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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

English Malady: The Opiate Use in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*

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| ABSTRACT

This article argues that Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* deploys opium as both narrative engine and cultural signifier to diagnose mid-Victorian imperial and domestic anxieties. Using close reading within a historicist and socio-cultural framework, it situates the novel's multi-voiced structure against contexts of imperial commerce, East End drug cultures, medical practice, and emergent regulation, with selective intertextual comparisons to contemporaneous narratives. The analysis shows that opium and the diamond operate as twinned Oriental emblems that oscillate between thrill and threat, linking colonial extraction to metropolitan contamination through scenes of disguise, mixed descent, and domestic incursion. The study posits that opium in *The Moonstone* both symbolizes and enacts a cultural hypnosis that surfaces the empire's external entanglements and internal fractures, anticipating Victorian recalibrations of imperial power and domestic governance while offering a critique of conquest, medicine, and class ideology.

| KEYWORDS

The Moonstone, opium, Orientalism, British imperialism, Victorian sensation fiction, class politics

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In 1868, Wilkie Collins was tormented by his serious oculopathy and also suffered from a double-whammy pummeled by "his mother's approaching death"(Hayter, 1968, p. 259). In excruciating pain and psychological distress, Collins "was taking laudanum continually as an anodyne [and] dictated his novel *The Moonstone*" (Hayter, 1968, p. 258). Therefore, his composition of this fiction was both besieged by this doleful mentality and struggled "under the sway of the laudanum" (Hayter, 1968, p. 259). *The Moonstone*, indeed, is a novel concerning the opium, too. In Collins's fiction, opium "is the true author of the diamond's removal" in the novel (Duncan, 1994, p. 315). And the truth of this detective story is about how an opium-dosed gentleman commits the theft and is later exculpated by the opium experiment designed by another opium-eater. Collins's *The Moonstone* story also belongs to a flowering of nineteenth-century literary works that involve the issues of drugs. As Susan Zieger points out, *The Moonstone* serves as a link between De Quincey's *Confessions* and the fin-de-siecle decadent novels, functioning "to form a continuous thematic strand in which [drug] use connotes the dilettantism, esotericism, and the vice of antisocial characters" (p. 213). Yet, this sensation fiction is also unique in its exposition of the opium problems in the mid-Victorian age. Considering the structure of its plot, *The Moonstone* "has a Chinese box intricacy" (Hayter, 1968, p. 259), tallying with the Orientalism Collins attempts to reveal in his depictions of opiates. Also, opium is further rendered as a motif that exposes a mid-Victorian society which fractures along class lines. In the following parts, I shall explore how *The Moonstone* uses the image of opium to formulate an internally schismatic empire.

2. Threats or Thrills: From the Far East to the East End

In *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, Crusoe boards a ship which in Siam "exchanged some of [their] wares for opium" and journeys unto China because it "bears a great price among the Chinese" (p. 155). Probably Defoe could hardly foresee that this drug the Britons once made profits of would be often linked with an Oriental threat in the later English master-texts. From the reign of Queen Anne to Queen Victoria, there emerges out of the opium no more an "idyll of [the British] empire

building" but a xenophobic Orientalism concerning the Victorians' scruples about this exotic cultural symbol (Nayder, 1992, p. 220). "*The Moonstone*'s Robinsonian counterpart" (Saul, 2004, p. 127), Gabriel Betteredge, for instance, shows distrust for the opium experiment designed by an Eurasian hybrid Ezra Jennings. Likewise, Betteredge in his related part also exposes his doubts about the value of another Oriental object–the Moonstone, in his description: "When you looked down into the stone, you looked into a yellow deep that drew your eyes into it so that they saw nothing else" (Collins, 2012, p. 84). This yellow object of conspiracy possibly shares some parallelism with opium, in Betteredge's eyes, both of which are also demoted as an Oriental "hocus-pocus" that invades the Christian society. Indeed, some critics have already revealed the homogeneity between the opium and the diamond in *The Moonstone*. The diamond's "entrancing powers" are closely associated with the drug's "hypnotic effects" (Mehta, 1995, p. 629), and pointed out by Jaya Mehta, in Vedic, the word soma has dual significance. It means either the Hindu "God of Moon" or the name of another native critic hallucinatory narcotic (p. 629). And thus this indirect trace also "paves the way for the entwining of opium and diamond" (Fazli, 2012, p. 173).

