

**Buy *Curio(u)s*:**

**Homosocial Possession and Camp Recoding of the Orientalist Object in Richard Marsh**

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<1> The stories in Richard Marsh's *Curios: Some Strange Adventures of Two Bachelors* (1898) are framed by the relationship of Pugh and Tress, two life-long friends bonded by a mutual obsession for collecting. In some of these tales—"The Adventure of the Pipe" and "The Adventure of the Ikon"—collection and coercion delineate Marsh's persistent anxiety about empire's control over and recurrent erasure by the nonnormative forces it seeks to harness. As a whole, the collection repeatedly interrogates unstable dialectics between the supernatural and the scientific, the bestial and the human, the working and the upper classes, the homoerotic and the homosocial, the other and the self—between possessions and being possessed, between the consumer and what he consumes. For the Victorian Orientalist, collecting is about knowing—a purportedly scientific brand of knowledge production that seeks to legitimate cultural appropriation of the Other, typically for less than grandiose purposes such as controlling empire and stabilizing Western self-identity. The acquisitiveness of collecting here enacts Orientalism's attempt to manage an exotic, destabilizing, sometimes threatening Other.<sup>(1)</sup> "The Adventure of the Auk's Egg" exemplifies the Orientalist precept that hegemony does not (always) require positivist veracity, that discursive control need not be rooted in (and sometimes may even be hindered) by objective knowledge of the Other. More generally, Orientalism hovers over the entire book in the guise of compulsive collection and theft as well as acute anxieties over the integrity of empire and the authenticity of one's collection of objets.

<2> Some might object to applying the term "Orientalism" to a field diverse enough to include not just India and the Levant but geographic and ethnographic outliers—such as Russian or Brazilian artifacts, or Jewish or Scottish characters. Yet such an application takes its cue from the generative interrelationship between Orientalism as an ethnographic practice ("which," as Edward Said writes, "until the early nineteenth century had really only meant India and the Bible lands" (4)) and Orientalism as the *ideological grounding* of that ethnographic practice. It's

partly through this interplay—and *after* the early nineteenth century, as Said’s phrasing implies—that Orientalism’s hegemonic ambitions were capable of extending beyond the field’s originating ethnographic and geographic provenance.<sup>(2)</sup> Orientalism’s ideological resilience, as Said notes, lies in trading some degree of ethnographic specificity for the broader ideological reach afforded by regarding Oriental as commensurate with a broader range of foreignness and non-Westernness, defined geographically, politically, and/or culturally in ways that consolidate Western (and usually Anglo-Saxon) identity against amorphous and destabilizing non-Western Others. Both senses in which Said regards Orientalism appear operative in *Curios*, with its miscellany of objets that qualify as Oriental both ethnographically (such as an Indian pipe) and in the more geographically nonspecific but ideologically commensurate sense (such as a Russian ikon or a Brazilian diamond). In some tales, the incidence of Orientalism seems to inform an imperialist subtext (Britain’s colonial ventures in South America and its historical consciousness of Scotland as an internal, though politically assimilated, otherness). Other tales, like “The Adventure of The Ikon,” manifest Orientalism’s capacity as an ideological construct capable of encompassing—and attempting to turn its proven subjugating powers on—*any* nonnative bodies, any foreignness whose difference threatens white British national and/or heteromale integrity and stability.<sup>(3)</sup>

<3> Collection repeatedly grasps at the foreign in an attempt, characteristic of Orientalism, to own, to know, to possess in perpetuity. However, in *Curios*, the boundary between imperial power and Other appears at times to have become permeable, collapsing the distance between the two and turning the acquisitive drive inward. When Pugh and Tress aren’t stealing from the Other, they are stealing from *each other*. Given that Orientalism is presumed to shore up boundaries separating the normative from the nonnormative, the instability of self/Other dialectics such as human/bestial, real/supernatural, and native/foreign betoken apparent failures of Orientalism. “The Adventure of the Cabinet” and “The Adventure of the Pipe,” in particular, speculate on what happens when Orientalism’s acquisitiveness and normalizing forces are frustrated. Once queer objets have been taken from their foreign origins, the collecting fever in *Curios* turns *inward* as Pugh and Tress compulsively steal their acquisitions from one another—as if to suggest that, despite its best projective efforts, Orientalism finds the nonnormative (the foreign, the queer) at home, discomfitingly within the self rather than reassuringly “out there.”

<4> In addition to the Oriental concerns in *Curios*, queerness circulates in the collection not just in the effete, antique-loving nature of its bachelor protagonists but also on the level of the strange and foreign objets at the center of the tales. Pugh and Tress are at once the closest of friends and the most competitive with and mistrustful of one another as rival collectors, each of them privy to the unscrupulous lengths the other is willing to go in pursuit of a curio. Their possessions are queered by the frenzied acquisition, theft, and *re*-theft that destabilize

boundaries between self and other, British and foreign, heteronormative and homosocial/homoerotic. *How to Be Gay*, David Halperin's recent exploration of the mechanisms of gay culture, describes the operations of camp upon straight cultural objects in terms productively serviceable to an understanding of the above tendencies in *Curios*. The leveling, destabilizing effect of camp reappropriation which is Halperin's focus—the queer recoding of (hetero)normative cultural artifacts—is palpable in Marsh's tales through a self-defeating cycle of theft and consumption that attempts, yet repeatedly fails, to project homoeroticism and the foreign *out* of self and empire.<sup>(4)</sup> And yet at the same time Marsh's work also posits a disheartening corollary: namely that, in Foucauldian fashion, even the queerest, most leveling of camp insights, cannot always ensure against the possibility of failing to transcend or even being co-opted by the heteronorms they often skew and dismantle. The watermark of some objects, like the recalcitrance of particular systems, may be more indelible, more recalcitrant.

<5> Of course, collecting has a long history in the West of viewing objects from a specific vantage, particularly in the case of Oriental or other non-Western curios whose different valuation (and typically exotic aesthetics, ethnicity, and beliefs) render such artifacts equally prized, inscrutable, and the collector's and/or imperial subject's rightful property. Our analysis of collecting and criminality and their relations to gender, sexuality, and class in *Curios* draws on a rich body of critical interdisciplinary examinations of collecting, imperialism, cultural appropriation, and fetishism during the Romantic and Victorian Eras. Of particular use in understanding the tradition of regarding collecting as an erotic(ized) endeavor is William Pietz's series of anthropological articles on the multiple links between European fetish discourse and imperial expansion.<sup>(5)</sup> Notable trends in the literature center on how collecting functions as an epistemological and social gesture toward Enlightenment-informed empiricism as well as in service to more nefarious, avaricious impulses created by the Industrial Revolution's amplification of capitalism. Often, the erotic vectoring of collection tracks with the material and epistemological cupidity of capitalism, imperialism, and Orientalism in ways that can be as culturally nonnormative as they can be counterhegemonic.

<6> Using both postcolonial and queer theory, we suggest that *Curios'* multiple narratives of collection, cupidity, and theft illustrate the extent to which collection, despite its apparently dissident elements, ultimately seems to restore the dominant order. *Curios* dramatizes Marsh's preoccupation with the ways in which nonnormative forces such as the queer and the Oriental both unravel the fabric of empire and its underpinning ideological agents and yet also end up facilitating and instrumentalizing the repressive cultural work that they do so much to resist. What's equally striking is Marsh's nuanced depiction of the relationship between heteronormativity and Orientalism as not simplistically parallel. At times, these tales' operative queerness—the collectors' camp exaggeration, the camp energies of objects and perhaps of the

collectors themselves—permits odd artifacts and persons to shake Orientalism’s normative grasp. At other moments, however, collecting and camp seem powerless to disrupt, and sometimes may even collude with, the ambitiously diffuse hegemonic reach of sexual, national, ideological and cultural normativity.

<7> Our reading can be usefully framed by its broad consonance with Jeff Nunokawa’s work on the importance of Orientalist representation to Victorian efforts to safeguard and sanitize domestic property from the corporeality, instability, and degeneracy to which bodies and capital tend to be subject. In *The Afterlife of Property*, Nunokawa notes how domestic property, from real estate and possessions to wives, was tamed and purified by distancing it from an alignment of the exotic, the bodied, and the foreign, from a degenerate Orient doomed to corporeality, death, and thus extinction.<sup>(6)</sup> Similarly, in *Tame Passions of Wilde*, Nunokawa observes the taming of desire by way of aestheticized Oriental representation: an “ideological operation” that seeks to neuter the disruptiveness of one’s own impulses by regarding an Orient defined *purely* as an aesthetic artifice lacking any menacing reality or substantive relation to the Occidental self. Capable of being collected, objectified, and possessed, Oriental objets—each embodying *Oriental* objet—can be rendered merely aesthetic, and any potential threat to the stability of home, law, or nation, immobilized (51). In Marsh as well, although the Oriental and the exotic threaten to export destabilization to the British home and body, the latter ultimately emerges triumphant and largely unscathed. One difference worth noting, however, is that the texts examined by Nunokawa—works by Dickens and Wilde—seek to tame desire, to suppress the volatility of circulation and the taint of corporeality. In Marsh, by contrast, collectors Pugh and Tress manifest moments of camp dissidence to, or at least irreverence toward, the interlocking Occidental enterprises of nation, home, and family. A further insight of Nunokawa’s that might be applied to *Curios* is that the final ineffectiveness of such dissident gestures might imply their having only been half-serious to begin with, having been—in camp’s hollower, less political sense—merely for show.

