Deciphering Race

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The Perils of Certain English Prisoners” (1857), a Christmas story written collaboratively by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, differs quite dramatically in structure and ideology from Harriet Martineau’s The Hour and the Man. In stark contrast to Martineau’s revisionist biography, and more in line with Knox’s virulent, irrational, and ambivalent racism, Dickens and Collins’s Christmas story engages with racial conflict by addressing the contested boundaries distinguishing British subjects from various colonial “others.” Mid-Victorian arguments about race, especially in texts dealing explicitly with racial conflict, often center on the problem of reasserting clear and impermeable boundaries between people and ideas from different communities. Boundaries of gender, genre, class, nationality, authorship, and architecture become zones of anxiety in Dickens and Collins’s story, which struggles to resolve these crises in its resolution of the two plotlines.

“Perils” is set in 1744. A regiment of Marines arrives on the island of Silver Store in South America, having been ordered there to protect the British subjects from pirates in the area. Davis, the hero of the story, is an uneducated foundling. Self-described as “a subject of his Gracious Majesty King George of England, and a private in the Royal Marines” (“Perils,” 175), the rough and bitter Davis resents having to protect a group of affluent colonials. Early in the story, Davis meets Christian George King, a character the narrator describes as a “sambo”—half negro and half Indian. His name provides an ironic comparison between Davis, who becomes a proud subject of George II, and the first of the story’s villains, who has taken—and implicitly usurped—the monarch’s title as his name. Pirates
attack the British and take them captive, but the British eventually escape by raft. Christian George King is shot and killed, and after a description of the deaths of the pirates offstage and a picture of the future friendship of Davis and the heroine of the story, Marion Maryon, the tale ends.

The two villains in Dickens and Collin’s Christmas tale—the traitorous black servant Christian George King and the pirate captain Pedro Mendez—both violate the trust of a band of British colonials on the fictional island of Silver Store. Written as a response to the events of the recent Indian Rebellion, “Perils” suggests in its depictions of these two figures the anger and frustration felt by an English public reading accounts of atrocities committed especially against British women, many of whom, as Jenny Sharpe discusses in Allegories of Empire, turned out to be fictional themselves. Rather than engaging with events by writing a biographical study, as Martineau chose, or a “scientific” treatise, as Knox preferred, Dickens instead aestheticized the events of the rebellion in its totality, such that connections with the historical incidents remain allegorical and metaphorical. Rebellion represents an act of ideological and political transgression—it is a crossing of the lines of authority and order. The emphasis on boundaries evident in “Perils” speaks to its allegorical relationship to the historical events of the Indian Rebellion. In this chapter, I will first discuss the tale’s assertion of boundaries in its context, form, and content. Then, I will use this discussion to argue that the fate of each of the villains represents a differently conceived catharsis of cultural rage felt in response to transgressions of the imperial order, such as the Indian Rebellion. These historical transgressions are implied in challenges to social and physical boundaries within the tale. Christian George King is sent into the wilderness and killed with one clear shot, suggesting the Biblical scapegoat strategy of Christian theology. Pedro Mendez, a figure laden with the conflicted ideologies of Victorian racial discourse, is humiliated and abandoned, functioning in the text as a fetish, left unfinalized and metonymically referencing the complications inherent in the conflicted Gil Davis, the story’s hero. The dialectic created by the two resolutions disempowers the story’s potential catharsis, leaving this representation of Victorian racial anxiety unfinalized.

Dickens, Christmas, and the Christmas Tale

The formal and thematic parameters of the Christmas tale suggest predictable similarities between middle-class domestic ideals and social
boundary conflicts evident in mid-Victorian discussions of race. “Perils” both adheres to the formal requirements of this genre, which Dickens developed, and reflects the historical mutations that took place in Victorian celebrations of the holiday. The story first appeared in the 1857 Christmas edition of Dickens’s journal *Household Words*. After the success of Dickens’s first four Christmas books, the most famous of which is *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Dickens began writing an annual Christmas story for publication in his weekly magazine. The Christmas stories, according to critic Ruth Glancy, were “written between 1850 and 1867 for the Christmas numbers of his two weekly magazines, *Household Words* (1850–1859) and its successor *All the Year Round*.” They were “unique experiments in journalism for Christmas, written in collaboration with other writers and taking many forms from autobiographical essay to ghost story to comic monologue” (xxi). Like many of the Christmas tales, however, “Perils” does not specifically mention the holiday. Instead, the stories became part of the entertainment people provided their friends and relatives during the festivities (Carolan, 195). Rather than reflecting the celebration, the stories became integral components of the domestic holiday ritual. So not only does “Perils” represent Dickens’s, and to a certain extent Collins’s, attitudes toward the rebellion in allegorical and metaphorical form, but its relationship to the holiday for which the genre itself is named is ideologically reflective rather than realistic.

