

The Horrors of Scientific Investigation: Parasitic Mesmerism in Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Parasite*

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In *Degeneration* (1880) E. Ray Lankester seriously warns against the common presumption that all evolution means progress. In the final paragraph of his work he pleads for the fostering of scientific rationality to combat the danger of degeneration: 'The full and earnest cultivation of Science — the Knowledge of Causes — is that to which we have to look for the protection of our race — even of this English branch of it — from relapse and degeneration.'¹ In Lankester's opinion 'Science' is a universal remedy to ensure the progress of humanity. Arthur Conan Doyle played his part and created more than one scientifically minded character who answers Lankester's challenge for the Anglo-Saxon race, including Professor Challenger and, of course, Sherlock Holmes, who has received the most popular and scholarly attention. Laura Otis believes that Doyle, a trained doctor himself, saw in his famous detective a way to alleviate a general fear of foreign infiltration and infection, both literally and metaphorically.² She suggests that 'Holmes unmasks innumerable "curses", reinforcing the empire's confidence that its science and technology could overcome demonic threats associated with the people it was colonizing.'³ Indeed, much of Doyle's writing is informed by racial and imperial prejudices prevalent at the time.⁴

Soon after he killed off Holmes for the first time in 'The Final Solution' (1893), Doyle created a like-minded character, Professor Gilroy in *The Parasite* (1894), whose scientific examination of the mesmeric enigma represented by Penelosa, a woman from the West Indies, closely resembles Holmes's investigative method based on pure reason.⁵ Somewhat surprisingly — considering the usual pattern of the Holmes stories — Doyle, in

¹ E. Ray Lankester, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1880), p. 62.

² Laura Otis, *Membranes: Metaphors of Invasion in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Science, and Politics* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 90.

³ Otis, p. 111.

⁴ See for instance Catherine Wynne, *The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism, and the Gothic* (London: Greenwood Press, 2002).

⁵ In most editions the name is rendered as 'Penclosa'. However, in the use of 'Penelosa' this article follows Catherine Wynne's 2009 Valancourt edition which is based on the text of the British first edition published by Archibald Constable in London, December 1894.

this short novella, challenges Lankester's belief in the unequivocal benefit of science for human progress. Through the character of Gilroy, the 1894 novella problematises Otis's assessment of Doyle's endorsement of the analytic method as it questions the firm belief in science as the means to combat foreign, even 'demonic' threats of degeneration and racial pollution, often associated with the colonised. In an interesting plot development, Gilroy's rationality grows less and less effective when attempting to come to terms with Penelosa's impenetrable and inexplicable hypnotic power. Instead, he experiences the horrors of losing control over his own will to this 'parasite', as he comes to call the elderly, unattractive, and even 'deformed' woman from Trinidad who represents the colonised Other in manifold ways.⁶ Thus, *The Parasite* presents an anomaly compared with much of Doyle's work, as the rational hero is not victorious over the foreign threat in the end. In contrast to such champions of science, progress, and deductive reasoning as Professor Challenger or Sherlock Holmes, the 'hero' of this novella is helplessly at the mercy of an unfathomable woman from the colonies. Through her mesmeric control over him, he eventually experiences the degeneration of his intellectual abilities that Lankester dreaded, and does so not despite, but rather because of, his earnest cultivation of the scientific method which ultimately neglects all other aspects of human interaction.

Through Gilroy's loss of selfhood, questions of free will and identity are raised and left unanswered by the novella. Doyle's specific interest in these questions becomes clear in an unpublished essay, from which Pierre Nordon quotes:

A man is impelled to do some act by the irresistible action of a hypnotic suggestion which may have been made some months before. Yet to him the action appears to emanate from himself and however *outré* it may be he will always invent some plausible reason why he has done it. [...] How can we tell that all our actions are not of this nature? What appears to us to be our own choice may prove really to have been as unalterable and inexorable as fate — the unavoidable sum total of suggestions which are acting upon us.⁷

Doyle clearly believed in the power of post-hypnotic suggestion, which was heatedly discussed in the periodical press in the 1890s. In *The Parasite*, he uses it as a gothic trope to explore the nature of human identity. Gilroy's understanding of himself as scientist and rational man is seriously challenged by his encounter with Penelosa. This article therefore explores the ways in which this particular scientist is driven to madness and irresponsibility

⁶ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Parasite* / Bram Stoker, *The Watter's Mou'*, ed. by Catherine Wynne (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2009), pp. 36, 35. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Quoted in Pierre Nordon, *Conan Doyle* (London: John Murray, 1966), p. 151.

through his obsession with scientific investigation into an unknown and, as it turns out, unknowable power. It traces the decline of the protagonist from moral and professional certainty to the onset of insanity, and eventual moral and intellectual degeneration. Gilroy's scientific rationality eventually produces the opposite of progress in Lankester's sense. Lankester's faith in the pursuit of knowledge as a panacea for degeneration is effectively turned upside down in Doyle's novella, which serves as a startling critique of the tendency of materialist science to neglect the human aspect of research.

