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Reciprocal Colonization in the Irish Fairy Tales of Lord Dunsany

Abstract

Sheley's interest is in how Dunsany's inside-out Orientalist tales demonstrate or challenge theories of colonialism, anti-colonialism, and post-colonialism, delving into Dunsany's history with W.B. Yeats and comparing his tales to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

Additional Keywords

Dunsany, Lord—Relationship with W.B. Yeats; Dunsany, Lord. *The Book of Wonder*; Dunsany, Lord. *Tales of Wonder*; Orientalism (literary theory); Postcolonialism (literary theory); Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children*; Yeats, William Butler—Relationship with Lord Dunsany



RECIPROCAL COLONIZATION
IN THE IRISH FAIRY TALES
OF LORD DUNSANY

ERIN L. SHELEG

*"Come," said the Sultan to his hasheesh-eater in the very furthest lands that know
Bagdad, "Dream to me now of London."—Lord Dunsany, "A Tale of London"*

*"I was born in the city of Bombay...Once upon a time."—Salman Rushdie,
Midnight's Children*

THESE PASSAGES FROM DUNSANY AND RUSHDIE both deploy the tropes of magic and fairy tale to establish temporal and spatial points of origin in very different colonial contexts and suggest how the mythopoeic may serve an important organizing function in the post-colonial text. Ella Shohat identifies two potential meanings for the term "post-colonial": the first reflecting "the supercession of outmoded philosophical, aesthetic and political theories" and the second "underlin[ing] a passage into a new period and a closure of a certain historical event or age, officially stamped with dates" (Shohat 323). She notes, too, the recent critical move to expand the term "to include all English literary productions by societies affected by colonialism," criticizing it for equating, improperly in cases such as Australia as compared to India, "the relations of the colonized white-settlers to the Europeans at the 'center' with that of the colonized indigenous populations to the Europeans" (324). Generally she observes that this globalizing quality of post-colonial discourse "downplays multiplicities of location and temporality, as well as the possible discursive and political linkages between 'post-colonial' theories and [...] anti-colonial, or anti-neocolonial struggles and discourses" (325). Shohat's analysis underscores the complex structure emerging from the condition of global colonial empires spanning diverse locations and officially and unofficially disbanding at various historical moments. Her attention to modern "anti-colonial" struggles, for example, indicates that the discourses of resistance of currently colonized peoples—though not temporally "post" colonial—nonetheless fit into the category of cultural resistance with which what we call "postcolonial" studies engages.

While far afield from the more contemporary context with which Shohat is particularly concerned, the less-expected case of early twentieth-

century Ireland provides a fruitful site for considering the necessarily pluralistic and multi-polar nature of postcolonial—or more properly, “anticolonial”—struggle, and how the discourses of one colonized people may, all at once, deploy, buttress, or diminish the anticolonial positions of other peoples across the globe. In this paper I will identify, in the writings of the Irish Revivalist (though staunchly Unionist) writer Edward Plunkett, Lord Dunsany, the double-edged function of the literary fantastic in dislocating the British colonial center through a process that both participates in and undermines discourses of cultural authority over Asian colonized subjects.

The “Oriental” in the Celtic Twilight

In the early twentieth century, the Irish Home Rule¹ movement in politics had its cultural manifestation in the form of the Celtic Revival, an attempt amongst Irish writers and artists to uncover an authentic “Celtic” cultural past, as distinct from that of the English. The Celtic Revival and the Irish Literary Revival in particular were—as Shohat would likely note—problematic as examples of the empire “writing back” for several reasons. First, of course, England had its own Celtic history, rendering the divide between colonizer and colonized less discernible along the historical trajectories in which the movement was interested. Second, many of the preeminent voices of the Literary Revival, including W.B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, Lord Dunsany, and John Millington Synge, were themselves Anglo-Irish: Irish Protestants of English ancestry—as opposed to native Irish Catholics. Gerry Smyth has argued that the Anglo-Irish occupied a position of “supplementarity,” allowing them to, as Joseph Lennon puts it, fill a “mediator role” between Irish peripheral culture and the English center (Lennon 255). This mode of mediation seems, of course, a particularly self-conscious variety of the problem Gayatri Spivak identifies when she asks whether the subaltern can “speak.” (Spivak utilizes the term “subaltern” to refer to the colonized individuals excluded from the hegemonic authority of the prevailing colonial power.) The crippling poverty in which the vast majority of the Irish Catholic peasantry subsisted (to say nothing of their construction as sub-human in the prevailing English imagination²) arguably precluded them from inclusion in whatever “Celtic” subjectivity the literary elite attempted to translate back to the metropole.

