Reading Eternity: Haggard's *She* and Immortality in the Fin-de-siècle Novel

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Abstract: Immortality has been an enduring human desire, and certainly one that British novelists in the late century engaged with. H. Rider Haggard was one such novelist, and in his sensational *She: A History of Adventure* he raises the possibility of transcending human conceptions of time through the titular Ayesha, whose existence represents both an existential threat to the British way of life and a seductive fantasy. Although initially illegible to the explorers who encounter her, through her bodily destruction Ayesha, and the scale of time that she stands for in the text, becomes legible, dissolving the fantasy.

Keywords: She: A History of Adventure, H. Rider Haggard, Victorian literature, novel, immortality

Introduction: The Victorians and Immortality

Eternity as a concept is so far beyond human scale that it is unfathomable. Even vastly simplified allegories only gesture towards a truly infinite period: common fables about moving a beach one grain of sand at a time, or the ocean one drop of water at a time only approximate eternity. The task of depicting eternity in any meaningful way is a crisis of legibility, a span of time for which no conventional categories used for organizing temporal units are useful and which language fails to describe. The length of time gestured towards is simply so large that it dwarfs the units of time encountered in daily life by too many orders of magnitude to allow for linguistic representation. Despite this illegibility, the prospect of eternity and eternal life remains a seductive fantasy, and many late-century Victorian writers struggled with the dilemma by devising possible solutions, or at least suggesting possibilities, in their fiction. One such novelist, the often-bizarre H. Rider Haggard, mapped the crisis of illegibility onto the body of an unageing character whose body itself was illegible in his sensational 1887 *She: A History of Adventure*. Through her, he presented the alluring fantasy of eternal life, a possible vantage through which one might comprehend all of eternity, and through her unmaking and bodily destruction, he dissolves the fantasy but renders her, finally, legible in death. Through the deconstruction of this fantasy, what Haggard is doing is, in effect, attempting to make time outside of the scale of a human life legible in a fictional human body: despite the extensive critical commentary to date on Haggard and his novel, this aspirational project that runs underneath the other politics at work in the text has largely gone unremarked upon, and it intersects in nuanced ways with more conventional imperial, psychoanalytic, and gendered readings of Haggard's novel. In anticipation of a reading of *She*, it is prudent to provide a background in three parts: first, the fascination with immortality and eternal life in *fin-de-siècle* England, then the logistical issues that this fantasy brings, already anticipated by the Victorians themselves, and finally the path towards its representation and interrogation in Gothic, particularly Imperial Gothic, fiction.

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Stories about quests for eternal youth, immortality, and the reversal of aging have existed for as long as there have been recorded narratives, but for the Victorians this fantasy was felt acutely on a societal level in their medical science as well as their spirituality. To be literal on the one hand, the simple fact was that Queen Victoria was getting old, and this was, according to Karen Chase, a difficult subject for the Victorians: "by the century's end, there were images circulating everywhere of [Victoria's] intact, corpulent persistence, her heavy refusal to die…She was of course not the only one to age: by the end of the century more people than ever were living past 50" (187). As their queen aged, there was the possibility that with her death their epoch might end, that something decidedly different, something un-Victorian, would characterize future generations. Outside of novelistic worlds in contemporary medical fields, there have long been "Immortalists," to use Susan Behuniak's term, whose "goal is to defeat old age" using medical technologies and working toward potential salvation in biology and longevity science (162). As lifespans grew longer and the effects of old age were felt acutely across the population, the theoretical groundwork for this field of medicine was already being laid in the late century.

Less centered on materiality, and perhaps on the other extreme of their political reality at the center of the empire, modernity brought to the Victorians, according to Gerald Gruman, "a marked decline of faith in supernatural salvation from death…While these beliefs are still adhered to by many in times of bereavement, their role in everyday life has been weakened greatly" (5). Despite the "material satisfactions of modern life," he argues, "the individual feels hollow and powerless when faced with death" (5). It had long been felt that there were, borrowing John Carroll's formulation, "two quite different phenomena animating the human psyche. On the one hand, there is vitality, energy, life-force, and ego. On the other, there is soul. The former constellation is mortal" (411). This is a familiar divide that is complicated considerably by the Victorian thinkers who grappled with religion and a lack of faith in it, Darwin's influential theories, and the trends in psychology in the mid-century, which "had taken on an increasingly physical bent" (Stolte 404). Tyson Stolte argues that "there was a growing acceptance even among more conservative writers of the role of the body in mental processes….With this shift in focus to the nerves and brain came a shift in understanding: the mind came more frequently to be seen as a product of the physical body, the ontological distinction between mind and matter began to collapse, and it seemed to many that there was less and less room for any transcendent understanding of humankind" (404). As medical science advanced and lifespans increased across England, the general belief in the eternal life of the soul in the face of new discoveries was simultaneously waning.

