

Red Slippers: The 'Detection' of Foreign Evil and the Celebration of Domestic Tradition

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Critics have habitually seen in the evil Dr Roylott a product of 'Orientalisation'. In Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band' (1892), he is attributed a variety of Eastern traits and motives that signal his contamination through exposure to the malevolent influence of the colonies. As a threat from the outside, Dr Roylott must be removed by Sherlock Holmes to preserve the superior social integrity of England. A notably different creative expression of East-West engagement is provided by John Frederick Lewis's 1856 watercolour A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Sinai, 1842. Although clearly 'Orientalised', the painting's original patron, Lord Castlereagh, presides over a harmony of cultures, complacently upholding the older traditions of a structured society. When reread in consideration of this painting, 'The Speckled Band' offers an alternative impression. Rather than a victim of physical and moral disease from the tropics, Dr Roylott is exposed as an indigenous danger, a home-grown threat to the society and traditions that are his responsibility. The cultural markers that conflate him with Western ideas of the pernicious East become transparent and anaemic. By killing Dr Roylott, Holmes transforms from a defender of the domestic status quo to a metaphorical agent of social transformation.

Considered by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to be his best story, 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band' (1892) was originally published in *The Strand Magazine* and included later that year as one of twelve entries in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.¹ In this tale, intrigued by a mysterious death, Holmes suspects Dr Grimesby Roylott of plotting the murder of his stepdaughter in order to retain control of her inheritance. By the application of the process that he identifies as 'the science of deduction and analysis', Holmes uncovers the plan of Dr Roylott to kill his stepdaughter in her sleep through the bite of a poisonous viper.² Thanks to Holmes, the snake is intercepted and repelled, killing Dr Roylott in a confusion of 'snakish temper'.³

An early contribution to the Holmes canon, this adventure displays one of the recurrent attributes that broadly mark the collection of novellas and short stories: the theme of social disruption and disorder caused by the introduction of the foreign into domestic British culture. The prevalence of this theme in the Sherlock Holmes tales, appearing in at least two-thirds of the fifty-six stories per Diane Simmons, is critically viewed as a consequence of empire, a fear that the order and moral structure that was hopefully exported to the wider world would be repaid with native furore and violence.⁴ As Laura Otis notes: 'Imperialism, the product of European aggression had rendered Europe

¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band', in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp.257-273. (Hereafter 'The Speckled Band').

² *Ibid.*, p.23.

³ *Ibid.*, p.273.

⁴ Diane Simmons, *The Narcissism of Empire* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2007), p.70.

porous'.⁵ Britain, now vulnerable to the peoples, practices, and principles of the colonised, became fearful 'that the empire sometimes bites back' observes S C Harris.⁶ Just as opium was considered a form of eastern contagion that infected the physical bodies and minds of the British populace, the colonies came to be seen as a source of social as well as medical contamination. As Michael Gillespie highlights, this infection of the body politic, a dreaded reverse colonisation, became a staple in the public imagination through sensationalist newspapers and the popularity of 'invasion literature' and the 'imperial gothic'.⁷ As reiterated by Lauren Raheja, foreign source drugs, toxins, and infectious agents became metaphorical representations of the physical, moral, and cultural contamination possible in the colonies.⁸ Facilitated by the miasma theory that remained potent in European scientific practice, physical presence in the East was associated with essential change to the Western visitor. Even the narrator, Dr Watson, on first meeting Holmes is sun-darkened and haggard, weak from enteric fever and stiff from a wound inflicted by a Jezail bullet.⁹ Watson, observes Amber Gaudet, like Victorian Britain, has been 'pierced by the foreign' and is forever changed.¹⁰

The murderous Dr Roylott is frequently presented as a critical example of the contaminating influence of the East.¹¹ Born into genteel poverty, he achieves a medical degree and boldly sojourns to Calcutta where he

establishes a large and successful practice through the application of professional skill and force of character. But his position as an exemplar of Western science and culture crumbles when he is imprisoned over the killing of his native butler in a fit of anger. His stepdaughter believes that his 'long residence in the tropics' was an adversely stimulating experience; to this she attributes his recent ferocious quarrels with his Surrey neighbours and, by implication, the murder of the Indian butler.¹² Shut up in Stoke Moran in his dilapidated family home and unable to retain any servant, the troubled and troublesome Dr Roylott is presented as a savage, degenerate version of the once ambitious and capable physician who ventured to India.

