

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 20.2 (Summer 2024)

The Koh-i-Noor Diamond and Dinah Mulock Craik's Fantasy of Consensual Colonization

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If there is one object in nature more interesting to human beings than another, it is the Diamond. (*Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, July 28, 1849)

<1>This essay places Dinah Mulock Craik's 1851 novella "The Half-Caste; An Old Governess's Tale, founded in Fact" in the historical context swirling at the moment of its publication—the "acquisition" of the famed Koh-i-Noor diamond; its surrender to Queen Victoria as one of the terms of the 1849 Treaty of Lahore; and its exhibition, from May 1 to October 15, 1851, as one of the star attractions of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. Few readers of "The Half-Caste" would not also have encountered the Koh-i-Noor, either as one of millions of visitors to the Great Exhibition or through extensive reporting about the diamond's acquisition and display. Craik's inclusion of a stolen Indian diamond in "The Half-Caste" opens up a reading of the story as a key intertext with the myth-making of the Koh-i-Noor that was simultaneously playing out in the British press.

<2>As a popular working-through of British attitudes towards India, I argue that "The Half-Caste" operates as both self-conscious critique and moral exculpation of empire, staging an allegory of iniquitous imperial plunder only to supersede that critique, via the marriage plot, with what I call a fantasy of consensual colonization. In summoning the Koh-i-Noor, Craik exposes the criminality inherent to conquest, which she associates with the exploitation of two generations of Indian women by British men. At the same time, Craik unselfconsciously endorses the "civilizing mission" embodied by the story's narrator, a British governess charged with the education and assimilation of the title character. This moral blind spot reveals the limits of Craik's self-critique, particularly when it comes to the role played by women in the British colonial project. A narratological reading of "The Half-Caste"

underscores Craik's imperial ambivalence while also suggesting that the novella anticipates (unwittingly, perhaps) more recent attention to the complicity of white women in maintaining structures of racial and gender oppression.

A Tale of Two Diamonds

<3>In the May 25, 1849 dispatch of *Allen's Indian Mail and Register of Intelligence for British & Foreign India, China, & All Parts of the East*, the first item lauds the recent "accession" of the Punjab and its people for the British empire:

The fluctuating conjectures, the doubts and speculations, which have so long prevailed respecting the ultimate fate of the country of the Five Rivers, are now set at rest by an official Notification and Proclamation, from the Governor-General of India, declaring that 'the kingdom of the Punjab is at an end, and that all the territories of Maharaja Dhuleep Singh are now and henceforth a portion of the British empire in India, which thus receives an accession of 100,000 square miles, with a population of 3,500,000 souls.' (Summary and Review, 289)

The 1849 Treaty of Lahore simultaneously enacted a massive expansion of empire and extraction of wealth—the vast majority of which filled the corporate coffers of the East India Company and helped build the personal fortunes of its directors and shareholders, with one noteworthy exception. As the *Indian Mail* went on to report, "The Sikh treasury was transferred to that of the Company; the State jewels are to be sent to England,—the magnificent *Koh-i-noor*, or 'Mountain of Light,' being designated *as a present* to her Majesty" (290, my emphasis). The following observation only warrants an aside: "At Lahore the people are said to be discontented at the annexation" (290).[\(1\)](#)

<4>The Koh-i-Noor remains the most notorious symbol of the mass extraction of wealth from India by Britain, recently estimated by economist Utsa Patnaik to be worth \$45 trillion between the years of 1765 and 1938 (277). In addition to devastating taxation and trade policy, luxury commodities like gemstones, cashmere shawls, and precious metals were a symbolic, portable, and lucrative form of "colonial drain." Along with the Koh-i-Noor, the East India Company's immense plunder from the Lahore Toshakhana, or royal treasury, included textiles, household goods, weapons, gold, silver, and thousands of diamonds and other gems (Lena Login 182-3). The collection took months to catalogue and transport out of India.[\(2\)](#)

<5>Although neither the largest nor the brightest diamond in the world, the Koh-i-Noor was a strong contender for the most famous. As a prize gem of successive

empires—Mughal, Persian, Durrani, and Sikh—the Koh-i-Noor was virtually synonymous with imperial domination well before it was seized by the East India Company at the end of the Anglo-Sikh wars. The enormous diamond was, as historian Danielle Kinsey describes it, an “artifact of conquest” (Kinsey 391). Governor-General Dalhousie, who orchestrated the 1849 treaty and “surrender” of the diamond to Queen Victoria by 10-year-old Maharajah Duleep Singh, later called the Koh-i-Noor “the symbol of victory and empire” for all who had possessed it, “never more so than to our Queen” (396).⁽³⁾

<6>The hypervisibility of the Koh-i-Noor when “The Half-Caste” was published casts new light on an otherwise incidental detail in Craik’s novella—the lawful theft of a diamond from Indian royalty.⁽⁴⁾ In “The Half-Caste,” Zillah Le Poer is the orphaned daughter of a British nabob and Indian princess. In recounting her childhood to her British governess, who narrates the story, Zillah recalls that she chiefly remembers her mother’s hands, which were “covered with rings” (8). One, she recalls, “‘a great diamond, was worth ever so many hundred rupees. It was lost once, and my mother cried. I saw it, a good while after, on my father’s finger when he was dying,’ continued she carelessly; and afterwards add[s] mysteriously, ‘I think he stole it’” (8). Without naming Koh-i-Noor, Craik depicts an Indian royal robbed of her prize diamond by her British husband—legally, due to common law—just one year after the British queen “lawfully” received India’s most famous jewel.

