

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEM OF BRITISH INDIA IN RUDYARD KIPLING'S “THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING”

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FIRST PUBLISHED IN *THE PHANTOM RICKSHAW* (1888), the fifth volume in A. H. Wheeler & Co.'s “Indian Railway Library” series, “The Man Who Would Be King” may be the best and is almost certainly the last story that Rudyard Kipling wrote while still living in India.¹ It is, then, the culmination of an *annus mirabilis* that saw its twenty-three-year-old author publish six books, albeit short ones, and achieve widespread fame in India. He also garnered sufficient acclaim in England that he would decide to resign his editorial position at George Allen's two Anglo-Indian newspapers, the *Civil and Military Gazette* and the *Pioneer*, in favor of a literary life in London.² In light of these biographical facts, readers might reasonably expect the story to offer a summative, even authoritative, conclusion about life and empire on the subcontinent that Kipling had represented so abundantly all year.

Happily for future critics, the prevalence of the conditional and the slipperiness of individual subjects in the title, epigraph, and opening paragraph hint that such expectations of epistemological certainty will remain unsatisfied. According to the title, is this story the chronicle of a past king or an admonition to future aspirants; in other words, who is the titular “Man” and does he function as a subject of or audience for the narrative?³ Within the epigraph – “Brother to a Prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy” – by what standard and in the eyes of which judges can “he” be found “worthy” (244)? Further, is the pronominal referent “a Prince,” “a beggar,” or the potential “Brother” and “fellow” to them both? The opening paragraph, at least, introduces a narrative “I” who has occupied some of these subject positions, although the question of his and others' worthiness remains at the mercy of “circumstances”:

The law, as quoted, lays down a fair conduct of life, and one not easy to follow. I have been fellow to a beggar again and again under circumstances which prevented either of us finding out whether the other was worthy. I have still to be brother to a Prince, though I once came near to kinship with what might have been a veritable King and was promised the reversion of a Kingdom – army, law-courts, revenue and policy all complete. But, to-day, I greatly fear that my King is dead, and if I want a crown I must go and hunt for it myself. (244)

This paragraph also swiftly ascends through “a beggar” and “a Prince” to return to the “King” of the title, even if the monarch with whom the narrator once “came near to kinship” only “might have been a veritable” one, and who, the narrator “greatly fear[s],” is dead in any case. Never clear enough to be a metaphor, King/Kingdom/kin[g]ship functions in Kipling’s elliptical beginning to “The Man Who Would Be King” as a metonym, a center point whose opacity suggests an epistemological problem rather than its definitive solution. “If I want a crown,” the narrator concludes, shifting to the more particular rhetorical figure of synecdoche, “I must go and hunt it for myself.”

Even this rather overt interpretive imperative has been insufficient to attract much attention to the story’s opening from either of the two dominant critical approaches – the historicist-(post)colonial and the formalist-narratological – that have been brought to bear upon “The Man Who Would Be King.” This relative lack of scrutiny has persisted despite the potential relevance of crown-hunting to the issue of empire and of strategies of signification to Kipling’s sophisticated use of framing devices. Whether Kipling generally, and this story specifically, represent British empire-building in a positive or negative light, has been the dominant question in his reception since Robert Buchanan’s vitriolic dismissal, in the December 1899 issue of the *Contemporary Review*, of Kipling’s “Hooligan imperialism.” The author’s gradual rehabilitation on this point, at the hands of C. S. Lewis, Paul Fussell, Jeffrey Meyers, Louis Cornell, and others, was largely accomplished by the conclusion of the 1980s, after which it became the rule to treat his invocations of the imperial theme as deserving of more nuanced analysis.⁴ Thus, in a provocative marriage of post-colonial and psychoanalytic theory, Zoreh Sullivan’s *Narratives of Empire* “counters Kipling’s reputation as a bard of empire” by focusing on the “strained familial model through which Kipling chose to contain his disturbed relationship with India” (9, 4). Narrowing her focus to “The Man Who Would Be King,” Sullivan asserts, “The theme of the story appears to be an anticolonialist allegory in which the adventurers are an absurd parody of the British in the third world; yet its apparent absurdity is subverted by imagery and language that idealize the imperial mission” (101). Edward Marx’s “How We Lost Kafiristan” specifically challenges overly simplistic, allegorical readings of “The Man Who Would Be King” by relocating the story in the twin contexts of late-century interest in the actual region of Kafiristan – now Nuristan in present-day Afghanistan – and metropolitan versus Anglo-Indian opinions about race and empire following the Second Afghan War. Even such sophisticated post-colonial readings, however, tend to concentrate exclusively on Peachy Carnehan and Daniel Dravot’s imperialistic adventures north of the border, thereby excluding from their analyses the story’s first paragraph, as well as its first two scenes and its rhetorical and literary techniques.

Although largely overshadowed by the issue of empire, Kipling’s aesthetics have long been the concern of a smaller cohort of critics. Buchanan’s contemporary, the folklorist and reviewer Andrew Lang, had written perceptively in *Essays in Little* (1891) of Kipling’s “tiny masterpieces of prose and verse” (199). His sentiments were echoed by, among others, Oscar Wilde and T. S. Eliot, even before J. M. S. Tomkins’s *The Art of Rudyard Kipling* inaugurated the academic study of Kipling’s formal techniques. Narrative theorists, in particular, have devoted significant attention to how the telling of “The Man Who Would Be King” affects readers’ reception of the story. For instance, Thomas Shippey and Michael Short reveal Kipling’s “multiple six-part ‘frame’” and his use of “marked theme,” the linguistic inversion of the subject-verb-object pattern normally dominant in English prose. They argue that, by means of these techniques, “The issue of truth versus credibility is suspended with all the