Nonetheless, the Literary Revival—nicknamed “the Celtic Twilight,” after Yeats’s famous collection of fairy tales and folk lore—can and should be

¹ This was largely achieved in 1922 with the creation of the Irish Free State.

² As just one of many examples of this sentiment, consider the facial angle sketches from *Verhandeling van Petrus Camper* (1791) suggesting the simian kinship of both the African and the Irish human.

evaluated not only for its representational shortcomings and simplifications but also for the extent to which it is nonetheless a discourse of resistance which, by unsettling the dichotomy between colonizer and colonized, opens up a space for a variety of global subjectivities to assert agency. This claim is more than merely symbolic. As Joseph Lennon has discussed in his comprehensive 2004 work on what he calls "Irish Orientalism," a component of Celtic self-identification was a belief in Asian origin derived, originally, from a shared otherness relative to a Greco-Roman center (Lennon 5). Irish histories from the fifth to eighth centuries begin with origins stories in Scythia (5), and the conceptions of both Ireland and Asian nations as cultural "borderlands" carried down into nineteenth century representations of colonized peoples in both areas as alterior and barbaric (56).

From this history, Lennon develops the idea that "orientalism" as deployed by Irish revivalist writers, and Yeats in particular, cannot be understood in the purely objectifying and aestheticizing light Edward Said has famously identified. According to Lennon, "Irish Orientalism often directly claims allegiance to the narratives of both the colonizer and the colonized," using what Said would term "Orientalist" knowledge, yet using it in "anti-British and anticolonial narratives" which, Lennon argues, ultimately "provides agency for Irish cultural decolonization and, at times, enables cultural decolonization in Asian and West Asian colonies" (Lennon xxv-xxvi). In his chapter on Yeats, Lennon traces the trajectory of the poet's early identifications of both the Orient and an imagined Celtic otherworld with a mysticism that stood in opposition to the strictures of English convention (253-255). He notes the impact of Yeats' relationships with the Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee and the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore on the Irish Revival generally, and the extent to which the latter—by utilizing a "national" voice of resistance in his poetry—influenced Yeats to intensify the stylized "Celtic" persona he himself adopted.

In contrast to the dialectical relationship with Asia, and particularly India, with which Lennon credits Yeats, he describes Dunsany's work as depicting an Orient "in a fashion more consonant with [...] Anglo-French Orientalism," devoid of any cross-colonial allegorical resonances (209). In the remainder of this paper I will refute this characterization of Dunsany's use of the East in his fairy tale writing. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how the very structure of fantastic writing—which, at one level, renders the colonized subject as exotic and non-human—can be simultaneously used to dislodge and unsettle a colonial center in favor of a multiplicity of colonial subjects. I will draw upon what Shohat characterizes as "spatial" and "temporal" conceptions of post-coloniality which correspond to two different recurring fantasies in Dunsany's fiction, both of which tend, however unconsciously, toward the delegitimizing of the English subject in the precise historical context of the early twentieth century. Before proceeding to this analysis, however, a word is warranted on Yeats' more

explicitly “cross-colonial” use of the East in his own mythopoeic mode to better illuminate how Dunsany’s work participated in this discourse.

