Hands of Beauty, Hands of Horror: Fear and Egyptian Art at the Fin de Siècle

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While exploring a deserted London flat, a young British woman in Richard Marsh’s 1897 gothic novel, The Beetle, discovers a collection of Eastern objects that bear terrifying designs. Among these is a rug that depicts a gruesome scene of human sacrifice. The ensuing description suggests a direct relationship between the craftsmanship required to produce the object and the horror of its image:

A naked white woman [was] being burned alive. . . . She was secured by chains in such a fashion that she was permitted a certain amount of freedom, of which she was availing herself to contort and twist her body into shapes which were horribly suggestive of the agony which she was enduring,—the artist, indeed, seemed to have exhausted his powers in his efforts to convey a vivid impression of the pains which were tormenting her. (230)

In an eerie materialization of the body part that would be responsible for such handiwork, a “thin, yellow, wrinkled hand” (231) suddenly emerges from under the rug and grabs the heroine. Although this is not the artist’s hand per se—it belongs to the shady Egyptian man/woman/beetle hybrid who (that?) haunts London in this bizarre narrative—its emergence from the ornate rug typifies the late-Victorian gothicization of Egyptian manual productions that I discuss in this essay.

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the gothicization of Egyptian manual productions in late-Victorian mummy narratives. These narratives often isolate the mummy’s hand as a signifier of craftsmanship, a troubling object for a culture that was mourning the figurative loss of its artisans’ hands to mechanized production. Focusing on Bram Stoker’s 1903 novel, The Jewel of Seven Stars, I contend that the horror of the mummy’s hand emanates from its ambiguous position as an artifact that is itself a means of production. It displaces Friedrich Engels’s conception of the Western hand as a self-creating appendage into the atavistic domain of a long-lost Egyptian tradition, and in doing so, it forces the English observer to recognize the irrecoverable nature of aesthetic craftsmanship. Brought into violent contact with the creative potential of the mummy’s hand, the characters in Stoker’s novel try to disassociate the mummy from manual production but only succeed in confirming their own status as products of a mechanized age.

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The horror of this scene may seem surprising given the colonial-hand envy expressed by many nineteenth-century artistic and literary discourses. But different hands meant different things to the Victorians. Following the popularity of the Indian Pavilion at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, South Asian crafts came to represent the type of labor from which an overly industrialized England had supposedly become alienated (Barringer 243-67, Kriegel 146-78). The Indian hand emerged as the synecdochal sign of archaic skill in critical writings such as George Birdwood’s The Industrial Arts of India (1880) and in colonial narratives including Flora Annie Steel’s The Potter’s Thumb (1894). In contrast, the Egyptian hand—especially the mummy’s hand, which haunted fin-de-siècle narratives about Egypt—pointed to the uncanny aspects of Eastern craftsmanship, as it combined beauty with horror and perilously conflated nonhuman artifacts with human labor.

In his work on the Victorian fascination with mummies, ranging from the mummy unwrapings of the 1830s and 1840s to the prevalence of mummy fiction later in the century, Nicholas Daly describes these strange corpses as manifestations of the imperial commodity. He argues that in contrast to Marx’s theory of the commodity fetish, “which cleaves to a production-centered economic model, the mummy suggests the existence of objects whose commodity nature is not the effect of production. The mummy is the type of the object which becomes a commodity simply because it becomes desirable for consumers, and is thereby drawn into economic exchange” (90). This devaluing of the importance of production places new emphasis on consumer acts and identities, rather than on production and origins.

In what follows, I do not disagree with Daly’s claims but suggest more amply the appeal of this picture of the mummy as commodity. Victorians seized on the thought of mummies as commodities in order to avoid thinking of them as things created and with creative capacities. Fascinated and repelled by the mummy and its hand, late-Victorian writers managed their ambivalence by emphasizing the mummy as a collectible object, a physical maker of imperial (and, in some cases, romantic) conquest.

