle against perspectives limited not only by social morés but by our own overvaluing of the ego. As Virginia Woolf asserts, the writer must break through the “straight dark bar” of the “I”—especially the masculine “I”; otherwise, “all is shapeless as mist.”¹² Contemporary critical schools continue to converge and clash over the meaning and value of literature. The Marxist critic reads literature as important for what it says or demonstrates about the repression and manipulation of working classes by economic elites. The feminist critic explores the repression of women through the language defining Western civilization as well as through its devaluation of the content and form of her literary expression. The psychoanalytic critic studies how language, the symbolic order, privileges the predominating white, male, heterosexual by marginalizing as defective or

threatening Other any sexuality, class, and ethnicity differing from itself. The deconstructionist critic sees no one “sacred” text, or interpretation of a text, and delves into the myriad ways the varying backgrounds (cultural, individual) of those writing or reading a text create it, as well as exploring the reader’s determination to try to stitch together the gaps in the text that deny closure of meaning—much like trying to find the “truth out there” amongst the stories impossibly contradicting and confirming each other in “José Chung’s ‘From Outer Space.’”

In asserting what distinguishes and empowers literature as an art form, the key element that writers cite is what José Chung, “as a storyteller, [himself],” refers to a bit disingenuously as the transformative power of “words—mere words.”¹³ Thus, the earliest form of literature, mythologies, define the universe and humanity’s place in it, orally or in writing, with their own “Word[s]” of God[s]: the Sumerian *Enuma elish*, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, the Zoroastrian *Yasnad* and *The Vision of Arda Viraf*, the Hebrew Tanakh or the Christian Bible. Writers through the millennium demonstrate that Chung’s assessment of the powerful role of words in literature is part of an old tradition. Aristotle wrote that “the vehicle of expression [that distinguishes literature from other forms of art] is language”—and in literature this language is carefully selected and arranged on a basic level of sound, rhythm, and connotation to please and on a broader level in the ideas it conveys to teach morality and to reveal truth.¹⁴ Centuries later, Philip Sidney speaks of words as so essential to literature’s power that “besides their delight...one word cannot be lost but the whole work fails.”¹⁵ Four hundred years later still, in *Tripmaster Monkey* Maxine Hong Kingston wields language to reshape society itself, to write herself and other marginalized people into American culture: “I am trying to write an American language that has Chinese accents.”¹⁶ Contemporary literary scholars also look at the work and effect of literature’s “words, simple words.” The Lacanian psychoanalytic critic looks into the blanks, the lack behind the signs, the words in the Symbolic order that try to marginalize or contain the Presymbolic but cannot.¹⁷ Conversely, for the French Feminists, a *l’écriture féminine*, writing the diffuse experience of the female body, enables them to transcend the patriarchal binaries that would consign them and their union with the Presymbolic to silence.¹⁸

Yet even as “words” seem to be the trait that separates literature from other arts, this element of form is in itself a slippery designation, matching the indeterminacy of the smoky backlighting, the shadowy informants’ loyalties, and the constantly undermined revelations permeating nine years of *The X-Files*. Michel Foucault writes that since the sixteenth century words have lost the stability of being regarded as semiotic signs of what they mark, so that their meaning is determined by other words, themselves determined by other words,

unto infinity. And the meaning of those words shifts with mindset of the social system using them.¹⁹ So it is “the traversal of this futile yet fundamental space that the text of literature traces from day to day.”²⁰ The forms that literature uses to convey these words are equally unstable, blurring boundaries within literature and along its borders with other genres of art. Words can be spoken in oral recitations of myths and poetry in preliterate societies or even in conjunction with the written word: the words of a play, the poetry of a Frances Lee Harper or a Lord Tennyson or an Allen Ginsburg or a Nikki Giovanni designed to be read and heard aloud. Lyrics set to music weaken distinctions between music and literature. Rendering boundaries between the arts even more permeable, film and video draw on the language of spoken thoughts and words, while also incorporating diegetic words into the *mise-en-scène* and nondiegetic ones in the form of establishing titles, tag lines, and quotations—frequently literary. In this sense *The X-Files*, with its word play and symbolic use of signs or names, participates in this slurring of generic boundaries. The subject becomes not *The X-Files and literature* but *The X-Files as literature*.