In early works, Yeats took up explicitly Eastern subjects in much the same manner as he reworked Celtic mythologies: with a folkloric, fairy tale sensibility. For example, in “Anashuya and Vijaya,” a young Indian priestess suspects that her love has a second lover, a personal turmoil that gets worked out in mythological terms as Anashuya invokes the aid of Brahma to cause Vijaya to dream of her when he goes off to meet the other woman. However, in his short poem “A Coat” (1914) Yeats famously describes his early Celtic mythological poems as “a coat / Covered with embroideries / Out of old mythologies” which he was forced to discard after “the fools caught it,” discovering, in an expression of shifting poetic vision, that “there’s more enterprise / In walking naked” (Yeats, “Coat,” ll.1-10). Part of this movement away from Irish fairy writing, according to Lennon, was an increased imaginative fusion of Irish and Eastern interests: “Although not very aware of the workings of global colonialism or of modern India and its anticolonial struggles, Yeats sought to combat the ‘growing tide’ of modernity in Ireland with a ‘new science based in Orientalism and Celticism’ and eventually, with the failure of any coherent idea of Irish ethnicity derivable from Celtic fairy tales and myths, he ‘earnestly turned to basing a new sense of Irishness and Celticity on the Orient’ (Lennon 287).

In his later poems Yeats depicts the Orient as a place of refuge from the destructive pressures of Western modernity and his own aging. Most famously, in “Sailing to Byzantium,” he describes his home as “no country for old men” and proclaims that he has “sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium” (Yeats, “Byzantium,” ll. 1, 15-16) where aged body will transform into a mechanical nightingale “To keep a drowsy Emperor awake” or “sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium” (ll. 29-31). And in “Lapis Lazuli” he laments the triviality of art as represented by the English canon (“Hamlet rambles” and “Lear rages” futilely, while the political situation of World War II means “That if nothing drastic is done / Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out, / Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in / Until the town lie beaten flat” (Yeats, “Lapis,” ll. 5-8)). By contrast, the narrator finds peace in contemplating the tranquility of what he imagines as Eastern artwork—“Two Chinamen [...] carved in lapis lazuli”—delighting “to imagine them seated there; / There, on the mountain and the sky, / On all the tragic scene they stare. [...] / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay” (ll. 37-38, 50-56). One feature common to all of these works is their orientation around the poetic identity of the narrator—“orientalism,” for Yeats, becomes politicized when he depicts what he considers to be the Eastern sensibility as a more authentic identity for an intellect alienated by the world in which it exists. As I will endeavor to show below, Dunsany’s brand of orientalism, though much more fantastic in nature, is not wholly removed from Yeats’s project.

Dunsany as Imperialist

Any discussion of Dunsany in a colonial context must begin, of course, with the fact that, beyond merely being a member of the Irish Protestant ascendancy, he was one of the few members of the Irish Literary Revival who supported—ardently, no less—the union with England.³ Though initially a protégé of Yeats after the death of Synge, and involved early in his career with the Abbey Theatre, Dunsany eventually quarreled with his mentor, with whom his views on the Irish political situation had always diverged. Yeats strongly supported Dunsany's first play, *The Glittering Gate* (1909), which dealt with two deceased burglars, discussing the nature of the hereafter from the afterlife. Dunsany would later say he had written the play "chiefly to please Yeats," but was "uninterested" in it, despite its critical success, compared to his later orientalist fantasies (Dunsany, "Letters," 137). In a 1916 letter to Stuart Walker, an American producer of some of his plays, Dunsany furthermore seems merely tolerant of reported American mispronunciations of his name in a more Celtic manner: "Those who call it *Doon-sahny* have every right to do so, for since it is the name of an Irish place one can hardly blame people for pronouncing it in an old Irish unanglicized manner" (Dunsany, "Letters," 159). Indeed, in 1932, when Yeats co-founded the Irish Academy of Letters, he barred his former protégé from full membership because his work inadequately related to Ireland and the Irish (Miller). Patrick Maume writes that "Dunsany's version of imperialism in Ireland saw the system not as a pathway to modernity, but rather, as a means of preserving feudal values that were disappearing from Britain itself" (Maume 14). Dunsany was an agnostic, a fact which will be relevant to my discussion of his mythological writing, below, and Maume cites this fact as a reason why Dunsany "clings to the dream of empire even as he discards the claims to social progress and religious superiority that originally underwrote the dream" (14).

