

Victorian punitive expeditions:

Orientalist rationalisations behind the looting of colonial artefacts

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In the Victorian era, notions of civilisation, cultural superiority, and the beneficence of the British in India and Africa came into conflict with colonial art and treasure, indicative of advanced culture and high degrees of civilisation. The Moonstone, a fictional Indian diamond stolen by a rogue and murderous British army officer in a punitive expedition, offers parallels to the Benin Bronzes seized by British troops three decades later. This article explores these artefacts, as well as the complex and contradictory propaganda emerging following these punitive expeditions which celebrated the stolen treasure while simultaneously denigrating its creators.

A punitive expedition is a military campaign mounted to punish an enemy, often stemming from perceived aggression or an insult towards an imperial power. The term ‘punitive expedition’ itself is political, with a clear bias that justifies the actions of the imperial power meting out punishment.¹ Through an analysis of two items seized during punitive expeditions, the Moonstone, a fictional Indian diamond in Wilkie Collins’ 1868 book of the same name,² and the Bronze Portuguese Soldier from Benin, taken from Benin City in 1897,³ this article will examine the context within which British identity was forged during the Victorian era. Brutality and avarice were an ethical dilemma and a source of moral dissonance for the British during the nineteenth century. Despite self-interested motivations, Britons clung to the notion of their kingdom, and later, empire, as selfless actors on a civilising mission to ‘primitive’ peoples. They refused to acknowledge the contradictory evidence of ‘natives’ displaying rich and complex artistic, cultural and religious traditions. Obfuscation and denial led to greed, violence and colonial plunder becoming an integral, though largely unacknowledged, part of British identity creation in the nineteenth century. There are clear differences between an imagined artefact borne of popular entertainment, itself critical of colonialism’s worst abuses, and an actual artefact that stands in evidence of imperialism’s worst atrocities. How do we differentiate, as a matter of historical work, something imagined and something ‘real’ when the imagined provides more solid evidence of historical truth and the real is an expression of fantasy? Fact and fiction blur throughout, with the serialisation of *The Moonstone* offering a critique of the siege of Seringapatam and the Great Mutiny of 1857, while the outrageous imaginings of British newspapers justified the theft of the Bronze and Britain’s continued possession.

¹ David Pizzo, ‘Punitive Expeditions’, in *The Encyclopedia of War*, ed. by Gordon Martel (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338232.wbeow507>> [accessed 2 January 2020].

² Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, ed. by John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³ The British Museum website, <https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=82998001&objectId=618225&partId=1> [accessed 19 December 2019].

The Moonstone, initially released in short instalments in a two-penny newspaper format,⁴ was set in 1848, the year of European revolutions, and examines the individual and national responsibility of imperial violence.⁵ Although a work of narrative fiction, *The Moonstone* mixes fact and fiction throughout, with inspiration drawn from a number of historical events including the storming of Seringapatam, the Great Mutiny of 1857, and the famed Koh-i-Noor diamond. The Moonstone is described as a large, flawed, yellow diamond with an appraised value of £30,000, received as a tainted inheritance by Rachel Verinder. The butler Gabriel Betteredge describes the gem, writing:

It was a diamond! As large, or nearly, as a plover's egg. The light that streamed from it was like the light of the harvest moon [...] this jewel, that you could hold between your finger and thumb, seemed unfathomable as the heavens themselves.⁶

Collins creates a backstory for the fictional gem that begins prior to the eleventh century, with the yellow diamond set in the forehead of a statue of a Hindu deity. Generations pass, with Hindus worshipping the diamond in a golden shrine, with Vishnu himself commanding three Brahman priests to guard it through the ages, prophesying doom to anyone attempting to steal the gem. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, blending fact and fiction, the diamond comes into the possession of Tipu, Sultan of Seringapatam, a historical figure, who orders it to be inlaid in the handle of a dagger and placed in his armoury.⁷

