Is There a Doctor in the House? Rudyard Kipling’s Private Message to Arthur Conan Doyle in “The House Surgeon”

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1 When describing Rudyard Kipling’s earliest known story, “My First Adventure,” published in a hand-written home magazine by Kipling’s Burne-Jones cousins when Kipling was barely in his teens, Harry Ricketts claims that the tale contains some of the characteristics of Kipling’s mature work, including “the preoccupation with abnormal mental states; the delight in farce; [and] the use of cryptic personal references ...” (37). The three characteristics listed above could easily be a description of “The House Surgeon”; the third feature in particular rewards close examination. In his 1999 biography of Kipling, Ricketts returns again and again to the notion that Kipling used private codes in his letters and stories—that he liked to play “literary games” and pepper private jokes throughout his writing (95). Evidence from “The House Surgeon” and the lives of both Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle suggests that the story is in many ways intended for an audience of one: the man who created Sherlock Holmes.

2 Kipling’s stories are often extremely complex. As J. M. S. Tompkins says about Kipling, “Pattern and intricacy of all kinds delighted him, and he loved to play with his tools and his material” (258). Kipling consciously layered different meanings into his texts: writing about the composition of Rewards and Fairies in his autobiography, he says, “I worked the material in three or four overlaid tints and textures, which might or might not reveal themselves according to the shifting light of sex, youth, and experience” (Something of Myself 205). Tompkins compares such stories to icebergs and says they often contain a “hidden narrative” (112). “There are always sufficient directions,” says Tompkins, “but they do not spring to the eye; they must be looked and listened for” (112-13).

3 Such hidden narratives reflect Kipling’s love of the specialized knowledge of other crafts and the jargon associated with it as well as his delight in alluding to it in his work, often
indirectly. His hints and suggestions create what Lionel Trilling calls his “gnomic quality” (119). Kipling’s fiction and poetry allude to the secrets of exclusive groups such as Freemasons, scientists, and engineers, and that allusiveness is part of the attraction to his work: “Kipling’s superior cryptic tone . . . suggested first that the secret was being kept not only from oneself but from everyone else and then it suggested that the secret was not so much being kept as revealed, if one but guessed hard enough” (Trilling 120). Hidden narratives and private messages appealed strongly to a writer who loved secrets.

Part of the hidden narrative in “The House Surgeon” involves the private codes Ricketts mentions as a feature of Kipling’s writing. Although ostensibly a ghost story, this tale of a psychic haunting can also be read as a humorous tale, a story of healing, and a private communication to a friend. Only Arthur Conan Doyle could pick up the personal references in the story, which are so carefully hidden as to require the skills of Sherlock Holmes to decipher. I do not claim to be as astute as Conan Doyle’s famous detective, but a modern abundance of biographical materials enables any would-be detective to unravel the clues.

When “The House Surgeon” was first published in Harper’s Magazine in September and October of 1909, Kipling and Conan Doyle had been friends for fifteen years. Kipling, by all accounts, was selective about his friendships: he was an intensely private man who valued loyalty, tradition, and country. Conan Doyle, on the other hand, was a hearty, gregarious extravert, but he shared Kipling’s values. In this case, opposites attracted. They first met in Vermont in November of 1894 when Conan Doyle and his brother interrupted their American tour to spend two days at the Kiplings’ American home. Their friendship continued through correspondence, and the following year Conan Doyle sent Kipling a pair of Norwegian skis—the first pair of skis in Vermont, according to Charles Carrington, one of Kipling’s biographers (230). When Kipling moved back to England, visits were more frequent, and eventually the two men became distant neighbors in Sussex. For the next thirty-five years, they maintained a regular correspondence and read each other’s works as they were published.

Kipling and Conan Doyle had much in common, from artistic families to a total lack of musical ability. Both men were Freemasons and celebrated authors. They shared an admiration for Robert Louis Stevenson and for American authors as well as a passion for new technology, particularly motorcars, which were new to the English countryside at the turn of the century. They had a common literary agent and many of the same literary friends as well as strong interests in photography and the paranormal. At the time “The House Surgeon” was written, Conan Doyle had not yet embraced spiritualism as a religion. He and Kipling shared an intellectual curiosity about paranormal activity, but Kipling remained leery of spiritualism his entire life and was not sympathetic to Conan Doyle’s later views on the subject. However, their views had not yet diverged in the early 1900s.

