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Middle Class Anxiety in “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe”

“Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” was published by *The London Mercury* in 1918 and would later be included as the seventh story in Ernest Bramah’s 1922 fantasy anthology, *Kai Lung’s Golden Hours*. Though published in a well-respected journal alongside the likes of Virginia Woolf and Siegfried Sassoon, “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” has little in common with the modernist trends of the early twentieth century. The story features no stream of consciousness, experimentation in new styles, epiphany, commentary on sexuality or gender, evocative imagery, reference to the Great War, or religious symbolism. In fact, it seems safe to suppose that Woolf would have handed Bramah the disdainful label of “materialist” had his name been of enough consequence within respected literary circles to warrant her attention. As it was, Bramah’s primary genre was pulp fiction, serialized adventure narratives in the vein of John Carter and Conan the Barbarian. Where modernism was exclusive and elitist, Bramah’s stories were unabashed populist entertainment.

However, this is not to say that “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” is entirely without substance. In fact, contemporaries of Bramah, writing in the same genre, noted how, “[u]nlike most crime writers, [he] sometimes linked his stories to actual social problems of the period,” and “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” is no exception (“Ernest Bramah”). The rise of modernism coincided with that of the socialist movement, which had its beginnings in the Victorian Era, but hit its stride at the turn of the 20th century. Only a year before Bramah published “Wang-Ho and

the Burial Robe,” the Bolshevik Revolution had ousted the Russian Tsar with help from the Socialist Revolutionary Party, creating what would eventually become the Soviet Union (“Socialist Revolutionary Party”). The socialist movement had begun partly with Friedrich Engel’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, and was gaining steam in its country of origin, much to the anxiety of many in the middle class, including Bramah. At first glance, one could be forgiven for assuming “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” to be a Marxist fable about proletariat hero, Cheng-Lin, triumphing over his wealthy employer, Wang-Ho, and being freed from social stasis. But closer inspection reveals the story as a caution against socialism and an example of a middle-class fear linked to the establishment of fascist states in the wake of The Great War.

Bramah uses “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” as an opportunity to present and explore Marxist dynamics but with enough key differences to make his opposition to the ideology unmistakable, most obviously in regards to his treatment of economic inequality. “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” tells the story of Cheng-Lin, a young man who dreams of “[passing] the examination of the fourth degree of proficiency in the great literary competitions, and thereby qualify for a small official post” (Bramah 534). Theoretically, these examinations are open to anybody, but realistically, the exorbitant entrance fee, which Cheng-Lin cannot afford, places a glass ceiling above the head of anyone not already wealthy. The power of wealth is reinforced through textual analysis, which shows that the story most closely correlates the word “taels” (ancient Chinese currency used in the story) with the word “able” and “money” with “esteemed.” The wealthy are the ones who enjoy social status and who have the capacity for action, as contrasted to Cheng-Lin whose relative poverty has trapped him. In order to escape this trap, Cheng-Lin devises a plan to swindle Wang-Ho, a wealthy merchant for whom he works as a

scribe, out of the 500 taels he needs to break through the glass ceiling. This setup reflects the most basic of Marxist dynamics, that of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, but Bramah's twist is in the details of the two characters' situations.

The key difference is that Bramah frames the inequality in the story as cosmic rather than oppressive, a decision which removes Cheng-Lin from the moral high ground he would otherwise be granted. Though Wang-Ho is harsh employer who treats Cheng-Lin poorly, lowering his pay with only "my word has become unbending iron" to say for himself, he is not the reason for Cheng-Lin's poverty (537). He has never stolen from Cheng-Lin. Likewise, he has not become wealthy through exploitation. Wang-Ho made his money "advising those whose intention it was to hazard their earnings in the State lotteries," an ability which he has always had and only requires him to "close his eyes and become inspired" (533). By painting Wang-Ho's fortune as the result of luck and circumstance, Bramah acknowledges the socialist point that the question of whether or not wealth can actually be "earned" has validity (Wang-Ho certainly didn't break a sweat earning his), but refuses to concede that Cheng-Lin has any more right to that wealth than Wang-Ho does. In doing this, Bramah denies Cheng-Lin the moral high ground granted to Robin Hood figures whose stealing is justified by the fact that those they rob from are thieves themselves. Wang-Ho is lucky, true, (so lucky that he once "predicted the success of every possible combination of [lottery] numbers), but that does not make him guilty (534).

