

VICTORIAN COUGAR: H. RIDER HAGGARD'S *SHE*, AGEING AND SEXUAL SELECTION IN MARRIAGE

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Abstract

H. Rider Haggard's late nineteenth-century novel *She* (1887) details the adventures of two British explorers who venture deep into the heart of Africa, where they encounter an ageless, white African queen. The novel has fascinated Victorian scholars with its depictions of race, gender and power, but I argue that what distinguishes this novel is the way that Darwinian arguments infuse the narrative with male anxieties about older women and female choice in marriage.

The ageless, white queen Ayesha promotes a narrative that is ripe for exploration about the nexus of age and power. While my book *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth Century British Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009) argues that age is an aspect of gender by focusing on the figure of the ageing male husband in nineteenth-century literature, I turn here to the less common figure of the older wife. Ayesha, also called 'she who must be obeyed', challenges typical readings of Victorian power distribution in marriage. Using Darwin's theories of mate selection, Haggard engages this female character to pique Victorian anxieties about female choice in marriage. What is revealed is not a renewed sense of "natural" male selection, but overlapping anxieties about women's power, the ageing female body and degeneration.

The influence of Charles Darwin's work on H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) is hard to miss and corresponds with Haggard's querulous exploration of gendered relationships. Four paragraphs into the novel, Ludwig Horace Holly, a man characterised by his long arms, thick body hair, protruding forehead and barrel chest, remarks, 'Women hated the sight of me. Only a week before I had heard one call me a "monster" when she thought I was out of hearing, and say that I had converted her to Darwin's theory'.¹ There is little critical debate regarding Haggard's investment in evolution, and numerous scholars have theorised about what *She* says about late-Victorian imperial anxieties about civilisation, God, and race via evolution. Alan Sandison writes that 'Haggard has a very real affinity for the basic characteristics of Darwin's concept of evolution is thus beyond question'.² Lisa Hopkins concurs that '[i]nterest in evolution is everywhere in Haggard', adding, 'Haggard's most successful foray into Africa was with *She*, a novel on which the hand of Darwin lies heavy'.³ Sandra Gilbert, Anne McClintock and Patricia Murphy have also offered

¹ H. Rider Haggard, *She* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 41. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

² Alan Sandison, *The Wheel of Empire: A Study of the Imperial Idea in Some Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967), p. 45.

³ Lisa Hopkins, *Giants of the Past: Popular Fictions and the Idea of Evolution* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004), pp. 71-72. In 'A Triptych: Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Rider Haggard's *She*, and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*', *Comparative Studies in Society and*

pointed feminist readings of this boys' fiction that enjoys the narrative of the exploration, penetration and rejection of a feminised Africa.⁴ What has not been fully vetted regarding the novel is how Darwinian ideas inform the novel's late-Victorian delivery of the sentimental marriage plot. Holly's understanding that he is unattractive, that women 'hated the sight of' him, emphasises both the Darwinian importance of female choice in the mating process and the reciprocal misogyny that such power elicits in response. Ultimately, the novel reveals deep anxieties about female choice in marriage: anxieties that coincide with changes in marriage law that benefitted women, with fears that ageing altered gender roles, and with worries that widespread biological degeneration could return Victorian society to a primitive, matriarchal system.

Haggard's positions on these issues at times appear painfully, even embarrassingly, obvious. Describing the climactic scene in which the beautiful, ageless and powerful queen who is known alternately as 'She', 'Ayesha' and '*She-who-must-be-obeyed*' is destroyed by a pillar of fire, Gilbert concludes: 'Finally, therefore, naked and ecstatic, in all the pride of her femaleness, She must be fucked to death by the "unalterable law" of the Father'.⁵ Murphy agrees, arguing that the novel 'ultimately strives to contain the New Woman threat by annihilating the unruly She at closure'.⁶ These readings of the novel as semiconscious, immature backlash against women's power make sense: the novel champions the all-male society of Cambridge, the one woman Holly had previously loved only 'pretended' to return his affections, and she unkindly terminated their relationship by taking him to a mirror and reasoning: 'Now, if I am Beauty, who are you?' (p. 41). But this recoil from women oversimplifies the novel's dynamics. I agree that the novel chronicles the confused actions of confused men. As Holly explains after meeting She, 'for [...] I, a fellow of my college, noted for what my friends are pleased to call my misogyny, and a respectable man now well on in middle life, had fallen absolutely and hopelessly in love with this white sorceress' (p. 157). If Holly is drawn to the power of women against his will, Haggard is no more in control than Holly, and the novel's vacillations reveal much about late Victorian attempts to reconcile a gendered society

