Between Fact and Myth: The Kingdom of the Nonhuman in the Victorian Literary Imagination

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Abstract
This paper is an attempt to examine how animals and mythical creatures acquire an ideological importance in the Victorian imagination, a process which often involves the rise of conflicts in the taxonomic traditions in natural science. I explore the Victorian engagement with natural science through animal narratives that inform the works of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley—Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life (1848), Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story (1866), and The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby (1863). These texts engage with animal issues both in terms of cultural meanings and scientific implications, allowing the reader to see exactly how the human-animal boundary is constructed. Besides, they constitute a critical site for the representation of the conflict between truth/fact and myth/fantasy, science and romance. Moreover, I probe the role played by creatures such as apes and mermaids (perceived as either factual or imaginary) in the making of popular myth, as well as in the investigation of the central idea of systematic classification in the Victorian imagination. They present the taxonomic debate on classifying and categorizing species, which meanwhile illustrates the dichotomy of scientific realism and romantic imagination. When we consider the confusion between the idea of the ape and of the missing (or the myth-ing) link, we may better understand scientific discourse about the nature of species in the Victorian literary imagination.

Key Words
animals, nonhuman creatures, science, romance,
Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley
In Chapter 5 of George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the heroine Maggie Tulliver tells her brother Tom: “. . . if we were in the lion countries—I mean in Africa, where it’s very hot; the lions eat people there. I can show you in the book where I read it” (34-35). Chapter 5, in fact, is concerned with the difference between Tom’s and Maggie’s modes of knowledge: the brother has a practical understanding of the world, while the sister tends to use her imagination and bookish knowledge as a way to escape the world around her. But Maggie’s remarks have a further implication in that they reflect a general Victorian ideology about the world beyond England. Africa in her eyes is associated with nonhuman animals, which in turn invite the girl to fulfill her fantasies. A similar case is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the main character Marlow expects to see an “ichthyosaurus” (132) during his travel through the primeval forest on the African continent. While seeking work aboard a ship that will take him to Africa in London, Marlow sees in a shop window a map of the Congo River—“resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land”—which seems to lure him to venture into the unknown (108). In this venture, Marlow uses his imagination to fill in the blank spaces on the African map. The image of Africa within his own mind can be said to arise from the meeting of the imperial center with geographical “others,” nonhuman creatures in particular.

The connection between exotic creatures and geographical fantasies can further be seen in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), in which Miss Matty employs the animal imagery, the elephant and the boa-constrictor, to locate the exotic setting of India after her brother Peter Jenkyns travels to the land with the navy. She “had wanted to see an elephant in order that she might better imagine Peter riding on one; and had seen a boa-constrictor too, which was more than she wished to imagine in her fancy-pictures of Peter’s locality” (112). In all probability Miss Matty exemplifies an insular English mind’s attempt to define and understand the exotic place, imag(in)ing the boundaries between home and away through the medium of animals. The old lady thus illustrates a key aspect of the Victorian fascination with exotic creatures that help contribute to her awareness of the edge of the world. Also interesting is *The Jungle Books*, a late-Victorian collection of stories for children, in which nonhuman creatures constitute a major contribution to the plot development.1 Rudyard Kipling’s fictional treatment of Mowgli, who is

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1 As Kipling remarked in his autobiography, “. . . somehow or other I came across a tale about a lion-hunter in South Africa who fell among lions who were all Freemasons, and with them
brought up by a pack of wolves in the jungle of southern India, and his animal brothers—wolves, the python, the bear, and the black panther—brings into our attention the way in which the sub-continent colors and scenes enrich the British geographical imagination.\(^2\)

The literary examples of exotic species, as we have seen, all generate spectacular images of imperial outposts for Victorian consumption; these “other” creatures captivated the Victorian imagination and cultural vision. We cannot ignore the fact that Eliot, Gaskell, Conrad, and Kipling all lived in an era when Britain was becoming a global power and the industrial workshop of the world. In juxtaposing other parts of the world with the metropolitan center of England, they tend to convey an Anglo-centric view of the globe: England is located at the center, whereas the places outside the imperial nation adorn the periphery. By all accounts, the population of certain areas with nonhuman animals in their writings reflects their collective consciousness of other territories and hierarchical cultures. As David Cannadine has aptly put it, the British exported their imperial society to the ends of the earth in an ornamental mode during the age of empire-building. Their world vision was largely shaped by cultural norms and ideological forces—all the world was subdivided and graded according to a Western conceptual map. Since the British conceived and understood their metropolis hierarchically, they conceived and understood the periphery in the same way—the Empire in this sense was a hierarchical enterprise.\(^3\) Seen in this way, the association of foreign territories with nonhuman creatures in literary writings not simply acts as a means of recounting foreign cultures for a domestic audience; it reflects the British desire to locate “otherness” in an exotic landscape as well. In most cases, animals are relegated to an inferior position due to their difference from humanity, culture, and civilization.\(^4\)

2 In his portrayal of Mowgli’s life story from a child to the “Master of the Jungle” in India, Kipling establishes the jungle boy’s status as an imperial hero in the colonial process. The animals in this sense become an embodiment of the natives, while the jungle represents the primitive society for the imperial rule of the British. Kipling’s *The Jungle Books* can therefore be read as an allegory of imperialism. See John A. McClure, *Kipling and Conrad: The Colonial Fiction* as well as Don Randall, *Kipling’s Imperial Boy: Adolescence and Cultural Hybridity*.