<7>Like Zillah’s mother, Queen Victoria also wore fistfuls of rings. The first time she wore the Koh-i-Noor publicly—in Paris in 1855—she had one on every finger, including her thumbs (Menkes 1).⁽⁵⁾ Needless to say, the optics of diamonds adorning the British Queen are markedly different than Zillah’s mother, not “homegrown” gems worn by Indian royalty, but conspicuous tokens of global conquest and wealth. In both the story and history of the Koh-i-Noor, the diamond “changing hands”—from Zillah’s Indian mother to her British father, and from Maharajah Duleep Singh to the British Queen—meant its permanent removal from Indian ownership. Tellingly, in “The Half-Caste” there is no indication that her mother’s diamond was returned to Zillah upon her father’s death. And the Koh-i-Noor remains under armed guard in the Tower of London, one of 23,578 gemstones in the Royal Collection (Historic Royal Palaces website). India, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan have all demanded its return.

<8>Long-term disputes over the Koh-i-Noor’s rightful ownership were reignited with the death of Queen Elizabeth II and rumors that Camilla would wear the diamond at her coronation alongside King Charles III. Many pundits believe that Camilla’s original plans to wear the Queen Mother’s crown, in which the Koh-i-

Noor is currently set, were scuttled due to the ongoing diplomatic tensions around the diamond. The fact that a BJP spokesperson took the time to comment on the ongoing pain the British empire represents speaks to the Koh-i-Noor's immense political and economic implications, not to mention the treasure troves held in the Jewel House and every British museum that houses colonial loot. Ultimately, Camilla elected to wear Queen Mary's crown instead, a choice Buckingham Palace branded as historic, progressive, and ecological—a “recycled crown” selected “in the interests of sustainability and efficiency” (“Queen Mary's Crown”). In point of fact, Queen Mary's crown, which features 2,200 imported diamonds, was also designed to showcase the Koh-i-Noor, as have all three Queen consort crowns designed since Victoria's reign. For Camilla's coronation, a replica of the Koh-i-Noor was removed and Queen Mary's crown was set instead with the South African Cullinan III, IV, and V diamonds, themselves controversial emblems of settler colonialism.[\(6\)](#)

<9>Given ongoing attention to the Koh-i-Noor and the renewed critical attention Craik has received in postcolonial and disability studies (see Bourrier 2015; Gore 2020; Shields, 2007; Walters, 2013), it is surprising that scholars have not grappled with “The Half-Caste's” bearing on one of the most contested objects in British imperial history. The diamond is not mentioned in Elaine Showalter's seminal essay recovering Craik's work for feminist critics or in either of Craik's major biographies (Bourrier 2019, Mitchell 1983). Nor is “The Half-Caste's” relevance to Koh-i-Noor discussed in the recent Broadview edition edited by Melissa Edmundson (2016), which offers an otherwise excellent framing of its treatment of empire, race, and the “Eurasian question.” Craik's novella is also absent from discussions of the Koh-i-Noor's role in the British imperial project (see Dalrymple and Anand 2016; Kinsey 2009; Kinsey 2021; Munich 2020; Shah 2017).

<10>In her groundbreaking account of Craik's life and work, Sally Mitchell presents “The Half-Caste” as a Gothic Cinderella story in which “a half-Indian cousin is treated as a servant and generally thought to be illegitimate, but who is actually an heiress” (23-24). A key difference between Craik's novella and the Cinderella tale is that Zillah does not need a prince to save her from penury: as legal inheritor of her parents' property, she is neither poor nor dispossessed. In fact, it is Zillah's wealth, like the resources of her home country, that makes her the target of British treachery, as her relatives conspire to acquire her fortune through legal, but corrupt, means. Notably, Zillah's inheritance includes money extracted from India through trade—her father is a “nabob” (13) most likely employed by the East Indian Company—and lawfully “stole[n]” from her Indian mother—much like the jewels and other goods plundered from the Toshakhana. In other words, the fate of Zillah's fortune,

on which the novella's marriage plot will also hinge, invokes a broader context of global conflict, treaty, and trade.

<11> Craik's trenchant critique of empire as state-sanctioned theft is undercut, however, by the novella's denouement. At the end of "The Half-Caste," Zillah Le Poer willingly pledges the fortune she has inherited to her British guardian, Andrew Sutherland, whom she subsequently marries. Zillah's fortune directly benefits the economic interests of her British spouse—and even allows him to keep (and retire to) the family's country house. Having thus shored up the finances of her husband, Zillah's fair-haired children are his legitimate heirs—and legitimate subjects of the British crown. Craik's "happily-ever-after" denouement speaks of imperial reconciliation, as the theft of the mother's diamond by one British man is remediated with the daughter's happy marriage to another. This resolution invokes and echoes the carefully orchestrated presentation of the Koh-i-Noor by the young maharaja—first through a ceremonial *darbar* in Lahore where Duleep Singh surrendered the diamond to the British Queen, and later, at Buckingham Palace, through a performative "handing over" of the stone from its previous to its current owner. In this way, Craik's potentially radical exposé of an avaricious British state and its exploitation of colonial subjects is subsumed and sterilized through the novella's marriage plot, reassuring British readers that imperial subjects were, in fact, willing participants.