Further, not only do the boundaries between literature and other art forms shift but so do those between high and low culture in relation to literature. The Shakespearean drama venerated from the late eighteenth through twenty-first centuries, when originally staged, was mainly considered popular entertainment. The Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell now lionized by scholars were beloved but still considered far less of an intellectual challenge than Arnold, Mill, or Pater in their own time. And popular and high culture could intermingle even within the same era. For example, the Gothic genre contained the social and psychological intricacies of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* as well as the blue book knockoffs of *The Monk* that either excerpted the lascivious, shocking portions of the original text or created their own versions of them.²¹ More recently, the graphic novel has taken the format of the comic book into the realm of social criticism with *Maus* and into that of philosophy and aesthetics with Neil Gaiman’s drawing on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Tempest*, and William Shakespeare, himself, in his Sandman series.²² *The X-Files*, itself, cleverly plays on such a weakening of boundaries in “The Post-Modern Prometheus,” converting the frame of Walton’s letters in *Frankenstein* into the opening and closing panels and credits of a graphic novel.²³

Even the value and goals of literature have constantly shifted as much as the sources of power driving *The X-Files*’ government and alien conspiracies. For Plato, poetry is especially unreliable, lies to frighten children or to obscure our understanding of divine virtue. Successor Aristotle inverts the relationship of poetry to truth by elevating this art form as next to Good for being inspired by imagination above earthly misperceptions, thus creating “a likeness that is true to life and yet more beautiful,” that “preserve[s] the type and yet enable[s] it.”²⁴

Wordsworth sees poetry as a vehicle for the human imagination to illuminate and even “half-create” the sacred truth that “rolls through all things.”²⁵ Later, George Eliot reflects the growing doubts that many Victorians had with a human ability to know the truth objectively when any insight is hampered by the individual’s participation in that world with her parable of the candle reflected in a pier glass scratched indiscriminately by a housemaid’s polishing:

but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun [candle]. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement...the scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person...²⁶

And this questioning deepens into powerful doubts throughout the twentieth century, with literature changing from a way to know higher truth or to experience beauty into a recording of uncountable, unknowable, ungraspable possibilities, gardens of infinite forking paths. A writer could see him/herself as recording the malaise and disconcertion that this indefinability brings. As Don DeLillo says of his writing in a *Rolling Stone* interview, “paranoia in some contexts is the only intelligent response.”²⁷ In contrast, Maxine Hong Kingston reads this indeterminacy as an opportunity for the liberation of the voices and actions of writers and readers from inner and outer imposed constraint. She gives her *Tripmaster Monkey* the subtitle *His Fake Book* in reference to jazz musicians’ “book of tunes, songs, and chords” from which they take off on musical improvisations: “so I was trying to write a prose book with basic plots, suggestions for social action, for trips. I hope to trip the reader out and have them [*sic*] improvise further.”²⁸

Thus defined, literature proves a rich resource for *The X-Files*’ constant challenging of the “truths” we take for granted about our agency, our understanding, and the social and epistemological authority shaping our interrelations. On the one hand, traditionally, literature becomes a vehicle for searching out truth, usually a truth that will shatter, even transcend, social and intellectual authority. As Virginia Woolf writes, “whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.”²⁹ And as one era succeeds another, the higher truth sought, the artistic form needed to express or translate it into language keeps shifting, as, again, in *The X Files*, one layer of authority after another must be smashed or chipped away as each new truth ossifies into the latest oppressive, obfuscating authority. On the other hand, the perception of literature as didactic, high culture, and confusingly complex, joining with science, economics, and social morés as tools of the “intellectual

and political elite,³⁰ makes this art form an apt subject for *The X Files* to subvert in order to reflect and even spur its audience's questioning. Either way, *The X-Files* can be said at times to join Postmodernist writers such as Pynchon, DeLillo, Kingston, and Borges in dismembering, deconstructing, and even reconstructing narrative form to recreate the fragmented reality of late twentieth and early twenty-first century perception—although not all critics would agree on the degree of independence from social authority that *The X-Files* exhibits.