<8> The fact that queer theory and Orientalism much of the time appear to hinge on a similar binary opposition renders them apt partners, both ideologically and in our own analysis. After all, both heteronormativity and Orientalism turn on the differentiation of a stable, putatively normal self (Western, domestic, white, and heterosexual) against allegedly abnormal Others (Eastern, foreign, nonwhite, and nonheteronormative). At the same time, the Others against and through which Orientalism and heteronormativity instrumentalize and stabilize their own normative identity—the “queer” and the “Oriental”—are obviously not collapsible one into the other, nor are we suggesting they should be. And yet to regard them as incommensurable, or as working in merely analogous but unconnected ways seems far from warranted. Orientalism’s historical concerns with nationality and race (among other traits) might at first blush appear broader than as well as noncontiguous with the single, sweeping

opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Yet as queer theorists have long noted, the reach of heteronormativity seeks to regiment not just sexuality but also gender, ethnicity, nation, taste, knowledge, health, agency, and moral purity.<sup>(7)</sup> While the political and cultural ends to which Orientalism and heteronormativity have been enlisted diverge at significant points, they have also overlapped, often to their mutual reinforcement. Both share a tendency toward stark yet nonetheless—or perhaps *therefore*—efficacious binaries, a priority of attempting to regiment interlocking ideological constructs (whether heteronormativity or Orientalism) so as to instrumentalize, across the widest possible spectrum, the supposedly normal (Occidental, white, often Anglo-Saxon, and heteronormative) against the abnormal (Oriental, non-white, queer, and non-masculine). As ideologies whose imputed knowledge, privilege, and all too palpable exertions depend equally on the invisibility of the normative, Orientalism and heteronormativity have been, and continue to be, deployed in intersecting formations and projects of cultural hegemony whose effects are—sometimes alternately, sometimes simultaneously—subversive and reactionary.<sup>(8)</sup>

<9> Our title's double entendre ("buy curios"/"bi-curious") is meant as a camp wink at the ways in which Marsh repeatedly characterizes Pugh and Tress as effete aesthetes, bachelors whose relationship is marked by a mixture of rivalry, friendship, and criminality that locates it in the murky middle distance of a homosocial-homoerotic continuum. But the pun also contains a more serious point regarding the shared etymology of the words "curio" and "curious." Given the perhaps universal connection between a desire for knowledge and the unfamiliar, it's unsurprising that "curio" is an abbreviation of "curiosity," and that the latter refers both to an intellectual or emotional state and to the objects prized by antiquarians. It's hardly unexpected, then, that the desire to know is bound up, etymologically and in Marsh's stories, with the unknown, with unusual material possessions. Marsh's text routinely underscores this connection by having Pugh and Tress describe their passion for curios as driven by curiosity and how, once possessed, objects further incite curiosity and avarice—which, in the age of Decadence and sodomy trials, might risk being read, analogically, as homoeroticism.<sup>(9)</sup> What's more remarkable is the deeper relation suggested by this linguistic link—and by Marsh's *Curios*—between the camp object and postcolonial possession. Collection's cupidity as well as the collectors' proclivity toward camp excess might seem, at first, to operate as props for Orientalism, instruments for the normative acquisition and subduing of threateningly foreign, destabilizing Others. And yet queerness here appears to work not just, as one might expect, against heteronormativity, but also against the normalizing ideological force of Orientalism. This aspect of *Curios*, along with heteronormativity and Orientalism's shared, often symbiotic animosity toward the nonheteronormative<sup>(10)</sup> might seem to neatly align queerness with racially and culturally marginalized elements. These elements require material and symbolic resistance lest they undermine the paramount stability of the British self, home, nation, and their idealized normative foundations (heterosexual, white, Christian, economically

and intellectually privileged, masculinist heterosexuality). However, while *Curios* illustrates the frequent alliance of Orientalism and heteronormativity against subversive queer Others along the intersecting (though hardly coextensive) axes of race, nation, gender, and sexuality, further examination reveals that the relation of the queer and the Oriental is neither so simple, stable, nor uniformly collaborative. The curious tendencies of outré artifacts and those who aspire to possess them are such that cultural, erotic, and epistemological queerness are as capable of *reinforcing* the material and ideological strictures of the normative as they are of subverting them—that is, equally subject to being co-opted by or abetting heterocentric and colonialist priorities as they are of being threatened and marginalized by them. The bachelors' interest in uncovering the unfamiliar—in knowing, and thus controlling, the foreign—can be read as *both* articulating a camp politics of resistance to norms *and* finding its camp energies enlisted, or even consciously enlisting them, in service to an alliance of hegemonies to which camp might seem (and, indeed, often is) fundamentally opposed. *Curios* enjoins us to consider the extent to which the structuring binaries of hegemonic projects and the relations between distinct but overlapping projects of normative empowerment are far from simplistic or static—as well as the potential for shifting, often self-defeating allegiances by and among queer and Oriental Others and their ostensible normative adversaries.

### **Up in Smoke**

<10> As the book's inaugural tale, "The Pipe" establishes a representative scope for the cultural anxieties whose disparate counterhegemonic effects—debilitating as well as impotent—Marsh is concerned with tracing. The story also suggests how collection and scientific scrutiny, as tools of Orientalist and epistemological subjugation, alternately fail and succeed in subduing dissident forces. "The Pipe" is remarkable for the sheer number of interlocking binaries that seem under attack—oppositions where the dominance of one term over the other, prescribed by the host of values associated with Orientalism, imperialism, and heteronormativity, is normatively taken for granted. Although the story starts by associating the Oriental, the foreign, and the ugly in the rigidly biased way one expects from the Victorian period, it quickly reveals an efflorescence of hierarchies whose strengths are in turn erratic and redoubled: bestial/human, animate/inanimate, supernatural/real, masculine/feminine, active/passive, master/servant.

<11> The simplicity of the tale's premise belies the disruptive forces it contains, as well as the force it exerts in subduing that disruption. Tress sends Pugh a present, which is an uncommon occurrence since they are most often jealously possessive of their respective objets. As in most of *Curios*, the objet's provenance is Oriental. This distancing move both allows foreign, queer and other nonnormative elements to be projectively associated with a non-Western/British Other and also sets up as Marsh's common counterpoints the forces and drives represented by

those Others already extant inside the domestic, native sphere in disruptive and/or hegemonic capacities. In this instance, the Orient refers to India, where Tress stole a meerschaum pipe decorated with an oversized lizard-like creature. Although Pugh and Tress do not collect Oriental objets exclusively, when they do, their assessments are characteristically Orientalist: equally appreciative and disparaging of the exotic. Pugh describes the “Indian carving” and “workmanship” on the box containing the pipe as “undoubtedly, in its way, artistic [but] the result could not be described as beautiful,” being “ornament[ed] . . . with some of the ugliest figures I remember to have seen . . . devils [or] deities appertaining to some mythological system with which, thank goodness, I am unacquainted” (7).[\(11\)](#)

<12> Initially, the hegemonic potency of Orientalism and imperialism seems destined for upset, as this objet undermines conventional oppositions between animal and human, animate and inanimate, “supernatural” and real (13). The carved figure “perched” “on the edge of the [pipe] bowl” sports several “legs, or feelers, or tentacula,” with “one . . . particularly horrible [tentacle] . . . pointing straight at your nose” (8). As if the phallic import of the latter, distinctive digit weren’t obvious enough, this tentacle appears to “vibrat[e]” and “elongat[e] . . . towards . . . the tip of [the smoker’s] nose”—effects that Pugh and Tress explain away as a hypnotic “delusion,” drug-induced hallucination, or “haunt[ing]” (9, 13). Yet materialism seems unable to explain the lizard’s altered position after the pipe has been smoked. Collection offers a significant object lesson for imperialism’s political and symbolic ambitions: not just to treat countries and populations as artifacts to be collected, fixed, owned, to be seen as representative of the owner’s identity, but also to subdue amorphous anxieties, such as unruly, monstrous aspects of self and doubts regarding one’s right to imperial dominance.

<13> In addition to its illicit provenance, criminality is also manifest in the pipe’s addictive qualities. Whereas objets are to be owned and *valued*, the pipe compels Tress and Pugh to smoke it despite their aversion to soiling aesthetic articles through functional *use*.[\(12\)](#) By inveigling Tress’s servant, Bob Haines, to smoke the pipe in order to demonstrate the smoke’s effects more scientifically, Pugh and Tress counter fragile boundaries by using a servant like an object in a way that reasserts class differences. The tale’s conclusion is likewise ambivalent, as the reassuring rationalism of its Radcliffian denouement is undercut by lingering doubt. The pipe turns out to be not a haunted artifact but merely a trick: the lizard is revealed an ordinary, living creature that, having been immobilized in gum Arabic, moves when revived by the warmth of the lit pipe. Collection and Orientalism comfortingly appear to *re*stabilize shaken dichotomies. But, despite this soothing climax, a distinct fear remains that the dissected, destroyed Other may retain a potent real-world analog.