skill in Kipling's power, so that one's main response is in the end one of pity" (76, 81–82, 85). Manfred Draudt challenges this diagnosis of the final effect of the narrative frame, asserting that the "ironic counterpoints" between the narrator's "skepticism" when he first hears Carnehan and Dravot's plan and his later "sympathy and understanding" at learning of the results should alert readers to the untrustworthiness of Kipling's "somewhat slow-witted narrator" (317–19). Finally, Tim Bascom seeks to synthesize these two possible reactions to the narrator and to reconnect narrative analysis to the issue of empire: "the fundamental effect of the narrative framework is not so much to make us aware of our gullibility as to let us exercise it Although [the narrator's] ironic appraisal of Dravot and his sidekick may help us to see their efforts as a parody of 'true' Empire-building, his fascination with their effort and his silent participation show he admires the imperial impulse even in its parodied form" (162, 170). Such formalist readings usefully engage with elements of the story outside of the adventure plot, but the absence of historical contextualization renders highly presentist any conclusions about readers' likely responses to Kipling's fictionalization of empire.⁵

My own hunt for the crown takes as its starting point the twin epistemological and rhetorical hints at the outset of "The Man Who Would Be King" while at the same time building on the insights of both major strands of criticism surrounding Kipling's story. More specifically, I historicize Kipling's approach to the representation of British India, especially during times of crisis, as primarily a problem of knowledge, and I pinpoint his formal response to that problem as a recurrent and ironic reliance on the device of metonymy, rising on occasion to synecdoche. Kipling's choice of representational figures matters, I argue, because in remaining skeptically attentive to a discursive tradition of empire, he reveals the profound connection between rhetorical form and political action. I concur, then, both with Sullivan's revisionist approach to Kipling as something more than an imperial jingoist and with Marx's impeccably historicized reminder of Kipling's various audiences, even as I examine features beyond the former's familial metaphors and the latter's focus on race. Similarly, I emulate Shippey and Short's and other narrative theorists' attention to the story's narrative frames and structural divisions, while also showing how, through the repeated deployment of metonymy, Kipling's narrator undermines any facile sympathies with British India. Ultimately, I read "The Man Who Would Be King" in its entirety – inclusive of but not exclusive to Carnehan and Dravot – as highly skeptical of Britain's capacity to understand India and, as a result, as profoundly ambivalent about Britain's imperial mission on the subcontinent.⁶

The body of this essay is divided into four parts. It begins by historicizing the recurrent impulse of British writers to figure India as an epistemological problem in need of solution, and their continued recourse to metonymy and synecdoche as the appropriate means for reducing the heterogeneity of languages, religions, and peoples on the subcontinent to a knowable subject. Particularly visible during moments in which British interests in India were threatened by political and social upheaval, this representational strategy was sparked in the 1880s by Russian imperial competition for Afghanistan, and so my first section also provides historical background on Anglo-Russian tension during this period.⁷ The next three sections feature focused readings of the chronologically-distinct subdivisions of "The Man Who Would Be King." Each portion of the story is marked at its beginning and end by a different metonymic figuration of India under British rule; neither representation is particularly edifying to the Empire, and together they suggest the difficulty of ever coming to understand India in a meaningful way.⁸ That this pattern of epistemological cancellation

is repeated three times before the story arrives at its penultimate sentence and final line of dialogue – “Not to my knowledge” – may represent Kipling’s most authoritative, if negative conclusion about British India (279).

I Metonymy and Crisis

THE FIGURATION OF INDIA as primarily an epistemological problem – as opposed to an ethical, logistical, or economic one – dates to at least the mid-eighteenth century, when the English finally eclipsed the Dutch and the French as the preeminent imperial power in South Asia. That the solution to this problem lay in the strategic deployment of metonymy, rather than the painstaking and perhaps self-critical acquisition of “anything like accurate positive knowledge,” may reflect what Edward Said characterizes as a general European attitude towards India of “proprietary hauteur” (75); however, it also indicates the kinds of epistemological shortcuts demanded in times of crisis. During one such anxious moment, the British secured their ascendancy in India with Sir Robert Clive’s defeat of the French-supported Nawab of Bengal, Suraj Dowlah, at Plassey in 1757. “Clive” and “Plassey” both became totemic watchwords for the creation of British India; however, in a bit of historiographical shorthand, this creation was deemed a collateral effect of Clive’s righteous quest for justice after the infamous Black Hole incident, in which a supposed 146 British soldiers and civilians were confined overnight by the Nawab’s forces in a dungeon so small that 123 died before morning. As Kate Teltscher persuasively documents, this “resonant metonym for colonial horror,” the Black Hole of Calcutta, “was refashioned into one of the founding myths of empire” (30). Throughout the next century, metonymic references to the Black Hole would add a Providential mandate to the popular accidental empire thesis, elevating individual heroism and pluck over the more complex realities of Britain’s global war with France and the East India Company’s economic exploitation of the subcontinent.⁹

These same years witnessed a dramatic expansion of territory under the Company’s sway. The increasingly vast land area and bewildering diversity of its inhabitants made the epistemological problem of India that much more perspicuous and the solution to that problem through metonymy that much more appealing.¹⁰ In the 1830s, for instance, when British magistrates in India began to perceive that crime on the subcontinent was far more pervasive and interconnected than they had ever suspected, they experienced a crisis of confidence in their methods for gathering information that could only be resolved through the metonymic figure of the “Thug” and his practice of “Thuggee.”¹¹ Anglo-Indian administrator-turned-novelist Philip Meadows Taylor capitalized upon the sensational potential of this religio-criminal secret society in his best-selling *Confessions of a Thug* (1839).¹² Echoing earlier accounts of Thuggee in British quarterlies, Taylor’s authorial introduction focused on the difficulties of ever really knowing India:

How the system of Thuggee could have become so prevalent, – remain unknown to, and unsuspected by, the people of India, among whom the professors of it were living in constant association, – must, to the majority of the English public, who are not conversant with the peculiar construction of Oriental society, be a subject of extreme wonder. It will be difficult to make this understood within my present limits, and yet it is so necessary that I cannot pass it by. (5)¹³

