An Angel in the Midst of "Dark Business"

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In 1977, Carol Christ, a professor at The University of California, Berkeley, wrote an essay called "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House" for *The Widening Sphere,* a volume of essays about the changing role of women in literature. Prior to this essay, much had been written about the correlation between the growing pressures men faced in the social and economic spheres of Victorian England and the depiction of an ideal woman in nineteenth century literature in response to threats towards the traditional order, morals and values of the time – namely growing calls for women's rights. But before Christ, little attention had been given to what this idealization revealed about the male characters in the novels concerned with "the angel in the house" (147).

"The Angel in the House" is a domestic goddess naturally gifted with feminine values that men traditionally find themselves without – "love, intuition, beauty, virtue" –which Christ argues result from the idealization of a passive nature. Men, she argues conversely, are "defined" by their desire to act and in their actions "achieve;" this desire, however, only results in "anxiety and Pain," especially when their actions lead to failure (149). The early nineteenth century authors that Christ examines, therefore, depict an ideal manhood free of aggressiveness and ultimately asexual, very different from the male characters depicted in novels later in the century. Women, despite the belief in their passive natures, are not without power in these early narratives. Although this power is granted her by the respect of the man, it gains agency when it changes the behavior of the man as he attempts to "behave virtuously" and "strive to be worthy of her" (151).

This passive and asexual masculine ideal, however, disappeared later in the Victorian era. With real-life British adventurers conquering distant lands and discovering hidden treasures abroad, society in the heart of Imperial England began to embrace a more aggressive male comfortable with giving in to his inner bestiality. Both the works of Tennyson and Patmore, with which Christ deals, were written during the early and mid-century, and her analysis does not extend to novels written towards the end of the century. However, with the growing popularity of adventurers like David Livingston, Sir John Franklin, and Sir Richard Francis Burton, novels in the latter part of the century made way for a new kind of hero. Despite advent of this new genre of adventure novel, "the angel in the house" did not entirely disappear; instead, I would argue, her influence became even more necessary.

Much scholarship has been done on her role in these novels – the apparent weakness of her

character and her subjugation to the male ego – and several notable voices have offered explanations detailing the intersection between the changing role of women in Victorian England and the advent of women's rights activists and the growing population of prostitutes, but this angelic ideal was also necessary for defining her masculine counterpart in the face of a society now concerned with the influence of exotic cultures. By analyzing the masculine identity of the male characters through their relationships with the female characters of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, which was written later in the century, I will attempt to highlight the shift in masculine ideal toward a more aggressive chivalric hero that emerges in these two novels. Furthermore, I would argue that the role of "the angel in the house" not only informs but also creates a masculine identity in the midst of Victorian England, where a growing concern about a man's ability to display the characteristics of strength, valor, and gallantry sent many looking to the dark places on the map for true adventure.

Bradley Dean, in his essay on lost world fiction in the Victorian era, traces this shift in the ideal of manhood with the increase in discomfort over imperial conquest. He holds up Cecil Rhodes, a businessman in South Africa and self-proclaimed imperialist, as a manifestation of this tension. Rhodes, Dean reveals, boasted of his inner "barbarian," lauding anything "big and simple" and "brutal" (205). However, these qualities are also what his detractors criticized in his violent dealings in Africa, claiming that by conquering the East, Rhodes was reinforcing "'Oriental' values of fatalism and despotism" (205).

Although Dean focuses his argument on adventures abroad, Victorians also feared this aggression would find its way back to the heart of the Empire. With this embracing of a more brutal and aggressive masculinity, the need for a domestic womanhood completely innocent of the colonial threat became even more immediate. Empire began to seep into mystery novels like those of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker as a source of "criminal agents," "criminal means," and "criminal incentive" (Park 135). Therefore, "the angel in the house," innocent of the seedier side of life, also appeared in these novels, representing for the male characters the sanctity of their nation, which must be protected at all costs. Instead of encouraging passivity, the woman supplicant gives agency to the men that was lacking before her appearance.

