

# Illicit Consumption: The Meanings and Public Perception of ‘Everyday’ Opium Use in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-century London

BY NAOMI ELLIOTT, McGill University

*George H. Duckworth’s journey into London’s East End began unremarkably. Wandering through the neighborhood, Duckworth was greeted by children playing in the streets, alleyways, and churches: a poor area, certainly, but not too noteworthy.*

*Not too noteworthy, that is, until Duckworth entered the home of Mr. Khodonobasch. An Indian national, “Mr. K” had allegedly come to London as a curry chef for the Indian Exhibition at Earl’s Court. Rather than return home, Khodonobasch instead took up residence with a white English woman, “Mrs K.,” and together the couple had carved out a unique way of life: selling and smoking opium. It was a strange state of affairs, especially for Mrs. K, who had once lived the life of a genteel lady. Now, she told Duckworth, she had fallen from grace, married to an Asian opium seller and unable herself to even clean the house without a hit from the opium pipe. Dressed in men’s clothes, Mrs. K fit in well with the overall dishevelment of the den, recalled by Duckworth as dark and cramped, as if their deviant pastime were cut off from London proper, and perpetually filled with sweet smoke that the homeowners had long ago ceased to notice. Business, too, was bad, Mrs. Khodonobasch tells Duckworth, but their abode was open to serve anyone the drug: Chinese, Lascars, whoever. Indeed, Mr. Khodonobasch was something of a connoisseur when it came to procuring opium. Prussian opium was the best, he assures Duckworth and Persian the worst, although he himself preferred to buy his opium from a local chemist, before utilizing it at home for reasons of pleasure, rather than*

*pain prevention. Conversation continues, but with much of the neighborhood left to investigate, Duckworth departs when the couple begin to smoke. As Duckworth reemerged into the street, the dark, pungent opium den returned to the shadows again. It had been, Duckworth recalls, a “most interesting” evening.<sup>1</sup>*

This story, recounted in an 1897 journal, is not among the more conventional pictures of late Victorian London. With Britain immersed in trade and imperial expansion, the country’s capital—the “heart of the Empire”—was a powerful global city, heralded by residents as the “political, moral, physical, intellectual, artistic, literary, commercial and social center of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Stories like Duckworth’s may seem at odds with such dynamism. Yet on closer inspection, these two images are not so far removed; indeed, Duckworth’s narrative points to several key themes associated with late nineteenth-century London. These include the prominence of empire and the cultural significance of commerce, embodied in the figures of the displaced opium trader and his Asian clientele, as well as more implicit con-

1 George H. Duckworth, George H Duckworth’s Notebook, personal record, London, 1897, BOOTH/B/346, London School of Economics and Political Science, Charles Booth’s London: Poverty Maps and Police Records, accessed February 13, 2017, <https://booth.lse.ac.uk/notebooks/b346#?cv=65&c=0&m=0&s=0&z=1583.097%2C199148%2C520.1503%2C309.3751>.

2 Richard Dennis, “Modern London,” in *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. 3, 1840-1950, ed. Martin Daunt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 96, 125-31.

cerns about race, gender, and the subversion of norms placed on oppressed groups. All these dynamics met in the shape of the infamous “opium den,” the purchasing of the drug, and its consumption. Viewed this way, Duckworth’s story is not at the margins of the imperial splendor of late Victorian London; it is, in a distorted way, its mirror image.

Much has been written about the development of British “consumer culture,” when commodities began to assume a more central role within the nation’s cultural life.<sup>3</sup> It is only recently, however, that historians have begun examining the influence of mass consumption in shaping Britons’ subjectivities. According to Joanna de Groot, while acts of consumption have some tangible aspects, they also “express values, identities, and the contests around them.”<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, historians have begun looking at this boom in mass consumption—particularly of goods associated with empire—to assess the values and meanings behind consumptive acts at the intersection of Britain’s material, political, and cultural life.<sup>5</sup> British imperialism was experienced domestically primarily in the form of commodities, from museum exhibits to soap packages. Using this analytical framework to bring together consumption and empire has prompted historians to consider what numerous imperial commodities meant to Britons and how these meanings subsequently shaped

daily life in London.<sup>6</sup>

Opium was one such imperial good. Procured through trade networks and associated with the Far East, opium was empire incarnate in the metropole.<sup>7</sup> Widely available in the form of patent medicine, and consumed by multiple segments of society for alternative ends, opium occupied a distinct position in late Victorian London and was naturally tied up with a range of values and meanings. In line with historians like de Groot, this paper will examine the impact and influence of non-medical opium on late Victorian and early Edwardian London society from the perspective of consumption. For the purposes of this paper, I define non-medical opiate use as the consumption of opium for purposes outside those promoted by mainstream professional medicine, covering uses that today might be deemed recreational, self-medicating, and so on. While this distinction comes with its gray areas, I utilize it as a way of bracketing off professional and institutional discourse surrounding opium, allowing me to analyze how opium consumption was understood as part of the fabric of everyday urban life and as a social practice bound up in wider value judgements and public discourses.

Up to this point, the scholarly literature on this topic has been surprisingly patchy. The majority of the work here has come not from historians, but from literary scholars, dissecting portrayals of opium use in fiction.<sup>8</sup> Historical scholarship on London and opium

---

3 Howard Padwa, *Social Poison: the Culture and Politics of Opium Control in Britain and France, 1821-1926* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2012), 5-60; Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11-12.

4 Joanna de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections: Reflections on Consumption and Empire,” in *At Home With the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, eds. Catherine Hall and Sonya O Rose (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 169.

5 de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections,” 166-167, 169; Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 12.

---

6 de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections,” 167-171.

7 de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections,” 171; Barry Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains: Opium and the Orient in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 20-1.