3 See *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*.

4 In much the same way, menageries, and zoological exhibits in Victorian Britain served in the interest of the imperial enterprise. As Harriet Ritvo writes in *The Animal Estate*, “[t]he maintenance and study of captive wild animals, simultaneous emblems of human mastery over the natural world and of English dominion over remote territories, offered an especially vivid rhetorical means of reenacting and extending the work of empire . . . ” (205). The desire to view exotic animals in chains and cages, she adds, symbolized expanding English influence over
It is often noted that animals bear various cultural meanings and sociological implications—as companions, food, and commodities, for example—and they are part of the richly varied world of popular culture. Animals, however, also play a crucial role in the establishment of natural history and serve as an important medium for the dissemination of scientific ideas. To clarify the meaning of exotic creatures in English society, some critics draw upon ideas of animals and animality to examine the shifting relationships between human beings and nature. They not only detail the spectrum of Britons’ animal concern from the perspective of natural history but capture the fervor of the scientific age for classifying and categorizing every new specimen, plant or animal species which British explorers, soldiers, and sailors brought home. More specifically, they provide an overview of the connection between human beings and the natural world, reading the collection of fauna and flora found in exotic lands as a cipher for imperialist ideology. Literary representations of specific exotic landscapes populated by other creatures, then, focus on a further dimension: they demonstrate how the British express their perception of empire overseas in relation to the culture of natural science. In other words, the study of nonhuman animals has a great deal to tell us about the way science and culture meets at various times in history.

This paper is an attempt to examine how animals (and mythical creatures) acquire an ideological importance in the Victorian imagination, a process which often gives rise to conflicting points of view within certain traditions in natural science. It seeks to explore the Victorian engagement with natural science through animal narratives that inform the works of Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley. remote exotic territories (209). In these terms, maintaining exotic animals in captivity is instrumental in shaping Britons’ mental geographical image of foreign territories.

5 The past decade or so has witnessed the production of scholarship on the human-animal boundaries and on the role of animals in the construction of individual and social identities. Adrian Franklin looks at how humans relate to animals in the twentieth century as well as how attitudes and practices towards animals vary widely according to social class, ethnicity, gender, region and nation. See *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity* (1999). A similar point is made by Jennifer Wolch and Jody Emel, who address the issue relating to the battle for dominance between humanity and nature. They explore the diverse ways in which animals shape the formation of human identity, in particular the racialization and gendering of animal images. See *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands* (1998).

6 As Harriet Ritvo well observes in her discussion of the natural world in the Victorian age, the Empire was “often read as ‘nature’ in opposition to the ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’ of the mother country”—imperial boundaries are defined through this dichotomous contrast (“The Natural World” 283). See also Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*, and N. Jardine, J. A. Secord, and E. Spary’s edition of *Cultures of Natural History*. 
Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life (1848), Wives and Daughters: An Every-Day Story (1866), and The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby (1863) have been chosen for good reasons. All these literary works engage with animal issues concerning their cultural meanings and scientific implications, allowing the reader to see exactly how the human-animal boundary is constructed. Besides, they constitute a critical site for the representation of the conflict between truth and fact, myth and fantasy, and science and romance. Taking selected Victorian fiction as my focus and paradigm, I probe the role played by creatures such as apes and mermaids (perceived as either factual or imaginary) in the making of popular myth, as well as in the investigation of the central idea of systematic classification in the Victorian imagination. Along with the Victorian fiction, I also read social-historical Victorian sources and contemporary criticism to engage these issues. I maintain that the problem of knowledge about mermaids in Mary Barton can be used as a specific example to present the taxonomic debate on classifying and categorizing species, which meanwhile illustrates the dichotomy of scientific realism and romantic imagination. To see further how the human-animal debate is brought into British consciousness and experience, I also investigate how Gaskell and Kingsley reflect a Victorian concern to distinguish humankind from apes in Wives and Daughters and The Water-Babies. When we consider the confusion between the idea of the ape and of the missing (or the myth-ing) link, we may better understand contemporary scientific discourse about the nature of species in the Victorian literary imagination.

The Mermaid Myth

According to the constitution of mermaids, so much of a mermaid as is not a woman, must be a fish.
—Barnaby Rudge

I know there used to be children in the water, and mermaids too, and mermen. I saw them all in a picture at home, of a beautiful lady sailing in a car drawn by dolphins, and babies flying round her, and one sitting in her lap; and the mermaids swimming and playing, and the mermen trumpeting on conch-shells.
—The Water-Babies

Elizabeth Gaskell’s Mary Barton, most remembered as an industrial novel, provides a convenient point of departure to illustrate how an English sailor turns a far-off land into a repository of raw materials to fit into categories of knowledge, as
well as how the conflict between fact and science and myth and romance occurs. As Gaskell describes in Chapter 13 of the novel, entitled “A Traveler’s Tales,” Will Wilson has recently returned from an overseas voyage and recounts his experience to an eager audience of Manchester listeners—Job Legh, the artisan-naturalist and Mary Barton, the seamstress and heroine of the novel. The sailor figure and his travels of the sea in Mary Barton have been largely ignored by the critics due to their apparent insignificance in the development of the novel. Arthur Pollard, for example, claims that “[w]e do not really need a half chapter about Job Legh and that baby Margaret, nor Will Wilson’s traveler’s tales” (42). Will’s “traveler’s tales,” however, has more far-reaching implications. Noticeably, the chapter is headed by a motto composed of two stanzas from Walter S. Landor’s poem (1834):

“The mermaid sat upon the rocks / All day long, / Admiring her beauty and combing her locks / And singing a mermaid song. / And hear the mermaid’s song you may, / As sure as sure can be, / If you will but follow the sun all day, / And souse with him into the sea” (173; hereafter cited as MB). This motto is functional on the grounds that it foreshadows the coming of a travel narrative of mermaids. It also gives another dimension to Gaskell’s perception of the Pacific as an exotic land which is saturated with mythology, sexuality, and most vital of all, natural science.