History, 35 (1993), 726-45. Bruce Mazlish also points out the connection between Darwin and Haggard. See Bruce Mazlish, 'A Triptych: Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Rider Haggard's *She*, and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35 (1993), 726-45 (pp. 735-36).

⁴ The dedication to Haggard's earlier *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) reads: 'This faithful but unpretending record of a remarkable adventure is hereby respectfully dedicated by the narrator, Allan Quatermain, to all the big and little boys who read it', see H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002), p. 37.

⁵ Sandra Gilbert, 'Rider Haggard's Heart of Darkness', in *Coordinates: Placing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. by George E. Slusser, Eric S. Rabkin and Robert Scholes (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), pp. 124-38 (p. 131).

⁶ Patricia Murphy, 'The Gendering of History in *She*', *SEL*, 4 (1999), pp. 747-72 (p. 748).

with science and a gendered science with society. Questions about marriage, its obligations and its power structures punctuate the novel's attempts to square evolutionary principles with contemporary gender relations. Ultimately, these anxieties about evolution and gender converge in the figure of the sensual older woman, the Victorian "cougar", Ayesha, who, in both choosing her mate and seducing him with her aged, indeed 'ancient' body, hastens the process of societal devolution.

The novel's plot runs thus: on the eve of his death, Holly's friend places his only son and a mysterious quest in Holly's hands. The quest is to be undertaken when the child, Leo Vincey, turns twenty-five. Holly raises Leo as if he were his son, and when Leo is of age, both learn the unfulfilled quest has been passed down in Leo's family for two thousand years. 'Vincey', they deduce, derives from Vindex: the avenger. Leo and Holly pick up the challenge and travel to Africa with their servant Job, where they travel up river in search of the ageless white queen Ayesha. Along the way, they run into cannibals, and Leo is chosen by the beautiful native Ustane to be her husband before they are brought by Ayesha's people to her underground caves. Everyone fears Ayesha – she is so powerful that her subjects literally crawl on their bellies to address her at her throne. Ayesha cures Leo from a serious illness, discovers he is the reincarnation of her beloved Kallikrates, whom she killed two millennia ago out of jealousy and has been awaiting ever since, and eliminates her modern rival Ustane by killing her. Ayesha is so beautiful that she makes both Holly and Leo fall in love with her despite her awful power and unfeminine ways. Ayesha explains that her secret to eternal youth comes from stepping into a hidden pillar of fire, and she pledges to share its secret. Testing it out for them, however, she finds that the flames have a reverse effect on her already ageless body, and she instantly withers into a mummy. Horrified, Leo and Holly nevertheless pledge their faithful love, and the novel concludes with their awaiting Ayesha's return.⁷

Women's decisions drive the plot, and the novel contends that women's choice in sexual selection limits men's participation in, and control of, the evolutionary process, though this conclusion is not one that Darwin advanced himself. Darwin conceded that among 'the lower orders' sexual selection rested with the females of the species. But Cynthia Eagle Russett and Rosemary Jann have explained how Darwin manipulated his theories to correspond with Victorian gender roles: how Darwin sidesteps the human implications of female choice in sexual selection among birds by arguing that, in humans, evolutionary skills like warfare and creating tools increased male intelligence and eventually led to a system of *male* choice in mating.⁸

⁷ *Ayesha*, Haggard's 1905 sequel to *She*, reunites the main characters in Tibet, though gender roles are more traditional in this incarnation.

⁸ See Rosemary Jann, 'Darwin and the Anthropologists: Sexual Selection and its Discontents', in *Sexualities in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Andrew H. Miller and James Eli Adams (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 287-306.