More tangibly than life after death, the premise of eternal, or even hyperextended, earthly life presented legitimate logistical issues despite its apparent desirability. Reading Voltaire's satire *Micromégas* which presents extraterrestrial life forms who live many times longer than humans, Karl Guthke argues that "no matter how far prolonged into the future a lifetime may be envisioned, as long as it remains finite, it will allow and encourage the human subject's autonomous shaping and structuring of such a life, which gives that life its meaning" (4). In other words, Guthke, suggests, if the average human lifespan suddenly tripled, it would only represent a restructuring of the perceived phases of that newly increased lifespan (a childhood that goes on for fifty years, for example) along preexisting metrics of youth, age, and senescence. Beyond this, again from Guthke, "the prospect of a life of endless duration…suggests a radically different experience of time, one that prompts the question of the meaning of human life in such temporal infinity in an entirely different way: would any activity at all make sense once the constraints of limited time no longer exist?" (4). Writing on William Godwin's 1799 novel *St. Leon* which contains a protagonist who is given the secret to eternal life, Andrea Charise reads the thrust of the novel as ultimately leading "readers to consider how eternal individual vigor might thwart the collective goals of a benevolent society" (22). Leaving aside some legal logistical issues—what would a life sentence in prison mean for an immortal being, and how would land deeds and property transfer between generations?—a society of immor-

tals would either need to immediately cease reproduction or flood the earth in short order. The turnover between generations, while terrifying from the perspective of the waning generation in the 1880s and their own perception of their legacy, was a necessity, paradoxically, for their way of life to continue: Victorian society as the Victorians knew it would collapse if they achieved earthly immortality.

Predictably, English novelists took up these conflicting energies with a pronounced vigor in their fiction using narrative tools that included more conventional approaches in addition to the wild possibilities raised by authors like Haggard. Reading George Eliot's mid-century fiction, Edward Hurley observes that the author's "concern with death and the limits it places on the individual seems to have grown as [she] grew older. To counteract death, the role of the family expanded and began to transform the past into a new, ever widening future" in her novelistic worlds (226). This is at once conservative and utopian: many are the Victorian novels that end with babies bouncing on knees, reproductive futurity secured, but the continuity between generations in Eliot's later work is certainly a gentle way to acknowledge the passing of time and turning over of generations without a caustic downward narrative spiral in a later novel such as Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Ted Underwood suggests that historical novels featuring "analogies between historical imagination and resurrection" suggest a "longing for immortality, felt most strongly in the moments of historical double vision that acknowledge, but magically negate, the transience of human bodies and ways of life" (443). Of these novels, he argues, the "idealization of life" emerges from efforts "to represent social totality as ceaseless change and to give their characters and readers a sense of participation in its permanence" (469). In the relationships of characters and readers to fictionalized histories and in reproductive futurity, these novelists offer ideas that do not radically rupture the realism of their storyworlds.