After his account of a trip to Sierra Leone, Will tells a story about the mermaid that his mate Jack Harris has “witnessed” off the coast of Chatham Island in the Great Pacific. In Will’s account, the place near the Chatham Island is “a warm enough latitude for mermaids, and sharks, and such like perils,” and the mermaid, “sitting on a rock, and sunning herself,” lives near the land where women go “half-naked,” where muslin is too hot to wear, and where the sea is “milk-warm” (MB 175). The concern with the mermaid’s physical appearance ignites an interesting conversation between the three workers. Will says:

“Oh! Jack used to say she was for all the world as beautiful as any of the wax ladies in the barbers’ shops; only, Mary, there were one little difference: her hair was bright grass green.”

“I should not think that was pretty,” said Mary, hesitatingly; as if not liking to doubt the perfection of any thing belonging to such an acknowledged beauty.

“Oh! but it is when you’re used to it. I always think when first we get sight of land, there’s no color so lovely as grass green. However, she had green hair sure enough; and were proud enough of it, too; for she were combing it out full length when first they saw her.
They all thought she were a fair prize, and may be as good as a whale in ready money (they were whale-fishers, you know). For some folk think a deal of mermaids, whatever other folk do.” This was a hit at Job, who retaliated in a series of sonorous spittings and puffs.

“So, as I were saying, they pulled towards her, thinking to catch her. She were all the while combing her beautiful hair, and beckoning to them, while with the other hand she held a looking-glass.”

“How many hands had she?” asked Job.

“Two, to be sure, just like any other women,” answered Will, indignantly.

“Oh! I thought you said she beckoned with one hand, and combed her hair with another, and held a looking-glass with a third,” said Job, with provoking quietness. . . . (MB 176-77)

Using his nautical language, Will conjures up a romantic and feminine figure of a mermaid in his mind. As he recounts how the mermaid makes her first appearance in the milk-warm seawater, a feminine curiosity about the unfamiliar and the remote is aroused at the same time. A reader can have a sense of Mary’s female interest in a wider world through her quick response to the story of the mermaid: the heroine considers the mermaid a sea wonder. Unlike Mary who is preoccupied with Will’s “romance” of the mermaid, Job assumes a skeptical attitude in that it is incredible, not part of scientific knowledge. The artisan-naturalist tends to evaluate the credulity of Will’s story with his knowledge of natural science: he treats Will’s travel account with contempt, despite the sailor’s effort to prove the truthfulness of his story. Job’s and Mary’s different attitudes towards the tall tale of the mermaid thus reflect a prevalent ideology of sexual difference of their age.

The travelogue about the mermaid also invites us to consider another aspect of Gaskell’s mental map of the world. While Will’s tall tale points to the cultural and environmental differences between Britain and the Pacific, the temperate zone and the tropical zone, it is nonetheless suggestive of male erotic desire and sexuality. We can therefore trace a long established link between sexuality and foreign lands to see how the Pacific is mapped in Mary Barton. In mythologies, legends, or stories, mermaids are frequently symbols of beauty, sexuality, and femininity, and associated with seafarers’ sea-adventures. The same logic can be seen at work in Mary Barton: the mythological figure of the mermaid constitutes a major contribution to our understanding of Gaskell’s feminine representation of the Pacific. As the sailor describes how the mermaid combs her hair with one hand and
holds a looking-glass with another near the land where women go “half-naked,”
sexual imagery is invoked. Similar to Christopher Columbus’s comparison of the
shape of the earth to a woman’s breast or Henry Rider Haggard’s map of Sheba’s
breast in King Solomon’s Mines (1885), the sailor’s encounter with mermaids in
Mary Barton can be said to draw on a long tradition of male travel as a symbolic
sexual adventure.

More than anything, the Pacific in Mary Barton is a region inhabited by other
creatures, which reflects the close ties between overseas voyages and knowledge
acquisition in natural science. As already mentioned, it is hard for Job to accept the
tale of the mermaid in an age characterized by the growth of science. What he
believes is “the natural history of the different countries [Will] has visited” (MB
175), rather than the myth of the mermaid. Conversely, we see Mary’s “imagination
running on coral combs, studded with pearls” as Will claims he has seen Jack
Harries combing his hair with a mermaid’s coral comb (MB 178). Gaskell’s
reference to coral combs has its own significance here. The coral was an object of
scientific discovery in the Pacific in Captain James Cook’s time. Corals brought
back from Cook’s first voyage allowed John Ellis to provide evidence that they
were animals, not vegetables (Smith 219). If the mermaid represents a product of
the romantic imagination, it then serves as an antithesis to scientific realism
suggested by the coral. A similar situation can be seen in an 1850 poem—“The
Mermaid’s Last New Song”—in Punch magazine in which a mermaid regards the
submarine telegraph, one of the cutting-edge information technologies of its day, as
a “wonder.” The invention is “[a] marvel new and strange to [her]” and “an
enchanted wire” connecting “nations that were foes of yore” (116). The division
between science and romance is clearly revealed. This also reminds one of “A
Word to the Mermaids,” a cartoon from the 1865 Punch, in which Neptune tells the
mermaids to get off the telegraph cable due to the possibility of wrecking it (Fig. 1).
Along with the mermaid in Mary Barton, the Punch cartoon brings a vivid sense of
immediacy to the debate surrounding the dichotomy of scientific realism and
romantic imagination.