This collection of essays covers both how *The X-Files* works with literature's own constantly morphing definition and portrayal of truth through form and content and how the television program may or may not subvert our own contradictory expectations and distrust of literature's providing us with enlightenment. The first section, entitled "Mythologies" is less concerned with the alien invasion arc that the program created but more with how and why *The X-Files* rewrites mythos that have shaped Western culture. Myths were the human imagination's attempt to order a seemingly chaotic universe. As David Leeming writes, "myths were stories by means of which our forbears were able to assimilate the mysteries that occurred around and within them." More importantly, Leeming elucidates mythology's identity within literature:

both as story and as extended metaphor, myth is the direct ancestor of what we think of today as literature. The meaning of myths, like the meaning of any literature, is, as Northrop Frye has said, 'inside them, in the implications of their incidents'.³¹

Myths, then, might be described as literature at its most distilled, for though entertaining and imaginative, they are more than merely tales of the supernatural but systems designed to create order and meaning. So, by explaining why events occur (good and bad); who or what is responsible; or how humans can control, propitiate, or win an alliance with the forces that have power over creation, mythology rescues humanity from unpredictable happenstance. Perhaps more importantly, by these means mythology provides an opportunity for humans to protect themselves from and exert control over their environment—be it storm, plague, flood, fires, war, or even bad luck. These myths also provide a moral compass for societies, their scenarios reflecting and reinforcing values concerning obedience to authority, gender and class roles, the distribution of political power, the importance of war or peace, and the superiority of the earthly or the spiritual world.

Thus, the male Gilgamesh is a hero for the Sumerians for bringing them conquests, water, and many cedars in an environment of numerous hostile patriarchal cultures fighting for water, crops, and materials for building forts and weapons. Equally significant, these myths change as the circumstances of the societies change. For example, the Christians seeking to convert and control

pagans in continental Europe and Britain in the first millennium found it most effective to layer Christian holidays and traditions over pagan ones, thus gradually moving their targets' associations in the direction the Church desired. Interestingly enough, literature of the period often reflects this transition with an uneasy alliance of Christian and preChristian. In *Beowulf*, a beautiful song of creation glorifies the Christian God as one of love and beauty, yet the epic most emphatically stresses the preChristian warrior ethos of vengeance, battle prowess, amassing treasure, and paying tribute to one's temporal, political lord—and a warrior's proper funeral celebrates material not spiritual grandeur.³² *The X-Files* also takes religious and social myths that have strongly colored Western thought and revises them, either to reflect the changing needs of our evolving social relations or to make us ask ourselves in what ways we need to rethink the old mythic map of our identities.

Amy Donaldson's "The Last Temptation of Mulder: Reading *The X-Files* through the Christological Lens of Nikos Kazantzakis" layers revisions of the Christian Crucifixion/Resurrection mythos under a novel's modern adaptation. Drawing on "Amor Fati"'s parallels with Kazantakis's work, Donaldson sees *The X-Files* asking us to rethink the characterization of Judas and explore what the concept of the "lonely Christ," or savior/teacher, means to us in the turn of this century. Karen Wolf's "Whosoever Believeth: Rereading the Bible through *The X-Files*" also studies the program's reconsideration of the crucifixion/resurrection mythos, but in terms of the savior sacrifice as woman: Scully in the trilogy of "Ascension," "3," and "One Breath." Wolf's essay examines how this version of the Crucifixion/Resurrection not only reflects a rethinking of gender roles but emphasizes the importance of the individual's agency and choice in undergoing a personal dark night of the soul to attain his/her own resurrection. "The Grail of Truth: *The X-Files* as a Modern Day Arthurian Quest," by Joan R. Vredenburg, studies this television program's embodying a myth related to Christian tradition, if not one enshrined as an officially sacred text. Vredenburg's essay explores both the modernizations of "knights errant" and their struggles with honor and the supernatural and how the holy quest for "the cup of Christ" is adapted in Mulder's search for not just his sister but all the sacred truths that the dark forces surrounding him would keep hidden.