The history of the Benin Bronzes before their seizure in 1897 involves a good deal more speculation, since many of the historical details have been lost or were not recorded. With bronze casting techniques learned from the Ife at the end of the thirteenth century,⁸ Benin City metal-casters, working solely for the Oba (king) of Benin, produced a vast array of copper-alloy works between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁹ The Benin objects are mostly brass, although there are a few works in bronze.¹⁰ The raw material was acquired through external trade,¹¹ using bronze imported directly, and in large amounts, from Portugal.¹² The eighteenth century cast-brass figure of a Portuguese soldier with a gun was crafted by the Edo people in what was then called Benin, but now refers to an area in Southern Nigeria (Fig.1). The soldier stands at attention, holding a musket, and wearing a morion with a curved brim, decorated and

⁴ Collins, p. xxi.

⁵ Melissa Free, "'Dirty Linen': Legacies of Empire in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 48.4 (2006), 340-71 (p. 341).

⁶ Collins, p. 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

⁸ Andrew Godwin Onokerhoraye, 'Urbanism as an Organ of Traditional African Civilization: The Example of Benin, Nigeria / L'URBANISME, INSTRUMENT DE LA CIVILISATION AFRICAINE TRADITIONNELLE: L'EXEMPLE DE BENIN, NIGERIA', *Civilisations*, 25, (1975), 294-306 <www.jstor.org/stable/41229293> [accessed 16 December 2019] (p. 302).

⁹ Janet L. Schrenk, 'The Royal Art of Benin: Surfaces, Past and Present', in *Ancient & Historic Metals: Conservation and Scientific Research*, ed. by David A. Scott, Jerry Podany and B. Brian (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1994), pp. 51-62 (p. 51).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹¹ Onokerhoraye, p. 305.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 302.

pointed at the front and back. A tunic covers an undergarment with short sleeves and trunks with a cod piece, both decorated to suggest chain mail.¹³



Figure 1. Unknown artist, Bronze Portuguese Soldier, with gun, 18th eighteenth century, cast brass, 43 × 20 cm (British Museum, London; © Trustees of the British Museum)

The British Museum – where the statue is currently displayed – offers curator comments highlighting an interesting aspect of the weaponry and clothing, suggestive of centuries of contact between Benin and Portugal. The musket that the soldier holds, and the two pistols on his hips, have been identified as seventeenth century flintlocks. However, one of the pistols at the soldier's feet, is a trade gun and the other of the Ripoll type, both manufactured in Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Also notable is that the costume worn by the soldier does not correspond to the era of the weaponry. This suggests that different source material may have influenced the artist who created the work.¹⁴

The figure of the Portuguese soldier and the Moonstone were both seized by agents of the British Army during punitive expeditions, characterised by orgies of violence and avarice, before being brought to

¹³ T.A. Joyce, 'Bronze Portuguese Soldier from Benin', *The British Museum Quarterly*, 2.4 (1928), 95-97 (p.96) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4420893>> [accessed 16 December 2019].

¹⁴ The British Museum website, <https://research.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=82998001&objectId=618225&partId=1> [accessed 19 December 2019].

England as colonial plunder. The violence and theft of the British military and its agents was not well known to the British public. It was often only exceptionally violent encounters that would be widely reported, and then with the worst atrocities omitted. When the British public was made aware of violence, it was generally justified as necessary and heroic.¹⁵ An illustration of this is provided in *The Moonstone*, which begins with a mysterious prologue drawn from family papers by a truthful, unnamed cousin of John Herncastle. This cousin documents the brutal conquest of Seringapatam by a squadron of soldiers, under the command of General George Harris. The letter expresses dismay at the ‘plunder and confusion’ of the troops following the conquest, where soldiers ‘committed deplorable excesses’¹⁶ and ‘disgraced themselves good-humouredly’.¹⁷ The cousin finds Herncastle standing over the bodies of two dead and one dying Indian man, clutching a bloody dagger with a ‘a stone, set like a pommel, in the end of the dagger’s handle’.¹⁸ With a curse unleashed on Herncastle by the dying breath of Brahman’s guardian, the Moonstone is presumably smuggled into Britain when Herncastle repatriates.