<14> In contrast to “The Cabinet”’s ambivalent queerness (where, as we will shortly see, the imputed femininity of Tress’s inanimate paramour allows him to retain a quasi-heterosexual

normativity), “The Pipe” seems to compromise heteronormativity without a clear countermove. Oral-phallic penetration by the lizard’s tentacle is compounded by Pugh’s “dreadful dream” of a “hideous, green reptile . . . clutch[ing] me round the neck, gluing its lips to my throat [and] sucking the life’s blood out of my veins, as it embraced me, with a slimy kiss” (14-15). In an attack that’s part vampirism, part rape—reminiscent of Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897)—a final blackout shields the victim from unspeakable, implicitly queer horrors. The ensuing scene where Bob smokes the pipe is a set piece of hypnotism and nausea in the face of a queerness equally compelling and repulsive:

the whole hideous reptile was seized with . . . a fit of convulsive shuddering. It trembled . . . violently [as Bob] puffed steadily on.

The creature’s shuddering became more violent. It appeared to swell before our eyes. Then, just as suddenly . . . the shuddering ceased [and] the creature began to crawl along the stem of the pipe! . . . Our eyes were riveted on it with a fascination which was absolutely nauseous.

Slowly, slowly, it went, nearer and nearer to the smoker’s nose . . . .

We were all . . . speechless. . . . It seemed to me that [Bob] would *never* succumb. . . . I was spellbound. I would have given the world to scream [but] could do nothing else but watch. (23-24)

Notwithstanding the tale’s rational denouement, the creature’s shuddering is plausible as an orgasmic pantomime, just as Bob’s delay failure to “succumb” or faint in the face of overstimulating anxiety easily reads as the postponement of *la petite mort*.<sup>(13)</sup> When Tress himself faints from smoking the pipe, he awakens in a position that titillatingly mimics the receptive partner in anal sex: “I was lying on the floor . . . [in] about as uncomfortable a position as you can easily conceive . . . face downwards, with my legs bent under me” (11).

<15> Further complicating the episode’s homoeroticism and endangered masculinity is an unseemly overfamiliarity between social classes. Tress—who Pugh already thinks is unduly familiar with Bob—bribes the latter into smoking the pipe: “what would you say to a glassful of brandy . . . my boy . . . [and] a pull at a pipe when the brandy is drunk?” In turn, Bob extorts “a pound for taking a pull at your master’s pipe.” When Bob tries to stop smoking, Tress forbids him “to cheat me by taking that pipe from between your lips until I tell you [or you’ll] never again . . . be a servant of mine” (20). While being plied with money and liquor by one’s social betters doesn’t inherently constitute inducement to prostitution, it’s at least analogous to the sort of circumstances that, only a few years before *Curios*’ publication, famously generated public scandal for defendants in the Cleveland Street affair and for Oscar Wilde. Bob seems to acknowledge the scenario’s possibly homoerotic tenor when, lighting the pipe, he

“looked at each one of us in turn. When he looked at Tress, I distinctly saw him wink his eye. What my feelings would have been had a servant of mine had winked his eye at me I am unable to imagine! . . . A puff of smoke came through his lips” (21). A question that lingers past the tale’s end, however, is whether the denouement’s reaffirmation of hegemonic balance and normative hierarchies fully eradicates the dismaying instabilities—eroticized, blurred gradations of gender, sexuality, class, and species—that the story has borne witness to, if not helped generate.

### **I Was Just Faking It**

<16> Before turning to our analysis of exaggeration as a double-edged political tool in Marsh’s tales, it’s worth distinguishing those elements and considerations of camp theory that our reading draws on from those it does not. We’ve used Halperin’s *How to Be Gay* because, in its innovation, it builds on previous definitions and accounts of camp and gay sensibility that are, in our view, most balanced. Our analysis of sexual and Orientalist alterity moves beyond the school of camp theory that both defines camp more narrowly (as parody) and regards it either as apolitical or too mired in bourgeois values or negativity to form a productive or nurturing basis for an authentically progressive cultural critique.<sup>(14)</sup> By contrast, our view of camp, which is indebted to work like that of Jack Babuscio, David Bergman, and David Halperin, emphasizes generic violation, dissonance, and the flaunting of conventions regarding social (dis)respect and valorized (as opposed to discredited) social and sexual behaviors. As a mechanism for lampooning heterosexuality’s putative respectability and protesting its concomitant dismissal of divergent, marginalized perspectives (such as queer and female), this model of camp goes beyond parody to also embrace irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humor.<sup>(15)</sup> Babuscio, Bergman, and Halperin consider camp sensibility to be grounded in generic and tonal incongruity, the mocking of conventional morality and seriousness, and a consciousness of identities as role-playing rather than as essences. Although parody has been viewed by some as the centerpiece of camp (if not its defining feature), the exaggeration one finds in *Curios* lacks the overtly parodic element that, for some, is fundamental to camp. Our desire to address Pugh and Tress’s anxieties about the potential exposure of their own perceived nonnormativity requires pushing beyond camp-as-parody *tout court* to another, equally valid element of camp. Camp as exaggeration—heightened effects as well as hyperbolic affects—allows us to appreciate the illuminating powers of camp’s different facets: in this case, exaggeration as critique. In *Curios*, it’s the latter (as opposed to parody) that not only limns and attempts to leverage the ideological fissures in normative structures of sexuality and nationality. It also lays bare their disheartening tenacity as well as the sobering capacity of nonnormative Others to collaborate with the very hegemonies that marginalize them and that, at other moments, they menace or subvert.

<17> Tricks fundamentally define *Curios* as a collection of not only stories but *objets d'art*, the artifacts Pugh and Tress compete to own by any means, however dishonest. Among the words by which they refer to their desiderata (from the expected “curio,” “curiosity,” and “bric-a-brac” to “beauty” and “treasure”), the term “knick-knack” circulates as a silent subtext of ornament as well as subterfuge. Synonymous with “curiosity” and “bric-a-brac,” “knick-knack” denotes both a “dainty article of furniture, any curio . . . for ornament” and also a “trick, sleight, artifice, [or] subterfuge.”(16) “The Cabinet” trades on the term’s duality, hyperbolizing Pugh and Tress’s mutually manipulative attempts to possess a rare Louis Quatorze cabinet designed by the preeminent seventeenth-century cabinetmaker André-Charles Boulle.(17) The tale serves as a case study in collectors’ peculiar emotional relations to objects, which oscillate between excited possession, distraught loss, and forbidden—and possibly criminal—pleasure.(18) Tress’s verbal enthusiasm for the cabinet is just as embellished as its construction: ““Have you ever seen such chasing . . . such scroll-work? . . . The whole design . . . is just perfect. As I live, there is not such another cabinet in all the world”” (55). The telescoping nature of its hyperbolic one-of-a-kind status (in perfection, preservation, and origin) indicate the excess permeating the rest of the tale: Pugh and Tress’s word play, their personification of the cabinet as romantic partner, and the coding of collecting as criminality.

<18> “The Cabinet” displays camp traits in the machinations by which Pugh first secures the antique and by which Tress then tricks him into admitting he has it. After Pugh underhandedly buys the Boulle out from under Tress, its initial discoverer, Tress places a fake newspaper advertisement offering a reward for the “stolen property”’s return (60). The ad threatens the thief with imprisonment in order to scare Pugh into turning over the artifact. Though manipulative, Tress’s ruse hardly qualifies as “violence and highway robbery,” as Pugh puts it (54). There’s linguistic violence, to be sure, but, as with most of the collectors’ interactions, the animus is wielded with a degree of humor. That, along with their aestheticism and the incongruity and inappropriateness of their hyperbole, imbues much of their banter with a level of camp. Consider the ad’s slippage between “purchase” and “theft”: “a Reward . . . for such information as shall lead to the apprehension and conviction of the *purchaser*; and . . . a further Reward . . . for such information as shall lead to the recovery of the *stolen property*” (60; emphasis added). To equate “purchas[ing]” and stealing is a denotative aberration, not dissimilar to swapping a fake work of art for the authentic article. If Pugh reinterprets being defrauded of the cabinet as “highway robbery,” it is because he is initially fooled by Tress’s act of journalistic forgery. Tress takes pleasure not just in fooling a collector’s expert sensibilities but also, perhaps, in crafting an artifact whose telltale campness Pugh, in his literal avarice, fails to penetrate.

<19> The ad is not Tress’s only counterfeit, nor does Pugh fail, for very long, to join the verbal play of camp incongruity. When Pugh forges new, duplicitous meanings for actual events,

willfully misreading seller as victim and purchaser as cunning thief, he immediately adopts Tress's idiom: "On the contrary, I saved her from being robbed by you" (56). But it is Tress's reinterpretation of events that is most immoderate: "I see. That is how you put it. Ingenious ingenuous, Mr. Pugh! You are not aware that I had already purchased the cabinet . . . had already robbed the old lady, before you, the second and the greater robber, appeared upon the scene? . . . You are at least aware that I had told the old lady that I would purchase the cabinet—that is, that I would rob her" (56-57). Besides painting Pugh as criminal, Tress nuances his forgery by suggesting that Pugh, not Tress himself, is the ad's author and, contrary to their habitual characterization of collecting as theft, that Pugh alone is culpable (as well as credulous). Even though the thematization of forgery as queer is not limited to Marsh (consider Oscar Wilde or Jean Genet), *Curios* amplifies forgery's queer associations with camp irony and incongruity. If forgery in itself does not qualify as camp, Pugh and Tress's attitude toward both their crookedness and the cabinet *does*.

