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Gendering imperialism:
Anne McClintock and H. Rider Haggard

Gayatri Spivak’s work on nineteenth-century imperialist literature directs feminist analysis to the narrative dynamics of human reproduction and production.¹ She examines the codification of women as racial reproducers, and its relation to the conception of women as imperial producers of human subjectivity itself. Exciting though this direction is, feminist critics also need to further explore how economic production directly informs, and generates, literary themes. Likewise, discussion of reproduction can usefully be extended from Spivak’s formulations to include imperial masculinity and its mediation through reproductive ideology.

This is precisely what Anne McClintock’s work promises to do. I want to focus here on her celebrated Imperial Leather discussion of H. Rider Haggard’s popular and influential imperialist Victorian romance King Solomon’s Mines.² This depicts the quest for treasure in southern Africa by three British adventurers, who also restore the ‘rightful’ heir to the throne of an African kingdom. Several Anglo-American feminist critics, including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Elaine Showalter and Rebecca Stott, have favoured Haggard’s novels.³ McClintock differs from these in offering readers a distinctly materialist orientation. McClintock argues that the novel is concerned with

the reordering of women’s sexuality and work in the African homestead and the diversion of black male labor into the mines. The story illuminates not only relations between the imperial metropolis and the colonies but also the refashioning of gender relations in South Africa, as a nascent capitalism penetrated the region and disrupted already contested power relations within the homestead. (p. 233)

She regards King Solomon’s Mines as deriving from Haggard’s 1870s sojourn as a colonial administrator in Natal. The novel, accordingly,
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reflects Natal’s operations against the self-determining Zulu kingdom. Crucial to this non-capitalist Zulu political economy was the productive labour of its women, organised through polygyny. Recognising this, colonialists targeted polygyny and imposed taxes that forced Zulu men into wage labour. By making it impossible for the men to depend upon women’s homestead labour, colonialists themselves were able to appropriate the fruits of this labour and effectively supplant Zulu males as patriarchs.

McClintock thereby suggests that *King Solomon’s Mines* is an allegory of colonial power; specifically, that the novel allegorises colonial appropriation of African women’s reproductive and productive labour. Despite the plausibility of her reading, and its apparently demystificatory power, there is a tendency in McClintock’s analysis to reinforce the very categories of power that she claims to be exposing. I want to focus on the way McClintock analyses the dynamics of labour and degeneration, and to explore the political implications of her approach.

**Women’s bodies and labour**

To support her argument about the novel’s restructuring of production modes, McClintock cites examples from contemporary colonial discourses. These justify wage labour by denigrating traditional African production, which allegedly stems from pathological male laziness, degeneracy and excessive sensuality. One would expect *King Solomon’s Mines* then to reinforce these justifications, and to represent males as idle exploiters of their many labouring wives. But Haggard’s fictional Kukuana African society is strikingly free of such representations. Authorial judgement towards this community’s production patterns is also absent. Such absences, I want to argue, indicate that Haggard was no simple apologist for Natal colonial expansion. He was, instead, acutely ambivalent about the processes of capitalist modernisation both in the UK and in South Africa. It is such ambivalence that led him to fantasise a precapitalist African society that is, at the close of the novel, guaranteed to remain free from entry into any colonial economy.

If I am not persuaded by McClintock’s argument concerning female productive labour within the text, I am also sceptical about her arguments concerning female reproductive labour as an automatic threat to Haggardian imperial culture and sexual order. McClintock presents a version of women’s reproductive capability in which women are menacingly powerful regardless of whether they exercise any material control over the
reproductive and productive activities of themselves or others. This precludes recognition of the positive role accorded to white maternity within imperialist ideologies, a recognition upon which Gayatri Spivak’s earlier work was based.5

The affirmative imperial function of maternity is suggested by the journey of the novel’s protagonists to the mines. The heroes’ path takes them across a landscape, which goes from a female ‘head’ (a waterspout) to her breasts (two massive mountains) and culminates in the vagina or anus (the treasure cave and exit). McClintock reads this as an allegory of the ‘genesis of racial and sexual order’ (p. 241), in which the heroes travel across a hostile and temporarily castrating female body to the mineral wealth of the mines and once there perform ‘an extraordinary fantasy of male birthing, culminating in the regeneration of white manhood’ (p. 248). One would never know from McClintock’s account that Haggard constructs this feminised landscape as beautiful and on occasion sublime.6 And that instead of unremitting hostility, the land offers the travellers maternal sustenance – food and water.

The feminised ‘body’ of the African land suggests the way that the sexual sphere is instrumentalised throughout the novel: it becomes, I want to argue, a means of naturalising and hence legitimating economic imperial accumulation. Acquiring diamonds, Haggard tries to suggest, is as self-evidently ‘natural’ as male domination over women, with which he wants to render it analogous. Sexuality, in other words, functions as a means of resolving contradictions within the text’s political economy.