"The Half-Caste" and Popular Attitudes About Empire

<12> Examining the politics of empire in "The Half-Caste" is particularly significant because of Dinah Mulock Craik's status as a popular writer whose work was accessible to a large swathe of readers. Best known today for her novels and children's literature, Craik wrote across genres and published in a wide range of venues, including periodicals that reached hundreds of thousands of readers. As Karen Bourrier describes in her recent biography, "Dinah Craik was a Victorian bestseller par excellence: for forty years spanning Queen Victoria's reign, she wrote and sold the type of literature that many people, especially women, wanted to read, and did read, in large numbers" (ix). Craik was famous enough that when she died in 1887, ten years after Victoria became Empress of India, the Queen wrote her widower with condolences (Bourrier, vii).

<13> For a British audience, attitudes about imperialism were shaped in important ways by popular authors like Craik. As extolled by the editors of the Oxford Popular Fiction series, which reprinted Craik's novel *Olive* along with "The Half-Caste," popular literature has "often articulated the collective aspirations and anxieties of

their time more directly than so-called serious literature” (frontispiece). The transdisciplinary field of narrative persuasion invites us to go one step further, demonstrating that narrative texts do not merely articulate cultural attitudes, but also influence readers’ real-world beliefs and behaviors (Appel and Richter; Brock and Green; Strange and Leung). Craik herself would need no persuasion about the impact of literature on her contemporaries’ attitudes. In 1861 she wrote in an essay about the modern novel, “The essayist may write for his hundreds; the preacher preach to his thousands; but the novelist counts his audience by the millions. His power is threefold—over heart, reason, and fancy” (To Novelists, 442). In her introduction to *Olive* and “The Half-Caste,” Cora Caplan echoes this claim, arguing that popular domestic fiction offered writers like Craik “an opportunity to enter and reshape much wider debates about gender relations, community, and nationality in mid-nineteenth century Britain” (ix).

<14>The publication history of “The Half-Caste” speaks to its interest and staying power for a Victorian audience. The story was first published anonymously in 1851 in Volume 12 of *Chambers’s Papers for the People*. William and Robert Chambers, who played “a leading role in the cheap literature movement of the nineteenth century” (Frye 106), had aspirations to produce affordable and, “it was hoped, useful species of publication among the less affluent classes” (Chambers 240). The brothers’ publication scheme ensured that *Papers for the People* could be purchased at a range of price points: “Weekly Numbers at Three-Halfpence each; in Monthly Parts, at Sevenpence; and a Volume, consisting of Eight Numbers [and] done up in Coloured Fancy Boards, price One Shilling and Sixpence” (New Periodical 17). A 4-volume leather-bound collection of all 96 parts was also published, likely for “parish, school, regimental, prison, and similar libraries” (Chambers 259), and Volume 11 and 12 were republished as a combined Volume 6 in 1872.

<15>Within *Chambers’s Papers for the People*, fiction like “The Half-Caste” was published alongside history, philosophy, science, archaeology, and exploration. Notably, the series included a number of lengthy pieces that acquainted readers with a range of global cultures and contexts and sometimes openly advocated for imperial expansion. Particularly striking is a long essay in Volume 11, also published in 1851, which extols the economic and military benefits that would accrue from opening a shipping passage through the Isthmus of Suez. The essay commends “[t]he immense advantages to the merchant-commerce of Great Britain with India, and the great additional security for the permanence of English rule in that vast peninsula which must result” (Isthmus of Suez, 1). Although the author purports to care about Indian interests (a more streamlined trade route, they argue, would be “in the paramount interest” of that country even more so than Great Britain), the true beneficiary is

evident: “The material interests involved are, there can be no question, enormous—almost incalculable, as regards this country, now that railways and steam-navigation are beginning to open up the vast resources of the great Asian peninsula” (2).

<16>In addition to its multiple publications in *Chambers’s Papers for the People*, from 1853 to 1897 “The Half-Caste” was published in at least five collections of Dinah Craik’s short fiction. In 1853, it was included in *Avillon and Other Tales*, “by the author of “Olive,” “The Head of the Family,” “Agatha’s Husband,” &c, &c.” The audience for this collection, as Sally Mitchell describes, was more middle-class than that of “The Half-Caste’s” original venue, its three-volume structure suitable for the library trade (Mitchell 23). The framing of the story collection was also targeted to a predominantly female audience, with an emphasis on romantic and domestic stories, many of them centered on marriage. “The Half-Caste” was later published in a single volume of *Domestic Stories* in 1867 and 1869 (new edition), again targeted to a primarily female audience, but in a more affordable single volume format. And in 1897 it was published as the title story of a new volume of Craik’s short fiction, published concurrently in London and Edinburgh by W. & R. Chambers and in New York by Thomas Whittaker.(7)

<17>As its various publication venues suggest, “The Half-Caste” was widely available at a range of price points, similar to the range of admission prices charged for The Great Exhibition. This broad accessibility suggests that Craik’s novella reflects—and shaped—attitudes across the class spectrum. Along with popular literature, British perceptions of imperialism were influenced by public spectacles of empire, including the hugely popular Great Exhibition and the India Museum, a major attraction in Victorian London that served as the exhibition space for natural and manufactured resources seized by the East India Company.(8) In order to have a textured understanding of how British attitudes about empire evolved, then, it is critical to read popular literary texts like “The Half-Caste” in the context of the exhibition and consumption of imperial plunder and in light of contemporary print culture, including extensive reporting about the Koh-i-Noor.

