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James Krasner

University of New Hampshire

Torture, Literature, and History in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Leather Funnel"

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james.krasner@unh.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Leather Funnel" is a brief, rather ghastly tale that centers on a dream vision of a woman being brutally tortured. It first appeared in November 1902, at a transformative moment in Doyle's career, as he was returning to the literary world after serving as a medic in the Boer War between 1900 and 1902. Even more dramatically, he was resurrecting Sherlock Holmes after a nine-year hiatus with the serial publication of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in *The Strand* between August 1901 and April 1902. Before writing *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle had devoted himself to working on *The Great Boer War* (1901), both an exhaustive history of the conflict and an analysis of military procedures. This was followed by the pamphlet *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, a defense of the British army's conduct in the war, which was to gain him a knighthood. Given the towering works crowding around it, it is striking that Doyle should single out "The Leather Funnel" as artistically significant. Complaining about *The Strand's* formatting of the story for its second publication in 1904, Doyle asserted: "'Leather Funnel' was literature, or as near literature as I can ever produce. It is not right to print such a story two words to the line on each side of an unnecessary illustration" (Lellenberg *et al.* 2007, 576). Given Doyle's well-known misgivings about the artistic quality of the Sherlock Holmes stories, why would he consider this minor bit of sensationalism "as near literature as I can ever produce"? Given the great public attention surrounding

Hound of the Baskervilles and his historical works on the war, why would something as insignificant as the relationship between text and picture in a ghost story so offend his sense of professional honor?

Doyle's views on literature and history were informed by two cultural discussions occurring in the 1880s and 1890s. Nils Claussøn has shown how Doyle's opinions on "real" literature reflected a cultural debate over the rise of popular literary genres driven by the sort of periodical publications in which "The Leather Funnel" appeared (2008, 40). Amy Wong has discussed a similar conflict between popular and traditional modes of writing in the rise of "New Journalism", particularly the sort of sensational writing associated with W. T. Stead, which Doyle vigorously opposed on the grounds that it was insufficiently fact-based (2015, 63). Doyle's other major publication of 1902, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, was his defense of the British army against claims made by Stead in *Methods of Barbarism* (1901) that Boer women and children had been the victims of war crimes and systematic torture. Taken together, "The Leather Funnel" and *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* offer useful insight into Doyle's understanding of the relationship between literature and history, and the deployment of state power through written language ¹.

2. DENYING TORTURE

Having volunteered to serve as an army medic at Bloemfontein from March to June of 1900, Doyle saw his military mission as closely associated with his status as a literary man during, and especially after, the war. He completed what he considered to be a definitive history, *The Great Boer War* in 1900, but felt compelled to enhance it in 1902 with *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* in response to Stead's *Methods of Barbarism* (1901). Stead's work focused on the imprisonment and, he argued, intentional starvation of Boer women and children in "concentration camps" set up by the British government. Doyle published and publicized *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* using his own money, as well as funding from The Foreign Office and donations from like-minded citizens. Extremely enthusiastic about the

¹ My thanks to Ricky DiCillo, Dan Crawford, and Victoria Parker for their help in clarifying my argument in this essay.

publication, which he described as "the greatest public work of my life" (Lellenberg *et al.* 2007, 491), Doyle undertook to have it translated "into every European language and sent to every deputy and editor in the world" (489). In letters to his mother, Doyle describes having written the pamphlet in a fury of "white hot indignation" (488) against "the Stead kind of man who traduces our soldiers most foully. Nothing could be too much for such as scoundrel as that" (489). Despite his passion, he was confident that "after examining the evidence more closely & more impartially than most men" (488) he could set the historical record straight and counter the "infernal lie" (488) of British brutality. "I collect all the evidence in one small book which shall be sold at 6d ... You dear Idealist, living in the quiet backwater, you see things not as they are but as you dream them to be" (489). Such dreamers as his mother, Doyle implies, are easily manipulated by historical charlatans such as Stead, and need to be set straight by clear documentary evidence, rationally set forth.