Taylor goes on to list roughly twenty discrete causes for this epistemological problem, including, that India is “a vast continent”; that “parties, previously unknown to each other, associate together for mutual society and companionship”; that “even the principal roads . . . are only tracks made by the constant passage of people over them, often intersecting forests, jungles, and mountainous and uncultivated tracts, where there are but few villages and a scanty population”; that, as a result, an individual traveler’s progress is almost impossible to trace; and, that disguise by would-be bandits is abetted by “the endless divisions of the people into tribes, castes, and professions” (5–7). He concludes, “The facilities I have enumerated, and hundreds of others which would be almost unintelligible by description, but which are intimately connected with, and grow out of, the habits of the people, have caused Thuggee to be everywhere spread and practiced throughout India” (7). The ready slippage of Taylor’s central metonymic figure into the rhetoric of conspiracy so prevalent throughout the nineteenth century doubtless added to the popularity of *Confessions*.¹⁴ At the same time, his assertion of the conspiratorial ubiquity of Thuggee seems both unprovable and not particularly edifying to Britain’s management of its overseas empire.

The figure of the Thug was invoked again almost twenty years later, when despite “fifty years of filling up red ledgers and blue books, or penning maps, the British were caught unawares by the mutinies and rebellions of 1857” (Bayley 35). Ultimately, however, the imperial crisis of what came to be called the “Indian Mutiny” far outstripped whatever palliation inhered in the figure of Thuggee and gave rise to a new metonym, the Well of Cawnpore, which displaced even the Black Hole as a dominant signifier for Britain’s increasingly uneasy possession of India. Adhering to the discursive conventions established during earlier imperial paroxysms, British statesmen and periodical writers immediately cast the crisis of 1857 in epistemological terms. In his marathon address of July 27, Benjamin Disraeli asserted, with all the confidence of the Opposition, “I apprehend that the right understanding by this House of the cause of the present state of affairs in India is a primary piece of knowledge, without which we cannot undertake to support any measures that are brought forward for the purpose of putting an end to the disorders which there exist” (*Hansard’s* 442–43). He went on to beg “the generous forbearance of the House” for the length at which he was about to speak – he was on his legs for three hours – echoing Taylor in mentioning the “colossal proportions” of his Indian theme, the “corresponding magnitude” of the present crisis, and the over-determined value of “the just apprehension by Parliament” for “the greatness of this country” (448).¹⁵ To cite only a few of the more prominent examples, the authors of “The Bengal Mutiny” in *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, “The Sepoy Rebellion” in the *London Quarterly Review*, “India as it is – India as it may be” in the *British Quarterly Review*, and “The English in India” in the *Westminster Review* all follow Disraeli in framing the rebellion in epistemological terms.¹⁶ Perhaps more important for my argument is the readiness with which such higher journalists came to rely on the metonym of the Well of Cawnpore to represent the horror of the rebellion to their readers. The writer of “The Sepoy Rebellion” succinctly describes the essentials of this civilian massacre: “A number of our country-women, who had been preserved up to the day of the battle, – or the day previous, for the accounts vary, – were now not to be found; a well was choked with their bodies; and all that remained of these women above ground was ‘long tresses of hair, dresses covered with blood, here and there a workbox or a bonnet’” (252–53). A variation of this passage also appears in “Indian Mutiny” from the *Quarterly Review*: “Long tresses of hair, scraps of paper, torn Bibles and Prayer-books, workboxes and unfinished

work, and the little round hats of the children scattered about on the red floor, told too well the harrowing tale” (565–66). In both articles, the defining metonym of the Indian Mutiny is itself rendered metonymically through the figure of synecdoche. Logos is thus displaced by pathos, rendering epistemology a matter of feeling. The emotional power of this representational strategy is vividly demonstrated by reports of British soldiers charging into battle against the vastly superior numbers of the mutineers with cries to “remember the ladies and the babies.” These ladies and babies, and the Mutiny that their deaths in the Well of Cawnpore came to represent, would remain the dominant signifier of India in the collective memory of British administrators and colonial residents for the remainder of the century at least, inflecting especially Anglo-Indian responses to every subsequent irruption against Britain’s imperial hegemony.

The crisis that appears to have impelled Kipling to invoke this representational tradition in “The Man Who Would Be King” was the so-called Panjdeh Incident of March 1885. While the Afghan Amir, Abdur Rahman Khan, and the Indian Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, were meeting in Rawalpindi – an event Kipling covered as correspondent for the *Civil and Military Gazette* – Russian troops under General Komarov occupied the Panjdeh valley in Afghanistan. Since Britain was obligated by treaty and compelled by interest to defend the Afghan border, this Russian advance brought Britain and Russia to the brink of war. As B. J. Moore-Gilbert explains, there was particular consternation at this time among full-time English residents, who retained vivid memories of the Mutiny: “Fearful of a Russian alliance with France, its army depleted by almost a third due to campaigns in Africa and convinced that a single defeat in Afghanistan would be the signal for another 1857, these were days of desperation for Anglo-India” (89). Fortunately, an armed confrontation was ultimately averted through diplomacy, with the Afghan Boundary Commission establishing a new border between Russia and Afghanistan, and hence a limit to Russia’s military aggression towards British India.¹⁷

The specter of a belligerent Russia remained a source of great concern within the Anglo-Indian society inhabited by Kipling, however. For advocates of the Forward Policy, the Panjdeh Incident merely reinforced their contention that India could only be protected by ongoing imperial expansion, including the build-up of British troops in Afghanistan. In “The Hun Is at the Gate,” A. Michael Matin provides extensive background on Forward Policy advocacy in the late quarter of the nineteenth century, including specific attention to the writings of Charles MacGregor, whose aspirations, he maintains, “are satirically fulfilled in Kipling’s well-known short story, ‘The Man Who Would Be King’” (325). Primarily interested in relocating Kipling’s writings about India within the context of late-century invasion-scare fiction, from *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) onward, Matin also provides examples of Kipling’s journalistic statements during the Panjdeh Incident (323), biographical details about Kipling’s specific investments in anti-Russian sentiment (331–32), and examples of Forward Policy literature, most notably *The Great Russian Invasion of India*, published pseudonymously in 1879 (346–47).¹⁸