The popularity of the Christmas books and stories fostered Dickens’s legendary relationship to the holiday, and Glancy notes that this relationship was firmly in place by 1850 (xxi). In *Daily Life in Victorian England* (1996), Sally Mitchell argues that during the Victorian period the Christmas holiday underwent significant changes, producing what we would now call the modern Christmas (211). Because of Dickens’s relationship to the holiday celebration, he is often considered one of the major figures influencing these changes. Yet Katherine Carolan and Peter Ackroyd both dispute this idea: “What we now consider a ‘Dickens Christmas’ existed long before Dickens” (Carolan, 20). The Victorian Christmas acquired its “peculiar form,” argues Carolan, from its history as a holiday once legislated out of existence because of excesses practiced in its celebration. From 1644 to 1656, the Puritans officially banned Christmas. With the return of the monarchy, “Christmas was promptly reinstated but with some lack of its former vigor” (23). Carolan suggests that after this time, a sense of loss and nostalgia followed the season that “produced a national inferiority complex about Christmas, which extends from the Commonwealth to our own time. Christmas, the refrain runs, is
never what it used to be in the old days” (24). Within the Victorian Christmas celebration, this information suggests, is the shade of the older, richer, and more exuberant holiday only partly recovered after the Puritan suppression of the festival.

According to Carolan, Dickens brought to the holiday his own sense of what Victorian culture most needed: “Christmas becomes a touchstone of the communal spirit and charity Dickens found lacking in Victorian England” (7). “The attraction of Christmas,” Carolan writes, “is that it provides, if only momentarily, status and individual importance for the forgotten members of society” (17–18). Ackroyd suggests that Dickens emphasized the holiday’s “cosy conviviality” (413–14). Glancy argues more pointedly that the author’s goal in the Christmas stories was to convey his own particular brand of morality, as well as his own personal vision of Christian spiritual renewal (xxii). For Dickens, these critics suggest, the holiday was a time for personal and spiritual reflection, achievable through solitary contemplation, shared memories, and stories read aloud. Glancy suggests that Dickens was convinced that “personal or autobiographical story-telling was morally and spiritually renewing; in reliving childhood memories the adult storyteller can regain a sense of the wonderful that makes moral regeneration possible in a world full of regret and loss” (xxiv). Tied perhaps to his own feelings of loss deriving from hardships suffered in his early childhood, Dickens turned Christmas into a time of possibility, hope, and spiritual exploration; he transformed the holiday in his works into a chance to move beyond the limitations of personal circumstances, thus making possible a wider sense of peace and community.

It would seem ironic, then, that Dickens would choose a genre associated with reconciliation, reclamation, and “cosy conviviality” in which to dramatize the symbolic defeat of Indian sepoys. However, the plots of these Christmas tales draw a connection, in the rendering of strong ideological and architectural boundaries, between the domestic Christmas scene and middle-class Victorian concerns. And it is this ideology of idealized domestic harmony with which English colonials armed themselves as protection from contaminating racial influences when they left England. We saw this domestic ideal symbolized in the work of Robert Knox in repeated visual images of the English country house. Ackroyd observes that in the Christmas books and stories,

there is a constant contrast between warmth and cold, between the domestic interior and the noisome streets, between the rich and the poor, between the well and the ill, between the need for comfort and the anxiety
about hopelessness. And in that ambivalence he touched upon one of the
real spirits of the age. In many Victorian homes the exterior world seems
literally to be kept at bay by a whole artillery of protective forces—
screened by thick curtains and by lace inner curtains, muffled by patterned
wallpaper and patterned carpets, held off by settees and ottomans and
what-nots, mocked by wax fruit and wax candles, its metaphorical and lit-
eral darkness banished by lamps and chandeliers and candles. The central
idea is one of ferocious privacy, of shelter and segregation. (414)

Danger, in the Dickens Christmas tale, is symbolized by the actual or
threatened rupture of these crucial domestic boundaries, and it is here that
the genre becomes amenable to aestheticizing what would appear to be an
inappropriate topic for the Christmas number. If Christmas is about rein-
forcing the sanctity of the middle-class Victorian domestic sphere, an
arena most clearly represented by the figure of the English woman, what
better way to enact that project than by the symbolic defeat and humili-
ation of threatening, non-English, racialized villains.

Fictionalizing Race Rebellion

Dickens designed “Perils” as an allegorical rendering of his responses to the
1857 Indian Rebellion, and, more specifically, the Cawnpore Massacre.1
The Indian Rebellion, started by a group of Indian sepoys, began in May
1857. The British distributed Enfield rifles to the army, for which the ends
of the greased cartridges had to be bitten off before they could be loaded.
Yet the sepoys believed that the cartridges were greased with cow and pig
fat, and were thus an affront to their Hindu and Muslim beliefs. The idea
that they were being forced to commit religious sacrilege led them to rebel,
although the issue of the cartridges was simply the spark on longstanding
political and economic grievances. English officers, women, and children
were reported killed. Stories of sepoy atrocities reached the British press,
and the British public read daily reports of British martyrs. Especially dis-
turbing to British readers were tales of barbarous acts committed against
British women, such as the sale of Englishwomen in the streets of
Cawnpore and the bodies of women found in the Well at Cawnpore.2

Dickens reacted to these accounts with expressions of anger and geno-
cidal violence that startle readers more accustomed to his liberal critique
of slavery in America, and his obvious sympathy and identification with
the working classes in England. In particular, Dickens raged about Lord
Canning’s attempt to quell the revengeful bloodshed that the English soldiers unleashed against the Indians after the initial Rebellion. In a letter to Emile de la Rue on October 23, 1857, Dickens wrote:

I wish I were Commander in Chief over there! I would address that Oriental character which must be powerfully spoken to, in something like the following placard, which should be vigorously translated into all native dialects, “I, The Inimitable, holding this office of mine, and firmly believing that I hold it by the permission of Heaven and not by the appointment of Satan, have the honor to inform you Hindoo gentry that it is my intention, with all possible avoidance of unnecessary cruelty and with all merciful swiftness of execution, to exterminate the Race from the face of the earth, which disfigured the earth with the late abominable atrocities.”