Brian Hauser's "Vanishing Americans: James Fenimore Cooper's Detectives and the Trauma of Alien Invasion in *The X-Files*" studies how *The X-Files* challenges a myth of sacred nationalism. Looking to the work of Poe and Cooper, Hauser examines how *The X-Files*, in its detectives of the state, Scully and Mulder, "struggle against the state's own inclination to repress its past involvement in the extermination of indigenous peoples" to uncover for us our past's atrocities and to protect us from participating in or becoming victims

of further ones. Finally, Mikel J. Koven discusses *The X-Files*' participation in and commenting on the very folklore that comprises mythic systems in his "The Folklore Files: In(corp)orating Legends in *The X-Files*." In his study, Koven explains that "the series, as a whole, in availing itself to contemporary folklore debates offered television audiences (world-wide) alternative world-views in understanding 'the Other' within American culture at the *fin de siècle*."

The next section of this collection, "Gothic Redux," also deals with the supernatural in literature. This genre is especially apt for *The X-Files*, not merely for drawing on horror, the grisly, or the supernatural but because in doing so Gothic has challenged the intellectual and moral status quo. From its inception, Gothic undermined the demarcations between high and low culture, containing within itself both the sensation Gothic's lascivious monks, nuns, and demons as well as the philosophical Gothic's painful probing of human psychology and challenge to the wisdom and fairness of class and justice systems. Gothic even characteristically casts doubt on the efficacy of an individual's reason, any more than social, religious, or scientific authority, to provide order and protection, with the genre's virgins constantly kidnapped and raped; ghosts and demons constantly crushing, carrying off, or at the very least frightening the good and evil alike; and supernatural beings (vampires, ghosts, and split Jekylls and Hydes) defying the laws of science or twisting them to evil ends rather than the beneficent ones promised by parents, priests, scientists, or rulers. In fact, from the start, Gothic was viewed by many of the cultural elite as a threat to social order for inflaming the passions of the lower classes and giving them the power, through reading, to access knowledge that would lead them astray from their duties of obedience and sobriety.³³ Further, the Gothic could be considered particularly destabilizing because it gave voice to dissatisfactions and frustrations with social order across the class spectrum. In the lust and viciousness of Manfred, *The Castle of Otranto* revealed even the highest of the cultural elite to be prey to irrationality. *Frankenstein* unveiled not only the unjust treatment of lower classes and women but again emphasized that human ego and passion tend to outweigh human rationality, no matter what the veneer of learning. *Dracula* intimated fears of the Other reversing colonization or of a breed of sexual and independent "New Women"³⁴ destroying British civilization, with science and religious faith just barely giving civilization the edge. Thus, the Gothic's subversiveness is perhaps its strongest actual link with *The X-Files*.

Jason Vest's "The Truth Is Back There: *The X-Files* and Early Science Fiction" reveals how the social, philosophical, and technological fears informing early Gothic remain with us today, providing tropes for *X-Files*' creators to address such concerns with a Postmodern twist. Sage Leslie-McCarthy's "*The X-Files*: Continuing the Psychic Detective Legacy" studies how a Gothic

subgenre, the psychic detective story, provides *The X-Files* with a rich source for the subversion of ontological categories. Leslie-McCarthy's essay looks at the cultural factors of the last two turns of centuries that create both similar and differing concerns about the split of science and mysticism in intellectual inquiry. Finally, Rob Lively's essay explores how *The X-Files* turns to another subgenre, Gothic science fiction, to express our desire to channel the uncanny or the horrific back into a "natural order of things," as well as to convey human frustration and dislocation in world whose natural order may not be as congenial or comprehensible as we desire.