The Koh-i-Noor in Print and On Display

<18>The intrigue of the Koh-i-Noor—its bloody history and physical characteristics, its monetary and symbolic value, and its surrender to the Queen by “boy-king” Duleep Singh—appeared in countless periodicals in the years leading up to the Great Exhibition and “The Half-Caste’s” appearance in *Chambers’s Papers for the People*, including periodicals in which Craik frequently published. An 1849 piece that was printed in *Illustrated London News* (with illustration), the inaugural

issue of *Tales and Readings for the People*, and *The Gardeners' Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette* concludes its history of the Koh-i-Noor, "Such is a faint lineament of the countless and curious adventures of this imperial and oriental gem—a real romance!" (*Illustrated London News*, 332). An even longer account of the gem appeared as the cover article of the July 28, 1849 issue of *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*, another Chambers brothers publication in which Craik herself published translations and over 100 poems. The opening sentence patly observes: "If there is one object in nature more interesting to human beings than another, it is the Diamond" (*The Koh-i-Noor, or Mountain of Light*, 49).

<19>In fact, the Koh-i-Noor was of interest to Britain long before Governor-General Dalhousie orchestrated the diamond's surrender, a service for which he was rewarded with the title of Marquess. In the 1830s, East India Company officials reported at length on the diamond and its owner Maharaja Ranjit Singh, "Lion of the Punjab" and ruler of the Sikh empire. In his 1840 journal, *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Sing*, William Godolphin Osborne, military secretary to Governor-General Auckland, described seeing the Koh-i-Noor in Singh's camp and recounts its storied history, including its placement in the resplendent peacock throne of the Mughal empire (the diamond was set in the peacock's head); the throne's capture by the Persian Nader Shah in 1739; and the dramatic acquisition of the diamond by Ranjit Singh in 1813, having demanded it from Shah Shujah Durrani of Afghanistan in exchange for Singh's protection (ii-xxv).

<20>From 1813 until his death in 1839, Ranjit Singh wore the Koh-i-Noor regularly, first on his turban and later as an armband, and readily exhibited it to British officers. He would also send it for display to visiting ladies. In 1837, Fanny and Emily Eden, sisters of Governor-General Auckland, toured India and visited Lahore. In her diary, Fanny Eden recalls the Maharaja showing the party "his 'Sea of Light,' a diamond out of which he starved Shah Soojah," reporting, "It is as large as a small egg" (173). The Koh-i-Noor was only one among a parade of "perfect and enormous" (193) jewels the sisters were shown in Lahore, until Fanny becomes quite ill with "diamond and emerald fever" (101). Emily Eden also described meeting Ranjit Singh in correspondence with the Queen, and she sketched the Koh-i-Noor and other Indian jewels for her 1844 collection of lithographs, *Portraits of the Princes and People of India*, which Queen Victoria read with great interest. In it, Eden describes the Koh-i-Noor as "the largest diamond known to exist" (Plate 14).⁽⁹⁾

<21>After Ranjit Singh's death and the subsequent power struggle in the Sikh empire, his youngest son, Duleep Singh, was proclaimed Maharaja in 1843, at the age of five. The British East India Company declared war on the kingdom two years

later. After the First (1845-6) and Second (1848-9) Anglo-Sikh wars, Governor-General Dalhousie proclaimed the annexation of the Punjab on March 29, 1849; the 10-year old Maharaja was deposed. Soon after, the East India Company convened a *darbar* at the Lahore Fort, where the boy was made to sign the 1849 Last Treaty of Lahore, dissolving the Sikh empire, resigning his right to sovereignty of the Punjab, and granting all property of the State to the East India Company. Item III of the Treaty, however, positions the Koh-i-Noor as a gift from the young Maharajah to the Queen herself, cleverly casting the diamond as “taken” from the Afghan Shah but “surrendered” to the British Queen: “The gem called the Koh-i-Noor, which was taken from Shah Sooja-ool-moolk by Maharajah Runjeet Singh, shall be surrendered by the Maharajah of Lahore to the Queen of England.”

<22>In his letters, Dalhousie suggests that optics played a key role in distinguishing the diamond from the rest of the confiscated treasure: “It was more for the honour of the Queen that the Koh-i-noor should be surrendered directly from the hand of the conquered prince into the hands of the sovereign who was his conqueror” (88). Although the Treaty figures the diamond as an offering from Duleep Singh, Dalhousie was clear in his own mind that the true giver was not the Maharajah, but himself: “It is not every day that an officer of their Government adds four millions of subjects to the British Empire, and places the historical jewel of the Mogul Emperors in the Crown of his Sovereign” (62). At the time of its acquisition, estimates of the Koh-i-Noor’s worth ranged from £500,000 and £3,000,000 (Kinsey 402).

<23>After the annexation of the Punjab, British coverage of the Koh-i-Noor intensified. In July of 1849, Allen’s Indian Mail updated readers on the diamond’s progress: “It is already known to the public that this large diamond, which was lately in the treasury of Maharajah Duleep Singh, is about to be despatched to England as a present to her most gracious Majesty the Queen” (The Koh-ee-Noor 422). In a rhetorical sleight of hand, the author pronounces the diamond’s transfer from the Sikh empire to the British as lawful return rather than military conquest: “The fact is that it belonged originally to the rulers of India, and now it has come back again after such a long time to the hands of its rightful owner” (422). Once the diamond was safely delivered to England in 1850, the British press was breathless. In August of that year *Littell’s Living Age* proclaimed, “At last has arrived safely in England that celebrated Eastern gem, the Koh-i-noor diamond, which came into British possession by the annexation of the kingdom of Lahore to our Indian dominions. It has been brought *home* from Bombay” (Great Diamond, 345-6, my emphasis). Although there were rumors that Queen Victoria would not accept the diamond or would insist on paying compensation to her new subjects in the Punjab, in point of

fact, she was more than willing to accept the diamond as a gift, promptly adding the Koh-i-Noor to the British Crown Jewels.