Kipling and Doyle also shared many of their political views: unlike most writers of their era, both men were conservatives and both volunteered for service during the Boer War, Kipling as a journalist and Conan Doyle as doctor. In fact, Conan Doyle arrived for duty in Bloemfontein the day Kipling left the town. After observing the lack of military training among the British soldiers in South Africa, both men spoke out in favor of military reform at home and started local rifle clubs when they returned to England.

Another shared interest was the practice of medicine. Conan Doyle, of course, was a physician before he became a writer. Kipling’s interest was that of an intelligent observer
who was fascinated by all forms of science and technology. Kipling’s short stories often feature doctors, scientists, and engineers, along with new technological gadgets like the wireless and the automobile. He stayed current with new developments in medicine, too. Setu K. Vora and Robert W. Lyons claim that one Kipling story, “Love-o’-Women,” is “one of the earliest examples of literary description of a newly understood medical disorder [a disease that is a side effect of syphilis] and a diagnostic test associated with it” (1162).

Because Kipling kept his feelings private and seldom criticized his fellow writers, we cannot know his true opinion of Doyle’s works. He wrote to Doyle in 1894 that he had read one of the latter’s stories “at one fascinated sitting” (qtd. in Miller 173). Conan Doyle’s historical novel Sir Nigel came out in book form at the end of 1906, and Kipling wrote to Conan Doyle, “I spent all yesterday evening reading Sir Nigel at one gulp. From cover to cover I read it, and I put it down still hungry for more” (qtd. in Carr 175). Neither of these comments remarks on the quality of Conan Doyle’s works. However, Harry Ricketts claims that Kipling was a fan of Conan Doyle’s writing (209). Biographers of both men confirm that they were friends.

A few scholars have taken an ambiguous, second-hand comment in H. Rider Haggard’s diary as evidence that Kipling did not like Doyle. The diary entry recounts a visit Haggard made to Kipling’s home in 1911:

He [Kipling] told me that I was the only literary man with whom he cared to associate at all. He knew no others, though Conan Doyle, who lives somewhere near, sometimes came to call, but he “got nothing from him.” (Cohen 71-72)

No Kipling scholar could give credence to the notion that Kipling knew no other literary men: he had been an entrenched member of the Savile Club, a famous literary hangout, for fourteen years. This obvious inaccuracy throws Haggard’s entire comment into question. Even if Kipling did say something about getting nothing from Conan Doyle, his remark could easily refer to the latter’s literary works since Kipling’s known comments on them were so carefully worded that they suggest a desire to avoid giving offense. Nevertheless, one second-hand comment cannot void years of mutual correspondence and personal visits between Kipling and Conan Doyle. Similarly, the suggestion that a 1927 Kipling story, “Fairy Kist,” criticizes Conan Doyle as a writer has no bearing on their earlier friendship. One can like and appreciate the man without admiring his writing.

Conan Doyle’s opinion of Kipling’s works is more readily determined. Conan Doyle was never reticent about expressing his opinions in writing. In letters to his mother, he wrote admiringly of Kipling the man, and his many biographers record numerous incidents in which he praised Kipling’s work. John Dickson Carr reports that Conan Doyle told Robert Barr, the associate editor of The Idler, that Kipling was a great short story writer (78). Daniel Stashower claims that Conan Doyle studied Kipling’s poetry carefully and used it as a model for his own (209). In Through the Magic Door, Conan Doyle praises Kipling’s short stories: “There is a dash, an exuberance, a full-blooded confident mastery which carries everything before it. Yes, no team of immortals would be complete which did not contain at least two representatives of Kipling” (“Kipling’s Best Story” 303).

Conan Doyle seems to have considered Kipling not only a great writer but also an admirable man of honor, and honor was the highest virtue to Conan Doyle. He considered himself second only to Kipling in his ability to stir up patriotism among young men. When his mother was pressing him to accept a knighthood, Conan Doyle measured his response by Kipling: “Surely you don’t really mean that I should take a knighthood—the
badge of the provincial mayor ... Fancy Rhodes or Chamberlain or Kipling doing such a thing!” (Lellenberg, Stashower, and Foley 494).