Mesmerism and its academic exploration are the central idea driving *The Parasite's* plot. The eminent physiology professor Austin Gilroy is at first a thorough sceptic and only begins to believe in the power of mesmerism after witnessing Penelosa successfully hypnotise his fiancée Agatha. Now convinced of its power, Gilroy is eager to examine mesmerism in a series of experiments with Penelosa, offering himself as the subject, as he believes he could easily reach a sensational breakthrough and gain distinction in the under-researched field. The mesmeric sessions are extremely successful, and Gilroy only gradually realises that he has lost control over his own experiment and actions, and that Penelosa has fallen in love with him. He is horrified and, when the mesmerist experiences a moment of weakness which breaks the spell, he tells her how much he abhors her as a woman. From then on she is bent on revenge and slowly ruins his professional and even personal reputation by forcing him to ridicule himself in public and to commit crimes. She has acquired complete control over his will and can steer his actions even from afar. No matter how hard he tries to resist the impulses she sends, he is powerless. The final atrocity, in which he is set to destroy his fiancée's face with acid, is only prevented by Penelosa's sudden death and his release from her control.

Gothic tales using mesmerism or hypnotism — terms which were often used interchangeably — were abundant in the 1890s.⁸ The practice of mesmerism came to Britain from France in the 1830s and soon found vehement supporters and opponents in the medical profession.⁹ After a mesmerism craze in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, medical interest in particular began to decline, but public debate renewed its focus on the topic in the final decades of the century. The experimentations with hysterical women at the Salpêtrière under Charcot and wider investigations of hypnotism at the rival Nancy School had led to an increased acceptance of hypnotism as a scientifically valid practice among the British

⁸ Anon., 'Mesmerism, alias Hypnotism', *The British Medical Journal*, 1.1318 (3 April 1886), 654–55 (p. 654).

⁹ See Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

medical establishment. In the 1890s, it was widely discussed in the periodical press, and most attention was dedicated to the assumed dangers of hypnotism for the subjects' nervous system and its potential for criminal abuse. In turn, this provided plenty of material for literary exploitation, and the representation of hypnotism proved to be a useful imaginative tool for all sorts of moral and social commentary. At the end of the century in particular, discussions surrounding the relationship between hypnotism and crime had a great impact on popular fiction. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a great number of popular works on hypnotism, or mesmerism, and crime was published.¹⁰ Mesmerism clearly sold well. Daniel Pick suggests where this late-Victorian fascination with mesmerism might have come from: '[Hypnosis] complicated Victorian ideas about the nature of the self, the subliminal aspects of *all* relationships, the indeterminate border between covert command and creative collaboration, inspiration and interference, partnership and possession' (emphasis in original).¹¹ In Doyle's novella, Gilroy only gradually and painfully realises the all-encompassing influence of mesmerism on each of his personal and professional relationships. Indeed, in much of the popular fiction of the time, mesmerism was used to address or raise questions of free will: who (or what) really determines our life? Apart from George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), *fin-de-siècle* novels that immediately spring to mind are Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897). They all feature a villain — supernatural or otherwise — who abuses mesmerism to take control over the minds of others and completely obliterate their sense of self. *The Beetle* and *Trilby* were best-selling novels at their publication, and the persistent number of sales of *Dracula* up to the present day points to the overwhelming success of the theme of mesmerism in combination with gothic or sensational elements. According to Pick, du Maurier's *Trilby* is often assumed to be the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, to the point where the character of Svengali literally became synonymous with 'evil manipulator' in public usage.¹²

In 1895, one year after the publication of *Trilby*, the literary critic Arthur Quiller-Couch commented sharply on the popularity of hypnotic fiction, which he could not

¹⁰ See Donald Hartmann, 'Hypnotic and Mesmeric Themes and Motifs in Selected English-Language Novels, Short Stories, Plays and Poems, 1820–1983', *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 44.3 (September 1987), 156–66. Quoted in Mary Elizabeth Leighton, 'Under the Influence: Crime and Hypnotic Fictions of the *Fin de Siècle*', in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, ed. by Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 203–22 (p. 213).