In associating the drug with the diamond, Wilkie Collins actually "draw[s] a thread of colonial [links]" through the text (Mehta, 1995, p. 629). The drug and the diamond point to the two aspects of the Oriental, colonial culture. For mid-Victorians, those dangerous threats from the colonial regions (opium) "might be characterized with equal accuracy as seductive [Oriental] thrills" (diamond) (Milligan, 1995, p. 70). In *The Moonstone*, it is when Godfrey was attracted by the "ancient Oriental manuscript, richly illuminated with Indian figures and devices", that the Indians assaulted him (p. 256). More interestingly, the Occidental invader in the novel (Colonel Herncastle) loots the diamond from an Oriental treasury by killing the three guardians, yet another three Brahmins re-procure the moonstone later and send it back. Conversely, in the history, the British transported the opium to China so as to make profits since Defoe's years, but later in the 1860s and 70s, the Orientals set up opium dens in the east end and corrupted the London society in return. Arguably, the link and discrepancy between the opium and the diamond may also refer to the British paradoxical perception of the exotic culture in the mid nineteenth century. As Barry Milligan observes, for Victorians, the Far East "resemble[s] the violent, mysterious, and demonic Orient of the Oriental tales as much as they resemble the serene and beautiful Cathay of chinoiserie" (p. 20). A bold conjecture is that the demonic exotica (opium) may be the "lethal" double of the fascinating curiosities (diamond) from the colonial nations. These two coalesce in the Oriental culture reproduced in *The Moonstone*, and probably also co-influence the imperialist trespassers. Rosanna's japanned tin case conceals the evidence of Franklin's criminality driven by the influence of opium; and it is from an Indian cabinet that the Indian diamond was stolen by the opium-dosed gentleman. It is particularly notable that Colonel Herncastle becomes "a notorious opium-eater" after returning from India (Collins, 2012, p. 51). By this design, Collins may accuse the British of their culpability as depicted in the prologue. And further, as Marty Roth argues, "if we choose to understand [*The Moonstone*] as a collective Anglo-Saxon fantasy formed in reaction to some originating event, the two Opium Wars "would be the prime suspect" (89). In the Second Opium War (1856-60), much akin to the scene depicted in the prologue of *The Moonstone*, the British army also plundered the Summer Palace in Peking, and exhibited later some of its looted curiosities in the 1862 Exhibition, which "stir[red] interest" amongst the public (Chang, 2010, p. 125). But, as James Hevia states in his *English Lessons*,

> "The chaotic processes of looting the Summer Palace and transforming its materiality into curiosities might be understood, therefore, as mechanisms of deterritorialization [...] Brought low and disordered by these actions, the Qing Empire could then be reterritorialized in a new role: the backward student of a British tutor. The tutorials that resulted included punishment and discipline as the necessary grounding on which learning could be initiated" (p. 102).

Similarly, in the opening paragraphs of *The Moonstone*, the sacredness in the Indian diamond is deterritorialized as a "superstition" by the anonymous narrator (Collins, 2012, p. 4). And he further deprecates its value by incorporating it into the Occidental sociocultural context, asserting that the yellow diamond is often regarded in England as "a semi-transparent stone of the inferior order of gems" (Collins, 2012, p. 4). In his study, James Hevia only observes the "punishment and discipline" Britain inflicts on the Orient but neglects the reverse influence the British suffer from the imperialism and colonization. According to the "Treaty of Tianjin" China and Britain signed in 1858, opium begins to be "legalized as an import" in China (Brook and Wakabayashi, 2000, p. 7). Thence Britain used the opium trade to "harnes[s] [the Far East] to the institutions of European, and especially British, colonialism" (Blue, 2000, p. 31). But, the legalization of opium trade in China is not so beneficial to the British economy and society as they expected before. In the 1860s, China more relied on its own opium plantation than the shipments from the British India. Moreover, as Roth concludes, the drug "that was British-produced and illicitly sold to China soon became the demonic [Oriental] product par excellence" and in Victorian literature, the Orient is often featured as an evil power that contaminates and invades "England through the East End opium den and proceed[s] to turn [the British] citizens into addicts" (p. 91-2).

