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'She-who-must-be-obeyed': Anthropology and Matriarchy in H. Rider Haggard's She

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Abstract

This essay examines the nineteenth-century debate about an imagined matriarchal past, arguing that it raised significant questions about gender and history. It scrutinizes the interdisciplinary nature of the debate, demonstrating that anthropology and literature intersected in a fraught investigation of ‘mother-rule’. The essay contends that H. Rider Haggard’s novel *She* (1887) engages in complex ways with anthropological visions of a matriarchal past. The work of the major matriarchal theorists, J. J. Bachofen, J. F. McLennan, John Lubbock, and L. H. Morgan, often seen as triumphalist accounts of the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, was beset by tensions about gender, power, and temporality, caught between evolutionary meliorism and nostalgia, between a defence of patriarchy and recognition of cultural variability. Haggard’s *She*, the essay argues, exposes and deepens the tensions at the heart of the anthropological narrative. Critics have conventionally read *She* as a matriarchal dystopia, yet the novel offers an ambivalent dramatization of matriarchy, and is attracted as well as repelled by the matriarchal past embodied in the white African queen Ayesha and her people, the Amahagger. More than a *femme fatale*, Ayesha is sorceress and scientist, harbinger of life and of death; even her violence unsettles assumptions about gender and power. Haggard’s evocation of the Amahaggers’ marriage practices works to question the anthropologists’ hierarchical cultural evolutionism, moving towards an appreciation of plural cultures. The narrative’s insistence on cyclical temporalities also disrupts a linear narrative of progress from matriarchy to patriarchy, conveying the potent attractions of a resurgent female past.

Keywords

Anthropology; matriarchy; interdisciplinarity; Victorian literature; imperial romance; feminism; evolution; progress; dystopia; patriarchy; gender; temporality; history; modernity; survival; imperialism; female violence; H. Rider Haggard; J. J. Bachofen; J. F. McLennan.

'She-who-must-be-obeyed': Anthropology and Matriarchy in H. Rider Haggard's *She*

Julia Reid

1. Introduction

In 1901, from the vantage-point of a new century, the folklorist and critic Andrew Lang looked back on Alfred Tennyson's epic of female separatism, *The Princess* (1847), and set it in the context of late-Victorian debates about matriarchy. For Lang, Princess Ida's attempt to set up a 'University / For maidens' came 'prematurely', anticipating anthropologists' theories of a primitive matriarchy as well as the advent of real 'ladies' colleges'.¹ Ida's 'maidens' were not ignorant of the precedents for matriarchy in the ancient world, as Lang acknowledges. Indeed, they were well versed in the classical sources which the anthropologists were later to exploit: Lady Psyche's lecture to her new recruits 'Glanced at the legendary Amazon / As emblematic of a nobler age' and 'Appraised the Lycian custom [matriliny]'.² However, Lang points out, they knew nothing of recent revelations about 'Pictish [...] custom' or 'the position of women' among

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¹ Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess: A Medley*, 14th ed. (London: Edward Moxon, 1866), p. 23; Andrew Lang, *Alfred Tennyson* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1901), p. 55.

² See Cynthia Eller, *Gentlemen and Amazons: The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory, 1861-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 15-35; Tennyson, *Princess*, p. 36.

the ‘Hottentots’.³ Princess Ida, Lang observes, was ironically unaware that anthropology would soon endorse her experimental vision of female rule:

The learned Princess herself was not on our level as to knowledge and the past of womankind. She knew not of their masterly position in the law of ancient Egypt. Gynæocracy and matriarchy, the woman the head of the savage or prehistoric group, were things hidden from her.⁴

Here Lang strikingly interweaves literary and anthropological discourses. Continuing this playful interdisciplinary conversation, he quotes the folklorist E. S. Hartland on southern African precedents for matriarchy – precedents, he observes, that Ida misses.⁵ He also gives a contemporary political dimension to the conversation, associating Ida with her ‘shrill modern sisterhood’ (the suffrage campaigners).⁶ Lang’s commentary on *The Princess* intimates some of the ways in which Victorian literary texts, scientific writing, and political debate intersected in examining the meaning and value of matriarchy. His suggestion that Ida would have been more ‘modern’ had she known of ‘savage’ precedents is also illuminating, as it articulates a complex relationship between past, present, and future. The observation indicates the ways in which matriarchal narratives figured revolution, *reprise*, and cyclical return alongside and in tension with evolutionary progress, development, and teleology.

This article examines how the nineteenth-century debate about an imagined matriarchal past raised significant questions about gender, power, and temporality. As Lang’s reading of *The Princess* suggests, it was a debate that crossed genres, discourses, and disciplines, as anthropology, folklore, political tracts, fiction, poetry, classical scholarship, and archaeology conducted a

³ Lang, *Tennyson*, p. 56. ‘Hottentots’ was the name given by European colonists to the Khoikhoi, a people indigenous to southern Africa.

⁴ Lang, *Tennyson*, p. 56.

⁵ Lang, *Tennyson*, p. 56.

⁶ Lang, *Tennyson*, p. 56.

fraught investigation of ‘mother-rule’. Ann Taylor Allen, Cynthia Eller, and Carole Silver have drawn attention to the importance of this topic for the interdisciplinary study of Victorian literature, science, and gender.⁷ However, despite the current interest in the intersections between Victorian literature, science, and gender (and particularly in fiction’s engagement with Darwinian sexual selection), there has been no sustained scrutiny of how anthropology and literature engaged in a debate about an imagined matriarchal past.⁸ My discussion first focuses on matriarchal writings by theorists including J. J. Bachofen and J. F. McLennan before turning to a fictional work that was published four decades after *The Princess*: H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887). Scholars have often dismissed Bachofen and McLennan as patriarchal apologists, but I contend that their works articulate ambivalence about gender, history, and power. Haggard’s novel exposes and deepens the tensions at the heart of anthropologists’ accounts of the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, illuminating the fundamental doubts about the relations of gender and history that ran across late-Victorian literary and scientific discourses.

2. Matriarchal theory

⁷ Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe 1890-1970: The Maternal Dilemma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 19-39, and ‘Feminism, Social Science, and the Meanings of Modernity: The Debate on the Origin of the Family in Europe and the United States, 1860-1914’, *American Historical Review* 104.4 (Oct. 1999), 1085-1113; Eller, *Gentlemen, passim.*; Carole G. Silver, *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 94-116.

⁸ For examples of work on sexual selection, see Angelique Richardson, *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century: Rational Reproduction and the New Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 46-57 and *passim.*; Richard Kaye, *The Flirt’s Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002).

