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Dr Richard Storer, Leeds Trinity University, Brownberrie Lane, Horsforth, LEEDS, LS18 5HD
Email: r.storer@leedstrinity.ac.uk

Strange Case of Montagu Jekyll: Besant and Rice as a source for Stevenson

In an article in *N&Q* in 2005, Andrew Nash noted an 'explicit allusion', in Robert Louis Stevenson's Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886), to Walter Besant's novel All Sorts and Conditions of Men (1882).[1] The allusion is in Stevenson's initial description of the London square where Henry Jekyll's house wears 'a great air of wealth and comfort', in contrast to most of the other houses which are 'decayed from their high estate and let in flats and chambers to all sorts and conditions of men.'[2] Although the phrase 'all sorts and conditions of men' would have been familiar to nineteenth-century readers as a phrase from the Book of Common Prayer, Nash argues that understanding Stevenson's use of the phrase as a more explicit reference to Besant helps to illuminate Stevenson's way of describing London as a city with two different identities, one largely hidden from the other, which is a theme of Besant's novel and of obvious significance for Stevenson's tale of a divided self. In support of this interpretation, Nash notes that Stevenson mentions his admiration for All Sorts and Conditions of Men several times in his letters. He also notes that one of Stevenson's short unfinished earlier works, 'Diogenes at the Savile Club', provides evidence that Stevenson was aware of Besant's earlier profile as one half of the unusual 'Besant and Rice' novel-writing partnership, which enjoyed considerable success from 1872 until Rice's death in 1882, with nine novels and three collections of stories, all reprinted numerous times.

William Gray anticipates Nash in also noting that 'Diogenes at the Savile Club', which introduces a character called 'Besant-and-Rice' as a leading literary figure, provides an early link between Besant and Stevenson. But his attention, like that of most scholars who make this connection, is on the Besant-Stevenson relationship after Besant 'went solo' in 1882 – the most interesting point of indirect contact between the two authors seeming to be Besant's lecture 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) which famously prompted Henry James to write his essay of the same name and Stevenson to reply with 'A Humble Remonstrance'.[3] Gray not unfairly describes Besant and Rice as 'the best-selling (but

1 Andrew Nash, 'Walter Besant's All Sorts and Conditions of Men and Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', N&Q, 52 (2005), 494-7.

2 Robert Louis Stevenson, Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, ed. Richard Dury (Edinburgh, 2004), 18.

3 William Gray, Robert Louis Stevenson: A Literary Life (Basingstoke, 2004), 12, 18-20.

now forgotten) literary partnership' and this is the most notice their co-authored works usually receive in accounts of nineteenth-century literature. No-one seems to have considered whether Stevenson's awareness of Besant and Rice may have yielded other fruit. And yet hidden in one of the partnership's last publications, The Ten Year's Tenant and Other Stories (1881), is an intriguing story which potentially has more significance as a source for Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde than any of Besant's later works. This is the title story, 'The Ten Years' Tenant', which describes a scientist who has acquired a supernatural power, who confesses his whole story before meeting a tragic end, and who has the same surname as Stevenson's famous title character: Jekyll.

Most of the Besant and Rice short stories published in their three collections were first published in periodicals, for example in Christmas numbers of All the Year Round. No earlier source before 1881 has been identified for 'The Ten Years Tenant', however, and reviewers do not seem to have been as familiar with it as they were with the other two stories in the collection. Indeed, Stevenson would not have needed to read the story itself for the name of the main character, Montagu Jekyll, to register; he need only have read the review in The Saturday Review, which summarises the opening of the story in some detail.[4] The essence of the story is Faustian. Montagu Jekyll has been endowed with a way to arrest the aging process: as long as he performs an unspecified process on a certain date every ten years, he will always remain the same age and be immune to illness or aging. When he is first described, though he appears only middle-aged, he is in fact over two hundred years old. He is not immune to accidental death, however, and eventually succumbs to this when he is run over by a hearse the day after he tells his story to the unnamed lawyer narrator. The detail which resonates most strongly with Stevenson's story is, of course, the surname Jekyll itself. But there are a number of other correspondences which suggest that the re-appearance of this name may have been partly motivated by associated memories of the Besant and Rice story. Three of these are particularly worth noting. First, the power which Montagu Jekyll has acquired, like that of his counterpart in Stevenson's story, is not perpetual but dependent for its renewal on active completion of a physical process - and in both stories the process goes wrong. Besant and Rice made no attempt to describe the process, but Jekyll twice fails to complete it and on each occasion instantly becomes ten years older; that it involves chemistry in some way, as in Stevenson's story, is implied by the fact that Jekyll originally acquired the power through his service to a seventeenth-century alchemist and speaks of 'the infinite possibilities of chemistry'.[5] Secondly, much of Montagu Jekyll's story is taken up with a description of the difficulty of keeping his power a secret. After he

