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“*The very diablerie of woman*”

Representations of the Feminine in  
Henry Rider Haggard’s *She*

**Picture 1:** Dante Gabriel

Rossetti: *Proserpine* (1877)

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**Picture 2:**  
Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *Astarte Syriaca* (1877)

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When the man wants weight, the woman takes it up,  
And topples down the scales  
Man for the field, and woman for the hearth:  
Man for the sword and for the needle she.:  
Man with the head and woman for the heart:  
Man to command and women to obey;  
All else confusion.

from: Lord Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess. A Medley*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

"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."<sup>2</sup>

Henry Rider Haggard does more than simply placing a woman at the heart of his text<sup>3</sup> and shaping everything (and indeed, everyone) around it. Unlike the King in Lord Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*, who has "Man" at the opening of his lines, thus spelling him with a capital letter, Haggard puts a woman at the very beginning of his text: the title. Capitalized and in italics, *She* dominates the narrative from the very beginning: Apart from being the object of the quest and the secret to be discovered, *She* is also the subject,<sup>4</sup> dissolving the dyadic principles according to which the King in Tennyson's *The Princess* creates what he believes to be order, and threatening to initiate her own quest. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca*<sup>5</sup> parallels Haggard's text in that it presents a grand woman as both object and source of worship in an iconographic style. The lurid colours and unreal lighting make the scene very much like that of Kôr. A hymn to female beauty, the picture has an irresistible intensity of devotion. The seven lines from Tennyson's poem, Haggard's novel and Rossetti's painting all share a common feature: their image of woman is male-generated. Ludwig Horace Holly, Haggard's first person narrator recalls:

"I *knew* that I could never put away the vision of those glorious eyes; and alas! the very *diablerie* of the woman, whilst it horrified and repelled, attracted in even greater degree."

I have borrowed the words for the title of my essay from this man. Hence a precise analysis of the perspective which he has on the story he tells and the women he writes about seems crucial in order to gain an understanding of the presentations of the feminine in Haggard's text. Before I can attempt to answer Lilia's question "what kinds of tales did men tell men [...] by themselves,"<sup>6</sup> which is, of course, the secret to be discovered, I shall therefore take a look at the different men who appear in the text and, of course, at their relation to women.

Before the three explorers Holly, Leo and Job reach women of flesh and blood, they have to face three mistresses whom I have named "geophysical": the sea, the African moon, and, of course, the dark continent. A detailed description of these three "ladies" shall give some first impressions of the characteristics ascribed to women in the text. These results will be helpful when it comes to characterizing the "mistresses of flesh and blood." Although my observations will be firmly centred on Haggard's novel, I shall try to give some general ideas about the role of woman in the Victorian Age by quoting passages from other texts. A look at another painting shall round off the picture.

## 2. Male Perspectives

### 2.1 The Narrator

#### 2.1.1 Fact versus Imagination

<sup>1</sup> in: Lord Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess and Maud* (London: Macmillan, 1908) 100.

<sup>2</sup> quoted in: Peter Beresford Ellis, *H. R. Haggard. A Voice from the Infinite* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 104.

<sup>3</sup> Haggard, Henry Rider. *She*. London: Penguin, 1994, *Penguin Popular Classics*.

<sup>4</sup> Note that "she" is the pronoun used in subject position.

<sup>5</sup> See picture 2, page 2.

<sup>6</sup> in: Lord Alfred Tennyson, 8.

When Briam V. Street suggests that "Rider Haggard portrays the character of the average hunter/explorer as a man describing only superficially and without analysis,"<sup>7</sup> this does not apply to Ludwig Horace Holly, a Cambridge scholar who considers himself to be "a rational man, not unacquainted with the leading scientific facts of our history" (p. 155), and who gives an account of what he believes to be a "phenomenon [...] of unparalleled interest" (p. 12) from the point of view of an eyewitness.

There is indeed constant emphasis on the narrator's academic background. He tries very hard to bestow "every page of this history" with "so much internal evidence of its truth that it would obviously have been quite impossible" for him "to have invented it." (p. 135). To begin with, the reader is provided with facsimiles of Ancient Greek, medieval Latin, and Old English, which are transcribed by the narrator "for general convenience in reading" (p. 39).<sup>8</sup> Haggard said about his writing:

"It should in my judgement be swift, clear and direct, with as little padding and as few trappings as possible. The story is a thing, and every word in the book should be a brick to build its edifice. Above all, no obscurity should be allowed. [...] Tricks of 'style' and dark allusions may please the superior critic, they do not please the average reader, and - though this seems that many forget, or only remember to deplore - a book is written to be read."<sup>9</sup>

At first sight, the adding of texts in strange and ancient tongues seems inconsistent with Haggard's principles, for, just as Haggard was incapable of composing them himself, the "average reader" is almost sure to be incompetent of deciphering them on his own: they do not look as if they were "written to be read." A closer look, however, shows that these passages fulfil several functions. Firstly, they are "bricks" in the construction of a text that relies on an academic air for authenticity. After reading them, Holly himself stresses that "it scarcely seemed likely that such a story could have been invented by anybody. It was too original." (p. 38). Secondly, these unfamiliar letters and words add to the mystery that clothes the text. Finally, they act as a veil to the actual story, which has unveiling as one of its leitmotifs.<sup>10</sup> The reader has to turn these pages in order to get to the core<sup>11</sup> of the story. Numerous footnotes and painstakingly detailed descriptions of the vegetation, the agriculture of the Amahagger tribe (p. 91), and different works of art (such as vases, p. 98f. and sculptures, p. 134f.) lend the text a scientifically empirical flavour.

A fictitious editor is responsible for the publication and editing of the manuscript. Unlike the story of Amenartas, Holly's account does not reach its readers in mysterious, long winded ways, but is passed on to somebody whom Holly has met in Cambridge and who has written a book on a Central African adventure. Apart from adding explanatory footnotes, the editor changes the names<sup>12</sup> of the people involved "in accordance with the writer's request" (p. 12), which again lends the text an air of historical identity.