The last section of the book is called "Narrative Innovation" and addresses how *The X-Files* draws on a Postmodernist concern with form as well as content embodying the unmooring of the authority of the "Word" of religion, politics, or art that characterizes contemporary literature. Forming a bridge with the previous section are the essays by Tamy Burnett and Cary Jones, both of which look to Gothic influences to portray late twentieth- and early twenty-first century dis-ease with the individual's ability to perceive and report what she/he has seen or experienced. Burnett's essay looks at the influence of Poe's narrators who "attempt to persuade the audience as a means to establish and enhance the narrator's credibility and sanity in his own mind," with "his very identity...dependant upon his being believed by others." Cary Jones's "'Post-Modern Prometheus', Postmodern Voices: *The X-Files* and Subjective Storytelling" studies the program's subjecting the well-known Gothic narrative of *Frankenstein* to what Robin Nelson calls "flexinarrative," a Roshomon-style of story telling, to "create a greater narrative world for the audience to consume."

Matthew VanWinkle, Suzanne Speidel, Margaret Kaner, and Sherry Truffin address the self-reflexive nature of *X-Files*' narrative voice. VanWinkle's essay addresses the program's looking to Tennyson's preoccupation with the agony of an ever-aging but never ending existence in "Tithonus" as a narrative trope to express "a self-reflexive meditation prompted by the unexpectedly lengthy run of *The X-Files* as a series," "an antecedent for a narrative that must continue to unfold even as it recognizes that it cannot end, that it may in fact have outlasted its proper conclusion." Going even further in this vein, Suzanne Speidel studies not only how *The X-Files*' "perpetual postponement of answers and 'truth'" is at one with Modernists' views of closure as a false imposition on experience, but how *The X-Files*' use of this perspective is recreating the narrative trajectory of episodic television in the image of that literary movement. Margaret Kaner's "Believing the Lie: Interpretive Strategies and Epistemic Choices" focuses on the destabilizing competition between the interpretive strategies of Mulder's narrative of the mystical and Scully's of science, with the open-ended tag lines of the series underlining words' refusal to provide the narrative with clear

interpretive guidance. Sherry Truffin's article suggests that *The X-Files* is not merely destabilizing our expectations about what narrative is legitimate but revising them to create a new form of writing, the value of which lies in its openness to possibilities rather than an insistence of verifiable data that can never be satisfied.

Thomas Argiro takes a different stand on *The X-Files*, finding the television program not self-reflexive enough. In "The *X-Files* Meets *Vineland*," Argiro sees Scully and Mulder, not as challenges to a monolithic state, but as embodiments of our "conspiratorial re-normalization drives" that will "track down, apprehend and dispense with" whatever is abnormal or a threat to the state. Our identification with their restoring the "normal" after offering a superficial challenge socializes viewers to "internalize the behaviors of the ideologically charged figures." Argiro points out that Pynchon's *Vineland*, a study of an iconoclast co-opted by the "police state guardians she once opposed," provides a corrective to readings of *The X-Files* as purely subversive.

This collection, obviously, does not cover every connection of *The X-Files* with literature. Unfortunately, we have no entries looking at how creators of literature were influenced by *The X-Files*. However, we have tried to provide a rich sampling of how the television program rethought the form and the cultural work of specific literary pieces, even whole genres. It is the hope of those of us involved in this book that our essays will deepen your understanding of *The X-Files* as well as pique you to rethink your perception of literature and the truths it conveys with as much openness, verve, innovation as *The X-Files* has at its best.

Notes

¹ Simon Irvine and Natasha Beattie, "Conspiracy Theory, Pre-Millennium Tension and *The X-Files*: Power and Belief in the 1990s," *Social Alternatives* 17, no. 4 (1998) [journal online] [cited 4 January 2000]; available from Ehost@epnet.com. EBSCO HOST.

² Carter qtd. in Jan Delasara, *PopLit, PopCult and The X-Files: A Critical Exploration* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2000), 40-41. Delasara also cites Carter as admitting that "the big bang of my [Carter's] moral universe was Watergate" (8). In the introduction of *Deny All Knowledge* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996), editors Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright cite Charles Taylor to explain *The X-Files*' creation and popularity as a response to the lies and distortions of the Reagan and first Bush presidencies (2-3), while its preoccupation with alien intervention not only taps into a "cultural moment" pervading tabloids and television, but expresses a more profound psychological disturbance: a deep questioning of the scientific order and authority and a search for a transcendent reality. Summing up these ideas in terms of psychologist/psychiatrist John Mack, the editors point out