8 See: Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains*; Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

has been led by Virginia Berridge through her 1981 book *Opium and the People: Opium Use in Nineteenth-Century England*. The only comprehensive work on the subject to date, Berridge's book charts opium's changing fortunes within England as a whole. As instrumental as Berridge's work has been in shaping the historiography, much of her interest lies in opium's changing legal status, its position in medical discourse and practice, and the germinating concept of "opium addiction" and of the "opium addict" in the latter part of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Less has been written about consumption of opium and its cultural impact from the bottom up—that is, consumption which lay outside the realm of medical doctrine and, at times, the boundaries of social acceptability. The major work in this broad area is *Pleasures and Pains: Opium and the Orient in Nineteenth-Century Britain* by cultural studies scholar Barry Milligan, one of many works focused on literary sources relating London's opium consumption. While fictional portrayals of London's opium usage no doubt shaped public perceptions of the commodity and its consumption during this period, there were, by Milligan's own admission, other factors involved.<sup>10</sup> With this in mind, this paper will analyze opium in a way that bridges some of the aforementioned gaps in the literature. Building on Milligan, I will analyze the social meanings embedded in non-medical opium consumption as it was performed by London residents across race, class, and gender lines; unlike Milligan, however, I will also discuss the portrayals of opium consumption in London's everyday public discourse, specifically in non-fictional accounts. By analyzing perceptions of opium through a 'consumptive' lens, I aim to build upon the medical and political issues explored by Berridge, while pointing to the broader social impact that opium, as an impe-

rial commodity, had on day-to-day life in the Empire's capital city.

After providing an overview of opium's concrete presence in the city, particularly as an imperial and medical product, I will compare and contrast opium consumption in two of its most common iterations: within the opium den on the one hand, and non-medical consumption of opium originally intended for medicinal use on the other. My analysis will draw on a range of primary sources describing opium's presence in the city, particularly newspapers, magazines, and journal articles, as well as a number of court case records. Though often sensational in their descriptions, these sources were all written as non-fictional accounts, unlike those works analyzed by Milligan. I will utilize these sources to examine how London's opium consumption was understood in public discourse, and thereby grasp the various meanings that Londoners attached to opium consumption at this time. Much, though not all, of my analysis will focus on meanings attached to opium specifically as an imperial commodity, how Londoners made sense of this presence of empire in urban life, and how the drug shaped views of London as the heart of the empire. Through all this, I will illustrate the significant overlap in Londoners' views of these seemingly disparate forms of opium use within a city defined by segregation and difference.

### ***From East to West(minster): Opium's Journey to Victorian London***

Before discussing non-medical opium consumption in London, I will first attempt to sketch out how opium arrived to Britain's shores in the late nineteenth century, in the context of Britain's broader involvement with the commodity, as well as the changing official—that is, legal and medicinal—framework surrounding the drug's use. Before going further, it is vital to situate British opiate consumption within the wider international movement of opium in the era. For much

<sup>9</sup> Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 62-87, 113-173, xxxi-xxxiii.

<sup>10</sup> Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains*, 9-10.

of the nineteenth century, Britain was involved in orchestrating the international Indo-Chinese opium trade, in which opium grown in British India was sold to Chinese merchants for profit. This lucrative trade famously culminated in the mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars between Britain and China and, with Britain's victory, the formation of treaty ports and China's entrenchment in Britain's informal imperial network.<sup>11</sup> This international opium trade was an important project for the British Empire, and as a result the topic has remained prominent in popular memory as well as historical literature.<sup>12</sup> It is important for the purposes of this paper, however, to note that this international opium trade was *not* intended to supply British citizens with supplies of opium for domestic consumption. Rather, the opium bought and sold within England was procured in the nineteenth century by way of Britain's informal dominance of raw opium from the Ottoman Empire via British firms. Indian opium, in contrast, was purely a cash crop for consumption within Asia.<sup>13</sup>

British companies would transport Ottoman opium to Britain, where the drug would pass through the hands of wholesaling houses and brokers before appearing on store shelves up and down the country, ready for consumers to satisfy their hunger for poppy.<sup>14</sup> This trade of opium within Britain grew more important

over the course of the nineteenth century as domestic demand began to rise. Opium had of course been present in Britain for centuries, used as a medicine (and, one assumes, for alternate ends too); however, the drug entered a 'boom period' in Britain during the early to mid-nineteenth century as its medicinal uses expanded. In the 1830s, doctors prescribed opium for treating pain and restlessness; as the century progressed, the drug would also be recommended by medical professionals for bronchial infections and diabetes, as well as for the epidemics of cholera and dysentery that threatened Britain's urban centers throughout the period.<sup>15</sup> With the help of the country's informal imperial trading connections, British firms were able to meet the growing domestic demand for opium as it, and opium-derived patent medicines, became commonplace in British pharmacies and throughout British society.<sup>16</sup>

But commercial arrangements were not the only factors involved in structuring opiate use and in making opium the ubiquitous product that it was in nineteenth-century Britain. Prior to the 1868 Pharmacy Act, opium use in Britain was essentially unregulated.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, the drug itself was cheap and accessible; chemists and corner-store owners alike could and did sell opium in raw and processed forms at affordable prices.<sup>18</sup> Admittedly, this commercial freedom would not last indefinitely. Under the guise of "medical professionalization" and pressure from pharmacists, Parliament passed an act in 1868 which for the first time restricted the sale of opium and other potent drugs to

11 J. B. Brown, "Politics of the Poppy: the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade, 1874-1916," *Journal of Contemporary History* 8, no. 3 (1973): 98-101; Berridge Virginia, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England*, rev. ed. (London: Free Association Books, 1999), 173-4.

12 Brown, "Politics of the Poppy," 97-101; Joyce A. Madancy, "Smoke and Mirrors: Gender, Colonialism, and the Royal Commission on Opium, 1893-95," *The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 27, no. 1 (2013): 37-61.

13 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 3-7; de Groot, "Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections," 3-4; 171.

14 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 8-10, 21-7.

15 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 64-8; Madancy, "Smoke and Mirrors," 39-40.

16 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 72, 123-4.

17 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 3.

18 Virginia Berridge, "Opium Over the Counter in Nineteenth-Century England," *Pharmacy in History* 2, no. 3 (1978): 91-5.



qualified chemists.<sup>19</sup> For some Britons, however, these restrictions were not enough. Soon after the act passed, the country saw the rise of an organized “Anti-Opium Movement,” lobbying for an end to the international opium trade. While these activists focused exclusively on the Asian opium trade, rhetoric about opium’s destructive impact on China no doubt shaped how the drug was perceived at home, as suggested by the further drug restrictions put in place in the 1880s and 1890s.<sup>20</sup> These legal changes made opium even less accessible not only to consumers but to medical practitioners as well, and chemists began turning towards other drugs as alternatives. As a result, opium became less prevalent in Britain throughout the nineteenth century, rendering Victorian opium policy irrelevant by the First World War.<sup>21</sup>

As can be seen, opium had a complex institutional status in Victorian Britain: for a time, its medicinal justification and relatively unrestricted legal status allowed it to be widely used for numerous conditions. Additionally, its prominence and importance in imperial trade dictated relations between the West and the East. Of course, with opium becoming so ubiquitous in British society under the umbrella of the medical establishment, this shift also made it possible for consumers to use the drugs for a wider range of purposes than those originally intended by medical professionals. It is to these uses—non-medical and, as I suggest, illicit—to which I now turn.