<20> While we can read Marsh's camp irony as pastiche, we can also read Tress's acts of linguistic redefinition as another version of Wildean aesthetic theory by suggesting, as Wilde does in "The Decay of Lying" (1889), that language, regardless of its veracity or ethical content, determines reality. Tress's metacommentary, similarly, is not mimetic but generative.<sup>(19)</sup> In some sense, it's Pugh and Tress's mutual understanding of collecting and of one other as fraudulent that *renders* those activities criminal: "We're a couple of thieves. I knew that it was a robbery, you knew that it was a robbery, only you happened to land the plunder first" (62). Tress's finely crafted version of the cabinet's provenance is therefore, by definition, a curiosity, embodying—like Vivien's theory of Art in "Decay"—"careful or elaborate workmanship [and] perfection of construction."<sup>(20)</sup> Tress's narrative curio is superior because it does *not* reflect what actually happened. As with Wilde's valorization of Art over Nature, collecting's correlation between original and forgery deconstructively renders the forgery superior to the authentic article: a fake is not a copy of the original, but an improvement on it.<sup>(21)</sup> Marsh's send-up of collectors' "peculiar attitudes" does not mock collecting for the sake of denigrating it, but, when read through the lens of camp, instead celebrates it.<sup>(22)</sup> Pugh's ironic rebuff of Tress invites Marsh's readers to delight in the former's otherwise outré cupidity: "That man might take advantage of the ignorance of an unprotected female, but he shouldn't take advantage of me" (53). Pugh's expression of concern for himself, rather than for a woman in need of a male champion, isn't chauvinist (or isn't *only* chauvinist) as much as it is camp. For Pugh is doing more than ignoring the defenseless woman; with a camp fondness for feminine identification, Pugh casts *himself* as a defenseless woman.<sup>(23)</sup>

<21> If "The Cabinet" carries a warning, it is to be vigilantly skillful in the creation and identification of counterfeits. Even Pugh's claims of honesty are further evidence of camp: "Before, and above, all things, honesty, the reputation of honesty for me . . . . No man was ever

more conscious of innocence, no man was ever more keenly aware that his motives and his actions had alike been above suspicion. But I know how simple honesty is apt to be misjudged by a too censorious world" (62-63). Pugh is simply trying to justify calling on the solicitors named in the counterfeit ad to collect the reward himself. Yet, rather than admit to his own cupidity, he parodies an extreme crisis of conscience, rewriting history by pairing Tress's method of elaborate narrative workmanship with his own fondness for the superlative. This is more than mendacity or hypocrisy; it's high melodrama: overwrought, out of scale with the weight of its emotional context. Tress's criminalization of cupidity and underhanded bargain-hunting accords with a literalist, joyously amoral interpretation of possession as rightful ownership—a benign parallel to Tress's penchant for linguistic slippage in equating purchase with theft. As one might expect from camp's mockery of conventional, heteronormative moral valuations, it is the Boule's "display of taste and ownership" that determines the value and legitimacy of Pugh's and Tress's subject positions—not their adherence to a moral code stigmatizing the accumulation of *objets d'art* through verbal manipulation of their sequential owners.

<22> We must also take into consideration the extent to which these values are queered. If a sense of camp excess, play, and ethical critique informs our reading of Tress's trickery, Pugh's subterfuge and their mutual embrace of collection's delinquency predicate a *cultural* queerness (rather than, necessarily, a specifically *identitarian* queerness). *Curios'* readers can see how the queer underpinnings of camp inform the subversive, homoerotic implications of Pugh and Tress's camp-inflected desire for the Boule—as well as the penalties for acknowledging that desire, the ability of such desire to be read as damningly nonheteronormative. The late nineteenth century was a period not just of serious legal penalties for sexual nonnormativity in late Victorian Britain, where the 1885 Labouchere Amendment's on "gross indecency" criminalized male homosexuality, but also of relevant cultural anxieties about the stigma associated with merely suspected or perceived nonheteronormativity.<sup>(24)</sup> That law's stipulation of imprisonment for public and private male homosexual acts led to the prosecution of such infamous gay sex scandals as the Cleveland Street affair and Wilde's sodomy trial. With an eye toward this threat of imprisonment, Pugh's hyperbolic use of "violent" to describe Tress's recriminations regarding his own "depravity" suggests that a more serious offense might have—or might be *construed* as having—as much to do with depraved erotic proclivities as with voluptuary collecting tastes:

"Tress, you are so violent . . . ."

". . . Pugh, I believe I would submit to being broken on the wheel, if I might be the owner of such a cabinet, by Boule [sic]."

[Tress's] language was dreadful. His violence painful in the extreme. I had never had so clear a glimpse of the depths of depravity of which the man was capable . . . . Penal servitude for life, would, in my judgment, be too high a price to pay for all the treasure of art which the world contains. Before, above all things, honesty, the reputation of honesty for me. (Marsh 62)

We have read Pugh's parodic *mea culpa* as a screen that allows him to seek an illusory reward for the "purchase" of the "stolen" cabinet. This is not a claim for either collector's *literal* gayness; we lack the means as well as the desire to adjudicate such a claim. Nonetheless, far from begging the question, such a reading builds on other suggestively corroborating moments in the text: pronounced moments, such as in "The Pipe," where the homosocial shades into the homoerotic, as well as Pugh and Tress's teasing of one another, in multiple stories, with allegations that conflate collecting and criminality. The vagueness of their mutual imputations of scandalous nonnormativity hardly limits the charge being made to homosexuality, but the charge's innuendo hardly forecloses such a possibility, either—especially in a period when heightened legal and cultural scrutiny made homosexuality, whether proven, alleged, or merely insinuated, one of the more damning forms of nonnormativity. Pugh and Tress may know each other as thieves, but they seem to regard it as quite another, less desirable development for *outsiders* either to become aware of their criminal *erotic* tendencies or to falsely impute them. If we read "reputation" in the above passage in the context of the 1890s sodomy scandals, Pugh's concern might have less to do with his being known as a "bric-a-brac hunter" and more to do with the possibility of being *perceived* as given to nonheteronormative proclivities.<sup>(25)</sup> Being perceived as "honest," then, serves a smokescreen, a closeting cover, for the exposure of those kinds of nonnormativity that, more widely known, might well condemn either character to "penal servitude for life"—a sentence hanging over the heads of homosexuals as well as thieves in late nineteenth-century Britain. If we overwrite the dichotomy of criminal/lawful with homosexual/heterosexual, Pugh's honesty firmly situates him inside the closet—or the cabinet, as the case may be. To possess and admire an object of beauty as Tress does—to be dedicated to that desire to the point of submitting to being "broken on the wheel"—demonstrates a frank devotion to Decadence's cultural project. By contrast, as devoted as *Pugh* might be to the same desires and project, he is unwilling to pay such a price. He's reluctant even to be *suspected* of wrongdoing.

<23> One might suggest that Pugh's ambition to be at once inside and outside the cabinet—to expose Tress's criminality without himself being outed as criminal—evokes Sedgwick's discussion, in *Epistemology of the Closet*, of the "contradictory constraints on discourse" that "undermin[e] . . . the grounds of [gay men's] very being" by, alternately and inconsistently,

compelling disclosure *and* secrecy (70). Specifically, Sedgwick is referencing the “highly vulnerable management of information about” an individual’s homosexuality, the

radical uncertainty closeted gay people are likely to feel about who is in control of information about their sexual identity . . . [such] that no one person can take control over all the multiple, often contradictory codes by which information about sexuality and activity can seem to be conveyed. . . . [T]he position of those who think they *know something about one that one may not know oneself* is an excited and empowered one. . . . [T]his fact makes the closet and its exits . . . volatile [and] . . . even violent. (70, 79-80)

Although Pugh and Tress’s sexualities remain unstated and unactualized, such a context helps make sense of Pugh’s ambivalence over the cabinet’s possession and the criminality of collection. It’s as if Pugh flirts with the transgressive thrill of being “out,” an avowed thief with nonnormative erotic attachments to furniture and perhaps to other men, but also relishes the sadistic pleasure of exposing the criminality of others in order to deflect the fear and possibility of being outed himself. The camp irony of Pugh’s protestations of honesty slides dangerously close to a straighter metaphorical reading where “art” is the vehicle for a homoerotic tenor and where “treasure” stands for a near-literal “pleasure.” In a milieu where “things” are the crux of one’s desires, Pugh’s preference for “the *reputation* of honesty” (or presumptive normativity) hints at the very real dangers for homosexuals and other nonnormative Victorians, dangers that linguistic tricks cannot always mitigate or deflect.