<24>The timing and terms of the Treaty were also a boon for Prince Albert. The prominent display of the Koh-i-Noor in the Crystal Palace added notable luster (pun intended) to the Great Exhibition, even if the stone itself lacked the brilliance that European audiences desired. Conversely, the extraordinary exposure of the Exhibition helped guarantee the diamond's status as the most potent symbol of British imperial conquest. Over 5 ½ months, 6,000,000 visitors would visit the Exhibition, and Britons who didn't attend in person could have seen rhapsodic accounts in the press, all of which highlighted the Koh-i-Noor. The Crystal Palace itself was compared to a glittering diamond; as the *Times* exclaimed, its "polished ribs and sides shone like the Koh-i-Noor itself" (Opening of the Great Exhibition, 5).

<25>Unsurprisingly, the Queen's own tour of the Exhibition began with her newly acquired diamond (Kinsey 403). Notably, the Koh-i-Noor was not displayed within the India court; after all, it was the possession of the British Queen and thus "Exhibited by her Majesty." Set apart, the small crown at the top of the cage in which it was displayed was a metonym for its new owner, and the large bell shape of the cage evokes the hoop skirt of a British woman. Thus, as art historian and curator Siddhartha Shah argues, the cage itself transforms "the diamond's confines into the imperial body of Queen Victoria, who subsumes the Koh-i-Noor and, by extension, all of India represented by it" (38).

<26>Also on display in the Crystal Palace were a bounty of gems confiscated from the Lahore Toshakhana as well as Ranjit Singh's golden throne, which had been sent by the Company to the India Museum. The throne remains in the permanent collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum and, in 2024, is part of a major exhibition at The Wallace Collection, *Ranjit Singh: Sikh, Warrior, King*. The contents of the Lahore Toshakhana have been surprisingly absent from most histories of the Koh-i-Noor, but exhibited close by to the diamond were the magnificent Timur Ruby—which Victoria wrote was even more impressive than the Koh-i-Noor—the emerald girdle of Ranjit Singh—which prompted Fanny Eden to write, "If ever we are allowed to plunder this kingdom, I shall go straight to their stables" (192)—and 224 "very large" pearls fastened by a ruby clasp.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the *Queen's Exhibition Journal* from May 22, 1851, Victoria wrote: "This time we went to the Indian Courts, visiting those on both sides, and the beautiful things in the Nave. The jewels and ornaments from Lahore are quite magnificent—such pearls—and a whole girdle of emeralds" (quoted in Fay, 55). After the Great

Exhibition all of the pieces the Queen names in her journal were given to her by the directors of the East India Company; she would designate them as Heirlooms of the Crown.

<27>Paradoxically, the acquisition of the Koh-i-Noor and the exhibition of the Lahore gems helped cement India's status as the jewel in the British crown, a trope deployed by a flurry of observers in the years surrounding the Exhibition. The *Illustrated Exhibitor* referred to India as "the brightest jewel in Victoria's crown" (India and Indian Contributions, 317). Another account of the Exhibition, perhaps responding to the diamond's lack of brilliance, referred to India as the "largest if not the brightest jewel in Victoria's crown" (Historia, 35). John Forbes Royle, charged with organizing the Exhibition's India display, went one step further, referring to India as "the Koh-i-Noor of the British crown" (588). The metaphor of India as the jewel in Britain's crown invokes the very material Indian gemstones held in the British Crown Jewels. Whatever praise the metaphor implies is belied by its implicit claims of subjugation and control. Famously, after the Exhibition concluded, the Koh-i-Noor itself was subjugated and assimilated. Dismayed by its lackluster brilliance (and reception) at the Great Exhibition, in 1852 Prince Albert ordered that it be re-cut from a traditional Mughal style to a more fashionable European cut, almost halving the size of the stone from 191 carats to 105.6. The recutting of the Koh-i-Noor took 38 days. It commenced with a staged event featuring none other than the Duke of Wellington, whose successful military campaigns in India were thus reprised with the ceremonial cutting of the first facet of India's most famous jewel, now the "lawful" property of the British crown.

"The Half-Caste" and Imperial Myth-Making

<28>Danielle Kinsey (2009) and Siddhartha Shah (2017) have both seen in the exhibition of the Koh-i-noor and subsequent recutting of the diamond a gendered and racialized narrative of civilizing, scientific progress enacted through empire. I have focused on another dimension of the imperial fantasy inherent to Craik's story and the national myth-making surrounding the Koh-i-noor: the myth of consensual subjugation, dramatized in "The Half-Caste" through the title character willingly pledging her fortune to her British guardian/husband. In one of the more bizarre anecdotes from the diamond's history, Maharajah Duleep Singh and Queen Victoria spontaneously restaged the surrender of the Koh-i-Noor in 1854, the last time he held the diamond, while having his portrait taken by Franz Winterhalter at Buckingham Palace. During a break in painting, the Queen ordered beefeaters to retrieve the gem from the Tower of London and presented it to the young Maharajah for inspection (Edith Login 125). After staring at the re-cut diamond for what

appears to have been an awkwardly long time, the teenager handed it back to the Queen, saying, ““It is to me, Ma’am, the greatest pleasure thus to have the opportunity, as a loyal subject, of *myself* tendering to *my Sovereign* — the Koh-i-Noor” (126). Although this strange diplomatic incident gave Duleep Singh the opportunity to relinquish the diamond in person, Marquess Dalhousie’s response on hearing reports of the event belies the idea that the Koh-i-Noor was ever truly a gift: the talk “about the Koh-i-Noor being a present from Duleep is arrant humbug. He knew as well as I did that it was nothing of the sort” (315).