[4] Anon, 'The Ten Year's Tenant', The Saturday Review, 26 February 1881, 280-2.
[5] Walter Besant and James Rice, The Ten Year's Tenant and Other Stories (London, 1881) I, 61.

marries, he has to pretend to grow old with his wife, while physically remaining in his prime, and this results in a scene in which his elderly wife catches a glimpse of him in his true form and suffers such 'terror and amazement' that the shock kills her.[6] This scene has an obvious counterpart in the penultimate chapter of Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, in which Doctor Lanyon is fatally traumatised by witnessing Hyde transforming back to Jekyll. Finally, the spectacle of moral degeneration is an explicit theme of 'The Ten Year's Tenant', as it has always been assumed to be in Stevenson's narrative. In formulating their story, it does not appear that Besant and Rice were quite so interested in devising a 'vehicle . . . for that strong sense of man's double being' as Stevenson later said he was.[7] Their story seems to be rather a meditation on modernity encountering the historical past. Nevertheless, the emergence of a darker side to Jekyll is one result of this encounter. When he first acquires his power, Montagu Jekyll intends to use it to benefit mankind by devoting hundreds of years to continuous medical research. But he is soon distracted by 'the world with all its pleasures',[8] defers his research indefinitely, and gratifies his basic desires for comfort and sex by marrying and then abandoning seventeen wives. Hearing him describe this course of life without any apparent remorse or sympathy, the narrator reflects on the 'cruel, heartless, unheeding callousness' into which Jekyll has descended as a result of acquiring his power.[9] Cruelty and callousness are of course explicit qualities of Stevenson's Hyde in the later story.

There is no direct evidence that Stevenson read 'The Ten Year's Tenant' in 1881. But there is, as already noted, plenty of evidence that Stevenson was acquainted with Besant, and aware of Besant and Rice as authors, around the time the story was published. In his Autobiography (1901) Besant twice mentions Stevenson: first as one of the brilliant young writers whose conversation he enjoyed at the Savile Club in the 1870s; and then as a member of the Rabelais Club, the literary dining club which Besant founded in late 1879.[10] It is doubtful whether the peripatetic Stevenson could actually have attended many Rabelais Club dinners – and certainly not the first, as in late 1879 he was in Monterey, California. One of the stories he wrote there, however, 'The Pavilion on the Links', contains another curious instance of a main character with a surname previously used in a Besant and Rice narrative. In The Golden Butterfly (1876), the most popular of the Besant and Rice novels, Cassilis is the surname of the elderly financier with a beautiful younger consort. In Stevenson's 'The

[6] Besant and Rice, The Ten Year's Tenant, 98.

[7] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Chapter on Dreams', in Robert Louis Stevenson, Across the Plains, With Other Memories and Essays (London, 1892), 249. This essay was first published in Scribner's Magazine, January 1888.

[8] Besant and Rice, The Ten Year's Tenant, 80.

[9] Besant and Rice, The Ten Year's Tenant, 120.

[10] Autobiography of Sir Walter Besant (London, 1901), 176, 240.

Pavilion on the Links' Cassilis is the surname of the man who is protecting an elderly financier and his beautiful daughter. Since Cassilis was also a name in the Scottish peerage, it could have occurred to Stevenson for reasons which had nothing to do with Besant and Rice. But if he knew The Golden Butterfly, there is good reason why he might later have recalled details from it. The opening chapters of The Golden Butterfly, in which the name Cassilis is introduced, are set in California and include a scene in which a man is pursued by a bear and rescued by a hunter. One of the memorable characters Stevenson met while adventuring in California was a bear-hunter who rescued him when he had fallen dangerously ill.

As already mentioned, the fragment 'Diogenes at the Savile Club' presents the most interesting evidence of Stevenson's awareness of Besant and Rice. In this very short draft of a satirical sketch, thought to have been written in the early 1880s, the classical philosopher Diogenes is imagined as a tourist in literary London, still engaged in the search for an honest man (in this version just 'a Man') with which he is associated in philosophical tradition. He is directed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to 'ask for my friend Besant-and-Rice' at the Savile Club: 'He'll see you through'. When Diogenes does so, he is met by a 'manly form' with 'strong hands' who welcomes him into the club. Diogenes hesitates:

> "But are you Besant or Rice?" inquired the sage.
> "I am both," said Besant. Diogenes was cowed; without another word he followed the famous novelists into the Smoking Room of the Savile Club . . . [11]

A number of better-known authors, including Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde, are briefly caricatured in the remainder of the fragment. But what is most striking about the sketch is the oddly prominent role assigned to 'Besant-and-Rice': first recommended by the Archbishop of Canterbury, then imagined as presiding over the other authors, introducing Diogenes and proposing a toast. 'Besant-and-Rice' is in fact the only member of the Club who speaks in the text. This does not correspond at all to Besant's later account of his involvement in the Club, where he only attended on Saturdays and deliberately avoided the Smoking Room – and where James Rice, a shadowy figure, was not