Bramah's subversion of the proletariat hero continues with the revelation that Cheng-Lin's plan hinges on using his literacy to fool Wang-Ho, who is illiterate. Until this point, money has been the absolute source of power in "Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe," but Cheng-Lin exposes this as false by using a doctored contract to part Wang-Ho from his 500 taels (Bramah 542). Power, it turns out, is tied to knowledge and capacity more tightly than to money and

status. Wang-Ho's luck has gotten him far in life, but it cannot stand against a capable opponent actively working to take advantage of him. Textual analysis supports this, painting Cheng-Lin as an active agent rather than a passive victim by noting the strong correlation between his name, Lin, and the word "replied." Forty-seven times other characters reply to Cheng-Lin which suggests that he is the one imposing his will on the story; he is the one that all the other characters react to. Traditional models of power are of no use to Wang-Ho who, despite the "many weapons which he always wore," his wealth, and his connections with the local government, is powerless against Cheng-Lin. Convinced he is the underdog, Cheng-Lin never doubts that his actions are justified, and nearly the entire last page of the story is spent trying to convince "short-sighted" readers that he has done nothing wrong (543). Having earlier acknowledged the existence of economic and social barriers to upwards mobility, Bramah now rejects the notion that these barriers are impenetrable, and the close textual correlation between "age" and "office" (as in political office) seems to imply that the obstacles in Cheng-Lin's way will eventually disappear as he grows older, but he robs Wang-Ho because he is too impatient to pay his dues before achieving success.

Perhaps Bramah's most nuanced observation with regards to societal dynamics appears in his treatment of tradition in the world of "Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe," particularly in the way he melds it with superstition. The fulcrum around which this melding occurs is the story's titular burial robe, a traditional garment explained to be worn by those approaching old age. To explain its exact purpose, I defer to Cheng-Lin:

"Hitherto it has been assumed that for a funeral robe to exercise its most beneficial force it should be the work of a maiden of immature years, the assumption being that, having a

prolonged period of existence before her, the influence of longevity would pass through her fingers into the garment and in turn fortify the wearer.” (539)

In response, Wang-Ho agrees with Cheng-Lin’s description of the robe, commenting that “the logic of it seems unassailable” (539). This is, of course, pure nonsense, even in the context of the story itself. No article of clothing has the power to lengthen its owners lifespan. However, the nonsensicality of the burial robe’s supposed powers has not prevented a thriving industry from springing up around it, as evidenced by the Golden Abacus, a revered establishment dedicated to producing them. Tradition, Bramah seems to imply, is superstitious and arbitrary by nature, but its effect on the real world is as tangible as the robe itself. That this statement about the arbitrary but practical nature of tradition also applies to social status is made obvious from the story’s first lines. “There was a time,” Bramah begins, “when it did not occur to anyone in this pure and enlightened Empire to question the settled and existing order of affairs. It would have been well for the merchant Wang-Ho had he lived in that happy era” (533). As explained earlier, Bramah understands that social status is largely the result of circumstance and luck (as represented by Wang-Ho), but he stands by it all the same, condemning from the start Cheng-Lin’s desire to rise from his place in the hierarchy.

At the core of Bramah’s vilification of the lower class and utilitarian view of tradition is a fear that the proletariat, if encouraged, will use their victim status to justify violence against the middle and upper classes. The tone Bramah’s narrator uses throughout “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” is decidedly flippant and noncommittal, seeming at first to take its subject matter very lightly. It is only when that same narrator offhandedly mentions Wang-Ho’s “self-ending” some years after the events of the story that the narrative begins to carry more weight (543). Like a *volta* in poetry, Bramah uses the revelation of Wang-Ho’s suicide to recontextualize the entire

