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Feeble to Effeminacy: Race and Gender in the British Imperial Consciousness 1837-1901

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In the fall of 1810, droves of English citizens flocked to London to observe an indigenous South African woman that was "of singular anatomy. . . Physiqued in such a backward rounded way that she outshapes all others."[1] Sarah Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," did have a physique that, as suggested in the commentary of one British academic above, was alien to most white citizens of England. Responses like the above are not important merely as anecdotes to demonstrate that the empire attempted to educate its citizens during the era of the New Imperialism.[2] It also demonstrates that Victorian society was intensely preoccupied by obsessions with sexuality. Often times, as demonstrated by the quotation above, these sexual fixations were directed at non-white imperial subjects. In a more broad and important sense then, the intrigued responses of Britons to Baartman's appearances in London demonstrate that two particularly crucial factors converged to create a unique British consciousness during the New Imperialism: gender and race. Both classifications played pivotal roles in constructing British conceptions of non-white "otherness."[3] Little doubt pervades the academic community regarding the evolving nature of British perceptions of race. Indeed, as several notable historians such as Catherine Hall and Christine Bolt have suggested, racial language and thinking did not emerge on a wide scale in British culture until the latter half of the 18th century in the wake of black uprising in Morant Bay, Jamaica.[4] These kinds of studies have done a great deal to detail the duration and nature of certain epochs in racial thinking. They have, unfortunately, not sufficiently addressed the origins of racial

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1 Sanya Osha. "*Venus* and White Desire," *Transition* 99 (2008): 80-93.

2 The set of dates that constitute the era of the New Imperialism are arbitrary and debated. Generally speaking, the New Imperialism aligns nicely with the Victorian era in Britain, which lasted from 1837 to 1901. Still, the cultural shifts that occurred in the metropole and the British activities that took place on the imperial periphery, taken together, constituted an interdependent relationship that exceeded the time span of the Victorian era. For the purposes of this discourse, a "margin of error" that takes this complex relationship into account places the dates of the New Imperialism from about 1930 to the beginning of the First World War.

3 See Edward Said, "The Scope of Orientalism" in *Orientalism,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) for a general explanation of the ways in which Western societies have characterized non-white cultures, particularly in the East, as "other."

4 See Catherine Hall's *Civilising Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Christine Bolt's *Victorian Attitudes Toward Race* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971) for further commentary on the role that the Jamaican uprising of 1865 played in aggravating English perceptions of race.

thinking. Too often they focus on describing the manifestations of certain mindsets without adequately explaining the origins of attitudes. The literature requires a diagnostic analysis that considers the symbiotic relationship of race and gender – two concepts that converged in a sustained process of molding the British imperialist's mind. Ultimately, this study will demonstrate that perceived racial differences during the New Imperialism were resultant of and dependent upon predominant perceptions of gender roles within Victorian culture.

The radical racial thinking that preoccupied the minds of many imperialists conveniently emerged synchronously with new definitions of British masculinity (and, subsequently, femininity) during the Victorian Era. Nobleness, bravery, and an adventurous spirit became staples of the loyal, male, imperial subject. These values were not difficult to detect as they penetrated virtually every aspect of British society, from religion to popular culture. If individuals did not consume messages of the new masculinity in a church pew, they consumed it in literature. "Penny dreadfuls" and works by British authors like Sir H. Rider Haggard infused swashbuckling adventure stories with indoctrination to perpetuate new ideals of masculinity.[5] Scholars of the 19th century were not oblivious to these evolving gender values and widely speculated on the source of this new male identity, often concluding it was the culmination of advanced British social mores and institutions.[6]   The colonies served as a playground to exhibit this new masculine identity through the exploration of dark continents, administration of savage cultures, and numerous other exhilarating imperial activities.