These appeals to continuity between historical periods and frequent insistences of reproductive futurity abounded in the British novel throughout the decades of Victoria's reign, but late in her life and late in the century new and more experimental approaches to eternal life emerged in the complex webs of the Imperial Gothic[1] novel. Patrick Brantlinger cites the three major themes of this genre as "the waning of opportunities for heroic adventure," "regression," and "invasion" (239). For the masculine, thoroughly British adventurers and explorers who populate these novels, the secret and yet-unexplored nooks and crannies beyond England's borders present the last spaces for the supposed derring-do lacking in modern life, and with it threats of siege by powerful, sometimes supernatural, forces from abroad. Stoker's *Dracula* perhaps typifies the genre best, but both *She* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* traffic in its conventions and use its form to, according to Stephen Arata, "not only articulate and account" for the waning British hegemony in the late-century, but "also to defend against and even to assuage the anxiety attendant upon cultural decay" (622-3). These novels often include tremendously powerful, monstrous immortals, pitted against the British citizens who are made to encounter in them a nightmarish vision of the possible future as well as the ancient past: a figure such as Count Dracula has in him the double helix strains of potential future conquest as well as centuries-old knowledge and customs that defy (or simply don't align with) contemporary logic and mores.[2] In these novels, according to Arata, "a terrifying reversal has occurred: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized" (623). In addition to Arata's formulation, vitally, in these texts, the *reader* becomes himself *read and translated*, an uncomfortable reversal that is only undone as the immortal reader of his body and mind perishes. For all of the impossible happenings and wild plotting in Haggard's *She*, it is grounded, at its very core, in frustrated acts of reading and translation.

The Difficulty in Reading *She*

H. Rider Haggard is far from an excellent prose stylist. V.S. Pritchett wrote of him that, "like many popular best-sellers, he was a very sad and solemn man who took himself too seriously and his art not

seriously enough. The fact is that he was a phenomenon before he was a novelist: other novelists are content to be simply themselves, Rider Haggard was his public" (25). Despite his limitations as a writer, he was and remains immensely popular, and many of his novels have never been out of print. *She: A History of Adventure* was a smash hit and helped inspire generations of adventure novels and Hollywood films, few of which linger with the reader or viewer like Haggard's novel does in its starkest and most shocking moments. Aside from Ayesha's (the titular "She") horrific and memorable demise, there are destructive storms, lost civilizations, supernatural murders, and caverns full of beautifully preserved corpses. Haggard claimed that the novel was written in only six weeks, "at white heat, almost without rest…I remember that when I sat down to the task my ideas as to its development were of the vaguest. The only clear notion that I had in my head was that of an immortal woman inspired by an immortal love. All the rest shaped itself round this figure" (reprinted in Cohen 97). Describing Haggard's work in another famous quote, Pritchett wrote that "E.M. Forster once spoke of the novelist sending down a bucket into the unconscious; the author of *She* installed a suction pump. He drained the whole reservoir of the public's secret desires" (Pritchett 25–6). Almost certainly, the frenzied composition of the novel has led to its rich history in psychoanalysis and other fields of literary studies: reading through it, one does get the sense that Haggard had the germ of the text, Ayesha and her millennia-spanning love affair, and the rest flowed almost unbidden and unfiltered from the recesses of his mind.

Perhaps this wellspring emerged from Haggard's own inability to precisely narrate his lived experiences in Africa as a much younger man, a preoccupation of his characters in *She* who likewise fail to do so for much of the novel. In a typical example from his autobiography, Haggard writes, "I saw a curious sight the other day, a witch dance. I cannot attempt to describe it, it is a vague sort of thing" (*Day of My Life* 56). Of this episode, Robbie McLaughlin suggests that "Haggard's inability to articulate or depict the scene with which he is confronted exemplifies the shortcomings of colonial discourse and a teasing quality always present in his oeuvre. This imbues his narratives with a loaded ambiguity" (78). This perhaps gives Haggard a clearer, more well-defined artistic intention across his catalog of work than the "white heat" the novelist himself describes. Perhaps the truth, or a version of it, lies between this sort of coy ambivalence towards colonialism and groping, fetishizing curiosity: if the germ of this and other events on the so-called "dark continent" remained with Haggard for decades, his fiction can be read as an attempt to interrogate and make sense of that which he could not articulate. *She* and his other novels become a laboratory to test different forms of storytelling, narration, and meaning-making in fiction that eluded Haggard in his biographical writing. This dovetails nicely with Haggard's reply to an early review of *She*, wherein he writes that the novel is in "the first place, an attempt is made in it to follow the action of the probable effects of immortality working upon the known and ascertained substance of the mortal. This is a subject with a prospective interest for us all" ("Who is 'She'?" 13). Beyond the limits of Haggard's ability to articulate his lived experience, and beyond the limits of general lived human experience, *She* is poised from its conception to offer ways of reading and translating that which eludes by its very nature easy description.