(Dickens, Letters, 8:473)

Dickens makes similar statements in a letter to Angela Burdett Coutts dated October 4, 1857 (Letters, 8:459) and in his essay “The Noble Savage” (1853). And we see references to this rage in his last and unfinished novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870).

Although Dickens’s strong feelings led him to make the Rebellion the central focus of the 1857 Christmas number, in a letter to Mrs. Richard Watson on December 7, 1857, Dickens states clearly that he rejected the idea of directly fictionalizing the event: “I have been very busy with the Xmas Number of Household Words, in which I have endeavoured to commemorate the foremost of the great English qualities shewn in India, without laying the scene there, or making any vulgar association with real events or calamities. I believe it is rather a remarkable production, and will make a great noise” (Letters, 8:487). He struck on the idea of placing the events in South America, and he wrote to Henry Morley for historical background in order to make the story plausible (8:469). Dickens wanted to stay within the parameters of the possible, not fictionalizing the events so as to take them into the realm of fantasy. He needed a quasi-historical grounding to mirror feelings and attitudes about the Rebellion without being perceived as fictionalizing actual events.

Dickens’s decision to take the events out of India did not diminish the racial or imperial significance of the tale. As Brantlinger argues, “Dickens’s placement of his tale in West rather than East India does not provide the distance needed for considering the Mutiny dispassionately. Rather, it extends his view of the Mutiny to other parts of the Empire” (Rule, 207) and stands as yet another example of a white British author turning to the
aesthetic realm to manage and represent conflicting feelings about racial conflict. By taking the events out of the original context, the story transcends historical and geographical specificity to become part of the imperialist imaginary, effectively blanketing the length of the globe with polarized racial thinking. The villains in “Perils” mirror this extrapolation by becoming not just Indians, but a “multicultural” group of pirates representing many different nations around the globe. “Perils” presents Dickens and Collins’s decided determination that the English are the superior race at war with every anarchic, rebellious, and uncivilized race on the earth.

In form, “Perils” deviates from the standard construction of the yearly Christmas number. Generally, the tales contained an implicit storytelling component, which Glancy describes as “a neat format that would allow [Dickens] to blend tales, tellers and setting in the ancient story-telling manner of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or, particularly beloved by Dickens, *The Arabian Nights*” (xxii). Traditionally, according to Ackroyd, the numbers would be “a sequence of linked stories, written by several hands but with Dickens composing the transitional passages as well as some of the stories themselves” (599). They would emphasize the value of participating in community, as well as the indulgent or harmful qualities ensuing from a decision to withdraw into isolation.

Although “Perils” is not told as a series of tales, it remains within the Christmas story tradition as a work of collaborative writing, a partnership mirrored in the Lady Marion/Davis team that provides the framing narrative for the text. Wilkie Collins—Dickens’s collaborator on “Perils,” as well as on a number of other projects—had reading interests somewhat similar to Dickens in his early years, including *Robin Hood, Don Quixote*, the novels of Marryat, and *The Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* (Peters, 32). Steeped in a similar tradition of adventure stories, fantasy, and chivalric romances, Collins could draw upon a generic repertoire in keeping with that of Dickens. Collins, however, seemingly had—or at least developed—a more moderate view of the Indian race, at least by the time he wrote *The Moonstone* in 1868. As his biographer, Catherine Peters, argues, “[I]ndeed [the novel] is remarkable for its serious treatment of the Hindu faith, at a time when the violence of the Mutiny was still fresh in British memory” (309). The collaboration between the authors seems to have been genuine, with Dickens writing the first and third chapters to start, and Collins writing the middle chapter: “The Second chapter was done, on the perusal of my first and third, by Wilkie Collins. We planned it out, and it seems to me a very notable and happy piece of execution” (quoted in Glancy, 172). As Ackroyd points out, however—and this observation is true of many of
Dickens's literary and dramatic projects—Dickens probably exerted more control over the story than the idea of an equal partnership suggests.

Dickens and Collins's authorial dynamic is mirrored in the narrative presentation of authorship. Possibly in much the same way that Dickens designed, researched, and framed the story for Collins's participation, Lady Marion often disrupts the narrative to suggest a different direction. This tactic is evident only through Davis's interjections: "My lady stops me again, before I go any further, by laughing exactly in her old way and waving the feather of her pen at me." They then go on to debate a passage, discussing whether Lady Marion should "scratch it out" ("Perils," 175). Collins was concerned about being overshadowed and controlled by his friendship with Dickens. Although the relationship between the older man and the younger Collins was certainly beneficial to the young man's career, Peters describes Collins in the 1860s as beginning to ease "himself away from the Dickensian embrace" (281). "Perils" perhaps retains some of the tension inherent in this collaboration. The power differentiation between Lady Marion and Davis reflects the gulf between the firmly established literary giant Dickens and the younger Collins. The text inscribes directly the struggle—however playful and amicable—between Lady Marion and Davis in their debates about the direction of the story, but Lady Marion has the power of literacy, and thus the power to write down what she ultimately chooses. Although he did not edit Collins's contribution to the number, Dickens did create the genre, the story, and the narrative, and invited Collins to write the second chapter. He is the ultimate controlling authority over the text. Thus we must add to the growing collection of narrative, ideological, and spatial fissures within and around this text the element of authorial collaboration inside the story and in the shaping of its creation.