<sup>7</sup> Briam V. Street, *The Savage in Literature. Representations of 'Primitive' Society in English Fiction 1858-1920* (London/Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) 14.

<sup>8</sup> Haggard, who had never been to university himself, took great care for these texts to be absolutely genuine. Before beginning on his manuscript, he asked his former headmaster at Ipswich, Dr H. A. Holden, one of the best Greek scholars of that time, to compose the Greek. The text in medieval Latin was produced by a committee member of the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, and for the paragraphs in Old English he consulted his friend Dr Raven.

<sup>9</sup> quoted in: Hartwig A. Vogelsberger, *King Romance. Rider Haggard's Achievement*, diss., U Salzburg, 1984 (Salzburg: 1984) 103.

<sup>10</sup> The story of Amenartas is communicated in a kind of Chinese-box-structure. The men are blindfolded before they are led into Ayesha's "Palace." Curtains cover the entrances to the secret passages and Ayesha herself is enshrouded in cloth like her mummies.

<sup>11</sup> I take it that the resemblance between *Kôr*, the name of the ancient city, and the English word *core* is not accidental.

<sup>12</sup> As I will show later on, these are all telling names.

Despite these attempts, the narrator is not as convincing and reliable as he is pretending to be.<sup>13</sup> The scene "rises as clearly before my mind at this moment as though it had happened yesterday" (p. 15), he claims, only to contradict himself shortly after: "I was sitting [...] in my rooms [...], grinding away at some mathematical problem, *I forget what*" (p. 15, my italics). His list of the Roman names inscribed on the potsherd starts with "If I remember right" (p. 43). The description of the incident on the ocean contains phrases such as "I have a *faint recollection* of Leo sleeping" (p. 56, my italics) and "Then I remember *no more*." (p. 56, my italics).

He occasionally grants that "it seemed like a dream or a fairy tale, instead of the solemn, sober fact" (p. 234), and blurs the borders between the "real" and the "imaginary"<sup>14</sup> several times (p. 182: "What is imagination? Perhaps it is the shadow of the intangible truth."). The reader is asked to forgive "the intrusion of a dream into a history of fact" (p. 181) and the narrator admits once: "whether it was my imagination or a fact I am unable to say" (p. 162).

### 2.1.2 Monkey versus Man

The narrator describes himself as "short, thick-set, and deep chested almost to deformity, with long sinewy arms, heavy features, deep set grey eyes, a low brow half overgrown with a mop of thick black hair" (p. 15) and knows that he will have to rely on his brains rather than his looks. "Holly is a prickly tree." (p. 143), he explains to Ayesha, who finds him "honest at the core and a staff to lean on," and adds later: "thou growest the fruits of wisdom." (p. 145). His resemblance to a monkey is frequently stressed: The editor is "reminded [...] forcibly of a gorilla" (p. 10), women are converted to the monkey theory by the mere sight of him (p. 16), and Billali calls him Baboon.

His "abnormal ugliness" (p. 16) corresponds to Leo's unusual beauty and results in a terrible fear of women (p. 10). Needless to say that he wants to have Leo all to himself: "I would have no woman to lord it over me about the child, and steal his affections from me" (p. 26). He remarks that while Leo and Job are caressed, none of the young Amahagger ladies finds him of any interest, which is a relief to him more than anything else. His attitude towards women changes when he meets Ayesha, who soon has him to *Her* knees: "I am but a man, and *She* was more than a woman" (p. 185). To Leo's great amazement, it turns out that Holly has not forgotten "how to turn a pretty phrase about a lady's eyes" (p. 239). He jumps over the deadly gulf in order to prevent Ayesha from making fun of him: "It is better to fall down a precipice and die than be laughed at by such a woman" (p. 263 ).

### 2.1.3 Eloquence versus Speechlessness

Holly Horace can undoubtedly be said to be an eloquent man who uses language in a huge variety of ways. He is capable of entering into philosophical contemplation (p. 118: "What is the purpose of our feeble cryings in the silence of space?") or cynical observations (p. 28: "As for his [Leo's] mind, he was [...] not a scholar. He had not the dullness necessary to that result.").

Both poetic descriptions (p. 61f: "From the east to the west sped the angels of the dawn, from sea to sea, from mountain-top to mountain-top, scattering light with both their hands.") and clichés (p. 282: "A harp can give out but

<sup>13</sup> Nor is the editor. He is rather chatty (p. 9: "And so I may as well say[...]") and constantly contradicts himself. Although he has promised to "refrain from comments" (p. 13), he soon starts offering possible interpretations and deliberately draws the reader's attention to the fact that, in his eyes, "Mr. Holly would under ordinary circumstances have easily outstripped him [Leo] in the favour of *She*" (p. 14).

<sup>14</sup> I have put both words in inverted commas since I am talking about a piece of fiction, which is, of course, imaginary in itself. Since the narrator so boldly insists on relating facts, however, the (careful) use of such terminology seems adequate to me.

a certain quantity of sound, however heavily it is smitten.”) are part of his style. Apart from English, he also speaks Arab and Greek.

Significant changes in his language can be observed after his first meeting with Ayesha. He immediately copies her rather biblical speech using words such as ”thy” (p. 141) and ”thou” (p. 144) instead of the pronouns ”your” and ”you”. Whereas *She* is able to fling ”a world of meaning into the word” (p. 205) and one word of *Hers* can mean volumes (p. 191), Holly is frequently seen to be lost for words<sup>15</sup> when it comes to describing her:

- ”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.” (p. 152)
- ”the agony, the blind passion, and the awful vindictiveness displayed upon those quivering features, and in the tortured look of the upturned eyes were such as surpass my powers of description.” (p. 160)
- ”her terrible maledictions, no words of mine can convey how terrible they were” (p. 161)
- ”no words of mine could tell how sweet *She* looked - and how divine” (p. 277)