Throughout this same period of Russian military aggression and advocated British imperial expansion, imaginative interest in Afghanistan, and particularly in the northern Afghan region of Kafiristan, was peaking. As Marx painstakingly shows, Kafiristan fascinated British explorers, geographers, and ethnologists because it was supposedly populated by descendants of Alexander the Great’s invading Greek army, who were therefore “white” Aryan relatives of the English. In reconstructing the historical context for Kipling’s

“hypothetical” but not “purely imaginative or allegorical” fiction, Marx narrates the unauthorized trip of Mr. William Watts McNair into Kafirstan in 1883 and the survey of the Hindu Kush mountain passes conducted by Colonel Lockhart in 1885–86 (47). Although neither McNair nor Lockhart published accounts of their travels until 1889, the year after the appearance of “The Man Who Would Be King,” Marx asserts that the substance of both men’s explorations was known to the Anglo-Indian community. Kipling’s position as a journalist gave him unusual awareness of their efforts to render Kafirstan epistemologically and imaginatively accessible.

II On the Train to Mhow

IT IS WITHIN THIS RICH intellectual and historical legacy that Kipling wrote the somewhat elusive opening for “The Man Who Would Be King,” with its metonymic circling about the figure of sovereignty and its final synecdochal exhortation. The narrative proper, euphemistically referred to in the story as the “beginning of everything,” commences in the second paragraph and occupies the 14th through the 24th day of an unspecified month in what the narrator will later call the “amusing” cooler half of the year (244, 249). Traveling in northern India on unspecified government service, the narrator is financially compelled to ride intermediate on the train, which as a result becomes that part of India capable of standing in for the whole; the region’s sometimes confusing mix of economic, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences are thereby reduced to the more manageable matter of carriage class.¹⁹ First-class carriages, and the wealthy strata of society they represent, remain unseen and too expensive for the narrator, and by extension the reader, to know. Second-class carriages cost only half as much as those of first class and offer cushions for the journey; were the narrator not out of money due to a “Deficit in the Budget,” he, and we, would ride second class (244). Intermediate carriages are “very awful indeed,” exchanging creature comforts for a crush of Eurasian, native, and Loafer passengers with unsafe dining habits, high mortality rates, and deservedly low reputations (244). Thus, the train neatly divides India into colonial administrators and wealthy nabobs, Anglo-Indian civil servants and other respectable Europeans, and an undifferentiated mass of Indians along with whites who have sacrificed their racial superiority through intemperance, itinerancy, or poverty. The fact that the narrator occupies his own intermediate carriage allows him to elide for the reader the complex differences of caste, language, and religion that would otherwise present themselves.

The majority of this section chronicles the conversation that results when an unnamed “big black-browed gentleman” enters the narrator’s carriage (244). They talk “the politics of Loaferdom that sees things from the underside where the lath and plaster is not smoothed off,” and the stranger reveals his plan to impersonate a journalist in order to extort hush money from the Degumber Rajah (245).²⁰ Before he departs the train, this enterprising Loafer uses a Masonic code phrase to extract a promise from the narrator to deliver a mysterious message to his partner, whose path he knows the narrator will cross at Marwar Junction in ten days.²¹ At this point, the easy epistemological certainty fostered by the metonym of the train disappears. Not only does the narrator’s fellow passenger fail to exhibit the specific characteristics of a Loafer – he is, depending upon one’s sensibilities, “amusing,” but definitely not “intoxicated” – his entrance also signals multiple layers of insider knowledge: the Degumber Rajah’s secret murder of his father’s widow; the mechanics of an Indian blackmailing scheme; the signs and phrases of Freemasonry; the stranger’s uncanny command of the train schedules; even

the distinctive slangy argot that peppers the two men's conversation ("on tick," "tumble," "give him a jump," etc.) (244). If a single man, however big, carries this much mystery with him, then how much more must a subcontinent of 200 million persons hold for even a second-class reader-passenger?

India's Native States appear especially resistant to the orderly compartmentalization idealized in the figure of the train. Dangerous to those, like the stranger, who threaten to publicize their endemic corruption, these semi-autonomous principalities are, according to the narrator, "the dark places of the earth, full of unimaginable cruelty, touching the Railway and the Telegraph on one side, and, on the other, the days of Harun-al-Rashid" (247). This description challenges the boundaries of basic perception and imaginative accessibility, hinting once again that the impulse to know India through one or more rational figures, a process represented here by transportation and communication technology, will run up against phenomena that cannot be so reductively understood. The narrator's obligations in these Native States cause him to revisit the three subject positions featured in the story's opening, descending from "business with divers Kings" to consorting with "Princes and Politicals" to dining like a native passenger in intermediate and sleeping "under the same rug as my servant," fellow to a beggar indeed (247). Gone are the neat distinctions between carriages and peoples, with "the day's work" in India requiring one to mix indiscriminately with everyone (247).