However, Darwin's efforts to cover up women's role in sexual selection fail to remove the implications of his findings for Haggard, who constructs *She* to allow the human mating processes to develop in animalistic fashion. In Africa, Leo is known as 'the Lion', and Holly, 'the Baboon', and Haggard suggests, much like Joseph Conrad ten years later in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), that Europeans may feel compelled to "go native" when in Africa. Casting the African Amahaggar as primitive humans, Haggard also hints that they hark back to an evolutionary past that still permits women the ultimate power in mating. This exposure to women's controlling role in evolution is titillating in itself, but Haggard does not relegate it to the past or to Africa. Devolution and the threat of women's choice already threaten late-Victorian England.

The effects of female choice are most readily apparent through the experiences of the novel's hero, Holly. Despite Holly's intelligence, sensibility and physical strength, his unattractive appearance marks him as unmarriedable and effectively removes him from the fight for survival of the fittest. Before the quest, Holly ensconces himself within the masculine bastion of Cambridge, and his College offers an all male sanctuary, tinged with homoeroticism and misogyny, in which Holly can raise Leo. The servant Job performs traditional feminine tasks for them, 'clucking' motherly and buttering Leo's toast, and a neighbouring crusty 'old resident Fellow' plies Leo with 'unlimited quantities of brandy-balls [...] making him promise to say nothing about it' (p. 51). Within the College, Holly can comfortably ignore the power that women wield in evolution, but the role of sexual selection within natural selection becomes so prominent that women are acknowledged as a threat to men's survival. The editor of Holly's manuscript recounts witnessing Holly and Leo meet an attractive young woman on the street: giving Leo a 'reproachful look', Holly abruptly flees. The editor clarifies, 'I heard afterwards that he was popularly supposed to be as much afraid of a woman as most people are of a mad dog, which accounted for his precipitate retreat' (p. 36). Holly's fear is best read as more than the fear of rejection: in fact, it is also the fear of selection. The quest bequeathed to Holly and Leo is itself a matter of female choice, originating in the selection of Kalikrates by Amenartas, whose shard records that she 'caus[ed] him through love to break the vows that he had vowed' and that her selection results in generations and generations of men being drafted into a dangerous and fruitless quest. In this scenario, selection by women is both desired and feared.

Unlike Holly, Leo is attractive as a Greek god, fond of women and an eager participant in the evolutionary process (p. 52). The editor deems Leo 'altogether too good-looking' and observes that he cannot claim that 'young Vincey showed much aversion to feminine society' (p. 36). The editor goes as far as to warn his brother with a laugh that Leo 'was not the sort of man whom one would care to introduce to the lady one was going to marry, since it is exceedingly probable that the acquaintance would end in a transfer of her affections' (p. 36), and his comment

further emphasises the importance of women's choice in courtship. Women flock to the unwitting Leo throughout the novel, first Ustane and then Ayesha, and his success in "mating" coincides with Darwin's theories about male beauty and female choice. Darwin writes in *The Descent of Man* (1871):

it appears that female birds in a state of nature, have by a long selection of the more attractive males, added to their beauty or other attractive qualities. No doubt this implies powers of discrimination and taste on the part of the female which will at first appear extremely improbable; but by the facts to be adduced hereafter, I hope to be able to shew that the females actually have these powers.⁹

Ustane's seduction of Leo challenges readers by exhibiting a classic case of sexual selection as Darwin observed it amongst birds. Ustane is the 'handsomest of the young [Amahaggar] women' but, like Darwin's birds, is 'less modified' than the male she chooses (p. 93). Like many female birds, Ustane is brown, with hair 'of a shade between brown and chestnut', whereas Leo is decidedly flashy. As Darwin concludes, 'many cock birds do not so much pursue the hen, as display their plumage, perform strange antics' (p. 256), and therefore Leo 'excite[s]' the Amahaggar women's attention by presenting his 'tall, athletic form and clear-cut Grecian face' (p. 93). Haggard explains that when Leo 'politely lifted his hat to them, and showed his curling yellow hair, there was a slight murmur of admiration' (p. 93). Leo's mating ritual is a success: Ustane 'deliberately advanced to him, and in a way that would have been winning had it not been so determined, quietly put her arm round his neck, bent forward, and kissed him on the lips' (p. 93). Witnessing female choice being performed, Holly gasps, and Job cries: 'The Hussy – well, I never!' Meanwhile, the other Amahaggar women merely show 'traces of vexation' that they had missed their chance (p. 93). Leo, however, 'return[s] the embrace' (p. 93), fulfilling Darwin's account that '[t]hus the more vigorous females, which are the first to breed, will have the choice of many males; and though they may not always select the strongest or best armed, they will select those which are vigorous and well armed, and in other respects the most attractive' (p. 249).