As notions of what it meant to be an English man in the empire evolved, so too did perceptions of the ideal English woman's role in both the metropole and colony. English society continued the long tradition of placing a heavy emphasis on the woman's role as domestic caretaker, but that role became increasingly influenced by the growing empire. Domestic responsibilities were not independent of the empire, but played a crucial

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5   Wendy R. Katz. "Some Talk of Alexander: The Imperial Hero" in *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire: A Critical Study of British Fiction.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 58-83.

6   Patrick A. Dunae. "Boys' Literature and the Idea of Empire, 1870-1914," *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 1 (Fall 1980): 105-6.

role in it. In the metropole, it was the responsibility of the English mother to raise females who would consume from the empire and males who would administrate it. English mothers living in white settler colonies were expected to do the same, but had an additional responsibility to model the superiority of European life and practices to non-white indigenes.[7]

The long standing tradition of British academics arguing for gendered hierarchy based on "gender's status as a social or natural category and the body's role as anchor of social roles and identities," was reflective of a larger trend that sought to integrate discussions of the biological with the social.[8] Indeed, as Scott Juengel suggests, taxonomic studies gave Europeans a "lexicon for registering and thinking through heterogeneity as it is empirically manifest."[9] Indeed, an academic obsession with taxonomy demonstrated this trend by associating not only sexual differences, but racial differences as well, with varying degrees of social order and stability. Race emerged as an important focus of scientific nomenclature during the 18th century.[10] During previous periods, the so-called "Mark of Cain" may have provided some abstract validation for racial order in certain religious circles, but the elite post-enlightenment culture of Britain required far more concrete proof to legitimate the kind of authority that effective colonial administration required. This "proof" also came packaged in less reliable pseudo-sciences like phrenology. Devotion to the cause of scientifically establishing racial distinction was manifested in different ways, including societies that were committed to promoting these disciplines.[11]

Physical differences between races were clear enough to promote racialized nomenclature, but scientifically demonstrating the cognitive inferiority of non-white imperial subjects was more problematic. Often

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7   Alison Blunt. "Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4 (1999): 422.

8   Phillipa Levine. *Gender and Empire.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17.

9   Scott Juengel. "Countenancing History: Mary Wollstonecraft, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Enlightenment Racial Science," *ELH* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 901.

10 Ibid.

11 For a fascinating discourse on the subculture and practice of one of the most popular pseudo-sciences of the time, see Enda Leaney. "Phrenology in Nineteenth-Century Ireland," *New Hibernia Review* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 24-42.

times, measuring the degree of "civilization" a given society had attained was considered an accurate indication of mental capability. Gender roles within colonized societies, particularly, were used to demonstrate lower levels of civilization, and consequently, levels of mental capacity. Nowhere is this kind of thinking so evident as in T.B. Macaulay's essay concerning Warren Hastings and the early imperial administration of India. Therein, he suggested that the "organization of the Bengali [male] is feeble even to effeminacy." He went on to note that "courage, independence, [and] veracity" were not common characteristics among Bengali males.[12] The characteristics that Macaulay claimed Bengali men lacked were precisely the characteristics that British men assumed naturally defined masculinity during the Victorian era. Surely, when men of a given non-white culture collectively lacked any of these characteristics, British ideals of racial hierarchy would have subsequently been confirmed.

Though non-white ethnicities were more or less uniformly denounced as inferior to Britons, the fact that non-white societies were often evaluated based on their achieved level of "civilization" often demonstrated that race was a subordinate concept to gender in the imperialist's mind. The "civilization scale" used to measure non-European societies within the empire compared, among other things, the gender roles of indigenous societies with those of English society. Knowledge of gender-related indigenous practices was significant, for example, in helping imperial authorities determine the kind of administration that would most effectively exert and maintain Crown dominance in a given territory.[13] In perhaps the most infamous of several culturally intrusive legislations, William Bentinck demonstrated the weight gender roles played in racial thinking when he banned the Indian practice of suttee in 1829.[14] To the imperial thinker, the funeral rite of a widow throwing herself on her husband's funeral pyre represented a departure from "civilized" gender roles and, consequently, resulted in perceived racial

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12 John Rosselli. "The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century-Bengal," *Past & Present* 86 (February 1980): 122.

