Victorian Freaks

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The Victorian Mummy-Fetish

H. Rider Haggard, Frank Aubrey, and the White Mummy

Kelly Hurley

She was so beautiful that I was wont to creep in hither with a lamp and gaze at her. . . . I learned to love that dead form, that shell which once had held a life that no more is. I would creep up to her and kiss her cold face.

—H. Rider Haggard, She

They were both very, very fair to look upon—he handsome as a god, she as beautiful as a goddess; but their faces were not flushed with the warm blood of youth or health, or even of life at all. They . . . were but dead automatons made to move and act by some occult power, as might persons walking in their sleep.

—Frank Aubrey, King of the Dead

Frank Aubrey’s *King of the Dead* (1903) describes a lost white race hidden away in the wilds of the Brazilian rainforest. The novel’s “Myrvonians,” encountered by a small band of English men and women, are the heirs of a civilization older and more advanced than that of ancient Egypt, and their mighty empire once stretched all across the Americas, from “what is now Alaska to Cape Horn.” The present-day Myrvonians are merely the pitiful “remnant of a once proud, dominant, conquering race,”1 though their leader, Lyostrah, a powerful scientist-magician, hints darkly that his people will once again issue forth from their jungle stronghold to conquer the countries of the world, England
among them. Subtitled “A Weird Romance” to underscore its indifference to realist narrative conventions, *King of the Dead* deploys many of the “weird” plot elements common to imperial Gothic fiction at the fin de siècle, including the discovery of a lost white civilization, the threatened invasion of England, occult science, cannibalism, and menacing indigenous flora and fauna. Most notably, *King of the Dead* features mummies. Millions of mummies lie preserved in the labyrinthine catacombs of the city’s necropolis, awaiting resurrection. These millions, the reader gradually learns, will make up Lyostrah’s conquering army once they have been revived by a combination of advanced electricity, “Will-force,” and dark magic, wielded by Lyostrah and his companion priestess, Alloyah. Even now dozens of resuscitated mummies roam the city by night, attacking unsuspecting citizens and cannibalizing their corpses.

As is the case in H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887), a clear influence for *King of the Dead*, Aubrey’s mummies have been immaculately preserved by a process of embalming that is now a lost art. “What impresses you most,” says a character who has visited the catacombs, “is the wonderfully life-like appearance of these mummies. They are not dried up, as are the mummies of Egypt. . . . The dead appear as though actually alive; they seem to be sleeping, or . . . temporarily stupefied.” Haggard’s novel also features a necropolis, a hollowed-out mountain within whose hundreds of caves are laid out the mummies of the long-extinct people of Kôr, a forgotten white race whose empire spread across Africa more than six thousand years ago. Their science of embalming was also far superior to that of the Egyptians, their probable descendants: “the flesh to all appearance was still flesh. . . . It was not shrunk or shrivelled, or even black and unsightly, like the flesh of Egyptian mummies, but plump and fair, and . . . perfect as on the day of death.”

The mummy is a recurring figure in British imperial Gothic fiction at the fin de siècle, when interest in Egyptian and other ancient cultures was being fueled by museum exhibits, popular lectures on art, archaeology, and history, and the increasing availability of “exotic” artifacts for private collection. Fictional mummies may be hideous and fearsome, like the “horrid, black, withered thing” brought back to life in Arthur Conan Doyle’s “Lot No. 249” (1892), or surpassingly beautiful, like Queen Tera in Bram Stoker’s *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903). They may serve as objects of necrophiliac sexual desire, as we see in the quote from *She* that began this essay, or they may arouse the acquisitive desire of a scholar-collector such as Professor Braddock in Fergus Hume’s *The Green
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Mummy (1908). When fictional mummies are resuscitated, they may be fallen in love with and even married, as happens at the conclusion of George Griffith’s The Romance of Golden Star (1897). Or the reanimated mummy may turn murderer and thus take its vengeance against British imperialist rapacity, like the eponymous mummy in Guy Boothby’s Pharos the Egyptian (1899).

The overdetermined figure of the mummy serves any number of symbolic functions in late-Victorian imperial Gothic fiction, but the mummy always recurs as an object disproportionately and irrationally infused with affect, desirability, portent—as a fetish-object, in other words. Both commodity fetish and sexual fetish, mummies are also fetishized as magical objects that are simultaneously embodied and disembodied, corporeal and transcendental. While this essay will be concerned with fin-de-siècle mummy fiction in general, I am particularly interested in the figure of the white mummy developed in She and King of the Dead, a figure that serves as an uncanny double for the late-Victorian subject in a process both fearsome and pleasurable. By entertaining the fantasy of the perfectly preserved mummy, both novels fetishize the beautiful white body, but not the body in all its materiality—rather a fantasy body that will never decay and thus is not truly corporeal in an important sense. Moreover, given the thousands upon thousands of flawless white corpses that rest in seeming suspended animation in the catacombs of their forgotten cities, the mummy can be said to symbolize not just the potential immortality of the (white) subject but also the potential immortality of the (white) empire. The mummy thus functions as a prophylactic against the possibility of racial extinction, an ongoing anxiety in “lost white civilization” novels such as Haggard’s and Aubrey’s, wherein dead or dying degenerate white empires serve as potential monitory doubles for the British empire.