### *Venture into the Opium Den*

The opium den became a fixture in Londoners’

imaginings during the nineteenth century, enshrined in a new genre of writing: the opium underworld exposé. Taking their cues from contemporary British travel writing in the imperial hinterlands, these works portrayed grand tales of individualistic exploration into the city’s uncharted territory.<sup>22</sup> Although these pieces were officially factual, their theatricality blurred the boundaries between anthropological reports and sensational stories, allowing their narratives to spread widely in newspapers, magazines, journals, and even non-fiction collections.

As I will discuss, these sources shared a number of tropes that have direct bearing on how we should understand contemporary perceptions of opium consumption in London. Yet it is worth noting that the sources I discuss were produced by and for a particular subsection of London society, and so the views depicted should not be taken as representative of all Londoners. Rather, they should be seen as a window into dominant (white, middle-class) British culture. Often, these exploratory narratives appeared in society magazines appealing to a highly respectable and learned clientele. These included James Platt’s “Chinese London and Its Opium Dens,” featured in an 1895 edition of *Gentleman’s Magazine*. This journal was typical in its content, with articles across as wide a range of intellectual interests as possible, such that Platt’s quasi-ethnographic piece was featured among articles about biology, history, law, and much more. Accordingly, opium den pieces like Platt’s were often times framed as stories of niche intellectual interest, and appealed to middle-class notions of self-improvement and edification. One should also note the gendered nature of the journal in which Platt’s writing appeared. It is no coincidence that every writer I discuss here is male; it is easy enough to

19 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 113–20; Elizabeth Lomax, “The Uses and Abuses of Opiates in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 47, no. 2 (1973): 173–5.

20 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 176–93; Lomax, “Uses and Abuses,” 73–80.

21 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 235–42, 225.

22 See Laura E. Franey, *Victorian Travel Writing and Imperial Violence: British Writing on Africa, 1855-1922* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003), 10.

see how these tales of subterranean travel may have appealed to masculine ideals of exploration and adventure that were enshrined in colonial travel writing.

While learned magazines were a common source of opium den accounts, similar narratives were present in other forms of print media. One such work is a book by “J” Salter entitled *Works Among the Asiatics and Africans in London*. Published by W. Partridge & Co. Publishing in 1896 in London, Salter’s book consistently appealed to the exploratory, ethnographic gaze, Platt’s piece did. While less heavy-handed in its scholarly bent than *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, Salter’s book was again directed towards and presumably acceptable to a particular subsection of London society that was largely white, literate, and middle class, with both an avid interest in self-education and a disposable income to spend on these written works. At the opposite end of the spectrum, opium den narratives also appeared in London’s daily presses. Short and brief, these pieces would have allowed for a quick consumption of these adventure tales, perhaps intended for readers with less wealth or who were less invested in educational self-edification; in my analysis, this perspective is represented by the anonymous piece “Opium Smoking at the East End of London,” published in the capital’s *Daily News* in 1864.

Because of their prevalence, works like these will direct my analysis towards what I term the illicit consumption of opium. Here, opium was consumed in different ways and for different ends than those ordained by the medical establishment which considered itself responsible for prescribing how opium *should* be used. As a result, non-medical opium consumption can be seen as an illicit activity as well as a trope for expressing generic anxieties of late Victorian London. Drug use within opium dens was viewed as consumption of a foreign experience, one challenging Londoners’ identities as imperialists, producers, and consumers, identities that were considered the foundations of

the city’s social order.

With the posthumous publication of Dickens’ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in 1870, the opium den exposé gathered momentum in British literature.<sup>23</sup> Within this novel, nineteenth-century readers were introduced the character of John Jasper, a loyal customer of a local opium den. Dickens’ colorful description of the den in the novel’s opening pages forged a powerful image of a seedy underworld that would resonate in British opium den literature for decades to come, a world where men and women lie, dishevelled and stuporous, in the dank half-light. Although Dickens’ vision of the opium den proved tenacious, the imagery it evoked, in fiction and sensationalized non-fiction alike, was focused overwhelmingly on London’s Asian population. It associated opium dens with Chinatown, and later the East End ‘Limehouse’ district, a far cry from the quaint, small-town world portrayed in *Edwin Drood*.<sup>24</sup> These pieces would tell of one experienced gentleman-journalist’s visit to the opium den, that most hidden part of London with which people have “strange yearning[s] to make more intimate acquaintance.”<sup>25</sup> After strolling through Chinatown’s dank and squalor, the writer would meet an ‘opium den master’ who prepared pipes and weighed opium for smokers, processes sometimes described in minute detail.<sup>26</sup> The space in which this occurred was not, writers emphasized, a salubrious one. Opium dens were dark, cramped, and decaying,

23 Louise Penner and Tabitha Sparks, *Victorian Medicine and Popular Culture* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015), 114.

24 John Seed, “Limehouse Blues: Looking for ‘Chinatown’ in the London Docks, 1900-1940,” *History Workshop Journal* 62 (2006): 69.

25 “East London Opium Smokers,” *London Society: an Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature For the Hours of Relaxation*, July 1868, 68.

26 “East London Opium Smokers,” 69–74; James Platt, “Chinese London and Its Opium Dens,” *Gentlemen’s Magazine*, 1895, 275–8.

places where respectability emerged “minus its watch and coat.”<sup>27</sup> Descriptive flair aside, the dens’ actual opium commerce was, for observers, almost humorously simple. For variable prices—a guinea, several pence—the smoker could buy a quantity of raw opium.<sup>28</sup> The scene set, writers were thus free to recount the dens’ most titillating side: the perverse process that was opium consumption, opium smoking.