McClintock argues the evil Gagool to embody the threatening female power of generation, and bases this on the fact that Gagool is referred to by her attendants as the “mother, old mother”, and has the power to sentence people to death, as an isansui (p. 246). This interpretation overlooks the fact that Gagool does not have a monopoly on Kukuana femininity. She is constantly juxtaposed with the young, beautiful and nubile Foulata, in whom the power of female generation is most clearly evident and does indeed explicitly pose a specific threat to colonialism: the threat of miscegenation. McClintock bases her interpretation on the slenderest of linguistic evidence, the ‘mother’ word. The fact that Gagool is termed ‘mother’ is not itself proof of her fundamentally generative coding; the word is used idiomatically in the text to signify general respect for social seniority.

There is nothing in the text to associate Gagool with either literal or symbolic motherhood. On the contrary, I would argue that she is
stationed, as are the other female *isanusis, outside* of femininity, marriageability, and the cycles of reproduction. She is member of a class that publicly controls these feminine activities instead of participating in them. And it is her *departure* from traditionally female ‘generative power’, including her membership of a politically powerful class, that allows Haggard to align her with the destructive forces of anti-colonialism, coded here as *resentment*. In other words, Gagool is not maternal enough, rather than being too maternal, for Haggard. She violates normative femininity and thus takes on demonic qualities.

**Degeneration and regeneration**

McClintock contends that the novel is ‘legitimized by two primary discourses of the time: the discourse on “degeneration” and the discourse on the reinvented “father” of the “family of man”’ (p. 234). McClintock’s use of ‘degeneration’ here has little connection with the process of decline from one condition to another. Instead McClintock’s ‘degeneration’ refers to the classification of a group as essentially debased. *Should* an individual white male chance to actively decline, then his deterioration will take him down the evolutionary ladder; he will accordingly begin to resemble those fundamentally degenerate ‘others’. This allows her to argue that *King Solomon’s Mines* portrays white male regeneration, which they achieve through their ritual relocation as both the paternal evolutionary source and culmination of the human race.

McClintock’s account of evolution and degeneration presumes that there is only one position that the classified group can hold within the racial or evolutionary narrative, so that non-white peoples are necessarily degenerate in relation to whites. This presumption is not supported by Haggard’s text; the novel does equate degeneracy with blackness, nor does it present white males as the categorical antithesis of degeneration. On the contrary: the writing of Haggard and a number of his late nineteenth-century contemporaries is where these presumptions are *challenged*.7

Degeneration is for these thinkers a fear of the debilitation of the imperial British race, occasioned by the development of modern industrial and financial capitalism itself. Modernisation, in other words, is held responsible, and in a number of ways: it enervates the proletariat, it destroys the labouring agrarian classes, it threatens to diminish the ruling classes by making them indolent and hence susceptible to overthrow by more physically powerful races and/or classes. Within this degenerational
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anxiety, those peoples considered less economically developed may beidealised as repositories of the social, cultural and biological strengthswhich the modernised UK has lost. British male regeneration thenbecomes possible through temporary exposure to, and participation in,such peoples’ ‘primitive’ society – especially if such activity involves phys-ical and military exertion. This romantic primitivism, not a conviction ofblackness as a totally debased condition, enables Haggard’s representationof the neo-Zulu Kukuana people of King Solomon’s Mines.

Representing Africans

McClintock’s perspective on degeneration produces a reading strategythat ignores power differences within racialised and gendered groups. Thepolitical, classed mediation of African people disappears. This becomesevident when McClintock constructs King Twala and his adviser Gagoolas sole representatives of (Zulu) blackness and femaleness within the text. Thus she argues that

The Kukuana royal family is itself dangerously degenerate – offeringa spectacle of familial disorder run amok. In the features of KingTwala’s face one reads the degeneration of the race. He is a blackparagon of the putative stigmata of the race, excessively fat, repulsivelyugly, flat-nosed, one-eyed. (pp. 244–5; emphasis added)

It is inaccurate to view Twala as the sole representative of the Kukuanafamily itself, since the idealised Umbopa/Ignosi is constructed to be asrepresentative, if not more so. In other words, Twala’s degeneracy is afunctor not of his ‘race’ but of his illegitimate and corrupt kingship. Itis his political, rather than racial, identity, that is singled out for condem-nation here, just as it is Gagool’s political rather than her gender identitythat is the focus of Haggard’s hostility towards her. There is no room inMcClintock’s formulations for a prominent African such as Umbopa,whose acceptability for Haggard she explains simply by his willingness torecognise white power. This evades the fact that he, like most of theKukuana, contradicts the equation of blackness with degeneracy.