The reactions of Job and Holly reflect the Victorian hope that humans had evolved out of this system of female dominance in sexual selection, and Leo's participation in this "primitive" mating ritual reeks of degeneration. Ustane's power cannot be 'winning' to a Victorian gentleman, especially one like Holly who fails to profit from a structure that objectifies the male body and evaluates its worth. Ustane's power of choice proves unsettling because it has direct ties to specific social and legal bonds. When Holly discovers that Ustane's actions were not exceptional, in fact, that

⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 246. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

among the Amahaggar, ‘when a woman took a fancy to a man she signified her preference by advancing and kissing him publicly [...]. If he kissed her back, it was a token that he accepted her, and the arrangement continued till one of them wearied of it’ (p. 94), the implications of Darwinian sexual selection become clearer: female choice does not support a patriarchal society. Holly explains that he has learned that

women among the Amahaggar are not only upon terms of perfect equality with the men, but are not held to them by any binding ties. Descent is traced only through the line of the mother, and while individuals are as proud of a long and superior female ancestry as we are of our families in Europe, they never pay attention to, or even acknowledge, any man as their father, even when their male parentage is perfectly well known. (p. 94)

This threat of female choice to patriarchal rule makes Holly uncomfortable, and he is quick to note pettishly that because of his unattractive appearance, ‘none of the young ladies offered to pet me in this fashion’ (p. 94). This is a lose-lose situation for Holly: he neither maintains masculine privilege nor secures a mate. Yet his allegiance to Leo, as man and surrogate father, demands that he find some justification for Leo’s willingness to compromise his gender superiority for immediate sexual gratification. Attempting to ameliorate the effects of Leo’s devolutionary behaviour, Holly argues cultural relativity: ‘the customs of mankind on this matter vary in different countries, making what is right and proper in one place wrong and improper in another’ (p. 94). Holly reasons, when in Africa, do as the Africans, but don’t think of advocating female choice in Britain. However, in attempting to resolve Leo’s willing participation in matriarchal customs and openly promiscuous sex acts, Holly inadvertently complicates his case by conceding the ritual as the equivalent of marriage. Since ‘ceremony is the touchstone of morality’, Holly excuses his ward by deeming that there was ‘nothing immoral about this custom’, and he concludes the chapter by declaring ‘the interchange of the embrace answers to our ceremony of marriage, which, as we know, justifies all things’ (p. 94). Despite Holly’s claims that the marriage ‘justifies all things’ – that is, Leo and Ustane’s sexual relations – and that they are only subject to Africa’s laws while in Africa, his slippery logic leads to troublesome realities. In fact, as I have explained, the novel has already recognised that Africa’s laws of sexual selection were already active in England. Wittingly or unwittingly, Haggard also raises other troublesome questions about marriage. Is marriage a force of stability or instability for masculinity? Are men, like Leo, who wed women overseas immune to the implications of their vows when they return home?

The attention to sexual selection in Africa functions as a narrative distraction, meant to avert readers’ attention from women’s power in sexual selection back home, where numerous changes to Victorian laws regarding marriage and concerns about

degeneration heighten the significance of Haggard's foray into the sentimental marriage plot. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 extended the availability of divorce to the middle and working classes. Although the Act did not ensure equality – women still had to prove aggravated adultery to sue for divorce – it improved women's ability to determine her own destiny in marriage. Divorce, however, was viewed by many as regression. If human evolution followed the narrative of female choice giving way to male choice in sexual selection, any relapse suggested the potential for devolution. Just as the Amahaggar and Holly's baboon-like body serve as reminders of earlier evolutionary states, female choice in marriage and reciprocal legal reforms suggest backwards momentum. Divorce undermined the possibility that a wife was the property of her husband. Divorce also threatened the sanctity of marriage, suggesting that a breakdown in marriage law would lead to serial monogamy or, worse, outright promiscuity. Parliament considered this risk most serious among the lower classes, already believed to be less evolved, and hence only one divorce court was established in London, effectively denying the working poor from the country and surrounding industrial cities access because they usually could not afford travel expenses.¹⁰