It should not be surprising, then, given his intense focus on political and imperial power, and his specific attention to defending Britain against claims of torture, that Doyle should write a story in which these are central concerns. "The Leather Funnel" focuses on an evening visit between Lionel Dacre, a wealthy French collector of occult antiquities, and the story's narrator, a scholar of ancient Mesopotamian texts. After being shown the titular antique leather funnel by Dacre, the narrator is persuaded to sleep with it beside him, and experiences a horrifying dream-vision of water torture performed by what seems to be a medieval court. The torture victim is a "small woman with blonde hair and singular, light-blue eyes – the eyes of a child" (Doyle 1902a, 22). After he wakes screaming, the narrator is educated by Dacre concerning the historical events he saw in his dream. The woman in the vision was none other than Marine Madeleine Marguerite d'Aubray (Madame de Brinvilliers), an eighteenth-century aristocrat notorious for murdering her father and brothers; she had been tried and convicted by the Grand Chambers and Tournelles of Parliament in 1676, and sentenced to a punishment known as the "extraordinary question" ritual. This torture involved pouring roughly two gallons of water into the victim's mouth through the funnel, and was practiced in France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While its purported purpose was to acquire a confession, or information on accomplices, it typically served as a particularly horrible form of execution. After coming to understand the historical facts behind his dream, the narrator's horrified response is refocused on the criminal, rather than the punishment,

and the story ends with the two friends briefly discussing various marks on the funnel which prove its authenticity.

While it shares attention to material clues with the Sherlock Holmes stories, there isn't much to recommend the story by traditional standards of literary merit. What it does offer is an extravagant literary extension of the argument Doyle had made for the tragic necessities of state power in *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*. The relevance of medieval judicial torture to the South African war crimes comes directly from Stead, who frames his argument against the limitation of food in concentration camps with references to the torture chambers of the Spanish inquisition.

Starvation was thus deliberately employed as an engine of torture in order, by the suffering inflicted upon their women and children, to induce their men-folk to desert the ranks, and for pity's sake to sacrifice the cause of their country. We could neither kill, wound, nor capture the burghers who were still in the field. But we could catch their women and their helpless little children. Having caught them, we could pen them in our substitute for the Spanish Inquisition, the Prison Camps. Instead of stretching them upon the rack, using the thumb-screw, or applying the red-hot iron to the soles of their feet, we achieved the same result by inflicting the refined and horrible torture of slow starvation. Under this *peine forte et dure* the children sickened, pined away to living skeletons, and then happily were released by death from their sufferings. (Stead 1901, 9)

The *peine forte et dure* Stead refers to here was a form of torture involving heavy stones being placed on the torso of defendants who refused to plead; it was used between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries in England. Stead's comparison, while possibly justified in its moral import, seems both logically and imaginatively inappropriate; the individually-focused, claustrophobic horrors of the torture chamber bear little resemblance to a generalized policy of food distribution in a large scale refugee camp. Stead hopes to individualize and make frighteningly visible both the sensations of the sufferers and the violence of the state so that the "vast accumulated sum of horror which has been perpetrated in South Africa" (1901, 6) can elicit the response of "incredulous horror" (10) he believes it deserves.

In *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, Doyle dismisses Stead's comparisons as sensationalistic rhetoric that "curdles our blood" (1902b, 105) rather than presenting the facts. Doyle goes to great lengths to show the necessity and relative humanity of the camps, countering Stead's "Blood and Hell" broadsheet" (84) with the specific documentary evidence

of "a few witnesses from both sides" (86). He includes fifteen pieces of written testimony regarding the concentration camps, drawn from letters and official reports, all dated, and concludes "I cannot believe that any impartial mind can read the evidence without seeing that the British Government was doing its best under difficult circumstances to carry out the most humane plan possible".

3. DEFENDING TORTURE

Thus, in *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, Doyle denies that torture, particularly torture directed at women and children, ever took place. In "The Leather Funnel", by contrast, he takes the bolder strategy of implicitly defending torture as a legitimate expression of state power in order to emphasize the value of accurate historical apprehension. Doyle structures the story so that the narrator's naïve response of moral outrage at seeing a woman treated cruelly gradually develops toward a more sophisticated understanding of justice as Dacre places the proceedings in their legal and historical context. Initially, the narrator has an overwrought emotional response, riddled with inaccurate assumptions.