Though fictional, the details of this account and apparent cover-up are consistent with the *modus operandi* of the British authorities during the Victorian era. That the details of this shameful episode are only mentioned in private correspondence is consistent with the propaganda and close management of information, which propped up the myth of selfless and moral British engagement in India. There could be no justification for the manner in which the soldiers conducted themselves and, indeed, it was clear that they revelled in their atrocities. The feelings of pride, security and even superiority reflected by characters in *The Moonstone* stemmed from a lack of awareness. They were led to believe something well short of the truth of the acquisition of the gem. This fictional account seems consistent with what happened following real events, such as with the bronzes.

The overthrow of Tipu Sultan in Seringapatam in 1799, where 8,000 natives were slaughtered but only a few hundred British and sepoy soldiers were killed,¹⁹ was famous for its looting and plunder, with British soldiers ransacking the treasury after the Fourth Mysore War.²⁰ Although portrayed in the British press as a vicious tyrant, ‘Tipu Sultan had in reality spelled grave danger to the East India Company’s plans for expansion’,²¹ leaving the British public unaware of the commercial agenda behind the punitive expedition. It was in this way that Britain could simultaneously profit from violence, yet continue to claim the ‘moral

¹⁵ Bernard Porter, “‘Empire, What Empire?’ Or, Why 80% of Early- and Mid-Victorians Were Deliberately Kept in Ignorance of It”, *Victorian Studies*, 46.2 (2004), 256-63 (pp. 260-2), <www.jstor.org/stable/3830293> [accessed February 16, 2020].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

²⁰ Krishna Manavalli, ‘Collins, Colonial Crime, and the Brahmin Sublime: The Orientalist Vision of a Hindu-Brahmin India in *The Moonstone*’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 4.1 (2007), 67-86 (p. 76).

²¹ Manavalli, p. 74.

high ground'. Many critics believe that Collins used the fictional siege of Seringapatam as a critique for the hysteria generated by the Great Mutiny of 1857.²² In the decade following the mutiny, the Empire appeared to be disintegrating. With force the only means to contain the spreading insurgency, rebel atrocities and bloody British reprisals were reported from Jamaica to New Zealand.²³

The causes leading to the punitive expedition in Benin of 1897 share broad similarities with those of the siege of Seringapatam. As with Tipu Sultan threatening the profits of the East India Company, the desire to control trading routes lay at the heart of the conflict with Ovonramwen, the Oba of Benin, and the Edo peoples, with commercial interests hidden from the British public. Benin markets had long been closed to outside trade, but European pressure for commerce increased in the nineteenth century.²⁴ British officials were frustrated by their inability to break the monopoly on commodities held by the Oba. The Oba ignored the Treaty of 1892, which recognised Britain's sovereignty, and opened up Benin to trade by members of all nations.²⁵ In an attempt to dispute trading rights, a naïve and inexperienced soldier, Vice Consul James Phillips, led an unarmed party to the palace. Though lacking authorisation from the Foreign Office, the party persisted despite receiving warnings from royal envoys and Itsekiri middlemen to turn back.²⁶ On 7 January, believing themselves under attack, Benin soldiers killed all but two of the party. When news reached Britain, some 1700 men were swiftly sent in retaliation, and by 18 February 1897, Benin City was taken by British forces.²⁷

The punitive expedition resulted in the seizure of thousands of pieces of artwork which had also been controlled by the Oba.²⁸ The British troops were astonished by the calibre and quantity of bronze sculptures and ivory carvings, which seemed to contradict the negative reports of Benin, which was considered a 'city of death' by the British public²⁹ (Fig.2). The march of Phillips to the palace was a provocation to the Oba, yet the British troops felt morally justified in launching an attack on the Edo peoples. They stole their historic, treasured art and left the Oba's palace a burnt shell.

²² Free, p. 347.