The Mummy as Freak

Gothic monsters like the resuscitated mummy exist neither fully within nor entirely without the parameters of “the human,” and they violate other boundaries crucial within human culture, such as the boundary between life and death, or between natural and occult phenomena. Compare Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s discussion of nineteenth-century freak show exhibitions of anomalous humans such as “conjoined twins, the spectacularly deformed, the hirsute, the horned, the gigantic,
Freaks were thought to exist at the very limits of human identity and thereby to call into question what it meant to be a human subject in a human body. Of particular interest are the liminals: the indeterminately sexed; the “living skeletons”; the wild men, “missing links,” dog- and lion-faced boys, and others of ambiguous species identity. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, such freaks are seen as “intolerable” anomalies “whose existence imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life” and who “exist outside and in defiance of the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition.”

Elsewhere Garland-Thomson connects the “extraordinary” and admixed body of the freak to the strange monsters of mythology: “centaurs, griffins, satyrs, minotaurs, sphinxes, mermaids, and cyclopes,” whose composite forms “gesture towards other modes of being and confuse comforting distinctions between what is human and what is not.” The late-Victorian Gothic, too, is populated by phantasmatic liminals: “undead” figures such as the mummy and the vampire, shape- and sex-shifting entities, post-Darwinian species hybrids, devolutionary or otherwise transformative bodies that cannot hold their human shape. One can imagine a freak show front man hawking the fin-de-siècle Gothic: come read about the vampire-mummy, the beast-people, the beetle-woman, the fungus-man, the tentacled boy, the prehistoric survivals, the ape-man.

For the Victorians, mummies were also freakish by virtue of their exotic foreignness. On the one hand, “enfreakment” is the hypostasis of physical disability or difference into freakishness. The person who is legless, unusually hirsute, hermaphroditic, and so on, is subsumed within the totalizing identity of “freak.” But in the nineteenth century, enfreakment was also the hypostasis of racial and cultural difference into freakishness. Non-Europeans were exhibited side by side with, or at the same venues as, people who were physically anomalous, with both groups identified as freaks. Zulus, Central and North American Indians, Khoikhoi, and Bosjesmans might be dressed up and presented as wild men, missing links, species nondescripts, and survivors of lost races—or simply displayed to Londoners as weird ethnographic specimens. Ethnographic freak shows sought both to thrill their Victorian audiences and to educate them (nominally at least) about the customs and habits of the strange peoples at the far edges of the empire.

The Victorians tended to regard present-day non-Europeans contemptuously or condescendingly, as uncivilized barbarians, whereas
the ancient Egyptians were respected as a scientifically and culturally advanced people. Nonetheless, as imperial spectacle, ethnographic freak shows provide a useful context for the sensational Egyptian exhibits and events that were fashionable in England throughout the nineteenth century: the extravagant Valley of the Kings show in 1820; public unwrappings of mummies in the 1830s and 1840s; the Nile panorama at Egyptian Hall; popular lectures on ancient Egyptian culture and history; and museum displays of Egyptian mummies and other artifacts. Moreover, as the other essays in this section argue, the ethnographic freak show helped articulate Victorian racial and national identity in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, and this was no less true of the Egyptologist’s “freak show.” In the one case, Victorian audience members felt both complacent superiority to the “primitives” exhibited at the ethnographic freak show and discomfort at the thought of their evolutionary kinship, and thus likeness, and the “indistinct, elusive line that separates civilization from barbarism.” Similarly, while exhibits on ancient Egypt, with their bizarre animal-headed deities, scarabs, hieroglyphs, and mummies, seemed exotically strange to Londoners, they also served to remind the Victorians of the ephemerality of great imperial powers like their own.

The mummy in particular worked to mediate the British empire’s concern about its own mortality, as I will argue below. Already a freakishly “undead” figure—a corpse awaiting the resurrection promised by a half-comprehended, long-extinct religion—the mummy becomes further “enfreaked” when reanimated by Gothic fiction. To enfreak is to infuse an anomalous subject or phenomenon with affective frisson, just as the Gothic does by marking the anomaly as uncanny. Phenomena take on nonspecifiable, intense meaningfulness in excess of their own reality. This is also the strategy of fetishism.