Most problematic here is the way McClintock identifies Twala withthe people over whom he tyrannises. Colonial and imperial commenta-tors on the Zulu were (when it suited them) inclined to invest heavily in-distinguishing between Zulu rulers and people. By construing Zulus in
Haggardian discourse as an undifferentiated mass of hostile degeneracy, personified in the figure of their ruler, McClintock rules out the historical possibility and intellectual study of the ways in which colonial (ideological, political and economic) domination worked through as well as against colonised constituencies. This was achieved by settler and metropolitan alignment with the 'people' against 'oppressive' African rulers.

To equate the corrupt ruler Twala with the people he tyrannises over is to erase the conceptual distinction between dominating and being dominated, which is something that recurs throughout McClintock's book. It is illustrated when McClintock argues that the ideological negativity of Twala's rule derives from his 'unbridled access to women' (p. 245), his 'ritualised control of women' (p. 247) and also from the female basis of his rule, namely Gagool and the other isanuis (p. 246). Paradoxically, the more black men are seen by McClintock to depend upon controlling, profiting from and exploiting women's labour power, the more actual power she attributes to black women. In this account, control over women is indistinguishable from control by them.

**Discourse of the family**

McClintock's discussion accentuates figurative paternity: it was the authoritative condition of fatherhood that both animated and legitimated colonial activities. This condition was articulated, she argues, through various images and rituals of power. However in her analysis the status of such images becomes unclear. They fluctuate between reflecting and constituting that power. At work here is a synecdochic method: locate the word or image of 'the father', 'the family', and you have already identified, and explained, the material power relations that go with these. By naming reproductive woman the image of productive authority, it then becomes unnecessary to detail the processes of production within the literary text or women's place within these processes. To label fathers as the source of the family thus also excuses her from explaining the meanings of 'family' and the power relations within it, as these are automatically implied in the 'founding' term.

This analysis lacks a concrete notion of practices rather than static conditions and images. The focus rests primarily on what texts, like families, look like, not on how they operate. The synecdochic perspective makes talismans of the words mother and father, and abstracts them from the context that gives the terms their meaning. Synecdoche, then, leads
McClintock to equate (the representation of) African rulers with the whole society they rule over; it leads her to equate womb/labour power with all forms of power (for women) and simultaneously to equate image power with material power (for men). Haggard’s upper-class mother becomes, for McClintock, in many respects indistinguishable from his British domestic women workers and African women rural labourers. All signify generative authority and therefore pose the same threat to an imperial or colonial patriarchy.

Underlying her book as a whole is an idealist feminism (most familiar in the USA) that wants to counterbalance women’s material disempowerment by asserting the psychological, reproductive and sexual strength they possess, and to explain patriarchy as a paranoid defensive attempt to deny such power. McClintock’s discussion reinforces this through a romantic labourism that affirms work as the empowering expression of social or political agency. It is one thing to argue, as McClintock does beautifully elsewhere in Imperial Leather, for the ‘power’ of nannies to excite sexual desire in, initiate sexual acts with and inflict punishment upon young boys. In this capacity, such figures could clearly provide an example of human agency and thereby contradict femininity’s association with passivity and objectification. The domestic labour of these women, in so far as it likewise demonstrated agency rather than idleness, may also have subverted notions of femininity.

But it is disconcerting to watch her slide from this specific, delimited sphere of female ‘power’ to a social sphere, as for example when she says of Freud that: ‘Incapable of ascribing the prime originating power of psycho-sexual development to a working-class woman … he instead represses the nursemaid and displaces her power and his identification with her power, onto identification with the father’ (p. 94). McClintock thus overlooks a significant difference between the power embodied in the figures of the father and the nurse. The nurse’s power is private, subjective and limited; it has no social currency, whereas the father’s power derives from, and is embodied in, his social, political and economic status.

The same attribution of general power crops up McClintock’s discussion of the barrister Arthur Munby: ‘Perhaps in these encounters Munby could surrender deliriously … to forbidden recognition of the social power of working-class women’ (p. 147). In what that ‘social’ power consists remains unclear, especially when, as McClintock herself proceeds to say, ‘the contradiction that Munby faced was his dependence on working-class women whom society stigmatised as subservient’ (p. 148). McClintock
writes as if social power already inheres within these workers and must simply be named as such for liberation to take place. Celebrating women’s psychological power while naming it as social serves to endorse the continuation of the social systems that exploit them. This argument becomes yet more problematic in McClintock’s later section’s South African material, where we are told, for example, that:

The power of black women is a colonial secret. White domestic life unfolds itself about this secret, as its dreaded, inner shape. Displaced and denied, its pressure is nonetheless felt everywhere … The invisible strength of black women presses everywhere on white life so that the energy required to deny it takes the shape of neurosis. (p. 271)

Other directions

As my criticisms of McClintock’s synecdochic logic might suggest, I am arguing that we need to recover a notion of the whole from which those parts are taken. We need to introduce a working concept of a social-economic and textual totality into which patriarchy feeds and through which it is produced. The analysis of Haggard’s novel requires contextualisation that takes account of political-economic developments in both Britain and South Africa. Haggard’s ideological formation would then read, not as the product of a cumulative series of apriori metropolitan and colonial threats to patriarchy, but instead as historically contingent, variable and even contradictory.

