

Magic and the occult in kim



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In order to unpack Kipling's complicated stance toward English imperialism in his novel *Kim*, one can begin with an investigation of the role of the occult in the novel. Some critics have read Kipling's use of the occult as fantasy, a tool for bridging the gap between his limited experience as an Anglo-Indian and the multiplicity of voices, religions, and traditions in India. Problematically, then, the world of magic (like youth) must be guarded and secured by the way of the gun or imperialistic paternity. Kim, as a spy for the British Raj, is protector of the magical, Orientalized East. But how much of that magic is simply illusion? As the Lama's chela or guide, he is both spiritual subordinate and protector, necessary to the Tibetan Buddhist's physical survival. Kim is superior to the Lama in the ways of the world "obtaining food, managing money, and, later, after he is given a Western education, in mathematics and penmanship. It is Kim, not the Lama, who is the hero of Kipling's book; and it is through his perspective that we, as readers, are allowed to experience India. From an Orientalist standpoint, the most effective colonial rulers are those who, like Kim, know India, and are thus able to appropriate mystical knowledge in order to support the machinations of Empire. Following from this idea, how do Kim's encounters with magic help determine his ultimate position as a British spy? It is by probing the connection between magic, colonialism, and modernity, that we can interpret Kim's several important magical, or occult, experiences in the text. First is his encounter with Lurgan Sahib, and the incident of the conjuring up of the smashed jar. Kim, terrified, finds that he can resist Lurgan Sahib's magic by controlling his thoughts and meditating on the multiplication table in English. Lurgan Sahib asks him, "And then what did you do? I mean, how did you think?" Kim

Kim's response is: "Oah! I knew it was broken, and so, I think, that was what I thought it was" and it was broken. (207) The multiplication tables are a symbol of Western rationalism; following Descartes, Kim knows that he saw the jar break and thus it must be broken. Or, only when one allows himself to believe in magic, can one be swept away by it. Another moment in which Kim encounters the occult is when Mahbub Ali brings him to the spiritualist, Huneefa, whose task it is to put a protective spell on him. Again, West is pitted against East, as Mahbub Ali says (of Kim), "Allah! How he fought! We should never have done it but for the drugs. That was his white blood, I take it!" (239). In other words, according to Mahbub Ali there is something about the Westerner that makes him naturally, biologically impervious to the occult. Phrases like "white blood," a paradox, are typical of 19th century scientific racism, classifications of character based on so-called "race." Following this logic, Huneefa and Mahbub Ali must drug the Irish Kim in order to make him susceptible to the occult ritual and even then, the question of how susceptible he really is remains at stake. As many critics have noted, Kim makes comedy out of the often tragic consequences of colonial rule in India. In this sense, one can see the way in which Salman Rushdie perhaps takes Kim as his point of departure in *Midnight's Children*, another tragicomedy in which the comedy half arises from deflating and pin-pricking at what are seen as Eastern superstitions and often resultant culture clashes between East and West. Kim, a great hustler, impersonator, and spy, succeeds in passing himself off as having spiritual powers, such as when, thanks to insider knowledge, he informs a regiment that war is breaking out in the North and is mistaken for a prophet, or when his Western medical kit allows him to

have the "magical" powers of healing. And, yet, even as the occult is deconstructed or, as critic Max Weber would have it, "disenchanted," the failures of human rationality are so well-articulated by Kipling that one cannot help but consider the wisdom of finding an alternative to the Western overreliance on rationality through the five senses. Put another way, even though everything mysterious can be explained, human judgment often fails to perceive the truth, requiring in many cases a leap of faith. Finally, how does the very unspiritual Great Game of British Imperial spying relate to the Lama's mystical Wheel of Life, both of which Kim seems to follow? Both the Great Game and the Wheel of Life are monolithic systems which encompass all worlds in order to structure a worldview and confer meaning on one's life. One can conclude with three questions, which are perhaps the most provocative and challenging aspects of interpreting Kim. What does it mean that the Lama glimpses the long-sought River of the Arrow at the end of the novel? What is implied by the last scene, in which the Lama claims that "the Search is ended"? Why give the Lama the final lines of the book? (383) These are questions that certainly do not have easy answers but, in exploring them, we can begin to do justice to the role of magic and the occult in Kipling's work.