[11] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Diogenes at the Savile Club', in Robert Louis Stevenson, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde; Fables; Other Stories and Fragments ('Tusitala Edition', Heinemann, 1924), 195-197. The two 'Diogenes' fragments, 'Diogenes in London' and 'Diogenes at the Savile Club', were first published, as separate items, in 1920 and 1921, but the most convenient way to access them is via the 1924 'Tusitala Edition' of Stevenson's works, as referenced here. For the suggestion of 'a date in the early 1880s' see Roger Swearingen, The Prose Writings of Robert Louis Stevenson (Basingstoke, 1980), 196.

even a member. Stevenson's reason for foregrounding Besant and Rice in his sketch may have been partly to satirise their popularity, but it seems his real interest was in making jokes about the enigma of their partnership – a common talking point at the time.[12] Besant is both singular ('I' or 'He') and plural ('the famous novelists'), his popular dual profile confounding Diogenes's quest for a singular 'Man'. These references may help to date 'Diogenes at the Savile Club' more precisely to 1881, since James Rice died in early 1882, still in his thirties, and for Besant to say 'I am both' after this event would seem a joke in poor taste. It is more likely that it was written while Rice was still alive and new books in the 'Besant and Rice' name, including The Ten Years' Tenant and Other Stories, were still appearing and prompting speculation about how the partnership actually worked.[13] What 'Diogenes at the Savile Club' suggests, then, is not only that Stevenson was aware of Besant and Rice as authors, but that he particularly associated them with the paradox of 'double being' that he later explored in more gothic mode in Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. In the 'Diogenes' sketch, 'I am both' is a joke implying that 'Besant and Rice' might have been just the trading name of Besant writing alone - an easy way of solving the puzzle of their apparent 'double being'. In Stevenson's later story, 'I am both' is exactly what Jekyll is unable to say when referring to Hyde: 'He, I say – I cannot say, I'.[14] The unsettling mystery of Jekyll's relation to Hyde – whether as a completely different personality he cannot control, or as the repellent true form of his own personality – is what generates much of the enduring power of the narrative.

Few would deny that Stevenson's inspired choice of the name 'Jekyll' for his central character, with its slightly alien-looking archaic spelling, its rhythmic fit with '. . . and Hyde', and its potential to yield the hidden word *kill*, has also played a part in the success of the narrative. Where did the inspiration come from? Since by Stevenson's own account the story had its origins in a dream, it is eminently possible that more than one memory of the name 'Jekyll' may have played a part in the dream work which produced it. In the very first chapter of Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, the surname is pointedly endowed with significance when Enfield refers to it obliquely (and prophetically) as 'very well known and often printed.'[15] In fact the 1881 census identifies only 47 individuals living in Britain with that exact surname; although to this total should be added the family of the higher-profile military officer and diplomat, Sir Herbert Jekyll. It has been suggested, alternatively, that

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12 On speculation about Besant and Rice, see Richard Storer, '"Another Like Me": The Literary Partnership of Walter Besant and James Rice', in Kevin Morrison, ed., Walter Besant: The Business of Literature and the Pleasures of Reform (Liverpool, forthcoming).

13 Another way of dating the 'Diogenes' fragments is via a series of jokes in 'Diogenes in London' about Mrs Braddon's abridged cheap edition of the works of Scott – a literary talking point in 1881 (see for example 'Miss Braddon's Waverley Novels', The Saturday Review, 1 October 1881, 425-7).

14 Stevenson, ed. Dury, Jekyll and Hyde, 70

15 Stevenson, ed. Dury, Jekyll and Hyde, 10.

Stevenson may have found both names, 'Jekyll' and 'Hyde', in print in a membership list of the Society of Telegraph Engineers.[16] Literary precedents are rarer: in his edition of the story Richard Dury notes that the name 'Jekyl' was used for two minor characters in earlier nineteenth-century novels, by Scott and Le Fanu, but does not identify any previous instances of 'Jekyll'.[17] In this context, 'The Ten Years' Tenant', a Faustian narrative about a scientist called Jekyll, published only four years before Stevenson wrote his story and at a time when he took a particular interest in the odd dual identity of its authors, Besant and Rice, should certainly be added to the list of possible origins of this potent name.

RICHARD STORER

Leeds Trinity University

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[16] Sarah Hales, 'The Strange origins of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', The Institution of Engineering and Technology Member News, 18 March 2013. Available at: www.theiet.org/membership/members-news/32

[17] Richard Dury, 'Explanatory Notes', in Stevenson, ed. Dury, Jekyll and Hyde, 78.