<29>In “The Half-Caste,” as with the Koh-i-Noor, Henry Le Poer’s theft of his wife’s diamond is part of a larger extraction of wealth from India. Craik’s pejorative description of Le Poer as a nabob suggests a critique of colonial fortune-hunting, as does his daughter’s testimony that he stole the diamond from her mother. Shockingly, Le Poer curses his daughter from his deathbed, perhaps because he will lose the fortune to Zillah in death. After her father dies, Zillah, like her mother, is exploited by Le Poer men who attempt to abscond with her inheritance—both her uncle, who tries to manipulate her into giving it to her British relatives out of gratitude, and her cousin, Augustus Le Poer, who tries to seduce her into marriage at the age of fifteen. The Le Poer women, meanwhile, are either complicit in Zillah’s exploitation—Craik compares her cousins to Cinderella’s stepsisters—or ineffectual bystanders.

<30>But not all of the British characters in “The Half-Caste” are corrupt. Zillah’s guardian, a respected “Indian merchant” Andrew Sutherland, and her British governess, the daughter of another Indian merchant, are presented as defending Zillah’s interests. It goes unremarked that Sutherland’s own professional and economic interests, like Henry Le Poer’s, are served by extracting resources from India. As guardian, he arranges for Cassandra Pryor to serve as Zillah’s governess while he goes to India to tend to business, a role she plays from the time Zillah is a young teenager until her coming of age. In a moment of pique, Zillah’s cousin, Matilda Le Poer, reveals a secret to Cassandra that the family has kept from Zillah: when she turns twenty-one, Zillah “will then be very rich, as her father left her all he had; and Uncle Henry was a great nabob, because he married an Indian princess, and got all her money” (18). The girl goes on with a “cunning smile,” “Now, you see...we must be very civil to Zillah, and of course she will give us all her money” (18). The recipients of gifts, Craik seems to acknowledge, are not always deserving. Matilda’s brother Augustus, meanwhile, has his own plan: by marrying Zillah instead, he would “entrap her still childish affections, marry her, and secure all to himself” (18). At a dramatic moment in the story, Cassandra discovers Augustus Le Poer’s illicit courtship and interrupts his attempted abduction of Zillah. When the

governess discovers the extent of the family's machinations against her charge, she is horrified: "The whole was a tissue of crimes" (18).

<31>Reading "The Half-Caste" as an intertext with the Koh-i-Noor amplifies the novella's progressive critique of empire as criminal, if lawful, theft. And yet, if Craik imagines the abusive extraction of resources from India to Britain operating within the institution of marriage—both the marriage of Zillah's parents and the forestalled marriage of Zillah and her cousin—she also stages the moral exculpation of empire through "The Half-Caste's" marriage plot. When Andrew Sutherland returns from business in India in time for Zillah's twenty-first birthday, he fulfills his paternal role by throwing a ball signaling that she, and her fortune, are now available through marriage. Zillah soon receives an offer from a gentleman whose own fortune needs patching up; she refuses. But just weeks after Zillah has reached independence, Sutherland gets word that he is ruined, "that is, so far as a man can be considered ruined who has enough left to pay all his creditors and start in the world afresh as a penniless honest man" (30). Immediately upon hearing of her guardian's sudden bankruptcy, Zillah enthusiastically pledges the entirety of her fortune to save him from financial collapse. "I am of age," she says, "I can do just what I like; so I will give my guardian all my money... I tell you I will: all I have in the world is not too good for him. *Everything belonging to me is his*" (31, my emphasis). An hour later, Cassandra sees the new couple standing "close together, as lovers stand" (31-2). This time, she does not intervene.

<32>While Zillah's father, uncle, and cousins embody what Danielle Kinsey calls "a corrupt brand of plunder imperialism" (392) enacted by the East Indian Company, her future husband represents a more benign form of empire. Craik goes to great effort to avoid the appearance that Zillah's marriage will be a repeat of her mother's. Unlike Zillah's unscrupulous father, Andrew Sutherland is depicted as respectful and benevolent. And unlike the predatory Le Poer men, Sutherland says at one point that he would rather "die a thousand deaths" than marry a woman for her fortune. Significantly, Craik's narrator, who has loved him all along, defends Sutherland's disinterestedness in his new wife's fortune, saying of him, "no one could ever suspect the shadow of mercenary feeling" (31). Craik even manages the legal niceties, thus preempting any misgivings readers might have based on the self-serving actions of the Le Poer men. Cassandra reports that the couple "married quickly, as I urged, Mr. Sutherland settling his wife's whole property upon herself" (32). Significantly, while Craik's narrator condemns Zillah's mistreatment at the hands of her perfidious uncle and cousin—"the whole is a tissue of crimes!"—she endorses her subsequent union to Andrew Sutherland, thus reassuring a British audience that colonialism can take benevolent form.