story. Suddenly, his assertion in the first paragraph that disregarding tradition inevitably leads to “insurrection . . . indiscriminate piracy and bloodshed” must be taken at face value rather than as hyperbolic humor (533). In a very real sense, Wang-Ho’s death symbolizes the death of the middle class in the wake of the lower class’s rise. To what degree this fear can be attributed to paranoia and how much to Bramah’s own familiarity with socialist doctrines is difficult to say. Assuming that he had read *The Communist Manifesto* at some point allows us to suggest that Bramah’s fear could have been influenced by these lines from Section IV which read, “[The proletariat’s] ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win” (Marx and Engels). Further socialist writings such as *The “Dictatorship of the Proletariat”* by Joseph Weydemeyer appear to justify Bramah’s fears to an extent. Weydemeyer, a close friend of Marx’s, purports that “peaceful transitions” are impossible and that ensuring economic equality will “will require a concentrated power, a dictatorship at its head” (“Dictatorship of the Proletariat”).

The irony in this is that, as noted by George Orwell, Bramah’s fear of the lower class proved to be representative of a large-scale middle class anxiety which would allow for the rise of several fascist states in the early 20th century. As niche of an author as Bramah was, learning of his intersection with arguably the most well-known dystopian author of all time can come as a surprise to some. Whether or not Orwell ever read “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” is unclear, but Orwell was familiar enough with Bramah’s work to write a somewhat critical review of *The Wallet of Kai-Lung*, Bramah’s first book of short stories. Orwell did, however, write more extensively on Bramah’s novel, *The Secret of the League*, in his 1940 essay, “Prophecies of Fascism.” The book tells of the rise of a socialist government in Britain and its overthrow by a

cabal of wealthy elites known as The League. After completing their hostile takeover, “they abolish the trade union and institute a ‘strong’ non-parliamentary régime that we should now describe as Fascist (Orwell). Like “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe,” Orwell describes the tone of the book as “good natured,” apparently unaware of its own implications. In regards to the book as a whole, Orwell says:

The Secret of the League was written in 1907, when the growth of the labour movement was beginning to terrify the middle class, who wrongly imagined that they were menaced from below and not from above. As a political forecast it is trivial, but it is of great interest for the light it casts on the mentality of the struggling middle class. (Orwell)

In this way, “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” can be thought of as a sort of spiritual successor to Bramah’s earlier book, as both treat “the class struggle from the . . . middle class point of view.” Where Bramah’s fear was that the lower class would use their victim status to justify violence against the upper classes, Orwell ironically notices this very complex at work in Bramah’s own mind. “Why,” he asks, “should a decent and kindly writer like Ernest Bramah find the crushing of the proletariat a pleasant vision?” In viewing his own class as “threatened,” Bramah turns the lower class into acceptable targets in much the same way as Cheng-Lin does to Wang-Ho (Orwell).

Furthermore, the presence of this type of proto-fascist ideology in “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” could be an explanation for its admittedly confusing inclusion in *The London Mercury*, a well-respected literary periodical. The connection seems to be with J.C. Squire, the magazine’s editor at the time of the story’s publication. Though he had represented the British Labour Party (ironically the very party Bramah demolished in *The Secret of the League*) in the 1918 general election only two years prior, Squire’s decision to publish “Wang-Ho and the

Burial Robe” could be seen as proof that his views had already begun to swing rightwards. In 1933, Squire would meet with Benito Mussolini and by 1934 he had taken part in founding the January Club, a discussion group whose purpose was to attract support for the British Union of Fascists (Baldoli 103).

Though stylistically Edwardian, “Wang-Ho and the Burial Robe” possesses a fear and anxiety about the future which is decidedly modern. But while the pessimism at the heart of something like Yeats’s “Second Coming” or T.S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” is based in a fear that mankind will destroy itself through war (a common theme following The Great War), Bramah’s fear is destruction brought about as a result of the widespread adoption of new, radical ideologies that sought to build a new future by discarding the past. Like so many other writers, he was both right and wrong. While W.B. Yeats’s apocalyptic war did come to pass in the form of WWII, humanity soldiers on. Likewise, while Bramah’s phobia of an out of control political left would be realized by the Soviet Union and the Dekulakization efforts in which classicide was committed against the middle class on behalf of the lower class, Fascist states similar to the one espoused in *The Secret of the League* would arise in Germany and Italy and prove equally deadly.

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