In this authorial tension, we see elements of gender and class contributing to the creation of a narrative deliberately structured to convey a certain tone or ideological stance toward races other than the English. My intention is not to prioritize these categories in any way, or to suggest a kind of progression from one to another. Instead, I agree with Anne McClintock, who argues in *Imperial Leather* that "race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence in and through relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways" (5, original italics). My argument is that an examination of the interdependence among race, class, and gender in "Perils" reveals sites of boundary tension that illustrate both an obsession with limits within Victorian culture, and an emphasis on
strict lines of demarcation within nationalist and imperialist ideologies. For example, the Indian Rebellion suggests an attempt of the colonized to fight back, perhaps challenging the boundaries between themselves and their oppressors. The challenge was met, however, with swift and sure force. In terms of the transgression of the colonizer into the territory of the colonized, however, the imperialist project argues the necessity of crossing into the world of the colonized, in order to bring in the supposed light of civilization and to derive economic benefits. The boundary markers nonetheless remain highly policed, largely to maintain the separation between British women and “native” men.

In “Perils,” the figure that bears the burden of Davis’s (and Dickens’s) prejudices is Christian George King. Davis hates Christian George King. From their first meeting, Davis conveys his loathing for both King and natives in general: “I have stated myself to be a man of no learning, and, if I entertain prejudices, I hope allowance may be made. I will now confess to one. It may be a right one or it may be a wrong one; but, I never did like Natives, except in the form of oysters” (“Perils,” 182). It is scarcely possible that King could be portrayed as more annoying, evil, sycophantic, or untrustworthy in the tale. King betrays the colonials to the pirates, and he is complicit in their being taken deep into the colonial territory, away from the comforting familiarity of the settlement. He is described as “a double dyed traitor, and a most infernal villain” (“Perils,” 193). An analysis of Dickens’s use of King as a scapegoat for public frustration over colonial unrest convincingly explains one-half of the dynamics of racial representation in the story. Lillian Nayder’s work on the displacement of class and gender distinctions onto race in “Perils” suggests this argument, but leaves out the second crucial component of this dynamic: the pirates. By looking more closely at the pirates—and more particularly, at the depiction of the pirate captain—we see that this story moves beyond the project of displacing class and gender distinctions onto those of race. The tale presents a complex mapping of nationalism, race, class, and gender differences onto the motley crew of the pirates, a transfer that becomes displaced again, first in the escape of Pedro Mendez, and finally in the preeminent moment of the text: the killing of Christian George King.

Pirates and Racial Otherness

From the point where they are first introduced into the narrative, the group of pirates is described, from the British perspective, as a startlingly
diverse collection of non-English people:

From a spy-hole, I could see the whole crowd of Pirates. There were Malays among them, Dutch, Maltese, Greeks, Sambos, Negroes, and Convict Englishmen from the West India Islands; among the last, him with one eye and the patch across the nose. There were some Portuguese, too, and a few Spaniards. The captain was a Portuguese; a little man with very large earrings under a very broad hat, and a great bright shawl twisted about his shoulders. They were all strongly armed, but like a boarding party, with pikes, swords, cutlasses, and axes. (“Perils,” 199–200)

Pirates represent the overlap of racial and national signifiers. They are usually an international grouping, and they represent lawlessness and transgression. In works of fiction, they are traditionally identified by their nationality rather than by their racial composition. The group in “Perils,” which later Dickens will describe as the “scum of all nations” (“Perils,” 247), represents in one brushstroke elements of “otherness” as fearful, dangerous, anarchic, and bent on the destruction of the British colonialists. They threaten the British subjects and they represent the rebellion of all those who should remain under the control of colonial authority.

Pirates were staple figures for the British reading public. Among the most popular works was A General History of Pirates, reputed to be written by an unknown Captain Charles Johnson. David Cordingly, in Under the Black Flag, traces a debate about the author of this famous treatise on pirates, in which authorship is variously given to the mysterious Captain Johnson and by others to Daniel Defoe. Collections such as A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates (1724) or a later revision of another of Captain Johnson’s works, Lives and Exploits of English Highwaymen, Pirates, & Robbers: Drawn from the Most Authentic Sources, by Capt. Charles Johnson. Revised and Continued to the Present Time by C. Whitehead, Esq. (1842), present individualized biographies of the most famous criminals such as Robin Hood and Blackbeard. These volumes went into multiple printings, and fed readers with stories of romantic and dangerous outlaws. In popular novels such as Sir Walter Scott’s The Pirate, first published in 1821, and The Pirate by Captain Frederick Marryat, first published in 1836, we find a more fully elaborated picture of the pirate world as it intersected with the lives of ordinary, more conventional characters. By using accounts of actual pirates, as well as fictional constructions of both pirates and pirate captains, we can locate the ways Dickens and Collins use the figure of the pirate to convey the
racial degeneracy of colonial “others” within the cultural climate raised by accounts of the Indian Rebellion.

