Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the occult in the British adventure novel, 1880-1914.

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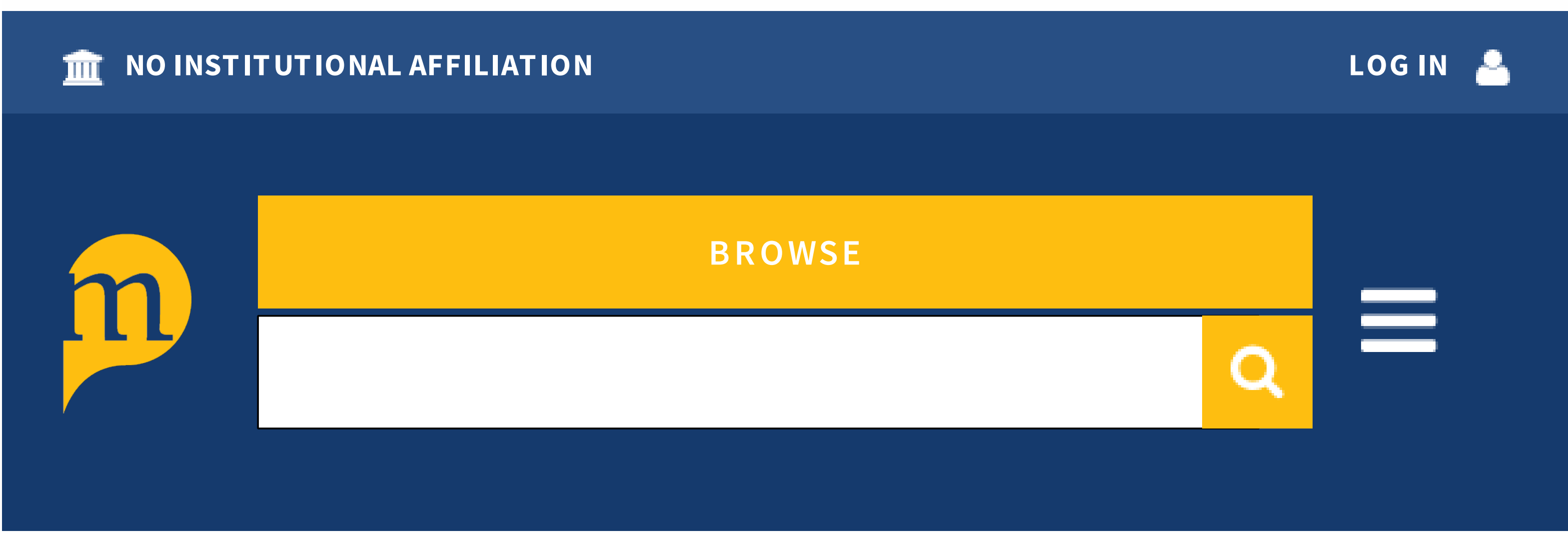

Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914

Patrick Brantlinger

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

243 IMPERIAL GOTHIC: ATAVISM AND THE OCCULT IN THE BRITISH ADVENTURE NOVEL, 1880-1914 Patrick Brantlinger (Indiana University, Bloomington) In "The Little Brass God," a 1905 story by Mrs. B. M. Croker, a statue of "Kali, Goddess of Destruction" brings misfortune to its unwitting Anglo-Indian possessors. First their pets kill each other or are killed in accidents. Then the servants fall sick or tumble downstairs. Finally the family's lives are jeopardized before the statue is stolen and dropped down a well, thus ending the curse.1 This featherweight tale is typical of many written between 1880 and 1914. Its central featureÂ—the magic statueÂ—suggests that Western rationality may be subverted by the very superstitions it rejects. The destructive magic of the Orient takes its revenge; Croker unwittingly expresses a social version of "the return of the repressed" which typifies imperialist fiction, or at least that blend of adventure romance writingÂ—imperial Gothic, as I will call itÂ—which flourished from Rider Haggard's She in 1887 down at least

