She: A History of Adventure and its Misogynist Attack on Early Feminism

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Abstract
This essay analyzes the gender-based socio-political implications of H. Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure*, which engages with the historical context of Victorian Britain. This essay argues that the novel, which functions as a misogynist political tool, implicitly strives to assault the progressive emergence of early first-wave feminism in Victorian Britain. In doing so, Haggard's novel attacks the values of two particular activists, as well as the following specific aspects of nineteenth-century feminism: a belief in the equal worth of women and men; opposition to social constructions of femininity that portray certain women as immoral or promiscuous; and opposition to a political structure that discriminates against women and renders them subservient to patriarchal interests. Near the end of the essay, a gender-based theme identified by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is explored in relation to Haggard's novel.1 In the process of analyzing the novel and its relationship with systemic gender-based oppression, this essay addresses the broad issue of the extent to which literature reflects human culture.

Literary works can often serve as socio-political instruments, as they artistically express ideological messages and react to sociological dynamics that define their historical contexts. Henry Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* – which ultimately concerns itself with the social landscape of Victorian Britain – functions as a misogynist weapon that strives to assault the progressive development of early first-wave feminism.2 The story of Leo Vincey and Holly, who meet the bold and powerful Ayesha, is driven by a cultural agenda that opposes the concept of a woman having political power. By serving as the carrier of such a story, the novel positions itself as one that is deeply committed to a patriarchal and oppressive status quo within the United Kingdom. This essay demonstrates the extent to which the novel attacks the following specific aspects of nineteenth-century feminism: a belief in

the equal worth of women and men; opposition to social constructions of femininity that portray certain women as immoral or promiscuous; and opposition to a political structure that discriminates against women and renders them subservient to patriarchal interests. While launching such a wide-ranging assault on early feminism, the novel also functions as an adversary of two key philosophical figures, John Stuart Mill and Josephine Butler. In short, the novel is a conservative political artifact from a country on the threshold of progressive social change.

The novel symbolically seeks to undermine a major element of John Stuart Mill's nineteenth-century feminism: relative support for the concept of male and female partners ultimately being of equal worth. John Stuart Mill's pro-feminist work, *On the Subjection of Women*, expresses a progressive belief that "the equality of married persons before the law" is a prerequisite for "moral cultivation" and "the happiness of [both partners]."³ Haggard's work, by contrast, is committed to a patriarchal belief that women are ultimately worth less than their male partners. The novel's representation of Ayesha's death — when considered alongside the novel's representation of Kallikrates' dead body — serves as the vehicle through which Mill's early feminism is opposed. Once Ayesha has been stripped of her supernatural power and her life, she is placed at a lower level socially than Kallikrates, who is belatedly designated as her partner after taking the reincarnated form of Leo Vincey. As a dead body that has been "perfectly preserved," Kallikrates has — in Holly's opinion — retained the status of a person of "uncommon beauty."⁴ Holly's decision to invoke such concepts as perfection and beauty when describing Kallikrates is important, as he thereby suggests that one must continue to recognize the dead Kallikrates as a notable person. Even as a corpse, Kallikrates remains a fully-developed human being and adult member of society. By contrast, the deceased and ex-supernatural Ayesha is depicted as being nothing more than "a monkey," "a badly-preserved Egyptian mummy," and "a two-months' child."⁵ In other words, she is infantilized, dehumanized, and rendered utterly imperfect. This implies that, without the assistance of supernatural power, Ayesha is an inferior being. As an infantilized corpse, she cannot be seen as the equal of an adult, and therefore cannot be valued as the equal of Kallikrates. In the process of turning into "a monkey," she essentially slides down the evolutionary ladder and consequently slides away from being the equal of Kallikrates, who is never presented as anything less than a fully-fledged member of the human species. As "a badly-preserved Egyptian mummy,"⁶ she evidently lacks the quality of perfection that characterizes Kallikrates' corpse earlier in the novel. Holly also asserts that she physically moves

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⁴ Haggard, 177.
⁵ Haggard, 216-17.
⁶ Haggard, 216-17.
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like a "tortoise," which positions her as the equivalent of a small animal. She is effectively placed in a position where she is not esteemed by Kallikrates, who - as the living Leo Vincey - recoils "a step or two" when first perceiving the commencement of her transformation. He cannot feel any desire for the ex-supernatural version of Ayesha. In other words, as a result of her lowered status, Ayesha can no longer hope for a relationship with Kallikrates in which equality and "the happiness" of both partners can thrive. When one assesses the ideally-charged symbolism surrounding Ayesha's dramatic death, it becomes clear that this conservative novel favours a misogynist social narrative in which non-supernatural women are the equivalent of children, represent a lower level of development, and are further away from perfection than their male partners. The novel clearly upholds a patriarchal construction of femininity in its bid to defeat the vision espoused by John Stuart Mill. Through its activation of patriarchal thinking in regards to the status of women in comparison to men, the novel's ideological hostility to the concept of progressive social change in the realm of marital life is revealed.