After the initial battle, the pirates in “Perils” take the remaining colonists prisoner, forcing them to make a long journey first across to the mainland, and then into the jungle. The journey into the interior is a common facet of racial narratives, made most famous perhaps in the much later novella by Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899; 1902). The colonists enter the world of the racialized “others,” constructed as before time, and before history. The group is brought away from civilization, away from safety, and away from familiarity, subject to the whims of this eclectic group of racialized bandits. The prisoners arrive at a holding area deep within the vegetation of the mainland. The structure, called “The Palace,” is the destination reached after going by a number of enormous idols. Here, we have another of these ruin sites that I will discuss more fully in my final chapter. Miss Marion suggests that the structure is a place where there lived “a lost race of people . . . I believe we are close to the remains of one of those mysterious ruined cities which have long been supposed to exist in this part of the world” (“Perils,” 221). It is run-down, missing a roof in many places, retaining indicators of its former splendor, but with vegetation growing within the rooms. The structure is separated into different spaces where the prisoners and their captors all sleep. Here, we see the spatial realization of the crisis in boundaries that the story represents. Encroaching into the interior, domestic space of the palace is the exterior, natural world. Pirates from a variety of different races have free access to the living space of the English colonials, especially that of the women, thus triggering fears of miscegenation and rape. Potential transgression of the boundaries between the English and the pirates, and between the inside and the outside spaces, is made the height of the horror for this group of prisoners. The threat of ruptured boundaries—the breakdown of clear distinctions—is the result of the journey into the interior of the mainland and into the horror of racialized anarchy.

The depiction of the pirates in “Perils” becomes focused specifically on the pirate captain, Pedro Mendez, Collins’s villain and the story’s racialized fetish. His depiction focuses the anger, conflict, and fear created by racial pluralism (represented in the story as the pirates, and in English culture as the frequent eruptions of racial violence in British colonies) and creates a distraction or substitution for it. Both Christian George King and Pedro Mendez can be read as representing English racial hostility at the time of the Indian Rebellion. However, they each hold slightly different roles. Christian George King, the focal figure in the chapters written by Dickens,
becomes the vehicle for the author to vent his rage at his powerlessness in the face of accounts arriving from India. We see these reactions in the letters referred to earlier. The figure of Pedro Mendez is central in the story’s middle section, written by Collins. And, far more than Christian George King, it is Mendez who receives the most elaborate and extensive depiction in the story, thus perhaps suggesting Collins’s more psychologically and culturally complex reactions to the rebellion.

Scapegoat and Fetish

The scapegoat and the fetish have much in common. Both are physical objects that attempt to manage cultural, economic, and psychological anxieties. Both bear the burden of sins, fears, and conflicts held by an individual or a culture. The Biblical roots of the scapegoat speak to its origin in a community ritual based on a need to alleviate feelings of guilt. The Biblical scapegoat, described in the book of Leviticus, is actually two goats: the first is killed as atonement for sins, and the second is used as a vehicle for confession and then sent into the wilderness. In a figurative transition, the community symbolically transfers unacceptable transgressions onto the two goats, and then removes them from the community through death and geographical displacement.

The dialectic set up between these two different types of cultural purgation, as represented by the two goats, suggests a similarity with the internal dynamics of the fetish. The fetish is a concept that straddles the economic, colonial, and psychological realms in quite startling ways. In his exhaustive series of articles, William Pietz argues that the term “fetish” emerged out of conflicting epistemological structures resulting from sixteenth-century trade relations in West Africa: “The fetish, then, not only originated from, but remains specific to, the problematic of the social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems” (Pietz, (i) 7). It was in the colonial environment, in the confrontation between different value systems and understandings of causality, that the fetish emerged as a way to bridge differences between cultures. Later, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud developed the classic understandings of the fetish, speaking to different aspects of the complex structure. Marx used it as a way to describe the magical transformation of labor within the commodity to a universal standard capable of being understood in the process of capitalist exchange. Freud argued that the fetish is a stand-in for the boy’s perception of the mother’s
missing penis, thus allaying his castration anxiety. Both of these classic explanations have been retooled, especially in recent criticism, in an attempt to revise these compelling concepts in light of contemporary theoretical concerns.

Two important elements of the fetish are its essential materiality and its ability to hold a subject’s understanding and misunderstanding in dynamic interaction. Aligning myself with the historicized materialism of Pietz and the blend of materialism and psychoanalysis in McClintock’s work, I agree that the fetish represents the crisis precipitated when a subject or culture confronts that which is “other” to its epistemological framework. What is crucial for an analysis of Dickens and Collins’s Christmas story is that this crisis necessitates the deployment of figurative language to imaginatively manage the anxiety created in this confrontation. As I noted in the introduction, Hayden White argues that “Metaphors are crucially necessary when a culture or social group encounters phenomena that either elude or run afoul of normal expectations or quotidian experiences” (Tropics, 184). The Freudian boy witnesses the mother’s lack of penis and manages his castration anxiety by creating a substitute so as to disavow his difference from her. Capitalist culture abstracts differences in labor within the commodity so as to facilitate the process of exchange. Frantz Fanon, Hayden White, and Homi K. Bhabha describe the ways in which skin color becomes a visible fetish structuring the colonial environment, both valorizing white skin as definitively human and enabling the repressive practices of the colonizer against a colonized subject deemed both nonhuman and quintessentially loyal. All of these confrontations with “otherness,” racial, sexual, and geographical, suggest a commonality in the deflected responses of a subject to the perception of difference and point to the necessity of creating a compensatory structure, hierarchy, or reality as a managing strategy. There is an oscillation between the subject’s or community’s succumbing to the fiction that mirrors the oscillation at work within figurative structures—what Laura Mulvey calls the fetish’s ability to “maintain knowledge and belief simultaneously” (Mulvey, xi). This aspect the fetish and the scapegoat have in common. I argue, however, that they differ in the particular levels of closure achieved in their negotiation of what is “other” to the culture: the scapegoat represents a more finalized relationship to what is rejected by the community, whereas the fetish maintains the more ambivalent posture of disavowal. In figurative terms, the scapegoat leans towards a more metaphoric relationship, whereas the fetish tends towards the metonymic, although the latter can deploy both.