13 Phillipa Levine. "Orientalist Sociology and the Creation of Colonial Sexualities," *Feminist Review* 65 (Summer 2000): 6.

14 Paul K. Monod. *Imperial Island: A History of Britain and Its Empire, 1660-1837.* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 368-69.

disparities.[15]

But while British imperialists often pointed to supposedly immoral practices and their nonwhite perpetrators to prove racial disparities and levels of "civilization," some practices, that would seem to warrant British stricture, oddly avoided criticism. While in India suttee indicated a low echelon of civilization in the eyes of British administrators, practices of similar moral ambiguity were not always utilized to demonstrate the "otherness" of a given race. S.M. Edwardes, a police commissioner in Bombay, once benevolently reported that the licentious Japanese brothels of his district could be fairly equated with "third class European houses."[16] Such "praiseworthy" comparisons seem incongruent with the concatenation of literature published during the New Imperialism that looked unfavorably on practices like prostitution, generally disagreeable to prevalent Victorian values.[17] Curiously, the conditions of brothels in India were fairly similar across racial lines, but those operated by Japanese women somehow escaped the scathing critique of Edwardes, an ardent imperialist.[18] One must conclude that Edwardes' specific "approval" of Japanese brothels was in some way related to the similarities between domestic roles played by European and Japanese women in India. Because Japanese women in India adhered to the gender roles deemed appropriate by British imperialists, practices that would generally be condemned as immoral and racially "other" avoided the criticism customarily bestowed upon disreputable institutions maintained by nonwhites.

Drawing from psychological methodologies may provide historians with a viable means to explain the apparent inconsistencies in critiques like those of Commissioner Edwardes. Such approval of foreign cultures whose practices mirrored the patriarchal structure of English society reflected the concerns of many imperialists. Indeed, the interest imperialists took with gender roles on the periphery may demonstrate that the empire itself may have been a manifestation of the contrived need

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15 Margaret Stobel. "Gender, Sex, and Empire," in *Islamic & European Expansion: The Forging of Global Order*, ed. Michael Adas. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993): 359-60.
16 Levine, "Orientalist Sociology," 9.
17 See Judith Walkowitz. "Social Science and the Great Social Evil," in *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980): 32-47.
18 Levine, "Orientalist Sociology," 9.

for a renewed patriarchal English society. Controversial interpretations of the relationship between gender and empire have drawn attention to this perceived need by utilizing a Freudian modus operandi. Ella Shohat, for example, indicates the necessity of acknowledging the "intersection of the epistemological and the sexual in colonial discourse."[19] Suggesting the empire bears resemblance to a phallic symbol may seem far stretched, but is not a conceptualization void of value. Conceptions of colored women as bearers of super-sexual aggression were common during the 19th century, and, at some point, probably began to cement pre-conceived ideals of European women as domestic caretakers more than objects of sexual desire. [20] If the English man's wife could not be the object of sexual desire, say Freudian historians, the empire could. Felicity Nussbaum, for example, puts forward a similar interpretation in which she claims that imperialism is defined by "a feminization of the colonized, so that the territory inhabited and penetrated by the colonist figured as a woman."[21] Historical models that draw heavily on Freud's theories of unified sexual consciousness are often problematic, but an analysis of the relationship between imperial aggression on the periphery and sexual repression in the metropole is valuable. A broader interpretation should extract the valuable idea of suppressed male aggression from Oedipal explanations that emphasize subconscious sexual complexes. Granted, the frequent allusions to penetration that Lloyd DeMause, Peter Gay, and other historians have made are perhaps too explicitly sexual to be applicable in any meaningful sense.[22] Still, although the empire may not have been a royal phallus in need of a sexual object to penetrate, Victorian Era sensibilities undoubtedly suppressed male urges that, if not inherent to manhood, had certainly been dominant throughout the Georgian era.[23]

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19 Ella Shohat. *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (United States: Ella Shohat, 2006): 32.