These utterances can be interpreted on two different levels. On the one hand, the absence of words is rhetorically more powerful than elaborate portrayals. It also involves the reader who is left to his own imagination. On the other hand, it shows a clear lack of male language, which is insufficient to grasp this woman, hence pointing both at female unreadability and at male deficiency. It is only in projecting other names, and thus other images, onto *Ayesha* (p. 153: ”Venus Victrix”, p. 156: Circe; p. 184: Aphrodité, p. 220: ”Galatea”) that Holly can get hold of her linguistically.<sup>16</sup> It is a ”sad mixture of languages” (p. 185), none of them sufficient on its own, that Holly uses to confess his love to Ayesha, which makes my second reading all the more plausible. Language is regained in the ”very womb of the Earth” (p. 273): ”I could have spoken in blank verse of Shakespearian beauty” (p. 275). Finally, my theory is confirmed by the ending of Holly’s manuscript. George Eliot writes that

”Conclusions are the weak points of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation.”<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, there is no conclusion, no finite end to the story. Wondering ”in what shape and form the great drama will be finally developed”<sup>18</sup> (p. 300), Holly ends his text with a question mark. It should furthermore be noted that the male editor has nothing to add either. *She* cannot be ”squeezed” into any structural case, and consequently the frame of the story is not taken up again.

## 2.2 Leo Vincey

Leo Vincey, who ”at twenty-one might have stood for a statue of young Apollo” (p. 28), is Kallikrates cloned. Everything about him is pretty, even his Arabic (p. 95: ”Leo [...] spoke Arabic very prettily.”) He spends considerable time in the novel flat on his back (p. 60f., p. 106-203), thus giving his servant a great deal of ”hanxiety” (p. 203). With his proud and vigorous air” (p. 205), he deserves to be called a Lion. Altogether rather shallow in nature, Leo is ”not too strong-minded where women are concerned” (p. 215). It is interesting, though, that he is most dependent on women. He is haunted by the voice of his ancestress Amenartas, who bids him to avenge her, and it does not take long for Ayesha to ”enslave” him.

## 2.3 Job

<sup>15</sup> The speechlessness surrounding *Ayesha* is indeed remarkable. Her servants, too, are deprived of language: they are deaf and mute.

<sup>16</sup> Ayesha points at this herself: ”I am of many moods, and like the water in that vessel, *I reflect many things.*” (p. 186, my italics)

<sup>17</sup> quoted in: David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction. Illustrated from Classical and Modern Texts* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992) 224.

<sup>18</sup> Apart from showing that the male narrator is not able to put a full stop to his writing, which again accounts for my theory, his openness also paves the way for the sequel. The story is continued in three more novels: *Ayesha* (1903), *She and Allan* (1918) and *Wisdom’s Daughter* (1921).

Unlike Leo and Holly, whose superhuman traits (beauty and knowledge respectively) are stressed to banality, Job looks at the events with "common eyes," as Ayesha sees it (p. 257). This is also reflected in his language:

"I make her a perlitte [!] bow, and I say, 'Young woman, your position is one that I don't quite understand and can't recognise. Let me tell you that I *has* a duty to perform to my master as is incapacitated by illness, and that I am going to perform it until I am incapacitated too,' but she *don't take no heed* [...]" (p. 165, my italics)

The passage is significant for several reasons. Firstly, Job, who bears the name of a biblical figure symbolising the person whose faith in God remains unshaken despite severe trials and blows of fate, is a faithful servant to his master, whom he has nursed since he was five. Secondly, his clumsy use of language points once more at his ordinary nature. Thirdly, the struggle with the woman shows that Job is like Holly "a bit of a misogynist" (p. 90), and when one of the Amahagger women tries to embrace him, "the respectable individual" (p. 85) is scared out of his wits.

Holly describes him as "a most matter- of- fact specimen of a matter-of-fact class" (p. 36) and this becomes clear when he refers to Ustane's dress as "that sort of nightshirt she wears" (p. 165). Ruins have no charms for him (p. 256). His being English is constantly stressed: he doesn't "hold much of foreign parts" (p. 53) and has "very stout and English looks" (p. 55). Having caught an old member of the College staff feeding little Leo with brandy-balls,

"Job told him that he ought to be ashamed of himself, 'at his age, too, when he might have been a grandfather if he had done what was right,' by which Job understood had got married" (p. 27f.)

Since Job's utterances are not coloured by any extreme trait of character (such as, for example, Holly's scholarly self-complacency), his value judgements provide the readers with an insight into some of the attitudes of the "common people" in the Victorian period.

## 2.4 Billali

Billali, the wise father of the Amahagger household was madly in love with a dead woman when he was a little boy:

"I learned to love that dead form, that shell which once has held a life that no more is. I would creep up to her and kiss her cold face, and wonder how many men [...] had loved her and embraced her in the days that long had passed away" (p. 111)

Although his mother burned the mummy as soon as she had learned of her son's secret passions, Billali, a true necrophiliac, managed to preserve her feet, which he proudly shows to Holly (p. 111). His wife was killed in one of the Amahaggers' regular uprisings against women, and he openly admits: "life has been happier since, for my age protects me from the young ones" (p. 114). He lives according to the proverb "Mistrust all men, and slay him whom thou mistrustest much; and as for women, flee from them, for they are evil, and in the end will destroy thee" (p. 110).

## 3. *Geophysical Mistresses*

### 3.1 The Sea

The three adventurers first encounter diabolic womanhood not in a living woman but in water, one of the elements that is traditionally considered to be female. The narrator quickly sketches the setting for this spectacle by using one of his favourite devices: comparison. In contrasting English smallness with the vastness of the ocean, he shows that the three men are now on new and unknown territory.

It thus does not take very long for billows to rise like "avenging ghosts from their ocean grave" (p. 59f.). The pleasant sound of water rippling musically against the sides of the ship (p. 55) is quickly replaced by the hysterical noise of a "shrieking sea of foam" (p. 59) as the "great calm ocean" (p. 53) becomes a battlefield of "twisting, spouting waves" (p. 59). The travellers turn into warriors facing the "fury of the squall" (p. 57) and fighting against "huge, white-topped breakers, twenty feet high or more" (p. 57).