<24> If the threat of being construed as criminal (queer or otherwise) is characterized by camp exaggeration, the terms in which both men frame their relationship with the cabinet are still more camp: in this case, troubling normativity by parodying heterosexual romance. Pugh casts the cabinet as not just a possession but an innamorata: “I was at least hoping that you would allow me to spend a few hours with it in silent communion, so that in solitude I might bid it a long farewell. Indeed, I think that you might allow me to spend with it still another night” (64). Just precisely *how* was he going to “bid it a long farewell?” Protracted sighs, gazing, and tender embraces seem more apropos of a lover’s tryst more than a collector’s appraisal. Tress himself has already coded the Boule as a long-lost romantic partner (“My beauty! My treasure!”) and described its purchase as the “consummat[ion]” of a “deed”—words reminiscent of a wedding night’s main attraction (55, 57). Tress later reiterates Pugh’s conjugal metaphor in a campily overblown cadenza to his “fair . . . mistress”:

“I have been having with it such an hour as that first hour which the Passionate Pilgrim(26) spends with his well-won lover. Though never had lover so fair a mistress as this sweetheart of mine. . . . Dare ever again, within my hearing, to even hint of robbing me of my true love—which is my own, my very own, for ever and for aye—and as I live,

I'll not leave in your body a bone whole enough to splinter . . . . Your presence desecrates the sanctity of this first sweet hour. . . . When the honeymoon is over, now and again you may come back to take a peep of my true love. . . ." (71-72)

Tress hurls down the chivalrous gauntlet of physical violence, as if the cabinet is worthier of protection than its female seller. His chivalry is less courtly, though still campily romantic, when he offers to function as procurer for Pugh: "now and again you may come back to take a peep at my true love," but only "[w]hen the honeymoon is over" (72). Tress's romantic-erotic relation to the cabinet manifests what Werner Muensterberger describes as the specular and emotional investments endemic to collecting's acquisitiveness. Nonetheless, given this desire's nonnormative, potentially queer coding, it might also signal what Sedgwick calls the "triangulation of desire." According to Sedgwick in *Between Men*, bonds among men competing for possession of a desired woman are imbricated with a range of homosocial and homoerotic affects that are just as strong as those they hold for the woman. Heterosexual strictures tend to mediate homoerotic and homosocial desires through female third parties.<sup>(27)</sup> The camp inversion here is that, instead of a woman operating as the object of gift exchange, an objet stands in for woman-as-object, literalizing the triangulation of desire not only by which women serve as vehicles of male homosociality but also by which consumer goods become objects of sexual mediation. The Boule serves as female proxy (more proxy than female, in this case), and Tress's admissions of decidedly erotic passion for the curio could be read as a nod and a wink to a queer longing for Pugh.

<25> It's here that David Halperin's study of gay signification becomes most useful, by elucidating the serious cultural work behind the sort of camp posturing, irony, hyperbole, and incongruity one encounters in *Curios*. As defined by Halperin, gay cultural practice entails a habit of conscious playing at and with affect and gender style that, while not limited to camp, is largely embraced by it. It's a manner of playing with traditionally disparate genres, or reveling in the violation of generic boundaries regarded as dividing high from low, masculine from feminine, serious from unserious, tragic from melodramatic, privileged from abject. Gay cultural praxis resides not in persons, objects, or sexualities but in the recoding of straight artifacts to endow them with queer meanings, camp valences, and gay cultural force. Gay reading, by queers, straights, or other gay cultural adepts, provides strategies for questioning and resisting, though hardly dismantling, the norms of heterosexual culture, those "socially constructed and asymmetrical polarities that demand to be taken straight" (Halperin 184). Far from escaping heteronorms (this seems impossible), highlighting their arbitrary and performative character accomplishes a powerful gesture of dissent: dissent from the dictatorial givenness by which they validate normative enclosure and engender homophobic rhetoric, violence, and policy. Gay male culture opens a latitude of figural play and "achieve[s] a certain degree of leverage" against heteronorms in a number of ways: by offering a "proxy identity"

that disrupts the clout or “authenticity” accruing to “heterosexual or heteronormative social roles and meanings”—and the *disrespect* accruing to queer ones—by refusing to “tak[e] seriously, literally, or unironically the most abject *and* the most esteemed social identities” (218, 318). While the “dominant social roles and meanings” (both those *with* and *without* normative privilege) “cannot [necessarily] be destroyed,” they “can be undercut and derealized,” their “preeminence eroded,” “deprived of their claims to seriousness and authenticity, of their right to our moral, aesthetic, erotic allegiance” (218). Finally, as a strategy for puncturing normativity’s givenness by subversively recoding it, gay culture calls out the constructedness of norms by invoking a “*conscious consciousness*” of the norms that straight culture typically encourages its participants, gay and straight, to remain *unconscious* of (453).

<26> The work of collection, considered as an epistemological and ideological project, operates by nearly identical principles. Pugh, Tress, and their fellow collectors possess objets in an almost purely homosocial context—and, by triangulation, possess one another. But they are also themselves possessed by the objets they pursue, by avaricious, transgressive desires that tend toward the erotic as much as the materialistic. Perhaps like many projects of resistant queer and subaltern cultural work, the transactions—the buying, selling, stealing, mastering, Orientalizing, and destroying of objets—are finally ambivalent in nature. “The Cabinet,” like the rest of *Curios*, exemplifies the conflicting trends Halperin observes at work in camp resignification: that is, ossification as well as subversion. Pugh and Tress’s profession, artifacts, and potential queerness alternately unsettle and ratify many of the hierarchies underwriting the hegemonic force of Orientalism and/or heteronormativity. Recoding is playful and sometimes disruptive, but it remains corseted by its broader cultural environment, the ideological confines it bedevils and that, consciously or in spite of itself, it sometimes also consolidates. The final and perhaps most telling parallel between gay culture and collection is this divided loyalty. For gay culture, this conflict manifests as a commitment to democratic values on the one hand (inclusion of stigmatized groups and values) and an affection for hierarchical tastes on the other (such as glamour, wealth, or aesthetic perfection). In *Curios* the “*equipoise*” Halperin traces in gay cultural artifacts between “aristocratic and egalitarian attitudes” may not be so “delicate,” or even desirable or stable. For Pugh and Tress it can be both unsettling and terrifying, productive of anxiety as well as secretly thrilling. (28)

<27> The valuable insight Halperin offers to readers of *Curios* is this: camp, like collection and queerness, can be culturally and erotically subversive, yet it remains fundamentally ambivalent. It remains ambivalent not simply because Orientalist and heteronormative hegemonies are difficult to sabotage, but because a *collector’s* campiness always remains to some extent in service of normativity, of the mercenary, imperial, and reactionary associations with which antiques and acquisition are imbued. Despite any disruptive surface effects Pugh

and Tress's irreverence may create, they still labor toward the *preservation* of history, of objets that it takes wealth to possess and that, even if valued as objects with no practical use, have very definite, reactionary connotations. As we've seen in "The Cabinet," camp may mock the seriousness prescribed to normative social roles and values. As we'll see in the next section, it may flaunt its nonnormative eroticism or even seek to cloak its nonnormativity in the shelter of Orientalism and heteronormativity. But, ultimately, camp cannot unyoke its practitioners from the regimenting systems it mocks and resists.

### **"Queer history" for the "plain bachelor"**

<28> "The Ikon" confronts—and in some ways appears to defuse—the threat of the Oriental along a different but still unsettling axis. Here the Other is not Indian but Russian and Jewish—neither of which might seem particularly Oriental in the sense of being associated with British imperial efforts. Both are nonetheless foreign and unsettling enough to a Victorian sense of authentic national identity to fall under the capacious category of the Oriental. Although "The Ikon" betrays a lingering anxiety over unassimilable, stubborn traces of otherness and queerness present in foreigners as well as British subjects themselves, the tale appears ultimately to quash the menace posed by foreign, filthy, and anarchic Others.

<29> Given Orientalism's characteristic equation of foreignness, inscrutability, and inferiority, the story's racist overtones, while unpalatable, come as no surprise. "The Ikon" is littered with anti-Semitic slurs and stereotypes. Tress discovers the ikon in "a dirty little shop in a dirty little Houndsditch street"—the latter forming part of the Whitechapel district made infamous by Jack the Ripper (73). Levi, the Russian-Jewish shopkeeper who sells Tress the ikon even though it belongs to his wife, is stereotypically materialistic.<sup>(29)</sup> Levi's brother-in-law, who tries to dissuade Levi from selling the ikon, is described as a "stunted," "nasty little Jew boy" (76, 88).<sup>(30)</sup> Like homophobic discourse, anti-Semitism combats the anxiety that Others may pass as normal (in this case, as Christian Anglo-Saxons) by snidely overdetermining the legibility of subaltern traits.<sup>(31)</sup> As with many such stereotypes, the racial Other is purported to be comparatively intemperate, less dignified, and less civilized. The deportment of Levi's wife (her "paroxysm of sobs," "feverish volubility," "hysteric cries," and "flood of weeping") stands in "striking contrast to the habitudes of our phlegmatic English constitution" (85-86). Such stereotypes do more than epitomize the rife anti-Semitism of Victorian England; they illustrate the broader eugenic fantasy that subtends Orientalism as a tool of domestic and colonial management. If the Other is no longer inscrutable, it can neither escape detection nor evade subjection.