Oh, what a blessed relief to feel that I was back in the nineteenth century – back out of that mediaeval vault into a world where men had human hearts within their bosoms. [...] To think that such things were ever done – that they could be done without God striking the villains dead. Was it all a fantasy, or did it really stand for something which had happened in the black, cruel days of the world's history? (1902a, 22-23)

In fact, it is not a medieval scene he witnesses, taking place in the "black, cruel days of the world's history", but in 1676. The men are not "villains" but identifiable and respected jurists and clergymen. Dacre undertakes to correct his guest's false impressions by taking "down an old vellum-covered volume from the shelf" (23) and, reading directly from legal documents "in the French of the seventeenth century", exhorting him to "judge for yourself" (23). He explains the provenance of the funnel, which was found in the house of "Nicholas de la Reynie, a high official of King Louis XIV [...] the gentleman specially concerned with the maintenance and execution of the Draconic laws of that epoch" (20). The era of the Sun King involves both a flowering of

imperial civilization and the “Draconic laws” that may regrettably accompany it. Doyle’s reference to Louis XIV directly evokes “Methods of Barbarism”, in which Stead declares that the Boer women and the children were forced into concentration camps because of the devastation of their lands. This devastation is of a “severity and a thoroughness which recalls the exploits of Louis XIV in the Palatinate, nearly two hundred years ago” (1901, 6). Dacre recites a detailed account of the legal proceedings against Madame d’Aubray, and is at great pains to validate the historical accuracy of his guest’s dream so that, rather than a ghastly sadistic fantasy, it emerges as an accurate account of a court proceeding.

The prisoner was brought before the Grand Chambers and Tournelles of Parliament, sitting as a court of justice, charged with the murder of Master Dreux d’Aubray, her father, and of her two brothers, MM. d’Aubray, [...] the Court, having found her guilty, condemned her to the ordinary and to the extraordinary question in order that she might be forced to name her accomplices, after which she should be carried in a cart to the Place de Greve. (Doyle 1902a, 23)

When understood in its correct historical context, even an apparently purposeless sadistic act against a powerless and diminutive woman – a woman “with the eyes of a child” (22) – can be understood as the appropriate deployment of state power. By the end of the story, the narrator has come to share Dacre’s conclusion that, as horrible as the proceedings may have been, her crimes “were in proportion to her penalty” (23).

Antonia José Miralles Pérez has demonstrated that, at this point in his career, Doyle considered himself a competent amateur historian based on the research he had done for his historical novels *The White Company* (1891) and *Sir Nigel* (1906). “He was confident that, by assuming the duties of an honest historian, he would be able to cope with the task of separating myth from reality when digging into the archives and primary sources” (2013, 194). I have argued elsewhere that, in writing *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle was preoccupied with the falsification of history (Krasner 2016). He clearly considered his response to Stead in *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* an attempt to set the historical record straight, leading not only the British public but the international community to reinterpret nightmarish images of starving women and children as legal and appropriate measures of state control. Like Dacre educating his guest, and like Sherlock Holmes educating Watson, Conan Doyle presents evidence to clarify a story that is too

easily misinterpreted. In "The Leather Funnel" he chooses what would on the face of it seem the most indefensible form of state power: the brutal torture of a physically unimposing woman by a government known for its excessive use of force. The psychological process the story records is that of the narrator gradually coming to understand, through the accumulation of historical documents, that his initial emotional response was inappropriate.

Dacre resembles Holmes in his egotism and decadence, and, more importantly, his penchant for unearthing mysterious histories using physical and documentary evidence. The narrator first meets Dacre because "my researches in the Assyrian Room of the British Museum had been conducted at the time when he was endeavouring to establish a mystic and esoteric meaning in the Babylonian tablets" (Doyle 1902a, 17). While the narrator is a reputable historian, and Dacre is a dilettantish occultist, both have a reverence for historical documents, particularly those associated with the great empires of the past. Dacre's rooms are "lined with the shelves of his books, and the cases of his museum" (19), and he has spent a fortune collecting "[b]ooks, weapons, gems, carvings, tapestries, images – there is hardly a thing here which has not its history, and it is generally one worth telling" (19). Doyle makes it clear that Dacre's motives may be suspect, but his methods are entirely reliable. His initial method of elucidating history through the "science of dreams" (19) depends on vision and emotion; visions with some historical accuracy can be accessed by sleeping beside an "object which has been intimately associated with any supreme paroxysm of human emotion" (20). However, he is not satisfied that his research is complete until he has corroborated this occult means of historiography with legitimate empirical research into documents and artifacts. The interchange between Dacre and the narrator over the course of the story involves the comparison of the dream to the historical record, until the first can be validated by the second.