Since the 1970s, historians have cast the major matriarchal theorists – Bachofen, McLennan, John Lubbock, and L. H. Morgan – as reactionary defenders of the patriarchal *status quo*.⁹ Yet these writers arguably evinced uncertainty about the value of a matriarchal past. Their works are beset by unresolved tensions about gender and history. In varying measure, they are caught between evolutionary meliorism and nostalgia, between a defence of present-day patriarchy and a recognition that such an institution was far from universal.

In 1861, when the Swiss jurist J. J. Bachofen published *Das Mutterrecht*, patriarchy was regarded as the original basis of society and was seen by many as divinely ordained.¹⁰ Bachofen proposed, instead, that all cultures had passed through a matriarchal age, which preceded the patriarchal era. Bachofen's complex narrative traced the development of human culture from a primal state of promiscuity through the 'Demetrian matriarchy' to two stages representing the gradual ascendancy and then triumph of the principle of masculine spirituality: the Dionysian and Apollonian stages.¹¹ His schema was further complicated by intermediate stages including periods of Amazonian revolt against male dominance. Bachofen's work betrays a fundamental ambivalence about whether the patriarchy's defeat of matriarchy should be celebrated or mourned. His work is sternly progressivist in positioning matriarchy as governed by the 'material' and the 'physical', and contrasting this with patriarchy's 'liberation of the spirit from the

⁹ See, for example, Elizabeth Fee, 'The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology', in Mary S. Hartmann and Lois Banner, eds, *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives in the History of Women* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 86-102; Anita Levy, *Other Women: The Writing of Class, Race, and Gender, 1832-1898* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 60-68.

¹⁰ George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. 197.

¹¹ J. J. Bachofen, *Mother Right: An Investigation of the Religious and Juridical Character of Matriarchy in the Ancient World*, in *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J. J. Bachofen*, tr. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 96. This publication was the first English translation of Bachofen's work, and there is still, to my knowledge, no unabridged English translation of *Das Mutterrecht*: Eller, *Gentlemen*, pp. 60, 202n, and 211n.

manifestations of nature, a sublimation of human existence over the laws of material life'.¹²

Bachofen's narrative, for many critics, including Andrew Lyons and Harriet Lyons, is emphatically one of 'progression'.¹³ Yet the book's nostalgic tone unsettles this meliorism: Bachofen elegizes the 'matriarchal age' as 'beyond the poetry of cultivated but enfeebled times'.¹⁴ '[M]other love', he rhapsodizes, 'stands at the origin of all culture, of every virtue, of every nobler aspect of existence'.¹⁵ Furthermore, he contests assumptions about matriarchy's inevitable 'barbarity', and emphasizes loss as much as advance in the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy (pre-Hellenic, matriarchal culture, he asserts, 'possessed the seed of noble achievement which was suppressed and often destroyed by later developments').¹⁶ Bachofen's work was important, as Rita Felski observes, in developing the 'mythology of the "eternal feminine"', as his 'deeply nostalgic vision of femininity' chimed with the *fin-de-siècle* 'upsurge of antimodern sentiment'.¹⁷ His essentialist elegy to a maternal past has often appealed to 'difference' feminists, but it has been repudiated by feminists writing within a liberal tradition of gender equality.¹⁸

Bachofen's ambivalence about the demise of the matriarchal past was not so evident in contemporary work by British anthropologists, whose depiction of matriarchy has often been characterized as dismissive and reactionary. Certainly, as Elizabeth Fee, Rosalind Coward, and Eller have argued, British anthropologists diluted Bachofen's emphasis on female power and

¹² Bachofen, *Mother Right*, pp. 92, 109.

¹³ Andrew P. Lyons and Harriet D. Lyons, *Irregular Connections: A History of Anthropology and Sexuality* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 80.

¹⁴ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 84.

¹⁵ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 87.

¹⁷ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 50, 35, and 49.

¹⁸ See Peter Davies, *Myth, Matriarchy, and Modernity: Johann Jakob Bachofen in German Culture, 1860-1945* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), p. 2; Lyons and Lyons, *Irregular Connections*, pp. 80-81.

agency, recasting patriarchy (female political power) as simply a matter of matriliney (descent being traced through the mother).¹⁹ These men wrote, of course, in the context of the intensified debate about the ‘Woman Question’ that accompanied the campaigns for reform of married women’s property laws and for women’s suffrage. J. F. McLennan, whose *Primitive Marriage* (1865) was published before he was aware of Bachofen’s theories, argues that society originally existed in a state of primitive promiscuity, in which descent was matrilineal; this state, he claims, was eroded by the practice of wife-capture and polyandry, and the gradual rise of the idea of paternity fostered the transition to patriarchal monogamy.²⁰ McLennan’s was an insistently progressive narrative: kinship was traced through the mother simply because paternity was unknown; matriliney, in other words, was a function of ‘lax’ morality.²¹ McLennan correlated the rise of patriarchy with the ‘growth of property’, as men established their property rights, first in their wives, then in their children.²² Other British evolutionists, including John Lubbock, told a similarly reassuring story, in which modern patriarchy can be read as a triumph of culture over nature, order over chaos, sexual restraint over promiscuity, as a taming of the past.²³ Nonetheless, for all their championing of present-day patriarchy, the evolutionists were radical in challenging the ‘patriarchal theory’ (the idea that patriarchy was the original social state, adumbrated in Henry Maine’s influential *Ancient Law* (1861)), and in recognizing the existence of alternative social states. McLennan wrote that Maine’s ‘theory turns on a fundamental error as to the primitive state. It postulates that human history opens with perfect marriage, conjugal

¹⁹ Fee, ‘Sexual Politics’, p. 93; Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents: Sexuality and Social Relations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 53; Eller, *Gentlemen*, p. 67. See, for example, Lubbock, *Origin*, p. 68.

²⁰ John F. McLennan, *Primitive Marriage: An Inquiry into the Origin of the Form of Capture in Marriage Ceremonies* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1865).

²¹ McLennan, *Primitive Marriage*, pp. 159, 127.

²² McLennan, *Primitive Marriage*, p. 246.