The Moonstone includes veiled depictions of the public concern for the east end opium dens in London. Near the end of *The Moonstone*, Godfrey is disguised as an Indian sailor "with a noticeably dark complexion" (Collins, 2012, p. 558). His true identity was not seen through until his death when the Sergeant Cuff "traced with his finger a thin line of livid white, running backward the dead man's forehead" (p. 575), as a proof of his disguise. Analogously, in the stories of *Sherlock Holmes*, Watson's English patient has a "yellow pasty face, drooping lids and pin-point pupils" (qtd. In Roth, 2002, p. 87). Both Collins and Doyle may in their fictions illustrate that the British opium-consumers in the east end dens can be "Orientalized by narcotic force" (Roth, 2002,

p. 87). Additionally, this process of "Orientalization" can also be realized by miscegenation, which triggers the Englishmen's deeper anxiety of the white female addicts in the east end. In *The Moonstone*'s post-text, Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the interior of the opium den is Good co described as containing "a large unseemly bed" on which lie "a Chinaman, a Lascar, and a haggard woman" (p. 7). Dickens in these depictions reproduces the Victorian dread of "the spectacle of [...] female British opium smokers consorting with" the Orientals (Gilbert, 2007, p. 161), and further, a profounder racist anxiety that their intercourse could contaminate the British descent. In the mid-Victorian age, an Eurasian, probably a product of this illegal sexuality, would have to tolerate much "vile slander" as Jennings in *The Moonstone* does who suffers from "the merciless treatment by [his] own family, and the merciless enmity to which [he] ha[s] fallen a victim" (p. 485). Even so, Betteredge still distrusts his opium experiment, in fear that he would have some designs on Miss Verinder. As I have mentioned, Betteredge denigrates Jennings's experiment as "a delusion and a snare" (Collins, 2012, p. 519), akin to his viewpoint on the Indian ink that all those exotic cultural phenomena come down to a "hocus-pocus" in a nutshell. Betteredge's attitude exactly reflects the racial anxiety held by the Victorian public that the Oriental culture and people can "penetrate the English domestic space and reverse the power dynamics of Empire, exercising a potentially retributive dominion over vulnerable and innocent English women and children" (Milligan, 1995, p. 77). A more obvious example in *The Moonstone* is that the three Indians coerced an English boy to "hold out [his] hand" even though he was unwilling (p. 28). And the ink on the boy's palms "joins in analogic series to" the opium effects on Blake, which both represent the Oriental cultural hypnotism that control the British minds (Duncan, 1994, p. 310). Intriguingly, as Lillian Nayder observes, Betteredge "responds to the [three] Indians" who dog the diamond holders "in much the same way that [Robinson Crusoe, in his colonialist Bible] reacts to the cannibals who visit the island" as Betteredge and Crusoe both possess "a mixture of fear and moral self-righteousness" (p. 221). In Robinson Crusoe, the title hero adopts Friday and teaches him "civilized", Christian manners. Similarly, in *The Moonstone,* Betteredge reprimands Jennings for his head "full of maggots" and attempts to "correct" him "with sardonic gravity" (Collins, 2012, p. 518-9). Also, Crusoe "stood like thunder-stuck" and was "terrified to the last degree" when he found the foot print invading his domain (Defoe, 2007, p. 130), whilst Betteredge cites this very paragraph to Franklin Blake (who is a cultural hybrid, too), probably indicating his own anxiety of the Oriental invasion into the Christian empire (Collins, 2012, p. 383). All in all, in linking the opium dens in the east end to those opium-smokers from the Far East, *The Moonstone*, with other mid-Victorian novels, tries to reiterate the collective incubus that "the Orient [...] will enter, colonize, and conquer the English body in the form of a contaminating contagion enabled by" this drug (Milligan, 1995, p. 83).

3. Poison or Panacea: Pleasures for Patricians, Placebos for Plebeians

As Lillian Nayder states, "if *The Moonstone* is in some sense [...] a representation of [Britain's] imperial affairs, it is also a novel about class resentment and the threat of social [economic] rebellion at home" (p. 225). In view of this, the opium in the novel not only embodies an Oriental "cultural hypnosis" (Free, 2006, p. 366), but also refers to the upper-classes' medical domination over the "unsuspecting public" (Harding, 1989, p. 13).