14 The events that I suggest inspired Kipling to write “The House Surgeon” were the death of Conan Doyle’s first wife, Louise, in July of 1906 and Conan Doyle’s long depression afterwards. Although the story was first published in 1909, obviously it had to have been written earlier. Most biographers, and Conan Doyle himself, state that the author sank into a depression after Louise died. As a doctor, he felt guilty that he had not been able to do more to relieve her suffering, and as a husband, he felt guilty that he had fallen in love with another woman. According to Martin Booth, “With her passing, Conan Doyle’s guilt increased. He started to sleep badly and his own health declined, although he was suffering from no medical condition. His ability to work left him and he grew very depressed” (258). Daniel Stashower concurs:

... as his wife was laid to rest in Hindhead, the cumulative stresses of the thirteen-year illness sent Conan Doyle to his lowest ebb. Tortured by insomnia, he grew weak and listless. His work ceased. The intestinal complaint of his South Africa days returned to plague him. He carried flowers to his wife’s grave and spent dark hours alone with his thoughts. (254)

15 Conan Doyle had certainly been under a great deal of stress, not only because of Louise’s long terminal illness but also because of his decade-long love for Jean Leckie, who would become his second wife. He wrote to his mother that his soul felt “wrenched in two all the time” (Lellenberg, Stashower, and Foley 473). He had grown touchy and irritable in the years before Louise died, and he suffered from black moods. Louise’s death only exacerbated the situation because his sense of relief was compounded by even more guilt. As a good Victorian, he also had to face at least a year of proper mourning before he could marry Jean.

16 Both grief and depression were states of mind that Kipling knew intimately. He suffered from long bouts of depression his entire life, and he experienced inordinate grief. Even though he had never met Robert Louis Stevenson, when the latter died, Kipling was “paralyzed with grief for weeks” (Dillingham, “Spiritualism, Bereavement” 415). He never recovered fully from the death of his beloved daughter Josephine in 1899. As William Dillingham writes, “At times he appeared to be almost obsessed with the subject of grief, which he considered to be one of the exquisite torments that make human existence a living hell” (“Sorrow” 3). Nothing was more inclined to elicit his sympathy and empathy than Conan Doyle’s mental and emotional state in 1906 and 1907. “The House Surgeon” extended a promise of healing.

17 In “The House Surgeon,” a first-person narrator later identified as Mr. Perseus investigates what might be called an emotional haunting of a country house owned by the M’Leod family. At certain times of the day, the household is overwhelmed by either black despair or an unutterable grief. Perseus tracks down the lawyer who sold the house to the M’Leods, and through him, the elderly sisters who used to live there. Eventually he figures out that the feeling of despair comes from the oldest sister, who believes a younger sister committed suicide in the house by jumping out a window. The grief belongs to the dead sister, who has been unable to communicate that her death was an accidental fall. Once Perseus convinces the two remaining sisters to revisit the house, they make their peace with the dead sister, and the haunting disappears.

18 When Kipling wrote “The House Surgeon,” Conan Doyle was dealing with a death, a depression, and an engagement. The characters in the story are also concerned with a
death, a depression, and an engagement. The death is that of Agnes Moultrie, the youngest of the three sisters. The depression belongs to Mary Moultrie, a strict Evangelical, who believes that her sister committed suicide and therefore went to hell. This belief disturbs Mary so much that she spends most of her time thinking about the place where her sister died; her strong emotions are what the M’Leods and Perseus feel in Holmescroft. Perseus’s detailed description of the depression that falls on him in Agnes’s room showcases Kipling’s personal familiarity with the emotion:

... I was aware of a little grey shadow, as it might have been a snowflake seen against the light, floating at an immense distance in the background of my brain. It annoyed me, and I shook my head to get rid of it. Then my brain telegraphed that it was the forerunner of a swift-striding gloom which there was yet time to escape if I would force my thoughts away from it, as a man leaping for life forces his body forward and away from the fall of a wall. But the gloom overtook me before I could take in the meaning of the message. I moved toward the bed, every nerve already aching with the foreknowledge of the pain that was to be dealt it, and sat down, while my amazed and angry soul dropped, gulf by gulf, into that horror of great darkness which is spoken of in the Bible, and which, as auctioneers say, must be experienced to be appreciated. (249)

The engagement is more of a suggestion than a statement. Thea M’Leod seems to be postponing her marriage because of the depression in the house. Nothing would have been easier than for her to escape the depression and grief by marrying and moving out, but Kipling does not present this as an option; thus he links the engagement to the emotions in the house.