William Gladstone, who opposed the Divorce Act, warned of the dangers if British working-class men's "natural" instincts were to go unchecked without the confines of marriage: 'Take care, then how you damage the character of your country men. You know how apt the English nature is to escape from restraint and control; you know what passion dwells in the Englishman' (p. 41). Other Members of Parliament identified women's unfettered sexuality as the source of real anxiety: for them, divorce raised issues of paternity, since women's adultery threatened the legitimacy of a husband's heirs, and hence the marriage itself. Other legislation that pushed women's rights chipped away at gender inequities regarding marriage. The *Women's Suffrage Journal* deemed the 1882 Married Women's Property Act the "Magna Carta" of women's liberties' as it gave wives control of property they brought to their marriage (p. 124). Meanwhile, issues regarding marriage, including a mother's custodial rights to her children and a wife's right to sue for marital rape, dominated public attention in the press and in the courts. Haggard's attention to the relative equality of Amahaggar women, who 'are not held to [their husbands] by any binding ties' emphasises their choice in entering and exiting marriage; men could only accept their fates 'when their wives deserted them in favour of a rival, accept [...] the whole thing much as we accept the income-tax or our marriage laws, as something not to be disputed' (p. 94). The fact that tax and marriage laws were in dispute for much of the century belies Haggard's seeming acceptance of Amahaggar custom; he never intends for his readers to be at ease with a female dominated

¹⁰ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 41-42. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

process of sexual selection. Moreover, the implications of female choice in marriage were thus not mere paranoia to men like Haggard; women's role in sexual selection raised immediate concerns in England. By the late nineteenth century, many Victorians could conceive of female choice in marriage as socially beneficial.¹¹ Feminist supporters of eugenics like Sarah Grand argued that women could detach themselves from purely physical motivations for marriage to make matches that held the fitness (both physical and moral) of the marriage's offspring foremost – in some ways, the Victorian version of a “designer baby”. Ayesha, also known as ‘She’, thus represents not just a character but empowered Western women *en masse* through the universality of her name, demanding of respect as characterised through the capitalisation of the personal pronoun.

Having proven how ‘among the Amahaggar the weaker sex ha[d] established its rights’, Haggard crafts the second marriage plot between Leo and the ageing Ayesha as further evidence of women's power in an earlier stage of evolution. If life among primitive nineteenth-century Amahaggar linked humanity to a past of ‘perfect equality’, Ayesha's magical two-thousand-year-old existence initiates a leap further into an evolutionary history of awesome female power, and Ayesha's age is a critical aspect of this process. Kay Heath explains that her character ‘registers apprehension about mature female power, the *femme fatale* whose experience gives her incredible dominion over men’ and that ‘she contravenes not only expectations of old maids but also the paradigm of sexless service expected of all postmenopausal women’.¹² Ayesha is not content with equality, nor does She fade into familiar gendered roles. Ayesha delights in her undisputed power over men, as when She brings Holly, who initially refused to bow to her, to his knees. Ayesha reverses the age dynamic of many Victorian marriages, in which older men selected and married women half their age. The ageing woman thus exaggerates the implications of female power and female choice in sexual selection, and, in doing so, provides characters with a representative figure who can be disciplined and punished for the advances suggested by Ustane and the other women in the text.

If a man's being selected by a same-aged woman pointed to devolution, then being selected by an ageing woman escalated the message of degeneration, as ageing was itself considered further slippage backwards on the evolutionary path. Even the modern use of the word “cougar” to describe an older woman who is romantically involved with a younger man exploits these animalistic associations. Male sexual attraction to the ageing female body overtly suggests sexual deviancy – it is not “natural” and seemingly does not promote reproduction, yet overtly hints at secret longings for a distant evolutionary past. In the 1880s, such abnormal, anti-progressive

¹¹ See Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 33-57.