It was, for white onlookers, a fantastically grotesque process. Because the majority of opium-den clients were Asian, these spaces were configured as the Orient writ small, spaces where writers could express their generic anti-Chinese prejudices. Smokers were described in animalistic terms, as, for instance, their eyes “gleam like a satisfied pig’s” at the sight of opium, a portrayal in keeping with late Victorian Sinophobia.<sup>29</sup> Sometimes, the apparently horrific act of opium smoking infuriated writers, inspiring recollections of “wretched rooms in the most wretched of all the houses, where yellow Chinese sit in the midst of filth... and stupefy themselves with opium.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, true to London’s imperialist zeal at the time, repulsion at the act of smoking opium was intermingled with fascination for experiencing—or consuming—this exotic, Oriental drama. One writer, for instance, half expected smok-

ers to include “eastern grandees” who “recline on sofas and indulge”; even the more mundane reality included smokers who were “picture[s] of happiness and ease.”<sup>31</sup> These cartoonish, patronizing portrayals suggest how much white Londoners viewed Asians as others within the city, and the foreignness of opium smoking within these displaced, Eastern corners seemed to confirm the Occident/Orient divide. Seen as portals into the East or the Empire, opium dens became the sites upon which Londoners could project their crude, simplistic thinking about Asian peoples and their ill-fitting positions in the Occidental city.

This perspective is not particularly surprising. As historians have noted, the late nineteenth century saw rising anxiety about racial health in “darkest England.”<sup>32</sup> With race and purity on Londoners’ minds, it is no wonder that London’s Asian peoples, with their ‘exotic’ opium smoking in secret Oriental spaces, became points of public interest and repulsion. This sense of racial health anxiety has been the primary lens through which historians have analyzed this public ill-feeling. Berridge, for instance, argued that opium den exposés “illustrated the structural tensions of late-Victorian society,” particularly on the lines of race and class.<sup>33</sup> While Berridge’s argument may be blunt, it is not inaccurate. Opium den exposés often portrayed these spaces as sites which brought depravity to the British people; James Greenwood, for instance, describes opium den regulars getting into fights with Londoners.<sup>34</sup> While not overtly racialized, these accounts, centered on the idea that opium dens lured white slum

27 Ritchie J. Ewing, *Days and Nights in London: or Studies in Black and Gray* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1880), 173; “East London Opium Smokers,” 69–70; J. Salter, *The East in the West or Work Among the Asiatics and Africans in London* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co., 1896), 26.

28 Maurice Vernon, “The Opium Dens of London,” *The Graphic* (London), November 30, 1907; Duckworth, George H Duckworth’s Notebook, 127; “East London Opium Smokers,” 71.

29 “East London Opium Smokers,” 70–1; Padwa, *Social Poison*, 57; Daniel Renshaw, “Prejudice and Paranoia: a Comparative Study of Antisemitism and Sinophobia in Turn-of-the-century Britain,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 50, no. 1 (2016): 49–53.

30 Thomas Archer, *The Pauper, the Thief, and the Convict*, 1865, quoted in Seed, “Limehouse Blues,” 62.

31 “East London Opium Smokers,” 68; Ritchie, *Days and Nights in London*, 177.

32 Berridge, *Opium and the People*; Renshaw, “Prejudice and Paranoia,” 35–42.

33 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, xxx, 198–205.

34 Seed, “Limehouse Blues,” 76–7; “East London Opium Smokers,” 88–9.

residents into the midst of dangerous foreigners, do suggest concern for London's population decline. Other writers followed the Social Darwinist line more closely. J. Salter even noted how one smoker "had become so deformed" that he verified "the popular idea of the Darwinian theory!"<sup>35</sup> Such accounts leave little doubt that the popular image of the opium den and perverse fascination for opium consumption within voiced more general concerns about national health in London slums.

The sheer scale of the paranoia driving these accounts becomes more apparent when one considers what the broader record beyond opium den public discourse indicates about London's late Victorian Chinatown. Despite what the volume of opium den exposés might suggest, London's Chinatown was a small place made up of a transient population of sailors, estimated at five to six hundred at any time, and serviced by restaurants and boarding houses.<sup>36</sup> Though these authors might have framed Limehouse as swarming with sinister opium dens, in reality this was likely not the case. In fact, some have estimated that writers were visiting just two dens, casual places where sailors smoked and socialized; even a contemporary observer conceded that Chinatown's dens probably only totaled a dozen.<sup>37</sup> While many factors went into imaginatively constructing these racially degenerate opium den worlds, the general state of Limehouse likely helped whip up public anxiety. Chinatown was a slum area with record high mortality rates, but was also one which was quite multicultural.<sup>38</sup> A place where death and decay intersected with racial exchange, Limehouse surely featured

in popular discourse about degeneration in "darkest England." Given all of this, it seems very plausible that, as Berridge suggests, opium den anxieties largely reflected more diffuse concerns about London at the time.

Yet, contrary to Berridge's argument, opium dens did not *only* reflect social anxieties. Viewing opium concretely as a commodity in London's economy, a commodity with specific qualities, it is evident that *acts* of opium consumption—purchasing and smoking—sparked views particular to this good. One such view concerned what Milligan calls the "reversal of Anglo-Oriental colonization," where the metropole became invaded by Asian others, destabilizing British identity.<sup>39</sup> This abstract process did materialize in nonfiction accounts of the day. Writers often suggested there to be a racial basis to Chinese opium-smoking—unlike the Chinese, white smokers "succumb" after one hit.<sup>40</sup> The unnerving corollary was that Londoners who smoked opium became more Chinese. Going further, Howard Padwa argues that these concerns arose from the way nineteenth-century Britons conflated a sense of Britishness with economic power: by rendering English smokers sedate and passive, opium made British people less industrious and therefore less imperiously British.<sup>41</sup> Again, there is truth to this; for instance, Maurice Vernon claimed there to be an opium den in a defunct but "world-famous shipping company" building, indicative of how Britishness, as defined by economic prowess, and Chineseness became unnervingly blurred via the opium den business.<sup>42</sup> Opium dens and the literal opium consumption they housed were not only a vehicle for expressing Londoners' general anxieties—they also

35 Salter, *The East in the West*, 44.

36 Ross G. Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination: Empires Intertwined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 193–5; Seed, "Limehouse Blues," 68.

37 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 200–1; Forman, "China and the Victorian Imagination," 198.

38 Seed, "Limehouse Blues," 63–8.

39 Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains*, 13, 113.

40 "Life in London's Chinese Quarter," *The Tatler*, August 5, 1908, 148.

41 Padwa, *Social Poison*, 53–6.

42 Vernon, "The Opium Dens of London."



created unique concerns for Londoners' imperial national identity.