4. PICTURING TORTURE

Francis O'Gorman has demonstrated Conan Doyle's close engagement with the periodical publishing market that enabled his literary success (2006, 53), noting how he "drew attention to the material form of his publications as part of the modern media itself" (2006, 59). Such attention is apparent in his complaint about *The Strand's* illustration crowding out his story. "Leather

Funnel' was literature, or as near literature as I can ever produce. It is not right to print such a story two words to the line on each side of an unnecessary illustration. It's bad economy to spoil a £200 story by the intrusion of a 3 guinea engraving". (Lellenberg *et al.* 2007, 576). The relative value of words and pictures can be measured in both artistic and monetary terms. While Doyle was known to be frequently dissatisfied with the illustrations of his stories, partly for fear they would spoil the endings (Lellenberg *et al.* 2007, 516), his dislike of pictures and cartoons is particularly marked in *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*. Newspaper cartoons, he argues, are virtually always misleading, and must be countered with letters, journals, official reports, or other forms of written evidence. The "myth" of war crimes at the Battle of Elandslaagte, for example, "arose from a sensational picture in an illustrated paper" (Doyle 1902b, 110). The false charge that South African "natives" had been encouraged by the British to loot Boer homes "has been the subject of many effective cartoons upon the Continent, [and] is as absurd as most of the other works of the same artists" (72). Doyle makes little distinction between cartoons and photographs, which he considers equally unreliable. In her discussion of Doyle's critique of New Journalism, Amy Wong has noted Doyle's "skepticism about the truth value of photojournalism" (2015, 64). When two inmates of a refugee camp are accidentally shot, Doyle complains, "so well known a paper as the German 'Kladderadatsch' is not ashamed to publish a picture of a ruined farm with dead women strewed round it, and the male child hanging from the branch of a tree" (1902b, 104). He is appalled, but not surprised, by the "unscrupulous" use of photographs of children to distort the truth.

It is worthy of record that the portrait of an emaciated child has been circulated upon the Continent and in America as a proof positive of the horrors of the concentration system. [...] This particular portrait however was, as I am credibly informed, taken by the British authorities on the occasion of the criminal trial of the mother for the ill-usage of the child. The incident is characteristic of the unscrupulous tactics which have been used from the beginning to poison the mind of the world against Great Britain. (92)

For Doyle, the most unscrupulous of journalistic tactics always seem to involve visual, rather than print, media.

Violence against women is, Doyle suggests, an irresistible topic for deceptive cartoonists. The "famous Eloff myth", concerning the murder of President Kruger's niece "gave material for many cartoons and editori-

als" (102). The charge that the British had used Boer women as human shields in a skirmish at Graspan "afforded excellent material for the caricaturists of the Fatherland. The picture of rows of charming Boer maidens chained in the open with bloodthirsty soldiers crouching behind them was too alluring for the tender-hearted artist. Nothing was wanting for a perfect cartoon – except the original fact" (103).

In "The Leather Funnel", the narrator's initial misapprehension of the Aubray case is based on his occult visual apprehension of the event as a sort of cartoon. His response is understandably emotional, demonstrating a tender-hearted response to the "supreme paroxysm of human emotion" (Doyle 1902a, 20) the scene displays, and his recounting of the vision lays great emphasis on his emotions.

My heart sank within me as I saw these ominous preparations, and yet I was held by the fascination of horror, and I could not take my eyes from the strange spectacle. A man had entered the room with a bucket of water in either hand. Another followed with a third bucket. [...] At the same moment one of the varlets approached with a dark object in his hand, which even in my dream filled me with a vague feeling of familiarity. It was a leathern filler. With horrible energy he thrust it – but I could stand no more. My hair stood on end with horror. (22)

Such a response, Doyle implies, is what one would expect from a naïve reader of Stead's "Blood and Hell" (1902b, 84) journalism, and, to be fair, Stead asserts that "incredulous horror" (Stead 1901, 10) is the appropriate response to reports from the concentration camps. For the narrator's vision to fully reflect "the original fact" (Doyle 1902b, 103) of Mme Aubray's trial, however, it must be corrected through a historical grounding in documentary evidence that places the horrifying cartoon in context. It seems likely that Doyle was particularly irritated by illustrations in both *The Strand* by Amédée Forestier and *McClure's* by André Castaigne, which portray Mme Aubray as a powerless victim surrounded by cruel, uniformed men. Castaigne's illustration of the dream, in particular, presents her in a posture of near-crucifixion with multiple authority figures looming above her and forcing the funnel into her mouth (Doyle 1902a, 24). Since the structure of the story is meant to move the reader from initial outrage at an innocent woman's brutal torture to acceptance of a guilty woman's just punishment, such images can only have the same distorting impact as false renderings of South African battles by "tender-hearted artists" and "caricaturists of the Fatherland" (Doyle 1902b, 103). That even