Victorian observers were fascinated by the intricate manual labor required to eviscerate, embalm, and adorn the body and ornament its sarcophagus and various accoutrements. When a group of Oxford scholars in Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “Lot No. 249” (1894) discovers a mummy, one of them expresses his admiration for the embalmer’s skill:
"A very conscientious worker he must have been. I wonder how many modern works will survive four thousand years?" (118). His question acknowledges one of the anxieties provoked by the mummy as artifact: that traces of its intricate production would obscure the standardization and alleged impermanence of British commodities. Similarly, Stoker devotes extensive sections of The Jewel of Seven Stars to laudatory ekphrastic descriptions of Queen Tera, the female mummy of his story: her body "was like a statue carven in ivory by the hand of a Praxiteles" (Stoker 1903, 270); "All the pores of the body seemed to have been preserved in some wonderful way. . . the skin was as smooth as satin" (270); and the case that held her severed hand consisted of "slabs of rock crystal set in a skeleton of bands of red gold, beautifully engraved with hieroglyphics" (108). The narrative depicts the mummy and her accessories as belonging to an irre-coverable artistic tradition; as one character angrily responds to a detective's imputation that her sacred lamps may be copies,

"Did you ever see a set of lamps of these shapes—of any one of these shapes? Look at these dominant figures on them! Did you ever see so complete a set—even in Scotland Yard; even in Bow Street? . . . Perhaps you can tell me what that figure of Ptah-Seker-Ausar holding the 1st wrapped in the Sceptre of Papyrus means! Did you ever see it before; even in the British Museum, or Gizeh, or Scotland Yard?" (100)

The queen herself appears as an irreproducible and perfect art object. Although she is not literally a statue, her immaculate state of preservation makes her rival the work of the most accomplished (and long-dead) of artists.

The impressive craftsmanship of mummies provokes responses that marry aesthetic pleasure with repulsion. As one author in Chambers's Edinburgh Journal describes his experience viewing an Egyptian mummy. "The contemplation of such a richly decorated mummy-case is fraught with sensations of pleasure—if associated with its antiquity, it becomes grand and astonishing—if with its contents, solemn and appalling" ("Egyptian Mummies" 111). Fictional narratives focus this dual sense of beauty and horror on the mummy's hand. The characters in E. and H. Heron's "The Story of Baelbrow" (1896), for instance, are haunted by a "bandaged arm and a dark hand with gleaming . . . gilded—nails" (221), while the titular character of H. Rider Haggard's "Smith and the Pharaohs" (1913) finds a "mummified hand, broken off at the wrist, a woman's little hand, most delicately shaped. It was withered and paper-white, but the contours still remained; the long fingers were perfect, the
almond-shaped nails had been stained with henna, as was the embalmers' fashion" (16). Both of these descriptions purposefully conflate the aesthetic with the grotesque, the beauty of gilded nails and pure whiteness with the dead tissue on which they appear. The detached mummy's hand is also one of the most treasured—and feared—artifacts of Stoker's novel: it is "so perfect that it startled one to see it. A woman's hand, fine and long, with slim tapering fingers and nearly as perfect as when it was given to the embalmer thousands of years before. In the embalming it had lost nothing of its beautiful shape; even the wrist seemed to maintain its pliability as the gentle curve lay on the cushion" (Stoker 1903, 103–04). At the same time, this graceful appendage displays aspects that infuse it with horror, the most obvious of which—is apart from its severed state—is that it bears seven fingers. As one explorer describes his discovery of this human object, "I stood gazing on it, as did those with me, as though it were that fabled head of the Gorgon Medusa with snakes in her hair, whose sight struck into stone those who beheld [it]" (128). Freud's association of the Medusa with castration anxiety comes to mind ("Medusa's Head" 212); here, the severed hand emasculates the viewer with the efficacy of the craft that has preserved it for thousands of years.

I want to suggest that the aesthetic horror of the hand in mummy narratives emanates from its ambiguous position as an artifact that is itself a source of production. The hand reminds its viewers both of the impressive (and now obsolete) manual craftsmanship that produced it and of the hand's own creative capacities. It is a human-made thing that exhibits its own ability to make. As one of the characters in Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249" observes regarding the mummy, "Perhaps these very hands helped to build the stones into the pyramids" (118). Similarly, after describing the perfection of Queen Tera's—the mummy's—hand, Stoker reveals that she herself was an accomplished artist:

The Princess had been brought up amongst scribes, and was herself no mean artist. Many of these things were told on the walls in picture or in hieroglyphic writing of great beauty; and we came to the conclusion that not a few of them had been done by the Princess herself. It was not without cause that she was inscribed on the Stele as "Protector of the Arts." (Stoker 1903, 144)

We learn that she was also responsible for carving the coveted Jewel of Seven Stars, an object that foregrounds the supernatural aspects of her artistic skill: "She had engraved on a ruby, carven like a scarab, and having seven stars of seven points, Master Words to compel all the