What Padwa overlooks is that these ideas about imperialism and identity, and opium's threat to them, were also deeply gendered.<sup>43</sup> In these exposés, white men rarely make an appearance, yet white women are frequently described. Often in relationships with Chinese opium masters, these women are portrayed as pale, gracious, and thin, possessing an exaggeratedly English physicality.<sup>44</sup> Such caricatures may reflect honest fascination for cross-racial relationships; however, this was not first in observers' minds. Female smokers, through the act of consuming opium, were themselves 'consumed' by Asian men and Orientalized. By, in one writer's euphemistic words, "long consorting with Chinamen" these women had "acquired their habits."<sup>45</sup> This veiled tying of opium den women to cross-racial sex voiced concerns for London's racial degeneration, as discourse about Chinatown's "slit-eyed mongrels" can testify.<sup>46</sup> Viewed through a consumer lens, it is noteworthy that opium dens themselves commodified these women; associations between opium dens and prostitutes were rampant.<sup>47</sup> The commodification of respectable women, turning consumers into the consumed, again upset London's imperial identity. By allegedly luring English ladies into their (commercial) grasp, opium dens challenged male Londoners' identities as imperial hegemony, controlling the Empire's economic exchanges and stopping its subjects from infiltrating the heart of the Empire via London's women.

Indeed, opium eroded Londoners' faith in the hierarchical relationship between metropole and colony that was so crucial to their self-identity. It is no surprise that commerce was essential here, yet the actual dynamics were twofold. Sometimes, the opium den was a place of commercial trickery, challenging London's genteel consumer society. Despite gently mocking the informality of their economy, the opium den was also a place where Chinese business trickery was on full display. Despite having "no books, no wages... John [the master] was not a fool," Vernon notes darkly. Even smokers were privy to China's less-than-respectable commercial practices, as customers gleefully divulged how China secretly sent subpar tea to Britain.<sup>48</sup> Of course, such descriptions echo prevailing anti-Chinese racisms.<sup>49</sup> Yet they also reveal concern for how opium subverted Britain's imperial hegemony. Joseph Charles Parkinson describes another opium master, Yahee, making 'slaves' of British smokers, thanks to the opium knowledge that allowed him to monopolize the trade.<sup>50</sup> This notion that a Chinese man held a monopoly on the British, reversing power relations that governed the Asian opium trade, again demonstrates doubts about Britain's stronghold on the relationship between metropole and colony, in which London was at the very center. These dens, as commercial spaces, thus opened up unique concerns for the very foundations of the "heart of the Empire."

Not all parts of Londoners' identity, or the social order it supported, were shaped solely by empire. Yet opium and the threat of its exoticism were promi-

43 Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 4–7.

44 Harold Begbie, "The Pipe That Brings Peace: Inside a London Opium Den," *Answers*, May 27, 1905, 53; "East London Opium Smokers," 68–70.

45 "Opium Smoking at the East End of London," *Daily News*, 1864, quoted in Padwa, *Social Poison*, 56.

46 Forman, *China and the Victorian Imagination*, 193.

47 Padwa, *Social Poison*, 56–8.

48 Platt, "Chinese London and Its Opium Dens," 277; Vernon, "The Opium Dens of London."

49 Renshaw, "Prejudice and Paranoia," 41–2.

50 Sascha Auerbach, "Margaret Tart, Lao She, and the Opium-Master's Wife: Race and Class among Chinese Commercial Immigrants in London and Australia, 1866-1929," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 1 (2013): 39.

ment in the metropolitan imaginary. For one, the dens challenged notions of economic freedom, especially relating to the place of women. The idea that decent women were squandering money in these places, and so degrading themselves, entailed a fear of women acting as economic agents—as consumers, as men. However, men were not spared this gendered discourse. Joyce Madancy argues that opium was seen to make male smokers feminine, passive and no longer valuable to British society.<sup>51</sup> This thinking runs through many exposés. One writer describes male smokers lying “in blank indifference,” as women argue in the kitchen.<sup>52</sup> Embroiled in chaos, this scene speaks towards the potential of opium consumption to upend the foundations of decent society. Though these men were Chinese, not British, the writer’s tone still suggests that opium could hurt London by instilling a culture of “unproductive” men, anathema to both the British economy and British masculine identity. Indeed, such thinking becomes clearer in accounts which deem male opium smoking acceptable—if one’s work was done first.<sup>53</sup> These ideas only emphasize how much opium dens triggered fear of the loss of a proper, economically dynamic, and powerful London.

These concerns merged with prevailing ideas about urban space too. Sadly, work on this topic has been minimal. Yet, as de Groot notes in her analysis of tea rooms, spaces of consumption carried substantial meaning in nineteenth-century London.<sup>54</sup> Opium dens were similar as places where clients smoked upon sofas and mattresses and where commerce in the drug blurred the (gendered) public/private divide. Natural-

ly, concerns for English opium den women reflected the dens’ inability to conform to ideas about women’s space. However, the opium den space also touched more general nerves about white Britons’ commercial liberties. Maurice Vernon, for instance, discusses how some opium dens barred white people from entry.<sup>55</sup> This was regarded as an encroachment on liberal Britons’ cherished freedom to engage in commerce. Moreover, exposés also suggest that opium dens encroached on ‘licit,’ middle-class commerce, the sort these writers valued; Vernon, again, describes an opium den being secretly situated behind a respectable Chinese restaurant.<sup>56</sup> While these ideas did not constitute moral panics, they do underscore how opium dens unsettled Londoners’ entrenched ideas about how the city’s respectable, consumer-driven society should be oriented.

Such themes—consumption of the East and the subsequent destabilization of London’s social order—became tropes in opium den literature. However, writers were not always so scathing. By the century’s end, many noted how opium dens were cleaned up, harmless, even friendly.<sup>57</sup> Yet despite this shift, fundamental ideas behind the den—particularly consumption and imperial power—remained. Instead of merely frequenting opium dens, writers now incorporated them within Chinatown day trips. Opium was but one more exotic Asian ware to be browsed; writers often discussed local food, or the ever-present tea, as well as opium.<sup>58</sup> Here, opium dens were acceptable because Londoners could sample this good among others, exercising consumer freedom in consuming China rather than having the substance forcibly imposed London society—leav-

51 Madancy, “Smoke and Mirrors,” 37–40.

52 Archer, *The Pauper, the Thief, and the Convict*, 134.

53 Ewing, *Days and Nights in London*, 180.

54 de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections,” 175–6.