Until the late 1860s, the use and acquisition of opiates were "completed unrestricted" in Britain (Platizky, 2002, p. 209). Collins himself was also an opium-eater when he was writing *The Moonstone*. According to Böhm-Schnitker, Collins "imbibed huge amounts of laudanum" every day, and "the palliative function of opium and the smooth functioning of the economy are intertwined in Collins's endeavour [of novel writing]" (p. 171-2). Before *The Moonstone*, in his 1864 fiction *Armadale*, the character Miss Gwilt's "attitudes to opium [are remarkably] affectionate" (Hayter, 1968, p. 258). Besides, opium gains its recognition from many other mid-Victorian writers. For example, Gaskell "calls opiates given to Manchester in time of crisis 'mother's mercy'" (Platizky, 2002, p. 213). In *The Moonstone* also, doctor Candy does "dreadful mischief" of giving Franklin Blake the laudanum without his knowledge of it, in order to prove its curative effects of insomnia to Blake who dares to "attac[k] the art of medicine at the dinner table [...] [and] "put [him] out of temper" (Collins, 2012, p. 492-3). Candy's trick may represent the dominant opinion of the mid-Victorian medical profession that the opium is a panacea rather than poison, and furthermore, his deed can be regarded as the behaviour to maintain the nobleness of opiates. Possibly, Candy's rage against Blake's challenges is more out of the fact that an upper-class gentleman should hold the same "ignorant distrust of opium" as "the lower and less cultivated classes" do (Collins, 2012, p. 493). And his assistant Jennings also exculpates Candy, pleading with Blake"for a more accurate and more merciful construction of motives" (Collins, 2012, p. 493). In the opinion of many mid-Victorian medical professionals like Candy and Jennings, opium is truly believed as "a universal panacea" "taken for such trivial complaints as earache or influenza as much as for the more serious ones such as hydrophobia, haemorrhage and heart disease" (Harding, 1988, p. 8). And some prostitutes even use opium to treat syphilis and gonorrhoea (Chepaitis, 1985, p. 13). Therefore, before 1868 when the Pharmacy Act came into effect, opium could be available at nearly all drugstores, exactly "the way aspirin [...] can be today" (Platizky, 2002, p. 55). For the lower classes that have no doctors to resort to, the drugstore is the only place they can be dependent on. Just as Gaskell in *Mary Barton* states, "the only medical advice [the workers] could have must be from a druggist's" (p. 61). However, once a plethora of plebs turn to the druggist's rather than practitioners, the abuse of "panaceas" gives rise to serious public health problems. By 1868, many patients, especially the infants had been "drugged and killed by opiates" (Lomax, 1973, p. 176), and according to Roger Platizky, in the 1860s, "statistics in England indicated that opiate-related poisonings and suicides were on the rise" (p. 213). For the lower classes, opium is not confined to a medical necessity, but also becomes a substitute for other

less cheaper recreational products such as alcohol. In *The Moonstone*, though the house-steward Betteredge is not an opium-eater, he regularly consumes another opiate-like addiction—nicotine, as he "ha[s] tried [Robinson Crusoe] for years—generally in combination with a pipe of tobacco" and "found [these two] [his] friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life" (Collins, 2012, p. 17). Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton* provides a more direct explanation of reasons why the low classes' pursue opiates:

> "It is true much of their morbid power might be ascribed to the use of opium. But before you blame too harshly this use, or rather abuse, try a hopeless life, with daily cravings of the body for food." (p. 164)