“Perils” presents both strategies for cultural catharsis, and thus speaks
to the text’s immersion in the social and racial conflicts experienced by many English readers in response to reports of the Indian Rebellion. The relationship here between historical events, Victorian representations of those events, and contemporary reading of this story is not a simple one. Rather, I suggest that the complexity of this relationship is exactly what contributes to producing the fetishistic and scapegoat effects evident in “Perils.” By articulating the zones of anxiety in the text, we can begin to decipher the representations of Christian George King as scapegoat and Pedro Mendez as fetish, and the ways in which the dialectic between the two ultimately impedes the ability of the text to achieve fictional catharsis.

The Fetish of the Pirate Captain

Individual pirates quickly recede into a multicultural mob, bowing in reverence to their leader. Mendez, the Pirate Captain, emerges at the intersection of the story’s presentation of economic, gender, and racial crises:

The ruler who held all the ruffians about us in subjection, was, judging by appearances, the very last man I should have picked out as likely to fill a place of power among any body of men, good or bad, under heaven. By nation, he was a Portuguese; and, by name, he was generally spoken of among his men as The Don. He was a little, active, weazen, monkey-faced man, dressed in the brightest colours and the finest made clothes I ever saw. (“Perils,” 204)

Fictional pirate captains tended to be a blend of good and bad qualities, strong and commanding, yet lacking a certain moral vigor. For example, the pirate captain of Scott’s The Pirate, Cleveland, is a sympathetic figure to a certain extent, his brutality and past explained by his economically disadvantaged childhood, his father’s life as a pirate, and his need to be able to survive among bloodthirsty pirate crews. He is described as “rather above the middle size, and formed handsomely as well as strongly” (Scott, 127). He never becomes as bad as he could, and there is always a glimmer of morality in him. He falls for the heroine of the novel, and vows to change his ways. But, much like a fallen woman, the pirate captain can never go back to live the life of a respectable man.

The pirate captain of Marryat’s The Pirate, Cain, is more traditional. He is strong, mean, ruthless, but with a weak spot for the boy, Francisco, for whom he will turn himself in to the authorities at the end of the novel:
“In person he was about six feet high, with a breadth of shoulders and of chest denoting the utmost of physical force which, perhaps, has ever been allotted to man. His features would have been handsome had they not been scarred with wounds; and, strange to say, his eye was mild and of a soft blue” (434).

Collins’s use of the terms “little” and “weazened” to describe Mendez suggests that the pirate captain of “Perils” will not be drawn from within the tradition of the dangerous yet powerful and attractive pirate captain, who at some point sacrifices himself to save another. Rather, Mendez is rendered thoroughly unlikable, vicious, and unattractive; he is potentially more in keeping with the actuality of the pirate captain, rather than the romantic fictional counterpart.

Clothing was a central element signifying pirate-captain status. It served to create a clear demarcation between pirate captains and more “legitimate” members of the business of trade. In “Perils,” Mendez is described as dressed in the following manner:

His three-cornered hat was smartly cocked on one side. His coat skirts were stiffened and stuck out, like the skirts of the dandies in the Mall in London. When the dance was given at the Island, I saw no such lace on any lady’s dress there as I saw on his cravat and ruffles. Round his neck he wore a thick gold chain, with a diamond cross hanging from it. His lean, wiry, brown fingers were covered with rings. Over his shoulders, and falling down in front to below his waist, he wore a sort of sling of broad scarlet cloth, embroidered with beads and little feathers, and holding, at the lower part, four loaded pistols, two on a side lying ready to either hand. (“Perils,” 204)

Marryat’s Cain certainly follows this pattern of the captain wearing colorful and dramatic attire. As with the description of Mendez, his costume blends together bright colors, stripes, and gold buttons, with the markers of violence—the pistols and the knife. Scott’s Cleveland mirrors the costume of Marryat’s Cain, although perhaps not quite so flamboyantly. Scott notes that it is the presentation of the visual excess that excites the admiration of the crew, and helps to ensure loyalty and servitude. By modeling the object of their actions, the captain stands as a kind of visual reminder of the promise of piracy: riches, finery, gold, jewels, and money. The captain is a figure of excess: excessive violence, excessive color, and excessive splendor.