A review of John Frederick Lewis's 1856 watercolour quite specifically entitled *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Mount Sinai, 1842* (Figure 1; hereafter *A Frank Encampment*) provides an alternative opportunity for assessing the creative representation of an engagement of East and West during this era. The painting was commissioned by Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh, in 1842 as a memorialisation of his Oriental tour of that year. However, the painting was not fully executed until 1856, by which time the original patron had quite reasonably lost interest, if not patience. The work represents, in the assessment of Christine Riding, a 'conflation of genre painting,

⁵ Laura Otis, 'The Empire Bites Back: Sherlock Holmes as an Imperial Immune System', *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature*, 22:1 (1998), 4 (p.4).

⁶ S C Harris, 'Pathological Possibilities: Contagion and Empire in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Stories', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31:2 (2003), 447-466 (p.452).

⁷ Michael Gillespie, 'Sherlock Holmes, Crime and the Anxieties of Globalisation', *Critical Review*, 23 (2001), 449-474 (p.462).

⁸ Lauren Raheja, 'Anxieties of Empire in Doyle's Tales of Sherlock Holmes', *Nature, Society and Thought*, 19:4 (2006), 417-426 (p.425).

⁹ Doyle, pp.16, 24.

¹⁰ Amber Gaudet, 'Orientalism and the Construction of Victorian Identity in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Series', *Sigma Tau Delta*, 96 (2021), 146-153 (p.151).

¹¹ See for example: S.C. Harris, Sempo Rassi, and Simon Workman.

¹² Doyle, p.260.



Figure 1: John Frederick Lewis, *A Frank Encampment in the Desert of Sinai*, 1842, 1856, watercolour, gouache, and graphite on paper mounted on board, 66.7 x 135.9 cm, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, Connecticut.

portraiture and performance'.¹³ Set in the Egyptian desert near the ancient monastery of St. Catherine, this work presents a flattened pyramidal structure that is centred on the rigid upright figure of the Arab guide Sheik Hussein of Gebel Tor, whose red clothing boldly contrasts with the lighter surrounding sand and rock. While Sheik Hussein commands the summit of the arrangement, accentuated by the peaked backdrop of Mount Sinai, the dominant authority resides unusually but unambiguously to the lower right in the reclining figure of Lord Castlereagh. The British traveller, writer, and politician, although comprehensively and exuberantly attired in local dress, can be easily identified by following the attentive gaze of the other figures. Nicholas Tromans observes that Lord Castlereagh, supine on ornate rugs and cushioned with plush pillows, is positioned in a reversal of the more traditional placement of the European 'approaching with trepidation the peripatetic court of the Oriental potentate'.¹⁴ Surrounded by aides, guides, and servants of diverse race and colour, Castlereagh appears in the judgement of John Ruskin as 'quiet, delicate, and firm', qualities that easily comport with Western ideas of both the remote Eastern ruler and the attentive English squire.¹⁵ Tromans notes that Castlereagh's 'composure is absolute' and reiterates the 'complacency' that contemporary critics attributed to his depiction.¹⁶ A tranquillity of position and purpose lies beneath the domestic bustle of routine, a stark contrast

to the disturbing condition of Dr Roylott and his household.

'The Speckled Band' symbolically marks Dr Roylott's devolution by providing him with clear connections to the East, inviting readers to make Sherlockian inferences concerning the 'moral and mental aspects of the matter'.¹⁷ 'His face', we are told, is 'seared with a thousand wrinkles [and] burned yellow with the sun' despite his absence from the Indian climate for almost a decade.¹⁸ The implausible permanence of these physical effects operates to signal what Yumna Siddiqi sees as an elemental and indelible moral alteration in body, passion, and intellect.¹⁹ This Victorian logic equates, in the fashion of Dorian Gray's picture, damaged skin to a damaged soul. The literary and mythological capacities of Holmes's deductions, approximating the expectations of a newly 'scientific' society, seem to offer an illusion of credibility to this exercise.

The text also reveals that Dr Roylott wears 'red heelless Turkish slippers' and smokes 'strong Indian cigars'.²⁰ This assumption of native dress and habit was customarily considered scandalous; 'going native' confused the boundary between European and native identity notes Siddiqi, and threatened to disrupt the distinctions that predicate colonial rule.²¹ Dr Roylott therefore risks not just the stability of his own identity but threatens to expose the

¹³ Christine Riding, 'Travellers and Sitters: The Orientalist Portrait', in *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, ed. by Nicholas Tromans (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), pp.48-75 (p. 53).