²³ John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilisation and the Primitive Condition of Man: Mental and Social Condition of Savages* (London: Longmans, Green, 1870), pp. 50-113.

fidelity, and certainty of male parentage'; in fact, he continued, the patriarchal family 'is not the primary unit it is assumed to be.'²⁴

The sympathy for matriarchy that runs through Bachofen's writing, and also (in somewhat subterranean fashion) through both McLennan's and Lubbock's studies, was rather closer to the surface in the American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. Morgan stands in some ways apart from the British evolutionist writers in his attitude to the matriarchal past. He was, for a start, the only one of the 'grand [matriarchal] theorists to visit and observe a functioning matrilineal society, namely, the Seneca'.²⁵ In *Ancient Society* (1877), moreover, Morgan argued that the transition from matriliney to patriliney produced an 'unfavorable influence' on women's social position.²⁶ Morgan was the main source for Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884), which famously lamented the 'world historical defeat of the female sex'.²⁷ For all Morgan's sympathy for matriarchy, however, his remained a narrative of linear progress in which, as Coward notes, matriliney was firmly situated in the irrational past and whose *telos* was 'the biological family, monogamous [...] and recognising the rights of the father'.²⁸ While he looked forward to greater sexual equality in the future, there was no suggestion that matriarchy should be re-established.²⁹

The anthropologists' ambivalence about the matriarchal past underlies not only the divergent literary and political uses to which their theories were put in the nineteenth century but also the continuing disagreement about the value of their vision. Many critics, as noted, have interpreted the anthropologists as offering an 'evolutionary apologia' for Victorian patriarchal

²⁴ McLennan, *Primitive Marriage*, p. 270.

²⁵ Lyons and Lyons, *Irregular Connections*, p. 78.

²⁶ Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (1877; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 298.

²⁷ Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State: In the Light of the Researches of Lewis H. Morgan* (1884; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1940), p. 59. See Fee, 'Sexual Politics', p. 97; Allen, 'Feminism', p. 1094.

²⁸ Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents*, pp. 39-40.

²⁹ Morgan, *Ancient Society*, p. 420.

values.³⁰ McLennan, Lubbock, and Morgan, according to Fee, constructed an evolutionary narrative that simply updated Maine's discredited patriarchal theory: a 'refurbished, scientific patriarchalism'.³¹ However, as we have seen, matriarchal theorists demonstrated a complex and often ambivalent attitude towards the matriarchal past. George Stocking points out the radical nature of their subversion of 'the notion of divinely instituted patriarchalism'.³² Bachofen conveys, indeed, a sense of the shock administered by the revelation that marriage was a recent phenomenon, claiming that the public will be embarrassed to learn that the human race had such an 'unworthy [...] childhood'.³³ The conception of patriarchy as a historically and geographically contingent phenomenon was vitally important, providing, Allen judges, the 'basis for the emergence of a feminist critique of male supremacy'.³⁴ By the 1880s, feminist thinkers in Europe and the United States, including Mona Caird and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, were using the matriarchy debate to critique present-day patriarchy and to argue for reform.³⁵ Feminists drew on a range of matriarchal theories (Bachofen's work, not yet translated into English, was introduced through writers including Alexis Giraud-Teulon, Elie Reclus, and Karl Pearson).³⁶ Matriarchal theory also appealed to feminists as the emphasis on motherhood, so evident in Bachofen's idealization of 'mother love', resonated with the maternalism that was an important strain in *fin-*

³⁰ Lyons and Lyons, *Irregular Connections*, p. 78.

³¹ Fee, 'Sexual Politics', p. 92.

³² Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 207.

³³ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 93.

³⁴ Allen, 'Feminism', p. 1087.

³⁵ See for example Mona Caird, 'Marriage', *Westminster Review*, 130.1 (July 1888), 186-201; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'The Matriarchate: Or Mother-Age', in Rachel Foster Avery, ed., *Transactions of the National Council of Women of the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1891), pp. 218-27.

³⁶ Allen, 'Feminism', p. 1095; A. Giraud-Teulon, *La mère chez certains peuples de l'antiquité* (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1867), *passim*; Elie Reclus, 'Female Kinship and Maternal Filiation', *Radical Review*, 1.2 (Aug. 1877), 205-23; Karl Pearson, *The Ethic of Freethought: A Selection of Essays and Lectures* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1888), pp. 395-426.

de-siècle feminist discourse.³⁷ For all their loyalties to the modern European patriarchal order, then, the matriarchal theorists enabled a recognition of the possible alternatives to the *status quo*.

3. H. Rider Haggard's *She*

From about 1870, the matriarchy debate began to cross discursive, disciplinary, and generic boundaries. Novelists responded to the anthropologists' vision of the 'mother-age' by imagining a resurgent matriarchy. From Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) and Walter Besant's *The Revolt of Man* (1882) to Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889), Florence Dixie's *Gloriana; Or, The Revolution of 1900* (1890), and – later and on the other side of the Atlantic – Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), authors dramatized the possibilities of female rule and unsettled the relationship between past, present, and future.³⁸ The most famous, or notorious, fictionalization of matriarchy was H. Rider Haggard's *She*. In the remainder of this article, I argue that this novel's engagement with matriarchal theory is more complex and interesting than has usually been allowed.

Critics have conventionally read *She* as a matriarchal dystopia. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar interpret the novel as an exposure of the dangers of 'female misrule'.³⁹ Eller describes it as 'vastly more one-dimensional and harsh in its attitude toward women than the matriarchal myth articulated by the late nineteenth-century anthropologists'.⁴⁰ Critics have

³⁷ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 79. For feminist maternalism, see Richardson, *Love*, pp. 9, 53-57, 67-76, 95-115, and 157-77; Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex, and Morality* (1995; London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 70, 90, 217-21, and 230-35.

³⁸ Edward Bulwer Lytton, *The Coming Race* (1871; London: Routledge, 1874); Walter Besant, *The Revolt of Man* (1882; Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1883); Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (London: Tower Publishing, [1889]); Florence Dixie, *Gloriana; Or, The Revolution of 1900* (London: Henry and Co., 1890).

³⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Sexchanges*, in *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988-1989), II, 14.

⁴⁰ Eller, *Gentlemen*, p. 190.

depicted a gulf between ‘male-authored dystopias and female-authored utopias about sexual battle and female rule’, between, for example, Haggard’s novel and Gilman’s vision of a quasi-matriarchal future governed by ‘Mother-love’.⁴¹ At the heart of this reading is the imperial romance’s perceived relationship to gender and modernity. For Elaine Showalter, the genre constituted a reactionary flight from a modern world in which women were perceived as increasingly assertive.⁴² Rebecca Stott, too, situates the *femmes fatales* of male romance in the context of a ‘conservative “backlash”’ against social and cultural change.⁴³ Certainly, the genre’s late-Victorian champions, as Stephen Arata judges, hailed it as ‘an antidote to an effeminate modernity’.⁴⁴ Haggard and Lang, for example, saw romance as an escape from a feminized present and a return to vigorous, masculine primitivity.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the romance genre’s supposedly retrograde, nostalgic temporality harbours tensions about gender, modernity, and power. Haggard’s novel, far from being an uncomplicated dystopia, expresses ambivalence about the idea of a matriarchal past.