The sail of the dhow is the first to fall prey to the unpredictable, monstrous waters of the "great ocean of death" (p. 57). Torn out by the blast it flutters away like a "wounded bird" (p. 57). The once swan-like (p. 58) English whaleboat is tossed like a toy, and more appropriately referred to as a "swallow" (p. 59) speeding down the waves. "Smiting and gnashing together like the gleaming teeth of hell" (p. 59), the breakers have already relished the ship with her eighteen men, and only reluctantly do the "jaws of death" (p. 58) let go of Leo. Finally, peace is restored just as quickly as 'war' was declared (p. 61):

"Quieter and yet more quiet grew the sea, quiet as the soft mist that brooded on her bosom, and covered up her troubling, as the illusive wreaths of sleep brood upon a pain-racked mind, causing it to forget its sorrow." (p. 61)

### 3.2 The African Moon

The moon is one of the heavenly bodies that is usually thought of as female, and Holly warns Job of "her" seductive, maddening powers: "[...] only be careful to keep out of the moon, or it may turn your head and blind you." (p. 56).<sup>19</sup> After providing the lighting for the dreadful spectacle (p. 53, p. 57), the moon goes "slowly down in chastened loveliness," and departs like "some sweet bride in her chamber." (p. 61).

### 3.3 The Dark Continent

The three Englishmen have barely escaped with their lives only to find that 'Mother Earth' is not too welcoming either. When Holly says that they appear to be "between the devil and the blue sea" (p. 68), this is, of course, an idiomatic usage expressing that they are faced with two equally unpleasant alternatives. It can, however, also be taken literally. They are indeed with their backs to the sea and in front of them stretches a pandemonium-like landscape, or, in Joseph Conrad's words: a "colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life."<sup>20</sup> Haggard's Africa, too, is feminized: Leo's father writes of "great mountains shaped like cups" (p. 34).

Like the sea that turns into an "ocean of Death" (p. 62), the unmapped continent also threatens to take vengeance upon its violators. "Thin, sickly looking clouds of poisonous water" (p. 67) evaporate from the "lonely" and "death-breeding" swamps (p. 70), accompanied by "malarious exhalations" (p. 116). Leo learned from the captain of the ship that "the country is [...] full of snakes" (p. 54) and Billali points at "large qualities of hideous black water-snake, of which the bite is dangerous" (p. 115f.). In ancient civilisations, the snake was believed to represent the underworld, since it spends much of its life in hiding. In the Bible, the snake is the embodiment of Satan in the garden of Eden, and Egypt mythology has it that the gigantic Aphis threatens to capsize the boat of the sun god. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe recalls

"a mighty big river,[...] resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me a snake would a bird - a silly little bird."<sup>21</sup> (p. 12)

<sup>19</sup> It should be added that it is Holly rather than Job who is going to be blinded by female loveliness.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1994) 87.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* 12.

Paralyzed by the bite of a snake, one of Billali's bearers dies a terrible death and it is only thanks to Holly that Billali's life is saved. Hundreds of crocodiles (p. 69), water reptiles whose form is suggestive of that of a dragon, are lining the banks of the canal on which the men are travelling. The explorers are soon shrouded in clouds of vampire-like, "most bloodthirsty, pertinacious, and huge mosquitoes" (p. 71) and hungry lions menace to feast upon them (p. 71).

The fight between the lion and the crocodile (p. 72f.) parallels the struggle on the sea, with the exception that Leo, Job and Holly are now only spectators.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the scene is important for it contains a note of foreboding. The lion's head is bitten off by the crocodile, and, figuratively speaking, Leo Vincey, too, is going to lose his head later on. "This duel to the death was a wonderful and a shocking sight," comments Holly (p. 73). The African continent is indeed experienced as at once horrifying and fascinating. Holly describes the wonderful sight of water-lilies "in full bloom, some of them blue and of exquisite beauty" (p. 74) and is amazed at "a very beautiful variety of painted snipe" (p. 115).

As the three men journey through savage Africa, they also encounter savagery in themselves, which they find frightening. A passage in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* describes:

"I think it [the wilderness] had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude - and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating." (p. 83)

The whisper of the wilderness awakens dormant desires in the three Englishmen, such as the lust of killing and hunting. Holly admits that he was "mad with rage, and that awful lust for slaughter which will creep into the hearts of the most civilized of us when blows are flying, and life and death tremble on the turn" (p. 103).<sup>23</sup>

## 4. *Mistresses of Flesh and Blood*

### 4.1 The Amahagger Women

So far, the fates of the travellers have been subject to the ever-changing moods of the ocean, the African moon, and the Dark Continent, all of which are femininised. The superiority of the three geophysical mistresses finds its equivalent in the Amahagger society, where, according to Billali, "the women do what they please." (p. 113).

Women in Victorian England were defined through their relationship to men. In his book *The Elements of Health and Principles of Female Hygiene*, which was published in 1852, Edward Tilt suggests that:

"That which makes men more bold will generally awaken greater timidity in woman. Puberty, which gives man the knowledge of power, gives the woman the conviction of her dependence."<sup>24</sup>

This is vividly illustrated by George Elgar Hicks' triptych *Woman's Mission*, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1863.<sup>25</sup> The three compartments of the painting are entitled *Guide to Childhood*, *Companion of Manhood* and *Comfort of Old Age*, thus representing the roles performed by the feminine ideal. In contrast, the Amahagger women "are not only upon terms of perfect equality with the men, but are not held to them by any binding ties." (p. 84). Whereas the Victorian lady in George Elgar Hick's picture is supportive, comforting and responsive, the women of the Amahagger tribe are self-confident and make their own decisions:

<sup>22</sup> It is also noteworthy that, however paradox it may seem, their lives are saved because of this duel, as the crocodile prevented the lion from reaching their boat.

<sup>23</sup> About half a century later, William Golding is to tell us that this lust for slaughter does not need to creep into our hearts because it is already in there: "Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head [...] "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" in: William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (London/Boston: Faber & Faber, 1954) 158.