The novel is presented as a manuscript given to an editor by the self-labeled misogynist Horace Holly, a Cambridge scholar, and his younger ward Leo Vincey as they prepare to set out to "Thibet," as it is spelled in the novel, to continue their adventures. Leo's father dies of a wasting disease as the narrative begins, and Holly is charged with raising and teaching the boy, who becomes a fast favorite at the university due to his charm and beauty. His education includes classical subjects, sports such as shooting, and half a decade of intensive and extensive language training in Arabic in addition to Greek and Latin. On his twenty-fifth birthday, Leo comes into his inheritance, a mysterious chest full of instructions, artifacts, glyphs, and translations from across continents and across centuries that points the pair towards Africa in search of a mythical source of eternal life, along with an Arab ship captain Mahomed and their manservant Job. Their ship wrecks in a storm, and they

encounter a lost race of natives called the Amahagger who guide them to Kôr, the domain of She-who-must-be-obeyed, a "Diana in jack-boots" and the mystical immortal queen of an underground kingdom who believes Leo is the reincarnation of a lost love from two thousand years prior (Etherington 80). Holly narrates the text, and it is through him that the reader learns most of the information about Ayesha, her history, and the lost knowledge and treasures in her kingdom. Eventually, in the novel's climax, she reveals to the men a mystical pillar of flame that confers eternal life on those who dare to step into it. To prove that it is safe for Leo to do so, Ayesha bathes in the fire a second time, and, in an instant, ages two thousand years as her immortality is stripped from her. The men, physically and mentally scarred, then flee home to England, aided by an Amahagger elder, Billali, who took an earlier liking to Holly.

The text primes the reader, through its main male duo, to expect acts of reading in the mode of an archeological dig, or a tour through a museum of pilfered artifacts. The excessive flurry of foreign objects and translations Leo and Holly encounter before setting off on their journey, according to Katy Braundan, "is deliberate. First, the translations…reinforce the heroes' philological learning and replicate the kind of appendices one finds in explorer's narratives. At the same time, their very excess signals the novel's knowing participation in absurd Orientalist fantasies" (Brundan 964). Everything from the veiled instructions upon Leo's maturation to the mysterious treasure box to its contents engages with this fantasy. This continues as Holly narrates Africa and the people he encounters there. The Amahagger, fortuitously, speak Arabic, and Holly tells them, "We are of a brave race who fear not death…that is, if we can get a little fresh information before we die" (*She* 91). When he is faced with cultural customs that are unfamiliar to his genteel, British norms, Holly turns to simple simile. He translates, in other words, things such as women picking their husbands, a freer exchange of spouses, and matrilineal lines of heredity to a lexicon he and his imagined audience are already familiar with: "I am bound, however, to say that the change of husbands was not nearly so frequent as might have been expected. Nor did quarrels arise out of it, at least among the men, who, when their wives deserted them in favour of a rival, accepted the whole thing much as we accept the income-tax or our marriage laws" (*She* 94). A few pages later, he performs a similar surveying analysis of the types of livestock the Amahagger keep, their distribution of labor, and more, all in the mode of an anthropologist gathering and organizing information for a domestic readership.

This continues as the men are led towards Kôr, even after Mahomed is killed by the Amahagger; his death does little to change Holly's prying eyes and approach to knowledge-seeking. The entire kingdom, according to Shawn Malley, is itself a sort of archeological site. He writes that much "in the way archaeology resurrects past cultures from places of interment, Holly and Leo penetrate the spirit of the past in the catacombs of Kôr" (287). Initially, even Ayesha, Malley suggests, fits this mold: "[v]eiled and mummy-like, she has been preserved fro the modern archaeologist figuratively to unwrap" (289). Holly sees Ayesha first in a dream, very much in the form of a puzzle he must solve:

> My dreams that night when at last I got to sleep were not of the pleasantest…in the background, as it were, a veiled form was always hovering, which, from time to time, seemed to draw the coverings from its body, revealing now the perfect shape of a lovely blooming woman, and now again the white bones of a grinning skeleton, and which, as it veiled and unveiled, uttered the mysterious and apparently meaningless sentence:
> '*That which is alive hath known death, and that which is dead yet can never die, for in the Circle of the Spirit life is nought and death is nought. Yea, all things live for ever, though at times they sleep and are forgotten* (*She* 115, italics in original).