¹² Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian England* (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 105. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

desires were subject to public scrutiny, and signs of premature ageing, likely the result of poor environmental and nutritional practices in urban centres, incited worries of widespread regression. By the end of the century, a story about 11,000 Manchester men applying for military duty and 8,000 of them being turned away because of physical problems fuelled fears that society was rapidly degenerating. Reports deemed men ‘tadpoles’ because of their large heads and underdeveloped bodies.¹³ Ageing was one sign of physical regression. Heath theorises:

During the last two decades of the century, an unprecedented advertising boom and mounting anxiety about degeneration combined to offer manufacturers increased impetus to exploit decline apprehensions for commercial profit [...]. Many of their campaigns focused on youthfulness as an imperative midlife concern, capitalizing on the degeneration fears of a mass audience. (p. 173)

Victorians struggled to hide ageing and any potential devolution from others. Like the readers of Haggard’s novel, Ayesha strives to look younger than her years. Having discovered a pillar of fire that gives eternal life, Ayesha’s beauty secret is more effective than that of most Victorians, who only enjoyed Pears’ Soap and various tonics. Ayesha is thus old and not old. She is repulsive yet desirable. Even Holly, who had fought so hard to remove himself from women’s influence, finds himself succumbing to her beauty against his better judgment: ‘the very *diablerie* of the woman, whilst it horrified and repelled, attracted even in a greater degree’ (p. 157). Part of the appeal is in fact Ayesha’s age; Holly reasons that a ‘person with the experience of two thousand years at her back’ is superior to regular women and ‘certainly worth falling in love with, if ever woman was’ (p. 157). Ayesha’s age is inseparable from her power to ‘slay’ men both literally and figuratively. With only partial regret, Holly muses, ‘to fall victim to a modern Circe! But then she was not modern [...]. She was almost as ancient as the original Circe’ (p. 157).

When She selects Leo, again because of his appearance as he looks just like her former lover Kallikrates, She fulfills Darwin’s theories of sexual and natural selection, since She must also destroy her rival Ustane.¹⁴ In language strongly suggestive of late-Victorian theories of Social Darwinism, She justifies killing Ustane: ‘day by day we destroy that we may live, since in this world none, save the strongest, can endure. Those who are weak must perish; the earth is to the strong, and the fruits thereof’ (p. 192). Despite Ustane’s repeated claims that Leo is her rightful

¹³ See Vanessa Heggie, ‘Lies, Damn Lies, and Manchester’s Recruiting Statistics: Degeneration as an “Urban Legend” in Victorian and Edwardian Britain’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 64 (2008), 178-216.

¹⁴ As Mazlish points out, Haggard draws much of this plot from Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (1871) in which an all powerful female leader Zee rules a world where women also control the selection of mates. See Mazlish, ‘A Triptych’, pp. 738-39.

husband and Leo's confirmation that Ustane and he are 'married according to the custom of this awful place' (p. 209), Ayesha kills Ustane and 'with a sweet, mocking laugh' predicts that Leo will 'within a very little space [...] creep to my knee, and swear that thou dost love me' even though he calls her a 'murderess' and declares 'I hate thee' (p. 211). Ayesha is right. Within moments, Leo uses the body of Ustane as an altar and 'plight[s] his troth to [the] red-handed murderess – plight[s] it for ever and a day' (p. 213). He cannot do otherwise, as he has very little power in this ancient, female-controlled sexual selection. Indeed, the devolution is clear to him: 'Leo groaned in shame and misery; for though he was overcome and stricken down, he was not so lost as to be unaware of the depth of the degradation to which he had sunk' (p. 213). She had chosen him, and there was literally nothing he could do about it.