**Fetishism**

The word *fetish* signifies an object, or parts or attributes of objects, which by virtue of association to sentiment, personality, or absorbing ideas, exert a charm . . . or at least produce a peculiar impression which is in no wise connected with the external appearance of the sign, symbol or fetish.

—Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*

In his important article series on fetishism, William Pietz discusses the
historical origins of this concept that would be developed in the nineteen-
teenth century by anthropology, economic theory, sexology, and psychoanalysis. The pidgin word fetisso derived from the Portuguese feitiço, alluding to the magical practices of the peasant classes in the late Middle Ages. The feitiço, as opposed to the idolo (a “freestanding statue representing a spiritual entity”), was an object worn close to the body, such as a charm or amulet, “which itself embodied an actual power resulting from the correct ritual combination of materials.” Unlike the idol, an object of worship, the feitiço had a more limited and specific instrumentality, being employed “to achieve a concrete, material effect.”

Thus feitiço alludes to an idiosyncratic and contingent practice of magic suited to the occasion (albeit subject to traditional ritual): to a religious practice that is flexible rather than idolatrous, and oriented toward the material rather than the transcendent.

Mary Pratt uses the phrase “contact zone” to describe the “space of colonial encounters” wherein geographically and culturally disparate peoples meet and “establish ongoing relations,” relations usually characterized by conflict and inequality. The concept of fetisso emerged in just such a contact zone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the West African coast, where first Portuguese then Dutch traders initiated commercial relations with various black African societies. Fetish discourse attempted to negotiate “the problematic of the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems.” That is, European merchants engaged in the exchange of commodities found themselves baffled by the markedly different economic, social, and religious values their new trade partners assigned to material objects. Black Africans were derided for their willingness to exchange gold for inexpensive “trifles” such as colored cloth and shells and for their general overvaluation of supposedly worthless items, for “just as blacks seemed to overestimate the economic value of trifles, so they were perceived to attribute religious value to trifling objects,” fetissos that often appeared to be chosen at random. During this early modern European encounter with extreme cultural difference, then, a period of crisis that revealed the “nonuniversality and constructedness of [European] social value,” the idea of the fetisso allowed Europeans to try to comprehend and engage with, as well as derogate and contain, an alien value system.

They themselves being subject to a protocapitalist overestimation and mystification of commodities, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans traders struggled to comprehend the mysteries of the thing,
whose value to one person or culture might seem incommensurate with its innate qualities. Pietz argues that “the discourse on fetishism represents the emerging articulation of a theoretical materialism” particular to modernity and at odds with existing philosophical systems.23 Within this nascent secular and antiplatonic tradition, objects appear in all their suchness, referring to nothing but themselves. But fetish discourse shows how the material object, however meaningless because of its intractable materiality, can nonetheless be infused with meaningfulness. The significance attributed to the object might be arbitrary and irrational, and human overinvestment in a mere thing might signal primitivism to the ethnologist, false consciousness to Karl Marx, perversion to the sexologist, neurosis to Sigmund Freud. But when they become fetishes, even mere things have a “shine” about them, to use Freud’s word from his 1927 essay on fetishism.24 Objects come to life when singled out by human need or desire.

For Marx, the unexpected liveliness of inert objects is yet another symptom of human beings’ estrangement from the products of their own labor and from one another under capitalism. In Capital (1867) he argues that straightforward “articles of utility” become fetishized commodities, taking on a “mystical” quality incommensurate with their use-value, when humans interact only through the exchange of products, not the sharing of labor. The “definite social relation between men” is displaced by “the fantastic form of a relation between things,”25 and things become more substantial, more evocative, than their human owners. Attending to the Gothic undertones in Marx, Nicholas Daly shows how the Victorian narrative of the reanimated mummy demonstrates the commodity’s uncanny ability to take on a life of its own, particularly in the consumer-driven economy of the later nineteenth century when commodities might be desired not because of their usefulness but because other consumers had marked them as desirable. In mummy love stories, Daly argues, “the relations of subjects and objects are problematized so that objects become subjects, and subjects come under the spell of objects.”26

Within mid- and late-Victorian anthropology, fetishism alluded to the religious practices of non-European “primitive” peoples who worshiped and made use of inanimate objects, plants, and animals thought to be invested with magical powers or properties. Fetishists were scorned for their naïve and superstitious relation to the natural world, their irrationality, and the arbitrary, unsystematic nature of their religious practices.27 The Amahagger in She (a hybrid, degenerate, cannibalistic
race descended from the people of Kôr) set fire to the mummy-corpse and use them as torches “to light up a savage fetish dance” where they dress up as and imitate animals, a ritual Holly describes as “fiendish,” “hideous,” and “grotesque.”