[f]or Mack, the essence of the abduction experience is nothing less than an epistemological crisis in which abductees experience “ontological shock” (44) that requires “another ontological paradigm” (389) after realizing the limitations of a chronological, physically-based interpretation of reality.... [T]his new consciousness is one that perceives the falsity of the scientific/materialist worldview that is perpetuated by the intellectual and political elite or our culture....the UFO abduction experience radically undermines the assumptions of a culture that seeks to place human beings at the center of the universe, able to control and predict all events. (11)

Peter Knight, in *Conspiracy Culture* (18), explores how conspiracy beliefs have morphed from the parvenu of the radical left or right into the American mainstream so that “much conspiracy culture might instead be understood as an attempt to make sense, albeit in a distorted fashion, of the deeper conflicts which reside not in the psyche but in society” (London: Routledge, 2000). *The X-Files* reflects and reinforces this psycho/social ambience with its constant deferral of truth and its insistent dislocation of the source of ultimate power through layers of cabals and aliens:

Paradoxically, then, the more *The X-Files* promises to reveal a traditional humanist conspiracy of top-down control, the more it seems to paint a Foucauldian portrait of decentered power which is everywhere in the system but in no particular location. In a tone of increasing despair and frustration at never getting to the bottom of things, Mulder declares to a UFO convention that there is “a conspiracy wrapped in a plot inside a government agenda.” (220-21)

³ A tip of one of my many hats to Bob Walker for the *Without a Trace* reference. For a web site that contains an encyclopaedic compilation of references to *The X-Files* up through 2002, see Laura White, “*The X-Files* In-Joke List 1996-2003,” [web site online] [cited 21 July 2006]; available from <http://www.lunacynet.com/xfiles/>; INTERNET.

⁴ Gordon A. Craig, review of *The "Jewish Threat": Anti-Semitic Politics of the US Army* by Joseph W. Bendersky and *"Communazis": FBI Surveillance of German Emigré Writers* by Alexander Stephan, *The New York Review of Books* 48, no. (6 April 12, 2001) [newspaper online] [cited 16 August 2006]; available from http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=14165; INTERNET.

⁵ Delasara, *PopLit*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷ “The Unnatural,” *The X-Files*, written and directed by David Duchovny, original broadcast 25 April 1999, *The Complete Sixth Season*, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment 2002, DVD.

⁸ Other examples of literary allusions informing *The X-Files* include the following examples. In “José Chung’s from ‘Outer Space,’” the name “Kinbote” that the red, Ray-Harryhausen-styled alien shares with Vladimir Nabokov’s fictional novelist in *Pale Fire* (Lavery, Hage, and Cartwright, *Deny*, footnote. 20, p.14) merges high and low culture. So does giving the dorky UFO fanatic Blane the same last name as southern-Gothic writer William Faulkner, known for fictions as convoluted and mysterious as this episode.

In “2Shy” an Italian scholar evokes Danté and his *Divine Comedy* with the name Virgil Incanto: respectively, the guide of Danté’s personae and the verse form of the poem.

⁹ Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 15. See also Jane Tompkins, “The Reader in History,” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), 206-10.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth. “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), l. 49.

¹¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry,” ed. Perkins, *Romantic*, 1134, 1146, 1144.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1957), 103-05.

¹³ “José Chung’s ‘From Outer Space’,” *The X-Files*, written by Darin Morgan, directed by Rob Bowman, original broadcast 12 April 1996, *The Complete Third Season*, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001, DVD.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover, 1951), 97, 57, 95-101, 105-07. See also Tompkins, *Reader-Response*, 202-05.

¹⁵ Sydney, *Poetry*, 54.

¹⁶ Maxine Hong Kingston, “Eccentric Memories, a Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston,” interview with Maxine Hong Kingston by Paula Rabinowitz, in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, (Jackson, Mississippi: UP Mississippi, 1998), 67-76.

¹⁷ Johanna M. Smith, “What Is Psychoanalytic Criticism,” in *Frankenstein* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1992) 237-39.