Men's subordinate position in this process is clear. In agony, Leo curses himself for what had happened to himself and to Ustane. He does not curse Ayesha. And his lamentations reveal his utter subjection: 'not that I could help,' 'I cannot resist', 'I know I shall do it again', 'I know that I am in her power', 'I must follow her as a needle follows a magnet', 'I would not go away now if I could', and 'my legs would not carry me' (p. 220). Also in love with Ayesha, Holly is likewise impotent, unable to escape. He describes, '[w]e could no more have left her than a moth can leave the light that destroys it' (p. 221). Ayesha is likened to opium, a devastating addiction, and she is deemed 'wicked' and, blurring genders in her power, even 'the old gentleman', the devil himself (pp. 221, 223). The men are horrified by their lack of control, their lack of choice, and the novel ratchets up the dynamics of the plot when Ayesha announces her plans to return with Leo to England. Leo and Holly react with 'exclamation[s] of horror' to the idea of Ayesha's power contaminating England's patriarchal system. Holly and Leo ultimately come to terms with their powerlessness by acknowledging that this system of female choice in sexual selection and female power in marriage is already at work in England. With misogynist humour, Holly reasons: 'True, in [Leo's] uniting himself to this dread woman, [Leo] would place his life in the hand of a mysterious creature of evil tendencies, but then that would be likely enough to happen in any ordinary marriage' (pp. 221-22). Holly's hatred of women stems from feelings of powerless that originate in England, and again, the men's efforts to confine women's power to a distant and exotic Africa fail. Thus, while Holly attempts to ameliorate the effects of his realisations, these notions of universal female control and devolution are vexing rather than comforting. Haggard suggests that England's system of male dominance is an elaborate ruse hiding the truth of female control just as a myth of evolutionary progress hides an alternative reality of evolutionary decline.

Though the text makes clear that Leo will never be Ayesha's equal, She demands that he undergo the life-extending properties of the pillar of fire as soon as they wed. She explains that without reconciling their 'difference', they could not

marry or ‘mate’, nor could he even look at her at length without endangering himself (p. 227). Leo’s alteration would be to make him worthy of She; he really has no choice in the matter. Likewise, Ayesha does not ask for Leo’s hand in marriage. She demands: ‘we [shall] stand in the place of Life, and thou shalt bathe in the fire, and come forth glorified, as no man ever was before thee, and then, Kallikrates, shalt thou call me wife, and I will call thee husband’ (p. 228). Leo is not even Leo. She renames him, recreates him, as his ancestor from thousands of years ago. Like Ustane, Ayesha needs no outside entity to sanctify her marriage; She performs her own marriage ceremony: ‘Here, too, are we wed, my husband – wed till the end of all things; here do we write our marriage vows upon the rushing winds which shall bear them up to heaven’ (pp. 254-55). Ayesha’s plan to return to the pillar of fire leads to her undoing, what Gilbert reads as her being ‘fucked to death’, controlled and punished. And, indeed, the pillar changes her, taking her rapidly through ageing and into death. However, instead of offering a comforting resolution to the problem of female control in sexual selection, the hidden reality of Ayesha’s age proves even more threatening to male privilege.

When the pillar of fire removes Ayesha’s superficial appearance of youth, she appears both old and devolved, and the extent of the men’s complex fear of and longing for devolution becomes apparent. Without a mirror, Ayesha is the last one to perceive her physical decline. No longer empowered, she asks with confusion, ‘[w]hy, what is it – what is it?’ when she notices the changes through reading the faces of the men who view her. Suddenly, there is ‘no spring in her step,’ her arm is ‘thin and angular’ instead of plump and round, and her beautiful face ‘*was growing old before [their] eyes!*’ (p. 261, emphasis in original). Her voice alters from ‘deep and thrilling notes’ to one ‘high and cracked’ (p. 261). In witnessing the ‘horror of horrors’ of the ageing female body, Leo recoils, backing away from Ayesha. The process continues; Ayesha’s hair falls out, leaving her ‘utterly bald’, her skin browns and wrinkles, resembling ‘an old piece of withered parchment’ (p. 261). Nestled in ‘the masses of her own dark hair’ and rolling upon the floor, She is ‘no larger than a big monkey, and hideous’ (p. 263). Characteristics of ageing and degeneration fuse throughout Haggard’s description of her destruction; ‘turning into a monkey’, Ayesha ‘pucker[s] into a million wrinkles’ and ‘shrivel[s] up’ until She is ‘no larger than a she baboon’ (p. 261). The effects of the transformation are too much for Holly, who reflects ‘nobody ever saw anything like the frightful age that was graven on that fearful countenance’, remembering the image of a degenerated She ‘swaying her head slowly from side to side as a tortoise does’ (p. 263). When Ayesha dies, Holly quickly covers her withered remains with her shroud; he had ‘no wish to look upon that terrible sight again’ (p. 266).