<sup>24</sup> quoted in: Linda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality. Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) 29.

<sup>25</sup> See appendix, p. 17.

”When a woman took a fancy to a man she signified her preference by advancing and embracing him publicly [...]. If he kissed her back it was atoken that he accepted her, and the arrangement continued till one of them wearied of it.” (p. 84)

The Amahagger are cannibals who kill people by placing a hot pot on their heads. A cross between cooking and decapitation, this procedure also has a feminine air, which shows that the Amahagger women can be just as devilish and bloodthirsty as their geophysical counterparts. The hideous African water-snakes are paralleled in the image of women as fatal serpents: one of the Amahagger women is compared to a snake when she caresses Mahomed to prepare him for ”the ghastly formula that had to be gone through” (p. 100).

## 4.2 Ustane

Ustane, the ”handsomest of the young women” (p. 83), has taken Leo as her husband according to the custom of the Amahagger tribe. The use of the word ”handsome” instead of ”pretty” or ”beautiful” points at certain man-like features. In a time when it was common to cover piano legs, female desire was officially classified as abnormal, as the following extract from an article in *The Westminster Review* in 1850 demonstrates :

”In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous [...]. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent, till excited by intercourse [...].”<sup>26</sup>

In the light of this Victorian double standard, Ustane’s frankness about sexuality seems rather astonishing.<sup>27</sup>

”And now let us love and take that which is given to us, and be happy; for in the grave there is no warmth, nor any touching of the lips. Nothing perchance, or perchance bitter memories of what might have been. To-night the hours are our own, how know we to whom they shall belong tomorrow?” (p. 96)

The ”wild cat”, as Job calls her (p. 165), can be very tame when it comes to nursing her husband. ”Ustane do do her best for him, almost like a baptized Christian” (p. 164), Job remarks, and this is undoubtedly the greatest praise a savage woman can expect to get from him. Determined to let nobody near Leo, she threatens Job with a knife (p.165).

A devoted wife, she stands up against her rival Ayesha and is not easily intimidated: ”[...] a woman’s eyes are quick to see - even through thy veil, O Queen!” (p. 217). Ustane is, of course, the reincarnation of Amenartas (for it is all just a little bit of history repeating...), and utters a gloomy prophecy:

”And now, [...] standing on the steps of doom, do I know that thou shalt not reap the profit of thy crime. Mine he is, and, though thy beauty shine like a sun among the stars, main he shall remain for thee. Never here in his life shall he look thee in the eyes and call thee spouse. Thou too art doomed, I see” (p. 218)

This is the first time for somebody to pass judgement over *Her*, and Ayesha is seen in a state of ”mingled rage and terror” (p. 218). There is no ”mockery” (p. 200), no ”little silvery laugh” (p. 215) from her part this time. Without saying anything *She* blasts *Her* competitor to death, which can be interpreted as a clear sign of *Her* own inferiority. Later on *She* admits: Amenartas ”was too strong for me” (p. 229), and ”I am but a woman, and *no prophetess*, and *I cannot read the future*.” (p. 269, my italics).

<sup>26</sup> [ibid] 6.

<sup>27</sup> A passage from Henry Rider Haggard’s notebook for 1885 reveals that Ustane’s attitude towards sexuality is similar to his own: ”Holy Mother we believe / Without sin thou didst conceive / Holy Mother thus believing / May we sin without conceiving.” quoted in: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man’s Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. Vol. 2. Sexchanges* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989) 382.

## 4.3 Ayesha

### 4.3.1 La Belle Dame sans Merci

#### 4.3.1.1 *Drugging Men: Ayesha's Evil Beauty*

Thoroughly aware of her irresistible seductive powers (p. 153: "Beauty is like the lightning; it is lovely, but it destroys"), Ayesha uses them systematically to achieve her ends. *She* knows that "men are faithful only as temptations pass them by" (p. 196), and is willing to test Leo only minutes after *She* has killed the woman he loved:

"Yet within very little space shalt thou creep to my knee and swear that thou dost love me. [...] Come, there is no time like the present time, here before this dead girl who loved thee, let us put it to the proof." (p. 219)

The "power of her dread beauty" is indeed to "take possession of his senses, drugging them and drawing the heart out of him." (p. 220), and her eyes are to draw him "stronger than iron bands" (p. 221).

Horace Holly, the ape-like Cambridge scholar and convinced (?) misogynist, has already been lured by her "softest and yet most silvery voice" (p. 140), which can also produce snake-like, hissing sounds (p. 160f.). Ayesha, in her white garments that are fastened by a barbaric "double-headed snake of gold" (p. 152), is at once Eve and the fatal serpent. She unveils with "a certain serpent-like grace that was more than human" (p. 152), and her walk is of an "extraordinary undulating smoothness" (p. 190). Holly is sure that "no mortal woman could shine with such supernatural radiance" (155), and he must admit: "the very *diablerie* of the woman, whilst it horrified and repelled, attracted in an even greater degree." (p. 156). Ayesha, who succeeds in destroying the love between Leo and Ustane almost instigates Holly's fall, thus splitting the homosocial bond between him and Leo:

"He [Leo] was very, very ill; and again the horrible fear seized me that he might die, and I be left alone in the world. *And yet if he lived he would perhaps be my rival with Ayesha; even if he were not the man, what chance should I, middle-aged and hideous, have against his bright youth and beauty?*" (p. 157, my italics)

and later:

"I was rent by mad and furious jealousy. I could have flown at him, shame upon me! *The woman had confounded and almost destroyed my moral sense, as She was bound to confound all who looked upon her superhuman loveliness.*" (p. 220, my italics)

Leo is fascinated by Ayesha "as a bird is fascinated by a snake" (270), and he feels: "I am sold into bondage [...], and *She* will take my soul as the price of herself!" Holly complains about the hardship men have to endure: "[...] how easily the best of us are lighted down to evil by the gleam of a woman's eyes!" (p. 189). Like Satan, however, Ayesha is capable of sudden transformation. Having cast off her terror and sad wisdom, *She* is the "incarnation of lovely tempting womanhood" (p. 184). Both life - "radiant, ecstatic, wonderful" - and death flow from Ayesha. This makes her the exact counterpart of the dark continent, which is riddling with hideous snakes, lions and crocodiles whilst at the same time presenting itself in full bloom and in a huge variety of tropical flowers, trees and animals. Her moods change as unexpectedly as those of the ocean, and like the sight of the unclouded, full African moon, her unveiled face has maddening, blinding powers.