such a monster as Mme Aubray can be easily turned into a hero by simple-minded public opinion is made clear in the story, when the narrator recalls “that the bravery of her end had done something to atone for the horror of her life, and that all Paris had sympathized with her last moments, and blessed her as a martyr within a few days of the time when they had cursed her as a murderess” (1902a, 25).

The story concludes with close attention to the funnel itself, upon which Dacre and the narrator identify the victim’s initials, placed there by her executioner, and some mysterious marks on the leather. The text, Dacre explains, was engraved by the government official in charge, to identify it as “a grim souvenir. It was not often that a marchioness of France underwent the extraordinary question. That he should engrave her initials upon it for the information of others was surely a very ordinary proceeding upon his part” (1902a, 25). The initials serve as a label, an evidence tag created by the head of police, to establish the object’s status as a legal artifact “for the information of others”. The non-alphabetical marks on the funnel serve a similar function, and they come there in an equally official, although less voluntary, manner. “[F]ive inches above the brass tip the narrow neck of the leather funnel was all haggled and scored, as if someone had notched it round with a blunt knife” (19). The mystery of these marks is unveiled in the story’s last lines, when Dacre remarks “‘She was a cruel tigress, [...]. I think it is evident that like other tigresses her teeth were both strong and sharp’” (25). The marks on the funnel are not textual evidence, but material evidence created by the victim’s body in her death throes. Dacre characterizes them as predatory, demonstrating the same man-killing power that made her punishment appropriate, and offering the narrator the most tangible evidence that her crimes were in proportion to her penalty.

5. CONCLUSION

In her analysis of the relationship between torture and language in Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony”, Isabel Capeola Gil argues that,

Semiotic torture, then, becomes in the end its own purpose. It does not seek to extract a confession, a truth, that the defendant cannot strive to acquire but acts to submit the body to the totalitarian grip of the law of language. (Gil 2016, 134)

Language, in such a proceeding, has the effect of physical force; in Gil's terms, it can "grip". Both, the "extraordinary question" which appears in the story, and *peine forte et dure* mentioned by Stead, are forms of torture that involve forcing prisoners to speak crucial information, upon which the status of their legal case depends, while being subject to bodily violations that make speaking impossible – filling the mouth with water and compressing the chest with heavy weights. Such a mode of interrogation demonstrates Gil's point that state torture is not actually attempting to extract truth from its victim. The marks on the funnel suggest that not only Mme Aubray's own words, but her lack of words, the nonverbal scraping of her teeth against it, become part of the official story. Gil identifies in literary representations of torture, however, a "fragile sanctuary for a flawed humanity" in which "the author and the reader are willing once again to be exposed to each other and to go on trying, to go on relentlessly trying and resisting" (138). For Doyle, by contrast, real literature involves an alliance between the reader and social institutions, including the courts, the military, and various government agencies, because they are more likely to offer access to facts. Throughout *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, Doyle demonstrates a profound confidence in the good intentions of the everyday British soldier, and of the government institutions he represents, and seeks out discourses that are not characterized by paroxysms of emotion, but by the clarity of thought and preponderance of objective evidence typical of official government writing. The operation of political language in *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, and of literary language in "The Leather Funnel", both serve to present a truth that is coherent because it does not express a victim's sufferings, or the emotional responses of those who observe, or dream they observe, them, but because it is fully elided with the words and documents of state power.

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ABSTRACT

Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Leather Funnel" is a brief, rather ghastly tale that centers on a dream vision of a woman being brutally tortured. Doyle's other major publication of 1902, *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct*, was his defense of the British army against claims made by W. T. Stead in *Methods of Barbarism* (1901) that Boer women and children had been the victims of war crimes and systematic torture. Doyle structures the story so that the narrator's naïve response of moral outrage at seeing a woman being tortured gradually develops into a more sophisticated understanding of justice as his vision is placed in its proper legal and historical context. Taken together, "The Leather Funnel" and *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* offer useful insights into Doyle's understanding of the relationship between literature and history, and the deployment of state power through written language.