The beginning of *The Sign of Four* has been studied most often for its apparent insight into the dark fathoms of Sherlock Holmes' brilliant brain. He is stymied, frustrated, restless, needing work that provokes his intelligence. He fills the void this need has left within him with cocaine. The diction used to describe his drug use connotes anther kind of ecstasy; he finds it "transcendentally stimulating" as he "thrusts" the needle into his arm, "pressed down the tiny piston" and heaves " a long sigh of satisfaction" (Doyle 1). The sensual and erotic language of Homes' drug use suggests his use of cocaine fulfills a sexual frustration.

Watson, too, projects an air of frustration and impotency. As a doctor and friend, Watson finds Holmes' drug use detrimental and longs to broach the subject. However, Holmes' "great powers" and "masterly manners" intimidate him into holding back (Doyle 1). His passive impotency places him fully outside of himself as a man and the expected conventions of his position in three manners: firstly, he is a doctor, but is unable to offer medical advice; secondly, he is a man, but is not the master of his household; and finally, he has a vigorous and

active nature – he served in a war – but has been physically injured and left feeble.

In his dejection and apparent confusion over his gender role in his friendship with Holmes, Watson submits to a subordinate and, perhaps, feminized position. In fact, in chapter one, "The Science of Deduction," he is reminiscent of nothing so much as a nagging wife. He begins his diatribe with a sarcastic "Which is it to-day?' … 'morphine or cocaine?" (Doyle 1). But even at Holmes' calm and somewhat condescending response, Watson does not bristle; instead he marvels at his friend's capabilities, "earnestly" insisting it is all of "greatest interest" to him (3). His only real objection comes when Holmes does not provide the expected praise for Watson's accounts of their adventures together, which, as any domestic woman would also attest, were "specially designed to please him" (2).

Watson's gender confusion can be easily explained by his living conditions. Both Watson and Holmes live in a bachelor pad devoid of a feminine influence beyond the occasional intrusion of Mrs. Hudson, who, although she is a landlady, acts almost as a subordinate housekeeper; it is she who answers the door and escorts Mary Morstan at Holmes' request to "Ask the young lady to step up" (5). Holmes' response to Mary is in direct contrast to his earlier repose; he becomes erect in his chair "rubbing his hands" with "eyes" that "glistened" (6). In this moment, Watson compares him to a "hawk" whose direct concentration is focused on his prey (6). Both men indicate a deep interest in their guest and, in turn, become much more themselves. Holmes becomes caught up in the case, enthusiastically seeking the fulfillment she is offering. Although she by her nature as "the angel in the house" is virtuous and, therefore, untouchable, Holmes is able to spend his sexual frustration in chasing and neutralizing the outside threat to her body. Watson, previously asexual and representing the form of masculinity idealized in the earlier part of the century, aggressively becomes the hero and protector, casting off his lack of agency.

Mary Morstan, consequently, gives every indication of being delicate prey; while entering, Watson notes, "her lip trembled, her hand quivered, and she showed every sign of intense inward agitation" (5). Her appearance offers no threat to the men, being "small," "dainty," and feminine, but not a great and fearsome beauty (5). Instead, Watson describes her as "sweet and amiable" and finds something "spiritual and sympathetic" in her gaze (5). Despite the delicacy of her description, Watson's prolonged focus on her physical appearance eroticizes her person. Mary's form and figure become the objects of Watson's masculine need. However, in her quiet femininity, she offers the men a vision of the English rose, which, instead of being confronted with sexual aggression, must be, like England itself, at all cost protected and sheltered.

Mary, as "the angel in the house," may be an object of sexual desire, but must also maintain her virtue in order to have power over the men. Accordingly, Watson attempts to ignore his attraction to Mary and simply admire her from a distance; this, however, only increases his obsession with her, as he cannot help but to think and even dream of "her smiles, the deep rich tones of her voice" for the rest of the day (8). Watson himself refers to these musings as "dangerous" (8). He naturally feels that he is not good enough for the paragon he has made of Mary's character and, therefore, strives to be worthy of her by seeking to protect her interests.