In *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, when van Huyn opens Queen Tera’s tomb, one of the Bedouins who accompanies him proves himself a fetishist by breaking off the mummy’s seven-fingered right hand “to use ... as an Amulet, or charm,” which his fellows “regard with special awe and reverence.” Van Huyn disapproves of these Bedouins as a “callous,” greedy, and superstitious lot. However, *Jewel* makes clear that Europeans are no less fetishistic than the “primitive” Arabs they deride. Trelawny displays the freakish mummy hand as the ultimate fetish object, assigning it pride of place within his magnificent collection: the hand rests upon a “cushion of cloth of gold as fine as silk,” which is nested within an intricately engraved case of crystal and gold, which in turn rests upon an “exquisite” alabaster table.

The European’s liability to fetishism was amply documented by nineteenth-century sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who understood fetishism as a form of obsessive sexual behavior. The libido becomes fixated on an object associated with a person (or with masculinity or femininity in general), which object then, inappropriately, itself becomes the focus of desire, “producing feelings of delight and even ecstasy.”

Like all sexual deviancies, fetishism was considered a degenerative practice, thus linking the European to the “primitive” subject as Marx’s model of commodity fetishism had done.

Freud’s subsequent work produced a much more singular definition of the fetish: “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (mother’s) phal]lus which the little boy once believed in and does not wish to forego.” In Freud fetishism represents an extreme and aberrant response to the always traumatic perception of sexual difference, when the little boy first catches sight of his mother’s genitals and discovers that she has been “castrated.” The discovery serves as a blow to his narcissism: both the narcissistic belief that he is the sole point of reference and everyone else is just like him, and the “narcissism which Nature has providentially attached to this particular organ,” since the boy fears that the father who castrated the mother might castrate him as well. If the trauma of the realization of difference is too great, the boy denies the mother’s castration and designates an object to serve as the nonexistent maternal phallus, investing it with libidinal affect. Often this object is determined by a “last impression received before the uncanny traumatic one”: underclothes, the foot or the shoe or the stocking glimpsed as the boy
peered up his mother’s dress, or velvet and fur, which “reproduce . . . the sight of the pubic hair which ought to have revealed the longed-for penis.”

Jacques Lacan has shown how “imagoes of the fragmented body” that recur in dreams—scenarios of the mutilation, dismemberment, and the dehiscence of the body—are terrifying because they disrupt the subject’s fantasy of itself as a coherency or gestalt. But for the (male) fetishist, the dismembered body part, rather than serving as a nightmarish reminder of the inchoate nature of the subject, signifies a more or less successful consolidation of the subject through containment of the difference of the Other. The fetish “remains as a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it.” But it is only partially successful, as Holly’s experiences with part-objects will demonstrate, because the fetish also hypostatizes the moment of trauma: “the horror of castration sets up a sort of permanent memorial to itself by creating this substitute.” When Holly picks up a perfectly preserved mummy foot in his sleeping chamber, he launches into a sentimental paean to femininity, imagining the foot’s owner as a harmless “blushing maid” and “perfect woman.” “Shapely little foot! Well might . . . the lips of nobles and of kings have been pressed upon its jewelled whiteness.” But when Holly’s first glimpse of the dread Ayesha is a disembodied “beautiful white hand” appearing through the curtains, he is “fill[ed] . . . with a nameless terror.”

As Garland-Thomson points out, in Freudian discourse women are naturally freakish (mutilated, castrated) because of their departure from a male norm. The putatively castrated woman becomes even more freakish when she is phantasmatically reinvested with the phallus, as is the case with Ayesha and still more clearly with Tera. Tera’s physical anomaly—the extra fingers on her right hand, which is the locus of her extraordinary powers—marks her as a “phallic woman,” one whose bodily excess both symbolizes and helps her to consolidate her inappropriately masculine potency. The snakes growing out of Medusa’s head, the sixth and seventh fingers on Tera’s hand: these phallic symbols out of place, these grotesque extrusions on the female body, hypostatize the fearsome possibilities of sexual liminality and sexual dissonance and render them monstrous, just as the enfreakment of the hermaphrodite renders them monstrous.

It is a “technical rule,” Freud reminds us in “Medusa’s Head,” that “a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration.” The phallic woman signifies castration simply because she is a woman, and already
castrated, but also because she is herself a castrator, and thus a figure of
terror to men. Ayesha murders Kallikrates with her supernatural powers
and threatens similarly to “blast” Holly and Leo when they anger her;
Tera places Trelawny in a coma and attempts to rip off his hand at the
wrist as her own was ripped off.40 Within Freud’s formulation, noethe-
less, the phallic woman is an oddly reassuring figure. The snakes on
Medusa’s head “serve actually as a mitigation of the horror [of castra-
tion], for they replace the penis, the absence of which is the cause of
the horror.”41 And indeed, when Perseus brandishes it as a weapon—as a
fetish—Medusa’s decapitated head greatly augments his masculine puis-
sance. Tera’s disembodied hand with its extra fingers is both a disquiet-
ing symbol of castration and a fetish-object which confers power and
thus comfortingly belies the possibility of castration. Fetishism substi-
tutes a phantasmatic but potent object for a lost one, or one whose loss
is threatened. Working from Freud, we can consider the ways in which
the fetish serves as a compensatory mechanism at the cultural as well as
psychosexual level. It compensates for a perceived lack, as I will discuss
below.