<30> It's worth noting that the tale's ethnic slurs, while patently anti-Semitic, serve as a convenient lightning rod for a more general xenophobia.<sup>(32)</sup> Levi, his wife, and her brother are marked as foreign not just ethnically but also nationally. As distinct from their Jewishness, their

Russianness makes them as unintelligible and suspicious as it does legible. Levi and his brother-in-law argue over selling the objet in a tongue that Tress identifies as neither Russian nor Yiddish (the most likely candidates) but simply “a flood of gibberish” (74). Blocked and unintelligible communication highlights Orientalism’s simultaneous confidence in and apprehensiveness about its own epistemological and aesthetic prowess. Tress criticizes his purchase as “rubbish,” a “fetich” that might be “curious . . . from an artistic point of view, and in some of Russia’s most revered places” (read: solely as an example of primitivist religious art) but that an urbane Western eye recognizes as second-rate (77). Not only has the ikon’s questionable value been further diminished by poor care (“obscured by dirt and grime”), but its crude aesthetics also brand it as irretrievably foreign and inferior: “The Russians have a way of *daubing* their Ikons, even those which make some *pretence to art*, with paste and tinsel in a fashion which strikes the outsider as amazing” (77; emphasis added). Non-Western paintings may aspire to the status of canonical, Western art, but to the Orientalist they are nothing more than “daub[s],” *crafts*—kitsch. (A similar failed authenticity, to normative Victorian eyes, might seem implicit regarding Christianity’s more exotic sects, such as the Russian Orthodox Church.)

<31> Despite its imputed lack of aesthetic merit, Tress decides to settle whether it might be made more valuable by his sophisticated ministrations. Deciding that this is a “case for restoring,” he applies a gentle chemical “medium” to it, producing “smoke” and a “disagreeably pungent odour,” and, to his surprise, burning his finger as if by “corrosive acid” (78). Worried that he may have been bilked, he begins to doubt his expertise as both collector and rationalist: “In the ordinary sense, the thing was not a painting at all; unless I was to suppose that it was, in very truth, a ‘holy’ picture, and that I was being punished for my sacrilegious handling” (78). When Tress describes the ikon’s “presence” as “uncomfortably conspicuous,” he’s observing more than the smell it emits during cleaning (79). He’s fleetingly conceding the power of the Other—the supernatural, the foreign, the queer—to be possibly more than speculative, talismanic, or abortive.

<32> The ensuing tussle between the collector’s mastery and the objet’s recalcitrance turns on the question of the potency or weakness of the former’s hermeneutic prowess. Once the smoke clears, Tress sees that the ikon’s image has been eroded, revealing a “bare panel” that he suspects conceals something. Determined to “peer into [a] mystery” “well worth my while to solve” (epistemologically as well as monetarily), he tries to open the apparently seamless frame (80, 84). Opting for brute force as the only solution, Tress is reaching for a chisel when Levi’s wife breaks into the house and begs him to return the artifact. Her refusal to reveal a reason only heightens Tress’s belief that the ikon must mean *something*: “A conviction came to me—unreasonably enough—that there was some strange story associated with the thing, the key to which I would . . . unriddle” (81). Even though he eventually manages to open the ikon, the significance of its contents eludes him as “queer” and unintelligible (93). Before looking at

the artifact's ultimate secret, we want to pause over two significant hermeneutic moments: Tress's anxious theory about what the ikon means or contains *before* he gets it open, and his cold yet queasy reaction to its revealed significance.

<33> The thrill of imminent possession unexpectedly veers into political paranoia. Seeking to rationalize what he hears as “voices—persons whispering”—and to explain why the wife's brother has followed him home to “spy on me”—Tress conjectures that the ikon contains “bank-notes” or “documents of vital consequence” (90). The threat morphs from religious or ethnic otherness to political radicalism as he feels a “thrill in the region of the spinal cord” in the face of certain danger to national as well as personal well-being: “‘Suppose that the secret was political?’ . . . Good heavens, suppose that it was! I thought of the stories . . . of the ‘underground railway’ which exists between England and Russia; of the ‘Nihilist centres’ . . . suspected . . . in our midst; of the . . . convey[ance of] criminating matter to and from their co-conspirators at home” (88). Tress's fear of the “Nihilistic wickedness” conjures the foreign not as a comfortably external object of magisterial scrutiny but as an alarming fifth column (89). Orientalism's unsurprising overlap with politically reactionary discourse generates rhetoric as protective as it is vague and overwrought. The amorphous threat imagined by Tress—does “criminating matter” refer to plans for anarchist espionage or terrorism, stolen national secrets, or information for blackmailing British citizens?—justifies the widest subjugating gaze of normative institutions and ideologies.

<34> Just as supernaturalism is undercut by Radcliffian deflation elsewhere in *Curios*, perturbing political radicalism is displaced by the revelation that the ikon is merely a personal memento. Yet the bait-and-switch leaves some doubt as to whether the tale's presentation of religious, political, and cultural Others as unassimilable and unintelligible can be dismissed as mere projection. This isn't to say that those pejorative assessments have any merit, but rather that such misperceptions are vital to Orientalism and heteronormativity's muscular hegemonies, their ability to control not just imperial subalterns and abject Others but also their ostensibly normative administrators.

<35> In *Curios* as well as previous works, Marsh's work demonstrates how Orientalism, rather than being cowed by inscrutability, thrives on it, how nonnormative forces like the queer and the Oriental may be co-opted, made to facilitate the repressive cultural and ideological work they elsewhere resist.<sup>(33)</sup> In failing to correctly read the ikon, Tress confronts the extent to which an object of study's thingness problematizes the Orientalist's prerogative to be the one doing the collecting and studying. In one sense, what Tress finds inside the objet could not be more conventional. Its secret is a heteronormative one: articles of baby clothing and a picture of an infant, sentimental mementos of a dead, illegitimate child fathered by another man before the woman's marriage to Levi. Her desperation to retrieve the objet is neither political

nor religious but personal: the shame of a “secret hidden even from [the] husband” who had believed her a virgin (85). The ikon is a shrine not to any deity or political principle but to the sacralized heterosexual family, to motherhood as religion.(34)

<36> More interesting than the ikon’s secret is Tress’s reaction to it. He relinquishes the objet because, after hearing “further details of [the woman’s] queer history,” he finds its worth unfathomable: “It is extraordinary in what strange fashions some women who have been mothers do cherish the memory of a little child—beyond a plain bachelor’s understanding” (93). More than showing Tress to be out of step with the nineteenth-century sentimental cult surrounding dead children, this moment reveals his reaction to maternal and family bonds to be not so much apathy as incomprehension. The emotive appeal of her “queer history” leaves this “plain bachelor” cold. The use of the word “queer” here seems odd and crucial enough to warrant further analysis. Coupled with Tress’s indifference, “queer” suggests an unexpected parallel between “nihilists” and collectors. Both pursue their ends deviously, even ruthlessly. But what’s striking is how the story’s unexpected conflation of ostensibly dichotomous elements (self and Other, foreign and native) creates an embarrassing resemblance between spies, who believe in nothing but a brutish philosophical cause, and aesthetes, who are enamored of artifacts but dead to family feeling. Despite the fact that Tress labels the woman’s backstory “queer,” “The Ikon” suggests that collection may not always make one a master of the outré or Oriental but may, sometimes, make one queer oneself.

<37> Calling the woman’s story “queer” aligns queerness with other nonnormative elements typically targeted by the epistemological and governmental gaze of Orientalism and imperialism, such as the nonwhite, the female, and the foreign. And yet what could seem queerer, in the sense of odd and/or homosexual, than two bachelor antique collectors?(35) It certainly seems odd for Tress—whose unmarried status and aesthetic raptures could be read as signaling nonnormative masculinity and/or sexuality, as marking a man as *subject to being read* as queer—to apply the word “queer” to someone else, particularly a heterosexual. Perhaps this moment can be clarified by suggesting that it turns on a reversal, a projection of queerness onto the Other when one’s own actual or potential queerness threatens to come into view. When Tress applies “queer” to a figure whose heteronormativity has just been doubly vouched for (as mother and wife), the word “queer” either marks queerness’s enlistment in the service of hegemony or constitutes camouflage maneuver—which comes to the same thing. Throwing out “queer” in a pointed encounter with not just foreignness but heteronormativity might be an attempt to dodge that label at a moment when the speaker himself is most open to such a charge. It’s as if, failing to chime with the apparent, histrionic consensus on children and families’ unrivaled value, the bachelor senses just how queer he himself is (or is *liable* to seem) and how seeming so includes him in the list of targets for hegemonic regimentation and punishment. This would help explain the “bilious attack” that

keeps Tress in bed the next day (93). Is it precipitated simply by feeling “guilty of some sort of sacrilege in breaking into so strange a shrine” (91)? Perhaps—but not because the shrine is a religious one. Tress inadvertently intrudes upon the shrine of normativity (which includes gender and sexual normativity) and finds himself in the minority, capable of *looking* distinctly nonheteronormative: “I behaved like an old fool . . . . One’s follies are sure to find one out somewhere, somehow” (93). Is he embarrassed because “old fool” is code for “old queen”? What folly is he referring to? Surely it’s more than letting the woman and her brother go—or, as Tress self-righteously puts it, “compound[ing] a felony, or something very like one” (93). Perhaps the folly is to think oneself exempt from becoming an object of study, especially if one’s tastes, antiquarian or otherwise, might be viewed as queer. Perhaps Tress feels sickly and foolish because, despite a lifetime of collecting antiques and Oriental artifacts, an unexpected confrontation with marriage and children has finally given him away (or seemed to), making him vulnerable to the lens of normative scrutiny after having wielding it so long himself. Likewise, Tress’s use of the word “felony” seems more exaggerated and anxious than the situation merits. It’s as if the crime he’s “compounded” (in the sense of exacerbating or magnifying) is not simply the woman’s act of housebreaking but also the queer disposition, the lack of interest in the normative, that has been imputed by this showdown with heteronormativity, making “plain” just how “queer” this “bachelor” might be.(36)