¹⁴ Nicholas Tromans, 'The Orient in Perspective' in *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, ed. by Nicholas Tromans (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), pp.102-125 (p. 107).

¹⁵ John Ruskin, *Notes on Some of the Principal Pictures Exhibited in the Rooms of the Royal Academy and the Society of Painters in Watercolours No II, 1856* (London: Smith, Elder and Company, 1856), p.42.

¹⁶ Tromans, p.107.

¹⁷ Doyle, p.23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.264.

¹⁹ Yumna Siddiqi, 'The Cesspool of Empire: Sherlock Holmes and the Return of the Repressed', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), 233-247 (p.241).

²⁰ Doyle, pp.272, 261.

²¹ Siddiqi, p.239.

fragility of the divide between the coloniser and the colonised. 'The illusion of a homogeneous white race, affluent, powerful, [and] impeccable' allows for no exceptions.²² By this logic, Dr Roylott's moral demise presents a risk well beyond his own person. In contrast, Lewis's portrayal of Lord Castlereagh provides a vision of propriety even though the viscount is completely arrayed in Oriental costume. The colours, textures, and design of his attire, as well as the rugs, cushions, and delicately decorated tent, provide a testament to the beauty and culture supported by traditional craftsmanship. According to John MacKenzie, this artistry harkens back to an age before the 'industrial techniques of mass production' began to churn out artefacts 'of a shoddy uniformity'.²³ In this case, the Orient represents a contemporary version of a way of life lost to Britain through industrial 'advances'.

A similar difference is detectible in the smoking habits attributed to the Lord Castlereagh and Dr Roylott. As David Grylls notes: 'smoking was frequently used [...] as a mode of sexual implication, employing tropes and character types that simplified social reality and functioned as a kind of code'.²⁴ Although these codes may be complicated and irregular, the cigar is generally identified with hedonism and sexual transgression, bringing to mind the glowing red tip of Alec D'Urberville's cigar in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Alternatively, the pipe carries a more 'stolid and traditional' connotation.²⁵ 'For the British particularly' observes MacKenzie, 'the pipe

became a symbol of reflection, solidity, repose after action'.²⁶ Thusly encoded, Lord Castlereagh's pipe enhances his 'complacency' and grounds him within tradition.

Against tradition, Doyle's Dr Roylott 'has a passion for Indian animals', allowing a cheetah and a baboon to freely wander the remains of his property.²⁷ The local villagers fear these exotic creatures almost as much as their master, equating Dr Roylott with these alien beasts. As such, he is imaginatively moved into the realm of the brute, a monstrous stranger that represents the conflation of the criminal and the foreigner. It is not lost on readers that Holmes is frequently framed as a big game hunter, with the criminal posed as animal.²⁸ It appears irrelevant to the task of creating fictional frisson that baboons are not Indian animals but derive from Africa. Likewise, the murderous instrument of the tale, a deadly 'swamp adder' whose venom kills in ten seconds, appears to be wholly contrived. In a tale that celebrates the value of detailed accuracy, it appears that zoological authenticity is not required, simply a trespassing from the domestically familiar into the realm of the frightening 'other'. In contrast, the domesticated camels in *A Frank Encampment* are benign and act as expressions of purposefulness; notably, they mimic the Arab guides by seeming to look to Lord Castlereagh for governance. Additionally, the rabbits, ducks, and gamebirds resting in the picture's foreground have a decidedly British familiarity. Even the gazelle conjures memories of the time-honoured hunt, a

²² Siddiqi, p.240.

²³ John MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 106.

²⁴ David Grylls, 'Smoke Signals', *English*, 55:211 (2006), 15-35 (p.32).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁶ MacKenzie, p.62.

²⁷ Doyle, p.260.

²⁸ Sempo Rassi, 'Tigers in the Fog: The Foreign in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes Adventures', (unpublished master's thesis, University of Helsinki, 2013), pp.20, 21.

distinctly masculine activity and ‘the favoured pastime of European royalty [and] aristocracy’.²⁹