¹¹ Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 64.

¹² Pick, p. 2.

‘abide’.¹³ In the essays, he complains that these tales all follow the same pattern, and that hypnotism eliminates free will, and thus any morality and human interest in a story. He continues,

Let us distinguish. Hypnotism is a proved fact: people are hypnotised. Hypnotism is not a delimited fact: nobody yet knows precisely its conditions or its effects; or, if the discovery had been made, it has certainly not yet found its way to the novelists. For them it is as yet chiefly a field of fancy. They invent vagaries for it as they invent ghosts.¹⁴

However, Doyle’s depiction of mesmerism deviates from the common pattern that Quiller-Couch so abhors. Gilroy’s subjection is made the more prominent by the fact that all power within the novella emanates from a woman, who is old, unattractive, and foreign at that. Quiller-Couch trenchantly remarks, ‘the hypnotiser in these stories is always the villain of the piece. For the same or similar reasons, the “subject” is always a person worthy of our sympathy, and is usually a woman. Let us suppose a good and beautiful woman — for that is the commonest case.’¹⁵ Both *The Parasite* and Doyle’s earlier short story ‘John Barrington Cowles’ (1884), which also uses mesmerism as a source of horror, are unusual in this point, because they share the motif of a dangerous and sexually voracious female mesmerist.¹⁶ In contrast to the male mesmerists of much of the fiction of the 1890s, Doyle’s female villains remain undefeated. Rational and scientific measures associated with the medical community, which was also dominated by men, fail against their strong mental powers. The interplay between exact science represented by the male characters and natural forces represented by the villainesses induces madness in the scientists. Their rational understanding of the world is unhinged and they cannot grasp the female power over their minds. The only escape is death, either of the victim or of the mesmerist herself, which terminates the mesmeric control. This gendered power reversal illustrates the imbalance in materialistic scientific research which Doyle came to criticise later in life. A purely rationalistic approach to science detached from

¹³ Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Adventures in Criticism* (London: Cassell and Company, 1896), p. 403. Mary Elizabeth Leighton first drew my attention to this in ‘Under the Influence: Crime and Hypnotic Fictions of the *Fin de Siècle*’.

¹⁴ Quiller-Couch, p. 406.

¹⁵ Quiller-Couch, p. 404.

¹⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the role of the female mesmerist in Doyle see Kelly Hurley, ‘Science and the Gothic’, in *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 170–85; and Catherine Wynne, ‘Arthur Conan Doyle’s Domestic Desires: Mesmerism, Mediumship and *Femmes Fatales*’, in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, ed. by Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 223–43.

human life, as represented by the male scientist Gilroy, cannot, Doyle implies, decipher or conquer all mysteries of life, such as Penelosa's erratic and natural power.

Doyle's scientific and investigative interest in questions of psychical phenomena is marked by two events in his biography. In 1891 he became a member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), and in 1916 he formally converted to Spiritualism.¹⁷ With his official conversion, he professed to be convinced of the possibility of telepathic communion with the dead and thus left neutral scientific inquiry behind. *The Parasite*, however, was written in the heyday of his involvement with the SPR, during which time his scientific curiosity influenced his writing. As he says in the collection of essays *Through the Magic Door* (1907), '[t]he mere suspicion of scientific thought or scientific methods has a great charm in any branch of literature, however far it may be removed from actual research.'¹⁸ This is particularly true in the case of mesmerism, the alleged power of which he uses to great gothic effect in both 'John Barrington Cowles' and *The Parasite*. Whereas the short story is quite crude in its use of mesmerism, and also adds strong occult and supernatural elements to the powers of the mesmerist, *The Parasite* is scientifically well informed and up to date with the latest research on the topic. It is not at all 'removed' from actual research, since the scientific interest in the practice of mesmerism provides the basis for the entire plot of the novella. According to Nordon, Doyle had become very well read in supernatural phenomena by 1888; he was informed about the Nancy School as well as the work being done by Charcot at the Salpêtrière, and had read Alfred Binet's and Charles Féré's standard work *Animal Magnetism* (1887), to which he refers explicitly in *The Parasite*.¹⁹

The text draws on scientific textbooks to demonstrate the validity of mesmerism as a science. Doyle has Gilroy read *Animal Magnetism* as a preliminary study of mesmerism before he seriously enters on his series of experiments with Penelosa. Moreover, Catherine Wynne draws attention to the last chapter of Binet and Féré's work, which outlines the potential danger of criminal abuse, exactly the fate that is awaiting Gilroy.²⁰ Binet and Féré claim,

It is possible to suggest to a subject in a state of somnambulism fixed ideas, irresistible impulses, which he will obey on awaking with mathematical precision. [...] [T]he hypnotic subject may become the instrument of a terrible

¹⁷ Catherine Wynne, 'Introduction', in Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Parasite / Bram Stoker, The Watter's Mou*, ed. by Catherine Wynne (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2009), pp. vii–xxxvii (p. xii).