20 Indrani Sen. *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858-1900.* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2002): 8.

21 Felicty Nussbaum. *Torrid Zones.* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3.

22 For a general discussion of Freud's value to historians, see Peter Gay. *Freud for Historians.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). For a case study that applies psychoanalysis to a specific historical narrative, see Lloyd Demause. *The History of Childhood.* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

23 See Matthew Mccormack. *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

With this relationship in mind, it is clear that the emergence of radical racial thinking was underlined by a broader gender identity crisis in Britain. Edward Said noted in his monumental work *Orientalism* that the socially turbulent nature of the empire was evident from the "battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections" that were played out both in efforts to incorporate and exert dominion over indigenous peoples.[24] All of these were most likely birthed from a lacking sense of male purpose in a period of perceived docility after the series of wars that had lasted throughout the Georgian era. This was troubling to a British masculinity that had long been defined by "the mental and emotional effort to experience and present oneself as a culturally recognizable 'man' by internalizing and enacting manly ideals and norms [that] entails an active striving toward something."[25] Empire provided the object of striving. Non-white members of the empire provided the object of masculine domination – at least when they were defined in racial terms.

Though racial distinction did often result in European ascendancy, the expansion of the empire required the compliance of certain indigenous peoples to work in administrative roles – a practice that would make the maintenance of a distinct color line more difficult. The practice of placing native Indians in administrative roles in the Raj, for example, was a strategic necessity, but extremely problematic in that it discounted the notions that the indigenous men were effeminate and naturally ill-fit for masculine leadership roles. Gendered racial conceptions of non-white subjects were similarly challenged in the Gold Coast and Kenya colonies where Frederick Lugard's concept of indirect rule had become vital in maintaining imperial control. As non-white imperial subjects became increasingly integrated into British social and political institutions, and demonstrate their ability to act, to some degree, as "British" men, it became increasingly difficult to justify the exertion of power based solely on racial distinctions.[26]

As a result, the independence movements of the 20th century

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24 Edward Said. *Orientalism.* (New York: Random House, 1994): 8.

25 Sarah A. Kaiksow. "Subjectivity and Imperial Masculinity: A British Soldier in Dhofar," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 62.

26 Matthew Lange. *Lineages of Despotism and Development: British Colonialism and State Power.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010): 31-3.

represented a backlash to the gendered imperial policies of the empire. Frantz Fanon correctly assumed that "break[ing] the back of colonialism" through violence was an act of psychological liberation.[27] Independence movements, from a psychological perspective, represented not a repressed male sexuality, but a repressed male desire for autonomy and leadership in patriarchal non-white societies. It is telling that indigenous peoples of the elite class were generally less eager to involve themselves in violent struggle. While subordinate positions in imperial authority offered native elites an illusion of autonomy, the ordinary indigenous subject was forced to reassert his patriarchal gender role through violent opposition to the oppressor. One nationalist newspaper in India noted after the partition of 1947 that the process of decolonization had been both "a challenge to our manhood, no less than to our nationalism."[28] Indeed, gender continued to encompass imperial discussions even as the empire was being dismantled by racial conflicts.

Racial thinking no doubt occupied a central place in British consciousness during the New Imperialism, but not autonomously of dominant gender ideals through which various races were analyzed. Sarah Baartman was not an intriguing specimen to English citizens merely because of her defining racial features in themselves, but for the divergent gender identities within the empire that her body signified. When racial thinking was not gendered, it held little value to the British citizen for the purpose of evaluating non-white imperial subjects. It would not be accurate or fair to advocate a study of empire based on either race or gender as the exclusive defining component of imperial consciousness. Instead, scholars of the British Empire should turn to an approach that understands perceived racial differences as a result of dominant, preexisting perceptions of gender during a given epoch in question.

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27 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2004): 146.

28 Uvashi Butalia. "Legacies of Departure: Decolonization, Nation-making, and Gender," in *Gender and Empire,* ed. Phillipa Levine (New York: Oxford University Press: 2004), 205.

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