Many critics link the oppression in the house to the Kiplings’ experience in a rental house in Torquay in 1896. Rock House was as sunny and bright as the M’Leods’ house and had similarly been inhabited by three old maids. As Kipling states in his autobiography, it was also inhabited by “a growing depression which enveloped us both—a gathering blackness of mind and sorrow of the heart... It was the Feng shui—the spirit of the house itself—that darkened the sunshine and fell upon us every time we entered, checking the very words on our lips” (Something of Myself 143). Tompkins links the house in the story to both Rock House and a house in which Kipling spent a miserable childhood:

When Kipling fused his experience in the unhappy house at Torquay, of which he has told us, with still living experience of the spiritual climate of the House of Desolation, and cleansed the site, not as by fire but as by the water of grace, he performed an act of imaginative charity. Moreover, he put the “I” into the story, subjected him to the reflected agony of despair, and used him to remove the barriers that obstructed the renewal of love and hope. (130)

Despite the acknowledged connection to previous houses Kipling had known, the house in the story also has much in common with Undershaw, the house Conan Doyle built for Louise in 1897. Like the M’Leods’ residence, Undershaw was a country house on four acres of land approximately forty miles outside of London. Both homes were south-facing and plentifully supplied with windows, had tennis courts and modern electricity, and were near to new golf courses. Mr. M’Leod is extremely proud of his house, boasting of its gravel, its electric lighting, and the considerable expense of remodeling it. The gravel is mentioned casually several times, but the electric lighting and the cost of the house receive a great deal of attention. Undershaw was also built at great expense and boasted a gravel drive and its own electric power plant, which one of Conan Doyle’s biographers says was “unheard-of in country places” (Carr 99). Just as Perseus notes the lovely setting of the M’Leods’ house, visitors to Undershaw waxed poetical about the view from Conan
Doyle’s drawing room: Bram Stoker compared the scene to a painting by Turner. Conan Doyle was an inveterate collector of all kinds of things, so the drawing room also featured a special display shelf, where he exhibited items he had collected on his journeys, including weapons, stuffed birds, and walrus tusks (from his stint as doctor on an Arctic whaler). Not coincidentally, in “The House Surgeon,” Mr. M’Leod boasts that he has “the finest collection of narwhal tusks in the world” (247). The most obvious clue that the M’Leods’ house is linked to Conan Doyle is its name—Holmescroft—which incorporates the name of the famous detective and the first name of his brother Mycroft. The name of the house is one of many references to Sherlock Holmes.

Earlier scholars have mentioned some of the Sherlockian references in “The House Surgeon,” but none of them have made a stronger connection to Conan Doyle. Although William B. Dillingham contends that the first-person narrator in another Kipling story, “Wireless,” resembles Arthur Conan Doyle in that both men are physicians with a strong faith in the power of logical reasoning along with an eagerness to believe in a spirit world, Dillingham has not traced the links between Kipling and Conan Doyle any further (“Eavesdropping” 136). Angus Wilson calls “The House Surgeon” Kipling’s “Sherlock Holmes piece” and sees it as an imitation of Conan Doyle, but he does not pursue the reason for the Holmes references (268). Ricketts specifically links Conan Doyle’s visit to Kipling in Vermont to “The House Surgeon” (209). Other critics find these allusions of little importance; John Coates, for instance, finds Wilson’s ideas of passing but minor interest (5).

Harking back to Tompkins’s stress on Kipling’s complexity and subtlety, however, a careful reader cannot afford to disregard any allusion as a passing reference, particularly not a repeated allusion. Although Tompkins herself misses the Holmes connection, her discussion of a supposedly passing reference in another story, “My Sunday at Home,” shows the care with which she usually examines such references. “My Sunday at Home” contains a remark about “Tess’s country,” which Tompkins pursues to the conclusion that the story, while not a parody of Thomas Hardy, nevertheless is a deliberate attempt to follow in Hardy’s footsteps (46–48). Tompkins sees conscious reflections of Hardy’s style and theorizes that Kipling’s story is a counter-statement to Hardy’s negative view of life. One seemingly casual remark leads Tompkins to look for other, less obvious clues, which she does indeed find. As Tompkins puts it, “Kipling never labours these hints; they fall almost noiselessly, but in a sufficiently copious shower” (46).

The hints in “The House Surgeon” extend further than the surface clues already noted. Besides the name of the house, there are two other obvious references to Sherlock Holmes in “The House Surgeon.” After his first visit to Holmescraft, Perseus writes, “I am less calculated to make a Sherlock Holmes than any man I know, for I lack both method and patience, yet the idea of following up the trouble to its source fascinated me” (255). His “first attempt at detective work,” however, leaves Perseus “more bewildered than any Doctor Watson at the opening of a story” (257). Nevertheless, the narrator plays at being both Holmes and Watson: he plays detective to track down John Baxter, the lawyer who sold the house to the M’Leods, and through him the Misses Moultrie, as well as to determine the source of both the despair and the depression; later he plays doctor to Miss Mary Moultrie. He is initially inept at both roles. As a detective he comes up with several faulty theories reminiscent of Dr. Watson’s lamentable attempts at logical reasoning, and as a doctor he faces the contempt of Miss Moultrie: “I cut my hand trying to save myself.
Who has tied it up in this filthy handkerchief?” (266). The story is, without a doubt, a
detective story, and Perseus muddles through to a successful conclusion of his case.