The (Im)Material Body

Trelawny is a fanatical collector: as his assistant, Corbeck, says,
when Trelawny “makes up his mind that he wants to find a particu-
lar thing, . . . he will follow it all over the world till he gets it.” Jewel
displays, if not outright disapproval, at least a certain uneasiness with
European tomb robbing and the systematic confiscation of artifacts. And
yet that uneasiness may stem from the overwhelming British fascination
with Egyptian culture no less than British exploitation of it. Corbeck
describes Egyptology as a madness, an addiction, and an obsession that
has absorbed his entire life and Trelawny’s as well.42 When Ross sits
among Trelawny’s Egyptian artifacts he seems to lose himself, becoming
overpowered by the mysterious atmosphere seemingly generated by the
collection itself. “There were so many ancient relics that unconsciously
one was taken back to strange lands and strange times. There were so
many mummies, or mummy objects . . . that one was unable to forget
the past. . . . More than once as I thought, the multitudinous presence
of the dead and the past took such hold on me that I caught myself
looking round fearfully, as though some strange personality or influence
was present. . . . All at once I sat up. I had become lost in an absorbing
reverie. The Egyptian smell had seemed to get on my nerves—on my memory—on my very will.”

As Pratt points out, “transculturation” works in both directions, unequal power dynamic notwithstanding. Both colonizer and colonized are transformed within the “contact zone” of imperial encounter, even more so when the contact zone begins to extend back “from the colonies to the metropolis.” The fruits of imperial conquest—knowledge about and artifacts from alien cultures—are returned to England itself, so that domestic subjects, too, might experience the shock of encounter with extreme cultural difference. In mummy fictions such as Jewel, “Lot No. 249,” and The Green Mummy, where English bedrooms and sitting rooms are crowded with “sepulchral ornaments,” scarabs, “brilliantly tinted mummy cases” full of their “embalmed dead,” and statues of animal-headed deities, “domestic space . . . is increasingly experienced as foreign; the present is increasingly infiltrated by what it has designated as archaic.”

Pietz argues that the fetish “not only originated from, but also remains specific to,” cross-cultural exchanges and negotiations. In general, we may see the Victorian mummy-fetish as symptomatic of dissonances within the British empire at home and abroad, including anxieties about the health of the empire, concerns about the legitimacy of its mission, and the narcissistic shock of the repeated encounter with radical cultural difference. (I will have more to say about this in the final section.) Pietz argues further that the various fetish discourses attribute to the fetish an ability to “create the illusion of a natural unity among heterogeneous things” and to seem to reconcile conflict or contradiction. For instance, in Freud the fetish compensates for the loss of a bodily organ, the mother’s phallus, that never existed in the first place. A tangible object is substituted for a phantasmic one, and the child simultaneously “retains th[e] belief” in the woman’s phallus and “gives it up.” Working from Pietz, Anne McClintock suggests that the fetish “marks a crisis in social meaning as the embodiment of an impossible irresolution. The contradiction is displaced onto and embodied in the fetish object, which is thus destined to recur with compulsive repetitiveness,” for fetishes “do not resolve conflicts in value but rather embody in one object the failure of resolution.”

What are the contradictions and crises that the late-Victorian mummy-fetish embodies and vainly attempts to resolve? First, like the commodities exchanged between the sixteenth-century Dutch and West Africans, the mummy illustrates the stubborn problem of translating
value across the gulf of cultural difference. Professor Braddock acquires the green mummy in order to unwrap it and “examine into the difference between the Egyptians and the Peruvians, with regard to the embalming of the dead,” and because the emeralds hidden in its casket will finance his life’s passion, Egyptological research. Don Pedro demands the mummy’s return because the Inca Caxas was his ancestor, “my own flesh and blood.” For him Braddock is engaged in the “desecrat[ion]” of a rich and deeply personal cultural heritage, while the scientist-scholar dismisses Don Pedro as irrational and “uncivilized.” Just as the reanimated mummy represents the commodity that holds its would-be possessor in thrall, as Daly argues, it is also an object of scholarship that comes to haunt its would-be investigator. Since Great Britain enjoyed the power to enforce its own system of valuation as the “correct” one, a vengeful mummy such as Boothby’s Pharos the Egyptian may be said to incarnate the bad conscience of empire, as well as enacting a kind of return of the oppressed. “Ah, my nineteenth-century friend, your father stole me from the land of my birth, . . . but beware, for retribution is pursuing you, and is even now close upon your heels.”