¹⁸ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Through the Magic Door and Other Pieces* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), p. 86.

¹⁹ Nordon, p. 151.

²⁰ Wynne, 'Arthur Conan Doyle's Domestic Desires', p. 226.

crime, the more terrible since, immediately after the act is accomplished, all may be forgotten — the crime, the impulse, and its instigator.²¹

Both Gilroy and his fiancée Agatha experience exactly this when being mesmerised. This could have been a warning for Gilroy. Binet and Féré continue, ‘although the subject is quite himself, and conscious of his identity, he cannot resist the force which impels him to perform an act which he would under other circumstances condemn’.²² According to contemporary theory it is thus absolutely possible for Penelosa to prompt Agatha to break her engagement with Gilroy, and for Gilroy to ridicule himself in public, without anyone noticing anything odd about them. To convey the danger of hypnotic suggestion even more compellingly, Binet and Féré explain, ‘[t]he danger of these criminal suggestions is increased by the fact that at the will of the experimenter, the act may be accomplished several hours, and even several days, after the date of suggestion.’²³ The experience of the novella’s characters confirms this belief in post-hypnotic suggestion. Gilroy is trapped in a spiral of terrible acts that he might commit unwittingly at any time. Not only does Doyle incorporate the names and theories of real scientists into his novella to give the power of mesmerism more weight, he also clearly panders to the public fear of the possible abuse of that power for malicious or criminal ends. What is more, in both ‘John Barrington Cowles’ and *The Parasite*, despite all the scientific grounding of the practice of mesmerism, the strange power proves scientifically uncontrollable and induces a sense of horror in the narrator investigating it.

Gilroy’s purely materialistic approach is depicted as impotent and actually endangers his sense of self. Gilroy examines the phenomenon of mesmerism in his diary, taking the reader with him on his journey from scientific curiosity into total loss of control over his willpower. Gilroy’s language is marked by his scientific approach to life and informed by the latest theories on hypnotism. He keeps name-dropping eminent scientists, and constantly refers to himself as a rational and well-educated academic who adheres to the strictest methodical principles both in his career and in his private life. His diary is an expression of this scientific spirit; he keeps it out of professional habit in order ‘to define [his] own mental position’ (p. 6). This strictly analytical approach to his own existence dooms him to experience the complete dissolution of his self in his experiments with Penelosa. Although she has no abstract understanding of her own power, it is not any less effective. Of course, in Gilroy’s view, her claims about the power of mesmerism are simply ‘the gossip of a woman’,

²¹ Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, *Animal Magnetism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1889), p. 372.

²² Binet and Féré, p. 373.

²³ Binet and Féré, p. 373.

which ‘cannot claim any scientific weight’ (p. 15). He is about to learn that there are powers which are uncontrollable by academic analysis and classification. This increases the horror of his experience, as mesmerism crushes both his worldview and his willpower.

In Wynne’s introduction to *The Parasite* she suggests that

Miss Penelosa, for all her quasi-vampiric proclivities, is not supernatural. She probes the boundaries of psychic knowledge, penetrates a scientific community, and in the process destabilizes one of its elite for sexual gain. The novella traces prevailing nineteenth-century tensions concerning the boundaries of orthodox science, as ‘other’ knowledge, ranging from ‘semi-science’ to ‘charlatanry’, threatened medical authority.²⁴

Gilroy is the perfect representative of this medical elite and has submitted his entire life to the dictates of what he understands science to demand of a serious investigator. The ensuing conflict between Penelosa’s will and his idea of himself is already indicated in the novella’s early pages. Gilroy briefly mentions Claude Bernard, *the* representative figure of materialism in science, and firmly places himself as one of his followers. His fiancée calls him a ‘rank’ materialist, and he confesses that ‘[a] departure from pure reason affects me like an evil smell or a musical discord’ (p. 5). Gilroy articulates a rationalistic, even cold and unemotional approach to life, and this is how he aims to investigate mesmerism as well. There is not an ounce of spirituality in him. Doyle came to criticise just such an attitude in scientists in a speech given to medical students in 1910. In ‘The Romance of Medicine’, he remembers his own days as a medical student:

We looked upon mind and spirit as secretions from the brain in the same way as bile was a secretion from the liver. Brain centres explained everything, and if you could find and stimulate the centre of holiness you would produce a saint — but if your electrode slipped, and you got on to the centre of brutality, you would evolve a Bill Sikes.²⁵

Gilroy thinks in similar terms about mesmerism, viewing it as a field to be mapped out as easily as a brain. He somewhat ashamedly admits a ‘highly psychic’ quality in his material make-up due to his dark complexion (p. 5), reflecting the commonplace racial prejudice that believed that Celtic and less purely Anglo-Saxon types were more susceptible to mesmeric influence. He relies on his scientific training and education to counteract this vulnerability

²⁴ Wynne, ‘Introduction’, p. xiv.

²⁵ Quoted in *Arthur Conan Doyle: A Life in Letters*, ed. by John Lellenberg, Daniel Stashower, and Charles Foley (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 95.

and believes himself sufficiently equipped to explore this new, as of yet unrecognised, scientific field of mesmerism.

He is so eager to exploit Penelosa's power for his own scientific advancement that he entirely disregards her as a human being with her own wishes and agenda, as all he is interested in is earning his Fellowship of the Royal Society. His arrogant attitude towards her 'insignificant' presence and 'retiring' manner proves to be his downfall (p. 7), as soon as Penelosa takes control of the experiments for her own aims. He ignores all signs that he is entering a dangerous realm well beyond his knowledge or control. When he first approaches Penelosa with the idea of executing a series of experiments with himself as the subject, she refuses him; but when he expresses his eagerness, she changes her mind and informs him, '[i]f you make it a personal matter, [...] I shall only be too happy to tell you any thing you wish to know' (p. 16). He is so blind that he does not realise her personal, probably emotional, interest in him. Even when fellow scientist Charles Sadler, whom Penelosa also pursued as a romantic object for a brief period, tries to warn him about her, Gilroy puts it down to scientific jealousy. All he is interested in is his scientific breakthrough, and Gilroy becomes obsessed with defining the workings of mesmerism, focusing solely on '[r]esults, results, results — and the cause an absolute mystery' (p. 18). His singular concentration on knowledge for knowledge's sake misses the point of scientific research, which should strive for the advancement and betterment of humanity. In his address to the medical students, Doyle himself warns against such a fatalistic approach to finding the causes of things: 'Not only have we never got to the end of any medical matter, but it is only the truth that we have never got to the beginning of it. It will help to keep you humble if you remember how largely the very words we use, Life, Matter, Spirit, and so on, are mere symbols of the real meaning of which we know little.'²⁶ Gilroy would have benefitted from his creator's insight, as he neglects the 'real meaning' of life, the human side. As Pick notes in the remark quoted above, mesmerism fascinated the Victorians because it pervaded *all* areas of life. Research into this field bears on human emotions and spiritual affinities as well as actions, all of which Gilroy completely ignores. Too late he realises his grave mistake, acknowledging that '[i]n my eagerness for scientific facts I have been foolishly blind to the human relations between Miss Penelosa and myself' (p. 21). Gilroy has, up until this point, closely associated his scientific worldview with his sense of self, and this lack of human interest not only contributes to his failure as scientist but also leads to the unhinging of his mind.

²⁶ Quoted in Anon., 'St. Mary's Hospital: Introductory Address on "The Romance of Medicine" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle', *The Lancet* (8 October, 1910), 1066–68 (p. 1066).