With a link to Sherlock Holmes firmly established, Kipling moves into stealth mode,
engaging the private codes and literary games noted by Harry Ricketts. Less obtrusive
Sherlockian references—mere suggestions—are peppered through the story. However,
every detail counts in a Kipling story, so these suggestions, a discussion of which might
otherwise be dismissed as over analysis, strengthen the Holmes connections. Perseus
notes “a promising copper beech” in front of Holmescroft, and later he joins the family
for tea under that copper beech (248). This species of tree does not appear to be rare in
the English landscape, but anything to which Kipling draws specific attention is
significant. One of the popular early Holmes stories is titled “The Adventure of the
Copper Beeches,” which features a country house similar to Holmescroft. Violet Hunter,
the heroine of the Holmes story, is “freckled like a plover’s egg” (Doyle, “Copper Beeches”
157). Not coincidentally, when Mr. Baxter is caught in a white lie, he turns “plovers’ egg
colour” (Kipling, “House Surgeon” 257). This description of Baxter’s skin color occurs
immediately after the reference to Dr. Watson’s bewilderment at the opening of a story;
description of Violet Hunter is indeed at the opening of a story, and Perseus is
bewildered by Baxter’s reaction. The plover’s egg reference is obscure enough that R. E.
Habord decided it required a definition in his Readers’ Guide to Rudyard Kipling’s Works
(2877).

One of Holmes’s most recent cases at the time “The House Surgeon” appeared was “The
Adventure of Black Peter,” published in The Strand Magazine in 1904, featuring a ship
called the Sea Unicorn and some stolen South American securities and Canadian railway
stocks. “Sea unicorn” is another name for “narwhal,” thus making a connection to Mr.
M’Leod’s collection of narwhal tusks, and the nameless young man who wants to marry
M’Leod’s daughter “knew everything about South American railway stocks” (Kipling,
“House Surgeon” 251). In fact, Perseus refers to him throughout the story only as the
young man who knows all about South American railways. Perseus’s refusal to use the
young man’s name suggests a bit of jealousy on his part as he too is susceptible to Miss
M’Leod’s charms. “Black Peter” also mentions a case about a canary trainer, and Mr.
M’Leod calls his daughter “a perfect canary” who used to sing all the time (246).

Another Holmes adventure that Kipling may be invoking is The Hound of the Baskervilles,
which appeared in The Strand Magazine from August 1901 to April 1902. In the first
paragraph of “The House Surgeon,” Perseus and several others are telling ghost stories,
one of which deals with a “Curse on the family’s first-born” that turns out to have a
physical cause (245). Such a curse and explanation are featured in the plot of the Holmes
novella, although the physical explanation is nothing as mundane as the drains that
Perseus mentions. Likewise, one of the first characters to appear in the Holmes tale is Dr.
Mortimer, who is a former medical resident or house surgeon. Conan Doyle came up with
the idea for his story while playing golf at a hydro called Cromer on the North Norfolk
coast; R. E. Habord suggests that the fictional hydro Burry Mills in “The House Surgeon”
is based on Cromer (2878).4

Perseus himself seems to be a link to “The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter,” the story
that introduces Mycroft Holmes. His name has obvious connections to Greek mythology,
which Kipling flirts with. Thea M’Leod, the daughter, whose own name is Greek for
“goddess,” compares the depression in the house to Medusa and talks about being
chained to a rock. Although the obvious reference is to Andromeda’s rock, Kipling may
also be thinking of Rock House, the depressed house in Torquay. The author goes to considerable trouble to establish the narrator as Greek without actually stating his nationality. In fact, the narrator’s name is only mentioned twice, so his Greek nationality must be inferred through his recurring comments about the peculiarities of the English and the English language and Mr. M’Leod’s apparent non sequitur during his first conversation with Perseus, in which he mentions, apropos of nothing, that his wife is Greek. The most obvious reason for M’Leod to mention his wife’s origin is to make a connection to Perseus. Thus we might assume that when Perseus and the M’Leod ladies discuss the oddities of the English, they may be speaking Greek. Perseus certainly becomes a Greek interpreter of sorts by acting as a cultural translator between the very English and Evangelical Misses Moultrie and the Greek/Jewish M’Leods and by converting the wordless anguish in the house into peace and acceptance.