Haggard’s anthropological interests were at the heart of his romance *credo*. Like Lang, who used the anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s concept of evolutionary ‘survivals’ to hail the romance

⁴¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *War of the Words*, in *No Man’s Land*, I, 18. For a similar exposition of the division between dystopic ‘male-authored fantasies’ and utopic ‘female-authored fantasies’, see Katherine Stern, ‘The War of the Sexes in British Fantasy Literature of the Suffragette Era’, *Critical Matrix* 3 (1987)

<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=000000621192461&Fmt=3&clientId=43168&RQT=309&VName=PQD>> [accessed 3 August 2012]. Gilbert and Gubar compare *She* and *Herland* in *No Man’s Land*, II, 71. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (1915; London: Women’s Press, 1979), p. 68.

⁴² Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990; London: Bloomsbury, 1991), pp. 76-83.

⁴³ Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss of Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 13.

⁴⁴ Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 89.

⁴⁵ H. Rider Haggard, ‘About Fiction’, *Contemporary Review*, 51 (1887), 172-80 (p. 175); Arata, *Fictions*, p. 92.

as a ‘survival of barbarism’, Haggard thought that adventure fiction appealed to universal, primitive instincts.⁴⁶ Avowedly popular and sensational, his novels also accorded serious attention to the intellectual concerns exercising contemporary anthropologists. His experiences in southern Africa, where he lived from 1875 until 1881, first as a member of the British colonial service and then as a farmer, no doubt shaped his anthropological concerns (and perhaps even informed his interest in matriarchy, as he may have heard of the queen who ruled over the Lovedu people, in the Transvaal).⁴⁷ The present article, however, is chiefly interested in the ways in which Haggard’s engagement with matriarchal theory underlies *She*’s complex exploration of gender and power. The ambiguous gender politics evident in *She* run through many of Haggard’s other novels, uniting powerful, engaging, and disturbing female figures from Gagool in *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) to Rachel Dove in *The Ghost Kings* (1907-08).

She is deeply engaged with anthropology, its anthropological aspirations indicated by its dedication to Andrew Lang, who took a quasi-editorial role with the novel, by its attention to custom and belief, and by its pseudo-scholarly footnotes. Haggard would have been familiar with the matriarchy debate through Lang’s *Custom and Myth* (1884).⁴⁸ In that work, Lang surveys scholarship on the early history of the family, adjudicating between Maine’s ‘patriarchal theory’ and McLennan’s belief in a matriarchal stage. While he rejects Bachofen’s and McLennan’s depiction of primitive ‘promiscuity’, arguing that male jealousy would have encouraged ‘monogamy or patriarchal polygamy’, Lang accepts McLennan’s contention that the ‘matriarchal

⁴⁶ Lang, ‘Realism and Romance’, *Contemporary Review*, 52 (1887), 683-93 (p. 689); Haggard, ‘About Fiction’, 172-80.

⁴⁷ Morton Cohen, *Rider Haggard: His Life and Works* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), pp. 28-62, 109. Haggard denied that he had heard of the Lovedu: see ‘The Death of “Majajie.”: Mr. Rider Haggard’s “She.”’, *African Review* 8 (19 Sept. 1896), 639.

⁴⁸ Robert Fraser records that Haggard read this work shortly after meeting Lang in March 1885: see *Victorian Quest Romance: Stevenson, Haggard, Kipling, and Conan Doyle* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998), p. 30.

family' prevailed at an early stage of social development.⁴⁹ Lang (like McLennan, Lubbock, and even, on balance, Bachofen) took a meliorist view of the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy: he regarded matriarchy and matriliney as contraventions of 'morality and decency', which were eventually outstripped in the progress of civilization.⁵⁰

Haggard's novel dramatically subverts Lang's progressivist narrative, recounting the discovery of a matriarchal kingdom in East Africa and hinting at the possibility of a resurgent matriarchy within civilized Britain. The novel's representation of gender, I contend, is much more equivocal than is suggested by scholars' interpretation of the novel as a hostile exposure of the dangers of female rule. Its dramatization of a matriarchal past discloses and deepens the tensions evident in matriarchal theory, as the novel's matriarchal motifs query the 'natural' relations of gender and power and explore the idea of cultural variability. Insistently evoking cyclical temporalities, *She* also unsettles a linear, teleological narrative of progress from matriarchy to patriarchy and offers a nostalgic celebration of a potent female past. The ending intensifies the challenge to anthropologists' confidence in the ultimate victory of patriarchy. Critics have interpreted the ending as portraying Ayesha's defeat and punishment by a triumphant patriarchy, but *She* imagines a matriarchal past that is poised to return to confound modernity.

The narrative of *She* appears alternately attracted and repelled by the vision of female rule embodied in the figure of the white African queen, Ayesha, '*She-who-must-be-obeyed*'.⁵¹ Ambivalence is embedded in the form and structure of the novel, which is replete with layers, inversions, and doublings. The tale is introduced by a fictional editor, who presents the Cambridge don Horace Holly's account of the African quest he undertook with his young ward Leo to avenge the death

⁴⁹ Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1884), pp. 246-48, 251.

⁵⁰ Lang, *Custom and Myth*, p. 249.

⁵¹ H. Rider Haggard, *She* (1887; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 85. All further page references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the essay.

of Leo's ancestor, the ancient Egyptian priest Kallikrates, at the hands of the two-thousand year old Ayesha. As many critics have noted, the ancient potsherd with its inscribed plea for vengeance is both a recognition and a suppression of female priority.⁵² The sherd records not only the original plea, written by Amenartas, the wife of Kallikrates, but also the handing down of the quest through generations, from father to son; it becomes a patrilineal document, aligning Leo's family with crucial points in western history (p. 38). For all that the sherd expunges the Egyptian princess Amenartas, however, she returns to haunt the text. The narrative hints at the possibility that she is reincarnated as Ustane, the Amahagger woman who becomes Leo's wife: Ayesha recognizes the 'proud, imperial' Ustane as a reincarnation of Amenartas (pp. 92, 153). The book ends, moreover, with Holly's final, haunting question: what part will Amenartas play in the 'next act' of the inexorably unfolding drama (p. 316)?