After his business is complete, the narrator returns to Marwar Junction to fulfill the Masonic promise extracted from him earlier. As if to dismiss altogether the remaining explanatory power of his previous image of the British train, he reveals that he must also return here to catch "a funny, little, happy-go-lucky, native-managed railway" to complete his trip to Jodhpore (247). Before doing so, however, he perceives his earlier companion's friend in the only second-class carriage on the Bombay Mail train, delivers his coded message – "I am to tell you that he has gone South for the week. He has gone South for the week!" – and is left standing alone on the platform (248). At this very late stage, the narrator abortively proposes, for making sense of the experience of British India that he has shared with us thus far, this section's secondary synecdoche: "a rupee I should have kept . . . as a memento of a rather curious affair" (248). Crucially, this is a coin the narrator never actually receives, memorializing an event that he, and we, cannot fully understand. As an epistemological device, then, this absent symbol of an abstract exchange system – in a currency suffering from devaluation in the 1880s, hence the narrator's original money troubles – does not offer readers much certainty that they will ever easily know British India.

III An Editor's Duty

SIX OR SO MONTHS LATER, the narrator has become "respectable, and returned to an Office where there were no Kings and no incidents except the daily manufacture of a newspaper" (248). His new place of employment serves as both the primary setting and the first microcosmic metonymy of the story's second section, which takes place over a single day, from Saturday night through Sunday morning. The newspaper office, a verisimilar fiction of Kipling's experience at the *Civil and Military Gazette*, offers both a chronological and a sociological survey of British India.²² The cool season attracts the full range of second-class carriage riders, including zenana-mission ladies, disgruntled colonels, bellicose missionaries, bankrupt theatrical companies, mechanical hucksters, money-grubbing tea traders, and

self-important Anglo-Indian socialites, as well as “every dissolute ruffian that ever tramped the Grand Trunk Road” (248–49). During this period, the news consists of “Kings being killed on the Continent . . . and Minister Gladstone . . . calling down brimstone on the British dominions,” but “most of the paper is as blank as Modred’s shield” (249). The Indians who would have been the narrator’s companions in intermediate are represented by “the little black copy-boys,” who whine “‘*kaa-pi chay-ha-yeh*’ (copy wanted) like tired bees” (249). A richer image of India than that offered by the train, this extended account of the newspaper office provides a much fuller breakdown of the middling ranks of Anglo-Indian society, which does not sparkle with the exposure. The narrator’s inclusion of the copy-boy’s patois allows for a brief glimpse of the subcontinent’s linguistic diversity, even as their call for material to set deflates the importance of events in Europe. Finally, the allusion to late-century Arthuriana, in the figure of Modred’s shield, invokes Tennyson’s rather bleak appraisal of imperial decline in *Idylls of the King*, completed earlier that year, even as it casts Anglo-India as the undeniable, if illegitimate and unheroic heir to the British Empire.

Once the weather turns, and this “amusing part of the year” becomes the hot season, no visitors come “and nobody writes anything but accounts of amusements in the Hill-stations or obituary notices” (249). There are plenty of fevers that don’t make the news, while European empires and kings “continue to divert themselves as selfishly as before,” and, in a rare shift to metaphor within the overall metonymy, all “is the dark half of the moon, and, as the advertisements say, ‘must be experienced to be appreciated’” (249, 250). Illness and death become the defining characteristics of India, and the immanent mortality allows for a further diminution of what passes for news back in England. In the unremitting heat of the Indian summer, the blank of Modred’s shield, which was understandable if unedifying, gives way to an unknowable lunar landscape couched in the banalities of late-century marketing. Even were the considerably less neat metonym of the newspaper office to retain its representational integrity throughout this section, its evocation of India cannot give readers great confidence in either the idea or the longevity of Britain’s presence in South Asia.

Whatever lingering epistemological certainty can be derived, on “a pitchy black night,” from a press-room full of “all but naked compositors” waiting for a “King or courtier or a courtesan or a Community . . . to die or get a new Constitution, or do something that was important on the other side of the world,” is broken by the reappearance of the men from the Mhow and British Mail trains (250). Introducing themselves as Peachy Carnehan and Daniel Dravot, they challenge the capaciousness of the figure of the newspaper through their very physical presence: “They certainly were too big for the office. Dravot’s beard seemed to fill half the room and Carnehan’s shoulders the other half” (252). Their plans match their stature. Unlike the narrator-editor, who waits for news from Europe about the doings of royalty, they propose to travel to Kafiristan to make themselves Kings. Their conviction of their own fitness rests upon their skill at military drilling and their “Contract,” which in a parody of legal form asserts that they will refrain from drinking and womanizing while providing each other mutual support in their quest for crowns (254). Much as the Native States exploded the easy subdivisions created by the figure of the train, then, this “greasy half-sheet of notepaper” signals both a class of persons and a set of actions quite outside the boundaries of a colonial newspaper (254). The narrator leaves Carnehan and Dravot in overnight possession of his office pouring over maps and reference texts, and his departure signals a surrender not merely of space, but also of meaning and knowledge.

As the narrator quits the field, Dravot bids him to come to the Serai in the morning to see them off. When the narrator arrives at this “great four-square sink of humanity,” he finds the inhabitants entertained by a mad priest and his servant who seek a caravan with which to travel north in order to sell charms to the Amir (255). They are, of course, Dravot and Carnehan in masquerade, and they are successful in joining the train of an Eusufazai trader bound first to Peshawur and then on to Kabul. As priest, Dravot bears an exemplar of their wares, “a child’s paper whirligig,” and this simple pinwheel serves as the secondary metonym for this section, as well as a recurrent image for the remainder of the story (255). An emblem of madness that is feigned, the final piece of a disguise that appears “complete to the native mind,” it represents a form of protection against the “death – certain and awful death” that seemed inescapable in the summer newspaper office (257). At the same time, the whirligig distracts attention from Dravot and Carnehan’s real cargo, a load of twenty Martini rifles – successors to the Enfield rifles that were instrumental in both fomenting and suppressing the Indian Mutiny – with which they hope to win their crowns. Dravot’s “never still” charm, which remains in perpetual motion no matter which way the wind blows, thus represents death averted and death concealed, fortunate madness and cunning dissimulation, superstition and technology, all together (256). As an integral part of their costume, it is sufficient to convince those present in the Serai, who comprise “the nationalities of Central Asia . . . and most of the folk of India proper,” and later the residents of Peshawur, that Carnehan and Dravot are what they appear (255). In other words, the whirligig represents India so well that even the Indians accept its significance; for readers to do so, however, requires a suspension of Shippey and Short’s “issue of truth versus credibility” in favor of what Draudt pejoratively, and Bascom more sympathetically, labels gullibility. Like the coin that he never receives, then, the whirligig leaves the narrator, and through him the reader, “overcome with astonishment” rather than with understanding (257).