The mummy-fetish represents an attempt to come to terms with not only the new global culture but also a modern secular, scientific culture and its discontents. Rapid and continuous technological change had led to alienation and anomie, as Max Nordau argued in his famously cranky polemic Degeneration (1892), and Victorian science was maligned for having stripped away all mystery from “this prosaic age.” Evolution theory, geology, and paleontology in particular proved incompatible with traditional religious belief and offered no spiritual alternative in its stead. In The Place of Enchantment, Alex Owen describes late-Victorian occultism as a secular movement that nonetheless pursued “metaphysical quests, heterodox spiritual encounters, and occult experimentation, each of which seems to signal the desire for unorthodox numinous experience in a post-Darwinian age.” Rejecting the anthropological orthodoxy that science necessarily superseded religion in the evolution of cultures, late-Victorian occultists brought scientific methods to bear on their topic and argued that magical phenomena could be rationally demonstrated and validated. Mummy fiction also seeks “to mobilize a reworked notion of science in the name of the religion of the ancients,” imagining cultures in which science and thrilling magic are so seamlessly blended that they are indistinguishable from one another.

Ayesha appears both omniscient and immortal, can read minds and
“blast” her enemies with her bare hands, yet she insists that “there is no such thing as magic,” only “a knowledge of the secrets of Nature.”

Lyostrah shows his English friends “marvellous” devices that he admits might seem like “downright black magic,” and “yet they are merely developments of other lesser inventions and discoveries that are perfectly familiar to you,” like electricity and wireless telegraphy.

The Jewel of Seven Stars, David Glover argues, “is striking in its use of scientific discovery as a springboard for metaphysical conjecture, bringing questions of immortality or reincarnation into the world of radium and X-rays” and the most up-to-date Victorian sciences of mind.

Jewel explores both the magical nature of such phenomena as the human unconscious and the exciting possibility that ancient magic might be susceptible to factual explanation.

Most of all, science and magic are reconciled across the body of the mummy. The scientist-sorceress Ayesha, enswathed in her white wrappings, is like a beautiful living mummy. In She the myth of reincarnation is proven as sober fact when Leo meets his perfect double, his mumified ancestor Kallikrates. Lyostrah resuscitates the mummies from the necropolis using rays from a rare indigenous “lightning plant” and controls them through hypnosis. The mummy hand is “a central point or rallying place for the items or particles of [Tera's] astral body. That hand . . . could ensure her instantaneous presence in the flesh, and its equally rapid dissolution.” Trelawny, in fact, hopes that when Tera's mummy is resuscitated and her ancient wisdom brought to life in the modern West, she will reconcile all oppositions: she “can link together the Old and the New, Earth and Heaven, and yield to the known worlds of thought and physical existence the mystery of the Unknown.”

The mummy is an incarnate oxymoron: a decaying body preserved from decay. It speaks to the afterlife, to the prospect of immortality and the transcendence of the body. But the mummy is also a corpse—“the utmost of abjection,” as Julia Kristeva says. Pietz emphasizes the “untranscended” physicality of the fetish, relating this to a theoretical materialism characteristic of modernity. As I have argued elsewhere, late-Victorian materialist sciences, particularly the evolutionary sciences, described an “untranscended” human subject bound to the earth by the contingencies of natural selection, instinct, and the instability of the flesh. Thus the most difficult cultural work the mummy-fetish is asked to perform is to conjoin the human body, in all its ineluctable materiality, with the immaterial world of the spirit. Like the Freudian fetish, the mummy-fetish serves a compensatory function: in a secular
and post-Darwinian age it reinvests the human body, a body that has become a mere thing, with numinosity. Again like the Freudian fetish, which simultaneously acknowledges and denies the unwelcome “truth” of the mother’s castration, the mummy-fetish simultaneously acknowledges and denies the untranscended materiality of the human subject.

**Decline and Fall**

Kôr is fallen! No more shall the mighty feast in her halls, no more shall she rule the world, and her navies go out to commerce with the world. Kôr is fallen! and her mighty works and all the cities of Kôr, and all the harbours that she built and the canals that she made, are for the wolf and the owl and the wild swan, and the barbarian who comes after.