I contend that Haggard’s writing in general — and *King Solomon’s Mines* in particular — reveals (even as it attempts to resolve) discontinuities between imperial-metropolitan and settler-colonial interests and ideologies. There emerged in the British invasion of Zululand and the subsequent civil war a number of conflicting interests between politicians and populace based in Britain and those based in Natal. Haggard’s non-fictional writings show him to be torn between the two. A typical metropolitan imperial perspective would, in the mid-1880s, invest in the fantasy of an ‘imperial’, militarily powerful, sovereign Zulu kingdom, whereas a settler-Natal perspective would be interested in the material and ideological conversion of that Zulu into a wage-labouring, indirectly ruled colonial satellite.

*King Solomon’s Mines* reflects this contradiction in both its form and its content. The military actions of the imperial heroes in Kukuanaland...
correspond to, and reinforce, a colonial concern for establishing control over Zulu monarchy, but these are deliberately divorced from the political and economic relationships to which they would belong in colonial practice. What prevails instead is the *imperial* fantasy of an autonomous Zulu polity, restored with the temporary assistance of British men to its true form after the episode of a tyrannous illegitimate ruler. The same applies with the text’s approach to wealth accumulation: what is important is the fact that the beneficiary of the wealth is England, not Natal.

In other words, we need methodologies that can account for, and incorporate, different imperial and colonial agendas. This is particularly important in the analysis of the fantastic genre of romance, which needs to include a notion of literary ideology as following something other than the norms of mimetic realism. The romance genre as pursued by Haggard here is more aligned with imperial-metropolitan than with colonial ideology; Haggard uses African material to satisfy a primarily British readership’s imaginary desires, and uses romance as a genre particularly well suited to the symbolic resolution of material contradictions.\(^{11}\) The particular contradictions which seem most to concern Haggard at the time of *King Solomon’s Mines* are those generated by the systematic development of industrial capitalism in the UK, contradictions which by 1885 were beginning to emerge in Southern Africa also.\(^ {12}\) What Haggard finds in the incipient mining industries of South Africa, and in the mythical archaeology of the Great Zimbabwe, are potential analogues for the British modernisation and capital accumulation. What he turns them into is a corrective.

Gender analysis of the novel needs to engage with this modernisation and Haggard’s anxieties about it. He fears that urban industrialisation is dangerous to national well-being because of its inhumane production of unfit humans, and therefore to be opposed. He also fears modernisation because of its association with democracy, and its potential destabilisation of ‘real’ political-economic growth. Haggard’s elitist romanticism, then, generates a complex contradiction: ‘the people’ emerge as both the victim and as the cause of contemporary decline. This gives rise to a fiction in which immense value is invested in the vision of non-reified, non-industrialised humans, Africans whose production and reproduction belong to the workings of nature not culture.

Within such a scheme, as I have already argued, the dynamics of sexual reproduction serve ideologically to naturalise economic production. For Haggard it is axiomatic that sexual difference and reproduction are
natural processes, and it is here, through Haggard's twin concerns with capitalist reification and wealth accumulation, that I would begin to analyse the interrelation of reproductive and economic power. Along with the reintroduction of the notion of the totality in feminist postcolonial criticism, I want to argue for the reintroduction of the notion of mediation. The notion of the totality allows us to engage at a macrological level with the structures through which literary subjects are given ideological value. The notion of mediation allows us to engage with the ways in which those values are textually produced. Gagool's case, for example, marks the conjunction of Haggard's sexism and his classism, which found in isanusi a class politically antagonistic towards white power. Haggard's political concerns are mediated through the category of gender. Equally, gender ideology is mediated through the politicised category of class.

I am suggesting that for feminist criticism of imperial and colonial culture to develop it needs ironically to go 'backwards'. Back, in the sense that Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* has gone back, to the study of the collective properties of imaginative literature as a distinct modality within imperial culture, and away from the analysis of such literature as functionally interchangeable with social science and administrative writings. Back then to notions of totality, mediation and ideology as analytic tools.

Notes


4 See for example Haggard's *Cetywayo and His White Neighbours, Or, Remarks on Recent Events in Zululand, Natal, and the Transvaal* (London: Trubner and
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13 For an example of this discourse analysis mode see David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).