The confrontation between the sexes that the narrative on the sherd inaugurates is further prefigured in Holly's narration of Leo's youth in Cambridge. Entrusted to the self-confessed misogynist Holly's care by his dying father, Leo is carefully protected from female influence: 'I would have no woman to lord it over me about the child, and steal his affections from me', Holly observes, choosing instead a male nurse, Job (p. 19). The manuscript offers an alternative reason for Holly's choice of Job: the college authorities only allow Leo to live with Holly when he 'promis[es] that no female nurse however aged should be allowed to take up her quarters in the college'.⁵³ The original text thus points to the wider context of a homosocial university world, one that is hostile to the incursions of women. This mistrust of women connects the university world with the belief that the imperial romance offered an escape from a feminized present. Indeed, Holly's agreement to join Leo in his African quest is premised on his

⁵² Arata, *Fictions*, 103-04; Barri Gold, 'Embracing the Corpse: Discursive Recycling in H. Rider Haggard's *She*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 38.3 (1995), 305-27 (pp. 305-06, 308); Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, II, 11-12.

⁵³ H. Rider Haggard, Manuscript of *She*, MS 4692/8, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich.

expectation of ‘first-class shooting’ (p. 46). The irony is that while the adventurers expect – and the genre seems to promise – that they will discover a rejuvenating primitive masculinity, they encounter instead a potent vision of ancient female rule.

The novel’s representation of Ayesha – and of the matriarchal past – is much more equivocal than is suggested by the critical consensus (exemplified by Gilbert and Gubar, Patricia Murphy, and Stott) that *She* is a misogynistic caricature of the dangers of female rule.⁵⁴ Ayesha is not simply a *femme fatale*, a creation of what Bram Dijkstra characterizes as the period’s ‘war on women’, its ‘fascination with woman as the embodiment of evil’.⁵⁵ Certainly, Holly describes Ayesha as a witch: a ‘white sorceress’ or ‘modern Circe’ (p. 159). However, Holly’s language has to be seen in the context of Haggard’s portrayal of a war between the sexes. As Holly notes of the British servant who accompanies the adventurers to Africa and who also regards Ayesha as a ‘witch’, ‘Job, like myself, is a bit of a misogynist’ (pp. 245, 88). Moreover, while the novel deploys conventional images of the *femme fatale*, it also negotiates a complex path through contemporary debate about witchcraft, which some saw as a survival of the female scientific knowledge prized in a matriarchal era.⁵⁶ Holly eventually accepts Ayesha’s seemingly occult powers as natural rather than fiendish, as is evident in his description of Job’s reaction to her mind-reading:

So far from accepting a natural explanation of the matter, which was after all [...] nothing more than an instance of glorified and perfected telepathy, [Job] set the whole thing down as a manifestation of the blackest magic. (p. 216)

⁵⁴ See Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man’s Land*, II, 14; Patricia Murphy, ‘The Gendering of History in *She*’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 39.4 (1999), 747-72 (pp. 761, 765); Stott, *Fabrication*, pp. 105, 118.

⁵⁵ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 313, 341, and 235.

⁵⁶ See for example Karl Pearson, ‘The Woman as Witch’, in *The Chances of Death and Other Studies in Evolution*, 2 vols (London: Edwin Arnold, 1897), II, 1-50.

In spite of his initial scepticism Holly is converted to a belief in Ayesha's specifically female knowledge, admitting that she is a 'great chemist', and noting that 'the wisest man upon the earth was not one-third as wise' (pp. 194, 243). In one of the text's characteristic inversions, however, it is revealed towards the end of the narrative that Ayesha stole the secret of life from a man, the 'hermit' and 'philosopher' Noot (p. 280). There are similar tensions inherent in Ayesha's affiliation with the powers of both life and death. This duality accords with Bachofen's belief that in matriarchal societies women were seen as embodying both 'concern for the living' and 'grief for the dead'.⁵⁷ As the classicist Jane Ellen Harrison later explained, the 'Earth-Mother' had a 'darker underworld side', evident in her mythical association with death and violence.⁵⁸ For all her affinity with a life-giving Mother Nature, Ayesha is, in the phrase Harrison used of Artemis, a 'death-dealer'.⁵⁹ Her rule is volatile, and her deadly powers are used to gratify jealous whims.

The depiction of Ayesha's violence also works to unsettle nineteenth-century understandings of gender and power. Bachofen identified the rise of Roman patriarchy with the origin of imperial ideologies. Subscribing to the conventional contrast between 'the passive feminine principle' and 'the active masculine principle', he held that the 'imperial idea' allowed Rome to 'triumph' over the 'Asiatic nature-bound conceptions of material motherhood'.⁶⁰ He established a connection between masculinity, spiritual power, and imperialism, writing that 'our Western life truly begins with Rome. [...] Roman is the idea through which European mankind prepared to set its own imprint on the entire globe, namely, the idea that no material law but only the free activity of the spirit determines the destinies of peoples'.⁶¹ Ayesha, despite her Arabian pedigree, appropriates the imperial principle that Bachofen identified with Roman

⁵⁷ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 79.

⁵⁸ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Mythology* (London: George G. Harrap, 1924), p. 119.

⁵⁹ Harrison, *Mythology*, p. 119.

⁶⁰ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, pp. 77, 100.

⁶¹ Bachofen, *The Myth of Tanaquil* (1870), excerpted in *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, p. 237.

patriarchy: she is ‘the imperial *She*’ (p. 299). Although she is sometimes capricious, she uses her violence strategically, governing, as she explains, ‘not by force’ but ‘by terror’: ‘My empire is of the imagination’ (p. 175). Nor is Ayesha the only character through whom Haggard queries the usual gendering of imperialism: Amenartas’s plea for vengeance calls on her descendants to ‘*sit in the place of the Pharaohs*’ (p. 31). Ayesha’s plan to overthrow Queen Victoria and, with Leo, ‘assume absolute rule over the British dominions, and probably over the whole earth’ plays on *fin-de-siècle* fears of reverse colonization but also, more interestingly, sets up parallels between Ayesha and Queen Victoria as fellow imperialists (p. 256). Holly imagines that Ayesha will soon make Britain ‘the most glorious and prosperous empire that the world has ever seen’ (p. 256). Critics have customarily found in Haggard’s novel an analogy between women and colonized peoples. Stott, for example, reads Ayesha, despite her whiteness, as embodying the threat of Africa, the ‘invading Other’.⁶² Yet, as Laura Chrisman has argued, Ayesha is a figure for the colonizer as much as for the colonized.⁶³ Thus the narrative’s depiction of the ‘imperial *She*’ undoes conventional assumptions about gender and power, subverting nineteenth-century understandings of women as the passive objects of colonization.