Beyond his views on Ireland specifically, Dunsany was an active participant in the project of global empire. In 1899 he fought with the Coldstream Guard in the Boer War and would later say of his play *King Argimenes and the Unknown Warrior* that, while he had written it "from a sudden fancy I had of a king in rags gnawing a bone," the idea may have come from a subconscious memory of a time he "was hungry, sitting and sleeping upon the ground with other disheveled men in Africa" ("Letters" 138). Dunsany's other experiences with empire included several visits to Egypt, hunting trips to Algeria, East Africa, and Sudan, and a visit to his army officer son when he was staying with the Nawab of Ranpur. Though, as Maume notes, Dunsany's aristocratic

³ For example, in 1914 he smuggled weapons for the Ulster Volunteer Force across the Irish Sea in his luggage (Amory 103) and in 1916, as a member of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, he was shot in the face by an Irish rebel during the Easter Rising (Maume 16).

reminiscences about these trips focus on the landscape and “[pay] little attention to urban natives, except to lament that they are being destroyed by civilization” his conversations with the Nawab and other Indian princes reveal a doubled view of the colonial political encounter: “Dunsany both pokes fun at their naiveté and insinuates that Oriental despotism may be superior to British Liberalism” (Maume 22). Furthermore, it should be noted that Dunsany’s critique of the destructive effect of “civilization” referred to the same Western modernizing brand of civilization which he frequently lamented for its similar effects back in Britain. As Maume puts it, Dunsany’s “unswerving belief in empire was accompanied by total disbelief in the claims of European civilization to political, economic, and religious superiority over indigenous peoples” (21). I now turn to two characteristics of the fantastic in Dunsany’s writing which reveal this contradiction and have the effect of disrupting the very hegemonic discursive structure within which he operates.

Ahistoric Temporality in the Mythic Mode

In comparing Dunsany’s fantasy novel *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* to Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Hans Ulrich Seeber states that both texts utilize magic to create “structures which overcome the power of space and time” (Seeber 236). In Rushdie’s case, Seeber claims that the fusion of magic, reality, myth and technology result in a structural depiction of the world in a post-colonial moment: “everything seems to interconnect as if the novel’s language and structure intended to flesh out the idea of a global syncretism of cultures and the magic idea of cosmic unity at the same time” (233). While Seeber notes, correctly in my view, that the magical timelessness in this particular Dunsany text (in which a fairy princess longs for the static atemporality of her father’s unchanging kingdom after having married a mortal prince and briefly sojourned in the mortal world of historical time) is more concerned with “the timelessness and the power of art” (236) his comparison of this technique to Rushdie’s, with its contemporary political implications, invites us to consider how Dunsany’s preoccupation with atemporality functions in his other fiction, much of which explicitly engages the relationship between “East” and “West.”

In Yeats’s introduction to a selection of Dunsany’s stories—while expressing the wish that he could “bring his imagination into the old Irish legendary world instead of those magic lands of his with their vague Eastern air,” the former notes the origins of Dunsany’s tales in “those romantic ideas that are somewhere in the background of all our minds” and in particular “the mysterious power which is sometimes called by some great god’s name but more often ‘Time’” (Yeats, “Introduction” 6-8). Yeats goes on to acknowledge both the timelessness and the particularity of Dunsany’s relationship to temporality in this “Eastern” context—on the one hand pointing to the tales’ common theme of

“vague rebellion” against time, while on the other comparing his authorial voice to Sir John Mandeville—whose fourteenth century highly fictitious account of travels to Asia signify both the temporal specificity and fantastic construction of the moment of contact. (Mandeville himself was likely not a historical person but a series of compilers, yet the dawning awareness of Asia as a physical place was very real.)