But the association of Mendez with ladies’ lace, with dandies, and with feathers suggests an effeminacy that we do not see in other depictions of
the pirate captain. This effeminacy possibly suggests the way in which the authors mark this figure as a symbol of biologically and socially degenerative qualities, suggesting a kind of racialized emasculation more commonly associated with representations of “oriental” men. It also suggests a latent homosexuality in Mendez’s relationships with his crew. Contributing to this sense of veiled homoeroticism is the mysterious reason the pirates have for wanting to take the male prisoners further into the country. In a note to potential rescuers regarding their intentions towards the prisoners, Mendez writes that he is taking the women and children and several of the men for an unarticulated reason: “They will be taken up the country, with fourteen men prisoners (whose lives the Buccaneers have private reasons of their own for preserving)” (“Perils,” 207). Gill reflects on the question of what the pirates have in mind: “I wondered then, as I had wondered once or twice already, what those private reasons might be, which he had mentioned in his written paper, for sparing the lives of us male prisoners. I hoped he would refer to them now—but I was disappointed” (“Perils,” 212). There is certainly ample reason to believe that Davis thought the pirates wanted to sell them into white slavery, or to put them to work onboard ship. And we learn later that the pirates use the prisoners to prepare materials for rebuilding their home base. But the insistent emphasis on male physicality—coupled with Davis’s confusion—suggests an unspoken reference to possible sexual abuse of the men.

Cordingly argues that although pirates lived in single-sex environments, homosexuality was not more prevalent among pirate crews than it was in the larger population (101–3). In Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition, however, B. R. Burg argues, from limited primary sources, that men who chose life on pirate ships were quite possibly seeking out a single-sex, transgressive environment which included active homosexuality among the crew. Hans Turley, in Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash, further complicates the issue by arguing that the information we have on pirates blurs the line between fact and fiction, and thus we can only talk about the transgressive nature of the trope of the pirate, rather than the literal prevalence of homosexuality on pirate ships. But Turley also argues that homosexuality and strong affective bonds between men are part of fictional pirate subjectivity, albeit often cloaked, in literature dealing with pirates.

It is not my intention to suggest that Collins intended to directly portray homosexuality in the middle chapter of “Perils.” What I am arguing is that the authors render Mendez, the trope of the pirate captain, unlikeable and dangerous, in part by making him less traditionally masculine than other fictional pirate captains, and by suggesting a homoerotic component
in the “mysterious” and “private” reason that the pirates have for wanting to take away the men. What Collins’s depiction lacks is the strong masculinity and admirable presence attributed to Cain and Cleveland. Further evidence for this racialized emasculation is evident in the dismissive and deprecating tone of the pirate captain’s “foreign” way of communicating: “I got on my feet, and saw the Pirate Captain communicating with the Indians of the village. His hands were making signs in the fussy foreign way, all the time he was speaking” (“Perils,” 219–20). What blend in this description of the figure of the pirate captain are an intense and growing xenophobia and a need to dominate textually the figure of the pirate. Mendez is a much less ambivalently unlikable, unadmirable, and immoral figure than Marryat’s and Scott’s captains.

The degeneracy and ignorance of the crew, and of the “sambos” and “indians” who work with them, is suggested by their decision to follow so degraded a character. And, coupled with their dogged devotion to this figure, there is a certain underlying sense of physicality in their dealings with him:

His face was mere skin and bone, and one of his wrinkled cheeks had a blue scar running all across it, which drew up that part of his face, and showed his white shining teeth on that side of his mouth. An uglier, meaner, weaker, man-monkey to look at, I never saw; and yet there was not one of his crew, from his mate to his cabinboy, who did not obey him as if he had been the greatest monarch in the world. As for the Sambos, including especially that evil-minded scoundrel, Christian George King, they never went near him without seeming to want to roll before him on the ground, for the sake of winning the honour of having one of his little dancing-master’s feet set on their black bullock bodies. (“Perils,” 204)

As the passage ends, we see the interjection again of a kind of homoerotic and submissive physicality that becomes a point of specific interest for the British crew. The juxtaposition of the “dancing-master’s feet” with the “black bullock bodies” signifies Mendez’s dominance of the natives that suggests both their lack of judgment in following such a character, and the ability of Mendez to be eventually overcome. It is also reminiscent of Dickens’s words in “The Noble Savage” where he says that “I think a mere gent (which I take to be the lowest form of civilisation) better than a howling, whistling, clucking, stamping, jumping, tearing savage” (133).

The British soldiers have exactly the opposite response to the captain, as evidenced in their reaction to Mendez’s need to have a separate person
carry his guitar. Tom Packer, one of the British Marines, is horrified at this incident because he cannot believe that he is the prisoner of so uninspiring a man: “I can stand a good deal,” whispers Tom Packer to me, looking hard at the guitar; ‘but confound me, Davis, if it’s not a trifle too much to be taken prisoner by such a fellow as that!’” (“Perils,” 213). Unlike the pirates, the “sambos,” and the “indians,” the tried-and-true British men perceive weakness and a lack of true masculine identity in this figure.