At this point unaware of precisely what he is seeing, Holly seems poised to do what Haggard could not, solving the puzzle of the signs and symbols he encounters by making their hidden meanings apparent. He has been given a sort of riddle through his dream; the reader might expect him to work through the riddle, informed by the information in the chest left behind by Leo's father and the inquisitive spirit of the gentleman explorer.

Shortly thereafter, Holly's attempts to make sense of what he reads around him are thwarted. His dream vision is the final time in the text, until the pages concerning Ayesha's demise, that he will be established as the interpreter of any text or message at all. At first, his descriptive powers fail him, and he admits that it has become "quite impossible to describe [Kôr's] grim grandeur as it appeared to me" (*She* 131). Then, he is faced with a language that, despite his extensive training, he cannot translate: "Between the pictures were columns of stone characters of a formation absolutely new to me; at any rate they were neither Greek nor Egyptian, nor Hebrew, nor Assyrian—that I can swear to. They looked more like Chinese than anything else" (134). He will later repeat this same guess, that it "looked more like Chinese writing than any other that I am acquainted with," almost as if he feels compelled to lend credence to his guesswork as something closer to fact than speculation (172). These mounting inadequacies reach their summit when Holly attempts to read the actual body of the woman he saw in his dream vision. He relates that he could "not see the person, but I could distinctly feel his or her gaze, and, what is more, it produced a very odd effect upon my nerves. I felt frightened, I don't know why" (142). Resorting to pure physical description, Holly is again frustrated: "I say a figure, for not only her body, but also her face, was wrapped up in soft white, gauzy material in such a way as at first sight to remind me most forcibly of a corpse in grave clothes. And yet I do not know why it should have given me that idea, seeing that the wrappings were so thin that one could distinctly see the gleam of the pink flesh beneath them…Anyhow, I felt more frightened than ever at this ghost-like apparition" (143). The steady, sure adventurer who likens unfamiliar rituals and customs to those in London has been bested; his resigned, atypical "anyhow" is at once a jarring tonal change from his earlier anthropological tenor yet also a perfect encapsulation of his confused state as a frustrated reader.

Here, for the first time in the text, Holly finds himself as an object being read rather than the reader. Ayesha informs him that he "wast afraid because mine eyes were searching out thine heart, therefore wast thou afraid" (144). She removes her shawl, and Holly, faced with her unearthly beauty, finds words desert him again: "How am I to describe it? I cannot—simply, I cannot! The man does not live whose pen could convey a sense of what I saw" (153). He is unable to read Ayesha, including her physical body, her thoughts, and her motivations in much the same way that he is unable to read the text adorning the walls, statues, and reliefs in Kôr. Haggard positions Ayesha as a human manifestation of the unknowable, the entirety of Kôr and all that it represents in miniature. Brundan argues that she presents an "overarching linguistic threat toward the British men" which is especially noticeable when Ayesha engages in a "reverse translation scenario," reading the British men who expected to be in the position of privileged viewers and readers of the lose civilization (959). It is Ayesha who peers into Holly's mind, and Ayesha who determines that Leo is Kallikrates, her long-dead lover, inscribing him with an identity that is not his own. Further, her body itself frustrates attempts to understand her, as her corporeal form does not bely her true nature. Holly asks, "Thou art a woman, and no spirit. How can a woman live two thousand years? Why dost thou befool me, oh Queen?" (*She* 148). By way of answer, Ayesha "leaned back upon he couch, and once more [Holly] felt the hidden eyes playing upon [him] and searching out [his] heart" (148). She does not show her age; she lacks the lines on her face that should signal her thousands of years on the earth, and Holly lacks the ability to translate the effect of this gap between appearance and true nature into lines on the page. When she questions his understanding of her motives and actions, Holly, meekly, tells the reader "I was dumbfounded, and could not answer. The matter was too overpowering for my intellect to grasp" (149).