Haggard’s evocation of Ayesha’s people, the Amahagger, also conveys a complex attitude to the matriarchal past, articulated through the British explorers’ contrasting reactions to Amahagger matriliney and female sexual empowerment. Women take the initiative in courtship, and when Ustane kisses Leo, thereby claiming him as her husband, the horrified Job, who judges Amahagger society by comically inappropriate Victorian values, calls her a ‘hussy’ (p. 81). By contrast, the ethnographically inclined Holly evinces a more liberal cultural relativism, explaining that:

⁶² Stott, *Fabrication*, 125. See also Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man’s Land*, II, 36-41.

⁶³ Laura Chrisman, ‘The Imperial Unconscious? Representations of Imperial Discourse’, *Critical Quarterly*, 32 (1990), 38-58 (pp. 45-46).

women among the Amahagger 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. 81)

Holly's account confounds two of the anthropologists' commonest slurs on matriarchy. First, McLennan had attributed matriliney to ignorance of paternity; Holly points out, on the contrary, that matriliney obtains even when paternity is 'perfectly well known'. Secondly, he denies that sexual freedom leads to promiscuity: 'I am bound [...] to say that the change of husbands was not nearly so frequent as might have been expected' (p. 81). Challenging the patriarchal theorists' progressivism, Holly's account of the 'Amahagger custom' of female selection of a mate moves towards an appreciation of plural cultures:

It is very curious to observe how the customs of mankind on this matter vary in different countries, making morality an affair of latitude, and what is right and proper in one place wrong and improper in another. [...] as all civilised nations appear to accept it as an axiom that ceremony is the touchstone of morality, there is, even according to our canon, nothing immoral about this Amahagger custom, seeing that the interchange of the embrace answers to our ceremony of marriage. (p. 82)

Holly's belief that there is 'nothing immoral about this Amahagger custom' goes well beyond the anthropologists' recognition of alternatives to patriarchy: it unsettles their hierarchical cultural evolutionism, their tendency to judge non-western marriage practices as, in Lubbock's words, 'very repugnant to our feelings'.⁶⁴ The text's embryonic cultural relativism only emerges, incidentally, in relation to marriage practices; in other respects the Amahagger are depicted as stereotypically savage and cruel. Once the tolerance, even approbation, of female empowerment

⁶⁴ Lubbock, *Origin*, p. vi.

has been established, in yet another of the narrative's inversions, it is undercut by the tribal elder Billali, who is significantly described as 'patriarchal' and addressed throughout as 'father' (pp. 106, 77). According to Billali, while the men 'worship' the women as 'the source of life', every second generation the men 'rise' and kill the old women 'as an example to the young ones, and to show them that we are the strongest' (p. 114).

The novel, then, reveals and intensifies some of the tensions inherent within matriarchal theories, offering an equivocal representation of female rule, in which sympathy and admiration for the matriarchal past coexist with unease, and which develops the anthropologists' nascent recognition of cultural plurality. Still more strikingly, it challenges the progressivism of matriarchal narratives by unsettling a linear notion of time – one that is associated with masculinity and history – and championing a cyclical temporality that is coded as feminine. In nineteenth-century culture, men were affiliated with history, and women were located outside history's domain, in an anachronistic, prehistoric, or natural space.⁶⁵ The matriarchal theorists endorsed and developed this interpretation of the female as ahistorical. Bachofen drew on Hegel's depiction of a dialectical struggle between Matter and Mind – a struggle in which, as Alison Stone has demonstrated, Hegel 'symbolizes matter as female and the concept as male'.⁶⁶ Bachofen developed the implicit gendering of Hegel's opposition between a masculine history, spirit, and mind, and a feminine nature and materiality.⁶⁷ The rise of patriarchy, he wrote, brought 'the liberation of the spirit from the manifestations of nature, a sublimation of human

⁶⁵ See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 31, 39-40; Christina Crosby, *The Ends of History: Victorians and 'The Woman Question'* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-3.

⁶⁶ Alison Stone, 'Matter and Form: Hegel, Organicism, and the Difference between Women and Men', in Kimberly Hutchings and Tuija Pulkkinen, eds, *Hegel's Philosophy and Feminist Thought: Beyond Antigone?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 211-32 (p. 212). For Bachofen's indebtedness to Hegel, see Eller, *Gentlemen*, pp. 34, 41-2.

⁶⁷ On Hegel's association between history and spirit, see Crosby, *Ends*, pp. 33-4.

existence over the laws of material life'.⁶⁸ McLennan similarly cast the female as ahistorical: matriliney, he noted, was a mark of all 'non-advancing communities', whether they were 'isolated in islands or maintaining their savage liberties in mountain fastnesses'.⁶⁹ Victorian culture interpreted this opposition between masculine history and female nature as a contrast between the linear temporality cultivated by progressive and civilized cultures and the cyclical temporality practised by 'primitive' or 'pagan' peoples.⁷⁰

Haggard's novel clearly cleaves to this binary opposition, contrasting the male Vinceys' alignment with western history with the cyclical temporality enshrined in Ayesha's affiliation with life and death, with nature, and with circular patterns of degeneration and reincarnation. However, the narrative's treatment of this opposition does not support Murphy's claim that 'the linear time of history associated with the masculine civilizing mission is valorized over the nonlinear time conventionally associated with female subjectivity'.⁷¹ Rather, the novel's representation of degeneration, its thematic insistence on survival, and its movement from scepticism to belief in the occult work to unsettle faith in linear temporality and to suggest the enduring potency of the past.

The motifs of degeneration that proliferate in the novel serve to establish the idea of cyclical time. The Amahagger are degenerate descendants of a civilized Arabic race which once inhabited the now ruined '*City of imperial Kôr*' (p. 178). Kôr's fate intimates the cyclical inevitability of the rise and fall of great civilizations: '[t]ime after time', Ayesha recalls, 'rich and strong nations' have 'been and passed away and been forgotten' (p. 180). As Arata observes, the

⁶⁸ Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 109.

⁶⁹ McLennan, *Marriage*, p. 229.

⁷⁰ See Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow / Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 10-16.

⁷¹ Murphy, 'Gendering', pp. 747-48.

novel's lament for Kôr 'becomes a proleptic lament for Britain itself'.⁷² Holly makes constant comparisons between Kôr and London. Kôr's charnel-house is the size of St. Paul's Cathedral, its 'main thoroughfare' is 'wider than the Thames Embankment', and the ancient canal system is 'unequaled' by Britain's Suez Canal (pp. 181, 260, 258). Such connections raise ominous questions about imperial Britain's fate, querying a narrative of linear progress and bolstering Ayesha's belief in cyclical time, her contention that a 'great people' falls at its appointed time and that '[t]ime eats up the works of man' (pp. 179-80).