The hold that Penelosa has over Gilroy's mind actually drives him close to insanity; by this point in the narrative, when he has realised her complete power over him, nothing is left of his rational scientific superiority. This occurs because his thirst for scientific distinction leads Gilroy to irresponsibility: he agrees to sittings with Penelosa without a chaperone, and thus sets in motion a spiral of disappointed desire and feelings of rejection on the mesmerist's part, which almost destroys him. He does not realise for a long time that the experiment, even though instigated by himself, is entirely controlled by Penelosa and that he has lost any control over his own mind. He has acted irresponsibly because he opens up his mind to the West Indian without perceiving her own motivation for the series of experiments (sexual or at least romantic attraction), or even wasting a single thought on it. From then on, he presents a danger not only to himself and those close to him but to the community at large. As a consequence of his recklessness, Gilroy loses control over his actions; under Penelosa's influence he professes his love to her, punches Charles Sadler, and tries to rob a bank. Once he realises that he has, albeit unconsciously, displayed signs of affection for Penelosa, he is horrified at this dishonourable act towards his fiancée. It is only when he really understands the magnitude of Penelosa's sway over him that he finds relief and no longer feels the weight of responsibility for his actions. Nevertheless, he senses that he has sunk from the high moral and intellectual standard he expects from himself. He perceives it as personal weakness and thinks of himself as being a slave to her will. Ironically this subverts the relationship between coloniser and colonised, and shows how easily an arbitrary scale of racial and, in late-nineteenth-century understanding, moral superiority can be overturned. In Doyle's earlier story 'John Barrington Cowles', the mesmerist Kate Northcott, of undefined origins and with close connections to India, undermines male confidence as a colonial Other in a similar overturning of a moralised racial hierarchy. The only fiancé out of three who does not commit suicide after coming into too close contact with her, Archibald Reeves, becomes a 'degraded creature', finding escape in alcoholism.²⁷ In each text the mesmerist provokes an extreme reaction in her victim which leads to degeneration from their codes of conduct and high principles. This loss of control over his own actions accelerates Gilroy's decline into madness in ways that are in keeping with contemporary theories of the dangerous effects of mesmerism on its experimental subjects.

Binet and Féré consider questions of criminal responsibility, and propose that offenders who have acted under hypnotic influence 'should be treated like insane

²⁷ Doyle, 'John Barrington Cowles', in Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Parasite* / Bram Stoker, *The Watter's Mou*, ed. by Catherine Wynne (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2009), pp. 110–34 (p. 115).

criminals'.²⁸ When Penelosa seeks her revenge after being spurned, Gilroy's irritation first increases to hatred and then his mental state begins to decline. He is driven closer and closer to insanity by his hatred for this 'she-devil' and his judgment becomes impaired (p. 40). Mesmerism was indeed widely believed to be a morbid state and to upset a subject's nervous system severely. Thus, medical men frequently proposed in the press that 'the dangers of mesmerism are numerous and far-reaching, that hypnotism has far more serious drawbacks than ordinary treatment; in that it deeply, and possibly permanently, alters the nervous system, the character, feelings, &c., of the patient'.²⁹ Gilroy experiences a similar effect on his nerves and feelings. At first, before he completely understands the hold Penelosa has over him, he simply wonders, '[w]hat is the matter with me? Am I going mad?' (p. 23). He also realises that he could not confide in anyone because '[t]hey would set me down as a madman' (p. 25). He fears that colleagues will subject him to the same cold scientific curiosity that he has hitherto displayed towards Penelosa; he does not want to be exhibited like 'a freak at a fair' (p. 34), and he criticises his colleague Wilson, who also investigates psychic phenomena, for having lost sight of human beings: 'Every thing to him is a case and a phenomenon' (p. 34).

Eventually, he and others actually think of him as being mad. Gilroy identifies Penelosa as the cause of this, and vows, 'I will not leave her behind, to drive some other man mad as she has me' (p. 42). He begins to harbour violent thoughts, such as, 'I could have taken the crutch from her side and beaten her face in with it' (p. 32); his body reacts physically to the mental stress with 'hiccough' and 'ptosis of the left eyelid' (p. 32); and his nerves suffer from the pressure. When he finally realises the danger he has put Agatha in, he collapses: 'At the thought of what I might have done my nerves broke down and I sat shivering and twitching, the pitiable wreck of a man' (p. 46). Henry Maudsley emphasises the importance of nervous balance for mental sanity:

Whatever opinion may be held concerning the essential nature of mind, and its independence of matter, it is admitted on all sides that its manifestations take place through the nervous system, and are affected by the condition of the nervous parts which minister to them. If these are healthy, they are sound; if these are diseased, they are unsound. Insanity is, in fact, disorder of the brain producing disorder of the mind; or, to define its nature in greater detail, it is a disorder of the supreme nerve-centres of the brain — the special organs of mind — producing derangement of thought, feeling, and action, together or

²⁸ Binet and Féré, p. 375.