If we take as a given that “masculinity (like femininity) is a relational construct, incomprehensible apart from the totality of gender relations; and that it is shaped in relation to men’s social power” (Roper and Tosh, 2), we can see that the crisis in masculinity attached to Mendez is part of a greater gender problematic in the story, which includes Maid Marion’s participation in battle, engagement with danger, and defense of nationalism. Marion’s transgression into the more masculine realm, however, is a requirement for the preservation of the British subjects, and thus suggests her heroism and her allegorical relationship to the trope of the brave British woman, as described by Sharpe, produced in Mutiny discourse at this time. In opposition, the derogatory painting of Mendez in the context of Victorian constructions of masculinity perhaps suggests an overlap with the overall racial ideology of the text. As Michael Roper and John Tosh argue, “Dominant ideologies of masculinity are also maintained through asserting their difference from—and superiority to—other races” (13). Racial superiority is represented here as a more traditional masculinity, whereby the male British subjects work with, support, and listen to the female members of the British group, but retain their own sense of British masculinity.

Failed Catharsis

Interestingly, rather than the angry, working-class Davis, it was Mendez that captured the hearts of audiences and readers. In the six versions of this story that “played in London and Brighton theatres in 1858,” it was “Collins’s flamboyant pirate captain, Mendez, stealing the leading role from Dickens’s modest marine, Gill Davis” (Glancy, 173). Mendez becomes the focus of reading and viewing pleasure, because the story constructs him as a compelling figure, startlingly attired, powerful, and transgressive. His role as fetish derives from this ability to deflect the reader from the true conflict at the heart of the text: Gill Davis’s divided loyalties, mended by Maid Maryon before the battle caused by Christian George
King, but nevertheless vulnerable. Davis’s realization of his liminal position regarding the silver on Silver Store leads him to an analysis of his subject position, and his role in offering his life for its protection. By drawing him into an ideology of nationalist identification, and forcing him to defend himself from a mob of racialized attackers, Davis (and the reader) is diverted from the real problem—class—and refocused on a new villain—Pedro Mendez. Mendez’s questionable relationship to Victorian ideals of masculinity only reinforces his power to draw the reader’s attention and encourage the reader to disavow the text’s true conflict.

The story attempts closure by moving away from the colonials’ rather anticlimactic escape from Mendez (he is left sleeping), and back into a direct engagement with the simplified figure of Christian George King. The group escape on rafts in the middle of the night and are eventually rescued by Captain Carton, Maryon’s future husband. It is Carton who spies Christian George King alone in the brush, and who kills him in what seems earmarked as the dramatic resolution to the story. We learn that it is Christian George King who has betrayed them by helping the pirates, thus valorizing Davis’s initial dislike of him. In the final pages, we learn of the events that took place offstage, including the defeat of the pirates. Thus, the climax is not a bloody battle where all the pirates are killed, but one clean shot killing the ultimately hated betrayer, Christian George King. The scapegoat—set up as a symbol of all the rage, betrayal, and hate pent up in the mind of the contemporary British reader steeped in accounts of the Indian Rebellion—is thus both found in the wilderness and killed in a clean moment of vindication.

But is it effective? As a moment of cultural catharsis, the final point in the story is actually a failure, because of the diffusive power of the middle chapter. In effect, Collins’s fetish, the easily deceived Mendez, remains unfinalized and thus inhibits the ability of the text to solve the problem of Davis’s class conflicts. At the end of the text, all of the traditional limits and boundaries remain in place: ‘Having proved his nobility,’ private Davis is rewarded—but not in the manner that we might expect. He is not promoted to the rank of sergeant; instead, he is transformed into a subservient ‘vassal,’ who pledges himself to his ‘lady,’ Miss Maryon, in chivalric fashion” (Nayder, 701). Davis does not marry Marion; he becomes her loyal servant in the way that is appropriate for his social standing. And this reassertion of authority is mirrored in the manner of the story’s production: “Unable to read or write, Davis needs the help of Lady Carton to tell his story; she puts his oral account of the pirate attack into writing. In this way, the regressive social ideal of ‘The Perils’ is inscribed in its narrative
form. In this double-voiced narrative, Lady Carton controls written language, the narrative's mode of production” (Nayder, 702).

But this reassertion of the dual narration—the dual manner of the text’s production—reaffirms that this story is about contested boundaries, limits, and fissures, as well as the inherent issues of power which exist in all of these areas. For this story presents a remarkable encapsulation of the complex system of forces that participated in the mid-Victorian construction of race. As we have seen, generic, spatial, authorial, ethnic, national, gender, and cultural fissures riddle this text and keep it from achieving the moment of catharsis that Dickens arguably sought when he first conceived of his tale of pirate adventure in Silver Store. Rather than providing a moment of closure, the reemergence of the dialogic nature of these categories after the death of Christian George King, represented metonymically in the fetishized figure of Pedro Mendez, undermines the power of the story to express an effective moment of xenophobic catharsis.

Moving from the overt fictionalizing of historical events evident in “Perils,” we turn now to a text that announces itself as an extreme representation of reality: the transcript of the Royal Commission’s inquiry in the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion. What we will find, however, is that even within this text, which consists of hundreds of pages of records of question and answer sessions held with numerous people in Jamaica in an attempt to recreate the events of the rebellion and discern Governor Edward Eyre’s guilt or innocence in the violent retribution, we find that the narrow line of questioning obscures the true economic and social motivations for the uprising. Even within a genre so overtly focused on transmitting facts, we find that the parameters of the discourse deflect the reader from a direct engagement with the events. The ambivalence and conflicted nature of white British engagement with racial conflict, and the recourse to the comfortable solace of generic requirements, survive even this extreme example of empirical inquiry.