Mary has become caught up in the intrigue surrounding her fathers' dealings with Jonathan Small and three Indian conspirators; her case associates her with the Agra treasure and, therefore, the Orient. Even the turban she wears "stir[s] in the two men" "fantasies" of exotic worlds (Frank 62). Hyungji Park, in his essay

"Empire, Women, and Epistemology in the Victorian Detective Plot," suggests that the threat from those seeking the Agra treasure against Mary is representative of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 – known in Britain as a mutiny – in which British women and children were violently murdered. This sparked a defensive attitude toward the colonies, and British men took up the mantle of "chivalric rescuers staving off the Indian aggressors" from attacking the "vulnerable English woman" (137). Tonga, an Islander, represents the base depravity found in places of colonial conquest and the threat of that wickedness to the empire. McBratney points out that "Doyle's narrative ascribes the Islander's violence not to any legitimate resentment of British invasions of the archipelago but to his race's innate proclivity for monstrous aggression (156).

However, throughout the novel Mary Morstan remains passively innocent of most of the workings of the Empire. Only Thaddeus Sholto, youngest son of her father's friend and murderer, gives her any indication of the darker side of the case. Mary, indeed, beautifully fits Patmore's vision of "the angel in the house." Watson even refers to her as "angelic" after admiring her womanly prerogative to stay calm to soothe the housekeeper of the late Mr. Bartholomew Sholto. Her intuition of the needs of the housekeeper and her desire to fulfill those needs born out of her love of her fellow man creates an ideal of domestic womanhood. She chooses to stay behind as Holmes and Watson take the burden of the case onto themselves and face the disturbing murder upstairs. She firmly positions herself as a damsel in distress by calling Holmes and Watson her "knight-errants" (Doyle 39).

Watson finds himself to be a new man in her presence. Instead of a merely the passive observer of Holmes' great work, the reflection of himself Watson finds in Mary's eyes is a brave, heroic man. In her fear of the disturbing sounds in Bartholomew's house, Mary physically and emotionally turns to Watson for comfort and protection. Watson views their holding hands as childlike, and a new "peace" steals over him in the midst of the "dark things that surrounded" them (18). Later, on the drive to her home, Mary becomes "faint" and gives in to a fit of weeping (26). Her actions allow for Watson to become her protector, bravely shielding her from the ugliness of the Empire as it creeps into her life. After dropping Mary off into the loving arms of Mrs. Forrester, Watson refuses her request for news of the case, instead choosing to put Holmes' plan into action and heroically riding off to defend Mary's interests. As he disappears into the night Watson glances back:

> I still seem to see that little group on the step, the two graceful, clinging figures, the half-opened door, the hall light shining through stained glass, the barometer, and the bright stair-rods. It was soothing to catch even that passing glimpse of a tranquil English home in the midst of the wild, dark business which had absorbed us. (26)

This iconic image of domestic purity further enraptures and frustrates Watson. Despite Watson's desire for Mary, he is unable to fully act upon it yet. He has placed her on a pedestal of virtue, innocence, and love. Her relationship with Mrs. Forrester casts her as both a mother and child; she is the governess in Mrs. Forrester's household and is responsible for caring for and educating her children, but she is also a daughter to the older woman despite their being no blood ties between them. The love between them is obvious, as Doyle describes "how tenderly her arm stole around the other's waist" and how "motherly" Mrs. Forrester speaks to Mary (26). Their love is bathed in the "hall light," making it almost heavenly and sacred (26). This image reveals Watson's view of Mary,

and while his idealization of her as something both domestic and holy stymies his sexual desire, it gives agency to his exploration of the "dark business" of the case, by which he hopes to prove himself worthy of her (26).