²³ Ian Duncan, 'The Moonstone, the Victorian Novel, and Imperialist Panic', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 55.3 (1994), 297-320 (p. 305). <http://solo.ouls.ox.ac.uk/OXVU1:LSCOP_ALL:TN_proquest1290874732> [accessed 17 December 2019].

²⁴ Philip Aigbana Igbafe, 'A History of The Benin Kingdom: an Overview', in *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, ed. Barbara Plankensteiner (Ghent: Snoeck Publishers, 2007), pp. 41-54 (p. 51).

²⁵ Annie E. Coombs, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 9.

²⁶ Coombs, p. 10.

²⁷ Barbara Plankensteiner, 'The "Benin Affair" and its Consequences', in *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, ed. Barbara Plankensteiner (Ghent: Snoeck Publishers, 2007), pp. 199-211 (p. 199).

²⁸ Ekpo Eyo, *Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art* (Lagos: Federal Department of Antiquities, 1977), p. 132.

²⁹ Plankensteiner, Benin Affair, p. 200.



Figure 2: Rear Admiral H.S. Measham, Transport of artworks from Benin (1897), photograph.³⁰
(British Museum, London; © Trustees of the British Museum)

A portion of the artwork was immediately distributed to expedition members according to rank. Some pieces were reserved for the queen, and some were auctioned off in London by the Admiralty. In addition, many pieces of art changed hands in Lagos immediately following the punitive expedition.³¹ It is difficult to trace the movements of the Portuguese Soldier figure until 1934, when it was acquired by the British collector, Harry Geoffrey Beasley. His ledger lists the item as ‘A standing bronze figure of a Portuguese soldier with a musket at his shoulder’, along with the code ‘AO’ indicating that he paid £20 for it (Fig.3).³²

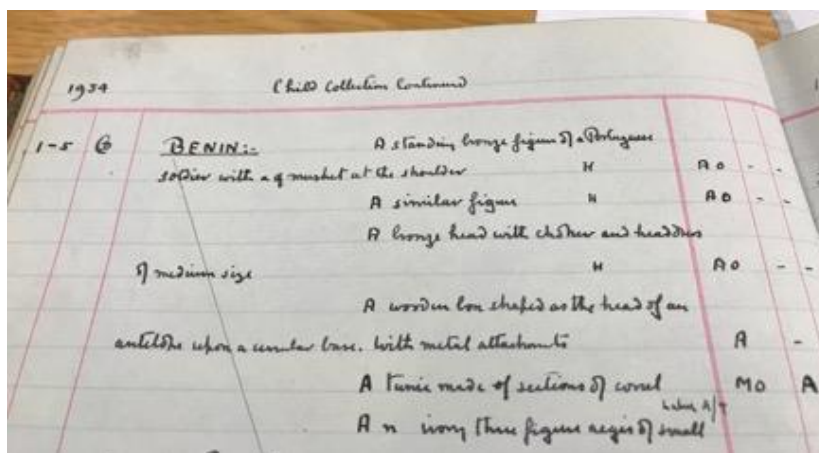


Figure 3: Harry Geoffrey Beasley, Ledger, (1934), British Museum, London. (Author’s photograph)

³⁰ Ibid., The photo inscription reads: ‘Benin Expedition 1897. The donkey belonged to Seppings Wright, local correspondent of the *Illustrated London News*’.

³¹ Barbara Plankensteiner, ‘Introduction’, in *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, ed. Barbara Plankensteiner (Ghent: Snoeck Publishers, 2007), pp. 21-40 (pp. 32-3).

³² The figure of £20 paid by H. G. Beasley to acquire the statue of the Portuguese Soldier is derived from a letter held in the British Museum archives from Andrew West to Mrs. D. C. Starsecks dated 26 July, 1982, which offers a key to the code used by Beasley (AO in his ledger, figure 3) indicating A stands for 2 and O for 0.