The novel's antipathy towards early feminism is not simply contained in its opposition to John Stuart Mill's philosophy. By reinforcing a patriarchal ideology that constructs certain women as immoral or promiscuous, the novel also implicitly lashes out at the successful feminist activism of Josephine Butler. As an activist, Butler condemned the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s - which basically authorized the "instrumental rape" of suspected prostitutes - and the argument that was invoked to justify them, which involved a male belief in the nature of a prostitute supposedly being that of a "determined corrupter" and stemming from the alleged "coquetry of women." At various points in the novel, Ayesha represents the misogynist construction of femininity that Josephine Butler actively challenged. This becomes apparent for the first time when Holly, who is watching Ayesha unveil herself, describes her "awful loveliness" as an "evil" quality. He also "hoarsely" asserts that he is "blinded" by her beauty, which includes her "air of sublimated coquetry." In short, Ayesha's beauty is presented as a destructive force that can apparently harm, confuse, and impair a man. Moreover, Holly's reference to "coquetry" is significant, as it explicitly aligns Ayesha with the kind of behaviour associated with the figure of the supposed female "corrupter." Later parts of the novel - which build on this early depiction of Ayesha's nature - strive to further associate Ayesha with the concept of corrupting, or otherwise overwhelming, men. In particular,

7 Haggard, 217.
8 Haggard, 216.
9 Mill, 61.
11 Haggard, 118-19.
12 Boyd, 47.
the seventeenth chapter of the novel strongly suggests that Ayesha enjoys tempting men. When Ayesha invites Holly to “press [his hands] round [her waist],” Holly indicates that he can “bear it no longer” and “[falls] upon [his] knees.” Ayesha, who “[claps] her hands in glee” upon seeing his behaviour, reveals that she was “[wondering] how many minutes it would need to bring [him] to [his] knees.” In other words, her conduct is made to appear very deliberate. Furthermore, when she invites him to “kiss [her]” and “[fixes] her dark and thrilling orbs upon [his] own,” Holly asserts that he is being “made [to feel] faint and weak.”

While she eventually puts an end to this scene, she refers to her own behaviour as “wanton play” and argues that “it is hard for a woman to be merciful.” This portion of the novel encourages the reader to view Holly as a male victim of female sexuality, while Ayesha is depicted as a self-designated representative of merciless female “coquetry.” Ayesha’s words, which imply that she reflects the alleged attributes of women in general, are present in this novel to provide ammunition for misogyny. The novel’s construction of Ayesha’s sexuality is aimed at strengthening hostility towards women.

This socio-didactic goal becomes more apparent in the twentieth chapter, when Ayesha draws Leo “into evil,” overpowers him, and makes him kiss her over “the corpse of his dead love.” Holly, who functions as the male audience of this scene, decides that Leo “cannot be blamed too much” and thereby lays the blame at Ayesha’s feet. This chapter holds Ayesha responsible for a sexually-charged scene that is “horrible and wicked.” These two negative and hostile adjectives, in conjunction with the message that they amplify, further intensify the novel’s war against women. Through its determination to construct female sexuality as a negative force, the novel attempts to tear credibility away from feminist opposition to patriarchal thinking. In effect, the novel establishes itself as a public platform for the literary expression of misogyny, as well as a launching pad for the reinforcement of an anti-feminist political agenda.

The novel’s devotion to patriarchal politics is also apparent in its twenty-second chapter, which presents the patriarchal political status quo of Victorian Britain in a normalized and supportive way. Leo and Holly tell Ayesha that “real power in [their] country [rests] in the hands of the people.” They also assert that their country’s female constitutional monarch, who does not represent ‘real’ political power, is “beloved by all

13 Haggard, 144-45.
14 Haggard, 145.
15 Haggard, 145.
16 Haggard, 172.
17 Haggard, 172.
18 Haggard, 189.
right-thinking people in her vast realms.” Both assertions are aimed at inciting support for the existing political state of affairs, which involves legislative power for men at the expense of women. In the process of promoting a ceremonial female figure as a political model, Leo and Holly reveal their patriarchal admiration for a non-legislative mode of femininity. In fact, by stating that those who admire the non-legislative female figure in question are ‘right-thinking’, the two men essentially suggest that those who do not share their perspective suffer from distorted thinking patterns. This particular aspect of their statement presents their socio-political opinion – which ultimately favours male legislative power – as a manifestation of supposed normality. As conservative supporters of the political disenfranchisement of women, they can clearly afford to love a symbolic queen who poses no threat to male power – a reality that they subtly emphasize when they express their views on ‘real’ power. They state that this power rests with people, which implies that they see their country’s political system as sufficiently democratic. When this part of the novel is placed in its proper historical context, it becomes clear that Leo and Holly view men as the sole representatives of personhood. Women, who were not allowed to vote in the nineteenth century and did not have political rights, are excluded from their conception of personhood. The novel was written a few years after British Prime Minister Gladstone “threatened to drop” a parliamentary bill aimed at extending the franchise “if the woman’s amendment was not taken out.” In other words, Leo and Holly are content with a system that is assembled only by men and controlled by an anti-feminist head of government. They view the political disenfranchisement of women as something that is acceptable and normal. By downplaying any need for political reform, and thereby embracing a structure that has attacked early feminism, Leo and Holly attempt to undermine the efforts of those who wish to establish voting rights for women. This discussion is effectively a tool through which the socio-didactic aspirations of the novel, which involve antipathy towards feminism, are further activated.