By 1868, the same year *The Moonstone* was published, the opium abuse by the working class "had [...] become [such] a major issue of concern" that it cannot be further overlooked by "public health campaigners"(p. 96). Therefore, the first Pharmacy Act in 1868 was published to "restrict the sale of opium to [licensed] pharmacists" (Zieger, 2011, p. 211). Nevertheless, the publication of this Pharmacy Act may include other considerations other than out of mere sympathy with the victims harmed by the drug overdose in the working class. John Hawley points out that "the middle classes feared that workers would find opium to be a less expensive intoxicant", and once "they had less self-control", the stimulating influence might have risks driving them to commit crimes or other debauchery behaviour (p. 24). As is depicted in *The Moonstone*, the opium inculpates the gentleman Franklin Blake and stimulates him to steal the gem in his unconscious sleep-walking. Besides, as Geoffrey Harding puts it in an incisive way, "working-class practices of self-medication stood in diametrical opposition to the rising aims of the middle-class medical and allied professions", and thus this Act designed by the middle-class aims to "strengthen [the medical profession's authority] and control over all forms of" therapy (p. 16). In *The Moonstone*, Lady Verinder calls Clack and Godfrey to assist her in dropping "six drops" of liquid in her l"little phial" (p. 272). This medicine is probably a sort of opiate. Intriguingly, Lady Verinder tries to conceal what she does about from her daughter, as if a "warning voice of an inner moral dictate" exhorts her that her deed could mar her reputation (Saul, 2004, p. 127). But Miss Clack, as a pious Christian, still feels ashamed by her aunt's furtive act, when she exclaims "my aunt's secret was a secret no longer." (Collins, 2012, p. 276)

Both Lady Verinder and Miss Clack may equate the opium-consuming as a deed beneath a lady's dignity, which shows the upper-classes' ambiguous attitudes to drugs in the mid nineteenth century. Though fully convinced of opium's medical functions, they are afraid that the overdose will demote them to morally corrupted addicts as those in the working-class and the east end dens. Pertinently, Lady Verinder's concealment also exposes the "mendacity" of the Victorian bourgeois, most of whom have their unspeakable secrets. For instance in the novel, Godfrey Ablewhite, the philanthropist of "Mothers'-Small-Clothes-Conversion Society" (this weird name is also an irony of the various philanthropic bodies in mid-19th century), is actually "a man of pleasure" in debt with "a villa in the suburb [...] and with a [mistress] in the villa" (Collins, 2012, p. 583). As for the philanthropic association, Godfrey confesses that his "charitable business is an unendurable nuisance to [him]" (Collins, 2012, p. 302). The explanation of Godfrey's hypocrisy finds further support in Hugh Cunningham's argument that "love of power, ostentation, and vanity were the principal motives driving [the mid-Victorian philanthropists], along with superstition (the belief that you would benefit in the afterlife) and spite (disappointing expectant heirs)" (p. 141). Also, other characters in *The Moonstone* have their own "hidden" "side" "from the general notice" (Collins, 2012, p. 583). Franklin's father tries by every means to "be next heir to a Dukedom"(p. 24). Betteredge regards matrimony as an economical item for what drives him to marriage is his supposition that "it will be cheaper to marry [Selina Goby] than to keep her" (p. 20) Even Miss Clack, the devout Christian, cares much about money. "[I]f my name had appeared in the Will, with a little comforting legacy attached to it [...] Much better as it was!" (p. 281) All those pursuits of profits and fame seemingly "[perform] the same narcotizing function [...] that Karl Marx [...] attribute[s] to [...] religion[s] as 'opium of the people'" (Kern and Hainmueller, 2009, p. 396).

4. Conclusion

It is also interesting to note that in 1868, two another decisive events occurred in the English and global history. In Britain, the general election was held under the guide of 1867 Reform Act. A number of urban workers had the right of voting, which "transformed England into a [real] democracy" (Himmelfarb, 1966, p. 97). Moreover, in the Far East, Meiji Restoration ends the Japanese Edo period, enabling Japan to "eliminate the unequal treaties" with the Western imperialist powers, and accelerating the modernization in China and Korea (Tipton, 2002, p. 42). The Orient begins to become "no longer [...] a closed [region], isolated from Western influence" (Tipton, 2002, p. 41). Both those events probably foresee the decline of British imperialism in the later phase of Pax Britannica and its transformation from "the empire on which the sun never sets" to a "welfare state" several decades later, similar to what Collins in *The Moonstone* uses the motif of opium to suggest and anticipate. As Barry Milligan concludes, "it is opium that both symbolises and manifests this hypnotic effect on a putatively physiological level that parallels the cultural one", and in *The Moonstone* particularly, "brings to the surface" the external and internal crises in this imperial twilight when the modification of the empire was and "ha[d] been long underway" despite many Britons' still willful blindness in this process (p. 82).

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