After his death in 1939, the statue of the Portuguese Soldier was donated, along with other works, to the British Museum in 1944.³³

Both *The Moonstone* and the press coverage immediately following the Benin expedition proved enormously popular amongst the reading public. Both were fuelled by the boom in print publication during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Benin expedition received mass press coverage in Britain,³⁴ despite not being a major theatre of war in comparison to other African campaigns.³⁵ There were even special supplements devoted to Benin such as the one issued by the *Illustrated London News* on 27 March 1897. This described eyewitness accounts of ‘the remains of human sacrifices and mutilated bodies, as well as the fetish altars covered with human blood’, with the bronzes and artworks dismissed as ‘having the most grotesque appearance’.³⁶ Full-page illustrations, such as ‘The Golgotha, Benin’, represent the horrors of Benin, with a contorted figure seen amongst a mountain of corpses (Fig.4).³⁷



Figure 4: Arthur David McCormick, *The Golgotha, Benin*, lithograph, *Illustrated London News*, (27 March 1897). (Look and Learn/Illustrated Papers Collection; © Bridgeman Images)

³³ Lucie Carreau, ‘Becoming “Professional”’: From the Beasley Collection to the Cranmore Ethnographical Museum’, *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 23 (2010), 41-55 (pp. 51-2) <www.jstor.org/stable/41416854> [accessed 30 December 2019].

³⁴ Coombs, p. 7.

³⁵ Plankensteiner, *Benin Affair*, p. 201.

³⁶ Coombs, p. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

To reinforce the stark difference between Britons and the Edo, accompanying illustrations in the supplement depict British soldiers ‘washing, boiling water or tending to the injured’ which, according to Plankensteiner, stressed their ‘self-sacrifice and humanity’.³⁸ The British public were regaled with propaganda around the national heroism of the expedition and the ‘native’ depravities. Discussion of trade monopolies was omitted from accounts of the raid, with British intervention portrayed as purely altruistic.³⁹ Likewise, the triggering factors of the campaign of Philips were withheld.⁴⁰ The Benin expedition was presented as a civilising mission, with a permanent British presence necessary to stop the slide into savagery.⁴¹ Press coverage of the punitive expedition in Benin therefore reconfirmed self-serving notions of British superiority over the Edo peoples.

As a result of the acquisitions, there were interesting variations in the British perceptions surrounding their Indian and Edo subjects. It can be argued that both peoples are limited and contained within the framework that the scholar Edward Said referred to as Orientalism, implying ‘a European invention [...] of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences’ which ‘has helped to define Europe’.⁴² Orientalism was inherently political because it colluded with the imperial project, advancing racial agendas that ‘valued’ white Europeans over other ‘races’. It was a key component in rationalising the greed and violence of colonial looting. Even in the fictional *The Moonstone*, there appears to be a greater attempt made to understand Indian culture. The ‘White Man’s Burden’ (as Rudyard Kipling famously referred to the interventionist colonialism that necessitated the civilising of ‘sullen savages’ based on British racial and moral superiority) was representative of the colonial approach toward settling foreign territories.⁴³ Despite anxieties arising from the Great Mutiny, *The Moonstone* was published within that framework. The last three decades of the Victorian era saw British interventionist policies change. At the time of the Benin expedition, a shift from colonialism to a new imperialism – a method of empire-building involving the seizure and exploitation of foreign territories often for commercial motives – had occurred.⁴⁴ The British became committed to expansion and empire building. They grew increasingly dependent on a global economy necessitating new trade routes, with uncooperative prospective partners subject to the

³⁸ Plankensteiner, *Benin Affair*, p. 201.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴¹ Coombs, p. 10.

⁴² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 30-31.

⁴³ Rudyard Kipling, ‘The White Man’s Burden’, in *The Five Nations, Volume I (of 2)*, Project Gutenberg eBook <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/60260/60260-h/60260-h.htm#Page_94> [accessed 15 January 2020] (p. 94).