¹⁸ See Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 195-202; Luce Irigaray, “This Sex which is Not One” and “When Our Lips Speak Together,” 203-210; and Julia Kristeva “Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature” and “Women’s Time,” 212-218, in *Modern Feminisms Political Literary Cultural*, ed. Maggie Humm (New York: Columbia UP, 1992).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things, An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, Vintage Books/Random House, 1973), 40, 40-42, 78, 80-81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹ Lee Heller, “*Frankenstein* and the Cultural Uses of Gothic,” in *Frankenstein*, ed. Johanna M. Smith, 328-29.

²² Douglas Lanier, Keynote Lecture: “Two Dimensional Bard,” Shakespeare and the Popular: Central Massachusetts Undergraduate Shakespeare Conference, April 23 2006, Worcester Polytechnical Institute, Worcester, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

²³ This point was raised by a student in my Film and Literature class at Worcester State College, Worcester, Massachusetts, Spring 2001.

²⁴ Plato, in *The Republic*, Book 2, trans. B. Jowett (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1942), 279-87. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 57, 35, 63, 95-101, 105-07.

²⁵ William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in *Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), ll.102-06.

²⁶ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 1985), 297.

²⁷ Don DeLillo, qtd. in Knight, *Conspiracy*, 232.

²⁸ Maxine Hong Kingston, "Talking with the Woman Warrior," interview with William Satake Blauvelt, in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston* (Jackson, Mississippi: UP Mississippi, 1998), 77.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1925), 140.

³⁰ Mack qtd. in Lavery, Hague, and Cartwright, *Deny*, 11.

³¹ David Adams Leeming, *The World of Myth* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 3-4.

³² *Beowulf*, trans. and ed. Burton Raffel (New York: Signet, 1963). For the song of creation, see lines 90-99. For one of the funeral descriptions, see Prologue, lines 26-52.

³³ Heller, "Cultural Uses," 325-29.

³⁴ For reverse colonization, see Stephen D. Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization," in *Dracula*, eds. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 462-70. For the "new woman," see footnote 1, page 86 in *Dracula*.

PART I:
MYTHOLOGIES

CHAPTER ONE

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF MULDER: READING *THE X-FILES* THROUGH THE CHRISTOLOGICAL LENS OF NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

AMY M. DONALDSON

“You’re not Christ. You’re not Prince Hamlet. You’re not even Ralph Nader.”
—Cigarette-Smoking Man to Mulder, “The Sixth Extinction II: Amor Fati”¹

Before Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code*, there was *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis’s powerful novel that includes a depiction of Jesus wed to Mary Magdalene and expecting a child by her. But the life that Brown attributes to Jesus, the common life of a husband and father, is no more than a tortured dream for Kazantzakis’s Christ and one that he must ultimately repudiate. It is his last great temptation: to walk away from the burden of the cross and adopt a simpler life, one of love, family, and obscurity. The tangible humanity of Kazantzakis’s Christ inspired a controversial film adaptation by Martin Scorsese, which, along with the novel, prompted a television version in an episode of *The X-Files*. Envisioned by David Duchovny and co-written with Chris Carter, this episode, “The Sixth Extinction II: Amor Fati” (7x04), places Fox Mulder on a cross of his own and parades before him the taunting images of a normal life. This messianic paradigm provides an insightful perspective on Mulder’s quest and its challenges, with lasting implications for his life choices and his interaction with the key figures in his life. But *The X-Files* uses this Christ as not only a template but also a foil, moving beyond Kazantzakis’s construct to inject its own unique message of the power of partnership and love.

Kazantzakis’s Christ

Kazantzakis’s novel opens not with an infancy narrative or a fully-developed Messiah but a Jesus who has yet to understand his calling and spends his days as a carpenter, building crosses for the Romans. Judas, a proponent for the Jews, appears on the scene early and, unable to comprehend how Jesus can participate