²⁹ St. Clair Thomson, 'The Dangers of Hypnotism', *Westminster Review*, 134 (July 1890), 624–31 (p. 626).

separately, of such degree or kind as to incapacitate the individual for the relations of life.³⁰

Gilroy finally realises that he is ‘out of all touch with [his] kind’ and surrenders to this incapacitation (p. 39); at first, he considers suicide but then settles on murdering Penelosa as the only solution, at the same time renouncing all that is important to him in life: his career, his social position, and his fiancée. Maudsley identifies the weakening of the moral sense as one of the earliest indications of insanity: ‘One of the first symptoms of insanity — one which declares itself before there is any intellectual derangement, before the person’s friends suspect even that he is becoming insane — is a deadening or complete perversion of the moral sense.’³¹ In the nineteenth century, moral insanity became a popular concept, and a means to classify people of unimpaired intellectual faculties as insane. As James Cowles Prichard suggests, ‘[t]his form of mental derangement has been described as consisting in a morbid perversion of the feelings, affections, and active powers, without any illusion or erroneous conviction impressed upon the understanding.’³²

Penelosa’s effect on Gilroy has devastating consequences for his conscience, as he realises that ‘[s]he has made me as desperate and dangerous a man as walks the earth. God knows I have never had the heart to hurt a fly, and yet if I had my hands now upon that woman she should never leave this room alive’ (p. 42). Maudsley discusses the conscience in *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (1874): ‘Let it be noted how [the conscience] is perverted or destroyed sometimes by disease or injury of the brain. The last acquired faculty in the progress of human evolution, it is the first to suffer when disease invades the mental organization.’³³ Indeed, a ‘parasite’ — the morbid state of hypnotism — has invaded Gilroy’s mental organisation and has induced his mental deterioration. Gilroy’s deadening of feeling and need for rash action results in his rationalising his conviction that murder is necessary for Agatha’s and the world’s safety. He even calls it his ‘duty’ (p. 47). His moral compass has degenerated and he becomes insane; Gilroy is punished for his scientific greed in the end by

³⁰ Henry Maudsley, ‘Moral Sense and Disordered Brain’, an extract from *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1874); reprinted in *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Vieda Skultans (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 190–92 (p. 191).

³¹ Maudsley, ‘Morals and Constitution’, an extract from *Body and Mind* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1873); reprinted in *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Vieda Skultans (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 189–90.

³² James Cowles Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London: Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper, 1835), p. 12.

³³ Maudsley, ‘Conscience and Organization’, an extract from *Responsibility in Mental Disease* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1874); reprinted in *Madness and Morals: Ideas on Insanity in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Vieda Skultans (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 192–3 (p. 192).

the loss of his self-respect, sense of honour, and sanity. Even the final ‘redeeming’ act of taking revenge on the one he believes responsible, which would have returned the power of agency to him, is denied to him by her natural death.

The prudent and rational scientist has found the limit to scientific curiosity in his own person; he does not conform to his exacting expectations anymore. George M. Gould, an American opponent of the fashion of mesmeric performances, notes that ‘fascination [with hypnotism] gives prompt way to disgust when it is seen that what really takes place is only the most brutalizing of crudities — a relapse to the mental and social conditions of animalism and barbarism’.³⁴ Mesmerism prompts degeneration, according to Gould; Reeves’s alcoholism in ‘John Barrington Cowles’ and Gilroy’s aggression seem to correspond to this theory. This racially informed ‘atavistic return to primitive and savage mental states’ connects Gould’s anxiety with prevalent fears of degeneration, most emphatically voiced by the previously quoted Lankester in *Degeneration*.³⁵ Referring to the white races of Europe, Lankester warns that ‘[i]t is possible for us [...] to reject the good gift of reason with which every child is born, and to degenerate’.³⁶ Loss of the power of reason is a symptom of degeneration from which both Reeves and Gilroy suffer. The ‘full and earnest cultivation of Science’ which Lankester would like to see as a protection against degeneration has, on the contrary, led to precisely this state in Gilroy’s case. His materialistic approach in experimenting with an unknown power demands the price of his reason.

By making his scientist surrender his reason to Penelosa, Doyle addresses the question of free will and human identity. Gilroy is deprived of all footing in his life once he loses the power to control his actions, and consequently he loses his sense of self. His experience of degradation, even degeneration, seriously questions the existence of a stable identity for him. Very often the idea of the self is identified with ‘soul’ in the novella. The soul is fragile and needs protection, as Gilroy immediately realises when he witnesses Agatha’s hypnotisation. He instantly exclaims (in his diary), ‘[b]ut her soul! It had slipped from beyond our ken. Whither had it gone? What power had dispossessed it? I was puzzled and disconcerted’ (p. 10). Gould agrees with this assessment of mesmerism: ‘Disguise it as one may, the hour’s amusement has been at the expense of nothing less than the Disintegration of a Soul, and the Dissolution of Personality.’³⁷ In relation to his own exposure to mesmerism, Gilroy does not see the same need for protection, however. His sexist beliefs

³⁴ George M. Gould, ‘The Ethics of Hypnotism’, *The Open Court*, 4 (1890), 2172–74 (p. 2172).