In the story collection *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905), and its follow-up *Time and the Gods* (1906), Dunsany develops a polytheistic cosmography of an imaginary world, intended to mimic the archaic prose cadences of the Bible. The explicit Old Testament influence suggests a blurring of the sacred traditions of the Judeo-Christian West and the various polytheistic traditions of the East, whose distinctions only became relevant with the incursion of historical time. For example, in the first story in *Time and the Gods* Dunsany opens: “Once when the gods were young and only Their swarthy servant Time was without age, the gods lay sleeping by a broad river upon earth” (Dunsany, “Time” 3). As the series of stories progresses to describe how various deities came to be worshipped, Dunsany incorporates the role of mortal mediators in constructing and interpreting the divine. He repeatedly suggests such mediation to be suspect, in part due to its authoritative regulation of temporality.

In “The Sorrow of Search,” a king who seeks knowledge of the gods consults his prophet who tells him that “by the side of the road to Knowing [...] stand many temples, and the doorway of every temple stand many priests, and they cry to the travelers that weary of the road, crying to them: ‘This is the End.’” None of these temples prove in fact to be “the end,” as many of the travelers in fact continue on their way until one traveler reaches the “Utter End” at which he finds, at the bottom of an abyss, one small god “no bigger than a hare,” whose voice “came crying in the cold: ‘I know not.’ And beyond the gulf was nought, only the small god crying” (“Sorrow” 42). The initial structure of this story strongly suggests a teleological narrative in which the unified godhead of Christianity will prove to be the one universal truth, after a series of illegitimate pretensions by polytheistic faiths. Therefore the powerlessness of the “one small god” at the end of the tale, in undermining these expectations, comes shockingly close to a refutation of Christ as the one savior. As S.T. Joshi notes, Dunsany’s criticism of religion goes beyond “merely a display of the duplicity and avariciousness of the priesthood: there is a fundamental questioning of the very foundations of religion” (Joshi 25-6). Yet in passing judgment on all religions—and perhaps most keenly on Christianity, for the child-likeness of its central figure and absurdity of its centrality—Dunsany powerfully undermines the Christianizing narrative previously justifying the colonial project.

Dunsany revisits the relationship between temporality, illegitimacy and contact in another letter to Walker, written from the trenches of World War I. In

explaining that his fairy tales should never be taken as allegories Dunsany writes:

[W]hen I write of Babylon, there are people who cannot see that I write of it for love of Babylon's ways, and they think I'm thinking of London and our beastly Parliament.

Only I get further east than Babylon, even to Kingdoms that seem to lie in the twilight beyond the East of the World. I want to write about men and women and the great forces that have been with them from their cradle up—forces that the centuries have neither aged nor weakened. Not about people who are so interested about the latest mascot or motor that not enough remains when the trivial is sifted from them. (Dunsany, "Letters" 134-5)

Dunsany's view of the "East" as increasingly timeless is certainly problematic for a number of reasons. In the first place it associates Eastern-ness with the dead civilization of Babylon, accessible only through aestheticized artifacts through which Dunsany may arrogantly assert omniscient knowledge of "Babylon's ways." Furthermore the association of the East with prehistory and endowed with the knowledge of the "cradle" seems to endow it with the kind of "timeless childhood" Said has much more recently accused the United States of attributing to the Middle East (Said 191).

Nonetheless, in resorting to an Orientalized timelessness Dunsany is necessarily—and quite explicitly—disavowing the historical particularity of the British empire, whose center of political power he considers "beastly" and whose citizens the superficial products of their fleeting temporality. Escapism from modernity—the darker side of which Dunsany was intimately experiencing at the time he wrote these words—is an oft-cited function of fantasy literature. But for an author so deeply committed to the notion of empire as a system of exchange in the abstract, it is difficult to avoid seeing in mythopoeic texts like *The Gods of Pegāna* some of the "magic idea of cosmic unity" (233) Seeber discerned in Rushdie's magical realist post-colonial text.