—H. Rider Haggard, *She*

Late-Victorian popular fiction charts a paradoxical anxiety about Great Britain’s imminent and inevitable decline during the decades when the empire was in fact at its height, solidifying its worldwide dominance. Such literature responded to and perhaps aggravated widespread concerns about late nineteenth-century British deficiencies, real and perceived: Britain’s loss of global economic ascendancy, its often fraught relationships with its colonies, its internal weakness due to social and cultural degeneration and decadence. In 1871 England was invaded and ignominiously defeated by the Prussians in Sir George Tomkyns Chesney’s best-selling *The Battle of Dorking*, and dozens more stories of England besieged by European powers were published in the wake of *Dorking’s* success. Stephen Arata has described the late-Victorian novel of “reverse colonization,” such as Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) or Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897), which depicts Britain as the target rather than the instigator of imperial aggression, in danger of “being overrun by ‘primitive’ forces” from “outside the civilized world.” Dystopian novels such as Richard Jefferies’s *After London* (1885) represent a future England that has imploded and relapsed into feudal barbarism. In Jefferies the capital city itself has become an abject necropolis, a vast, toxic swamp filled with chemical pollutants, sewage, and the decomposed remains of London’s unburied millions.

A corollary to these late-Victorian narratives of moribund England was an often morbid fascination with actual dead civilizations, especially
ancient Egypt. Amelia B. Edwards, famous for her public lectures and popular writings on archeology and Egyptian culture, describes Egypt as a city of the dead rather than a living nation in *Pharaohs, Fellahs and Explorers* (1891). “It has been aptly said that all Egypt is but the façade of an immense sepulchre.” Estimating that at least 731 million mummies were interred in the days of the Pharaohs, Edwards notes that “there are probably at this moment more ancient Egyptians under the soil of Egypt than there are living men and women above it.” The thousands of as-yet-unexcavated tombs and tumuli might make Egypt seem something like a “great museum” awaiting its British curators, but they also served as a melancholy reminder of the inevitable decline and fall of even the greatest civilization.

Novels such as *She* and *King of the Dead* also provide a somber meditation on the ephemerality of empires. “Time after time have nations, ay, and rich and strong nations, learned in the arts, been and passed away and been forgotten, so that no memory of them remains,” Ayesha tells Holly. The long-ago people of Kôr “conquered till none were left to conquer,” but they fell suddenly, to a catastrophic plague, and their massive state works have lain in silent ruins for six thousand years. Myrvonia was once a mighty empire, but it came to know “evil times. . . . Little by little they lost a province here, a territory there, until even their original country became overrun by invaders, and little was left to them save the memory of their former glory.” More pointedly, both of these white empires serve as potential monitory doubles for Great Britain. The citizens of Kôr were once a high-living, luxurious people, but the plague swept across their decadent empire and laid them low. The Myrvonians once boasted of their technological superiority and military dominance, but there came a shameful time when they could not retain their colonies or even safeguard their own borders.

In these two novels, however, the white mummy serves as a fetish object that compensates, or attempts to compensate, for the prospective decline and fall of the white empire. While both necropolises showcase the spectacle of mortality, they simultaneously deny mortality’s power. The thousands upon thousands of white mummies in Myrvonia and Kôr have defied death and decay. “Nearly all the bodies, so masterly was the art with which they had been treated, were as perfect as on the day of death thousands of years before.” This fantasy of a white body that is flawless and unchanging has its corollary in the fantasy of immortality, or near immortality: both Ayesha and Lyostrah have plumbed the secrets of nature and enjoy long life in undiminished youth and beauty.
In the catacombs of Myrvonia it is the city-state itself, the body of the empire, that seems to have been suspended in time. King of the Dead's mummies are grouped together in “natural” arrangements—scenes of kings holding court, citizens at work, and so forth—and sealed behind glass as if in a museum. Moreover, Myrvonia’s catacombs conceal a mighty living-dead army poised to conquer and rule, with its “soldiers, fully dressed, and equipped with complete arms and armour, standing in long rows, their officers beside them, as though on parade.” Lyostrah looks forward to a “Second Empire”: when he has succeeded in resuscitating the eight million dead of Myrvonia, “the ancient glories of this people shall be revived, [and] they will issue forth once more as a conquering nation, subduing everything and everybody that may stand in their way.”