Job, however, is enchanted by Will’s narratives of flying fish and tailless cats
simply because they are truth-claiming knowledge, illuminating part of natural
science. With his knowledge of natural science, Job tells Will that the flying fish is

7 In her last and unfinished novel Wives and Daughters, Gaskell also employs the image of a
mermaid to hint at the traditional concept of a woman’s sexuality and femininity by referring to
Cynthia as “a star, a flower, a nymph, a witch, an angel, or a mermaid, a nightingale, a siren . . .”
(388; hereafter cited as WD).
Figure 1
“A Word to the Mermaids”
*Punch*, 5 August 1865
“the Exocetus; one of the Malacoptygii Abdominales.” To this, Will responds immediately by saying:

Aye, there you go. You’re one o’ them folks as never knows beasts unless they’re called out o’ their names. Put ‘em in Sunday clothes, and you know ‘em, but in their work-a-day English you never know nought about ‘em. I’ve met wi’ many o’ your kidney; and if I’d ha’ known it, I’d ha’ christened poor Jack’s mermaid wi’ some grand gibberish of a name. Mermaidicus Jack Harrisensis; that’s just like their new-fangled words. D’ye believe there’s such a thing as the Mermaidicus, master? (MB 179)

Although this is a joke played by Will upon Job, it points to the ambivalent relationship between travelers’ tales and truth-claiming knowledge when we think of British endeavours to maintain natural history as a unified discipline. In nineteenth-century Britain, natural history was frequently tied up with overseas voyage and geographical exploration. In the wake of Captain Thomas Cook’s voyages, global explorations became increasingly important partly because they introduced the Western world to other cultures and other peoples, and partly because countless new species of plants and animals were found, classified and brought to Europe. The Pacific turned out to be a place where most of the pioneers of natural selection, for example, Charles Darwin, Joseph Dalton Hooker, Thomas Huxley, and Alfred Russel Wallace, emerged (Smith 223). In Gillian Beer’s account, the nineteenth-century journeys that set out from Britain to other territories served as “an expression of the will to control, categorize, occupy, and bring home the prize of samples and of strategic information. . . . The prosaic quality of such voyagers’ enterprise could also become part of the claim to truth-telling” (Open Fields 59). Beer’s statement about the culture of natural history in nineteenth-century Britain neatly sums up the impact of overseas expansion on biogeography owing to the exercise of national power in foreign lands. The Pacific region in this

8 Concerning the significant role of the Pacific in enhancing Europeans’ knowledge of natural science, Peter Whitfield also write: “It was during the eighteenth century that a new spirit of exploration emerged among the European nations, a spirit which found its clearest expression in the Pacific. . . . What it held was a myriad of islands, whose variety of peoples, flora and fauna challenged the European mind to observe, analyse and understand this richness. It stimulated both their intelligence and their imagination, and the Pacific became both a place where real ships sailed, and a philosophical playground where questions about man and nature were explored. In this sense the Pacific became a more rational version of the medieval twilight realm beyond
sense is more than an imaginary zone or a dream territory filled with mermaids: it is a hunting ground for fauna and flora.

Natural history was enormously popular in Britain in the 1840s. Collecting, although not a well-established profession like medicine or the clergy, was a cultural tradition with its own rich history stretching back well into the sixteenth century (Camerin 46). The idea of collecting exotic specimens indeed became common practice during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a key period in research into the anatomy and classification of new species. Such research was made possible by quite a few naturalists and zoologists who tried to classify the natural world, grouping plants and animals in species, genera, phyla, orders, and so on, based on similarities and differences. Long before that, the great chain of being (composed of a number of hierarchical links extending from God down to the lowest forms of life) had been a classical and medieval conception of the order of the universe. In the second half of the eighteenth century, as Mary Louise Pratt has noted, a Euro-centered form of global or planetary consciousness gained ground, characterized by interior exploration and the systematization of the natural world (Pratt 15-37). Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish scientist who grouped species according to shared physical characteristics and identified them by a set of names, is one of the pioneers in this movement.

Within this tradition, naturalists in Britain claimed the right to classify the plants and animals of other territories: exotic specimens not only provided the originals of travelers’ tales but kept forward the acquisition of scientific knowledge in Britain. In *Mary Barton* Job Legh’s enthusiasm for gathering “weird-looking creatures” (*MB* 42) in particular illuminates the prominent role played by exotic creatures in legitimating Britons’ knowledge of a wider world. One of Job’s rare specimens, the scorpion, directs to our attention the exchange of images of landscapes as well as commodities and exotic species through sailors in the port of Liverpool. As Job’s granddaughter Margaret describes:

... Grandfather went to Liverpool one Whitsun-week to go strolling about the docks and pick up what he could from the sailors, who often bring some queer thing or another from the hot countries they go to; and so he sees a chap with a bottle in his hand, like a druggist’s physic-bottle; and says grandfather, “What have ye gotten there?” So the sailor holds it up, and grandfather knew it was a rare kind o’

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Europe, filled not with demons and monsters, but with exotic, natural, verifiable phenomena...”

