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The Law of *The Jungle Books*

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Children's Literature

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 20, 1992

pp. 1-14

10.1353/chl.0.0579

ARTICLE

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

The Law of *The Jungle Books*

John Murray (bio)

There is broad critical agreement that the concept of law is vital and pervasive in Kipling's work, and the concept has been the subject of at least one book, Shamsul Islam's *Kipling's "Law"*. Islam devotes

considerable space to a discussion of the law in *The Jungle Books*, asserting that "an exposition of the nature of the Law is one of Kipling's main aims in *The Jungle Books* in general and the Mowgli stories in particular" (122). He highlights their didactic purpose by stating that while they are "primarily children's books, [they] are secondarily educational manuals" and that Kipling is being "didactic as well as entertaining" (121). Bonamy Dobrée agrees with these sentiments, asserting that "what Kipling felt to be essential to the Law is made plain in *The Jungle Books*, where it. . . brings into play the virtues of loyalty, keeping your promises, courage, and respect for other people" and that the law in *The Jungle Books* "is intended to be far from what we often casually refer to as jungle law" (67). Ironically, in the jungle, where popular usage finds no law at all, Kipling finds a detailed and pervasive, but morally neutral, code "that has arranged for almost every accident that may befall the Jungle-people" and ensures the preservation of jungle society ("[How Fear Came](#)," *Second JB* 3). In the village, however, he finds the disorder and improvidence that lead to its eventual destruction.

The Mowgli stories contain more than forty direct references to law,¹ and the first of the stories, "Mowgli's Brothers," contains fifteen such references, repeatedly advertizing to the "Law of the Jungle, which never orders anything without a reason" (5), and "lays down very clearly" the rights of individual wolves (10) and the procedures for solving disputes (12). Yet many critics writing in the second half of this century react to such an obviously important matter with unease, evasion, or dislike. Islam feels constrained to comment on the primitive social setting of the law to excuse the vengeful violence that Kipling's "educational manuals" contain; violent revenge, he says, "need not trouble the reader too much" (129). Elliot L. **[End Page 1]** Gilbert tries to counter misgivings about the ethical nature of the law in his article "Three Criticisms of *The Jungle Books*" by saying that the law in *The Jungle Books* is a "law of nature," thereby removing all legal and ethical content from it (7). A "law of nature" is not a law in the usual sense but rather a proposition concerning the working of the universe: one cannot, for example, claim that the First Law of Thermodynamics is good or evil, desirable or

otherwise, and one cannot disobey or alter it. ("Natural law," by contrast, is law deduced from ideals of justice and human rights.)² C. S. Lewis, who cannot "understand how a man of taste could doubt that Kipling is a very great artist," can still "recoil" from Kipling's world because it is "unendurable—a heavy, glaring, suffocating monstrosity" (99). His reaction is partly caused by ethical considerations, and he puts his finger precisely on the reason for his reaction: much of the law is a code of group survival, and is "morally neutral—the obedient servant of valour and public spirit, but equally of cruelty, extortion, oppression, and dishonesty" (115-16).

This uneasy or hostile reaction of otherwise sympathetic critics stems from their assumption of a necessary connection between law and ethics. A crucial distinction may be made among all the different conceptions of law, however, and it hinges on a single issue: whether or not there is an ethical dimension to law. Proponents of the doctrine of natural law would say that there is. On the other hand, proponents of the "analytical positivism" associated with John Austin (1790-1859), and current in English jurisprudence at the time of the writing of *The Jungle Books*,³ would say that there is not—as would adherents of today's "critical legal studies" movement.⁴ In the light of legal theory, Dobrée's association of the law with virtue is not a...

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Kipling's "Law", ed. Francella Buñer, Arthur Rosen, and Judith A. Pflieger. Yale University Press, © 1982 by The Children's Literature Foundation, Inc.



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