in the death of his own people, soon seeks Jesus' death. Through a long struggle for understanding and a quest that takes him into the desert and back again, Jesus gradually begins to realize his role as Messiah, earning the loyalty of Judas, Mary Magdalene, and the disciples along the way. Having survived the many temptations of his youth and the testing in the wilderness after his baptism, Jesus faces his greatest test in his final moments hanging on the cross. In the midst of his cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus receives an extended vision, guided by a guardian angel sent from the Father.² Led first to his wedding procession with Mary Magdalene, then to a long life of progeny and prosperity with both Mary of Bethany and her sister Martha, Jesus lives out the quiet life of a carpenter, the life his mother always wanted for her son. Although lulled into complacency by the angel, Jesus is later visited by his disciples, among them Judas, who reveals the angel's true identity as Satan. Jesus has been led astray, deceptively directed away from the cross and his destiny as the Savior of humanity. Once his eyes have been opened to this reality, he must make a choice, and he chooses to return to the cross, to his pain and suffering, and to his true calling—and in this choice he finds great joy.

For Kazantzakis, Christ was one of a series of savior figures in his life, and one whom he always respected as a paradigm of triumph in the great struggle between the spirit and the flesh. This struggle is at the heart of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and the story's very purpose:

This book was written because I wanted to offer a supreme model to the man who struggles; I wanted to show him that he must not fear pain, temptation or death—because all three can be conquered, all three have already been conquered.³

What Jesus represents is the utmost human challenge, that of releasing the divinity within from its earthly confines. In order to achieve this, he must prevail over the trials that affect the common man. The simple joys of home and family, symbolized by the female figures in Jesus' life, are his supreme temptation, the material force that threatens to weigh down his spiritual nature. On the other side stands Judas, calling him to fight for justice and elevating the liberation of the body over the state of the soul. While the Marys would make Jesus a husband and a father, Judas would make him a revolutionary. Jesus is drawn to explore both sides of his material existence, first preaching love as the great Bridegroom, then taking up the axe and storming Jerusalem. But in this Hegelian dialectic, swinging from one pole to the other, he finds his identity only by overcoming, or integrating, both aspects of the material world.⁴ Only then may he free the spirit within and ascend to a higher level of existence, not in the next world, but in this one.

The ethical calling of humanity, therefore, is to sacrifice the self for the greater good and to elevate the spiritual above the material.⁵ While Kazantzakis portrays Jesus as striving to be true to his divine nature and his heavenly Father, to free his divinity from its earthly bonds by rejecting temptation and embracing the cross, the primary focus is on Jesus' humanity. It is through his experience as a human who underwent real trials, pain, and suffering that Jesus is most present to us. He understands our challenges because he has already passed through them, and, in this, he sets an example for us.

That is why his suffering is so familiar to us; that is why we share it, and why his final victory seems to us so much our own future victory. That part of Christ's nature which was profoundly human helps us to understand him and love him and to pursue his Passion as though it were our own.... We struggle, we see him struggle also, and we find strength.⁶

Kazantzakis understood, however, that Christ's temptations must be genuine or he was not fully human.⁷ The hunger and desire that he felt must be real, truly enticing him to satiate his physical needs. Thus, the last temptation that Jesus encounters is extremely compelling and vivid, and one to which he almost succumbs. This, then, is the Christ that Kazantzakis presents in his novel, one who undergoes real conflict between the demands of his flesh and the higher calling of his spirit, is truly human in every sense, but always triumphs over sin.

This true humanity, and real temptation, was faithfully transmitted into the film version, and perhaps is one of the reasons that it stirred up such controversy. For Martin Scorsese, who had been searching for a vehicle to present a life of Christ, this book was so appealing because

Kazantzakis understood something that few have ever understood as keenly in a work of art, be it a novel or a film. He understood that Jesus must have felt as much of an obligation toward his own humanity—an obligation to fulfill his life as a man, in the way we all feel it—as he did toward his divinity.⁸

This same emphasis is what made the novel and the film so appealing to David Duchovny, who adopted the story as a template for the life and struggle of Fox Mulder:

That's what makes Christ so heartbreaking in that movie and in that book: his struggle is not only godlike, but also profoundly human. People ask, "when is Mulder going to get a personal life?" Well, this is the equation.... Mulder is a guy who's been given the same problem.... I wasn't saying Mulder is Christ; I'm not inflating Mulder. What I'm doing is using the very human model of Christ to make Mulder an everyman.⁹