The Moultrie sisters provide another link to Greek myth. There are three of them, just as the ancient Greek stories feature many female triads: three Graces, three Graeae, three Hesperides, and three gorgons. The gorgons are particularly appropriate. Mary Moultrie is a Medusa figure, terrorizing Holmescroft with her despair over Agnes’s presumed suicide. Although Perseus does not literally slay Mary, he does vanquish her despair and bring peace to Agnes’s troubled spirit, thus freeing the house from its gorgon and Andromeda from her rock.

Kipling had an ulterior motive for making Perseus Greek and M’Leod Jewish. Providing these backgrounds for his characters allowed him to play with Matthew Arnold’s concepts of Hellenism and Hebraism, which Arnold viewed as two forces influencing Englishness. In Culture and Anarchy, Arnold associates Hebraism with doing and Hellenism with thinking. The English, Arnold thought, combined the “Hebraic” virtues—hard work, thrift and moral duty—with a ‘Hellenic’ tradition which stands for the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, beauty and truth” (Cheyette 18). In discussing the force of Hebraism, Arnold uses terms like “energy,” “acting,” “moral impulses,” “strictness of conscience,” “feeling,” and “obedience.” Terms he associates with Hellenism include “intelligence,” “thinking,” “ideas,” “intellectual impulses,” and “knowing.” Arnold says these two forces share the same aim: “man’s perfection or salvation” (Arnold 130), but they go about it in different ways. One or the other of these two forces has been ascendant at different times in English history, but the ideal is a “spiritual balance” between the two (141).

Oddly enough, the character who most represents Hebraism is Mary Moultrie, the confirmed Calvinist. According to Arnold, Protestantism is an outgrowth of Hebraism, sometimes taking “strictness of conscience” to an extreme: “Christianity changed nothing in this essential bent of Hebraism to set doing above knowing. Self-conquest, self-
devotion, the following not our own individual will, but the will of God, obedience, is the fundamental idea of this form ...” (132). Mary Moultrie’s conscience is so strict that she is certain Agnes committed suicide and therefore went to hell. Her feeling of despair is rooted in this belief, and like the legalistic concern with God’s rules, feelings are associated with Hebraism. In Mary Moultrie, Hebraism is taken to an extreme, unleavened by Hellenism.

Perseus is the voice of Hellenism, not because he is Greek, but because of his disinterested pursuit of knowledge. He wants to trace the depression to its source and find the truth. As Arnold says, “The uppermost idea with Hellenism is to see things as they really are; the uppermost idea with Hebraism is conduct and obedience” (131). Perseus applies his little gray cells to the matter and gathers all the information he can find about the house and its previous owners. He pursues a friendship with Baxter, the attorney who sold the house for the Moultrie sisters, who are his cousins. Everything he does is focused on gathering information and using his intellect and intelligence to interpret it correctly. He finally sees things as they really are: Agnes fell out of the window accidentally and her spirit is desperate to tell her sister so. When this voice of Hellenism brings Mary Moultrie, the representative of extreme Hebraism, back to Holmescroft, spiritual balance is achieved; Agnes’s spirit somehow communes with Mary, and both find peace. And, incidentally, the M’Leod family and Perseus experience a riot of joy and hilarity, thus firmly connecting the thinking of Hellenism with the feeling of Hebraism.

Conan Doyle was familiar with Arnold’s work and his concepts of Hellenism and Hebraism, so he must have recognized what Kipling was saying here about the need for spiritual balance. In his anguish over his wife’s death, the good doctor had gone too far in the direction of Mary Moultrie’s extreme Hebraism, and he needed to bring his intellect to bear in order to see things as they really are: to temper his grief with thought.

The strongest evidence that “The House Surgeon” is a coded message to Conan Doyle is biographical. In addition to the parallels between Holmescroft and Undershaw, there are multiple references to Conan Doyle’s medical profession. The title of the story itself is a pun on a hospital’s resident surgeon and Perseus’s role in “curing” the sick house. Thea M’Leod visits various hydros (health spas) to recuperate from the effects of the house, Perseus meets Mary and Elizabeth Moultrie for the first time at a hydro where they are seeking relief for their chronic bronchitis, and the Misses Moultrie mistake Perseus for a doctor (which is why they follow his prescription to revisit their old house to confirm that their sister’s death was accidental). During his wife’s long illness, Conan Doyle spent many months with her at similar hydros. Besides making medical references, Kipling gives his Jewish furrier a Scottish name—M’Leod—thus creating a link to Conan Doyle’s ancestry. Thea M’Leod, who sings beautifully, has put her engagement on hold because of the haunted house; she is reminiscent of Jean Leckie, a trained mezzo-soprano who had waited for Conan Doyle a decade while his first wife died slowly of tuberculosis, and then an additional year while he observed the requisite period of mourning. The two women even have similar descriptions, both being young and dark-haired. Add to all of this the topic of the paranormal, an interest in modern home improvements, a fascination with those newfangled motorcars, and the joy of golf, and the picture that emerges could be a snapshot of Conan Doyle’s life.