(114-15).
scorpion, not common even in the East Indies where the man came from; and says he, “How did you catch this fine fellow . . . ?” And the man said as how when they were unloading the ship he’d found him lying behind a bag of rice, and he thought the cold had killed him, for he was not squashed nor injured a bit. He did not like to part with any of the spirit out of his grog to put the scorpion in, but slipped him into the bottle, knowing there were folks now who would give him something for him. So grandfather gives him a shilling. (MB 43)

In reading a passage like this, one might be tempted to conclude that the growth of knowledge in foreign species is intimately bound up with Britain’s overseas commercial and maritime power. The flourishing trade in specimens is well exemplified in the interaction between the sailor, the artisan naturalist, and the Empire. Either the sailor or the artisan naturalist seeks and collects specimens for British consumption, searching for new markets for the exotics.

But Margaret’s description is important for another reason: Britain’s imperial expansion in the nineteenth century facilitated the appropriation of exotic animals and plants, and it was within this wider context that the study of natural history could be exploited to the best advantage. Quoting Harriet Ritvo again, “[i]ncreasing access to remote and exotic ports had been an exponential growth in the apparent diversity of nature. Ships returned from their voyages laden not only with official or commercial cargo, but also with information. This information took various forms, of which exotic animal, plant and mineral specimens were the most palpable” (“The Natural World” 281-83). In these terms, British ideas about nature seem to “thrive on the remote, the strange, and the unfamiliar for their essential vitality” (Rousseau and Porter v). Imperial expansion accordingly turned exotic corners of the globe into a repository of raw materials: possession of creatures from distant parts of the world represents a form of living natural history.

It is important to bear in mind that the study of animal and plant geography was one of the most obviously imperial sciences in nineteenth-century Britain. After the time of Linnaeus, great emphasis was laid in Europe on the significance of searching for foreign specimens. Exotic specimens, considered much more exciting and interesting than those found at home, provided British naturalists with the inexhaustible lure of travel and anticipated pleasures of foreign lands. The given names of fauna and flora were mostly based on the Linnaean taxonomic scheme and entwined with geographical regions. A love for natural history and a desire to travel, and most vital of all, the hierarchical structure of British society, and the
expansionist national ethos, contributed to the expansion of overseas activity among naturalists. The collection of foreign plants and animals therefore mirrored “the developing infrastructure of empire”—each fauna and flora could be regarded as “a colonizing force” in terms of their distribution over the globe (Browne 305-18). Seen in this way, exotic creatures reinforce the role of natural science in the British penetration of far-flung corners of the globe. They, too, conjure up a particular spatial imagery when we address the issue of culture/nature within the imperial context.

Again, when we turn to the dialogue between Will and Job about the mermaid, we may find that it points to the connection between nomenclature and scientific knowledge. The mermaid in this case is not only a mysterious and romantic figure, but an example of British entanglement with systematic taxonomy in an age of scientific classification. As is well known, widespread interest in the existence of the mermaid had many romantic and imaginary underpinnings. Sailors or the indigenous inhabitants of northern Scotland frequently made attempts to report sightings of bare-breasted mermaids in nineteenth-century natural history books (Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 208). And yet, there was plenty of room for argument about the nature of the mermaid. The popular interest in the stuffed mermaids in Britain in the 1820s is one illustration of this. Japanese fisherman at the time found that the manufacturing of artificial mermaids was a major source of their income and therefore many stuffed mermaids traveled all the way from Japan to Europe for the purpose of public exhibitions. In the autumn of 1822, for instance, a Feejee Mermaid was preserved in a glass dome and brought to the Turf coffeehouse in London by an American sea captain Samuel Barrett Eades for a public display. After careful examinations, however, William Clift at the Royal College of Surgeons found out that the mermaid was a fake—it was half mammal and half fish.9 Thanks to Phineas T. Barnum, an American showman, the Feejee Mermaid went on a display again in America in 1842. Although the mermaid was claimed to be genuine, it turned out to be the dried husk of an orangutan’s torso and baboon head sewn to a salmon’s tail. Likewise, Francis Buckland in his *Curiosities of Natural History* (1858) wrote that the mermaid-like creature shown at a public house at Spitalfields was a combination of simian and hake (Carrington 14; Ritvo, “Professional Scientists and Amateur Mermaids” 278). In each case, the mermaid was regarded as a patchwork creature, an outlandish hoax to appeal to the public’s curiosity about the unknown.

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9 For a more detailed description of the Feejee mermaid, see Jan Bondeson (36-63) and James W. Cook (73-118).
The sensational potential of the mermaid tells us as much about a society whose obsession with categorizing new specimens is indicative of the interplay between fact and myth, fictional and documentary. However, we have to notice that “many of the so-called mythical animals . . . come legitimately within the scope of plain matter-of-fact Natural History” because explorers and paleontologists frequently discovered creatures that would previously have been implausible or even unthinkable (qtd. in Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 182). The case of the sea serpent may further illustrate this point. Like mermaids, sea serpents received much attention from the public. Sightings were often reported by fishermen, naval officers, and travelers. Newspapers and magazines meanwhile offered space for amateurs’ gibberish and taxonomists’ witness, but the language of the discussion tended to be sober and technical. The 1848 *Daily News*, for instance, presented Captain Peter M’Quhae’s report to the Admiralty, “complete with latitude and longitude, precise meteorological observations, and trigonometric estimates of the sea serpent’s dimensions and speed.” The sighting of the great sea serpent by the crew of the frigate Daedalus off the Cape of Good Hope was also contextualized in the 1848 *Illustrated London News* together with oral evidence from naturalists and naval officers, as well as detailed illustrations (Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 183). Although sea serpents were considered more like creatures of oceanic myth than quotidian marine animals, naturalists were inclined to take them seriously. The coverage of sea serpents in the popular press with widespread interest and credulity, in particular, caused the naturalist Richard Owen to see it as a serious institutional challenge. However, Owen believed in sea serpents very seriously despite his contemptuous attitude towards the credibility of the witnesses in public (Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 185-86). This invariably brings to our attention the ambiguous relationship between science and romance.