<33>What does a popular text like “The Half-Caste” add to our thinking about the evolution of British attitudes towards empire in the 1850s? On the one hand, it is significant that Craik critiques the corrupt extraction of resources enacted by the East India Company and embodied in the theft of the diamond and exploitation of two generations of Indian women. At the same time, Zillah’s marriage to Andrew Sutherland constructs a salutary model of Indian wealth infusing the British economy, as long as one can sustain the myth that it is offered freely.

<34>Despite her critique of “plunder imperialism,” Craik propagates an even more pernicious notion of imperialism that increasingly took hold in the second half of the century, pernicious precisely because it obscures conquest and exploitation in favor of a progressive, “civilizing” view of empire that benefits rather than exploits colonial subjects. A narratological reading affirms the central importance of education to Craik’s more salutary framing of empire, highlighted by Cassandra’s dual role as governess-narrator—both teacher and teller of the story. A dim-witted, slovenly, unattractive girl at fourteen, Zillah becomes by twenty-one “fair in person, well-cultured in mind, and pure and virgin in heart” (25), all of which is credited to none other than her British governess. Zillah’s intellectual and spiritual improvement under Cassandra’s tutelage simultaneously lends credence to racist stereotypes held by the Le Poer family and commends English culture for its capacity for moral uplift. Zillah’s edification (and beautification) places Craik squarely in the Anglicist camp of the Indian education debates, echoing Macaulay’s 1835 *Minute on English Education*: “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (729). On this reading, it is the British governess who is the real engine of empire, as she prepares Zillah to overcome what Craik (and her narrator) views as the weaknesses of “her mother’s race” (5) and “the languor of her native clime” (6).[\(11\)](#)

<35>Significantly, it is also Cassandra who facilitates, even enables, Craik’s fantasy of consensual colonization via the marriage plot. Zillah’s education—*managed by a British governess who herself loves Andrew Sutherland*—not only prepares the girl to be a desirable spouse to a British gentleman, but also primes her to willingly proffer her fortune to him. Indeed, it is Cassandra who takes Andrew Sutherland word of Zillah’s offer—“I will give my guardian all my money. Go back and tell him so!” (31)—and then leaves the two of them alone, expediting their engagement. It is the story’s narrator, in other words, and Zillah’s teacher, who trains Zillah to be the ideal colonial subject and then facilitates her “surrender” of material wealth. Having played her role perhaps too well, Cassandra leaves the newlyweds to take a position abroad. By the time the narration begins, however, she has returned to England and settled into the Sutherlands’ home, this time to help care for their “fair-

haired” (32) children and, presumably, extend her civilizing mission to “a new generation” (32). Her cohabitation with the couple serves as tacit approval, justifying to Craik’s readers that consent by the colonized exonerates the colonizer.

<36>Read as Zillah’s *bildungsroman*, “The Half-Caste” participates in the national mythmaking of a benign, even beneficent, empire that gives British culture to imperial subjects rather than taking material goods from them. But this is Cassandra’s story as much as Zillah’s, as Kiran Mascarenhas has explored. And while Craik is quick to disavow the abuses of the mercenary Le Poers, she betrays little qualm about the role played by the governess-narrator. It may be that, as a marginalized, female member of British society, the governess was a more palatable vehicle for benevolent colonialism than powerful men. However, it is also difficult to ignore the similarities between the “The Half-Caste’s” narrator and its author. Dinah Maria Mulock was 25 when she published “The Half-Caste,” the same age as Cassandra Pryor when she “went out” (1) as a governess. Both are unmarried women “authoress[es]” (32) needing to earn their own way. These similarities may have contributed to the relative lack of accountability to which Craik holds her narrator, despite the fact that she directly benefits from the same fortune the scheming Le Poers attempted to steal.

<37>Cassandra’s attitude towards Zillah and her children speaks to her inherently divided loyalties. She loves them, but that love is conditional on their growing Englishness, and thus suffused with cultural and racial superiority. Notably, it is also Cassandra who records the (presumably desirable) attenuation of Indian characteristics in Zillah’s daughter, reporting that “my namesake, my darling” (32) has inherited her mother’s smile, but carries “her father’s eyes and brow” (32). In this way, her role echoes that of Dr. John Spencer Login and his wife, Lady Lena Login, guardians of Duleep Singh after the war and treaty. As the newly appointed Governor of the Citadel of Lahore, Login was charged not only with care of the young Maharajah, but also cataloguing and safeguarding the vast contents of the Toshakhana in preparation for its removal to England. The “Memorandum of Memorabilia” under Login’s custody includes “THE DIAMOND (KOH-I-NOOR)” and “The young RULER of the Sikhs” (Lena Login 182). Separated from his mother and dependent on the Logins for support and company, Duleep Singh would come to call John Login “Ma-Bap,” mother-father (Lena Login 220). But the nature of the Logins’ relationship with the boy was always ambivalent, even before it became increasingly vexed as he grew older. As guardian, Login would advocate for Singh—including reclaiming some of the confiscated diamonds for the boy (Lena Login 175)—and also for his people—he hoped that the Crown would take up a collection to pay for the Koh-i-Noor and fund public works in the Punjab (Lena Login 177).