IV I Was the King of Kafiristan

TWO YEARS PASS WITH VERY LITTLE change in the narrator’s circumstances. Once again, his office at the newspaper serves as the setting, not for the majority of the action of the story’s third section, but for its retrospective narration: Carnehan returns, alone and almost unrecognizable, to recount his and Dravot’s rise and fall as Kings of Kafiristan. In contrast to his overwhelming presence earlier in their acquaintance, when he had compelled the narrator’s attention and cooperation with his knowing lucidity and sheer size, Carnehan now appears as a “rag-wrapped, whining cripple” who “isn’t mad – yet, but . . . shall be that way soon” (258, 259). A testament to the hardships he has suffered, Carnehan’s shocking diminution of mind and body limits the coherence and contiguity of his story, which he tells in fits and starts of marked theme and oscillations between first and third person, and amidst repeated warnings that his “words will go all to pieces” (259). In addition, as he admits at one point, “Dravot did a lot I couldn’t see the hang of, and he learned their lingo in a way I never could” (268). Incipient madness and his own perspectival and linguistic limitations thus make his narrative suspect to all but the most epistemologically naïve of interlocutors.

Nevertheless, it is these very limitations, and the periodic vagueness they engender, that permit Carnehan’s story itself to serve as the primary metonym for India in section three. At no point even close to precise enough to be an allegory of anything, Carnehan and Dravot’s fortuitous creation of their Kingdom does sound, as Sullivan notes, “remarkably like a

seedy version of the British Raj” (100). In fact, Kipling parodically re-presents a favorite discursive convention of numerous Anglo-Indian periodical writers during the Indian Mutiny when, through Carnehan’s narration, he offers his own ironized history of British India. Like the early representatives of the East India Company, Carnehan and Dravot travel to Kafiristan, however disingenuously, as traders. Local conditions, in the form of “ten cold days” in the mountains with the twin dangers of avalanche and exposure, nearly kill them before their superior weaponry, the Martini rifles, allows them to settle a local dispute and then to begin to expand their influence through a mixture of hard work, the trappings of religion, and technological superiority (261). Eventually made Kings, although Dravot holds the majority of power, they govern with the aid of a native council held together by the bonds of Freemasonry, and reinforced by native troops that they have trained using their previously established expertise in military drilling. By now, Dravot’s goals have grown more grandiose – from “I’ll make a damned fine Nation of you,” he escalates to “I’ll make an Empire!” – and, in an explicit allusion to the Afghan border crisis, he envisions, “Two hundred and fifty thousand men, ready to cut in on Russia’s right flank when she tries for India!” (267, 269).²³ Unfortunately for Dravot and Carnehan, these troops ultimately turn against them, and “Ruin and Mutiny” ensue, when Dravot violates the prohibition in their original Contract against pursuing women and thereby alerts the locals that he and Carnehan are not gods, but men (274). Invoking the persistent British anxiety about the security of their Indian empire, Carnehan declares, “This business is our ‘Fifty-Seven’” (275).

It is at this point that Carnehan’s metonymic narration begins to break down, first through a divergence from historical fact. Unlike the British, who managed to survive the initial outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, which was afterwards quickly suppressed, Carnehan and Dravot have no synecdochically-inspired soldiers from home on whom they can rely. Only one native chief, Billy Fish, stays loyal, and the remaining Kafirs cut his throat when they catch him with the two fleeing kings. Dravot they kill, and Carnehan they crucify; the latter survives to be exiled so that he can tell his story. Even the slight epistemological solace that can be derived from Carnehan’s account of his experiences thus far – however bleak it may seem for the long-term prospects of the British in India – collapses altogether when he ceases to narrate: “He rocked to and fro and wept bitterly, wiping his eyes with the back of his scarred hands and moaning like a child for some ten minutes” (277). Overcome by his own personal trauma, Carnehan succumbs to the madness he had predicted when he first entered the newspaper office, disrupting the explanatory power of his extended metonym as surely as he and the Native States had exposed the insufficiency of the figure of the train, or he and Dravot had broken the mould of the press room.

As in those earlier sections of “The Man Who Would Be King,” however, the narrator presents readers with a secondary figure for representing British India. As proof of the story he has just told, Carnehan

fumbled in the mass of rags round his bent waist; brought out a black horsehair bag embroidered with silver thread; and shook therefrom on to my table – the dried, withered head of Daniel Dravot! The morning sun that had long been paling the lamps struck the red beard and blind sunken eyes; struck, too, a heavy circlet of gold studded with raw turquoises, that Carnehan placed tenderly on the battered temples. (278)

A synecdoche of a metonym for Britain's complete colonial history in India, this disembodied crowned head also recalls the story's obscure opening invocation of kingship, thereby returning readers to the same indeterminate point from which they had begun. Reclaiming his memorial, and professing unfinished business at Marwar, the original junction at which the narrator had delivered his mysterious message to Dravot in the story's first section, Carnehan shambles out of the office and into the street; later, the narrator discovers him, bereft of sense, and so takes him to "the nearest missionary for eventual transfer to the Asylum" (279). Returned to the Anglo-Indian authorities, Carnehan dies the next day; his few possessions have disappeared by the time the narrator arrives to check on him. Thus, the story's final synecdoche, its last tangible evidence of kingship, vanishes when brought under the control of the Raj. Put another way, it is only once Carnehan is back in British hands that he loses his head, both literally and figuratively.