The free associative nature of my connection here may remind us of Shohat's concern that the shared experience of imperialism and colonialism may open the door to discussing the colonizer and the colonized in the same category of the post-colonial. Yet Dunsany's magical rendition of contact as having both a geographic and a temporal component—while it, admittedly, does violence to the genuine experiences of the factual colonized subject at the time of his writing—also has the effect of exploding the narratives of exceptionalism and pre-ordination driving the British colonial enterprise at that moment. While partially cloaking the more extreme religious implications in the language of "once upon a time," Dunsany centers his mythological "pre-colonial" East at the

expense of *both* factual colonial and post-colonial subjects, and their European colonizers.

Reciprocal Colonization and the Othering of London

Even more explicitly than in his use of temporality, Dunsany effects a magical de-centering which I will refer to as “reciprocal colonization” through his fixation on the orientation of Britain generally and London specifically relative to the Eastern other. In expressing a general lack of interest in his first play, *The Glittering Gate*, Dunsany describes his second play, *King Argimenes and the Unknown Warrior* as “the first play I ever wrote about my own country” (Dunsany, “Letters,” 137). Though, on one level, a statement about the greater role of his imagination in crafting the second play, this observation also makes two oppositional moves within a multi-centered colonial context. On the one hand, Dunsany suggests that the Irish colony of which he is actually a citizen (in which even his privileged position is subordinate to the English authority) is not his country. Instead, by devising the fantastic proto-Babylonian setting of *King Argimenes* he has created his own Eastern space over which to assert sovereignty—to become the governing subject instead of the governed.

Yet the statement likewise suggests that the entire timeless Eastern world to which Dunsany returns in his plays and stories is, itself, “his country,” in contrast to an alienating contemporary Britain. Dunsany’s own Anglo-Irish identity makes the meaning ambiguous, but it is interesting to note that the bifurcated role of colonizer/colonized that such an analysis proposes is actually borne out by the substance of the play itself: the title character—with whom, as described earlier, Dunsany had explicitly identified with his position as a beleaguered colonial soldier in Africa—was a king who lost his sovereignty after becoming enslaved by another king, only to eventually regain it. This cyclical structure, again, serves to disrupt the geographic binaries of empire. Furthermore, in complaining that parents might decide to use plays such as *King Argimenes* to teach their children historical lessons about Babylonian civilization, Dunsany uses the colonized subject as a model for the proper intellectual engagement with the work, insisting that “the schoolmaster [...] must be caged” so that “people can enjoy themselves without being pounced on and made to lead better lives, like African natives being carried away by lions while they danced” (“Letters” 148). Again, Dunsany simultaneously objectifies and aligns himself with the colonized subject, in a rhetorical strategy intended primarily to call into question the systems enforcing the British political authority.

Throughout his fantasy writing and his letters, Dunsany perpetually recurs to a defamiliarized and exoticized London, reinscribed into a fanciful Eastern setting. Always, the orientation of the two locations relative to one another forms a central anxiety. Lamenting to Walker the alien constructedness

of contemporary London, in comparison to the parts of the world over which it asserted sovereignty, Dunsany writes: "As a matter of fact it is not the ruins of Ypres or a street in Dublin that shows the high water mark of our times' barbarity; it is to be seen in London in our 'musical' 'comedies,' in much of our architecture, and in toys made for children" ("Letters," 138). Such language aligns Dunsany with the perspective of a magical Eastern observer in his tale "A Narrow Escape," in which an Arabian magician living in a "dank cavern below Belgrave Square" decides to destroy London for having "abused its opportunities [...] gone too far, in fine, with its civilization," by concocting a potion made from "the heart of the toad that dwelleth in Arabia and by the mountains of Bethany" (501). Like Dunsany, he criticizes the effects of modernity on the city, cursing it "from fog to loam-pit, from zenith to the abyss, motor-bus, factory, shop, parliament, people" (502).