But the Logins were also responsible for ensuring the boy's cooperation, cultural assimilation, and religious conversion. As John Login wrote of the Maharajah in 1849, "he is young enough to mould" (157). It seems clear that Craik herself would not take issue with the Logins' "civilizing" mission, any more than she appears to judge Cassandra's. Of course, she also couldn't know in 1851 that Duleep Singh would go on to resent his guardians and regret the coerced surrender of the Koh-i-Noor, going so far as to refer to the Queen as "Mrs. Fagin" for robbing him and his people of the diamond and usurping his rightful sovereignty over the Punjab (Alexander and Anand 49).

<38>Ironically, if Craik's governess-narrator is an agent of civilizing empire, she also pays a steep price, as her conjugal hopes are dashed by her employer's marriage to their young charge. As his mother has let on at different points in the story, Andrew Sutherland is attracted to "half-caste" women—a preference one suspects is compounded by Cassandra's lack of funds. And while the narrator proclaims that she is "filled with peace of heart and thankfulness towards God; to—" (32), Craik's use of dramatic irony (that unfinished sentence!) suggests a different story. The "old governess" will have no spouse, children, or home of her own; it is only the Sutherlands' daughter, Cassia, who is Cassandra's surrogate "niece and namechild" (1). This is a classic diversionary tactic: the cost of empire, Craik suggests, is borne not by the colonial subject, but by the redundant English woman.

<39>Ultimately, "The Half-Caste's" appraisal of empire rests as much on its impact on Cassandra Pryor as on Zillah Le Poer and her mother. The novella's concern for the governess's painful exclusion from the marriage plot indicates that, whatever care Craik extends to Zillah, it is outdone by her interest in the white British woman who tells her story. And despite its emotional cost to the narrator, Craik does not dismiss colonialism's material rewards. Crucially, empire's economic spoils underwrite the very act of narration, as Cassandra pens her "old governess's tale" from her comfortable bedroom in the Sutherlands' country home. It is especially telling that Craik does not disclose the location from which her narrator is writing until the novella's final paragraph, a narrative deferral that serves to suppress the material conditions of Cassandra's storytelling. This withholding further betrays the governess's—and Craik's—conflicted loyalties. Only when the location of narration is revealed does it become apparent that, throughout the time of narration, Zillah's fortune has funded not only the next generation of British gentry, but also Cassandra's ability to live and to write under their protection. This narrative frame cements Craik as both imperial critic and apologist, reminding readers of the immense material interests of colonial drain—interests that were felt "at home" by all British subjects.

Notes

(1)W. H. Allen and Co. was located at 7 Leadenhall Street, just down the street from the East India House, and had close ties with the British East India Company.(^)

(2)Contained in the treasury were also religious artifacts and relics. Particularly painful to the Sikh community is the loss of the sacred Kalgi (plume) of Guru Gobind Singh, which was claimed by the Governor-General himself but subsequently lost.(^)

(3)In the same letter, Dalhousie refutes the persistent rumor that ill-fortune comes to those who possess the diamond, saying he has only heard so in the English papers (395).(^)

(4)Quotations in this essay are based on the 1851 *Chambers's Papers for the People* edition.(^)

(5)Victoria would go on to wear the Koh-i-Noor on numerous occasions; the diamond appears, for example, in Franz Winterhalter's 1856 portrait in a brooch setting; it could also be fitted to her Regal Circlet, which was designed for the Koh-i-Noor in 1853 and which she also wears in the Winterhalter portrait. Victoria wore the Koh-i-Noor, again as a brooch, for her Golden Jubilee in 1887—for which she was practically dripping with diamonds.(^)

(6)The Koh-i-Noor appeared at Queen Elizabeth II's 1953 coronation in the Queen Mother's crown, which was also prominently displayed on top of her casket in 2002. Queen Elizabeth II did not wear the diamond, but she frequently wore jewels that were seized from the Lahore Toshakhana. The Coronation earrings, which feature the large side diamonds that flanked the Koh-i-Noor in Ranjit Singh's armlet, and the Coronation necklace, whose central pendant is the 22.48 carat Lahore diamond, were favorites of both Queen Victoria and her great-great-granddaughter. The Coronation necklace has been worn at every coronation since Victoria's reign—by Queen Alexandra, Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth II, and Queen Camilla.(^)

(7)Although the focus of this essay is what "The Half-Caste" reveals about evolving British attitudes about empire, it is significant to note that American readers also encountered the novella in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1850s Virginia, for example, readers in Alexandria could purchase *Chambers's Papers for the People* at George E. French's Bookshop (Alexandria Gazette 1851, 2) and

Entwisle & Son (Books and Stationary 4), and readers in Richmond could purchase *Avillon and Other Tales* from James Woodhouse & Co. (Amusements 2).(^)

(8)From 1798 until 1861, the India Museum was located in the East India Company's headquarters on Leadenhall Street; much of its collection is now held by the Victoria & Albert Museum.(^)

(9)Eden also painted Queen Victoria in her coronation robes, a gift to Ranjit Singh that was "set in a large gold frame very much emeralded and diamonded" (Fanny Eden, 170). The diamond-encircled miniature of Queen Victoria worn by Duleep Singh in Winterhalter's 1854 portrait *Maharaja Duleep Singh* is also credited to Eden.(^)

(10)The "Indian pearls" (179), as Menkes identifies them, were favorites of both Victoria and Elizabeth II.(^)

(11)The insidious association between education, assimilation, and gender socialization surfaces even in a recent biography of Craik, in which Karen Bourrier uncritically observes that Cassandra "teaches [Zillah] to be a proper lady" (174).(^)

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