There is no real evidence that a mermaid exists in the world. There is also no evidence that one does not exist. But Will’s exchange with Job about the naming of the mermaid presents a dispute over classifying and categorizing the mermaid which has puzzled many scientists for centuries at the margins of science. The study of the anomaly such as the mermaid had occupied an ambivalent role in natural history indeed.10 Creatures suspected to be imaginary or fictitious had come to bear a different relation to the natural order by the eighteenth century. Since bizarre specimens needed to be explained away, entrepreneurs, their eager audience and the

10 Richard Carrington asserts that the natural history of mermaids cannot be understood by the methods of science alone; it should also be discussed together with their romantic ideological past (3-19).
opportunistic press gave a challenge to the established zoological order to redefine the legendary creatures such as unicorns, mermaids and sea serpents (Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 175-80). In spite of the controversy over the likely existence of mermaids, zoologists still considered them sea wonders as well as a source of study in natural science. To offer mermaids a space in natural history, the quinarian taxonomists William MacLeay and William Swainson in 1829 claimed that they had found a space for an as-yet-unknown amphibious primate which, as MacLeay suggested, might “explain why there is such a general feeling among mankind of all ages, in favor of the existence of mermaids and may indeed render the past or present existence of amphibious primates probable” (qtd. in Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 182). By the middle of the nineteenth century, mermaids were no longer a topic for discussion within the context of zoology and therefore the public interest in them increasingly faded away. Whatever the reason, the mermaid still found its way into the anatomical collections despite the fact that the skeptical viewpoint dominated the discussions.

Questions concerning the authenticity of the mermaid had provoked much controversy. It is at this point that the Victorian periodical press played upon in its perception of the ambiguous relationship between mankind and mermaids. “The Mermaid no Myth” from the 1871 issue of *Punch* is exemplary in this respect. The article began with a question “Who says there are no Mermaids?” and continued to examine the evidence presented at the British Association meeting. It then made points about the mermaid’s role in the missing link:

Mermaids have been seen on the coasts of Scotland by respectable persons, who told a gentleman, who at the late meeting of the British Association told a scientific audience what they said. Nobody present questioned a statement about which there can, of course, be no question among zoologists.

The Mermaid (*Siren canora*) is one of the connecting links of which many are missing, between Man and the Marine Ascidian. She is a pneumono-branchiate animal, and as there are no males, constitutes an instance of true parthenogenesis. . . . Being endowed with gills as with lungs, the mermaid is amphibious in the true sense of the world. . . . (79)

However this may be, the idea of the missing link formed an important part of nineteenth-century anxieties about situating other creatures within the scientific
context. It also provided an alternative mode of understanding a larger world. By the end of the Victorian era, St. George Mivart, biologist and fellow of the Zoological Society of London, claimed that the dugong and the manatee were the only two mermaids existing from a scientific perspective (Ritvo, *The Platypus and the Mermaid* 181). This can further be seen in a *Punch* cartoon of 1883 issue, “Mr. Punch’s Odd-Fisheries Exhibition for 1884,” which presented a picture of a mermaid and a dugong getting together to listen to Neptune playing the harp (Fig. 2).¹¹ For the most part, the mermaid-like creature offers a blank text upon which people can allow their imaginations full play and learn about the way to order the knowledge of the animal kingdom.

¹¹ The cartoon was a humorous response to the International Fisheries Exhibition held in London in 1883, a conference which addressed the theme of declines in fish catches. Thomas Huxley, the well-known scientist, delivered the Inaugural Address Fisheries Exhibition.
Figure 2
“Mr. Punch’s Odd-Fisheries Exhibition for 1884”
*Punch*, 4 December 1883
The Ape Allure

Figurative Party. “SO LONG AS I AM A MAN, SORR, WHAT DOES IT MATTHER TO ME WHETHER ME GREAT-GRANDFATHER WAS AN ANTHROPOID APE OR NOT, SORR!"

Literal Party. “HAW! WATHER DISAGWEEABLE FOR YOUR GWATE GWAND-MOTHER, WASN’T IT?”

—“The Descent of Man”

Punch, 24 May 1873

The taxonomic debate over the likely existence of the mermaid, as we saw earlier, allows readers to call into question certain dominant notions about the missing link between mankind and other species. While attitudes varied considerably, the general consensus is that the study of the anomaly points to what Gillian Beer has called, a period when “‘a fact is not quite a scientific fact at all’ and when ‘the remnant of the mythical’ is at its most manifest” (Darwin’s Plots 2). The question to pose here, then, is “What is the boundary between mankind and the animal?” The mermaid is not alone in representing various preoccupations that we find at work in the literary imaginary we saw earlier; the ape plays an increasing role as well. In the wake of Charles Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1859), Britons began to rethink the natural world in terms of biological and evolutionary concepts. They took an avid interest in the classification systems for specimens of plants and animals, in particular those belonging to the world beyond the imperial center.