<38> In making final sense of “The Ikon,” as well as *Curios*, Halperin’s study of gay cultural appropriation again serves as a useful interpretive lens. Like camp appropriation and recoding, the queer business of collecting sometimes promises, or appears to promise, to disarm the hegemonic force of Orientalism and interlinked ideologies such as heteronormativity. But it’s not always reliable in doing so. Indeed, it may sometimes abet the hierarchical structures it has previously flustered, calcifying the dichotomies only recently warped by the energies unleashed by collecting and its objects and adjuncts (such as queerness and unruly Others). The concluding violence of both “The Pipe” and “The Ikon”—moments where objets are destroyed by a collector—might be Marsh’s way of grappling with, if not of resolving, this paradox. As Dennis Denisoff remarks, it was a staple of fin de siècle Decadent sensibility that “an aesthete’s greatest sin is the destruction of art” (40).(37) At the end of “The Pipe,” Tress kills the lizard previously regarded as inanimate. “The Ikon” climaxes with Tress chiseling the eponymous artifact apart to divulge its riches or secrets. Repeated violence, especially against the very objets Tress and Pugh expend so much energy finding and stealing, suggests a particular fantasy. The fantasy is that—either by destroying artifacts possessed with cultural and epistemological unruliness, or by finding them to be unthreatening hoaxes—the disruptive nonnormativity of the Other, perhaps also of oneself, can be ideologically classified, permanently mastered and shelved. But Marsh’s tales work, ultimately, to defeat that fantasy. Collection, like camp—perhaps also like the twinned Pugh and Tress—seems to be of two minds: a loyalty divided between what Halperin calls “aristocratic [as well as] democratic

impulses,” to hegemony as well as subversion. On the one hand, the camp energies of collection are subversive of appropriation: allowing queer objets and collectors alike to dodge Orientalism’s grasp, to appropriate and repurpose the queer and abject for ends that are not always fully normative. On the other hand, camp’s operation in *Curios* seems to leave hegemony’s undergirding binaries and their impulsions sturdily in place. The ikon’s destruction reunites a mother with mementos of her dead infant and affirms heteronormativity’s most sacred fetish.<sup>(38)</sup> The collector, by contrast, is left empty-handed, with nothing to show for his efforts and potentially—given his exposed difference, his illness, his fear of being branded a felon—with everything to lose

### Endnotes

(1)See Said, 3-8, 12, 21, 95, 121-123, 205-206, 221-222, 274.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)Said’s preliminary definition of Orientalism, just preceding the quoted passage, suggests not only a movement beyond the geography bounds of previous definitions of the Orient but also Orientalism’s broader epistemological and ideological ambitions: “To speak of Orientalism . . . is to speak mainly, *although not exclusively*, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant . . . the spice trade, colonial armies and . . . administrators, a formidable scholarly corpus, innumerable Oriental ‘experts’ and ‘hands’ . . . a complex array of ‘Oriental’ ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use—the list can be extended more or less indefinitely” (4; emphasis added).<sup>(^)</sup>

(3)In addition to the fact that Burton’s “Sotadic Zone” encompassed the Levant in its wide geographical net, we would suggest that Jewishness’s historically ambivalent positioning in British culture—as both assimilated and yet still markedly “other”—qualifies it for the commodious ideological category that is “the Oriental.” For example, Tress finally finds the object’s possible *political* associations with nihilism as threatening as its Russianness. It’s also worth clarifying that, while part of what renders the story’s Russian characters foreign for Tress is their Jewishness, our intent is hardly to collapse Orientalism with anti-Semitism. If anything, the Russianness and political otherness of the ikon is *equally* as anxiogenic for Tress as its (associated) Jewishness. The tale’s anti-Semitism is a good subject for further study, in light of the history of British anti-Semitism as well as Marsh’s own German-Jewish ancestry.<sup>(^)</sup>

(4)A shared awareness of the dynamic and uneven tensions between normativity and nonnormativity—and the latter’s enduring susceptibility to the former—makes queer theory

and postcolonialism natural partners for analysis when considering *Curios*. For the aspects most relevant to our purposes, see Halperin, chapters 8, 9, and 10.[\(▲\)](#)

(5)See Pietz's "The Problem of the Fetish, I," "The Problem of the Fetish, II," and "The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa," as well as Patricia Speyer. Barbara Benedict's overview of English cultural perspectives on collecting in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries help contextualize Marsh's positioning of collecting as a criminal tendency: "curious men's . . . pursuit of monstrosities or curiosities . . . made them monsters or curiosities themselves . . . . Satires discipline[d] curiosity, turning it into the popular condemnation of elite fraud [which] idiosyncratically value[s] objects . . . or people" (50-51). Other cultural histories of collecting relevant to our analysis—and indicative of the wide cultural reach of imperialist collecting as well as the interdisciplinary spectrum of collection studies—include Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello; John Elsner and Roger Cardinal; Michael Hatt; Victoria Mills; Werner Muensterberger; Judith Pascoe; Susan M. Pearce; Susan M. Pearce, Rosemary Flanders, Mark Hall, and Fiona Morton; and Michael Robinson.[\(▲\)](#)

(6)See Nunokawa, *The Afterlife of Property*, 15-16, 40-42, 61-76.[\(▲\)](#)

(7)See Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 10-11.[\(▲\)](#)

(8)See Jasbir Puar; and Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan.[\(▲\)](#)

(9)For occurrences of the word "curious," see Marsh, 8, 18, 27, 77, 99, 126; for "curio," see 13, 50, 116, 130, 134; and for "curiosity/ies," see 95, 116, 117.[\(▲\)](#)

(10)Sir Richard Burton's hypothesis regarding the so-called "Sotadic Zone" provides a classic Victorian example of conflating putatively nonnormative sexualities with nonnative/Orientalist Others. In an appendix to his 1885 translation of *The Arabian Nights*, Burton posited that "the Vice" of male homosexuality was endemic to specific geographical areas and their corresponding ethnicities, almost entirely non-British and nonwhite (206-207). As defined by Burton, the Sotadic Zone spanned from the Mediterranean coasts of Europe and Europe (including Egypt) across Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Afghanistan, China, Japan, the South Seas Islands, and North and South America—all areas associated with British or European colonialism. As a means of ideologically containing and projecting homosexuality onto a subjugated, uncivilized non-Western Other, the Sotadic Zone is as overdetermined as it is fragile. Burton hypothesized, on the one hand, that homosexual intercourse is native to specific, non-Western/nonwhite races and locales, that it was viscerally disgusting to white British citizens, and that British bodies are constitutionally incapable of having gay sex. At the same time, however, he worries that homosexual intercourse *is* capable of being engaged in by British citizens—if, the implicit logic goes, they are seduced by travel within the Sotadic Zone or perverted by the invasion of a sacrosanct, fundamentally heterosexual Britain by non-Western

bodies and/or habits. For a discussion of the shadow cast by the Sotadic Zone on Victorian literature, see Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 182-198.(^)

(11)As in so much Orientalist discourse, “connoisseur[ship]” is ideologically aligned with knowledge, whereas in reality, as Said and Sedgwick respectively argue in regard to postcolonial and queer theory, it’s ignorance—most often a pretended, structured ignorance—rather than knowledge that constitutes and wields hegemony’s power (Marsh 13). For the relevant passages in *Epistemology*, see Sedgwick, 3-8; in Said, see note 1 above.(^)

(12)Thing theory considers the ways in which an entity loses its use value and becomes a thing, undermining the subject/object polarity operating, within the context our discussion, between the collector (or the collector’s mind) and his objets. Thing theory usually confines itself to examining the role of Marx’s theory of commodification, which ties use value to labor and thingness to the alienation of value from the means of production. However, Bill Brown and Arjun Appadurai, among others, trouble these notions of value within a consumer/producer model by locating objets outside the marketplace and inside contexts of private collection and museal display.(^)

(13)“The Puzzle,” another *Curios* tale, summons the apparently ubiquitous nineteenth-century specter of masturbation. Tress’s statement that “[i]t would be too much of a joke if Pugh’s precious puzzle exploded in my hand” echoes contemporary anti-masturbation rhetoric circulating around orgasm and self-abuse: not only the fear of compulsion but of the compulsion, the terror and/or the thrill, of not being able to stop. Regarding Victorian-era anti-onanism, see Jean Stengers and Anne Van Neck, 99.(^)