⁴⁴ John Darwin, ‘Imperialism and the Victorians: The Dynamics of Territorial Expansion’, *The English Historical Review*, 112.447 (1997), 614-42 (p. 615), <www.jstor.org/stable/576347> [accessed 17 January 2020].

harsh measures experienced by the Oba of Benin. To be one of these colonial holdings meant to be valued less than Britain.

In *The Moonstone*, India is portrayed according to contemporary Victorian ideologies, with the duality of India as a 'site of colonial terror', alongside 'a romanticized India as a predominately Hindu-Brahmanical society'.⁴⁵ In true Orientalist fashion, the India of the novel is a timeless land with a pre-historic culture, its greatest glories relegated to history, in opposition to European modernity. In fact, India was a source of great anxiety to the British. The country house of the Verinders acts as a stand-in for Great Britain, contaminated by the Indian gem. As Gabriel Betteridge states, 'here was our quiet English house suddenly invaded by a devilish Indian diamond [...]. Who ever heard the like of it – in the nineteenth century, mind, in an age of progress, and in a country which rejoices in the blessings of the British Constitution?'⁴⁶ The colonial blot, together with involvement in a modern global economy, threatened to destabilise the British national character.⁴⁷ Plunder characterised the imperial economy and many feared a loss of British character, resulting from avarice for colonial loot. The diamond brought those fears to a head by showing an India that could be contained. Manavalli argues that in 'the seamless context of colonial and domestic crime, the looting [...] presages the moral disintegration in England,'⁴⁸ with the gem metamorphosing, according to John Reed, into a 'sign of England's imperial depredations – the symbol of a national [...] crime'.⁴⁹ Melissa Free concludes it is denial of imperial collusion, not the diamond itself, that is the source of all the mischief in *The Moonstone*.⁵⁰

As to how the Indian characters in *The Moonstone* perceive the British and their possession of the diamond, it is harder to discern, as they do not control the narrative. The Hindu-Brahmanical characters do display a single-minded focus on re-gaining possession of the diamond, and disregard both Islamic and British claims of ownership. Free of uncertainties that plague the Western characters, they triumph in the final pages of the novel with a scene of restitution. Here, tens of thousands of Hindu devotees gather to worship the Moonstone's return to the deity's forehead after 800 years. The three Brahmans responsible for the return, stripped of caste, nobly sacrifice themselves to permanent exile for their gods. In juxtaposition to this scene of Hindu worship, a comparison can be made with the millions of Britons surrounding the Koh-i-Noor at the Great Exhibition of 1851.⁵¹ This celebrated commercial and imperial plunder in a

⁴⁵ Manavalli, p. 67.

⁴⁶ Collins, p. 38.

⁴⁷ Duncan, p. 307.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

⁴⁹ John Reed, 'English Imperialism and the unacknowledged Crime of *The Moonstone*', *Clio*, 2 (1973), 281–290, (p. 286).

⁵⁰ Free, p. 356.

⁵¹ Collins, p. xiii.

perverse parody of Hindu religious rites, where *darshan* (sight) of the *murti* (deity's image) is a fundamental practice of religion.⁵²

It was challenging for the British to reconcile the discovery of thousands of highly esteemed pieces of artwork, which met European aesthetic criteria indicative of advanced civilization, with their widely disseminated beliefs around the 'savagery' of the Edo people. These contradictory attitudes were expressed in an Orientalist manner, emphasising a past glory which was responsible for producing the art and a decayed present. The Edo were portrayed as a 'degraded race' or 'degenerated culture', a recurring feature of the characterisation of certain colonised peoples.⁵³ Ormonde Dalton praises the artworks as 'treasures' that are a new 'Codex Africanus, not written on fragile papyrus, but in ivory and imperishable brass'.⁵⁴ Yet, he dismisses the Edo as cowardly, thieving fetishists who perform human sacrifice, with the Benin 'a decadent and incurable degenerate [...] city of horrors'.⁵⁵ Early commentators displayed an inability to believe in or acknowledge an African origin of the artwork. Dalton and Charles Read state that 'it is strange that among the many examples of bronze casting by native artists no single piece has occurred that can be attributed to their European teachers', speculating that the Portuguese models were still-to-be unearthed.⁵⁶ Three decades later, T.A. Joyce, describing a similar Benin statue of a Portuguese soldier, continues to misidentify the art of *cire-perdue*, or lost wax casting, as originating from early Portuguese travellers, a misidentification common amongst scholars and emblematic of cultural racism and justification.⁵⁷