V And There the Matter Rests

CARNEHAN'S FATE SUGGESTS THAT THE epistemological problem of India may be unsolvable. Metonymy and synecdoche offer temporary shortcuts to colonial knowledge that could prove affectively useful during and impressively memorable after times of crisis, not to mention entertaining when skillfully fictionalized. Figures like the Black Hole of Calcutta or the Well of Cawnpore, however, were ultimately insufficient to understand the subcontinent, and, unless one could trust entirely to Providence or pluck – neither of which saves Carnehan and Dravot – these same signifiers forcefully imply that India might be too dangerous to colonize. If imperialism relies upon the acquisition and control of information, an assumption under which the British had been operating since at least the middle of the eighteenth century, then "The Man Who Would Be King" represents their tenure in South Asia as radically unstable. Far from Sullivan's idealization or Shippey and Short's pity, therefore, Kipling seems finally to direct his readers towards uncertainty, even confusion, concerning the British presence in India.

Although in its recurrent pattern of tropological deconstruction – whereby the train is displaced by a coin, the newspaper office by a whirligig, and the proto-imperial conquest of Kafiristan by a mummified and crowned head – "The Man Who Would Be King" figures the epistemological lacuna of India with extraordinary vividness, the story is hardly alone among Kipling's many fictional representations of the problem of knowledge on the subcontinent.²⁴ For instance, a number of his stories from the late 1880s and early 1890s, among them "The Phantom Rickshaw" (1888), "The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes" (1888), and "The Mark of the Beast" (1891), deploy the supernatural to express similar doubts about their English characters' capacity to understand themselves, much less India.²⁵ *Kim* (1901), of course, so thoroughly imbricates its eponymous protagonist's quest for self-knowledge with his facility with Indian languages and customs that his recurrent question, "What is Kim?" might just as accurately be transcribed, "What is India?" The novel leaves the answer to this question somewhat ambiguously suspended between two metonymically-rendered possibilities, Creighton's "Great Game" and Teshoo Lama's "The Way," thereby signaling the enduring fecundity of both the rhetorical technique and the epistemological conundrum of "The Man Who Would Be King."

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NOTES

I am grateful to Stephen Tedeschi for help with revising this essay.

1. Both the qualitative and the chronological judgment are taken from Cornell's *Kipling in India* (161, 184).
2. On the publication history of "The Man Who Would Be King," see Page, *Kipling Companion*, (36–45). In a letter to Edmonia Hill dated [11?] July 1888, Kipling recounts the reaction of Allen to his potential turn from journalism to literature: "All of this is black treachery to Allen who wishes me to live and die in his service. 'Journalism' sez he and, inferentially, 'me for your Lord God Almighty.' 'Literature,' sez I and, though this does not concern him, 'a divinity of my own choosing'" (*Letters* 250).
3. Several literary and cultural scholars have gone one step further, from language to history, speculating that Kipling may have been inspired by the exploits and theories of a wide range of individuals, including American adventurer Josiah Harlan; Sir James Brooke, the so-called White Rajah of Sarawak; and Charles MacGregor, the head of military intelligence in India.
4. There are a number of collections of essays that trace Kipling's critical history through this crucial recuperation. Among them, Orel's *Critical Essays on Rudyard Kipling* is particularly noteworthy for the balance and quality of its selections, and for Orel's bibliographical introduction, which I find a model of comprehensiveness and fairness to both Kipling and his critics.
5. A third, more recent strain of criticism has focused on the often-queered gender dynamics of "The Man Who Would Be King." See, for instance, passages reflecting on the story in Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy*, Lane's *The Ruling Passion*, and Deane's "Imperial Barbarians." Once again, though, critical attention remains on Carnehan and Dravot's escapades.
6. I take to heart Hai's pithy caution that, "Kipling was heavily self-conscious about his role as a colonial writer, both implicated in and potentially subversive of colonial power, even as this role was both enabled by and potentially threatened by that power," and that, therefore, "Even if Kipling does not go so far as to undertake a critique of empire, his 'lies' certainly register a profound knowledge of the casualties incurred by imperial rule, and of the difficulties of writing about them" (600, 616). Hai's article offers incisive readings of a large number of Kipling's stories, although, perhaps fortunately for me, not of "The Man Who Would Be King."
7. In the interests of space, my choice of historical examples will be necessarily selective. For instance, although the Afghan misadventure to which Kipling most immediately alludes is the 1885 Panjdeh Incident, about which more in a moment, his story also resonates with lore surrounding both of Victorian Britain's Afghan Wars (1839–42, 1878–80), which remain beyond the scope of this essay.
8. My reading roughly corresponds with Arata's broader contention that, "Kipling's fictions tend not to represent the exotic as imaginatively available for the domestic reader" (13). In the case of this particular story, however, I would go a bit further than Arata in asserting that, even for Kipling's favored "select coterie of Anglo-Indians," the India of "The Man Who Would Be King" may remain fundamentally unknowable (13).
9. A significantly more cerebral, and certainly more sympathetic, but no less metonymic method for rendering India epistemologically accessible was offered by Sir William Jones later in the eighteenth century. Motivated by his "ambition to know *India* better than any other European ever knew it," Jones proposed a philological solution to India's welter of languages and cultures (qtd. in Said 75; emphasis in original). His Proto-Indo-European thesis gave "Sanskrit, Indian religion, and Indian history . . . the status of scientific knowledge," and offered linguists and laymen alike a metonymic key with which to reduce all of India's heteroglossia to a single absent, but nevertheless imaginable, source (Said 75). Of course, given his commitments to the tradition of Enlightenment radicalism, Jones sought a scientific basis for establishing the equal merits and common sources of Indian and European culture, and so his motives remain almost diametrically opposed to those of the imperialist press memorializing the Black Hole.