Quite a few literary works were published under the influence of evolutionary ideas. Consider, for example, Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters, which was written at a time when “‘natural history’ was still close to everyday life” (Stoneman 184), and when Africa was becoming in British culture the focus of scientific investigation and geographical exploration. The description of Roger Hamley’s scientific expedition to Africa in Wives and Daughters shows how Gaskell looks upon the geographic territory as an ideological landscape that helps extend her vision abroad. In a sense, geographical exploration comprises the ideological apparatus sustained by the British powers in their geographical expansion and their control of the African continent in age of imperial rivalry. Above all, the reference to Roger’s study of osteology in the novel articulates a sense of contemporary scientific discourse about
the nature of species. In Gaskell’s portrayal, the gentleman is a great lover of natural history and comparative anatomy who has published a paper in a scientific periodical to “confute some theory of a great French physiologist,” and the paper has “proved the writer to be possessed of a most unusual amount of knowledge on the subject” (WD 311). In another scientific article, he has also made a reply to a French osteologist (WD 383), an expert in the study of the structures and functions of bones, in particular those of apes. In fact, the scientific study of the relationship between humankind and apes was the focus of much public attention in the 1860s. Scientists made an effort to solve the myth about the divine origin of man and to find out whether humans were descended from apes. In 1861, Paul du Chaillu, a French-American explorer, exhibited his collection of decapitated ape-heads under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society. In the same year, he published Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa in England, which described vividly his travels to the regions of West Africa. The African expedition allowed him to claim he was the first white man to have seen a gorilla and therefore his selling of hunted gorillas to the Natural History Museum in London sparked popular excitement among the British. One year later, Thomas Huxley also had an ape-brain dissected at the meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Cambridge (Hodgson 230-37). The kingdom was so obsessed with apes that the mania was caricatured in a cartoon of the 1862 Punch in which a distressed woman cried out for Mr. Punch’s help to hunt gorillas in Britain (Fig. 3). Anthropology, then, emerged as a discipline as the Anthropological Society of London was founded in 1863 to promote the scientific understanding of man. In his book Man’s Place in Nature (1863), Huxley made this observation that humans and African apes shared a common ancestry. All of these events not only perpetuate a shared ideology about the evolutionary past but suggest the Victorians’ desire to differentiate themselves from other species.

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12 Gaskell was well informed about the current views of leading comparative anatomists concerning the theory of classification. Her allusions to such French naturalists as Georges Cuvier and Geoffroy St. Hilaire in Wives and Daughters are exemplary in this respect. Cuvier established the field of vertebrate palaeontology by creating the comparative method of organismal biology. In opposition to Cuvier, Geoffroy had a different thinking about the nature of species. He believed in the underlying unity of organismal design, and the possibility of the transmutation of species in time. As Charles Darwin describes in The Origin of Species, Geoffroy “has insisted strongly on the high importance of relative connexion in homologous organs: the parts may change to almost any extent in form and size, and yet they always remain connected together in the same order” (qtd. in Litvack 734).
The connection between mankind and apes is further illuminated if we turn to Charles Kingsley’s fairy tale *The Water-Babies*, in which Tom, a ten-year-old chimney sweep, falls into a river, drowns, and becomes a water-baby who embarks upon adventures in the underwater world. A close reading of *The Water-Babies* significantly demonstrates the ways in which Kingsley shares Victorian anxieties about the missing link between mankind and apes. As Kingsley describes in the earlier part of the book, Tom, falling down a chimney one day, finds himself in a room where a clean white girl called Ellie sleeps:

And looking round, he suddenly saw, standing close to him, a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth. He turned on it angrily. What did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady’s room? And behold, it was himself, reflected in a great mirror, the like of which Tom had never seen before.

And Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty; and burst into tears with shame and anger; and turned to sneak up the chimney again and hide; and upset the fender and threw the fire-irons down, with a noise as of ten thousand tin kettles tied to ten thousand mad dogs’ tails. (17-18; hereafter *WB*)

Incidentally, Tom catches sight of himself in the mirror and finds his own reflection looks like “a little ugly, black, ragged figure” and more, “a little black ape.” In Tom we seem to encounter a combination of animal and negro stereotypes: the little white boy is represented as a “nigger minstrel, a caricatured black man” who is bestial at the same time (Hodgson 228). The association of Tom with the ape implies that there is a racial or ethnic component in the Victorian appropriation of the animal figure.

The ape-like creature, a typical Victorian representation of a black man, is suggestive of the lowest rank of human races. As is often noted, the debate among scientists about the relationship of humans to animals prompted British racists to make frequent comparisons between Irish people, black people, and apes. Science intensified the Victorian ideology of racial difference and the national imagery was consistently linked with biological and racial attribute. Kingsley himself was well aware of this hotly debated issue. In 1860 he wrote to his wife from Ireland by saying that: “I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country... to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were
Figure 3
“Gorilla Hunting in Great Britain”
*Punch*, 11 October 1862
black one would not see it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours” (qtd. in Curtis 84). Given the popular image of the ape-like creature, Kinsley draws an analogy between Tom and a gorilla in The Water-Babies when the climbing boy tries to run away after Ellie mistakes him for a thief:

And all the while poor Tom paddled up the park with his little bare feet, like a small black gorilla fleeing to the forest. Alas for him! there was no big father gorilla therein to take his part; to scratch out the gardener’s inside with one paw, toss the dairymaid into a tree with another, and wrench off Sir John’s head with a third, while he cracked the keeper’s skull with his teeth as easily as if it had been a cocoa-nut or a paving-stone. (WB 19-20)