55 Vernon, “The Opium Dens of London.”

56 Vernon, “The Opium Dens of London.”

57 “Life in London’s Chinese Quarter,” 148; Platt, “Chinese London and its Opium Dens,” 277.

58 Begbie, “The Pipe That Brings Peace,” 53; “Life in London’s Chinese Quarter,” 148.

ing the capital's imperial hegemony intact. Even the opium dens themselves catered to Londoners' luxury consumer eye. Writers assessed the market value of opium pipes; Vernon even describes opium arriving via servants, on ivory platters.<sup>59</sup> By portraying the opium den as an Asian experience for British consumption, these writers made clear their own pseudo-imperial pretensions as cosmopolitan, middle-class consumers, an identity the opium dens bolstered, rather than challenged. Evidently, though the genre's rhetoric had shifted, the meanings behind it persisted.

It is worth noting that the Chinese were not the only Asians incorporated into this racialized imaginary. What is interesting is how neatly these alternate others fit within larger opium den discourse—testimony to how robust these views were. According to Salter, places throughout London sold opium to “Malays, and East Indians,” who then fell to gambling.<sup>60</sup> This generalizing of all degenerate others as vectors for moving opium into London echoes the fear of London's Orientalization via opium. Other writers were subtler; for instance, Ritchie Ewing recalled an opium den being “oppressive as... a Turkish bath.”<sup>61</sup> Given opium's Turkish origins, it is possible that Ewing was consciously framing the den as a conduit to the sensual East and its consumption. And, so far as Londoners' associations with opium, consumption, and imperial stature were concerned, we need look no further than Mr. Khodonobasch, depicted as a businessman peddling opium to sailors, and his ‘fallen’ English wife.<sup>62</sup> All this highlights how complex Londoners' understanding of opium dens was. When seen as commercial spaces, especially to “consume the East,” opium dens challenged Londoners' identities as

consumers and imperialists, identities that were shot through with gender, race, and middle-class propriety.

### *Venture into the ‘Medicine’ Cabinet*

There is another, very different side to the city, however, where the influence of opium was also felt. Escaping the underground space of the opium den, light, cleanliness, and prosperity enter the picture. This is the face of respectable London, the physical manifestation of imperial and commercial prosperity projected loudly to the world. Ironically, illicit opium here appears not in raw form for smoking, but dressed up with the veneer of professional medicine and the legal drug trade: in medicine bottles labelled “Chlorodyne,” “Godfrey's Cordial,” “Laudanum,” and many more. In some senses, non-medical consumption of these drugs—that is, consumption for reasons other than those which medical experts intended—encouraged very different public perceptions compared to smoking in opium dens. A normalized, at times even glamorized, part of respectable London life, medicinal opium largely lacked the veneer of foreignness that made opium dens at once so unnerving and so fascinating. Yet the difference between the two opium scenes should not be overstated, for in white London as in Chinatown, opium consumption was still in many senses illicit, and deeply tied to concerns about the precariousness of the capital's social order.

In contrast to the subaltern opium den, this world of illicit opium use was populated by white Londoners integrated, at least partially, into mainstream London society. This side of the city was not one so spatialized as the opium den, constituted as it was by diffuse spaces throughout the city read as visible, white, and British. This was a sphere that lay within London's dominant cultural world. This arena existed in Londoners' imagination within particular sites: the middle-class home, the pub, the (white) slum, and so on. In these more socially acceptable spaces, opium usage resided at the mainstream intersection of commerce and

59 Vernon, “The Opium Dens of London.”

60 Salter, *The East in the West*, 25.

61 Ewing, *Days and Nights in London*, 178.

62 Duckworth, *George H Duckworth's Notebook*, 124–30.

institutional medicine. Before the 1868 Pharmacy Act, opium-containing drugs could be bought in London as easily as Advil today. Yet, the 1868 Act was not particularly strict, and so commercial opium was still acquired with relative ease.<sup>63</sup> Through these years, medical opium was, as Terry Parsinnen puts it, “the Victorian’s aspirin, Lomotil, Valium, and Nyquil,” commonly used to treat ailments like diarrhea, consumption (TB), even ‘fatigue,’ hallmarks of nineteenth-century urban life for many.<sup>64</sup> Opium’s wide usage likely grew from pharmaceutical firms’ aggressive advertising. JT Davenport’s Chlorodyne advertisement, splashed across late Victorian London newspapers, was typical in claiming to treat everything from teething pains to diphtheria.<sup>65</sup> These campaigns, coupled with the drug’s affordability—cheap enough to be “within the reach of everybody,” one domestic manual noted—made opium a standard fixture in Londoners’ medical cabinets.<sup>66</sup>

But how did London’s consumers—not doctors, pharmacists, or drug companies—understand their opium usage? Evidence suggests that Londoners of all stripes responded to the drug’s all-purpose branding, while stretching its strictly ‘medical’ status. One writer for *Spinning in Town* magazine remarked that “we have all heard of, and many of us have tried” chlorodyne, yet she continually received letters about what the drug should be used for.<sup>67</sup> This may point to the rather cava-

lier consumption of the drug; but, more importantly, it also suggests that such consumption, some of which we may call recreational, was an unremarkable subject of genteel (and female) public discourse. Indeed, that this article was primarily a review of domestic products, opium sandwiched between sewing machines and toys, speaks volumes about the drug’s normalized status when consumed in official, medicinal form. Even overt opium abuse was not particularly taboo. One article in *Women’s Beauty and Health* discusses the struggles of “the opium habit” besides those of weight loss. Mrs. Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* advised readers to drink coffee, tea, or walk around should they overdo the opium.<sup>68</sup> Responding to opium’s “magic-bullet” marketing, nineteenth-century Londoners thus largely viewed the medical prescription of opium as an unremarkable facet of daily life, even when it was then consumed in non-medical ways.

Unremarkable meant British. Compared to opium dens, medical opium’s perceived links to empire or foreignness appear tenuous. However, this is not to say no such ties were made in consumers’ minds. Pharmaceutical firms, for one, often flaunted their imperial colors. J. T. Davenport decorated his chlorodyne bottles with Indian elephants, and advertised how the drug had been used by doctors around the world.<sup>69</sup> However, many late Victorian commodities were decorated with imperial motifs, even commodities with few imperial links.<sup>70</sup> And the odd elephant seems tame compared to the aggressively Asian imagery which, for instance, tea

63 Elizabeth Lomax, “The Uses and Abuses of Opiates in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 47, no. 2 (1973): 173-6.