Ayesha’s aged body is terrible because it suggests a complete lack of male choice in sexual selection to readers. They are still bound to She, regardless of their disgust. After recovering from fainting at the sight of Ayesha’s ageing and eventual

destruction, Leo promptly renews his marital commitment, promising to remember her, to never ‘have anything to say to another living woman’, and to ‘wait for her as faithfully as she waited for me’ (p. 267). Holly reflects to himself that he hopes that Ayesha will return ‘as beautiful as we knew her’ instead of as he last saw her, but, the text makes clear that, either way, Holly and Leo are committed to her. Holly explains, ‘[w]e both loved her now and for always, she was stamped and carven on our hearts, and no other woman could ever raze that splendid die’ (p. 267). Despite his physical revulsion from her aged body, Holly attributes incredible power to her years; he even excuses many of her atrocities as both the result of the bitterness that comes with age as well as wisdom. In a lengthy footnote to the main narrative, Holly concedes that Ayesha behaves as any man with enormous power would, and he further reasons: ‘Now the oldest man upon the earth was but a babe compared to Ayesha, and the wisest man upon the earth was not one-third as wise. And the fruit of her wisdom was this, that there was but one thing worth living for, and that was Love in its highest sense’ (p. 221). Although the novel attempts to control female choice in marriage, first by characterising it as exotic and alien to England, then by destroying its supreme embodiment, the novel ultimately concedes its power. Ayesha’s selection of Leo determines his past, present and ‘the dim and distant future’ (p. 280). Leo and Holly return to the protection of his male-only college, but even there they are not free from women’s selection. They have already been chosen, and all the men can do is to wait for her return.

Perhaps the convergence of female choice in marriage and ageing women’s power had special significance for a Victorian audience in 1887, the year of Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, when the details of the ageing queen’s reign were celebrated. Queen Victoria’s much romanticised marriage to Prince Albert was evidence of women’s role in sexual selection: like Darwin’s birds, many males competed for the hand of young Victoria, and, like Leo, Albert distinguished himself by his physical attractiveness. Victoria describes her early impressions in her journal: ‘It was with some emotion that I beheld Albert – who is beautiful’.¹⁵ Monica Charlott explains in her biography of the young queen, ‘Lord Melbourne praised Albert’s looks and advised her to “take another week” [to consider him as a husband]. Victoria confessed to him that she had not to admit the power of beauty’ (p. 165). Darwinian sexual selection plays out in textbook fashion, Victoria decides that Albert is the mate for her, and, contrary to etiquette, she proposes. Victoria’s journal reveals: ‘Then I asked [Lord Melbourne] if I hadn’t better tell Albert of my decision soon, in which Lord Melbourne agreed. How? I asked, for that in general such things were done the other way – which made Lord Melbourne laugh’ (p. 165). Even decades after Albert’s death, the royal couple taunted Victorians who idolised the couple while questioning their gender reversals. Combined with the growing sensationalised coverage of

¹⁵ Quoted in Monica Charlott, *Victoria: The Young Queen* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 164. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Divorce Court proceedings and the movement for women's rights in the daily papers, women's potential, even "natural", role in marriage was unsettling to the point that men like Haggard and Holly were tempted to consign it to distant lands and then attempt to destroy it. However, ultimately, the novel suggests a much more nuanced relationship with Darwin's theories. Haggard concedes, perhaps with bitterness, certain knowledge that women did wield power in sexual selection and that humans had not evolved into male control of the mating process. Moreover, this idea of female choice was attractive even while it frightened: it tantalised even while it repulsed.

Rather than functioning as a stabilising, conservative plot device, the sentimental marriage plot undermines conventional power structures in emphasising gender reversals through Darwinian sexual selection. Marriage in *She* is neither conservative nor strictly heterosexual as it toys with fundamental issues of gender and power. Even taking into consideration the undeniable backlash against the powerful women in *She*, Ustane's murder and Ayesha's destruction by the pillar of fire, Haggard's novel speaks to a marked, Victorian ambivalence toward female choice, deeming marriage a unique venue for gendered power to play out.

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