#### 4.3.1.2 *Ruling over Men: Ayesha's Empire of the Imagination*

Ayesha is the only one who is "obeyed throughout the length and breadth of the land," and "to question her command" is "instant death" (p. 92). *Her* loveliness lies in *Her* "visible majesty, in an imperial grace, in a god-like stamp of softened power" (p.153). The supremacy of *She-who-must-be-obeyed*, however, is of a merely spiritual kind, and *She* has no need for an extensive military machine:

"How thinkest thou that I rule this people? I have but a regiment of guards to do my bidding, therefore it is not by force. It is by terror. *My empire is of the imagination.*" (p. 172, my italics)

This, of course, means that her authority is as imaginary as her empire, and therefore extremely vulnerable. When it comes to passing judgement, Ayesha is therefore very careful to leave her "underlings" (p. 190), whom *She* contemptuously addresses with "'Dogs and Serpents'" (p. 170), with the right set of lasting impressions:

"Suddenly there was a cry of 'Hiya! Hiya!' ('*She! She!*'), and thereupon the entire crowd of spectators instantly precipitated itself upon the ground, and *lay still as though it were individually and collectively stricken dead*, leaving me standing there like some survivor of a massacre." (p. 167, my italics)

The "cold power of judgement" (p. 184) is exercised from "her barbaric chair above them all," with Holly to her feet (p. 170). *She* reminds her people of the fact that "'the law of *She* is an ever fixed law, and that he who breaketh it by so much as one jot or tittle shall perish'" (p. 171). Seeing that Ayesha's "'slightest word is a law,'" it goes without saying that their disobedience is severely and mercilessly punished. To Holly, who tries to make her change her mind, *She* coolly explains that "'those who live long, my Holly, have no passions, save where they have interests'" (p. 172).

Although Ayesha is "weary of flattery and titles" (p. 150), *She* is fully conscious of the sheer pleasures of power and, on occasions, enjoys them to the fullest: "'sometimes when they vex me I could blast them for very sport, and see the rest turn white, even to the heart.'" (p. 143). From time to time *She* is tempted to use her omnipotence "'out of vexation'" (p. 154). This shows the demonic and corrupt aspect of her rule.

### 4.3.2. The White Sorceress: Preserver and Destroyer

#### 4.3.2.1 *Terrifying Men: Ayesha's Necrophilia and Unholy Rites*

It is not by chance that Job mistakes Ayesha, whose garment has "'a death-like air'" (p. 190), for "'a corpse a-coming sliding down the passage'" (p. 190).<sup>28</sup> More than 2000 years of age, Ayesha has been embalmed alive and now lives under a mountain in the heart of African darkness in what Job anxiously refers to as "'dark rabbit-burrows'" (p. 237), labyrinthine passages and underground caverns, half of which consist of elegant apartments furnished with "rich hangings", "lamps" (p. 139) and "cushions" (p. 216), the other half being a set of vast catacombs.

Thanks to extraordinary embalming techniques, the womb of the world is also a tomb. *She* openly admits: "[...] tombs [...] are my palace halls" (p.182/183), and Ustane warns Leo: "'death is in the air we breathe'" (p. 214). Mummies are used as torches (p. 210) and braziers (p. 250) to provide light for diabolic festivities and the excursion to the Temple of Truth. Ayesha has spent twenty centuries of watching, praying, cursing, and sleeping by the side of the dead Kallikrates, and *Her* necrophilia resembles that of Billali:

"[The body of the dead Kallikrates] was a mask that memory might fill, serving to fashion out thy presence from the past, and give it strength to wander in the habitations of my thought, clad in a mummery of life that stymied my appetite with visions of dead days." (p. 227)

Obsessed with the past, *She* prefers the name "Ayesha" over all others, since this is "an echo from the past" (p. 150). For the entertainment of her guests, Ayesha organises a diabolic dance which is to take place in "a great ring of bodies flaring furiously" (p. 210). The festivity appeals to "moral as well as to the physical susceptibilities," as Holly puts it. It is indeed astonishing that Ayesha, who worships the corpses in her catacombs and who proudly presents them to her visitors, can be capable of initiating such blasphemous orgies:

"As soon as ever a mummy had burned down to the ankles, which it did in about twenty minutes, the feet were kicked away, and another one put in its place.." (p. 211)

<sup>28</sup> Victorian culture abounds in icons of beautiful, corpse-like women such as John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1851/52).

"Also it hath its lesson," Ayesha assures the baffled spectators, and continues to explain (just like Ustane did earlier on) that roses must be gathered while they may:

"Trust not to the future, for who knows what the future may bring! Therefore, live for the day, and endeavour not to escape the dust which seems to be man's end." (p. 211).

The "play" (p. 211) that is going to follow is really a black mass, introduced by "a sort of infernal and fiendish cancan" (p. 212) with a "most ghastly" theme (p. 212). The "tossing of legs and double shuffling" (p. 212) is interrupted by a large and powerful woman, a "foaming rolling creature" (p. 212), who hysterically asks for a black goat to satisfy her thirst for blood. This is followed by a sort of carnival of beasts: disguised as different animals, the Amahagger put on a "lumbering, unnatural" (p. 213) dance and fill the air with animal sounds: "roars", "bleating", and, of course, the "hissing of snakes" (p. 213). This is by far not the only scene in which Ayesha appears as a princess of darkness. Shortly before they reach the womb of the world, the gloom provides the "bridal canopy" (p. 271) for Ayesha's and Leo's wedding.