This picture of domestic tranquility grounds a narrative that takes flight through the streets of London. Watson quickly hurries back to Holmes, Toby in tow, in order to conduct a chase of the foreign criminals. Holmes embarks on the chase with the vigor of a young man and a "gleam" in his eye; for him, heroism is found in "the obsessive discovery of crime" (Farrel 32). He does not stop or slacken his pursuit of the criminal, setting in motion several means of ferreting out the truth, including the use of the Baker Street Irregulars, before putting his own nose to the ground. His dogged determination and aggressive agency is markedly different from his dissatisfied repose at the beginning of the novel.

Watson, however, is still stymied in his masculine role; two things stand in the way of him declaring his romantic love for Mary. The first is a gallant desire to not take advantage of her in her time of shock and weakness; second, and "worse still," is the idea that she might be wealthy (Doyle 26). However, I would argue, his hesitation does not come from her alteration – he would still believe her sweet and brave – but from his definition of himself in the face of her change in circumstance. He wonders if he would be perceived as a "vulgar fortune-seeker" and if it is "fair" or "honorable" – words evoking a chivalric hero – that he, in his lesser circumstances, takes advantage of the chance that has brought them together (26).

In the end, Holmes and Watson's need for heroism is fulfilled. Holmes catches the criminals, although he loses the treasure, and Jonathan Small proceeds to confirm all of his hunches on the case. It is Watson, however, who has the honor of relieving Mary's mind. Before, the Agra treasure was a bulwark between them, lifting Mary from her life as a dependent and making her in no need of a protector, but now that it has been dumped into the Thames, Watson is free to make a claim. Her response to the loss of the treasure is a relieved "Thank God" because she has no desire for material wealth, which therefore firmly places Mary as an example of an ideal woman perfect in her morals and values (52). Appropriately, Watson worships her as such: "Whoever had lost a treasure, I knew that night that I had gained one" (52).

Similarly, Margaret Trelawny in Bram Stoker's *Jewel of Seven Stars* becomes a damsel in distress in need of a chivalric hero to rescue her from an exotic threat. Malcolm Ross, a lawyer and member of the bourgeois class, eagerly answers her summons and is swept into an adventure whose roots are found in ancient Egypt. Mr. Trelawny, a renowned Egyptologist, has been mysteriously attacked in his own bedroom and has succumbed to a strange coma. It quickly becomes apparent that Margaret's father expected such a circumstance, as he has set in place legal stipulations for him to remain where he is and none of his artifacts to be moved; however, he does ask that his daughter and a friend "whom [she] can trust" keep vigil over his person at all hours day and night (Stoker 25).

Margaret, like Mary, is presented as a strong individual, not "shy, but who "rule[s] all around her with a sort of high-bred dominance" (11). Despite this firm practicality and her comfortable control of her domestic dominion, her father's illness and the strange men entering her home quickly throws off her equilibrium and puts her in need of a man's guidance. Seeing her pale cheeks and agitation, Malcolm immediately assumes command of the situation, introducing himself to the males in the house, the police

sergeant and the doctor, making himself the dominant presence in the home. The men quickly comply with his mastery; Doctor Winchester offers his magnifying glass first to Malcolm so that he might examine an object of interest before suggesting that Margaret might see (11). Malcolm gallantly offers Margaret the tool, but she, choosing to remain innocent, demurs and rejects the offer.

Margaret, however, does not maintain, as Mary Morstan does, this envelope of unassuming purity and innocence. Because Margaret Trelawny's birth coincided with her father's breaching of Queen Tera's ancient tomb, the two become entangled in one another's identity. At moments in the novel it is clear that Tera, an exotic and powerful figure, overtakes Mary's personality. In this way Tera becomes dangerous and is "demonized as an object from another world who is a force of destruction not love" (Smith 87). Like her counterpoint, Tonga, she wrests control away from the civilized men, plunging the narrative into chaos hinting at the supernatural; however, unlike the threat in The Sign of Four, Tera's encroachment on the sanctity of English womanhood is even more insidious. Her invasion of Margaret's self corrupts her purity from within and creates a barrier between the Malcolm and the object of his love.