64 Terry M. Parsin, *Secret Passions, Secret Remedies: Narcotic Drugs in British Society 1820-1930* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1983), 36; Lomax, “Uses and Abuses,” 168; Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 31.

65 J. T. Davenport, “Chlorodyne” advertisement, *Peter Parley’s Annual*, 19<sup>th</sup> Century UK Periodicals.

66 J. H. Walsh, *Manual of Domestic Economy*, rev. ed. (London: G. Routledge, 1874), 705.

67 “Spinnings in Town,” *The Englishwoman’s Domestic*

Magazine, March 1, 1873, 146.

68 “Question Department,” *Women’s Beauty and Health*, April, 1902, 21-2; Lomax, “Uses and Abuses,” 167.

69 Freeman’s, “Freeman’s Chlorodyne” advertisement, *The Illustrated Missionary News*, July 1, 1882, xxvii.

70 de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections,” 187-90.



was plastered with.<sup>71</sup> All this suggests that, while drug manufacturers capitalized on public fascination for imperial consumption, opium, despite its imperial origins, may not have had such a strong association among consumers. However, London's public was not totally oblivious to the drug's Oriental side; as one writer noted, "from the east it would appear that we have derived, with many nobler gifts and secrets, our knowledge of the powers and virtues and abuses, as well as our supplies, of opium."<sup>72</sup> All told, Londoners might have seen this form of opium consumer as a way of "consuming the East," like in the dens—but such thinking was not universal.

Yet this did not prevent public concerns over how opium-based medicines were consumed, or by whom. As with opium dens, these tensions were gendered. One recurring controversy in London's papers concerned mothers feeding their babies opium-based 'cordials' to quiet them.<sup>73</sup> In contrast to the opium dens, where respectable ladies were in the spotlight, these concerns targeted working-class women. True, 'baby-doping' was likely more common among this group, for "factory women," as one writer called them, could sedate their children for discount babysitting prices.<sup>74</sup> However, the way this public debate was formulated echoed concerns about women, especially urban women, improperly raising their children—namely, by violating the middle-class 'separate spheres' norm, where women were expected to remain at home. Thus, as with the dens, this consumption unnerved white Britons pre-

cisely because it seemed to undermine gendered bases of social propriety, especially within fast-changing urban societies. Moreover, these fears also voiced concern about women enacting agency as consumers, as women were accessing, likely purchasing, these drugs and bringing them into the household. By purchasing cutting-edge drugs for anti-maternal purposes, those women worried Londoners precisely because this form of opium consumption challenged gendered ideas about respectability and consumption in an unstable London society.

Middle-class women also spoke out. One writer for *Englishwoman's Journal* decried how "few but those who have been much among the poor" are aware of the danger of baby-doping.<sup>75</sup> Fearing that the risky baby-doping of the poor was silently encroaching on middle-class families, the author underscores how, for all its gendered facades, these concerns involved deeper fears about middle-class propriety and, so, social order. Gendered ideas about proper *consumption* did not go amiss, either. Mrs. Beeton rallied against "nefarious" nurses who gave children opium for a good night's sleep.<sup>76</sup> Beeton's concerns about poorer women's sly opium-peddling entailed fear that such children would become implicated in a world where women are no longer 'maternal,' thus removing the child from decent society. Moreover, this account also suggests an awareness that by not employing these opium-takers, one could stymie their nefarious practices. Knowing the threat opium consumption posed to middle-class propriety, London's ladies, acting in their private sphere, were vigilant about spending their wealth in ways that halted London's illicit opium economy, stemming this risk. While the appearance of these opium-laced fears,

71 de Groot, "Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections," 184.

72 W. A. F. Browne, "Opiophagism or the Psychology of Opium Eating" (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1875), 2–17.

73 *The Family Treasury*, vol. 1 (London: Houlston & Stoneman, 1854), 180.

74 Lomax, "Uses and Abuses," 169–72; *The Family Treasury*, 180.

75 "The details of women's work in sanitary reform," *Englishwoman's Journal* 3 (1859): 223, in Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 100.

76 Lomax, "Uses and Abuses," 170.

and the gender of their spokespeople, was different than that of the opium dens, their driving beliefs—propriety, consumption, the erosion of London’s social order—remained.

Not all public discourse about non-medical opium consumption and its dangers was so abstract. Again paralleling opium den exposés, concerns circulated about how this form of the drug could spark national decline. Such concerns entered the realm of adult abuse of patent medicine. One letter to the *Daily Mail* implored the government to strengthen drug regulation, lest more of Britain’s “brightest intellects and most promising careers” be ruined by this “terrible evil”. More sinisterly, a court record from an alleged murder, for instance, notes an empty laudanum bottle on the crime scene, thereby hypothesizing a link to the crime.<sup>77</sup> Despite the many differences between these accounts, both draw a connection between opium taking and decline into undesirable behavior. Reckless consumption, moreover, could breed reckless consumption—authors would note, for instance, overlap in London’s populations of opium takers and drinkers.<sup>78</sup> This perception of opium pushing users to gin, or vice versa, frames the substances in a web of destructive behavior with the potential to snowball out of control—rendering Britons unproductive and poor consumers, anathema, again, to Victorian Britons’ self-identity and perceived social order. Indeed, that cutting-edge medicine becomes itself pathogenic in these accounts speaks volumes for how uncertain London’s respectability then appeared. With opium’s face as a modern, magic-bullet cure dissolving, and with London’s consumers becoming consumed, it was feared that opium overuse might drag the

city down.

As with the opium dens, Londoners’ perceptions of medical opium use was shot through with concerns for the use of the city’s space. “Degenerate” consumption of opium-based medicine was often associated with slum areas; in court records, laudanum was frequently discussed in connection to malnourishment and want.<sup>79</sup> This association of opium with London’s decrepit spaces alone made opium troubling for middle-class observers. But this was amplified when opium usage shifted from London’s periphery to its center. An 1897 *Daily Mail* report describes a woman found dead in a London hotel, laudanum by her side. For the writer, the “most startling fact” of the event was someone dying by poison “in the very center of London” inconspicuously.<sup>80</sup> This drama unnerved precisely because it blurred the prosperous, ‘public’ space of central London with the city’s hidden, ‘private’ slums—an illicit consumption which challenged London’s self-image as respectable consumer capital. Indeed, medical opium’s unsettling place within the public/private divide ran deep. In a court record of one Ellen Moore charged with baby-doping, witnesses wonder whether Moore fed her child opium in the living room.<sup>81</sup> Paralleling the women in London’s hidden opium dens, concern here lies in whether Moore undertook such deplorable behavior within the feminine, private sphere of the home. Blurring slum and center, private and public, domestic angels and murderers, medical opium use can be said to challenge how Londoners understood the spatial divisions grounding the city.