The image of survival, too, suffuses the narrative, emerging most strikingly through Ayesha's identification with the past and the theme of reincarnation. Ayesha challenges western ideas about linear progress and about modernity's successful vanquishing of the primitive past. Her age, her knowledge of ancient learning and languages, and her fidelity to the memory of the long-dead Kallikrates combine to render her an 'animated corpse' (p. 209). Haggard's association of Ayesha with corpses and shrouds is often interpreted as a misogynistic move to identify female power with sinister and deadly forces.⁷³ Ayesha's affiliation with death, however, also conveys the potent attraction of an enduring past (an attraction conveyed by Ayesha's longing for Kallikrates, her waiting across the centuries for his rebirth). The novel offers Ayesha as a figure for anti-modern nostalgia, rather than 'privileg[ing] male historicity' and 'modernity' over 'female ahistoricity', as Murphy claims.⁷⁴ It is significant that she is an '*animated corpse*': through her the rich cultural past lives and breathes again. In her archaic language we find not the 'dearth of historical consciousness' or 'ahistoricity' that Murphy identifies but the endurance of past cultures.⁷⁵ That memories such as Ayesha's recollections of Jerusalem in Old Testament days (pp. 148-49) have endured through a female accords with one of the matriarchal

⁷² Arata, *Fictions*, p. 101.

⁷³ See Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, II, 17-18; Murphy, 'Gendering', p. 763.

⁷⁴ Murphy, 'Gendering', pp. 747, 758, and 747.

⁷⁵ Murphy, 'Gendering', p. 757.

theorists' most crucial insights (and one that was to prove most appealing to feminists): that women perpetuate culture.⁷⁶ In *She*, the adventurers find not so much the 'primitive martial manliness' which Bradley Deane argues the imperial romance seeks to rediscover, as a lost, natural, and traditional past which is emphatically feminine.⁷⁷ This Romantic and nostalgic vision of femininity aligns the novel with Bachofen's celebration of maternal power, and also underlies Sigmund Freud's famous description of the novel's 'hidden meaning' as 'the eternal feminine'.⁷⁸

The novel's engagement with reincarnation and the occult also embodies the power of survivals. *She's* interest in the occult revival and especially in Theosophy works to query evolutionists' linear narrative of progress from magic to science. Theosophy married an interest in ancient wisdom traditions, especially those of Asia, with scientific aspirations; its adaptation of Buddhist teachings popularized the idea of reincarnation.⁷⁹ Ayesha is 'an adept, a knower of occult law', as Carolyn Burdett demonstrates.⁸⁰ Her powers recall the Theosophist A. P. Sinnett's claim that 'seemingly magic feats' are performed by adepts through 'force of their own will' and understanding of 'a force in nature'.⁸¹ Ayesha kills Ustane by 'some mysterious electric agency or overwhelming will-force' and avers that her powers arise not from 'magic' but from

⁷⁶ See Bachofen, *Mother Right*, p. 79; Pearson, *Chances*, II, 8.

⁷⁷ Bradley Deane, 'Imperial Barbarians: Primitive Masculinity in Lost World Fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), 205-25 (p. 211).

⁷⁸ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), tr. James Strachey (1958; rev. edn, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), pp. 586-87. The connections between *She* and psychoanalysis form a fascinating topic in their own right. For extended discussion of Freud and *She* 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*, 35.4 (Oct. 1993), 726-45. On C. G. Jung's interpretation of *She*, see Cohen, *Haggard*, pp. 112-13.

⁷⁹ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 4-50.

⁸⁰ Carolyn Burdett, 'Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard', in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell, eds, *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 217-35 (p. 226).

⁸¹ A. P. Sinnett, *The Occult World*, 2nd edn (London, Trübner, 1882), pp. 21, 12, and 21.

‘understanding and applying the forces which are in Nature’ (pp. 227, 194). Here, Ayesha’s ‘magic’ is aligned with a scientific future, not simply a ‘primitive’ past. The novel’s challenge to linear temporalities culminates in the motif of reincarnation (a topic that fascinated Haggard, as his autobiography testifies).⁸² Ayesha believes that Leo is the reincarnation of her beloved Kallikrates, whom she killed out of jealousy. Holly is initially sceptical, mirroring what Theosophists saw as scientific naturalists’ stubbornly empiricist response to occult phenomena.⁸³ Ayesha describes him as ‘unbelieving’ and reluctant ‘to accept what [you] have not known’ (p. 257). Yet Holly eventually accepts her belief. ‘Is Leo really a reincarnation of the ancient Kallikrates [...]? Or was Ayesha deceived by some strange hereditary resemblance?’, he asks rhetorically, before declaring staunchly that ‘she made no such mistake’ (p. 316). The narrative, far from depicting cyclical temporality as a ‘discredited belief’, as Murphy argues, clearly endorses Ayesha’s belief in reincarnation.⁸⁴

Holly’s conversion from an initial ‘rational’ scepticism about supernatural ‘hocus-pocus’ to belief in the occult is part of a larger narrative movement (p. 158). After seeing the mummified bodies of a pair of lovers, Holly is overcome by a vision of the lovers’ past. Apologizing for the ‘intrusion of a dream into a history of fact’, he nonetheless begins to question the distinction between the rational and irrational, suggesting that the ‘imagination’ should be seen as ‘the shadow of the intangible truth’ (p. 186). The novel’s validation of the occult indicates the enduring potency not only of the past, but also of non-western belief systems: the narrative ends with the heroes’ departure on another journey, this time to ‘Central Asia, where, if anywhere upon this earth, wisdom is to be found’ (p. 4).

⁸² Haggard, *The Days of My Life: An Autobiography*, ed. C. J. Longman, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1926), I, 254-55; and II, 165-72, 241-43.

⁸³ Owen, *Place*, pp. 36-37.

⁸⁴ Murphy, ‘Gendering’, p. 760.