The psychic phenomena in the story create another major connection to Conan Doyle’s life. Although he had not yet converted to spiritualism at the time “The House Surgeon” appeared, he had been scientifically interested in psychic manifestations since 1880. Like
many other famous Edwardians, he was a member of the Society for Psychical Research, which investigated occult phenomena and exposed fraudulent mediums. Perseus must also be a member of this or a similar society. Why else would a stranger approach him and invite him to a haunted house, obviously expecting him to be able to do something about it? Thea M’Leod assumes that Perseus will report to “the Psychological Society” and then forget about the house (254). As Jonathan Rose points out in *The Edwardian Temperament*, “The emerging science of psychology was closely bound up with psychical research” and many eminent psychologists were members of the SPR, so Thea’s remark may refer to this organization (205). Since the British Psychological Society was not founded until 1901, Thea is much more likely to be familiar with the older and better known Society for Psychical Research.

37 Kipling’s use of coded messages also involved private jokes, and “The House Surgeon” is rife with such jokes, including medical ones. For instance, when Perseus arrives at the hydro, he is put through a gauntlet of ailing pensioners who confide every detail of their aches and pains. As a doctor who frequented such places, Conan Doyle endured many similar experiences, and Perseus’s plight must have elicited roars of laughter from him. Adding to the humor is the Moultries’ white-haired maid, Arthurs. Of all names, Kipling chooses a version of Conan Doyle’s given name. Arthurs is a disaster, especially in the medical arena. She breaks the bronchitis kettle and faints at the sight of blood.

38 Kipling’s biggest joke does not focus on Conan Doyle’s profession but rather on one of his favorite hobbies: golf. When Conan Doyle visited the Kiplings in Vermont, he introduced Kipling to the Scottish national pastime. By all accounts, Kipling did not enjoy the experience. Despite Conan Doyle’s enthusiasm for the game, he was apparently a mediocre player. His friend Robert Barr, interviewing him at Undershaw for *McClure’s Magazine*, writes, “Mr Doyle is a golf inebriate, and practices on this lawn, landing the balls in a tub when he makes the right sort of a hit, and generally breaking a window when he doesn’t” (Barr 109).

39 In “The House Surgeon,” Perseus uses golf to further his acquaintance with John Baxter, the Moultries’ cousin and lawyer:

> It appeared that he golfed. Therefore, I was an enthusiastic beginner, anxious to learn. Twice I invaded his office with a bag (M’Leod lent it) full of the spelicans needed in this detestable game, and a vocabulary to match. The third time the ice broke, and Mr. Baxter took me to his links, quite ten miles off, where in a maze of tramway lines, railroads, and nursery-maids, we skelped our divoted way round nine holes like barges plunging through head seas. He played vilely and had never expected to meet any one worse; but as he realized my form, I think he began to like me, for he took me in hand by the two hours together. (258-59)

40 Perseus uses these hated golf lessons to wangle an invitation to Burry Mills Hydro to meet the Misses Moultrie. However, I suspect the golf is really a joke for Conan Doyle. Baxter, like Conan Doyle, is the inept enthusiast, and Perseus, like Kipling in Vermont, is the reluctant student.

41 No one can know whether Kipling believed that laughter is the best medicine, but he must have believed it was at least a good medicine because he scattered jokes throughout this story about emotional healing. Bonamy Dobrée, one of his biographers, writes, “Laughter for Kipling was an essential element of living, and equal in value with work as an anodyne against the pain of living” (25). Laughter, however, is less germane than acceptance and forgiveness as far as healing is concerned. The main focus of “The House Surgeon” is on healing the house (thus the title), which can only be effected by healing the emotional
wounds of the Moultrie sisters, both living and dead. Healing the house frees not only the sisters and their cousin but also the M’Leod family and Perseus himself. When the oppression is lifted, Perseus and the M’Leods are giddy to the point of silliness in their feelings of release: “It was a disgraceful evening. To say we rioted through the house is to put it mildly” (275).