His suspicion of Margaret begins even before her connection to Tera is revealed. In what seems almost like a conspiracy, the men in the house begin to voice their concern about Margaret; however, Malcolm remains true to her cause, determining not to openly defend her in hopes that he will remain in their confidence, and therefore will be able to avert any aggressive action before it takes root, but his steadfastness begins to falter as he perceives that "The Margaret that [he] knew seemed to be changing" (Stoker 201). Once Malcolm recognizes the sinister force inside his love, their courtship takes on a disorienting pattern of attraction and repulsion. He does not recognize in her "the angel in the house" when she is possessed by Tera and, therefore, his role as her gallant hero becomes unnecessary. Margaret largely takes control of the experiment at the end. Malcolm narrates, "Margaret spoke with a strange ring in her voice; a ring that cannot be, unless there is the consciousness of truth behind it" as she dictates to the men the outcome of the "great experiment" (223). Her "truth" is garnered from the knowledge Tera has passed on to her, making her more powerful than her suitor, and this "intellectual aloofness made an impalpable barrier" between the two lovers (204). However, Malcolm is drawn back in every time the vulnerable Margaret reappears. After the jewel is recovered, Malcolm notes with relief:

> The change back was more marked in Margaret than in any of us. Perhaps it was that she was a woman, whilst we were men; perhaps it was that she was younger than the rest; …At any rate the change was there, and I was happier than I had been through the long journey. All her buoyancy, her tenderness, her deep feeling seemed to shine forth once more' (Stoker 198).

With the recovery of the tender Margaret, Malcolm once again finds his footing, gains agency, and commits to following the mystery through to the end. It is telling that Stoker entirely devotes chapter XVIII to Malcolm's doubts and fears over Margaret's inconsistency, and it contains what is perhaps the clearest explanation of his turmoil. "It was not her love, or honour, or her truth, or her kindness, or her zeal" that Malcolm doubts, but Margaret herself (204). Despite this hesitancy, Malcolm determines to see the experiment to the end even as he questions the very identity of his love.

The climax of their courtship arrives at the unwrapping of Queen Tera. Margaret reacts with

maidenly outrage, defending Tera's womanly virtue: "A woman is a woman, if she had been dead five thousand centuries!" (231). The stripping of the mummy is tied to the disrobing of Margaret. Malcolm's confusion over the "dual existence" of the two women has made them interchangeable in his mind, and even her father recognizes "there be the spirit of that great and wondrous Queen" inside of her (208-215). Despite their acknowledgment of Margaret's mystical connection to the mummy, both her father and Malcolm insist on exposing her flesh. Her father's only comfort is that "we men are accustomed to such things" (231). In this argument, Trelawny seeks to desexualize the event, but in his actions he fails.

As the men begin work, Margaret "clasped hands" with Malcolm and they "held each other hard" as the "pungent smell" wraps around him, making him feel as if it "caught or touched us in some special way" (233). Even before the revelation of Tera's body, the sexual tension is heightened by the sensual smell in the air. Margaret physically reacts as "her heart beat more and more wildly, till her breast heaved" (234). Her connection to Queen Tera's body links the experience to her own, thus the unwrapping of Tera is also the stripping of Margaret. Her virtue and innocence are being inexorably stripped from her.

Once the wrappings are removed, Tera is revealed in a "marriage robe" (235). This once more connects her fate to that of Margaret, as Margaret intends to become Malcolm's bride. Her wishes are left unfulfilled as the men prematurely deflower her. Her virtue is as delicate as the robe that veils her from their view, and it is just as easily stripped away. In his essay "Mummy Fiction and the Occupation of Egypt: Imperial Striptease," Dean relates "mummy wrappings…masks, veils, and shrouds" in gothic fiction to the "conventional signposts of the intersection of dreadful mystery and compelling desire" (391). In *Jewel of the Seven Stars*, the steady removal of Tera's coverings is the manifestation of Malcolm's sexual desire to unveil Margaret. Even as he refuses to partake in the unraveling, he stands "bent over" the body eagerly awaiting the outcome (Stoker 234).