Likewise, in "The City on Mallington Moor" (1916), the narrator, deciding to forgo a London season due in part to "the ugliness of the things in the shops" and in part to "a quite unreasonable longing for large woods and waste spaces" which "every summer in London [...] grew worse till the thing was becoming intolerable" (427) hears rumors of a "beautiful city, all of white marble, and with a foreign look up on Mallington Moor" (428). The story has two phases; the first of which defamiliarizes the English setting and the second of which replaces it with an alternative East. Mallington Moor, itself fictitious, can apparently be reached by the London traveler via the hamlet of Lingwold, also fictitious but described as a realistic part of the English countryside. The narrator provides us the etymology establishing Mallington Moor as a lonely place: "The Normans when they came had called it Mal Lieu and afterwards Mallintown and so it changed to Mallington. [...] And before that some say that the Saxons called it Baplas, which I believe to be a corruption of Bad Place" (428). This description shows England itself as an object of conquest and domination, with the landscape a site of sinister alterity much like some Western constructions of the East.

After consultation with an intoxicated shepherd who sometimes reaches the edges of the Moor when pursuing stray sheep, the narrator eventually discovers the city, which he describes as explicitly Muslim in appearance, though with distortions: "what [the shepherd] had called thin spires were minarets [...]. The city was obviously of the East and yet where there should have been crescents on the domes of the minarets there were golden suns with rays" (432). In contrast to the desolation of the Moor over which he has traversed, "the people had kindly faces" and "were evidently friendly to strangers" and he notes that the walls were inscribed with the words "Here strangers rest," in a number of languages including Arabic, Assyrian, and "the language that you see on the walls of the great temples of Egypt" (433-34). Weary, the traveler lays down to

sleep and his “thoughts seemed part of the song that the woman was singing in the midst of the court under the golden braziers that hung from the high roof” (434). The story ends with the narrator waking into the “morning on Mallington Moor” with the city “quite gone” (435). Through the doubled progress of this tale—in which the exploration and eventual return to Mallington Moor itself forms its own darker quest within which the exotic “Eastern” goal is inscribed—Dunsany seems to assert the foreignness and dangers of England itself, in contrast to the more welcoming space of the city. That the pseudo-Muslim city is evanescent, associated with dreams, and open seemingly as a highly aestheticized resource and comfort to the Western traveler reinforces a familiar colonial stereotype of Asia. Yet the traveler’s individualized experience of integration with the city and its music, in contrast to his repulsion by London and terror of the Moor, again opens the possibility for a non-hierarchical relationship between East and West, mediated by the perceiving consciousness of an individual subject.

In a similar fashion, in “How One Came, as Was Foretold, To the City of Never” (1912), Dunsany opens with a prophecy that magically links the spaces of East and West in another reciprocally colonial relationship: “The child that played about the terraces and gardens in sight of the Surrey hills never knew that it was he that should come to the Ultimate City, never knew that he should see the Under Pits, the barbicans and the holy minarets of the mightiest city known” (391). Here, the power lies in the imagined, again explicitly Muslim, East; the “hills of Surrey” occupy a peripheral space relative to the Eastern metropole. Yet simultaneously, the story establishes the English subject as the organizing consciousness of the story: the child, upon becoming a man, discovers that he has the magical power to harness the winged hippogriff (Dunsany’s frequently utilized “Babylonian” creature) which enables him to embark on his flight of discovery much like a Western explorer arriving in the “New” World. Yet upon reaching the city the hero discovers “dwarfing the mountains, an even greater city” (393) which “neither the magic halter nor anything that he did” could prompt his hippogriff to fly towards. This outcome both diminishes the heroics of Dunsany’s English hero through his “deed unaccomplished” (394) and suggests the possibility of the “Ultimate City” orienting itself around its own aestheticized Other.