Ayesha, the symbol of that which Holly does not know, cannot read, and is unable to translate into narrative material for the reader, is both absolutely enigmatic and, through her enigma, absolutely seductive in the fantasy she represents: Holly might, Haggard suggests, come to speak these hidden languages and know what is unknowable if he were to learn her secret to eternal life. Ayesha will later translate the ancient language to Holly and Leo aloud, and it is only through her words that the men

are able to understand her, rather than their observations. She reframes Holly's sense of temporal scale by orders of magnitude, two thousand years of perspective to the twenty years Holly has been preparing himself and Leo to undertake the journey to Kôr:

> What are ten or twenty or fifty thousand years in the history of life? Why in ten thousand years scarce will the rain and storms lessen a mountain top by a span in thickness? In two thousand years these caves have not changed, nought has changed, but the beasts and man, who is as the beasts. There is nought that is wonderful about the matter, couldst thou but understand. Life is wonderful, ay, but that it should be a little lengthened is not wonderful (150).

Appealing to geologic time rather than the time of mechanical clocks or even human lives, Ayesha reframes the purported purpose of this quest—to find the secret of eternal life—as something almost banal: life itself is wonderful, but after thousands of years she is jaded to its infinite extension. In bed hours later, Holly tells the reader he "began to gather my scattered wits, and reflect upon what I had seen and heard. But the more I reflected the less I could make of it" (156). Patricia Murphy indicates that this gap in perceived time and historical epochs between Holly and Ayesha "creates a suffocating and disorienting effect through the bewildering layers of centuries incorporated within She and consequently stymies efforts to affix her within a temporal span" (Murphy 764). Ayesha exists in time, but on a scale that is tantalizingly out of reach, escaping Holly's language and logic, but similar enough to seduce him. It is, like the unknown language he encounters, *almost like* touchstones he has access to, outside his grasp but well within Ayesha's.

The temptation that Ayesha represents is tempered by Haggard quickly, then by Holly's post-hoc footnotes in his fictional manuscript sometime after he returns from Africa, and finally by the shocking idea that she might decide, on a lark, to dominate the world and rule over it for eternity. The first is a subtle distinction that Ayesha draws, beyond Holly's comprehension, that, according to her, "there is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as understanding and applying the forces which are in nature" (*She* 184). She repeats this point upon demonstrating further supernatural powers ranging from clairvoyance to "blasting," which amounts to instantaneous murder, "I tell thee I deal not in magic—there is no such thing. 'Tis only a force that thou dost not understand" (195). Wendy Katz explains that a "good deal of Ayesha's attraction is created by her extreme wilfulness—she does whatever she wishes, regardless of the consequences… She is, after all, not the stoical and well-disciplined Englishman…but a more complex sort of leader, more aware of the sheer pleasures of power and very much more terrifying. At the same time, she is practically irresistible" (125-6). To Holly (indeed, to the reader), she seems a being of pure will: she decides to murder Leo's Amahagger lover Ustane with a thought, and so it happens. She denies the use of magic, any sort of comprehensible system, and only provides the information that there is yet another undefined, foreign set of forces and laws outside the Englishman's experiences and perhaps even his wildest dreams. This I argue is one of the cruxes of the fantasy of the immortal figure, that she has access to lexica mere mortals do not have and will never have, an understanding of things that is precluded by the nature of their more transient existence. What Haggard does by turning her to cold-blooded murder is spoiling this temptation, denying any possible utopian application so that, when Ayesha is undone and Holly can finally make sense of what he has seen and done, it has the sting of melodrama, a Faustian deal gone bad, rather than the tragic fall of a noble, star-crossed queen.

Slowly processing what is happening around him, Holly puts down the narrator's pen and takes up the role of editor of his manuscript by adding an informative footnote. After remarking that Ayesha is a "mysterious creature of evil tendencies," in the main text, he digresses:

> After some months of consideration of this statement I am bound to confess that I am not quite satisfied of its truth It is perfectly true that Ayesha committed a murder, but I shrewdly suspect that were we endowed with the same absolute power, and if we had the same tremendous interest at stake, we should be very apt to do likewise under parallel circumstances…It is a well-known fact that very often,

> putting the period of boyhood out of the question, the older we grow the more cynical and hardened we get, indeed many of us are only saved by timely death from utter moral petrifaction if not moral corruption…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 (221).