³⁵ Gould, p. 2173.

³⁶ Lankester, p. 60–61.

³⁷ Gould, p. 2173.

support the assumption that his will is stronger than any woman's. Nevertheless, watching Agatha, he receives a first glimpse of mesmerism's power to destabilise a definite sense of selfhood. Quiller-Couch believes that this sense of loss translates to the reader as well: 'I think my first objection to these hypnotic tales is the terror they inspire. I am not talking of ordinary human terror, which, of course is the basis of much of the best tragedy. [...] But the terror of these hypnotic stories resembles that of a child in a dark room.'³⁸ Mesmerism provokes something beyond ordinary terror; it questions the limits of our self and suggests a frightening permeability of our mind. The terror of a child in darkness denotes the experience of fear of the unknown, the feeling of utter helplessness. Indeed, Gilroy describes this exact feeling in very similar terms: 'I tried as I watched to preserve my scientific calm, but a foolish, causeless agitation convulsed me. I trust that I hid it, but I felt as a child feels in the dark' (p. 10). Already, at his first encounter with mesmerism, his scientific certainty is unsettled, but he chooses to ignore this.

In his materialist mind-set, he does not expect the unsettling consequences of allowing another will into his psyche; he only sees things in their biological context, neglecting all other aspects of life, and exhibiting exactly that sort of behaviour that Doyle warns against in his 1910 speech to the medical students. Doyle challenges his listeners: 'There is another fact which life will teach — the value of kindness and humanity as well as of knowledge. That is exactly the point which the intellectual prig has missed. A strong and kindly personality is as valuable an asset as actual learning in a medical man.'³⁹ Gilroy also misses the point of kindness and humanity in his dealings with Penelosa. Had he not at first ignored her so cruelly and then spurned her yearning for love, he — applying Doyle's own dictum — might not have suffered so much. Penelosa abuses her gift for her own benefit, but Gilroy is too focused on himself to realise the possibility of human failure. *The Parasite* exposes scientific arrogance at its worst and shows how easily a rational man can be turned into a madman.

In *Memoirs and Adventures* (1924), Doyle judged *The Parasite* to be 'very inferior'.⁴⁰ According to Wynne, Doyle's novella was considerably less popular than *Trilby*, which was also published in 1894, and suggests that this might be due to du Maurier's more conventional depiction of 'mesmeric subordination'.⁴¹ Indeed, Doyle later suppressed the novella from listings of his published work, and Stephen Knight believes that this is not

³⁸ Quiller-Couch, p. 403–04.

³⁹ Quoted in Anon., 'St Mary's Hospital: Introductory Address on "The Romance of Medicine"', p. 1066.

⁴⁰ Russell Miller, *The Adventures of Arthur Conan Doyle* (London: Pimlico, 2009), p. 443.

⁴¹ Wynne, 'Arthur Conan Doyle's Domestic Desires', p. 242.

because its critique of mesmerism ‘clashed with his later spiritual beliefs’, suggesting instead that ‘it may have been a bit too overt for comfort in the threats its hero encounters’.⁴² Doyle reverses the ordinary power structures in both scientific research and mesmeric performance in allowing the subject of the experiment, a woman, to seize control of the proceedings. *The Parasite* renders the Doylean hero unusually ineffective in his attempts to conquer this evil woman and, in doing so, it presents a surprisingly early critical view of materialism in science. Gilroy’s search for abstract knowledge to gain academic praise is severely chastised; for all his scientific knowledge, Gilroy is powerless against the dangers of mesmerism, degeneration, and insanity. The gothic element of undefeatable mesmeric power is not presented as supernatural, but serves to expose the impotence of a close-minded and purely positivist understanding of the world.⁴³ In Doyle’s words, ‘rank’ materialism proves ineffective without ‘kindliness and humanity’.

⁴² Stephen Knight, ‘The Case of the Great Detective’, *meanjin*, 40.2 (July 1981), 175–85 (p. 181).

⁴³ See Knight for a discussion of the ways in which the use of mesmerism and Gilroy’s eager exploration of it could also be read as a metaphorical code for forbidden sexual desire of the Other.