#### 4.3.2.2 *Ayesha's Powers of Transformation: A Threat to Male Dignity*

In the presence of the "savage royalty" (p. 139), male human beings "turn" into animals. Despite his high age, Billali approaches his Queen "writhing along on his stomach like a snake" (p. 138), and, in following him, Holly's dignified English manners are reduced to "the fashion of an Irishman driving a pig to the market" (p. 139). Like a monkey, he soon sits to *Her* feet. The Amahagger men whom Ayesha has sentenced to death are referred to by her as "'wolves'" and "'tigers to lap blood'" (p. 172). Male animalism is further emphasized by the fact that they eat meat, while Ayesha touches nothing but water, fruit and cakes of flour (p. 151). *She* plans to turn Leo into a vegetarian, too: "'I wish I could teach thee to eat naught but fruit, Kallikrates, but that will come after thou hast washed in the fire'" (p. 251).

#### 4.3.2.3 *Ayesha's Superhuman Knowledge and Supernatural Skills: A Threat to Male Values*

A "white sorceress" (p. 156), Ayesha has acquired strange herbal wisdom and esoteric healing skills, and seems to be in command of mystical energies that deprive men of their powers. *Her* medicine "'is of a sort to shake life in its very citadel'" (p. 150) and chemistry is her favourite pastime (p. 189). Ayesha constantly strives to lend a scientific air to what Leo refers to as magic:

"Have I not told thee that there is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as understanding, and applying the forces which are in Nature?" (p. 189)<sup>29</sup>

*She* does not scruple to apply *Her* knowledge not only in nursing Leo, thus in being a *Comfort to Manhood*, but also in creating new human beings. Among the Victorians, motherhood was regarded as the most valuable and natural component of woman's mission, her main reason for being and her chief source of pleasure.<sup>30</sup> Ayesha, too, is a "mother" to the Amahagger, whom *She* calls "'rebellious children'" (p. 169) and whom *She* has always "protected": "'Were it not for me, generations since ye had ceased to be, for of your own evil way ye had destroyed each other.'" (p. 171). Even the blood of modern readers curdles when they learn that Ayesha has put her knowledge of genetics to use by breeding a race of servants that meet her requirements:

"I bred them so- it has taken many centuries and much trouble; but at last I have triumphed. Once I succeeded before, but the race was too ugly, so I let it die away; but now, as thou seest, they are otherwise. Once, too, I reared a race of giants, but after a while Nature would have none of it, and it withered.'" (p. 151)

<sup>29</sup> These attempts resemble the narrator's efforts to lend his text an air of scholarship.

<sup>30</sup> Job, the ordinary Victorian man, comes of a family of seventeen (!) children (p. 26).

What a perversion of the Victorian ideal of motherhood! The fact that Nature turned against Ayesha's second violation of its laws is a crucial one: because it shows that Ayesha, too, is subject to higher forces and cannot always do as *She* pleases. "My vices are the children of a forced solitude," explains Victor Frankenstein's creature to its creator,<sup>31</sup> and Ayesha's doings are often also attempts of escaping boredom.

"Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through," states the overly ambitious scientist Victor Frankenstein.<sup>32</sup> Ayesha breaks through these bounds in two ways. Firstly, of course, *She* spends more than 2000 years over and above life and death, and *Her* home is where the dead and living meet. Secondly, and even more importantly, *She* shatters these boundaries by simply dismissing them: "'Let the Dead and Living meet! Across the gulf of time they still are one. Time has no power against identity.'" (p. 227).

The Victorians experienced and constructed their world according to dyadic principles: male versus female, good versus bad, moral versus immoral, normal versus abnormal, active versus passive and so forth. In this manner, people, places, objects and feelings were filed away rather nicely in separate drawers. In her conversations with Leo, Ayesha stands in front of this Victorian chest of drawers, pulls the drawers out and empties their contents on the floor:

"Thou sayest, too, that a crime breeds evil, but therein thou dost lack experience; for out of crimes come many good things, and out of good grows much evil. [...] Good and evil, love and hate, night and day, sweet and bitter, man and woman, heaven above and the earth beneath - all these things are necessary, one to the other." (p. 197)

To Holly's great horror, *She* refuses to tidy up the "mess" that *She* has made, the chaos that she has created:

"Therefore doth it not become to us to say this thing is evil and that good, or the dark is hateful and the light lovely, for to other eyes than ours the evil may be the good and the darkness more beautiful than the day, or *all alike be fair*." (p. 197, my italics)

The terrifying conclusion at which Holly arrives is that this "would absolutely destroy all morality, as we understand it" (p. 197).

#### 4.3.2.4 *Ayesha's Invasion Plans: A Threat to Male Order*

In his essay entitled *Of Queen's Gardens*, which was first published in 1865, John Ruskin claims that

"The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention, his energy for adventure, for war and for conquest [...] But the woman's power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention, but for sweet ordering, arrangements and decision [...] Her great function is praise."<sup>33</sup>

Refusing and questioning male values, Ayesha also redefines woman's role. *She* is the "doer, the creator" and why should her energy not be for "war and conquest"? Unrestrained by any morals, she reaches out for England and plans to overthrow Queen Victoria:

"[...] it made me absolutely shudder to think what would be the result of her arrival there. [...] It might be possible to control her for a while, but her proud ambitious spirit would be certain to break loose and avenge itself for the long centuries of solitude. [...] 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 had ever seen it would be at the cost of a terrible sacrifice of life." (p. 245)

Love was believed to drive Victorian women into domesticity. Fuelled by her love to Leo, Ayesha, the sleeping beauty, is awakened, and finds domesticity no longer satisfying.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Penguin, 1994) 142.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>33</sup> quoted in: Linda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality* 34.