This reads as an attempt to, simply put, establish agency in his own story when he had none. In the narrative, Holly has admitted he "would give [his] immortal soul to marry" Ayesha, so the digressive footnote and its philosophical musings ring with both Holly's voice and Haggard's (182). Mark Doyle points out that, for a writer concerned with moral decay and societal rot, "Ayesha's immortality…represents a way to fight the moral and physical devolution that Haggard feared" (A69). By crafting Ayesha as a figure that is tempting but illegible, and then a force of pure destructive will, Haggard is both tempering her desirability outside of the narrative and inside of it. This is further exacerbated when Ayesha declares, "the law! Canst thou not understand, oh Holly, that I am above the law, and so shall my Kallikrates be also? All human law will be to us as the north wind to a mountain. Does the wind bend the mountain, or the mountain the wind?" (232). She returns to geologic metaphors, rendering the British Empire as a gust against her mountain, and only then does Holly realize, finally, what he has risked by embarking on this venture: "In the end she would, I had little doubt, assume absolute rule over the British dominions, and probably over the whole earth, and though I was sure that she would speedily make ours the most glorious and prosperous empire that the world has ever seen, it would be at the cost of a terrible sacrifice of life" (233). Even here, Ayesha is a temptation that is hard to resist. Gerald Monsman cites exactly "this godlike refusal to subject her passion to moral law" as the core of what endows the character "with dread and splendor" (194). Here, Holly mixes linguistic registers, contemplating glory and prosperity built upon untold quantities of the dead. His use of "our Empire" belies the true root of the matter; the prospect of Ayesha's conquest is only even somewhat amenable to him because he is confident she and Leo would ensure England became the absolute seat of global geopolitical power, and he would thusly benefit. It goes without saying that if she had, in another version of the text, proposed to remake the globe in the mold of the native Amahagger's society, his reaction would be considerably more outraged.

Part of Ayesha's plan involves making Leo immortal through the same ritual she underwent many centuries prior and using him, Holly realizes, as a sort of interpreter, as she does not speak English. To borrow from Brundan's formulation again, Ayesha's "plan involves transforming Leo as a translator changes a text: domesticating its otherness, bringing it nearer to the target culture" so that he might be more useful and desirable to Ayesha (973). This is a narrative move that mirrors Dracula's transformation of young women into his thralls, and is in the vein of the Imperial Gothic novels which threaten a fate worse than death for the adventurers: they might, it seems, be left alive, perhaps even enriched with mystical power, but they would become thoroughly un-British at the whims of a being powerful enough to circumvent or outright ignore the laws and moral imperatives they hold so dear. Ayesha has been revealed as an existential threat to their very way of being, but unlike other immortal villains such as the evil Dracula, there is no apparent way to destroy her. Seemingly without a solution to the mounting problem they have inadvertently traveled across the world to find, Holly and Leo are led further into the caverns of Kôr towards the pillar of life that has granted Ayesha her immortality, a horrifying and apocalyptic climax to the text.

Much has been said about the short, three-page span comprising Ayesha's demise, perhaps more than has been written about the other several hundred pages of the novel. Trying to demonstrate to the men that the fiery pillar of life is safe, Ayesha steps into it so that Leo might follow. Its power, Holly and Leo discover, is stripped away upon a second bath in its heat, and each of Ayesha's two thousand years crashes down on her with the force of a hurricane. Sandra Gilbert reads the pillar of life as "an almost theatrically rich sexual symbol…a fiery signifier whose eternal thundering return speaks the inexorability of the patriarchal Law She has violated in her satanically overreaching ambition" (130). Her rapid aging upon her reentrance into the fire has been called a "Darwinian

nightmare" of evolution in reverse by Judith Wilt (264), "retrogressive evolution" by Rebecca Stott (115), and "a fiasco beyond human comprehension" by Henry Miller (92). Andrew Libby, interestingly, has called this climactic scene more "convenient and far-fetched than it is convincing," noting Haggard's "inability to legitimately dispose of [Ayesha's] threat" and anxiety "attending the rise of female power" (11-12). There is a sort of contrapasso to the scene, the unmaking of the queen by the same divine fiat that granted her power to begin with, and the sudden, horrible devolution that she suffers has the smack of a depraved, biblical justice, but Libby's point is worth taking very seriously indeed: Ayesha is not undone by a stake to the heart, but by what appears to be random (or arbitrary) chance. Haggard, I would suggest, isn't in any hurry to "be rid" of Ayesha because he has written himself into a position that is impossible to escape. Simon Magus has argued along this line previously, noting that "so keen was Haggard to destroy this character—terrifying femme fatale and personification of the overly powerful 'New Woman' of Victorian society—that he brought her back for a sequel and two prequels" (168-9). The scene is best read then, not as a quick and too-convenient killing, but a reorientation that puts the pen back in Holly's hand and allows him, finally, to read and narrate Ayesha and reclaim his narrative primacy as the reader rather than the object that is read.