Thus Haggard's novel disrupts the matriarchal theorists' linear, progressive narrative: its emphasis on cyclical temporality suggests the attractions and potency of a female cultural past. Nor is Haggard's vision of matriarchy safely confined to the past. The novel's ending, far from 'neutraliz[ing]' Ayesha's 'powers', as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, intimates that the matriarchal past is poised to return to confound modernity.⁸⁵ The climactic scene, in which Ayesha is destroyed by a pillar of fire, has been read by critics as a phallic punishment.⁸⁶ For Murphy, She is 'conquered by linear time', 'men', and 'history'.⁸⁷ Undoubtedly, the narrative emphasizes Ayesha's 'shame and hideous mockery': resembling a shrivelled 'monkey', she is a post-Darwinian figure of atavistic reversion; and Holly interprets her death as a providential deliverance for humankind (p. 295). It is arguably the men, though, who lack power and courage in this dramatic showdown between the sexes. Haggard contrasts the men's doubt, fear, and vacillation with Ayesha's majesty and conviction: the men passively 'cl[i]ng to each other' while Ayesha demonstrates 'strength for the fiery trial' (p. 291). Indeed, Ayesha enters the flames in order to persuade the hesitant Leo that he has nothing to fear from bathing in the fire (p. 289). The flames are gloriously transformative, suggesting that the symbolism of Haggard's 'pillar of flame' (p. 291) is not merely phallic, but encompasses spiritual transfiguration and divine presence, with its resemblance to the Biblical 'pillar of fire' (Exodus 13: 21-22). The scene also recalls the vision of the Holy Grail in Tennyson's poem (its 'long beam' and 'luminous cloud').⁸⁸ As Nina Auerbach contends, Haggard's men, 'shrinking from the flames', cannot live up to 'the

⁸⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, II, 10.

⁸⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*, II, 18-20; see also Stott, *Fabrication*, pp. 116-17, 123-4.

⁸⁷ Murphy, 'Gendering', p. 768.

⁸⁸ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Holy Grail', in *Idylls of the King* (1872), ed. J. M. Gray (London: Penguin, 1983; rev. ed., 1996), ll. 188-89. For the connection, see Norman Etherington, *The Annotated She: A Critical Edition of H. Rider Haggard's Victorian Romance With Introduction and Notes* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 237.

transfigured future Ayesha embodie[s]', and this failure brings about her destruction.⁸⁹ E. K. Johnson's illustration for the novel's serialization in the *Graphic* newspaper supports this reading, juxtaposing Ayesha's erect and dauntless posture with the Englishmen's prostrate forms (Figure 1).

The ending is replete with suggestions of Ayesha's future rebirth. The dying Queen predicts her ultimate return, and Holly's final words look into the 'blackness of unborn time', hinting at the future reincarnation of both Ayesha and Amenartas (pp. 294, 316-17). Murphy interprets these gestures towards the future 'as a prediction that She as New Woman will again be brought under control', and Showalter reads the heroes' eventual departure for Asia as an endorsement of the homosocial bond.⁹⁰ Yet the allusions to the future point equally strongly to Ayesha's triumphant reappearance. Indeed, Haggard and Lang plotted Ayesha's return from at least 1889.⁹¹ She was eventually reincarnated in Haggard's 1905 sequel, set in Tibet, *Ayesha: The Return of She*. *Ayesha's* plot, in which She reappears as the priestess Hes and Amenartas/Ustane as the princess Atene, vindicates doctrines of rebirth and reincarnation, espousing a cyclical temporality that is construed as feminine.⁹²

4. Conclusion

Haggard's *She* articulates a complex relationship between past, present, and future. While the female protagonist is defeated, and matriarchal power is seemingly suppressed, the narrative hints at the future return of the mother-age. Far from being a straightforwardly dystopic vision

⁸⁹ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 148.

⁹⁰ Murphy, 'Gendering', p. 768; Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 87.

⁹¹ Lang, MS letters to Haggard, 29 June [1889], 12 October [1889], 26 December [1889], Roger Lancelyn Green Collection, MSS 38260 (photocopies of letters in Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo), St. Andrews University Library.

⁹² Haggard, *Ayesha: The Return of She* (London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1905), pp. 207-39.

of female rule, the novel, as we have seen, is equivocal in its treatment of matriarchy, appearing both attracted and threatened by a resurgent matriarchal past. *She* exposes the ambivalence of the anthropologists' vision of mother-rule, suggesting the importance of cultural variability and of historical contingency, and querying the 'natural' relations of gender and power. Its interest in the occult and in cyclical time unsettles the evolutionists' narrative of irreversible progress from matriarchy to patriarchy.

She demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of the matriarchy debate, its ability to move across discourses, genres, and disciplines. The urgency of the debate was only intensified in the Edwardian period, when the rise of the suffrage movement gave it a new immediacy. The threat of female violence, which was at the heart of Haggard's novel, had remained remote, mythical, or fantastic in Victorian matriarchal debate; now it was brought into the present. Militant suffragettes appropriated matriarchal imagery to build an inspirational tradition of heroic female militancy.⁹³ The idea that women should not be violent, Gilman asserted, was nothing but a 'popular prejudice', rooted in men's 'deep seated terror' of women.⁹⁴ Fiction, meanwhile, frequently depicted suffragette violence and stridency. H. G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909), for example, lampoons suffragette use of matriarchal theory in the vindictive Miss Miniver's lectures on the 'primitive [...] Matriarchate'.⁹⁵ In the context of a general hardening of attitudes towards female rule, scientific writers too worked to promote a renewed vision of primal patriarchy. From the 1890s, research had increasingly questioned the belief that matriarchy was a universal

⁹³ See Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-14* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), pp. 205-13; Felski, *Gender*, p. 166; Katharine Cockin, 'Cicely Hamilton's Warriors: Dramatic Reinventions of Militancy in the British Women's Suffrage Movement', *Women's History Review*, 14 (2005), 527-42.

⁹⁴ C. P. Gilman, 'Should Women Use Violence?', *Pictorial Review*, 14 (Nov. 1912, rpr. in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader*, ed. Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 212-19 (pp. 214, 216).

⁹⁵ H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (1909; London: J. M. Dent, 1993), p. 29.

early social stage, and works from Edward Westermarck's *History of Human Marriage* (1891) to J. J. Atkinson's *Primal Law* (1903) drew on Darwinism and animal behaviour studies in order to prove that the primal family unit was naturally patriarchal.⁹⁶ As in the Victorian period, Edwardian matriarchal debate was mobile, crossing the frontiers of literature, science, and politics, as anthropologists, creative writers, and political commentators conducted a highly charged investigation of fundamental questions about gender, power, and history.

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⁹⁶ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage* (London: Macmillan, 1891); J. J. Atkinson, *Primal Law*, in Andrew Lang, *Social Origins*, and Atkinson, *Primal Law* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), pp. 209-94. Lang was Atkinson's cousin. He published the latter's text posthumously, with his own *Social Origins* serving as the lengthy preface.

Figure 1. E. K. Johnson, Illustration for *She*, *The Graphic: An Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*, 18 December 1886, p. 661. Leeds Library.