But if the mummy-fetish represents an attempt to deny the corruption of the body and the fragility of empire, the repressed returns in both novels, in scenes of overwhelming body horror—iconic scenes of white enfreakment. Located beneath the catacombs of Kôr is an “enormous pit” full of heaped-up plague-corpses, imperfectly mummiﬁed by heat and time rather than human arts. “It was nothing but one vast charnel-house, being literally full of thousands of human skeletons, which lay piled up in an enormous gleaming pyramid, formed by the slipping down of the bodies at the apex as fresh ones were dropped in from above. Anything more appalling than this jumbled mass of the remains of a departed race I cannot imagine, and what made it even more dreadful was that in this dry air a considerable number of the bodies had simply become desiccated with the skin still on them, and now, fixed in every conceivable position, stared at us out of the mountain of bones, grotesquely horrible caricatures of humanity.” These mummies even get resuscitated in a way, for Holly disturbs a skull that “bring[s] an avalanche of other bones after it, till at last the whole pit rattled with their movement, even as though the skeletons were getting up to greet us.” In Holly’s dreams these corpses march across their “imperial home” in battle formation: “thousands and tens of thousands—in squadrons, companies, and armies—with the sunlight shining through their hollow ribs.” Meanwhile, King of the Dead’s reanimated mummies do not remain Lyostrah’s obedient subjects but begin to engage in “ghastly, hellish revelries” and sexual “debaucherries,” and to hunt the living citizens of Myrvonia, ripping their throats out and devouring them. “Every face was that of a corpse, save as to the eyes, which blazed with a ferocity more like that of a beast of prey than of a human being.
Blood... still dribbled from their chins on to their clothes."74 At this particular freak show, the white spectator comes face-to-face with itself, in uncanny semblance.

In Holly’s dream the multiplication of white mummy-corpses symbolizes not the potential immortality of the white empire but the nightmare of imperial decline. A “bodiless voice” accompanies the dead army’s progress across a deserted city, lamenting ceaselessly: “Fallen is Imperial Kôr!—fallen!—fallen!—fallen!”75 In King of the Dead the white mummy, far from succeeding in spiritualizing the material body, serves to collapse the figure of the European degenerate and the cannibal savage into one most grossly corporeal body, and to point toward the white subject’s liability to degeneration and even devolution. The interrelated fantasies of reanimation and reincarnation, of the immortality of the flesh and the undying glory of empire, cannot be sustained: they crumple under the weight of the body itself, in all its untranscended materiality.

Notes


3. Aubrey had already perfected this formula in The Devil-Tree of El Dorado: A Romance of British Guiana (1896) and A Queen of Atlantis: A Romance of the Caribbean Sea (1899).


12. The prevalence of such literary representations can be related to the rise of biological and sociomedical discourses such as evolutionism, degeneration theory, and sexology, which served to dismantle traditional notions of “the human” during the late nineteenth century. See Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).


16. See Daly, 95–102; Altick, 206, 244–46.

17. Altick, 287.


23. Ibid., 6.


26. Daly, 111.


32. Freud, 205.

33. Freud, 205, 207. However, Freud also acknowledges that it is “not . . . possible to ascertain the determination of every fetish.” The “selection of individual fetishes is in part conditioned by accidental circumstances” (207, 204), and, moreover, the libido is capable of cathecting any object.


35. Freud, 206.


38. Conveniently enough, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* associates the two things. Trelawny says that the first glimpse of the ruby cradled in Tera’s hand “struck me with a shock almost to momentary paralysis. I stood gazing on it . . . as though it were that fabled head of the Gorgon Medusa with the snakes in her hair, whose sight struck into stone those who beheld” (99).


40. Charles Bernheimer argues that Freud’s model of fetishism is particularly useful for discussing fin-de-siècle culture, not because of Freudian theory’s “claim to universality” and transhistorical relevance, but because castration was “the seminal fantasy of the decadent imagination,” arising from fin-de-siècle misogyny and sexual hysteria. See Bernheimer, “Fetishism and Decadence: Salome’s Severed Heads,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Apter and Pietz, 62.


42. Stoker, 69. As David Glover writes in his introduction to *Jewel*, “Egypt is treated as if it were some ominous state of mind, irresistibly taking hold of the lives of all who come into contact with it” (xiii).


44. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6. In the imperial Gothic, colonizers may experience transculturation as regression to a more primitive state, or “going native,” like Fleete in Rudyard Kipling’s “The Mark of the Beast” (1890). See Brantlinger, 229–30.


46. Daly, 100.
47. Pietz, “Fetish I,” 7, emphasis added.

48. Ibid., 9. Pietz explains further that for Marx, “the term was useful as a name for the power of a singular historical institution to fix personal consciousness in an objective illusion.” For sexologists such as Alfred Binet, “the origin of the fetishistic fixation was in the power of a singular personal event to structure desire” (9).

49. Freud, 206. Freud notes that a fetish “constructed out of two opposing ideas is capable of great tenacity” (209).

50. McClintock, 184.

51. Hume, 11, 167, 178, 166.


53. Stoker, 140.


55. Ibid., 8.

56. Haggard, 155.

57. Aubrey, King of the Dead, 41.


60. Stoker, 151–52, 184.


63. See Hurley, Gothic Body, especially 23–38.


68. Haggard, 83–84.

69. Aubrey, King of the Dead, 131.

70. Haggard, 187.

71. Aubrey, King of the Dead, 185, 135, 132.

72. Haggard, 184–85.

73. Ibid., 185, 210.

74. Aubrey, King of the Dead, 211, 220.

75. Haggard, 210, emphasis in original.