The ultimate example of Dunsany’s imagined East defamiliarizing and othering the West occurs in the story “A Tale of London” (1916). The story opens with a Sultan “in the very furthest lands that know Bagdad,” asking his “hasheesh-eater” to “dream to me now of London” (413). The hasheesh-eater replies with a pseudo-“Eastern” description of London:

Its houses are of ebony and cedar which they roof with thin copper plates that the hand of Time turns green. They have golden balconies in which amethysts are where they sit and watch the sunset. Musicians in the gloaming steal softly along the ways [...] in the darkness suddenly they play on dulcimers. (413)

After several pages of description in this vein the Sultan asks simply "And is their government good?" The hasheesh-eater replies only "it is most good," before passing out entirely (416). Lennon criticizes the tale for demonstrating "the binary of the glorious metropole and the envious periphery" (209). In addition to this critique one could add that the depiction of Eastern characters as decadent drug abusers is a particularly pernicious use of stereotype. However, Lennon's criticism entirely ignores the abundance of Dunsany tales in which great imaginary Eastern cities function as the "ultimate" dreams for peripheral Western observers; against this backdrop it becomes clear that this tale is, in part, about the function of the colonial gaze, which renders the commonplace exotic and overly aestheticized. No British reader would be likely to recognize the actual London in this rendering of golden balconies and amethysts; the tale begs us to examine how distance causes us to fabricate and construct the "alien." Furthermore, read against Dunsany's repeated expressions of disgust for the British government, the fact that the hasheesh-eater, in contrast to his paragraph-long rhapsodies about the beauties of other aspects of the city, seems overloaded by the mere suggestion of having to find laudatory things to say about the government and breaks down entirely after a cursory response, is a fairly marked criticism of Parliament. Again, while working in the medium of Orientalist fantasy, Dunsany continues to build at a dialectical relationship between East and West, in which Britain itself becomes objectified, defamiliarized and re-oriented relative to the East (and in particular the Muslim East).

Conclusion

In one of his more unnerving uses of magic in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie establishes the motif of "the Widow" who haunts his narrator's recollections as—particularly with the images of the film *The Wizard of Oz* so permanent a part of the cultural imagination—an encounter with a witch:

[T]he Widow is green but her hair is black as black. The Widow sits on a high high chair the chair is green the seat is black the Widow's hair has a center-parting it is green on the left and on the right black. High as the sky the chair is green the seat is black the Widow's arm is long as death its skin is green the fingernails are long and sharp and black. Between the walls the children green the

walls are green the Widow's arm comes snaking down the snake is green the children scream the fingernails are black they scratch the Widow's arm is hunting see the children run and scream the Widow's hand curls round them green and black. (Rushdie 234)

The function of "the Widow" in Rushdie's autobiography of post-Partition India remains vague and haunting until the very end, at which she emerges with a highly specific political identity: she is in fact Indira Gandhi, to whose coercive means of government Rushdie attributes the ultimate death and destruction of his narrator (one of the children born at the moment of Indian independence).

Despite his ostensibly deep commitment to the project of imperialism, Dunsany's magical texts are pervaded with the disgust for the contemporary mechanics of British governance so frequently apparent in his letters. The structure of his tales bear striking resemblance to aspects of *Midnight's Children* insofar as they disorient the reader in a magical otherworld, deploy mythopoeic tropes (in Dunsany's case Old Testament-style prophecy and *Arabian Nights* landscapes) only to allow moments of political critique to solidify and emerge when least expected. Like Rushdie's Bombay of "Once upon a time," Dunsany's worlds strain toward both timeless mythic identity and particularized orientation within the colonial moment in which he wrote. Understanding the complexities of his texts, and in particular his use of ahistorical temporality and reciprocal colonization, can help us better understand the complexities of the Anglo-Irish colonial identity itself.



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