### 4.3.3. Ayesha's Death Through the (Male) Finger of Providence

In an apocalyptic climax, the Fire of Life ensures that there will be no survival, no triumph for the *femme fatale* with her

satanically overreaching ambitions. Ironically, it is male cowardice that causes the accident which saves Britain and her patriarchal order. In the "rosy air" (p. 278) of the womb of the world, Ayesha is sentenced to death by a phallic pillar of flame. This does not come totally unexpected. In order to pass the gulf that separates Kôr from their final destination, the three Englishmen and Ayesha had to wait for a sword of light to be stabbed "right through the heart of darkness" (p. 261). The aggression connoted by the opposition of light and dark, and by the image of a (male) sword piercing through a (female) heart of darkness prepares for the final combat, which *She* is going to lose.

Her death is a haunting, awe-inspiring scenario, gradually reducing *Her* from goddess to beast. Her arm grows "thin and angular" (p. 279), her voice becomes "quite high and cracked" (p. 279), her skin changes from perfect white to "dirty brown and yellow" (p. 280), and her once so delicate hand is nothing other than a "claw" (p. 280). The formerly towering lady rapidly loses height as *She* is transformed to something that resembles a "badly-preserved Egyptian mummy" (p. 280) and ultimately to a monkey. The eternal return of the male flame is a symbol for the inexorable patriarchal law, which is reinstalled through the victory over the savage Queen, who threatened to revolutionize society (p. 281) by constantly questioning male concepts and blurring male distinctions, on which (the Victorian) society is based. Holly speculates that Ayesha's revolutionary ambitions might have even "changed the Destiny of Mankind" (p. 281f.), thus calling the finger of Providence into play.

In bearing witness to the frightening spectacle, Holly and Leo do not only watch the death of a woman, but also the defeat of a goddess, and the deconstruction even of the idea of a goddess. On their way home, the sword of the fire lights Holly's and Leo's path, thus helping them to get back to England, their own country of masculinity.

## 5. Conclusion

"After all what is the Ayesha trilogy (*She*, *Ayesha* and *Wisdom's Daughter*)- what is this trilogy about other than a woman's 2000-year effort to reach the bed of the man she loves?" asks Richard Dale Mullen from Indiana State University.<sup>34</sup> Although I cannot speak for the trilogy and although Mullen intends this as a rhetorical question, my discussion has shown that there is more to the text than that, thus providing an answer to his question.

The leitmotif is best summed up by a line from Coventry Patmore's poem: "A woman is a foreign land."<sup>35</sup> Exotic, unknown, strange- woman is portrayed as the "other." The country of the Amahagger is described as uniquely alien and alien in particular because relations between its male and female inhabitants are antithetical to those that prevail in "normal" civilised countries. The narrator lacks words to describe Ayesha, thus Woman remains unmapped, remains no man's land. The sea, the African moon and the Dark Continent are all wild female creatures who take vengeance upon their violators and to whom the men and their proud English boat is a plaything. Ayesha incarnates all their qualities, she is both fascinating and horrifying, a passionate lover and a cool-hearted ruler, both a satanic *femme fatale* and a soft *femme fragile*.

Woman, whether in the shape of the ocean, the African continent or in mistresses of flesh and blood is a testing ground for manhood and male values. The text can be seen to anticipate Salmon Rushdie's "The Empire writes

<sup>34</sup> quoted in: Hartwig A. Vogelsberger, 95.

<sup>35</sup> quoted in: Ronald Carter / John McRae, *The Routledge History of Literature in English. Britain and Ireland* (London/New York: Routledge) 289.

back with a vengeance.<sup>36</sup> Woman, here equalled with the strange lands of the Empire does indeed strike back. In shattering the dyadic principles that dominate patterns of Victorian society she blasts the building blocks of patriarchal order and threatens to invade England.

”All else confusion!” says the King in Tennysons *The Princess*, and this, too, is the conclusion at which the text arrives. A phallic pillar of flame puts an end to *Her* and *Her* invasion plans, thus preserving natural (male!) hierarchy. The threat, however, remains, and Billali issues a warning:

”But if ever ye come to your country, be advised and venture no more into lands that ye don’t know, lest ye return no more, but leave your white bones to mark the limit of your journeyings.” (p. 298)

Not only woman is kept within her limits, man, too, is shown his boundaries.

## 6. Appendix

### 6.1 George Elgar Hicks: *Woman’s Mission*

George Elgar Hicks, study for <i>Womans Mission: Guide to Childhood</i> , 1863	George Elgar Hicks, <i>Womans Mission: Companion to Manhood</i> , 1863	George Elgar Hicks, study for <i>Womans Mission: Comfort to Old Age</i> , 1863
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### 6.2 List of Pictures and Sources

**picture 1: Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *Proserpine***

in: Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1981) 96.

**picture 2: Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *Astarte Syriaca***

in: Christopher Wood, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1981) 102.

**picture 3: George Elgar Hicks: *Woman’s Mission***

in: Linda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality. Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) p. 149 - 151.

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### **BITS & PIECES**

3.1:

- sight is beautiful and terrifying at the same time: Holly is watching with a "curious fascination" (p. 57)

His switching into the present tense makes the description all the more vivid.

"This is Africa, man-eater, soul destroyer, wrecker of men's strength, mother of fever and death, mysterious ghost which for centuries has sucked the blood of Europeans, draining them to the very marrow, or making them mad" (Paul Vigné d'Octon, *La Gloire du Sabre*, 1900)

- p. 138: "I was an Englishman, and why, I asked myself, should I creep into the presence of some savage woman as though I was a monkey in fact as well as in name?"

Instead of providing his readers with more detailed information on how family life is organised among the Amahagger, the narrator hurries on to show them the exciting, savage and exotic side of the tribe.

### *Astarte Syriaca*

Mystery: lo! betwixt the sun and moon  
 Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen  
 Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen  
 Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon  
 Of bliss wherof the heaven and earth commune:  
 And from her neck's inclining flower-stem  
 lean  
 Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that  
 wean  
 The pulse of hearts to the spheres' dominant tune.

Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel  
 All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea  
 The witnesses of Beauty's face to be:  
 That face, of Love's all penetrative spell  
 Amulet, talisman, and oracle,-  
 Betwixt the sun and moon a mystery.

(Dante Gabriel Rossetti)