

Kate Holterhoff, “Egyptology and Darwinian Evolution in Conan Doyle and H. Rider Haggard: The Scientific Imagination.”
English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920. 60.3 (2017): 314-340.

Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection left a lasting impact on scientific inquiry, and it influenced the ways in which the British public conceptualized their cultural identity in relation to the ancient past. Darwin’s seminal work *On the Origin of Species* (1859) precipitated foundational transformations in science, history, religion, philosophy, and literature. It also influenced archaeological theory and practice during a period in which Victorians presumed a “direct intellectual and hereditary line of descent” from Egypt to England (Holterhoff 317).

Britain’s occupation of Egypt from 1882-1914 triggered a period of unfettered archaeological exploration. Great exhibition sites such as the British Museum galvanized popular interest in Egyptology and stimulated British tourism to Egypt during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. British non-profit organizations such as the Egypt Exploration Fund supported archaeological fieldwork in Egypt as well. Kate Holterhoff suggests that many Victorian and Edwardian writers of *fin-de-siècle* romances also were attracted to Egyptian antiquity, because it bridged the “gap between classical history and primitive history” and related to “Darwinian themes” (316).

Britain’s excursion into Egypt was depicted in many fictional works including two short stories by Arthur Conan Doyle (pre-knighthood) and H. Rider Haggard. Through close readings of Conan Doyle’s “The Ring of Thoth” (1890) and Haggard’s “Smith and the Pharaohs” (1912-1913), Holterhoff considers how both authors’ “deep embedding in evolutionary thought” influenced their stories (314).

She traces the inspiration for both short stories to a trip Conan Doyle took with his wife Laura and her sister Emily to the Louvre in 1888; and several visits Haggard made to archaeological sites in Egypt from 1887-1912. She intimates that evolutionary theory was also a substantive part of Conan Doyle’s medical training at the University of Edinburgh from 1876-1881. Holterhoff theoretically aligns herself with a growing number of literary critics to propose how “romance can reveal more than realism about science’s role in culture” (315).

She poignantly suggests that “[h]uman relics, like human beings, inherit and express the residue of their own history” (315). Both authors integrated evolutionary themes into their prose to satisfy their readers’ insatiable fascination with ancient remains and the romantic stories that humanized them. It is appropriate that both stories largely take place in museums. In Haggard’s story, his protagonist, James Ebenezer Smith, enters the British Museum to escape from inclement weather, and he becomes infatuated with an unlabeled, plaster reproduction of the Egyptian Queen Ma-Mee: “Smith looked at it once, twice, thrice, and at the third look he fell in love” (Haggard 142). By not including the previous quotation in her analysis, Holterhoff misses the opportunity to deploy it as a metaphor for critiquing the authenticity of British interest in Egyptian antiquity. This is analytically unexplainable as she eloquently contrasts the “quality possessed by authentic artworks that copies cannot reproduce” (330) with Smith’s own possessiveness over the plaster cast of Ma-Mee later in her article.

In “The Ring of Thoth”, Conan Doyle’s protagonist (and Egyptologist), John Vansittart Smith, falls asleep in the Louvre, and he awakes to find the undead, Egyptian

scientist Sosra unwrapping the mummified remains of his beloved Atma. Smith listens to Sosra's story of his search for the ancient ring that will "undo his immortality" (319). Holterhoff evaluates the relationship between the two male scientists to further illuminate how the "progress of knowledge from ancient to modern times" might be a "direct consequence of Darwinian ways of knowing" (319). She offers an insightful "critique of Victorian materialism" (321) by interpreting Sosra's response to Smith's spiritual inattentiveness toward the museum's collection: "The whole keystone of our old life in Egypt was not the inscriptions or monuments of which you make so much, but was our hermetic philosophy and mystic knowledge of which you say little or nothing!" (qtd. in Holterhoff 321). Holterhoff did not include an historical comment on either the British occupation of Egypt or the deleterious effects of British archaeology on Egyptian antiquity. In so doing, she would have approached a deeper level of historicity within her analysis of the selected works.

"The Ring of Thoth" balances Smith's material science and Sosra's mysticism in order to assess civilization's intellectual progress from ancient to modern times. Similarly, Haggard's story provides scientific and moralistic guidelines for "how to properly" and "reverentially" conduct research without erasing cultural pasts (329). Both stories allude the possibility of a "more complete understanding of human cultural history" (328) through the study of ancient Egypt.

Through her examination of romance fiction, Holterhoff efficiently evaluates "example[s] from British history of Darwinism's overlap with literary culture" (336). By redressing criticisms of British colonial encroachment in Egypt, she might have provided a more complete response to historical, cultural, and scientific concerns about the preservation and restoration of Egyptian antiquity.

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