Holly arguably continues to represent antipathy towards political rights for women near the end of the twenty-second chapter, in spite of comments that initially appear to be ambivalent. A close analytical inspection of these two paragraphs reveals that his feelings towards early feminism are actually not ambivalent. He states that Ayesha, who has expressed a strong desire to go to the United Kingdom, “would speedily make [the British Empire] the most glorious and prosperous empire that the world has ever seen.” He feels that Ayesha, who is “wonderful,” would “change [the world] materially for the better” through the British Empire. While these statements may appear to express a degree of support for

19 Haggard, 189.
21 Haggard, 190.
a woman’s power, it is important to note that Holly’s positive tone is only reserved for a potential relationship between Ayesha and Britain’s foreign policy. He does not say anything positive about Ayesha’s potential for changing Britain’s domestic political landscape. In fact, he fears that within Britain, she would “blast her way to any end she set before her.”

He is evidently convinced that her desire for power on British soil would constitute a negative force. Moreover, when he is not specifically thinking of her possible relationship with British imperialism, he indicates that she is “terrible.” He only sees her power as being “wonderful” when he speculates that Britain—which is characterized by an imperialist agenda shaped by male politicians—could use her power to advance its colonialist goals. In short, he hopes to see Ayesha’s female power become a tool through which male colonial violence can be enhanced. He does not express a desire for political changes within his own country. As a result, Holly’s ideological beliefs clearly do not disrupt the anti-feminist agenda exposed earlier in the chapter. His views are consistent with the novel’s commitment to patriarchy, which involves unwavering support for the anti-feminist status quo of Britain and tolerance for modes of femininity that pose no threat to male domination. In essence, the chapter steadfastly remains a reflector of patriarchal conservative thinking and a crucial carrier of the novel’s anti-feminist message.

Furthermore, this misogynist novel builds on its desire to preserve Britain’s patriarchal political culture by dramatically punishing, and exterminating, the figure of the powerful and confident women. In doing so, the patriarchal novel engages in “sexual warfare” against feminist women, which has been identified as a nineteenth-century literary theme by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The novel violently punishes Ayesha in a way that combines physical suffering with humiliation. As Ayesha dies, she feels “dazed” and cannot “see, for her whitish eyes [are] covered with a horny film.” Holly, who witnesses her demise, cannot begin to imagine what she must be feeling, which clearly indicates to the reader that she is in a great deal of pain. Moreover, as she dies, she looks “too hideous for words” and associates herself with “shame” when she speaks for the last time. By forcing her to go through a painful and humiliating death, the novel aggressively tortures and destroys the woman who embodies female power. As a political document, this novel assumes the role of patriarchy as it yearns for a brutal victory in its war against feminism. As a work of literature, this book is clearly designed to symbolically argue that female power can be quashed. Its ultimate goal is to incite enthusiasm on the part of those who favour male power at the expense of women and, by extension, wish to see male domination continue to characterize Victorian Britain.

22 Haggard, 190.
23 Haggard, 190.
24 Gilbert and Gubar, 362.
25 Haggard, 216-17.
This essay has explored various details that establish a relationship between Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* and anti-feminist conservatism in Victorian Britain. As an opponent of John Stuart Mill's vision of relative legal equality between married partners, the novel simultaneously resists legal reform and supports patriarchal constructions of gender within marriage. As a weapon that is aimed at Josephine Butler's early feminism, the novel is geared towards providing literary fuel for misogyny. As an artifact that represents hostility towards feminist activism, the novel paints a picture of the British Victorian status quo that embraces male domination. In the process of destroying Ayesha, the novel confirms its allegiance to a system that was challenged by early advocates of progress. Overall, Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* is a reflector of the discriminatory and male-chauvinist wing of Victorian Britain's socio-cultural spectrum. It is a side of the spectrum that, within this work of literature, employs such devices as symbolic violence in its bid to maintain gender-based oppression. This novel does not simply represent fiction. As a political instrument that is aimed at influencing humanity and undermining a progressive movement, this novel tacitly acknowledges the fundamental relationship that can exist between literary works and human culture.
Works Cited