to John Buchan's Greenmantle in 1916. "Imperial Gothic" combines the seemingly progressive, often Oarwinian ideology of imperialism with a seemingly antithetical interest in the occult. As Lewis Wurgaft declares, "The revival of 'Orientalism' in the 1870s was accompanied by a wide-ranging . . . concern with the occult .... Anglo-Indian fiction [often deals with] inexplicable curses, demonic possession, and ghostly visitations."2 Wurgaft cites Kipling's "Phantom 'Rickshaw," and there were countless such stories, not restricted to Anglo-Indian writing . On of my favorites is H. G. Wells's "The Truth about Pyecraft," in which an obese Englishman takes an Indian recipe for "loss of weight," but instead of slimming down, begins levitating. The problem caused by oriental magic is then solved by Western technology in the form of lead underwear , which allows the balloonlike Mr. Pyecraft to lead an almost normal life. On a somewhat more serious level is G. A. Henty's 1893 novel for adults, Rujub the Juggler; the title character is a Hindu magician who saves the British good guys during the Mutiny through his clairvoyant powers, though he describes his magic as a dying art, stifled by Western rationality. In Somerset Maugham's The Magician, Oliver Haddo has acquired various mystic arts, including the occult lore of Egyptian and Indian snake charmers. In Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars, Western archaeology unearths Egyptian magic in the form of the "astral body" of Queen Tera, who in the horrific finale is resurrected through or over the corpse of the heroine. In John Buchan's PrÃ©ster 244 John, a black revolutionary gains power through something like voodoo. In Edgar Wallace's Sanders of the River, the commissioner of a West African territory out-savages the savages partly through police brutality, but partly also through knowledge of witchcraft. Says the narrator: "You can no more explain many happenings which are the merest commonplace in [Africa] than you can explain the miracle of faith or the wonder of telepathy."3 Imperial Gothic is related to several other forms of romance writing. In a recent article, Judith Wilt argues that there are subterranean links between late Victorian imperialism, the rebirth of Gothic romance in writers like Stevenson, and the conversion of Gothic into science fiction. "In or around December, 1897," she writes, "Victorian gothic changedÂ—into Victorian science fiction. The occasion was . . . Wells's War of the Worlds, which followed by only a few months . . . Stoker's . . . Pracula."4 Stoker's and Wells's novels can both be read, moreover, as fanciful versions of yet another popular literary form, invasion-scare stories in which the outward thrust of imperialist adventure is reversed . The ur-text is Sir George Chesney's The Battle of Dorking in 1871, and the essence of the genre is captured in P. G. Wodehouse's 1909 parody, The Swoop . . .A Tale of the Great Invasion, in which England is overwhelmed by simultaneous onslaughts of Germans, Russians, Chinese, Young Turks, the Swiss navy, Moroccan brigands, cannibals in war canoes, the Prince of Monaco, and the Mad Mullah, until saved by a patriotic Boy Scout named Clarence Chugwater.5 Invasionscare stories in turn frequently intersect...

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Patrick Brantlinger
(Indiana University, Bloomington)

In "The Little Brass God," a 1905 story by Mrs. B. M. Croker, a statue of "Kali, Goddess of Destruction" brings misfortune to its unwitting Anglo-Indian possessors. First their pets kill each other or are killed in accidents. Then the servants fall sick or tumble downstairs. Finally the family's lives are jeopardized before the statue is stolen and dropped down a well, thus ending the curse.[1] This featherweight tale is typical of many written between 1880 and 1914. Its central feature--the magic statue--suggests that Western rationality may be subverted by the very superstitions it rejects. The destructive magic of the Orient takes its revenge; Croker unwittingly expresses a social version of "the return of the repressed" which typifies imperialist fiction, or at least that strand of adventure-romance writing--imperial Gothic, as I will call it--which flourished from Rider Haggard's *She* in 1887 down at least to John Buchan's *Greenmantle* in 1916.

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