



Jonathan L. Friedmann
Whittier College

B-Movies, Exploitation, and a Real-Life Monster Man

[1] In 1912, Rondo Hatton was the pride of Hillsborough High School. Leading the Tampa, Florida school to unprecedented success in football and track-and-field, few locals were unaware of this witty, charming young man. Like many other high school athletes, Rondo was a popular item among his female classmates, and made fast friends with much of the school. After graduating, Rondo gained notoriety for his service in the Mexican Border War, and was later transferred to France to fight in World War I. With his confident swagger and affable ways, Rondo was a hit among European women and a trusted soldier on the battlefield. Before long, however, his charmed life would take a turn for the worse.

[2] During a battle outside of Paris, Rondo breathed in an unsubstantiated amount of German mustard gas. He was hospitalized with damaged lungs, and soon afterwards developed acromegaly, a disorder of the pituitary gland military doctors erroneously attributed to the poison gas.¹ Rondo's handsome appearance gradually became grotesquely deformed. With protruding brow and jaw, enlarged hands, feet, nose, and mouth, and increased space between his teeth, Rondo went from outgoing and popular to being a homebody and social outcast.

[3] This tragic story in many ways appears a formulaic B-movie plot. On screen, this storyline would have included Rondo's inward transformation. A "monster" on the outside, he would have surely become a social menace, engaging in subversive and murderous activities. Indeed, in a culture still morbidly attracted to freak shows and "preoccupied with the threat of the different body,"² Rondo's disability had a destabilizing effect, blurring the boundary between human and animal, and inspiring (irrational) fears.³ For the real-life Rondo Hatton, however, this terrible transformation led to increased piety, humility, and generosity. A religious Christian, Rondo was spiritually equipped to cope with his deformities, and to maintain a sense of self-worth even in the face of insensitivity and exploitation.

[4] Rondo realized his unique looks were indeed suitable for the silver screen. Playing villainous bit parts in forgettable films of the 1930s, Rondo's first notable—and perhaps most tasteless—role was in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), where he appeared in an ugly man contest. In 1944,

Rondo played the Hoxton Creeper in *The Pearl of Death*, a Universal Sherlock Holmes film. A quintessential movie goon, Rondo's character was friendless, hapless, and willing to perform unspeakable acts for his master, Giles Conover.

[5] Reprising variations of this role in films like *Jungle Captive* (1945), *House of Horrors* (1946), and the *Brute Man* (1946), Rondo was by all accounts a pitiful actor during what is considered the low point of Universal Pictures' horror cycle. Describing Rondo's film efforts, cult film historian Danny Peary wrote: "He had no talent whatsoever and no ability to elicit sympathy for his characters, although you couldn't help feeling sorry for the actor himself."⁴

[6] To be sure, much of his lackluster acting stemmed from genuine incompetence. Still, Rondo was noticeably uncomfortable playing characters whose evil inclinations were based on his unfortunate appearance. After all, the studios made no distinction between Rondo Hatton the man and the characters he portrayed, dubbing him "the monster who needs no make up," and exploiting the idea that people with "monstrous" deformities were doomed to live in the margins of society.⁵ Cast tastelessly as back-breakers, stranglers, and other killers, Rondo's on screen persona contrasted sharply with his gentle and religious nature.

Endnotes:

¹ Fred Olen Ray, "Rondo Hatton: Monster Man," *Midnight Marquee*, 37 (1988): 90.

² Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 36.

³ Petra Kuppers, *Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 45.

⁴ Danny Peary, *Cult Movie Stars* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1991), 248.

⁵ Diane Long Hoeveler, "Frankenstein, Feminism, and Literary Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther H. Schor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54.