This feeling of release from grief and depression was Kipling’s real message for Conan Doyle. The story opens with the promise of redemption after great suffering: “On an evening after Easter Day... ” (245). When it was first published in Harper’s Magazine, it opened with an ultimately hopeful quotation from 2 Samuel 14.14: “For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.” At the end of the story, Thea, released from the house’s oppression, is able to sing again. The song she sings, “With mirth, thou pretty bird,” referred to as “an old English song,” appears to be Kipling’s own composition (276). The pretty bird—no doubt the previously mentioned canary—is Thea herself, joyfully singing praise for her deliverance. Like most Kipling stories, this one is followed by a closely related poem, “The Rabbi’s Song,” about releasing our minds from grief and pain to avoid inadvertently distressing others:

| If Thought can reach to Heaven, |
| On Heaven let it dwell, |
| For fear that Thought be given |
| Like power to reach to Hell. |
| For fear the desolation |
| And darkness of thy mind, |
| Perplex an habitation |
| Which thou hast left behind. |

(279)

Thus Kipling’s promise to Conan Doyle is future peace and joy when past suffering is laid to rest. “The House Surgeon” is about dealing with grief and guilt after a loved one’s death, and it promises release and hope for a suffering soul. The myriad Holmes references are intentional, as are the biographical parallels and the jokes; therefore, the inevitable conclusion is that the story is meant to have special significance for one specific reader: Kipling’s bereaved, depressed, and guilt-stricken friend, Arthur Conan Doyle.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. According to Angus Wilson, Kipling worked as an editor in Bloemfontein from 1 March 1900 to 1 April 1900 (214). Wilson must be in error on the arrival date since the British did not take Bloemfontein from the Boers until March 15, so the military newspaper Kipling worked on could not have started before then. Other biographers say Kipling was only in Bloemfontein for two weeks. Conan Doyle arrived on 2 April 1900, the day Kipling would have left for Cape Town. See Booth 229.

2. Several recent biographies have suggested that Conan Doyle’s depression after his wife died is either fictional or highly exaggerated. Russell Miller, for instance, says that Innes Doyle’s recently released diary lists numerous social engagements in the months after Louise’s death (255-57). However, one of the so-called social engagements Miller mentions was the return of Conan Doyle’s teen-aged daughter from boarding school. The other two engagements are referred to as “rest cures” in Conan Doyle’s letters to his mother (Lellenberg, Stashower, and Foley 536).

3. Stoker describes Undershaw in glowing terms: “From where I sat the whole of the lovely valley, at the very head of which the house stands, lay before me. Due south it falls away, spreading wider as it goes, till its lines are lost in distance, an endless sea of greenery. Far away there are ranges of hills piling up, one behind the other, in undulations of varying blue. Even the whole sweep of the horizon visible from our altitude is like a wavy sea. Nearer at hand the wonderful green of the valley is articulated by the minor curves and slopes, the trend of surrounding hills. The mighty carpet of green is of the fresh young bracken, whose shoots seem close, are like little crosiers wrought in emerald [sic]. Against this the rising pine trees seem like dark masses. Close to us, beyond the vivid patch of tennis lawn, are some masses of color which are simply gorgeous amid the expanse of green. Great shrubs of yellow broom, clumps of purple rhododendron, luxuriant alder, with masses of snowy flowers starred in their own peculiar green. An expanse which, whether seen from near or far, in unity or detail, simply ravishes the eye with its myriad beauties.” (Stoker 155).

4. Kipling places his fictional Burry Mills in the Midlands, which does not include Norfolk, so I am not sure on what basis Habord claims it is Cromer.

ABSTRACTS

D’après ses biographes, Rudyard Kipling incorporait souvent des allusions privées dans son œuvre littéraire ; allusions qui ne pouvaient être comprises que par certains amis ou membres de sa famille. “The House Surgeon” offre l’illustration d’une histoire destinée à un lectorat à la fois public et très privé. Certains éléments de l’histoire et de la vie de Kipling et Arthur Conan Doyle...
suggèrent que “The House Surgeon” était un message privé pour l’auteur des histoires de Sherlock Holmes, un message d’espoir et de guérison pour un ami traversant une période difficile après le décès de sa première femme.

AUTHORS

DONNA R. WHITE

Donna R. White is a professor of English at Arkansas Tech University. She is the author of A Century of Welsh Myth in Children's Literature (1998), Dancing with Dragons: Ursula K. LeGuin and the Critics (1999), and numerous academic articles, and she has co-edited four collections of scholarly essays on Peter Pan, The Wind and the Willows, the work of Diana Wynne Jones, and posthumanism in young adult literature.