

Review of Sara Brio, “The Shocking Truth: Science, Religion, and Ancient Egypt in Early Nineteenth-Century Fiction.”
Nineteenth-Century Contexts 40. 4 (2018): 331-44.

Egypt’s place in the imagination of nineteenth-century Britain has been the subject of renewed scholarly attention. David Gange (2013), Martin Willis (2016), and Colin Kidd (2016) have highlighted how archaeology, artefacts, and mythologies were used in debates about religion, science, and metamythology. In each of these works, Egypt is presented as a storehouse of ancient wisdom that could be known to Victorian investigators through empirical study of those artefacts that had survived from antiquity. Yet, as Sara Brio argues, in the nascent genre of speculative fiction, ancient wisdom could be embodied and given voice, speaking directly to the concerns of the early nineteenth century. Brio’s article for an Egyptian-themed special volume of *Nineteenth Century Contexts* uses two pieces of fiction, Jane Loudon’s novel *Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-Second Century* (1827), and Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “Some Words with a Mummy” (1845), as case studies.

The central conceit of both works is the reanimation of a mummified ancient Egyptian using a galvanic battery. The mummies are then used to pronounce on the morality of contemporary issues of science and religion. As Brio puts it, “These icons of the ancient world were resurrected in order to question the role of morality in the modern world” (331). After deftly explaining the rather convoluted setting of *Mummy!* (a utopian, twenty-second century London ruled by an unmarried, female, absolute monarch), Brio demonstrates how this allows Loudon “to explore nineteenth-century scientific concerns” without “directly naming any particular philosopher or school of thought” (333). Using a five-millennia-old mummy, and a London society three centuries into the future, Loudon was able to frame the moral underpinnings of early nineteenth-century science as perennial concerns. Brio explains that these concerns formed part of a wider debate about the relationship between science and religion in Regency and early Victorian Britain. The boundaries of knowledge were being continually tested during this period, and Brio makes the telling observation that Loudon’s narrative parallels the Genesis account of original sin, in which humans were cut off from God as a result of their pursuit of forbidden knowledge (337-8). Several characters in *Mummy!* explicitly wish to obtain immortality or omniscience, and its protagonist, Edric, is forced to accept that both are forbidden for good reason; they are in fact curses. Indeed, only when Edric abandons his pursuit is the mummy Cheops able to return to eternal rest. Rather than the secret of eternal life, what is learned, Brio argues, is that reanimation may be scientifically possible but “the role of creator falls outside the moral boundaries set by Christianity, boundaries which must be respected for the good of society” (338).

Next, Brio examines Poe’s “Some Words with a Mummy”. This short story satirizes the nineteenth century craze of “unwrapping”, in which small groups observed a mummy being unrolled of its bandages, part of a performative culture of science merging scientific enquiry and spectacle. Poe’s narrator arrives at a private unwrapping at the home of a friend, where several sarcophagi and bandages of the mummy, Allamistakeo, are unwrapped. The group then apply electricity from a galvanic battery, which reawakens Allamistakeo. He chides the group for treating bodies as commodities, before accepting their apologies and engaging them in scientific

discourse over wine and cigars. It soon transpires that Allamistakeo represents an advanced intellectual culture, in many ways superior to that of his reanimators. As Brio observes, by giving Allamistakeo an urbane, sophisticated voice that contrasts with his comparatively ignorant audience, Poe is able to satirize both the unwrapping fad and the arrogant conception that the mid-nineteenth century represented the apotheosis of science and culture. Both are used to demonstrate “the pride behind the quest for the truth”, which is “relative and ultimately unattainable” (342).

Brio’s central argument is that these stories offer a unique insight into questions of science and religion, since they are qualitatively different from later works which tended to portray reanimated mummies as evil automatons. Rather than the increasing prevalent Orientalism of the later nineteenth century, Loudon and Poe “imbue ancient Egypt with a sense of mystical authority” (343). The mummies are therefore able to speak authoritatively on contemporary questions of science and religion. This thesis is strongly argued and well-evidenced, and Brio has done well to situate it within debates about natural theology and Robert Chambers’ controversial *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844). However, a few elements could have been more fully explored, particularly the cultural context of *Mummy!* For instance, Brio tantalizingly mentions the Irish king, Roderick. The circumstances by which Ireland became an independent monarchy are not explained, and yet this would have allowed exploration of contemporary debates about Catholic emancipation and the role of a monarchy in the aftermath of the Regency. Since one of the novel’s conceits is a Catholic monarchy in England, this would have provided the reader with helpful context. Nevertheless, Brio has done an admirable job in bringing to light an underexplored perspective on science, religion, and literature.

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