A keen amateur naturalist and Darwinian himself, Kingsley saw no conflict between religion and evolutionary ideas. He was a supporter of Chartism and a Christian socialist, thinking that the church should be involved in addressing social questions. He was also an evolutionist following Darwin’s line and an anthropologist holding the title of Honorary Fellow of the Anthropological Society of London.13 Through the representation of the Do-as-you-likes, who are degenerated by natural selection into apes in The Water-Babies, Kinsley further identifies himself as a proponent of the theory of degeneration. A fairy in the book describes how the Do-as-you-likes become less civilized due to complacency and idleness, as well as how the last of the Do-as-you-likes, gradually losing the ability to speak, is shot by du Chaillu at the end:

And in the next five hundred years they were all dead and gone, by bad food and wild beasts and hunters; all except one tremendous old fellow with jaws like a jack, who stood full seven feet high; and M. Du Chaillu came up to him, and shot him, as he stood roaring and thumping his breast. And he remembered that his ancestors had once been men, and tried to say, “Am I not a man and a brother?” but had forgotten how to use his tongue; and then he had tried to call for a

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13 Kingsley’s link to anthropology can also be seen in the third issue of the newly founded Anthropological Review in 1863, which touched upon “the extreme liberty with which his scientific opinions are characterized” in The Water-Babies (475).
doctor, but he had forgotten the word for one. So all he said was “Ubboboo!” and died. (WB 130)

This emblematic scene might well explain the crucial nexus between language and cultural/racial traits. Kingsley’s parable of degeneration indicates “the decay of mankind back into primitivism and thence into animality” since language, for mythographers and anthropologists, was closely related to evolutionary thinking and served as an index of distinguishing the features between man and beasts. Predominantly, the myth of degeneration serves as a reminder of the civilized counterpart of savagery (Beer, *Darwin’s Plots* 111).

But more remarkable is what the last surviving Do-as-you-like says when he is dying—“Am I not a man and a brother?”—which reminds one of the motto of the Anti-Slavery Society as well as “Monkeyana,” a poem published in *Punch* on May 18, 1861 (Fig. 4). At the outset of “Monkeyana,” a gorilla from the Zoological Society Gardens tells about his ambiguous identity: is he “A man in ape’s shape, / An anthropoid ape” or “monkey deprived of his tail?” After that, the gorilla mentions the notorious confrontation between Richard Owen and Thomas Huxley about man’s ancestry, a controversial subject that dominates debate at the time. Owen claims that “The brain of Chimpanzee / Is always exceedingly small, / With the hindermost ‘horn’ / Of extremity shorn, / And no ‘Hippocampus’ at all. . . .” His anti-Darwinian view leads him to remark that humans could not have possibly been evolved from apes in that gorillas and apes lack the hippocampus minor that humans have. Huxley, however, asserts “That OWEN he lies, / And garbles his Latin quotation; / That his facts are not new, / His mistakes not a few, / Detrimental to his reputation” (206). Another cartoon of the 1862 *Punch*, “The Descent of Man,” also carries the same suggestion about the clash between Owen and Huxley (Fig. 5). A hairy, apish man thus becomes an easily recognizable image of evolutionary ideas in most English minds.
Figure 4
“Monkeyana”
*Punch*, 18 May 1861
Figure 5
“The Descent of Man”
*Punch*, 24 May 1873
The Owen-Huxley rivalry in clarifying the nature of humankind and apes attracted much attention from the public. Thomas Huxley was one of the staunch defenders of Darwin’s theory that species develop over time from a common origin, especially through natural and sexual selection. In his book *Man’s Place in Nature*, a compilation of his lectures on humans, apes and evolution, Huxley asserted that the hippocampus was one of “the most distinctly Simian peculiarities which the human organism exhibits.” Richard Owen, however, was opposed to Huxley’s views of apes and believed in the physical difference between apish and human physiology. He even called Huxley an “advocate of man’s origins from a transmuted ape” in the literary magazine *Athenaeum* in the year of 1861 (qtd. in Hodgson 234). Whatever the reason, the continuing debate between them only led to increased uncertainty about the human-ape demarcation. Under such circumstances, Kingsley parodies the notion that humans are descended from apes through his character, Professor Pthmllnsprts, in Chapter 4 of *The Water-Babies*. The professor tries to point out the links between human beings and apes by saying that:

> If you have a hippopotamus major in your brain, you are no ape, though you had four hands, no feet, and were more apish than the apes of all aperies. But if a hippopotamus major is ever discovered in one single ape’s brain, nothing will save you’re your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-greater-greatest-grandmother from having been an ape too. . . . *(WB 83)*

While primarily comical in tone, the professor’s remarks about man’s simian ancestry nonetheless raise common anxieties about the implications of evolutionary thinking, and meanwhile reveal an ongoing fascination with animal figures in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. To be sure, Britons’ engagement with the animal kingdom enriches their understanding of the expanding world and their place in it. Locating nonhuman creatures and their role in the Victorian literary imagination reveals the specific socio-cultural-scientific context within which the connection between exotic species and natural science is constructed. It further shows an important aspect of the evolution of and revolution in scientific knowledge.14

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14 I would like to thank the reviewer for his/her suggestion that arguing over the existence of strange beings reveals both Gaskell’s and Kingsley’s awareness of multiple references. By dramatizing the competing reference models, the novelists were trying to find out the dominant theories to their likings. Therefore, it is hard to draw a clear distinction between fiction and science.
Works Cited


About the Author

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[Received 30 August 2006; accepted 19 January 2007; revised 23 February 2007]