The chapter title itself, "What We Saw," indicates the nature of Haggard's narrative sleight-of-hand. This is Holly's reclamation of mastery in the text, achieved through Ayesha's death. Portions of this spectacular passage are worth reprinting:

> True enough—I faint even as I write it in the living presence of that terrible recollection—she *was* shrivelling up; the golden snake that had encircled her gracious form slipped over her hips and fell upon the ground; smaller and smaller she grew; her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like an old piece of withered parchment. She felt at her bald head: the delicate hand was nothing but a claw now, a human talon like that of a badly-preserved Egyptian mummy, and then she seemed to realise what kind of change was passing over her, and she shrieked— ah, she shrieked!—she rolled upon the floor and shrieked!
>
> …
>
> At last she lay still, or only feebly moving. She who, but two minutes before, had gazed upon us the loveliest, noblest, most splendid woman the world had ever seen, she lay still before us, near the masses of her own dark hair, no larger than a big monkey, and hideous—ah, too hideous for words. And yet, think of this—at that very moment I thought of it—it was the same woman! (*She* 261, 263).

In her death throes, Holly compares Ayesha to a shriveled monkey and a tortoise, and, certainly, he leans on the languages of evolution and devolution in his descriptions. He also, however, uses another curious phrase: she becomes parchment. For all his earlier inability to speak, comprehend, and read her, finally, Ayesha is transformed into a state that Holly can narrate. He calls Ayesha "too hideous for words," and then continues to use his words to describe her despite this. He reaches to the reader and makes a demand: "think of this." Even the comparison to a mummy reframes the situation in terms that Holly, ever the archeologist, can understand and relate to the reader, rather than an impossible, unique event without any reference point.

As Ayesha loses her ability to speak and her power in the narrative, Holly takes over and becomes once again the expert and focalizing force he was in the earliest chapters of the text, scholar and authority over the manuscript that he will produce. When the pair is eventually rescued and led out from Kôr by Billali, Holly renarrates what happened in his own vision, rather than a truthful retelling of events: "I set to work and told him—not everything, indeed, for I did not think it desirable to do so, but sufficient for my purpose, which was to make him understand that *She* was really no more, having fallen into some fire, and, as I put it—for the real thing would have been incomprehensible to him—been burnt up" (274-5). By watching thousands of years enter Ayesha's body over the span of two minutes, Holly has learned how to read that span of time where he simply couldn't at earlier points in the text and can narrate it to his imagined reading public.

Other novels of the period include immortal figures who are killed, but none have such vivid, lengthy scenes wherein characters read the dying body. Dorian Gray's suicide and Dracula's killing are quick, and, despite Holly's assurance that Ayesha ages and dies in only a few minutes, the scene is long and lingers with the reader even though the text continues for several additional chapters. Mixing scientific registers of (d)evolution, archeological metaphors, and affective shock and horror, Haggard has Holly "invent" the language required to describe and understand time so far out of scale compared to the single human lifespan. This is the language required to describe and ultimately deconstruct the fantasy of eternal life, an almost instantaneous rot that sets in after being delayed for centuries. The book *She* as Holly purports to have written it in the storyworld is a guidebook on close reading and interrogating the fantasy that so obviously fascinated Haggard and other late-century authors, squashed and made abhorrent because it is unattainable and out of reach. That Haggard would resurrect Ayesha repeatedly in other novels speaks to her vibrancy as a figure and the seductive nature of her eternal youth, always tempting, and always oscillating between aspirational and obscene.

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Notes

[1] Sometimes called the Imperial Romance

[2] Jeffrey Franklin argues that these figures are "generally tied to a prior age and are reactionary in relationship to the progress associated with science, technology, and market growth" (167). I would suggest that they are perhaps more nuanced than this, and look forward as well as backwards, offering possible futures as well as remaining symbolically tethered to an older form of being.

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