(14)This school of camp theory (which tends toward narrow formalism and views camp as problematically unprogressive or apolitical) has its origins in Sontag, 275-292. Noteworthy discussions that more or less hold to this line of thinking include those by Andrew Ross, Moe Meyer, Richard Dyer, and Richard Dyer and Derek Cohen. Although Dyer’s emphasis on camp’s “equivocality” might seem to move him closer to Babuscio, Bergman and Halperin, his worry that camp “can trap us if we are not careful in the endless enjoyment of pursuit at any price” evinces an affinity with Sontag and company. Dyer and Cohen’s admission of gay culture’s ability to limn “the constructedness of gender identities, role play and sexual behavior” is undercut by the assertion that “[w]hatever [gay culture’s] limitations, we have to work with it in order to move beyond it” (Dyer 61; Dyer and Cohen 22). The Sontag school also views camp as an inhering in the object (thus, the frequent worry about camp’s superficiality). By contrast, the broader view of camp one finds in Babuscio, Bergman, and Halperin considers it to be constituted by the *relation* between viewer and object—a perspective that retains a healthy awareness of both progressive as well as the reactionary tendencies in gay culture.(^)

(15)See Babuscio, 19-29. It's important to note, along with Babuscio, Bergman, and Halperin, that camp at once honors *and* mocks queer pain, marginalization and claims for social respect. To critique *only* heterosexual claims to social respectability and clout would be untrue to the gay cultural insight that *all* roles and identities are performances, not essences; such a limited critique would involve a blindness to the fact that gay (sub)culture and its participants cannot fully escape their formative straight acculturation.(^)

(16)OED.(^)

(17)In his investigation of the connection between curiosity and psychosexual fetish, Michael Robinson considers the camp implications of the term “knack” (or “knick-knack”), which—for the “seventeenth-century *virtuoso*, an Italianate and effeminate collector-figure, said to keep ‘knacks’”—carries with it connotations of both curios and male genitalia (689). The act of collecting itself may be queer, whether the tricks are inanimate objects or sexual conquests.(^)

(18)Werner Muensterberger examines the psychological impulses that inform collecting and how the act of collecting resolves the tension between the id and the ego, highlighting “the spectacle many collectors make of themselves, their emotional involvement in the pursuit of their objects, their excitement or distress in losing them, their at times peculiar attitudes or behavior” (3). Although Muensterberger is describing transatlantic collecting throughout the centuries, his account could also be read as pertaining to Pugh and Tress.(^)

(19)In Wilde's essay, Vivien (the Decadent counterpoint to the Romantic Cyril) advocates for the superiority of Art and artifice over Nature: “My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature's lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition” (3).(^)

(20)OED.(^)

(21)As Wilde puts it, “After all, what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence. If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might . . . as well speak the truth”—truth being, for the Decadent Wilde, ethically inferior and ineptly crafted (6).(^)

(22)See Muensterberger, 3.(^)

(23)For the functions of camp in its relation gay femininity, see Halperin, 317-338.(^)

(24)See Karl Beckson, 186-192.(^)

(25)Pugh styles himself a “bric-a-brac hunter” in “Lady Wishaw's Hand,” another tale in *Curios*, partly in order to disown an even more unsavory label: being known as a “curator of

an anatomical museum” (117). While defended by some as venues of public health education, anatomical museums were also viewed as pornographic for their display of embalmed human genitalia. See Elizabeth Stephens.[\(△\)](#)

(26) Presumably, the reference is to *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), an Elizabethan anthology of poems attributed entirely to Shakespeare by the publisher. The fact that only five out of the collection’s twenty poems are agreed to be authentic Shakespearean works lends the allusion by Tress added significance in a tale predicated on theft, lying, and forgery. Ironically, “The Cabinet” is the one tale in *Curios* where the artifact proves genuine or fails to involve some element of trickery in manufacture or design.[\(△\)](#)

(27) Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 20-21, 26.[\(△\)](#)

(28) “Some of the most distinctive and pervasive features of gay male culture,” insists Halperin, results from a “simultaneous identification with the values and perspectives of both the privileged and the abject. . . . Gay male culture typically operates in two social registers at once, adopting the viewpoint of the upper and lower strata of society, of the noble and the ignoble, and relying on the irony fundamental to camp to hold aristocratic and egalitarian attitudes together in a delicate, dynamic equipoise” (182-183). The only contrast to gay cultural work is that Pugh and Tress’s split allegiance may be perceived—by themselves or by other agents of cultural normativity—as a shortcoming rather than a strength.[\(△\)](#)

(29) Levi’s wife, also Jewish, says that “for money, he would sell anything; his wife, his child—himself!” (83).[\(△\)](#)

(30) Ethnic slurs intrude even on the chapter titles, which include “The Jew Boy Pursues” and “The Jew Boy Haunts.”[\(△\)](#)

(31) Tress describes Levi’s wife as “obviously a Jewess, with . . . the big, velvety black eyes, which are a hall-mark of the race.” Also typical is the worry that race’s legibility might be disguised: apart from her eyes, the woman’s “features were as daintily fashioned as any Christian’s” (82).[\(△\)](#)

(32) It’s certainly possible to interpret the anti-Semitic stereotypes in “The Ikon” as validating speculation that Richard Marsh changed his name from Richard Heldmann in order to hide his father’s German-Jewish ancestry and thereby either evade cultural bias or obey an internalized anti-Semitism (see Baker ix). For Julian Wolfreys, by contrast, a lack of evidence of anti-Semitism in Marsh’s life as well as “his marriage as Heldman in the Church of England” hardly lends credence” to such a claim (11). Minna Vuohelainen offers a different and at least plausible explanation in her introduction to the Valancourt edition of Marsh’s novel *The Beetle* (1897). Based on contemporary news accounts about a con man also named Richard

Heldmann, Vuohelainen suggests that Marsh reinvented himself to escape his own criminal past—namely, having served eighteen months in jail for check fraud.(^)

(33)See W. C. Harris and Dawn Vernooy, 352, 366, 369-371, 378-380.(^)

(34)When frantically demanding “Have you seen?” Levi’s wife seems worried that Tress has uncovered her shameful secret; when, in the next breath, she declares “[t]here is nothing to see,” she’s obviously trying to convince him the ikon is an unremarkable memento of her homeland (85). Her frantic, conflicting words have a deeper subtext. The depth of her attachment to a Russian Orthodox Christian ikon is puzzling not simply because she’s Jewish, but because, as Tress himself finds out, there’s simultaneously something *and* nothing there to see here (depending on one’s perspective: collector or objet, native or foreign, heteronormative or queer). In terms of the ambivalent character of the object as discussed in “The Pipe,” the ikon turns out to be at once a hoax *and* authentic: while it’s certainly not a genuine ikon of Russian Orthodox art, *it is* authentic, if in a sentimental, heteronormative way the collector either is incapable of recognizing or is simply unmoved by.(^)

(35)Given that the word’s homosexual connotations may have yet been in their infancy at the turn of the century, some might balk at reading “queer” to mean “homosexual” as unduly speculative. But its speculative nature is much to the point. As Sedgwick notes in *Epistemology of the Closet*, it’s the “blackmailability of Western maleness”—the merest possibility that any man *could* be read as queer, an anxiogenic charge to which Western maleness has proven particularly vulnerable (20). Also relevant is Sedgwick’s nuanced reading of Marcher’s “secret,” in Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle,” as less a definitive homosexuality than its terrifying *possibility*: “the outer secret, the secret of having a secret, functions, in Marcher’s life, precisely as *the closet*. It is not a closet in which there is a homosexual man. Instead, it is the closet of, simply, the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining *a* homosexual secret. . . . Whatever the content of the inner secret . . . it is one whose protection requires, for him, a playacting of heterosexuality that is conscious of being only window dressing” (205-206). Marcher’s inner secret, like Pugh and Tress’s, cannot be finally determined as gay, but neither can it be determined as straight. It’s that indeterminacy—and the accompanying worry that one might be merely *subject* to the pejorative charge of homosexuality—that discomfits these men so.(^)

(36)If in “The Cabinet” Pugh frets about potential exposure as a criminal (of one sort or another), here Tress confronts a similar anxiety: the vertiginous uncertainty, described above by Sedgwick, about exactly “who is in control of information about [one’s] sexual identity.” The woman’s “queer” history has illuminated, much to Tress’s chagrin, the outlines of his own “glass closet,” a space whose “potential for exploitiveness,” for the “asymmetrical” exertion of knowledge, literally makes him ill (79, 80).(^)

(37) Denisoff is writing specifically about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and the novel that inspired it, Joris-Karl Huysmans's *A Rebours* (1884). Both novels end with the destruction of a work of art, as when Wilde's protagonist slashes the portrait that, supernaturally, has aged *for* him and kept him as ageless and frozen as the figures on Keats's Grecian urn. (^)

(38) The concluding fate of the heterosexual fetish in "The Ikon" seems to offer a not entirely dissimilar outcome to that observed by Jeff Nunokawa in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. That text's strategy of the "double-life," Nunokawa argues, is a "management style" in which the performance of "dissident" "desire works not to subvert heterosexual normativity, but rather to cooperate with it" (*Tame Passions of Wilde*, 42, 44, 45). One might wonder, then, whether moments of resistance to hegemony by Marsh's camp collectors are entirely sincere or wholehearted, whether camp's disdain for heteronormativity's trappings—given "The Ikon"'s triumphant reunion of mother, dead child-fetish, and the sacralized family—has been merely for show, and thus whether dissident nonnormativity has been knowingly complicit in its own defeat. (^)

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