Unlike *The Moonstone*, which was written from a European viewpoint about a colonised subject, the Bronze Portuguese Soldier offers an African viewpoint on Europeans. The first Portuguese (European) contact with Benin is believed to date from 1472, with the use of metals in artworks beginning after the fifteenth century.⁵⁸ The Portuguese are well represented in the iconography of Benin art, enjoying a privileged position.⁵⁹ Depictions of the Portuguese in court art are, in fact, a symbol of the Oba's power and served to strengthen his reputation. This led Eisenhofer to assert that 'the court at Benin was mainly interested in its own glory when it came to integrating the foreigners in its art', rendering an outside threat to the social order into a 'constructive part of Benin's world-view, [...] converted into something favourable'.⁶⁰

⁵² Lawrence A. Babb, 'Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism', *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 37.4 (1981), 387-401 (p. 387), <www.jstor.org/stable/3629835> [accessed January 24, 2020].

⁵³ Plankensteiner, Benin Affair, p. 201.

⁵⁴ Ormonde M. Dalton, 'Booty From Benin', *English Illustrated Magazine*, 172 (1898), 419-429 (p. 419), <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2186/docview/3260113?accountid=13042>> [accessed 14 January 2020].

⁵⁵ Dalton, pp. 420-1.

⁵⁶ Ormonde M. Dalton and Charles H. Read, *Antiquities from The City of Benin and from Other Parts of West Africa in The British Museum* (London: Longmans & Co., 1899), p. 19.

⁵⁷ Joyce, p. 96.

⁵⁸ Eyo, p. 148.

⁵⁹ Onokerhoraye, p. 303.

⁶⁰ Eisenhofer, p. 59.

Edo people use the bronzes as a means of interacting with outsiders and narrating events in their world, which shows their agency. They are not only observed, but they also observe others. Yet, what began in an empowering act of creation ended in seizure by imperial violence.

Is colonial expropriation theft? The answer depends on whether you are asking the coloniser or the colonised. Although the fictional Moonstone was returned to its Hindu-Brahmanical roots, one wonders about all the other Indian objects that remain in Britain, such as the Koh-i-Noor. What of the treasure hauled back by civil servants, nabobs and retired British India Army officers? Nigeria has been agitating for the restitution of the Benin Bronzes since independence in 1960. Yet, more than 1,000 bronzes are currently held in European museums. From as early as the 1890s, curators at the British Museum have rated their artistic merit at the level of the 'best of Italian and Greek sculpture', and they have only increased in value.⁶¹ The British Museum has recently agreed to temporarily loan some of the bronzes back to Nigerian museums.⁶² They refuse to return the plundered treasures outright, yet the restitution of cultural treasure should not be relegated to the pages of a novel. As argued in this article, obfuscation and denial led to greed, violence, and colonial plunder becoming an integral, though largely unacknowledged, part of the creation of British identity in the nineteenth century. Despite being the aggressor in punitive expeditions, Britons interpreted these events in a manner that justified their actions and confirmed their moral and racial superiority over the colonised peoples of the Empire. Returning the Benin Bronzes would be a just attempt to reckon with the sins borne of imperialism, and a small but symbolic measure of recompense for the exploitation which characterised that era. This bold step would result in Britain reclaiming its moral standing, in a post-colonial age.

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⁶¹ Alex Marshall, 'This Art Was Looted 123 Years Ago. Will It Ever Be Returned', *The New York Times*, 23 January 2020. Online. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/arts/design/benin-bronzes.html>> [accessed 28 January 2020].

⁶² Ibid.

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