77 “The Drug Habit,” *The Daily Mail*, February 3, 1913; Trial of John Frank Fyfield, May 23, 1887, Old Bailey Proceedings Online.

78 “The Doctor’s Opinion,” *The Family Economist*, 1857, 77; Trial of Frank Fyfield.

79 Trial of Margaret Waters and Sarah Ellis, September 19, 1870, Old Bailey Proceedings Online; Trial of Jane Palethorpe, 8 July, 1861, Old Bailey Proceedings Online.

80 “Woman Three Days Dead in an Hotel,” *The Daily Mail*, September 4, 1897.

81 Trial of Ellen Moore, May 3, 1875, Old Bailey Proceedings Online.

Pervasive though all these beliefs were, it must be conceded that medical opium did have another, more positive image: as a side effect of modernity. Like with much about opium, such discourse was classed. Parallels were drawn between contemporary opium use and that of “eminent literary celebrit[ies]” like Thomas de Quincy, known users of the drug some decades prior.<sup>82</sup> This paradox—opium being “degenerative” for working classes, prestigious for elites—is testimony to, again, how the drug’s meanings hinged on the circumstances of its consumption and consumers. Yet these were ideas probably quite particular to London, the ‘modern’ capital. Evoking the hustle and bustle of a prosperous middle class, commentator Thomas Crothers noted how narcotics were used by “active brain-workers, professionals, and businessmen... for greater productivity or to dull the effects of mental over-stimulation.”<sup>83</sup> Opium may not have been desirable, but it encouraged desirable things: modernity, productivity, perhaps even the consumption of other goods that London’s middle classes so cherished. When framed as a respectable, middle-class commodity for countering anomie, medical opium and its imperial, modern facade bolstered rather than challenged Londoners’ self-identity.

But, as with opium dens, positive meanings came with strings attached. While opium medicines could be glamorous, they became, by the century’s end, a symbol of decadence. A 1902 letter to the *Daily Mail* discusses how residents in the “fashionable part of London” inject themselves with morphia; in one case of an overdose which the writer heard about, “scarcely an

inch of skin... was left unmarked by the punctures.”<sup>84</sup> Here, opium is not about “getting by”; it is an exclusive consumer good, a shameful one. The ‘elite opium injector’ was a popular trope. Seymour Starkey, writing for *Nineteenth Century*, recalled “most elegant” women hiding opium behind jewelry on their person, and injecting discreetly in theatres.<sup>85</sup> As such, opium is embroiled in luxury and decadence, linked to theatre and jewelry; even hypodermic needles, relatively new to medicine, may have had this veneer.<sup>86</sup> Clearly, opium had changed. While it was still a luxury product, it could also, as it did for the poor, spark degeneracy and ‘consume’ consumers. Having reached their *reductio ad absurdum*, late Victorian beliefs about medical opium, with their linkages to propriety, consumption, and degeneration, had bled into each other. Opium being the symbolically weighty good that it was, such beliefs could never be simple.

### *Two Nations, One Drug*

Late nineteenth-century London was a city with many sides. At its center, London was a self-styled global city, defined by its economic prowess, imperial grandeur, and gentility; at its slummy peripheries, it was ground zero for Britain’s social decline and racial degeneration. Yet these two images overlapped and intertwined in complex ways. Opium, and particularly opium consumption, tapped into these dynamics. In this paper, I explored how the consumption of opium for non-medical ends was understood in two very different contexts in London discourse: the ostensibly seedy East End opium den and the more socially acceptable spaces frequented by white Londoners. Both imagined arenas housed opium usage that was coded as illicit, be it the

82 Browne, “Opiophagism,” 2–10.

83 Quoted in Penner Meredith Conti, “Ungentlemanly Habits: The Dramaturgy of Drug Addiction in Fin-de-Siècle Theatrical Adaptations of the Sherlock Holmes Stories and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Hyde,” in *Victorian Medicine and Popular Culture*, eds. Louise Penner and Tabitha Sparks (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015), 114.

84 “The Growing Drug Habit,” *The Daily Mail*, January 2, 1902.

85 Conti, “Ungentlemanly Habits,” 114.

86 Berridge, *Opium and the People*, 138–44.

smoking habits attributed to Chinese others or the consumption of patent medicines for non-medical ends by some white residents, and both forms of consumption were wrapped up in an array of prejudices and anxieties. Echoing other historians of consumption—and particularly imperial consumption—I presented a “bottom-up” approach to opium’s history in the capital in order to access what these meanings were among ‘everyday Londoners’ and how understandings of illicit opium usage in these two very different imagined spaces intertwined in public discourse.

With the opium den being the imagined site of foreign opium smoking in London’s East End, and non-medical consumption of patent opiate medicine being the vice of London’s white, sometimes even elite, populace, these meanings may appear different. But, on a closer look, it becomes clear that similar thinking animated both. Mainstream London society viewed opium dens as the “East writ small,” places where Londoners could ‘consume’ an Oriental experience. This strange presence of the Empire within the metropole rattled Londoners’ assumptions about their city. Imperial consumption in the dens fed into public discourse about national decline, middle-class norms of proper economic activity, space, gender, and London’s control over its imperial subjects—all challenging Londoners’ grand self-identity and the perceived social stability of their city. White opium consumption was not so different. Despite being a seemingly common practice in nineteenth-century London, and one seen as more British than foreign, this form of opium consumption touched the same nerves—about national decline, proper economic activity, gender roles, and so on. In both contexts, opium raised questions, and often concerns, about the precariousness of London’s entire social order and imperial position in the world. Evidently, through comparing opium consumption in these two sides of London, one can grasp broader overlaps in public discourse about London’s center and its peripheries. Positioned at

the nexus of imperial grandeur and slummy decay, opi-<sup>69</sup>um could synthesize many conflicting, even paradoxical, perceptions of the city at the time. And so, while opium may have occupied a complicated position in late Victorian London, it merely reflected the complexity of late Victorian London itself.