Instead, it is Margaret's father, the man traditionally charged with the task of protecting her, who lays Tera bare on the table. The scene is erotically charged as he "lifted the fold at the neck" and draws "a quick intake of breath" only to go on and lift "a little more" before "with both hands he raised the ample robe" (235). This exposes Tera's body before the men, but her face remains hidden until "with hands that trembled slightly" Trelawny lifts the veil away and leaves her completely "nude" (235). The men stand "awed" at the revelation of the "flesh" that is "full and round" and skin "smooth as new ivory" (236). Malcolm feels a "rush of shame" after her disrobing; he realizes it is "indecent" and "almost sacrilegious" (235). His embarrassment stems from his innate sense of chivalry and his need to protect the virtue and innocence of Margaret, yet he does not look away. In this moment, Tera's exposure coupled with Margaret's fall from grace is Malcolm's failure as the masculine ideal. He is not only unable to protect "the angel of the house," but he passively participates in her eroticism.

The scene becomes even more sexually charged as Malcolm realizes with her "long, black, curling lashes…nostrils, set in grave pride…full red lips…white line of pearly teeth…[and] fair, glorious in quantity and glossy black as a raven's wing" Tera even looks eerily like Margaret (236). Margaret, seeking to protect Tera and, in turn, herself from the ravenous eyes of the men surrounding her "threw over the body the beautiful robe which lay across her arm," but the damage is already done; her father is

"overcome" and "broke down" at the sight, seeing the body for the first time as that of his child (236). Margaret stands in the midst of the men fully exposed and distraught. Her virtue is lost in the disrobing procedure that reads almost like a rape as Margaret's protests are overpowered by a group of men.

Because of this, the male characters are destined to fail in their endeavor to raise Tera. They are no longer capable of victory or achievement since they have failed in the task of protecting Margaret from not only the outside threat but also the threat of their sexual desire. It is no surprise that when Malcolm finally illuminates the room after the great experiment, he finds his companions "had sunk down on the floor, and were gazing upward with fixed eyes of unspeakable terror" (244). "The angel in the house" has been lost with Margaret's virtue, and her death is merely a formal ending to Malcolm's courtship. Malcolm is the only one of his group to survive. In the end, he attempts to make right his part in Tera's unwrapping by carrying Margaret away from danger, a "dear burden" he discovers was, in fact, Tera (245).

The ending of Stoker's novel is ambiguous and hopeless. Auerbach insightfully suggests in "Magi and Maidens" that the reason for the loss of Margaret is that "Victorian wives-to-be" cannot be accommodated with the "vision of primordial, transfigured womanhood" (292). Because Margaret is invaded by the Other, she is lost to a foreign threat. Margaret's innate correlation to the English empire makes her death the "horror…of empire's end" (Dean 406). This final chapter was found "disturbing enough" by its readership that later "it was given an entirely different ending, which Stoker himself may not have written" (406).

Like the original ending, Margaret is swallowed up by the "black mist" symbolizing her death, but in the later version Margaret is reborn as she calls out "Yes, Malcolm!" and is once again bathed in light (Stoker 248). This rebirth seems to cleanse Margaret of the taint of foreign occupation with the "physical annihilation of the mummy" (250). Her cleansing and the removal of the foreign threat along with Malcolm's rescuing her by casting light in the darkness allows for their later marriage.

Mary Morstan and Margaret Trelawny are integral characters in these novels because, by exemplifying the ideal domestic woman who is virtuous, loving, innocent and intuitive, they create a male character who is chivalrous, vigorous, protective and heroic. Furthermore, with the growing threat to empire, male characters, like Watson and Malcolm Ross, fulfill a need to similarly defend England by preserving and protecting "the angel in the house." However, the alternate ending of Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* seems to open up more questions about the masculine ideal of the late nineteenth century than it answers. Does the clinging to the active, chivalric hero confirm the presence of this ideal or does it show a pervading fear of this heroism failing to protect English interests as Malcolm fails in the first version? The answers to these questions might tell us more about the importance of "the angel in the house" as a character that informs and creates a masculine ideal.

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