10. Although he does not discuss the relative prominence of metonymy among the tools of Anglo-Indian novelists, Moore-Gilbert mentions repeatedly the impulse in their fiction towards “educating the British reader about the real conditions of imperial rule” (12; see also 68).
11. In “Knowing the Country,” Bayley notes that the fundamental problem for the British in India was that, “information had to come from a ‘native informant’, an agent, a spy, an ‘approver’ who turned King’s Evidence, and, by their very nature, such agencies could not be trusted” (3–4). Bayley traces the history of intelligence gathering by the various empires that controlled India, with special attention to the information systems of the British East India Company (25–35).
12. Majeed identifies Taylor’s text as foundational to the Anglo-Indian novelistic tradition discussed by Moore-Gilbert. Building on the work of Bayley, Majeed links *Confessions* to British writers’ and readers’ “fascination with secret languages and mysterious codes”:

Intertwined with this [fascination] was a preoccupation with accumulating bodies of official knowledge to penetrate and expose the mysteries of cult and language, and an equal fascination with strategies to control the complex cultural, linguistic and communal heterogeneity of the subcontinent, which afforded so many opportunities for disguises and counter-disguises. (88)

13. Compare Taylor’s language with that of the anonymous author of “The Thugs: or, Secret Murderers of India,” which had appeared two years earlier in the *Edinburgh Review*: “We have to introduce to the knowledge of our countrymen a moral and political phenomenon, which is, perhaps, the most extraordinary that has ever existed in the world,—a phenomenon more striking than any thing that romancers have feigned touching the Old Man of the Mountain, or the Secret Tribunals of Germany;—a phenomenon, of which strange and appalling glimpses have been occasionally obtained, but of which the nature and extent have never, till the present time, been fully understood” (357). After describing the “approver” system adopted by the East India Company to suppress Thuggee, this same author offers a completely different epistemological solution to the problem of inaccurate or insufficient Indian information: “It must be perfectly obvious, that the application of force can only be a temporary and partial remedy for Thuggee . . . Happily a more efficacious remedy is not wanting. Some time ago a young Hindu who had received a liberal English education was persecuted by his friends for neglecting idol worship. Having been forced to the shrine of Kalee, he took off his cap, made a low bow to ‘Madam Kallee,’ and said he ‘hoped her ladyship was well.’ An Indian boy educated as we are, can no more believe in Kalee than we can ourselves” (394–95).
14. On this rhetoric of conspiracy, including a discussion of the figure of Thuggee, see my *Plots of Opportunity*.
15. Disraeli’s crushing response to the objections to his speech voiced by Mr. Mangles, the Liberal Chairman of the Board of Directors of the East India Company, is worth noting for its viciously effective use of Disraeli’s consistent focus on India as an epistemological problem:

The right hon. Gentleman denies that he knew anything, he protests his ignorance with a plaintiveness that is irresistible, and a pathos that I yield to without further struggle and argument with a Minister who, so far as India is concerned, would wish us to believe that his Government is the most purely ignorant Government, and the therefore the most incapable (because there are some who believe that capability does depend upon knowledge) – the most uninformed Government that ever presumed to influence the destinies of that country. (*Hansard’s* 538)

16. See “The Bengal Mutiny” (373); “The Sepoy Rebellion” (209–16); “India as it is — India as it may be,” (203); and “The English in India” (182).
17. In *Kipling and Afghanistan*, Moran details Kipling’s engagement as a newspaperman with the work of the Border Commission in 1885, providing an ample biographical connection between “The Man Who Would Be King” and the political context of Anglo-Russian competition in Afghanistan.

18. Although I ultimately disagree with Matin's characterization of Kipling as a "belligerent expansionist," especially when this conclusion rests upon a too-easy conflation of the author's journalism with his fiction, I find compelling his larger argument about the need to reconnect *Kim* and *Puck of Pook's Hill*, especially, with invasion-scare fiction and Forward Policy advocacy (321).
19. The train was a favorite symbol for Kipling, whom one critic has denominated "the poet and prophet of technology, and particularly transport technology" (Harvie 269).
20. Interestingly, Kipling describes himself as a "literary loafer" in a letter to Cornell Price dated 26 April 1888 (*Letters* 163).
21. According to a letter to Margaret Burne-Jones dated 25 January–24 March 1888, this exchange of Masonic phrases and coded messages was based upon Kipling's actual experience while riding an Indian train (*Letters* 153).
22. In a letter to Edmonia Hill dated 22 April 1888, Kipling describes working in the press room as not "quite as amusing as stoking a P&O liner in the Red Sea but it's a good deal hotter and combines excitement with education" (*Letters* 158). A later letter to Hill, dated 12–14 May 1888, appears to provide the origin for the opening of the second section in "The Man Who Would Be King" (*Letters* 172).
23. The ground for Dravot's optimistic belligerence — his belief that the local peoples are "the Lost Tribes, or something like it, and they've grown to be English" — not only alludes immediately to the contemporary fascination with Kafirstan explicated by Marx, but also literalizes Jones's late-eighteenth-century theory of a Proto-Indo-European link among the ancestors of modern European, Semitic, and Indian languages and civilizations (269).
24. Although she reads "The Man Who would Be King" as fundamentally idealizing Britain's imperial project, Sullivan remains attentive throughout *Narratives of Empire* to "the persistence of Kipling's original trope of uncontrollable loss and terror at unknowable India" (24). Focusing especially on how Kipling's familial metaphors break down when juxtaposed with instances of miscegenation, including Dravot's disastrous attempt to claim a Kafir wife, she asserts, "the connection between failure and transgressive knowledge is nowhere more explicit than in 'To Be Filed for Reference'" (111).
25. Battles describes Kipling's "The Mark of the Beast" as "one of his most forceful critiques of Empire: as an allegory of the relationship of British colonizer and Indian colonized, it deserves a place alongside such stories as 'The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes' and 'The Man Who Would Be King'" (333).

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