Meeting with Holmes and Watson, Dr Roylott’s stepdaughter additionally imparts that vagabond gypsies are allowed to encamp on the shabby remains of the estate, with Dr Roylott sometimes ‘accept[ing] the hospitality of their tents, wandering away with them sometimes for weeks on end’.³⁰ His close affiliation with people whose origin was then uncertain adds significantly to his unconventionality. Readers may attribute to him an aimlessness and lack of purpose that was commonly associated with ‘lazy’ foreigners. But his ‘wandering’ carries further implications of divergence and freedom from norms and restrictions. Even more scandalous is the report that Dr Roylott shares the gypsy tents. Such an assertion hints at the sexual license that was habitually attributed to ‘Orientals’ by popular ‘sensation’ literature and certain ‘Orientalist’ paintings. Dr Roylott wanders physically from his home and responsibilities but wanders further from the moral tenets and behaviours that signify membership in domestic Victorian respectability. Meanwhile, Lord Castlereagh suffers no indignity by association with the Oriental members of his depicted entourage. As guides, their presence demonstrates purpose and direction, dispelling notions of aimless wandering. Additionally, their attention to the person of Lord Castlereagh signifies a personal commitment, an echo of ancient personal loyalties pledged to a man rather than a factory, mill, or organisation. This ‘quasi-feudal past of personal relationship’ is set against the ‘urban

squalor, [...] mass demoralisation, [and] social discontents’ of Victorian Britain.³¹

In ‘The Speckled Band’, the Eastern associations of Dr Roylott are further accentuated through the dilapidation of his estate. The bramble-covered grounds, broken windows, and partially caved-in roof invoke the notion of Stoke Moran as a part of the East. As Linda Nochlin provides, it was a familiar topoi of Western artistic representation that the Orient was a culture in decline, a land of ‘lazy, slothful, and childlike [people that] let their own cultural treasures sink into decay’.³² By neglecting his birthright, Dr Roylott symbolically participates in this association and removes a bit of Surrey to an imagined Orient. Again, reference to *A Frank Encampment* offers a disparate symbolic meaning. The painting’s desert scene, rather than a site of barren neglect, offers a vision of unadorned natural purity. In contrast to the secular squalor of industrialisation, the desert registers ‘the biblical resonances of retreat for spiritual renewal, the restoration of courage and purpose’ as identified by MacKenzie.³³ The background of this painting is also of symbolic importance; at the base of revered Mount Sinai is visible the ancient Christian monastery of St Catherine. At the time of the painting’s creation, this religious compound had been occupied for over a millennium, home to the world’s oldest continually operating library. The pictorial presence of this ancient site enhances the scene’s sense of timelessness and continuity in an era of rapid technological and social change. This sense of stability and rectitude reflects on the traditional encampment and its members, both Oriental and Occidental.

²⁹ MacKenzie, p.56.

³⁰ Doyle, p.260.

³¹ MacKenzie, p.59.

³² Linda Nochlin, ‘The Imaginary Orient’, in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, ed. by Linda Nochlin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), pp.33-57 (p.55).

³³ MacKenzie, p.59.

As shown, the nature of relations between East and West as presented in 'The Speckled Band' and *A Frank Encampment* are significantly divergent. For example, the coded markers that Doyle attaches to the character Dr Roylott depend for their effect on forces identified in Edward Said's binary theory of Orientalism. Per this proposal, the same Western technological and military superiority that facilitated imperial dominance is facilitative of a discourse that shapes and limits Western conceptions of the East. By creating and maintaining a strategy of 'positional superiority', the Orient is appropriated by the Occidental, posits Said, 'to be turned into a structure of myth, prefabricated for Western use'.³⁴ ³⁵ This master narrative depends on a process of 'essentialisation', the reduction of Orientals to prescribed essences that become stereotypes with time and familiarity. These foreign 'essentials' are then utilised as referents in order to stress the contrast, difference, and necessarily the superiority of Westerners. It is through this process that Dr Roylott is identifiable as antithetical to domestic conventions; his red Turkish slippers and exotic menagerie are recognisable codes that position him on the 'other' side of the East-West binary divide. Conversely, the relationship presented in *A Frank Encampment* is not oppositional, but sympathetic. The harmony of integrated collaboration, guided and proscribed by a recognisable and respected social structure, seem to eliminate the oppositional chasm of Said's theory; binary certainties are replaced by the subtleties of transculturation. Fittingly, *A Frank Encampment* presents a dialogue in progress, presumably between Lord Castlereagh and Sheik Hussein. Mediated by the interpreter

positioned between the two men, two cultures metaphorically speak and listen to each other. This symbolic integration clearly differs from the embellishment of Dr Roylott with coded habits and attire. Roylott's red slippers invoke the absent presence of a menacing Orient in Doyle's story. Lord Castlereagh's red slippers, however, participate in the contrived multicultural scene, corresponding and communicating with the location and its people.

Despite their differences, both artistic creations exploit interpretations of the East to advocate for an alternative domestic culture. Lewis's painting evokes and exalts the lost traditions of England's past. Doyle's story laments the perceived contamination of England's conventional way of life. Both represent idealistic aspirations for a culture undergoing comprehensive transformation. However, compared to the holistic signifiers expressed through Lewis's painting, Doyle's markers of strangeness appear weak and transparent. Readers might reasonably agree with Sherlock Holmes when he states: 'The presence of the gypsies [was] sufficient to put me upon an entirely wrong scent'.³⁶ Indeed, by disregarding the false clues of otherness that are yoked to Doyle's narrative, the congenial and instinctive themes of tradition and structural stability expressed by Lewis's painting present a more profound and rewarding means to 'detecting' this tale's significance.

Re-appraised through the lens of historic regimented order, it is noteworthy that the first particulars concerning this case are that it involved 'the well-known Surrey family of the Roylotts of Stoke Moran'.³⁷ Dr Roylott's

³⁴ Said, p.7.

³⁵ MacKenzie, p.4.

³⁶ Doyle, p.272, 273.

³⁷ Doyle, p.257.

stepdaughter offers immediately that he is 'the last survivor of one of the oldest Saxon families in England', once among the richest in the land and owning estates over three counties.³⁸ But Dr Roylott is left without riches by a succession of heirs 'of a dissolute and wasteful disposition'.³⁹ A gambler in the Regency era completes the family ruin, leaving his descendant only a few rough acres, a heavily mortgaged house, and life as an aristocratic pauper. Yet Dr Roylott has been left a terrible bequest: 'Violence of temper approaching to mania has been hereditary in the men of the family'.⁴⁰ With this revelation, Dr Roylott and his ancestors are revealed to fully possess the pernicious traits that the symbolic Oriental markers are critically deemed to affix. Debauched, intemperate, and volatile, the Roylotts represent the complex of imaginative Eastern dreads that Edward Said believes haunt Western consciousness. It becomes apparent that time in the tropics is not supportably responsible for Dr Roylott's despicable condition. From this position, he does not represent a socially contagious risk to England, but a precarious endangerment to Calcutta. India becomes not a cause of Dr Roylott's criminal mind, but a victim of England's fury.

Considered in this fashion, other Orientalising markers also assume different functions. Most obviously, the decrepitude of Stoke Moran no longer signals Eastern indifference or Oriental sloth. Rather, the ruined estate is a testament to the many generations that neglected both their heritage and the obligations that come with ancient prominence. For this ancient family, aristocratic benevolence and ministry have been abandoned, the opposite of the structured order and composure of Lord Castlereagh's desert

camp. The exotic animals that occupy Dr Roylott's ragged bit of Surrey also assume a different meaning. Rather than signalling the otherness of their master, they take on a wider role. Wandering without purpose in a land not their own, these beasts evidence the long succession of Roylotts and other families that have squandered power, prestige, and wealth. Inexorably supplanted by the growth and influence of the middle class, these cultural relics find themselves in a land they no longer comprehend or control, as splendid and purposeless as a cheetah in Surrey.

The preponderance of criticism of 'The Speckled Band' is focused on the Orientalisation of Dr Roylott and the danger he presents to a stable but susceptible culture. But reappraisal of this tale in consideration of the encounter between East and West as presented in *A Frank Encampment* reveals that textual Orientalisation, much like the process of Holmes' detection, is simply based on stereotypes of ethnic temper and character.⁴¹ In 'The Speckled Band', these cultural markers are revealed to have no more substance than the imaginary 'swamp adder' or the impossible Indian baboon. Dr Roylott is not a threat from the East but an indigenous source of instability and insecurity, a shocking display of decay and disorder in the heartland. The pathology of criminality that S C Harris believes to have been imposed on the Victorian underclasses is here visible as a potentially lethal inheritance of the land's own elite.⁴² More importantly, the national consensus that the threats to social peace and order reside outside the borders is chillingly dispatched. Symbolising an irresponsible segment of the aristocracy, Dr Roylott is a dangerous but useless creature. By

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁴¹ Gillespie, p. 466.

⁴² Harris, p. 458.

destroying him, Holmes becomes not a defender of England's status quo, but a metaphoric agent of social change, removing the ineffectual and irresolute. For only through their demise can the Roylotts aid the nation.

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